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# CONNECTIONS

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PCF11 inauguration with the President of Botswana, the COL President, and Commonwealth Education Ministers, Botswana, 2025.

## IN THIS ISSUE

# PCF11: A celebration of open learning

With much anticipation, the Eleventh Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF11) opened in Gaborone, Botswana, on 10 September 2025. Co-hosted by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education of Botswana and Botswana Open University, this triennial event marked a significant moment for open learning across the Commonwealth. Over 400 in-person delegates, from policymakers and elected officials to educators and practitioners gathered at the Gaborone International Convention Centre at the Grand Palm Resort, with 48 nations represented, including 44 Commonwealth countries.

The opening ceremony was inaugurated by His Excellency Duma Boko, President of the Republic of Botswana. Joined by members of his Cabinet and the diplomatic corps, President Boko was welcomed with the national anthem *Fatshe Leno La Rona*, performed by the Botswana Defence Force Band. In his remarks, President Boko highlighted the need for creativity and innovation to build a knowledge-based economy and emphasised the importance of local partnerships and collaboration during a transformative moment for the country.

In the opening plenary, a virtual address by the Honourable Shirley Botchwey, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, highlighted education's transformative role in unlocking potential, generating jobs, driving economic growth, and empowering people in Commonwealth Member Countries.

Under the theme 'Innovative Open Education: Fostering Resilient Societies for Sustainable Economic Development,' the Forum explored how open and distance learning (ODL) can increase educational access, bridge the digital divide, and expand social and economic development.


COL President, Professor Peter Scott, welcomes Botswana's Minister of Higher Education, the Honourable Prince Maele during PCF11 opening ceremony.

Preceded by 12 pre-forum seminars, the three-day PCF11 programme featured 50 poster and parallel sessions, engaging keynotes, and panel discussions with Ministers and Vice-Chancellors, allowing delegates to dive into the critical issues facing sustainable open education. Delegates examined sub-themes, ranging from inclusive education and gender equality to skills for lifelong learning and sustaining communities of practice. In addition, emerging technologies, empowering women and girls, and youth engagement helped frame the Forum's discussions.

PCF11 also brought together Education Ministers from the Commonwealth, where they contributed to panel discussions in the plenaries and participated in parallel sessions, as well as receiving technical briefings covering key topics facing ODL. Following tradition, the Forum's outcomes were consolidated into a Statement, where a shared vision and a set of collective actions were agreed to guide the Commonwealth's open learning agenda.

View the opening ceremony:
https://commonwealthoflearning.info/pcf11-opening-ceremony-address

Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Honourable Shirley Botchwey, delivers opening plenary.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General's address:
https://commonwealthoflearning.info/pcf11-inaugural-address

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5748

# The Gaborone Statement

ELEVENTH PAN-COMMONWEALTH FORUM ON OPEN EDUCATION (PCF11), SEPTEMBER 2025

Forum partners from across the Commonwealth, representing 2.7 billion people of the Commonwealth, meeting in Gaborone, Botswana, under the theme of Innovative Open Education: Fostering Resilient Societies for Sustainable Economic Development, and in the spirit of CHOGM 2024's 'One Resilient Common Future,' support prioritising the following collective actions:

1. **Equity with quality at scale**
   Support inclusive, accessible and high-quality Open Learning via Open, Distance and Flexible methods for all learners, especially girls and women, persons with disabilities, disengaged youth and marginalised communities so that every learner can achieve, exchange knowledge and access quality learning.
2. **Skills for productive and resilient lives**
   Encourage the expansion of flexible, work-relevant learning for out-of-school youth and adults; the alignment of micro-credentials and prior-learning recognition with labour-market demand; prioritise TVET training and equipping; and the building of green and blue economy skills that also support intra-Commonwealth trade and investment opportunities.
3. **Ethical leverage of the digital dividend**
   Promote the development of Open Learning as digital public goods underpinned by open standards; the building of digital public infrastructure and connectivity for education; and the adoption of ethical, inclusive AI and data-protection guardrails.
4. **Teachers as skilled agents of change**
   Support the creation of flexible, technology-enabled pathways into teaching and learning; scale cost-effective, school, college, and university based professional development; and support communities of practice so teachers model lifelong learning and drive change.
5. **Reimagine assessment**
   Encourage the adoption of authentic, supportive and competency-based assessment (including micro-credentials) to strengthen employability and micro-entrepreneurship, with robust quality assurance and portability across borders.
6. **Positive disruption in postsecondary education**
   Strengthen technology-enabled learning ecosystems in TVET and HE; recognise prior and experiential learning; the expansion of OER and open science; and the use of trustworthy digital credentials to remove barriers to learning.
7. **Crosscutting commitments**
   Support resilience for small and vulnerable states and SIDS, climate and ocean literacy, and access to climate finance via skills and knowledge; gender equality and youth leadership integrated across all actions; safe, trusted information ecosystems consistent with Commonwealth principles on expression and media.

**Our ambition is to achieve this through:**

A. **Inclusive collaboration:** governments, institutions, communities, business and accredited organisations working together; strengthening synergies across the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and COL to maximise impact.

B. **Sustaining the momentum:** establishing an action tracker; sharing implementation evidence through CCEM and similar inter-governmental meetings.

