

Covid-19: from Response to Resilience



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Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Chair, Secretary-General, Colleagues, thank you for the opportunity to share some of the concrete ways in which COL has responded to the pandemic.

When COL was established to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training 32 years ago, Heads could not have foreseen that distance learning would be embraced globally and almost overnight.

The Covid-19 crisis has had an unprecedented impact on education—the education of more than 574 million students in the Commonwealth was disrupted by institutional closures.

When the pandemic struck, the education sector was clearly not prepared and had to pivot to online learning. But only half the world's population have internet access with a wide variation within the Commonwealth.

COL responded quickly with a multi-pronged approach—by providing several Guidelines and instruments, building the capacity of teachers, finding specific solutions to country needs and promoting collaboration at the global level.

COL believes that if the child cannot go to the school, the school comes to the child.

This can be done through open schools—which increase access to secondary education, promote equity by providing flexible options for girls, reduce costs to less than a fifth as you can see from the examples of successful open schools in India, Bangladesh and Namibia.

Because Botswana and Namibia had open schools, they were able to print the materials and distribute them to students of all schools so that learning could continue.

COL developed Guidelines for implementing different models of open schools which have been despatched to Ministers of Education.

Distance learning can keep the doors of tertiary education open in times of crisis.

There are 33 open universities in the Commonwealth that cater to over 5 million students annually.

During the pandemic, COL supported Nigerian universities to go dual mode and helped integrate distance and technology enabled learning in institutions in Antigua & Barbuda, Kenya and Malaysia. Support was also provided to integrate employability into the curriculum in Zambia and to develop online safety and

privacy policies at the University of Rwanda. These examples give you an idea of what was being prioritized during the pandemic.

From the experience of this pandemic, one thing has become clear—that we need innovative solutions appropriate to the context so that we do not leave anyone behind. COL has developed video-on-demand in STEM subjects aligned to the curriculum in Fiji, Nauru and Samoa. This works particularly well in low-bandwidth situations.

COL's Guidelines for Distance Learning were shared with Ministers of Education.

No one was prepared for the sudden transition to elearning. Teachers had to move from classroom lectures to online mode overnight.

COL has been offering free capacity building MOOCs for teachers on technology enabled learning, cyber security etc. with Athabasca University and other institutions.

In partnership with the Ministry of Education in Trinidad & Tobago, COL offered a customised MOOC at which over 8000 teachers in the country were trained.

COL also offers MOOKit a free platform that can work in low bandwidth situations.

In addition, several self-learning courses have been developed for teachers including one on Teaching in a Digital Age.

Because of the pandemic, youth unemployment is high in the Commonwealth and likely to be further exacerbated.

In collaboration with COURSERA, COL offered free training opportunities to 125,000 persons around the Commonwealth for workforce recovery. The greatest uptake has been in the Caribbean.

These girls from Fatima Jinnah Women's University have successfully completed the programmes for workforce recovery from some of the top universities in the world.

COL has developed Strategies for Blended TVET to scale skilling and reskilling youth—this too has been shared with Ministers of Education.

Most Commonwealth countries have responded well to the pandemic—but we need resilient systems that can withstand future disasters.

Collaboration rather than competition is the way forward. COL has established a global partnership which has already contributed more than 200 courses.

Finally, A Report for Commonwealth Ministers of Education with key recommendations was circulated in early June.

Having worked in the field of distance education for over 30 years COL can confirm that—distance education helps to increase access, improve quality, reduce costs and support inclusion, all with a lower carbon footprint.

Research shows that blended learning—a combination of online and face-to-face-- works best in developing countries. COL will continue to work with Member States to make a smooth transition from response to resilience. Thank you for your contributions.