

The History of the Commonwealth of Learning



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Greetings and Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here. The Commonwealth of Learning, which everyone calls COL, greatly appreciates the chance to participate in this meeting of Canada's Royal Commonwealth Society.

You have asked me to talk about the history of COL. Oddly enough I've never been asked to do that in a formal way before and I welcome the opportunity. However, let me say a few words about the recent present before I flashback to COL's creation.

You will be aware of the work of the Eminent Persons Group that is in the final stages of making recommendations about how to make the Commonwealth more relevant and dynamic. COL made a presentation to the group by teleconference last year and I titled it - *COL: Small, Successful and Not in London*. That summarises some of COL's key features.

The Commonwealth Conversation

You will also recall the Commonwealth Conversation organized by your own Royal Commonwealth Society so let me refer you to the two references to COL in its reports.

First, the interim report, *Common What?* has the following statement:

(I quote) **Official Commonwealth Institutions:** *It is quite clear that the Commonwealth needs modernisation and reform at the institutional level. With the exception of the Commonwealth of Learning (a small intergovernmental outfit focused on distance learning based in Vancouver, that received considerable praise from those who knew it), we have heard frustrations about the way that these institutions work at every turn.*(Unquote)

That tells you that COL has a good reputation but is not well known, which is why I am pleased to be able to present our work to you.

Then, the very last paragraph of the tenth recommendation of the final report reads:

(I quote again) *Finally, reaching more people could involve making the Commonwealth more polycentric. The vast majority of its intergovernmental and most prominent nongovernmental institutions are based in London, the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in New Delhi being two notable and successful exceptions. This not only adds fuel to the fire of colonial myths which surround the Commonwealth. It perpetuates an insular outlook and a limited sphere of direct influence.* (Unquote)

That tells you that COL's location in Canada is an asset if the Commonwealth wishes to present a less London-centric image, but of course our location does contribute to our being less well known. Let me now turn to the history. Why was COL established and why is it based in Vancouver?

The first part of the answer is that in 1987 Canada hosted the summit meetings of both the Commonwealth and the Francophonie. The Sommet de la Francophonie was held in Quebec City and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Vancouver.

This was obviously a great opportunity for Canadian diplomacy and Prime Minister Mulroney decided that to propose to each of these gatherings that they initiate projects to make more effective use of technology in education. Back in those days people were already talking about a communications revolution and many believed that all this new technology was too valuable to be left entirely to the entertainment industry.

Canada had invested considerably in developing satellite technology and Canada's Department of Communications saw an opportunity to put such technology to use. Some years earlier I had been involved in evaluating the early educational experiments on Canada's satellites. In 1987, when I was president of Laurentian University in Ontario, I was invited to join an informal group set up by the Government of Canada to suggest what Canada might propose to CHOGM.

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth Secretariat had set up a Standing Committee on Student Mobility chaired by the distinguished Barbadian, Sir Roy Marshall. It seems odd to recall today, when the numbers of students studying overseas are increasing steadily, but in the 1980s the Commonwealth was worried about a big decline in student mobility caused by sharp tuition fee increases in countries like Canada and the UK.

The Committee set up an Expert Group to look into the matter with Lord Asa Briggs, the famous social historian as its chair. It recommended, essentially, that if you couldn't move the students you should move the courses.

Its report was entitled *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning: A proposal to create the University of the Commonwealth for Co-operation in Distance Education*.

At its core was the inspiring objective that *'any learner, anywhere in the Commonwealth, shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth'*.

The Briggs Report and the Canadian proposal to do more to harness technology to education converged at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Vancouver in 1987.

The idea of creating a new Commonwealth agency to pursue these aims was strongly supported by the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi and his Nigerian counterpart. Their enthusiasm overcame the hostility of Britain's Margaret Thatcher to the creation of another intergovernmental agency. So COL was born.

It did not follow that because the CHOGM had been held in Vancouver COL would be based there. There was a 'beauty contest' in which countries were invited to bid to host the new organisation.

Canada teamed up with British Columbia to make a strong bid which won the day and COL has been happily based in Vancouver ever since. A small unit based in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, was added in the mid-1990s.

There was, however, the question of what COL would actually do. The Heads of Government had agreed to establish a new organisation because of their gut feeling that technology was important, but they had not had time to articulate a clear mission for it. Accordingly a pan-Commonwealth Planning Committee was set up that held a number of meetings in 1988 and recommended the contents of a Memorandum of Understanding that Commonwealth governments signed on 1 September, 1988.

I had the honour to chair the Planning Committee.

There were two options on the table, which you might summarise in the classic question: 'do you give people fish or teach them to fish?'

At one end of the spectrum there was the notion of an Open University of the Commonwealth that would beam courses by satellite around the Commonwealth. At the other was the concept of an agency that would help countries and institutions to apply technology for themselves.

Given the composition of the committee the choice was never in doubt. The government representatives were all from their development agencies, and development agencies were – and mostly still are – sceptical of hi-tech solutions to development challenges. Although the preparations for presenting the COL proposal to the CHOGM had been made by the techno-savvy Department of Communications, once the decision to create COL was made the dossier was handed to CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency, which had a simpler view of the world.

So that is what COL has been doing for 22 years. We help Commonwealth governments and institutions use various technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development.