*We thank the Government and people of Botswana for their warm hospitality and leadership.*

## CONTEXT

Education Ministers at PCF11 agreed to seven collective actions as a roadmap to advance Open Learning across the Commonwealth. The Gaborone Statement aligns with the CHOGM 2024 Samoa Communiqué and builds on the previous work laid out at PCF10 in Calgary, Canada.

The Gaborone Statement recording introduced at the PCF11 closing:
https://commonwealthoflearning.info/pcf11-closing-ceremony

# Innovation, inclusion, and future-ready learning: Highlights from COL's pre-forum seminars


Pre-forum participants engage in a group exercise during the two-day session on Empowering Women and Girls.

Beyond serving as an opportunity for dialogue and collaboration, PCF11 also advanced COL's programmatic work. In partnership with diverse collaborators and leveraging the presence of experts from across the Commonwealth, the COL team organised 12 in-person sessions. Each session focused on a unique theme, and collectively contributed to the ongoing and future programmes of COL. These seminars had four overarching themes: teacher capacity, equity and inclusion, institutional development, and higher education.

## TEACHERS' CAPACITY HOLDS THE KEY

Three of the 12 seminars focused on the needs of teachers in integrating technology into teaching, as well as Open Educational Resources (OER) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly in the context of teaching assessments.

The Beyond Numbers project seminar examined the needs of teachers in STEM education for future endeavors, where participants shared best practices from the recently concluded project phase and received training on creating courses using MoodleCloud.

A second seminar advanced Network for Open Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa bringing together five schools of education from Botswana, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa, to lay the groundwork for the co-development and localisation of OER, developing institutional policies and the optimisation of resources for long-term sustainability. This initiative responds to research revealing that while awareness of OER among educators is growing, classroom implementation remains limited due to a lack of training and localised materials suited for African learning contexts.

The third seminar, Assessment at the Intersections of Human–AI Collaboration, reimagined assessment as dynamic, context-sensitive, and future-oriented with clear guidelines and institutional frameworks for ODL while ensuring inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and equity, particularly in the context of AI integration, climate change, and economic uncertainty.

## EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND PARTICIPATION REMAIN CENTRAL

Equity and participation were central to the three seminars. The Empowering Women and Girls project brought its teams from five countries in Africa and Asia together to explore sustaining communities of learning and practice in innovative open education. The seminar examined the feasibility of learning from the use of Community Report Cards as a robust, community-based accountability tool for outcome measurement, ensuring it is aligned with participatory monitoring and collective learning.

While the seminar on The Innovations in Participatory Methods brought together nine COL partners to explore the REFLECT approach as a theoretical foundation for participatory social change through learning. Presentations focused on how learners in the community can contribute to knowledge creation for eMobile learning, sustain learning from authentic assessments in non-formal and needs-based university micro-courses, and use practical exercises to interrogate gender norms and influence social and cultural transformation.

The Inclusive Education and Specific Learning Disabilities seminar brought together representatives from the Ministries of Education of six Asian Commonwealth countries to discuss next steps for COL in Asia. This work includes developing a teacher competency framework for inclusive classroom practices focused on children with specific learning disabilities across Commonwealth Asia.

## INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Three seminars addressed systems strengthening and institutional development.

The Open Schooling seminar explored three key themes: inclusion, business models, and the vocationalisation of the curriculum. Participants recognised the importance of advocacy and community-based mentoring in bridging learning gaps and enhancing inclusion. They also recognised the importance of advocacy and using community-based mentoring to address gaps, enhance inclusion, and agreed that countries pursuing the vocationalisation of both open schooling and Open TVET curricula should create pathways between them.


Educators in the Openness in Teacher Education session learn practical ways to integrate technology into the classroom.

**The seminar on Strengthening TVET System Resilience Through Open TVET Initiatives brought together 15 participants from nine Commonwealth Member Countries to reflect on the implementation of their projects within their respective institutions.**

Sessions focused on emerging technologies, stakeholder engagement, gender responsiveness, and integrating them into blended TVET within their institutions. Participants developed action plans aimed at improving blended TVET practices, strengthening outcomes, and enhancing TVET resilience.

A third seminar, led by the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), strengthened collaboration among Management Committee members, VUSSC Voices presenters, and project leads from the COL–BOU micro-credential programme for youth and youth workers in Southern Africa. The discussions focused on aligning regional efforts, sharing best practices, and planning future collaborations to ensure that youth empowerment and inclusion remain central to VUSSC's work.

## NEXT GENERATION HIGHER EDUCATION

Three sessions within higher education focused on future-ready tools and approaches.

The Micro-Credentials session focused on national-level implementation frameworks and registries, aiming to deepen their understanding of credit transfer processes and enabling technologies. Participants examined policy considerations, resource requirements, and sustainable models for micro-credit framework implementation. They also collaborated on a roadmap and action plan for forthcoming national and regional implementations.

Based on guidelines provided prior to the Forum, the session on Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) Case Studies discussed the drafts that participants had already developed prior to attending the pre-forum seminar. Participants presented their work for wider discussion and feedback from the peer group, leading to the development of six final case studies, now available on COL OAsis https://oasis.col.org/.

Seminar on Scalable Learning and Frugal AI brought together experts from India, Malta, and South Africa to discuss advances in scalable learning. Going beyond open universities, scalable learning now extends to campus-based and large unitary universities that manage extensive outreach programmes.

