

Enhancing The Provision Of Open And Distance Learning Within The Commonwealth: Insights Into Staff Development Obtained From The Col Training Impact Study

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ABSTRACT

The mission of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and contribution to staff development within the Commonwealth is noted. Evidence from selected survey questions drawn from the large scale COL Training Impact Study, a study of 114 training events over a ten years period, is analysed and interpreted.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main functions of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), defined in the 1988 Memorandum of Understanding and confirmed by an initial review of requirements in 1989, is to undertake and support staff training in the techniques and management of distance education. At a Round Table (Commonwealth of Learning, 1990) participants identified the following priority training needs:

- basic orientation to distance education;
- planning, management and administration;
- instructional design and course development, including course adaptation;
- use of technology, including computers;
- research and evaluation;
- student support services.

In meeting these needs four delivery strategies were identified for adoption: the provision of workshops, the development of self-instructional training materials, the establishment of training fellowships and the development of special training institutions or units. (McWilliams & Mugridge, 1998)

COL's first Strategic Plan (1990-1993) re-iterated that training was a key function with three reasons being cited for still regarding training as an essential activity:

1. the implementation of open learning and distance education was dependent on the appropriate application of sound educational principles and innovative educational techniques and technologies that are changing and evolving;
2. many of the personnel in distance education institutions come from other educational and professional sectors and require training to adapt their skills to the contexts of distance education and open learning; and
3. the on-going global process of educational reform was breaking down the artificial and counter-productive distinction between 'distance education' and more traditional educational activities. This process will continue and will necessitate a supporting process of skills development in all types of educational institutions.

(Commonwealth of Learning, 1993)

More recent policy statements reinforce COL's mission and plans to realise it.

EVALUATION STRATEGY AND INSTRUMENT DESIGN

Between 1990 and 2000, 114 training events were organised or co-organised by COL in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, the Pacific and Europe. Forty-seven of these events (41%) were held in Africa, 35 (31%) in Asia, 20 (18%) in the Caribbean, 10 (9%) in the Pacific and 2 (1%) in Europe. The majority of the training events focused on the operational aspects of distance and open learning. Fifty-one (45%) focused on course writing or instructional design, 16 (14%) on computing, desktop publishing, multimedia or the internet and 11 (10%) on radio, audio or audio-conferencing.

The COL Training Impact Study was to provide feedback to COL and its stakeholders, on training events in the period 1990 – 2000 and in particular the:

- effectiveness of the training methods and approach;
- extent to which the objectives of the trainers and the participants were met;
- extent to which the training was reflected in improved practice;
- evidence of impact at the organisational level;
- extent to which the training was provided at an acceptable cost.

An eclectic 'illuminative evaluation' approach (Parlett and Hamilton, 1977) was used to collect the data. It involved a progressive focusing on emergent issues important to those directly involved rather than imposed by the authors. Data collection was undertaken by the authors and six specially contracted Research Associates in institutions across the Commonwealth; four groups of stakeholders in COL training events were targeted with COL Standard Evaluation Reports part of the analysis. (Table 1)

Table 1 Stakeholders and instruments used in the Training Impact Study

Stakeholders and Data Source	Instrument
1. Case study site representatives interviewed by the Research Associates	<i>Interview Proforma</i>
2. Former participants in COL training events 1997 – 2000	<i>Self-Completion Questionnaire 1</i>
3. Co-ordinators of COL training events	<i>Self-Completion Questionnaire II</i>
4. <i>Key Informants</i>	Self- Completion Questionnaire III

The questions in Data Sources 1 and 2 were based on 17 open and closed ended questions and designed to elicit identical information over a range of topics (for details of instruments see Lockwood and Latchem, 2000). The Study collected substantial amounts of data. However, of particular interest within this paper is how individual respondents rated the importance of training and how these needs had changed over ten years of COL training provision. Evidence from Data Source 1 was collected by Research Associates at six Case Study Sites (see Table 2). Data Sources 3 and 4 invited comments on a range of issues including future and emerging needs for training, the priority and focus that COL should give to its future training initiatives.

Table 2 Case Study Sites

Region	Case Study Site
Africa	University College of Education of Winneba, Ghana Makerere University, Uganda National College of Management and Development Studies, Zambia
Asia	Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh Indira Gandhi National Open University, India
Caribbean	University of Guyana, Guyana

Pacific Case study site in the Pacific was not identified. Last training event 1995 and outside timeframe.

