

The Commonwealth of Learning



The Commonwealth of Learning's presentation to the Honourable Julian Fantino, Minister of International Cooperation, Canada, 11 April 2013, Vancouver, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Professor Asha Kanwar, President & CEO

Honourable Minister, Kate Leyenaar and Colleagues:

It gives me great pleasure to formally welcome, for the first time at COL, a Minister of International Cooperation. It is perhaps appropriate that the visit is happening this year, when COL celebrates its 25th anniversary. Thank you, Minister for your time and for your interest in our work.

We are very grateful to the Government of Canada for its continued financial and intellectual support. We also appreciate the fact that we are hosted in beautiful British Columbia, which sparkles on a day like this.

We have a regional office for Asia in Delhi. Having our two offices outside London, the traditional home of the Commonwealth, clearly reflects the spread of the Commonwealth and provides a window to the expertise and resources available in both Canada and the Asian region.

We are a small organisation – 35 persons here in Vancouver and another seven in Delhi. My colleagues represent the diversity of the Commonwealth and come from the largest member state, India, to a relatively smaller one, Seychelles. In spite of this small group of 10 nationalities, we have activities in 47 of the 54 Commonwealth countries.

What do we do? Technology and distance education have an important role to play in providing access to education and training. We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn helps accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

Three years ago, the Royal Commonwealth Society organised a global conversation and the majority of those surveyed felt that the Commonwealth needed modernisation and reform, "with the exception of the Commonwealth of Learning, a small intergovernmental outfit focused on distance learning in Vancouver that received considerable praise..." Continuing in the same vein, a review conducted by the British Department for International Development last year, referred to COL as a "small and valued partner" and an "innovative niche operator".

What constitutes our success? Let me highlight three key factors.

One, we have a strong country focus and we tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Ministers of Education in 52 countries and this network not only receives triennial reports of what we have done in each country but also identifies the priorities that COL can address.

Two, we are results-oriented and apply Results Based Management to all our work in order to provide evidence of our outcomes and impact. This has resulted in the doubling of the number of countries that make voluntary contributions to our budget. For instance, in 2006, we had 22 countries contributing while now the number has doubled to 44. Another indicator is that Australia, after an absence of 8 years, has acknowledged COL's ability to deliver and returned as a financial partner and major donor. There are many countries that make very small contributions, but each contribution, however small, is a measure of confidence in COL.

Three, COL demonstrates value for money. By keeping our organisation small, we are able to invest the major part of our budget on the programme work in the field. In addition, we leverage our impact through partnerships with public, private and civil society organisations. Furthermore, we develop models which can be replicated in different contexts, which help us to scale up, reach out and achieve more with less!

In short, COL is a highly focused, results-oriented organisation that has reinvented itself over the years to respond to the needs of its stakeholders. My colleagues will briefly provide specific examples of how we do this. Let me first invite our Vice President to give an overview of our programme.

COL'S PROGRAMMES – OVERVIEW

Mr. Vis Naidoo, Vice President

COL's President focused on the organisation, its vision, mandate and governance. I want to focus on the initiatives that we implement and let my Colleagues, the Education Specialists tell you more on each initiative.

Using a consultative process, COL identifies the key needs of developing Commonwealth Governments, organisations and institutions and develops a three year plan. The strategic goals for the plan includes:

1. Quality education
2. Human resource development
3. Harnessing ODL and technology to achieve social and economic development.

The priority for COL includes girls and women, open education resources (OERs – where publically funded learning and teaching resources are developed and made freely available to other education institutions and learners for their own use) and skills development.

The current three year plan identifies the key outputs, indicators for these and the impact that we are trying to achieve.

COL has identified five core strategies to implement our work, viz. partnerships, capacity, materials, models and policies. My Colleagues, in providing concrete examples of their work, will illustrate how each of these strategies is used to show results.

COL has two sectors, viz education and livelihoods & health. These two sectors are further broken down into seven Initiatives and two cross-cutting initiatives.

For education – open schooling, teacher education, higher education, Virtual University for small States of the Commonwealth.

For livelihoods and health – technical and vocational skills development, lifelong learning for farmers and healthy communities.

COL has two cross-cutting initiatives, viz. eLearning and Gender.

We are also committed to a strong M&E framework. This is critical to enable COL to monitor the work being implemented, the difference we are making and use this data (both baseline and after implementation) to determine if we have achieved the outcomes. COL conducts an evaluation of our three year plan and is currently preparing for an evaluation of the past nine years of work and to determine whether the scope of our work has made a difference.