While cost and cybersecurity remain key considerations, encouraging progress has been reported with open-source solutions. COL's Frugal AI concept was widely endorsed for its immediate applicability to tertiary institutions.

## DID YOU KNOW?

More than 100 delegates from partner organisations across over 30 Commonwealth countries took part in 12 dynamic pre-forum sessions ahead of PCF11 in Gaborone, Botswana. With experts from across the Commonwealth gathered in one place, the seminars became a vibrant hub of shared knowledge, collaboration, and cross-learning.

## Continuing the conversation:

# PCF11 blog series

The PCF11 blog series extends the dialogue that began in Gaborone, highlighting key insights and practical pathways identified through the Forum. Each piece focuses on one or a combination of the seven collective actions endorsed by Education Ministers in the Gaborone Statement, offering perspectives that support educators, policymakers, and partners working to strengthen open and distance learning across the Commonwealth.

The first eight blogs are authored by COL specialists and available at: https://www.col.org/col-blogs/

### PCF11 Cross-cutting commitments in open schooling

Dr Tony Mays
Director: Education

### Advancing authentic assessment in ODL: Implications of human-AI collaboration

Professor Jane-Frances Agbu
Adviser: Higher Education

### Breaking boundaries for inclusive and high-quality schooling

Dr Jyotsna Jha
Director: Skills

### Micro-credentials in the context of skills for productive and resilient lives

Dr Jako Olivier
Adviser: Higher Education

### Enhancing quality systematically in higher education

Dr Sanjaya Mishra
Education Specialist: Technology-Enabled Learning

### Frugal AI: A Blueprint for digital sovereignty in Commonwealth education

Mr Ricky Cheng
Knowledge Services Manager

### Driving skills for resilient communities: Empowering women and girls at PCF11 and beyond

Ms Frances J. Ferreira
Senior Adviser: Women and Girls

### Building resilient TVET systems through skills for productive and resilient lives

Mr Robert Okinda
Adviser: Skills

WEBINAR SERIES

## Beyond the Forum: Rethinking Open Education Together

A BI-MONTHLY SERIES EXPLORING PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Now live! For details on this webinar series, visit: https://www.col.org/post-pcf11-webinars/

# Honorary Fellows

The title 'Honorary Fellow of the Commonwealth of Learning' recognises outstanding contributions to distance education in leadership, service, and published works, such as courseware, lectures, presentations, and mentorship.

Presented at every Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, the latest honorary fellows were announced on 10 September 2025 at PCF11. COL conferred the title on five eminent individuals from across the Commonwealth.

## Conferred at PCF11

COL VP presents Professor Mark Brown of New Zealand with his COL Honorary Fellows citation at ICDE Conference, New Zealand, 2025.

**Professor Mark Brown (New Zealand)**
*Global leadership in advancing quality, innovation and lifelong learning through digital education.*
Professor Mark Brown has been a leading figure in open and digital learning for over three decades. His research on micro-credentials, quality assurance, and blended learning has shaped international policy through the OECD and European Commission. His leadership in New Zealand and Ireland has set benchmarks for excellence in online and lifelong education worldwide.

**Professor Ioana Tuugalei Chan Mow (Samoa)**
*Pioneering work in technology-enabled learning and digital inclusion across the Pacific.*

Professor Ioana Chan Mow has led the integration of technology-enabled learning at the National University of Samoa and throughout the region. Through COL-supported initiatives in digital literacy, open courseware, and ICT policy, she has championed innovations that expand learning opportunities. Her leadership in open access and Pacific Open Courses has created new pathways for learners across island nations.

Honorary Fellows ceremony:
https://youtu.be/sod9SLme4yE

**Dr Evelyn Nonyongo (South Africa)**
*Lifelong leadership in open and distance learning, advancing equity and access to higher education across Southern Africa.*

Dr Evelyn Nonyongo has been a pioneer of open and distance learning for decades. She developed the Distance University Student Support Programme (DUSSPRO), opening higher education to black South Africans during apartheid, and helped establish UNISA's Certificate for Practitioners of Distance Education. Her work through DEASA and COL transformed distance education into a powerful instrument for inclusion and social justice.

**Senator the Honourable Professor Prakash Persad (Trinidad and Tobago)**
*Leadership in widening access to tertiary education and linking innovation with national development across the Caribbean.*

Senator the Honourable Professor Prakash Persad has advanced open, online, and flexible learning through his stewardship of the University of Trinidad and Tobago. He led the University's transition to digital delivery and championed community-based outreach connecting education with local industry. His pioneering work in applied AI and robotics continues to bridge the gap between technology, learning, and sustainable development.

**Honourable Dr Kaviraj Sharma Sukon, Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research (Mauritius)**
*Distinguished contribution to building innovative, accessible higher education systems in Mauritius and beyond.*

Honourable Dr Kaviraj Sharma Sukon transformed the Open University of Mauritius into a financially independent, ISO-certified institution serving over 13,000 learners. A mathematician, researcher, and policy leader, he guided national strategies in science, research and innovation, including the launch of Mauritius's first nano-satellite. His vision has positioned open and distance learning as a cornerstone of educational progress across Africa.


Vice-Chancellor of Botswana Open University, Professor Kgomotso Moahi delivers welcome remarks at PCF11 plenary.

