

COL in the Pacific: promoting Learning for Development

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**Presented by
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It is a privilege to present the Commonwealth of Learning and its work to you and I thank Beth Wellings for making this possible. Today I will highlight some aspects of ‘Promoting Learning for Development’ with some concrete examples to give you a flavour of what we do especially in the Pacific region.

COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987. COL believes that access to learning is the key to development.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

Our headquarters are in Vancouver and we have a regional office for Asia in Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia or CEMCA that covers the eight Asian member states.

Who supports COL? We are funded by voluntary rather than mandatory contributions from member states. In the last few years the numbers of countries contributing to our core budget have doubled. The seven major donors, Canada, UK, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, Australia and South Africa have seats on our Board of Governors.

One reason for the enhanced confidence is that we develop country action plans, track progress over the three year plan period and compile reports of what we’ve done in each country.

The Compendium entitled COL in the Commonwealth is presented to Ministers of Education at their triennial meetings. The next Commonwealth Education Ministers meeting will be held in June this year in the Bahamas when COL will present its report over 2012-15.

COL has integrated RBM in all its work and commissions external evaluations which are shared with stakeholders through its website. Two evaluations are currently under way—one an impact

evaluation to assess COL's development impact over the past nine years and the second to assess whether the expected outcomes for the current plan period have been achieved.

Our motto is learning for development.

Following the ideas of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, COL understands development as freedom. Increasing the freedoms that men and women enjoy is a definition of development, and greater freedom empowers people to be more effective agents of development. Learning must enable people to exercise their freedom 'to be and to do'.

Prof Amartya Sen proposes the capability approach which helps us to see that learning and acquiring skills are not an end in themselves but steps that help individuals and societies achieve development outcomes. This approach encourages us to think beyond outputs such as acquiring a degree to outcomes—how this degree will lead to a better quality of life. It also shifts the focus from developing capacity to capability and to the question—now that we have the capacity, what will we do with it? We develop skills or what Prof Sen calls 'functionings'—how can these enable us to overcome the constraints of our daily existence and make a change for the better?

What are the capabilities that learning must impart? Walker, who has worked on the capability approach, investigated the capabilities that girls in school in South Africa thought important and came up with three: personal autonomy and independence of thought; ability to enter the world of work and an identity and a voice that would get respect and recognition.

This is what we mean by learning for development. We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn increases their freedoms 'to be and to do' helps accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

In addition to placing our work within the context of internationally agreed development goals, we have a strong country focus and tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Commonwealth Ministers of Education and this network identifies the priorities that COL can address. The Focal Points for the Pacific at their meeting in 2011, believed that COL should make TVET materials available; bring good practice to the region, provide technical advice in ODL and OER.

As a result of the wide consultations in all the four regions of the Commonwealth, COL developed a strategic plan for 2012-15. The impact envisaged was an increase in the number of Commonwealth citizens with the knowledge and skills to lead healthy and productive lives.

Open distance and technology-mediated approaches can enhance access to quality education and training, cut costs and reach the unreached. These approaches have been tried and tested in formal education but COL is promoting their use for the non-formal and informal sectors as well, if we need to accelerate progress towards achieving development outcomes.

COL organised its work in two sectors: education and livelihoods & health. These two sectors have seven initiatives and two cross-cutting themes of elearning and gender. Let me give you examples of some of our activities in the Pacific.

As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education. 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. A research study conducted by COL showed that open schooling costs substantially less than conventional secondary schools. In India, it costs one sixth while in Namibia it costs one fifth of what it would take to put a learner through a government school.

In the Pacific, COL initiated its open schooling work by commissioning a 12 country report to identify the need for open schools. As a result, COL in collaboration with the USP supported the establishment of open schools in Tonga Kiribati and the Solomon Islands. COL has facilitated a twinning arrangement between the Te Kura Correspondence College, Wellington with Vanuatu Open School. The 22-country consortium of the Commonwealth Open Schools Association has six members from the region which include New Zealand and Australia.

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology. COL's work in teacher education in the Pacific has focused on building capacity in Quality Assurance, Curriculum Development and MultiGrade teacher training.

COL has worked with the Solomon Islands National University to develop distance learning teacher training materials.