MEHODOLOGY

The six Research Associates identified and interviewed five individuals as requested and returned all the transcripts thus providing the authors with 30 sets of feedback from senior and mid-level staff involved in distance education and with experience of COL training events. The initial response rates to the Self-Completion Questionnaires I (N=346 surveyed), II (N=37 surveyed) and III (N=16 surveyed) were extremely poor and reminders were mailed out to non-respondents. The final response rates to the various surveys were 26%, 41% and 44 % respectively. A poor response rate had always been anticipated for Questionnaire I because of the logistical problems of contacting participants several years after the event. It had always been considered likely that some of these would have changed their institutions or positions, left employment or retired, moved on from their last known address, or were even deceased.

The poor response rates to Questionnaires II and III were both surprising and disappointing, given that most of those contacted had been recommended by, and could be classified as key stakeholders in COL. However, the investigation was never intended to depend upon any one instrument or group of stakeholders. It was planned to draw upon the findings of the separate survey instruments. The intention was to illuminate the issues and perceptions surrounding the training events and, through a process of 'triangulation', establish correlations across the various instruments and groups of respondents. The authors worked independently through the data sets, only sharing and integrating these in the final stages, in order to ensure objectivity in correlating the trends and observations within the various sets of responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was available from the sources listed in Table 1. However, particular interest was evidence related to future training needs: data provided in Questions 2, 3 and 14 from Sources 1 and 2 and Questions 7 and 8 Sources 3 and 4.

Evidence from Source 2

Self-Completion Questionnaire I was designed to elicit information from participants in COL training events between 1997-2000. The sample was drawn from institutions in the six geographical regions identified above with the size of sub-samples intended to reflect the proportion of COL training events conducted within this three-year period. Questions 2 investigated how highly 22 possible training topics were rated. The frequency distributions are given in Table 3. The total of returned questionnaires was N = 91 and this base figure was converted into percentages. Where this fails to add up to 100%, this is because some respondents failed to answer this question.

Table 3 Percentage frequency distribution of ratings for Question 2 (N = 91)

Q. 2 How highly do you rate the importance of training in each of the following areas?

	Very High	High	Av.	Low	Very Low
Understanding open and distance learning	65	18	12	3	-
Diagnosing learners' needs and circumstances. 68	23	7	-	-	-
Setting course objectives.	55	33	9	1	-
Curriculum / course development	64	25	5	2	-
Instructional design/ writing for in print material	65	25	7	1	1
Instructional design/scripting for AV material 51	32	11	3	1	-
Instructional design in computer based learning. 49	24	15	5	4	-
Instructional design in Internet/Web instruction. 49	19	16	8	8	-
Basic radio/audio production	29	38	21	9	2
Basic TV production	26	42	22	5	3
Basic computer skills	36	38	19	2	3
Desktop publishing	32	38	22	2	3
Tutoring/counselling	52	30	11	4	-
Library/information management	26	41	26	3	2
Student support services	57	30	9	1	-
Assessing learner performance. 57	32	9	1	-	-
Costing open and distance learning.	57	27	13	-	-
Evaluating open and distance learning systems 62	29	8	1	-	-
Evaluating open and distance learning outcomes.	64	22	9	2	-
Managing open and distance learning systems. 56	32	9	1	-	-
Researching open and distance education.	62	24	11	1	-
Establishing Quality Assurance procedures	65	27	5	-	-

All of the topics rated highly but may be placed in three groups (Table 4).

Table 4 Grouping of frequency distributions in Table 1

Highest ratings

- Setting course objectives
- Curriculum / course development
- Instructional design/ writing for in print material
- Assessing learner performance
- Establishing Quality Assurance procedures
- Student support services
- Managing open and distance learning systems
- Diagnosing learners' needs and circumstances

Mid level ratings

- Costing open and distance learning
- Understanding open and distance learning
- Instructional design/scripting for AV material
- Evaluating open and distance learning systems
- Tutoring/counselling
- Evaluating open and distance learning outcomes
- Researching open and distance education

Low level ratings

- Instructional design in computer based learning
 - Instructional design in Internet/Web instruction
 - Basic radio/audio production
 - Basic TV production
 - Basic computer skills
 - Desktop publishing
 - Library/information management
-

The developed countries' pre-occupation with delivering materials digitally (Inglis, Ling and Joosten, 1999), internet/web-based education and information management (Eisenstadt and Vincent, 1998, Freeman et al, 2000) is not apparent here; such items rated less than other topics. Whether this is due to a lack of access to these tools or because these particular needs have already been met can only be a matter for speculation. The most highly rated topics were those associated with basic course design and development (Lockwood, 1998), learner needs, course objectives (Melton, 1997), learner assessment (Morgan and O'Reilly, 1999, quality assurance (Freeman, 1993) and course evaluation (Calder, 1994). However, the difference between these and the topics in the mid level rating group is small and any conclusions can only be speculative.