Interview

# PCF11 opening Botswana to the world

## A conversation with the Vice-Chancellor of Botswana Open University

As co-host and implementing agency of PCF11, Botswana Open University (BOU) delivered with COL and the Ministry of Higher Education one of the world's most significant education gatherings on open learning. Following the Forum, Dean Pogas, Director: Strategic Engagement at COL, interviewed the Vice-Chancellor of BOU, Professor Kgomotso Moahi about the Forum, its national impact, and the legacy for open learning in Botswana and the Commonwealth.

**Q: PCF11 was years in the making, with the Forum returning to Africa after nearly a decade. As the implementing agency for BOU and co-host with COL and Botswana's Ministry of Higher Education, what has this experience meant for your university and the country?**

We were humbled and honoured to have had the opportunity. The experience exceeded all our expectations. For BOU, it reaffirmed what we have always known — that when called upon, we rise to the occasion. With ten previous PCFs, each so successful and focused, we asked ourselves if we could live up to that high standard. But through the commitment and resilience of staff at BOU, and with support from COL and the Ministry of Higher Education, we did.

It cemented our position as an open university to be reckoned with, both regionally, across Africa, and internationally. We're just eight years old, but we've now been placed firmly on the map. The conference gave us a platform to demonstrate our capabilities and reliability as a partner.

Equally important, it gave BOU colleagues and myself a chance to participate in discussions of global relevance, such as, artificial intelligence, micro-credentials, employability, and the shift from long academic programmes toward shorter, skills-based learning. We've also come away with new knowledge and confidence to advance Botswana's Vision 2036 and for BOU to become a globally recognised university.

**Q: PCF11 has been a truly inspiring gathering in Botswana, a nation rich in culture, heritage, and vision. With the Forum's theme, 'Innovation for Open Education: Fostering Resilient Societies for Economic Development,' what has the reflection on education been for Botswana?**

For the Ministry of Higher Education, PCF11 placed a spotlight on open education, an area that often receives less attention but is vital for ensuring access and inclusivity. The lead-up to the forum involved radio and television interviews that helped bring open and distance learning into the national conversation.

As the Honourable Prince Maele, Minister of Higher Education of Botswana put it, his Ministry has become a 'ministry of firsts.' For example, this was the first time since the current government took office that a ministry hosted an international conference of this scale. Beyond policy, such events have tangible benefits — they stimulate the local economy, support tourism, and open doors to collaboration. For me, it truly warmed my heart to see Botswana opened to the world through ODL.

**Q: A number of Education Ministers from the Commonwealth came to PCF11, where we saw a high level of engagement, including in panel discussions, parallel sessions, and technical briefings. Key outcomes from PCF11 also culminated in the Gaborone Statement, in which seven Collective Actions were outlined. What is your reflection of these outcomes when it comes to the impact for Botswana?**

The Gaborone Statement aligns strongly with our national priorities, such as equity, inclusivity, and access. These are central to our government's human rights-based approach to education. Through open learning, we now see even greater potential to advance those goals.

What we're seeing is a shift from knowledge to skills in education — ensuring graduates are equipped to meet the needs of the economy. For example, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has become a top priority for Botswana, specifically with a draft national TVET policy developed, and we're revitalising technical education centres to attract more young people into practical, employment-creating pathways.

Bridging the digital divide as mentioned in the Gaborone Statement is equally critical. The government's Smart Botswana project is expanding connectivity to schools, clinics, and community centres — these centres known locally as 'kgotlas.' These are village meeting places where people gather; we are equipping them to ensure they have the digital tools needed for learning. Indeed the Government is focused on digitilisation as a catalyst for economic development.

We are also working on authentic assessments where with the rise of AI, we're exploring how technology can enhance inclusion and assessments — leveraging learner data to design fair, personalised evaluations rather than viewing AI as a threat. In addition, BOU has participated in the COL-AFTRA Beyond Numbers Project, aimed at scaling quality teacher development through through OER and ODL.

**Q: From the keynotes and panels to the parallel sessions and networking activities, collaboration and partnerships were central to PCF11. What have been the learning moments that have crystalised possibilities for collaboration?**

Listening to how others are tackling shared challenges was enlightening. It showed us that our struggles are not unique to Botswana and that solutions already exist. For example, during the Vice-Chancellors' Forum, we heard from Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paloma Mohamed from the University of Guyana on their 'Open AI' policy, which is a practical framework that others can adapt. While Minister Sukon showcased the University of Mauritius' national OER repository and work on a national micro-credentials framework. These exchanges showed that we don't need to reinvent the wheel; the expertise already exists within the Commonwealth, and we can leverage that through partnerships and collaboration.

Listening to how others are tackling shared challenges was enlightening. It showed us that our struggles are not unique in Botswana and that solutions already exist.

**Q: In reflection on how much was accomplished at PCF11 and the ability to bring Commonwealth education stakeholders together — what do you hope delegates take away from PCF11?**

I hope they are left with a deep sense of connection and possibility. Many of us gained new insights, even on familiar topics, through the exchange of ideas and best practices. I believe we achieved our objectives: to share experiences, learn from others, and forge partnerships for future cooperation.

On innovation, I was particularly struck by discussions on AI. If we can harness it correctly, AI can become a powerful tool for progress rather than something to fear. Technology is never neutral, but we can define how it serves us — making sure it benefits society as a whole with the proper guardrails.