Many Commonwealth countries are trying to improve participation in Higher Education. COL is using distance learning approaches to help achieve this. A feasibility study commissioned by COL has become the basis of the new Open University that PNG is in the process of establishing.

In the Pacific, COL's Legislative Drafting programme is offered through the Vanuatu campus of USP and COL provides scholarships for learners from the region.

USP invited COL to lead an international panel to review its flexible learning provision and the report was submitted in November last year.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for the small states, a network of 31 countries. Nine institutions, covering all Commonwealth regions are now offering VUSSC developed courses.

The first cohort of students of the sustainable agriculture course has graduated from the University of Samoa under the VUSSC arrangement.

The NUS, UPNG, Vanuatu Institute of Technology and the Tonga Institute of HE are active participants of VUSSC. A common Transnational Qualifications Framework is in place with the active involvement of the SPBEA.

COL's work in skills development builds the capacity of institutions to offer new, flexible courses for people working in the informal sector, especially women. COL has developed courses in Basic Trades and in Vocational literacy and these are being used in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, PNG, Tuvalu and Nauru. A strategic plan for the TVET Division, Department of Education, PNG was supported by COL.

Working with the Ministry of Education, COL supported a training programme on working with concrete and 167 young people qualified to work with concrete as a result of this training.

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in developing countries. COL offers a new approach called the Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3F. COL catalyses the links between the civil society, institutions and micro-finance institutions to develop multi-media based learning. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is also a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities.

Here are the participants of a recently initiated L3F programme in PNG.

The Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. 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 community develops programmes in the local languages that reach thousands of learners resulting in health-seeking behaviours in the community.

Building on consistent advocacy and capacity building, the Isabel Province Government had accepted a proposal to support technology mediated learning through the Isabel Learning Network. Capacity building programmes in community health and development include participants from PNG; Kiribati; Solomon Islands; Vanuatu.

Our work in elearning cuts across all initiatives. In the Pacific, we have established a Chair in OER at Otago Polytechnic. The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand's Certificate in elearning reaches stakeholders in Africa and the Pacific, through COL support.

COL's Directory of OER has a consolidated list of open and free courses in HE, TE, skills development and secondary education that anyone can adopt and adapt. This is an important resources for teachers and learners.

COL has developed a prototype for developing open textbooks through the use of OER and this is being piloted by Antigua and Barbuda, to be taken up by the other OECS countries. This would be very relevant for institutions in the Pacific. Advocacy efforts are under way.

Gender is another crosscutting theme that underpins COL's work. As we know, violence against women is a critical issue in several Pacific nations.

The gender guidelines for open schools have been piloted in Tonga.

COL approaches emerging technologies from the point of view of developing Member States. How can we reach students under this tree with quality learning materials?

Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls is one possible solution. It is developed by using readily available and low cost components, open source software and costs less than \$ 100.

Aptus does not require power from the mains. We can use solar chargers instead. It does not require any connectivity. We use a wireless router. All this enables teachers and students to access good quality digital materials through this device. As of now, learners can access the Wikipedia for schools containing over 6000 articles. Or the 2000 Khan Academy videos, covering topics relevant to learners in primary schools or high schools. A whole library of free books is also available.

To supplement all this, local content can be generated and added quite easily. As Dennis Pack from Kiribati writes, 'I was very impressed with the speed at which the resources loaded...if we add our own content, I can visualise the Aptus featuring as the main technology on many of our island primary and secondary schools'.

Jeffrey Tila from Vanuatu shares the excitement that was expressed by teachers administrators at the prospect of using this device to access a vast repository of resources.

Last September, we inaugurated PACFOLD or the Pacific Regional Centre in Flexible and Open Learning for Development hosted by USP in Suva. COL recognises the need to further strengthen its work in the Pacific. PACFOLD will be a key step in this direction. The Centre is expected to be a 'network of networks' and to become a hub of world class expertise in distance learning and technology in the region.

We also organised a regional meeting of Pacific Focal Points in Samoa and these are some of the priorities identified: need for skills development and entrepreneurship, employment, quality education, the vulnerability of small states and harnessing the potential of ICTs.

As the world gets ready to adopt the next set of goals, COL's strategic plan for 2015-21 will be entitled 'Learning for Sustainable Development', one which will promote inclusive development that leads to livelihoods and environmental sustainability.