So let me describe COL today. Who are we?

We are a small organisation. COL has 35 staff in Vancouver and seven at our Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi. 42 people cannot represent all 54 Commonwealth countries but we do pretty well. My ten international professional colleagues come from seven countries from India to Seychelles. Our local staff members in Canada reflect the multinational nature of Vancouver and bring links to another ten countries. So we are small but diverse and we punch above our weight.

Appointments to our Board of Governors are made from across the Commonwealth.

This is the founding Board and some of you will recognise Sonny Ramphal, the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the time. And this is our current Board.

We have had four Board chairs over the years, the current chair being The Hon. Burchell Whiteman, for many years Minister of Education of Jamaica and most recently that country's High Commissioner in London. And in that time we have had three Presidents, James Maraj from Trinidad & Tobago, Raj Dhanarajan from Malaysia, and me from Canada and the UK.

Based in Vancouver and New Delhi

Where are we? We are not in London. Being in Vancouver gives us several advantages. COL demonstrates daily that the Commonwealth need not be London-centric; we are a window for the Commonwealth to expertise in Canada and North America; and Vancouver and New Delhi are productive places to work partly because, unlike organisations based in London, Paris or New York, we attract only those visitors who really want to do business with us!

Successful

Third, people say we are successful. One measure of success is the number of countries that fund us. I stress that Member Governments fund COL on a voluntary basis – which is a good way of keeping an organisation responsive and honest.

In the last five years the number of Commonwealth countries making voluntary contributions to COL has risen from 27 to 41. That must mean that most Commonwealth countries like what we do. Thankfully those financial contributions have not slackened off during the economic downturn.

But the real test of success is that as well as governments, our hundreds of partner institutions and the hundreds of thousands of individuals affected by our work also value our impact. We invite you, as supporters of the Commonwealth from right across Canada to spread the word about this small Commonwealth organisation based in Vancouver.

What Does COL Do?

What does COL actually do? We were created 20 years ago because Heads of Government believed that media and technology, particularly Open and Distance Learning, had an important role in advancing education, training and learning generally. Everything that has happened since indicates that they were correct. Today, millions of people around the Commonwealth are involved in all kinds of technology-mediated learning.

Our mission is *Learning for Development*.

We believe that giving people the chance to learn is the fundamental route to achieving the international development agenda of the Millennium Development Goals; the Campaign for Education for All; and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

However, the challenge of learning at all levels is so massive that traditional educational methods cannot cope. Technology has helped respond to other development challenges and is now essential for expanding learning.

COL is increasing opportunities for learning on two fronts.

Education

In the first, we help countries to expand formal education. That means using distance learning technology in four areas: first, to expand secondary schooling because 400 million children between 12 and 17 are not now in school; second to expand and improve teacher education, because 10 million new teachers are needed; third to improve the quality of higher education and, fourth, to help the Commonwealth's 32 Small States provide postsecondary skills for their people. You will be aware that of the 54 countries of the Commonwealth, 32 are considered as small states and COL, with the Commonwealth considers that it has a special responsibility to them.

An important part of COL's commitment to the small states is an exciting programme, called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth which was initiated by and is managed by those countries.

This is not a new institution but a collaborative mechanism through which the small states work together to produce course materials that all of them can then use to strengthen their tertiary education institutions.

Livelihoods and Health

In the second sector of our programme we help to expand the informal learning that is essential for improving livelihoods.

That, area, Livelihoods and Health also has four areas: informal approaches to skills development; lifelong learning for better farming; helping communities improve health by using local media; and integrating eLearning wherever appropriate.

I also note the exciting work of our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, which last year developed a \$65 laptop which is now in use in a school in Maldives.

We believe this programme subsumes all important development priorities, such as climate change, and I can explain that later.

How Does COL Work?

That is what we do. How do we do it? Technology advances relentlessly so innovation is our watchword and scale is our mantra.

We help countries and organisations achieve impact by articulating policies, creating partnerships, refining models for technology use, building capacity and helping people develop learning materials.

I give you just one example. This very day thousands of women in India, who have been equipped with mobile phones by their local cell provider, will each receive several short audio messages giving them tips on how better to rear and feed the goats on which their livelihoods depend. The result is goats that are healthier on every dimension, which means more income for the women and their families.

Our third obsession, after innovation and scale, is country focus. We have an individual action plan for each Commonwealth country.

Our Vice-President, Professor Asha Kanwar, whom some of you have met, leads an intensive programme of stakeholder engagement. When we report to them at meetings of Education Ministers and Foreign Ministers, each country gets a separate report detailing what we have done to help that country. This is one reason why countries appear to support us with enthusiasm.

Finally, COL is highly focussed. We doubt that any of the world's intergovernmental agencies applies results-based management better than COL. But results-based management can easily degenerate into an obsession with process. We are obsessed with outcomes and impacts and we can demonstrate those.

Conclusion

That's my short introduction to the history and present reality of COL. We are well-known and appreciated by our thousands of stakeholders around the Commonwealth. Those stakeholders are mostly in the developing countries of the Commonwealth which are the focus of our mission.

That is why I'm delighted by the interest of the Royal Commonwealth Society of Canada in our work. I believe that you can feel proud of this small Commonwealth organisation based in Canada and I hope that you will spread the word about our work.

Thank you