EDUCATION

Ms. Frances Ferreira, Education Specialist - Open Schooling

Beyond the challenge of universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education – worldwide – 71 million adolescents are not in school. COL works in 26 countries in expanding open schooling to increase learning opportunities for secondary education, particularly for girls, out-of-school youth, and people in remote regions. Deeply engrained social, cultural and economic barriers, such as early marriage, prevent young girls from continuing with their education post elementary school.

Open Schooling is a powerful way of addressing issues of social justice and equity since it can bring the excluded into the schooling system and give them an opportunity to have a better quality of life. The world's largest Open School in India provides education to an average of 300,000 students per year at one tenth the cost, while in Namibia the Open School provides education to 48% of the total Senior Secondary School population in the country.

COL's contribution, through Open Schooling in developing countries, will result in more educated children of educated mothers/women taking an economic leadership role in the family and community and reduction in the incidence of poverty.

Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, Education Specialist - Teacher Education

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) goals on universal primary education (UPE) provide the rationale and context for COL's work in teacher education.

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. 1.7 million teachers will be needed if we are to achieve UPE by 2015!

It will not be possible to rely on only brick and mortar approaches to address the projected shortfalls in teacher supply. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology.

In 2009–2012 COL collaborated with these institutions to train over 350,000 teachers in 24 countries. This figure includes teachers of marginalised groups such as the nomads in Africa.

Many countries will not achieve UPE by 2015 and COL's aim is to continue to support them to achieve the EFA and MDG target of UPE.

Professor Madhulika Kaushik, Education Specialist - Higher Education

The higher education initiative helps Commonwealth countries and Institutions improve access to higher education and the quality of their systems and programmes. Just to take one example COL pioneered the development and offering of Professional education programmes through Open and distance learning, the commonwealth executive MBA and MPA programmes which enabled our partner institutions to improve the availability of trained managers and administrators in their countries. The programmes are offered through open universities in developing countries for whom it would have been very difficult to develop on their own, a masters level executive education programme of an international quality. To date, more than 21,000 working managers and administrators have enrolled for the programmes and nearly ten thousand have graduated. In most institutions, these programmes are offered at 1/3rd the cost of conventional MBA programmes.

This human resource development effort contributes to stimulating sustainable economic growth in these countries.

Mr. John Lesperance, Education Specialist - Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

When the Ministers of Education came up with the idea for having a Virtual University for the small states in 2000 only a small group of countries participated then. To date we have all 32 small states of the Commonwealth participating in the VUSSC initiative which constitute to two thirds of the Commonwealth membership.

The first VUSSC activity was held in August 2006 in Mauritius where educators from 15 countries convened to develop content in Tourism and Entrepreneurship.

Since then, we have held 11 training and materials development workshops and offered 12 online and face-to-face courses with the latter focusing on ICT, eLearning, Open Education Resources, and online course delivery. These have help to support educators developed sound knowledge and skills in these areas and in the process we have developed learning materials for 14 courses and programmes.

Seven institutions, covering all Commonwealth regions are now offering VUSSC developed courses.

As a result of all these, we have built the capacity of more than 11,000 people including educators, policy makers and IT managers.

Through the VUSSC collaborative network we have built strong partnerships with Ministries of Education, institutions, including regional and international organisations.

We have also developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to promote learners' mobility and credit transfer between countries and regions.

As you may have realised we are using technology to turn the digital divide into digital dividend.

Thank you.

LIVELIHOODS & HEALTH

Ms. Alison Mead Richardson, Education Specialist - Technical and Vocational Skills Development

Meet Eunice Maganga, a young woman from Voi, a rural community in East Kenya, who has had an opportunity to gain skills for improving her living through COL's work in skills development in Africa.

Through INVEST Africa (Innovation in Vocational Education & Skills Training) COL works with 12 partner institutions in six countries. We build the capacity of formal post-secondary institutions to offer new, flexible courses for people working in the informal sector, especially women. Through a team of Champions, colleges are strengthening their ICT infrastructure, establishing new centres for ODL, creating new strategic objectives and building the capacity of their teachers to integrate ICT into teaching and learning.

As a result, people like Eunice who left school with a poor secondary education get a chance to gain livelihood skills. Eunice has always wanted to be a builder like her father. She was working as unskilled labour on building sites from time to time. Eunice and 52 others, studied a free course in building technology, made possible by sponsorship of materials from local companies. For their practical work they built a staff house at the college. Eunice now works as semi-skilled labour and has increased her daily income by 150%. Eunice has enrolled for further studies at the college – which she can now pay for – as she wants to become a skilled bricklayer.

This is just one story of how COL's work impacts on improving skills and livelihoods.