Question 2 also invited respondents to list and rate other training topics and the following suggestions were made:

- policy-making and planning for open and distance education
- marketing open and distance learning
- evaluating collaborative arrangements within a region; and
- student databases and record-keeping

Changing needs

Question 3 asked respondents to describe in what ways and why the training needs have changed over the past ten years; several points emerge.

- the increased demand for education from school to postgraduate level, and the growing awareness, albeit still poorly developed, of the potential of distance education;
- the changing commitment from long distance education courses, with little or no choice in options, to short courses with substantial choice;
- the opportunity and need to apply distance education methodologies and technologies to literacy, basic education and school-level, continuing education and enrichment programs (Bradley, 2003);
- the cost effectiveness of distance education and economies of scale may be recognised and the number of learners may have increased, but the financial, human and physical resources have remained stagnant;
- changing technology has contributed to changing needs and practices – but not all learners in developing countries have access to these media;
- the increased competition in higher education and presence of new/global providers providing quality products albeit at relatively high costs, representing challenges to existing institutions;
- poor political leadership and management limiting distance education development (Latchem and Hanna, 2001);
- *academic and financial rewards insufficient to attract and retain quality staff;*
- COL's training interventions have been invaluable but have been carried out in a piecemeal way and have overlooked some important areas;
- the need for more national and regional evidence of the benefits of, and best practice in, distance education to inform decision-makers. Most evidence provided in the workshops had been drawn from developed rather than developing countries; and
- the need for more research into distance education systems, course design and development.

Future needs

Question 14 asked respondents to rate the importance of future activities by COL. The frequency distribution is presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Percentage frequency distribution of ratings for Question 14 (N = 91)

Q. 14 How highly do you rate the importance of the following possible future activities by COL?

		Very High	High	Av.	Low	Very Low
Same level of training support provided by COL	21	27	26	7	2	
Increased training support provided by COL		82	10	2		-
A greater focus on training the policymakers or managers	54	25	16	2	-	
A greater use of a 'train-the-trainers approach' supporting in-house training.	70	19	7	1	-	
The provision of training kits to support in-house training		66	26	4	-	1
A greater use of in-country collaboration in training.		56	33	7	-	1
The provision of formal qualifications or Accreditation for training.	55	31	8	2	-	
Increasing use of the Internet/Web for training.	35	34	19	7	-	

There was an extremely positive rating for all the activities listed and particularly those relating to future training support by COL. The training of policy-makers and planners and through the internet/web were marginally less highly rated.

Training needs identified within case Study Sites

Evidence collected by Research Associates suggest a high demand for the full range of training topics listed in Table 3. Those attracting 97% 'very high' or 'high' response rates were curriculum and course development, instructional design/scripting for audiovisual material, managing open and distance learning systems, and

establishing quality assurance procedures. Other topics receiving 90% or over were: costing open and distance learning (94%), assessing learner performance (93%), diagnosing learners' needs and circumstances (90%), instructional design/scripting for print (90%), tutoring/counselling (90%), and evaluating open and distance outcomes (90%). The lowest demand was for researching open and distance education (28%). These ratings confirm that the topics covered by the COL Training Kits are top priority but that there may be need to provide these in further topics.

Changing needs

In response to Question 3 interviewees cited changes in the socio-economic and political environments, the pressure to provide more distance education and in new areas of training, the enormous increase in student numbers and range of courses, the entry of new competitors, technology change, changing expectations in the students and other stakeholders and the reduction in resources and consequent need for better resource management. As a consequence of these changes, there was need for greater professionalism in program planning, management, delivery and review and for staff to acquire higher levels of knowledge and skill. It was noted that there had been little opportunity for personal growth in staff and that distance education providers must keep pace with the changing human resource needs within as well as outside the institutions.

Future needs

In response to Question 14 there was 100% support for an increase in training provision by COL. Eighty-three percent rated the need for training policy-makers and managers as 'very high' or 'high'. With regard to strategies, 97% gave high ranking to a greater use of a 'train-the-trainers approach', 94% to the provision of training kits to support in-house training, 93% to greater in-country collaboration in training and 90% to the use of the internet/web for training.

Workshop Co-ordinators' observations

Self-Completion Questionnaire II was sent to 37 former Workshop Co-ordinators – international experts and in-country experts. The survey achieved a response rate of 41% with open-ended responses mapping closely with those of the Key Informants. Indeed, within Questions 7 and 8 Workshop Co-ordinators identified many of the topics that others had rated as important, confirming that these are worthy of consideration by COL as new, extended or more advanced programs. They could be grouped under the headings of Educational topics, Management topics, 'Low tech' and 'High tech' topics.