Culturally, it was heartening to see delegates embrace Botswana — visiting local landmarks, wearing our national colours, and celebrating our traditions at the culturally-infused gala celebration. It's a reminder that culture, education, and opportunity are deeply intertwined.

Finally, what moved me perhaps the most was the scale of participation — from His Excellency President Boko and members of Cabinet and Parliament, to diplomats and 18 Vice-Chancellors. I've attended many conferences, but have never seen one with that level of presence. It was deeply humbling and a powerful reminder of what we can achieve when we come together. ■

# MEDIA

## IN THE NEWS:
## PCF11 draws media attention across the Commonwealth for innovation

PCF11 drew significant media attention, with more than 30 news stories published during the Forum, many from well beyond Botswana. From the United Kingdom and Samoa to South Africa and the Caribbean, media outlets reported on developments from Gaborone, spotlighting advances in open learning across the Commonwealth. Both small and major platforms carried stories from the Forum, including Botswana's national broadcaster.

Throughout the week, PCF11 served as a central media hub for dialogue and knowledge exchange with journalists covering a wide range of stories, interviewing subject-matter experts, and following key moments, such as the launch of COL's Frugal AI platform, the introduction of the Gaborone Statement, keynote addresses, innovations in ODL, and COL's conferment of its Honorary Fellows.

COL's social media engagement further broadened the Forum's reach. Delegates, government partners, and stakeholders shared updates across Facebook, LinkedIn, and X/Twitter, helping amplify PCF11's key outcomes and learning in real time.


## THE KNOWLEDGE ROOM: Voices that inspire learning

New to PCF, the Knowledge Room served as a media hub, bringing together Ministers, keynote speakers, COL staff, and subject-matter experts to share insights from the Forum. Set up as a studio, the space explored a wide range of topics, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities facing Commonwealth Member Countries as they navigate the critical issues of sustainable open education.

COL Director: Skills, Dr Jyotsna Jha, interviews PCF11 keynote Paloma Mohamed Martin and Professor Sharath Ananthamurthy, Vice-Chancellor, Kuvempu University on changing public perceptions of open education and how inclusive leadership is shaping the evolution of educational institutions.

More than a dozen interviews were conducted, featuring Professor Tim Drysdale from The University of Edinburgh discussing the potential of remote labs, and a dialogue between the Honourable Minister Cheryl Husbands of Barbados and the Honourable Dr Kaviraj Sukon of Mauritius on harnessing the human potential of open learning. Other discussions covered developing graduate employability frameworks, advancing disability inclusion, and expanding micro-credentials, reflecting the diversity of conversations at PCF11.

The Knowledge Room brought these ideas to life through interviews, digital stories, and quick commentary, generating content that extended the Forum's impact far beyond Gaborone and will continue to inspire COL's future learning initiatives.

## Ministers tackle challenges and opportunities facing youth employability and small states

A strong ministerial presence helped shape the conversations at PCF11, with eight Ministerial representatives actively participating throughout the Forum. Their engagement brought lively dialogue, often centred on how the Commonwealth's collective strength can advance sustainable open learning to meet the diverse needs of Member Countries. Their engagement included two ministerial panels: one on Small States and the Commonwealth and another on Employability, Prior Learning, and Credentialing for Enhanced Youth Engagement. Both panels highlighted how Commonwealth Member States can learn from one another, serve as incubators of innovation, and address shared challenges through collective action.

Beyond the plenary panels, Ministers came together for a closed ministerial roundtable that led to the development of the Gaborone Statement. The seven collective actions outlined in the statement reflect PCF11's key priorities, build on CHOGM 2024, and draw on earlier work from PCF10 in Calgary. Together, Ministers set these collective actions as a roadmap for advancing sustainable open learning across the Commonwealth, which were introduced at the Forum's closing ceremony and adopted by delegates.

Throughout the three days of PCF11, COL also launched a new Ministerial Technical Track to give Ministers direct access to subject-matter expertise. These closed, issue-focused sessions connected Ministers with COL specialists and external experts for tailored briefings on pressing topics, including COL's Frugal AI platform, AI-enhanced teacher development, authentic assessment practices, graduate employability, micro-credentials, and vocational training. Such ministerial-level exchanges will play an important role in guiding future collaborative action well beyond Gaborone.

Ministerial panel on youth employability: https://commonwealthoflearning.info/pcf11-ministerial-panel-2


Educational Ministerial representatives discuss how to strengthen youth employability, recognize prior learning, and improve credentialing pathways in panel session. Pictured from left to right: The Honourable Cheryl Husbands, Minister of Training and Tertiary Education, Technological and Vocational Training, Barbados; the Honourable Sarjoh Aziz-Kamara, Deputy Minister of Technical and Higher Education, Sierra Leone; the Honourable Dr Kaviraj Sukon, Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research, Mauritius; the Honourable Dr MM Gondwe, Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training, South Africa.

## COL Focal Points strengthen networks for advancing open learning

COL welcomed its Focal Points to join the plenary and parallel sessions at PCF11 and hosted a dedicated breakfast meeting to facilitate engagement. The gathering offered the COL team a valuable opportunity to connect with Focal Points from across the regions, creating a shared space for reflections, practical insights, and forward-looking suggestions on open learning. For many, the chance to meet fellow Focal Points in person and to build networks has traditionally been a key outcome of PCF.