*The college is Coast Institute of Technology

Dr. K. Balasubramanian, Education Specialist - Agriculture & Livelihoods

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in the developing countries. The present agricultural extension system based on face-to-face training is inadequate to address the challenges. COL offers a new approach called Lifelong Learning for Farmers in short L3F.

It mobilises and organises the farmers and links them with banks for financial capital.

It then facilitates their learning using devices such as mobile phones and radios.

Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities.

L3F has led to increased income, better food security and empowerment among 75,000 participants in Africa and Asia.

Financial institutions realising that poorer communities and HIV AIDS affected women are potential and valuable clients have started lending and investing in L3F since the repayment rates are very high. The initiative with high social rate of return has attracted governments and other stakeholders for scaling-up and replication.

Mr. Ian Pringle, Education Specialist - Media

I run COL's Healthy Communities initiative, which helps local development and communication organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development.

The reason we do this is because there is desperate need in many communities of the developing world for opportunities to learn about basic health and development issues – opportunities that conventional approaches will not meet at the scale, quality or cost required.

Working with our partners we have developed a model for local, low-cost, participatory communication programmes that address critical unmet community health and development needs.

Allow me to give you an example.

These photographs are of a learning programme called the Bag of Life in a district of Malawi with extremely high rates of maternal and child mortality. The programme is a collaborative venture between a community network of some 15,000 women, a local health NGO, the district hospital and a community radio. The Bag of Life centres on 60 minutes of weekly audio content that combines the "right" information about maternal and child health, i.e. vetted by doctors and nurses, with the voices of local women and their real life stories, both good and bad, of pregnancy and motherhood in rural Malawi. Some 3,000 women participate directly in weekly listening and discussion groups – note the radio sitting on a chair in the bottom left photo – and via FM radio the Bag of Life has the potential to reach 125,000 pregnant women and mothers of children under age 5.

Our evaluation shows that 2/3 of active participants have learned the importance of simple key messages, e.g. to deliver in the hospital or clinic. In perhaps the most powerful illustration of the value of the Bag of Life, over 150 women's groups representing over 2,000 women contribute their own money to keep this programme going.

The cost per active listener in the first year was approximately \$5.

In the current three-year plan the Healthy Communities initiative will work with hundreds of local groups in 16 countries to develop at least 30 such programmes reaching over 60,000 active learners, primarily women and youth, and contributing directly to better local health and development.

CROSS-CUTTING

Dr. Mark Bullen, Education Specialist - eLearning

I am responsible for the eLearning initiative.

And what we mean by eLearning is what this graphic depicts and that is a continuum of opportunities to use information & communication technologies to enhance and transform teaching, ranging from face-to-face teaching all the way to fully online learning.

The three main objectives of the eLearning Initiative are all about access, quality and transformation.

So we are working to:

1. expand access to education and training
2. enhance quality and,
3. ultimately, to transform education through the use of new pedagogies.

What we mean by transforming education is preparing students to work in knowledge economies....so:

- moving away from a teacher and content-centred approach,
- and towards a more resource-based and learner centred approach in which:
 - students use digital technologies to access learning resources,
 - collaborate with peers and ultimately
 - develop self-learning and critical thinking skills
 - so that they become independent learners who can navigate our increasingly digital and networked world effectively.

More specifically, we are engaged in two key activities:

1. Assisting countries to develop the appropriate policies and strategies to support the integration of information & communication technologies into education and, ultimately, transform their educational systems;
2. Training educators to use information & communication technologies and open educational resources to transform teaching and learning.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Dr. Venkataraman Balaji, Director, Technology and Knowledge Management

The scene on this slide may be a typical learning situation for many children in developing countries. Classes such as these are far from electric power grids. Internet access is not even thought of as a possibility. Would tech-supported or eLearning mean anything in circumstances like this?

source of image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/69583224@N05/8022556671/> (CC BY SA)

Our answer is yes. The sudden rise of affordable Tablet computers has made it possible to connect learners even in remote areas to experience the power and advantages of connected learning. Today, there is enough computing power in Tablets to make them work as servers. They can run a Learning Management System such as Moodle. Learners can access materials in the LMS server using hand-held tablets. In the picture here, the white device serves as power source and WiFi hot spot for the black device which is actually a PC. Together these two devices cost just under \$100.

Together they form the core of what COL calls "Classroom Without Walls".

ADMINISTRATION

Ms. Doris McEachern, Director, Finance, Administration & Human Resources

We very much appreciate the diplomatic type immunities and privileges extended to COL through its Headquarters Agreement with the Government of Canada.

This includes the administration of all official documentation required for our international Senior Official and Official staff, as well as their families, to be in Canada, from their arrival here until their departure home.

This has made their stays in Canada smooth and our work in administration easier.

Thank you.