Educational topics

- shifting from teacher-focused to learner-focused approaches to teaching and learning;
- diagnosing learner's needs and circumstances;
- developing self-guided study skills in learners; and
- tutoring and counselling distance learners;

Management topics

- understanding and designing open and distance learning systems;
- developing cross-institutional and national policies for open and distance education;
- encouraging partnerships in delivering distance education in small states
- costing and financial management in distance learning institutions;
- intellectual property rights; and
- institutional planning for the integration of educational technology.

'Low tech' topics

- production of low cost teaching and learning materials;
- instructional design and script-writing for audio-visual material;
- integration of print and audio-visual materials; and
- integration of new media with face-to-face methods;

'High tech' topics

- design and production of education interactive multimedia;
- computer graphics;
- computer-based learning;
- internet-based open and distance learning techniques;
- internet telephony (e.g. WAP and WML) applications;
- e-commerce fundamentals;
- portal design and construction; and
- maintenance of state-of-the art technologies.

The priority and focus that COL should give to its future training initiatives

Many of the Workshop Co-ordinators' comments echo those of the other persons surveyed. It was observed that the training needs continued to exist and that it was vitally important to take account of the varying needs of different countries,

localities, institutions and the factors that supported or hindered distance education development. This could only be achieved if there were comprehensive briefings for those presenting the training events and the aims, topics, profile of participants and follow-up plans were clearly defined. It was suggested that the training programs should do more to enable the new knowledge and skills to be put into practice. It was suggested that COL and any partners in training events should insist that the effects of the training is measured and the trainers and the participating institutions should be made jointly accountable for the outcomes. It was also noted that COL might make greater use of print or web-based self-instructional or support material. One respondent suggested there was need and potential for a 'virtual training institution' on the internet and to make training programs and materials more widely available for sale.

Key Informants' observations

Questions 7 and 8 provided further supporting evidence. It was noted that staff development needs should be linked to the strategic priorities and goals for open and distance education within organisations as a whole and that training should be based on observable gaps between current competencies and standards and those identified as necessary or desirable. However, it was also observed that gaps in performance may be due to other factors, such as organisational structures, systems, culture, or reward systems, and that these needed to be addressed in parallel. Furthermore, the respondents argued that such training should not be defined solely by individual or group preferences but rather the needs of the institution. To this end, it was suggested that COL should conduct an analysis of needs and that further training programs might be needed in:

- participatory decision-making and strategies for organising meetings/conferences;
- planning and costing economical, cost-effective distance education programs;
- testing and assessment in distance education;
- quality assurance in open and distance education;
- research and development or action research as an integral part of professional development;
- senior management issues in planning and operating distance education;
- the technical/vocational area;
- administrative leadership and management in the schools sector;
- learner support systems; and
- computerised information management systems' particularly in the maintenance of student's records.

There was a high degree of agreement on the importance of COL maintaining its training programs, but emphasising their regional focus and involving more local experts. Respondents believed there were substantial training needs to be fulfilled in:

- policy-making and planning in distance and open learning;
- managing and marketing distance education organisations;
- the commercialisation or partial commercialisation of distance education programs;
- management of change within distance teaching institutions;
- the new technology;
- media and technology for administrators, planners and policy makers; and
- training of trainers at regional levels.

CONCLUSIONS

There is evidence that over the last ten years COL has generally succeeded in addressing the objectives that were identified in 1990. It has identified the training needs of distance education institutions in Commonwealth countries, formulated strategies to meet these needs, examined the efficacy of the various types and levels of training and has evolved an approach for effective co-operation among institutions, agencies and countries.

The comments from the surveys indicate that overall, there is widespread appreciation of, and satisfaction with, the COL provided training events. There are many indications that these events are improving the understanding, skills and performance of individuals and some indications of their having a major impact upon certain distance teaching institutions. The participants observe that the events serve to strengthen regional, national and international understandings, foster the development of groups with shared interests and encourage rapport and collaboration between the participants, all of which outcomes they value highly. It is also clear that COL has made a significant contribution to capacity building in general and to the skills of local experts in particular. The provision of published texts will further contribute to this goal.

The Co-ordinators felt that the workshops met most of the intended goals and commented favourably on the dedication and participation of the participants. It was evident that Key Informants and other respondents perceive the provision of training as an important part of COL's mission. It is also evident that they believe it must continue to receive a high profile, high priority and as high a level of financial and professional support as COL can muster from its own and its partners' resources.

The training events have taken many different forms and been provided in very different contexts, often with extremely heterogeneous groups. The various stakeholders note various strengths and weaknesses in current training provision and after ten years of operation, it is understandable that they see some changes and new initiatives as necessary. However, it is evident that despite the numerous training activities that have been conducted these priorities and methods of delivery, (with some modification) remain valid.

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