Education Ministry Focal Points play an important role across the Commonwealth, providing the necessary feedback to inform ongoing work, flagging areas where ODL initiatives should be considered, acting as a coordinator among different education ministries and institutions, and advising COL on Commonwealth Member Country matters.

FOCUS

# Glimpses of PCF11

The Eleventh Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF11) welcomed over 400 delegates from 48 countries, including 44 Commonwealth Member States, to the Gaborone International Convention Centre from 10 to 12 September 2025. COL hosted the event with Botswana's Ministry of Higher Education and Botswana Open University. This triennial Forum focused on the theme, 'Innovative Open Education: Fostering Resilient Societies for Sustainable Economic Development.'

Highlights included:

- Keynote sessions that shared innovative ideas in open learning
- Engaging plenaries, including Ministers and Vice-Chancellor panels
- Over 50 sessions that focused on collaboration and knowledge exchange
- Cultural exchange sharing the vibrancy of Botswana, including gala celebration, markets and tradeshow exhibition

## Botswana President opens PCF11

His Excellency, **President Advocate Duma Gideon Boko**, officially opened PCF11 on the first morning of the Forum. In his remarks, President Boko stressed the importance of creativity and innovation in building a knowledge-based economy.

He emphasised that resilience and sustainability in today's world depend on the ability of nations to generate new knowledge, nurture innovation, and embrace creativity.

## COL launches new publications highlighting cutting edge research


COL kicked the first evening off with a warm welcome from Professor Peter Scott and Professor Kgomotso Moahi, Vice-Chancellor of Botswana Open University.
The evening set the tone for an engaging programme, as COL Education Specialists and Advisers unveiled a series of new publications. These works highlight cutting-edge research, compelling case studies, and innovative practices from across the Commonwealth, covering a diverse range of educational topics. Explore these and more available on OAsis, COL's open access repository https://oasis.col.org/.

## Asa Briggs Lecture

**Professor Elifas Tozo Bisanda**, UNESCO Chair and former Vice-Chancellor of The Open University of Tanzania presented The Changing Landscape of Open and Distance Learning in Africa lecture. The Asa Briggs Lecture honours the founding Chairman of COL's Board of Governors.

## More than 50 parallel and poster sessions

The parallel and poster sessions showcased an array of research and community-driven solutions across the Forum's four sub-themes. This highlighted creativity, resilience, and global collaboration driving inclusive education across regions, from Africa and Asia to the Pacific and Caribbean.

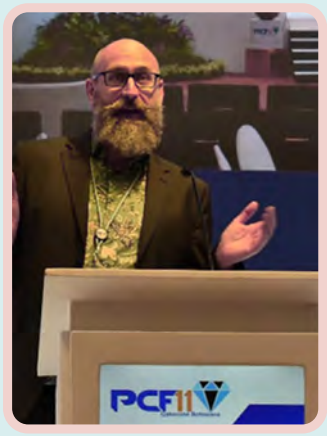
## Gala celebration

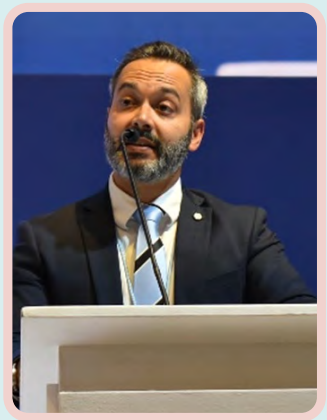
On the second evening, the Botswana Ministry of Higher Education hosted a vibrant gala that delighted guests with an unforgettable celebration that showcased Botswana's rich heritage through music, dance and culinary experiences, creating a warm and festive atmosphere for all attendees.

## Keynotes

Professor **Paloma Mohamed Martin**, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana shared a bold vision for how education can transform families, empower communities, and shape nations. Her keynote highlighted the liberating power of education to create not just successful students, but citizens who can thrive anywhere in the world.

Professor **Timothy D. Drysdale**, Chair of Technology Enhanced Science Education and Director of Strategic Digital Education, School of Engineering, The University of Edinburgh described that change in education is never easy, but that is essential. "Edinburgh resisted new lab spaces for decades. Today, we face similar challenges in creating a third space for teaching and tech. Success requires teams working across courses with dedicated time to innovate."





Professor **Rajiv Jhangiani**, Vice Provost, Teaching and Learning at Brock University called for approaches that go beyond the classroom: self-directed learning, collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and bridging formal and informal learning. "Education for sustainable development is not just about content, it demands action-oriented, transformative pedagogy."

Dr **Daniel Tau**, Founding Vice-Chancellor of Botswana Open University reflected on how strong institutions and inclusive innovation can transform open education into a driver of resilience and sustainable development.

COMING NEXT ISSUE:

## COL strengthens ties with India

On 29 October, the Consul General of India in Vancouver, Mr Masakui Rungsung, visited the new COL headquarters in downtown Vancouver ahead of the President's visit to India in November 2025. Coverage of the November visit will appear in the next issue of Connections, including a deep dive into the work of COL's New Delhi office, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA).

A key strength of the CEMCA team is its leadership in inclusion and disability. For example, the 'Go Red for Dyslexia' campaign, which originated in India and COL has championed across Commonwealth Asia. The programme has recently been incorporated into the Maldivian education system by the Government of the Maldives.

