

Commonwealth of Learning: Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



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Chair, Secretary General, Colleagues, thank you for the opportunity to present the Commonwealth of Learning. We have already provided a detailed report so I'll share some highlights.

As you are aware, COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987. Our headquarters are in Metro Vancouver with a regional office in New Delhi.

COL's mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

We work in two sectors: Education and Skills, with Gender as a crosscutting theme.

COL achieves impact by harnessing the potential of existing and new technologies. Let me share examples of how we support governments, institutions and individuals.

First, COL uses various strategies to build national resilience.

One such strategy is to support policy development. During this financial year, COL helped Seychelles and Sierra Leone to adopt national policies in distance and online learning. A national policy on Open Educational Resources or OER has been developed by Mauritius. The objective is to increase access, improve quality and cut the costs of education.

During the pandemic, teachers reported the lack of quality online learning materials. As a response and as part of a project supported by New Zealand, COL has developed ten OER repositories — a regional repository for the Pacific and nine for each Commonwealth island states. Over 5000 teachers have been trained in the development and use of OER, building capacity for sustainability and scale.

Following a cyclone, the education minister, Tonga, requested COL to digitise curricular material so that schools were prepared for future climate-related disasters. In Dominica, COL worked with the ministry and local communities to develop audios and videos for disaster preparedness.

The Minister of Education, Seychelles believes that COL is an invaluable partner... because of its conviction that small states of the Commonwealth need continuous support.' In fact one of COL's success strategies is to continue to work with partners over the long term until impact is achieved and the intervention sustainable.

Second, how does COL support the strengthening of institutions?

COL's Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth connects institutions in the 32 small states by promoting cooperation in the development and sharing of courses. One of the key priorities of VUSSC is to offer courses on the Blue Economy.

The Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered by universities in 12 countries. A study indicates that graduates of this programme saw an increase of 38% in their monthly income and every \$ invested resulted in \$ 3.40 direct returns for the learners.

As part of the post pandemic recovery efforts, COL initiated an ICT augmentation project to help small states and LDC's build resilience by providing specific equipment, solar panels, connectivity and capacity building. This is being implemented with partner institutions in seven countries.

Prof VS Prasad from India identifies the COL advantage 'More than material contributions, associational pride, prestige and learning are significant contributions to all institutions engaged with COL'.

Third, how does COL's work improve the lives and livelihoods of individuals?

Since the pandemic, the COL-COURSERA workforce recovery project and partnerships with Google and Udemy, have offered free skilling and reskilling opportunities to over 350,000 Commonwealth citizens. Even though connectivity was often a challenge, learners used mobile devices or library facilities. COL supported the establishment of Help Desks in the Ministries to provide learner support, leading to high completion rates.

In Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, women were trained to start agri-enterprises and a research study concludes that learning leads to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment, there is a 2.3% increase in profits.

COL's Girls Inspire has trained 127000 women and girls in vocational skills for employment or entrepreneurship in ten countries. This holistic approach provides training in technical skills, life skills, financial literacy and ICTs. During the training, participants are linked to employers and financial institutions for livelihoods opportunities.

Martine Benemariya, a mother two from Rwanda was struggling to keep her digital and online business afloat. As a result of participation in this project, her customer base and revenues have increased and she is now able to help train others including persons with disabilities.

COL responds urgently to some of the most pressing challenges in education by providing knowledge resources and technical advice. The biggest area of explosive growth is AI with a significant impact on students, teachers and institutions. COL offers a course on Introduction to AI, to help stakeholders make sense of this field.

Even with advances in AI, three kinds of jobs will still be in high demand: blue collar jobs, jobs that need empathy and jobs where creativity and innovation are the key requirement. COL's focus has been on providing targeted solutions according to specific contexts.

The second big challenge is the climate crisis. COL presented a report to Commonwealth Ministers of Education entitled Transforming Education for Climate Action. This provides a road map for how ministers of education can climate proof education systems and implement a green learning agenda.

COL's triennial Pan Commonwealth Forums offer a platform for advancing innovative solutions that work in developing countries. The most recent in the series was held in Canada and attracted the prime ministers of our host country and Samoa and 11 education ministers from around the Commonwealth. The next PCF will be held in partnership with the ministry of education, Botswana.

Former SG Sir Sridath Ramphal said 'Learning for sustainable development is one of the higher purposes toward which the Commonwealth can reach....COL's mandate and vision are ever more important...we need to keep it ever exceptional'.

Excellencies, let me assure you that we will do our part to keep COL exceptional in your service. Thank you for your contributions both financial and intellectual.