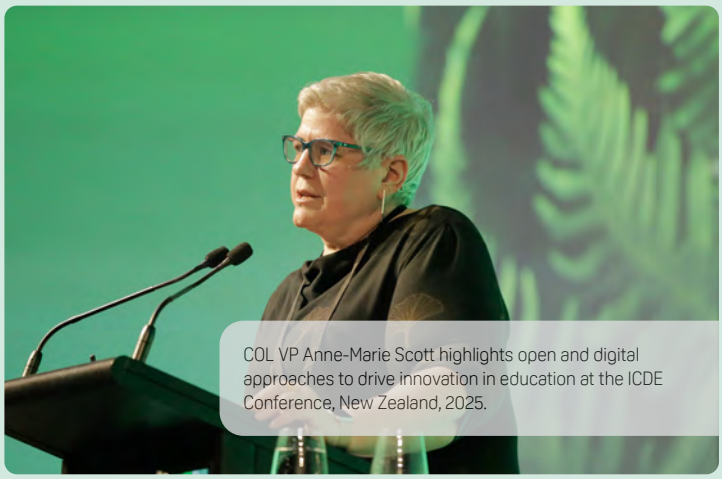
## PCF11 Plus

**Beyond the Forum brings together accepted papers based on the themes of the Eleventh Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, extending the dialogue beyond the conference through webinars and related online events.**

Collection of PCF11 Plus papers:
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5972

## Strengthening Pacific partnerships at ICDE conference

As a global leader in open education, COL participated in the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) World Conference in Wellington, New Zealand, in November 2025, contributing to discussions on quality assurance and educational innovation. COL's Vice President, Anne-Marie Scott, was an invited speaker at the Educational Policy Forum, where she emphasised the need to innovate in the face of increasing educational need and diminishing resources and underscored value for money as the key consideration for most funders. Using practical examples drawn from COL's work in the Pacific region, she outlined that embracing open and digital approaches to education is a proven and cost-effective innovation strategy.



COL VP Anne-Marie Scott highlights open and digital approaches to drive innovation in education at the ICDE Conference, New Zealand, 2025.

Key takeaways from the conference included the clear strength of Commonwealth thinking on micro-credentials, with Malaysia and Australia, in particular, sharing their world-leading approaches to opening up skills education and creating high-quality, stackable credentials.

The importance of explicitly designing for inclusion and diverse learner needs as a cost-effective and sustainable approach was consistently underscored through a focus on inclusive course design and various proven models for academic and pastoral care.

Strong and compelling visions for Commonwealth educational leadership and the transformative role of tertiary learning institutions in opening access to education were offered in keynotes by Professor Puleng LenkaBula, Vice-Chancellor of UNISA (South Africa), and Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith from Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi (New Zealand).

Attending the conference also provided a valuable opportunity to connect with COL collaborators from across the Pacific region, including the University of the South Pacific, the New Zealand Qualifications Agency and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, with whom a highly successful, five-year-funded project has recently concluded.

Over 30 High Commissioners and stakeholders gathered to explore how the Commonwealth can expand learning opportunities for its 2.7 billion citizens, Ottawa, Canada, 2025.

## High Commissioners in Ottawa discuss how learning creates value for the Commonwealth

COL President Professor Peter Scott led an engagement session in Ottawa in October 2025 with over 30 Commonwealth High Commissioners and other stakeholders to discuss COL's work in advancing shared priorities in Canada and around the world. The discussion focused on how learning, technology, and multilateral cooperation can strengthen Commonwealth Member Countries amid pressure on education systems.

Co-hosted by Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the event opened with remarks from COL Board of Governors member Ms Emi Furuya, Director General of the International Organisation and Human Rights Bureau at GAC. Professor Scott then delivered his presentation, 'Impactful multilateralism through education: How the Commonwealth of Learning creates value throughout the world.'

The session also explored how ODL can support disadvantaged communities; the potential of frugal AI in low-bandwidth contexts; the role of learning systems in helping small island states respond to climate shocks; and the value of skills-focused micro-credentials for improving employability. After the presentation, His Excellency Chinmoy Naik, Deputy High Commissioner of India, outlined India's education and sustainable development priorities, highlighting major investments in digital innovation and AI-enabled learning, as well as the importance of inclusive education that opens opportunities for all learners.

Throughout the conversation, High Commissioners returned to a central theme: the growing need for educational cooperation and leveraging the strengths of the Commonwealth at a time when multilateralism is under pressure, and the vital role COL plays in helping Commonwealth Member Countries expand opportunities through scalable, inclusive open learning.


High Commissioners reflect on how the Commonwealth strengthens collaboration in education and sustainability, Canada, 2025.

## Highlighting ethical standards at UNESCO Digital Learning Week

As a leader in OER and a strong advocate for Digital Public Goods across the Commonwealth, COL contributed to discussions on openness and equity in education at UNESCO's Digital Learning Week in Paris in September 2025. Speaking alongside panellists from Brazil, the UK, UNESCO, and South Africa, COL's Vice-President, Anne-Marie Scott, outlined the definition of an Open Source AI System and highlighted the opportunities an 'open' approach offers in the evolving AI space.

Under the overarching theme 'AI and the Future of Education: Disruptions, Dilemmas and Directions,' she highlighted how openness can empower educational institutions to exercise greater agency in their technology choices, strengthen collaboration, and adopt and share more ethical approaches. "If society can develop ethical standards for consumer goods with complicated histories, such as Fairtrade tea, then those similar principles can guide the use of educational technologies, helping ensure that the benefits of AI are realised responsibly."

# Partnership for ODFL in the Pacific: From vision to a resilient, inclusive learning model

Youth participants engage in practical techniques as part of the Basic Agriculture Skills course at the National University of Samoa, Upolu, Samoa, 2025.

Launched by COL in 2020 with support from New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) and regional leadership from PACFOLD at the University of the South Pacific, the Partnership for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) set out to strengthen Pacific education systems and expand access for those most often left behind, youth and women. Five years on, the partnership has worked across nine island countries, engaging more than 7,200 teachers, around 100 officials and well over 5,000 youth — becoming a regional model for flexible, inclusive learning and crisis-ready systems.

## FROM VISION TO ACTION

Designed in 2019 through a multistage consultative process, ODFL was officially launched in November 2020 with PACFOLD as the regional coordination hub. Early delivery coincided with COVID-19, and COL mobilised quickly through country Focal Points. In the early months, a rapidly growing OER collection, now over 300 Pacific-contextualised resources, helped teachers keep learning going, which provided immediate, practical support. Consultations with ministries and providers also shaped an online TVET Toolkit that would later be refreshed for Pacific culture and low bandwidth use. Regular regional coordination included discussions that built on PCF10's focus on resilient systems.

## TRAINING TEACHERS, EMPOWERING LEARNERS

Delivery was guided by three pillars: (1) teachers; (2) TVET educators, and; (3) youth. A suite of MOOCs and regional workshops were offered throughout the period, reaching more than 7,000 educators. Completion and satisfaction data were continuously collected and used to inform ongoing improvements. Targeted micro-credentials and short policy courses helped education officials understand how to integrate ODFL approaches into planning and policy frameworks across the region. Innovative, AI-supported OER tools piloted with STEM teachers enabled educators to co-create culturally relevant lessons at speed and share them across the region. Courses were delivered in blended, in-person, online, and offline modes so remote teachers could participate despite connectivity gaps.

## YOUTH AND WOMEN AT THE HEART OF CHANGE

Community outreach, delivered through a network of local NGOs, brought practical skills to young people, especially women. Training covered entrepreneurship, small business basics, and digital skills. Local facilitators also mentored learners to apply what they learned. Reflections in the project, with two-thirds of participants being women, showed tangible livelihood gains. Among FRIEND Fiji graduates, 55 percent found employment and 27 percent started a business — a pattern echoed in other sites where cohorts reported new jobs or microenterprises.

## TECHNOLOGY AND EVIDENCE FOR RESILIENCE

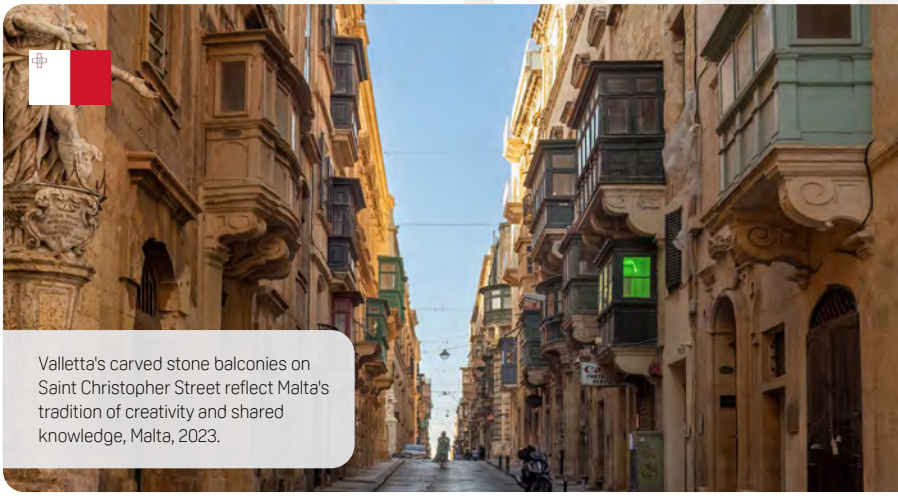
The partnership also invested in tools and know-how that protect education data and services during crises, while respecting data sovereignty. As ministries' preferences evolved, COL shifted from a cloud-first concept to hybrid solutions (e.g., incountry backups, power protection, and targeted training) and supported recovery efforts, such as deploying MoodleCloud to quickly restore teaching after disruptions. Alongside, OER repositories were consolidated for easier search and use, and a regional habit of data-informed, participatory learning took root, which strengthened policy and planning across the islands.

## A LASTING IMPACT

An independent final evaluation was conducted against MFAT aligned criteria for efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, inclusion, and resilience. The evaluation found that the initiative not only met, but in many cases exceeded targets, in particular delivering strong value for money. Most importantly, these outcomes leave behind lasting gains in enhanced digital literacy, improved teacher competence, and more resilient systems from the community level to ministry leadership.

# Our Commonwealth

## Small states, big lessons: How Malta and 3CL advance ethical digital learning



Valletta's carved stone balconies on Saint Christopher Street reflect Malta's tradition of creativity and shared knowledge, Malta, 2023.

Since its inception in 2017, the Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning (3CL) Foundation in Malta has sought to serve as a bridge between the Commonwealth and the European Union in shaping ethical and transformative approaches to educational technology. As one of 33 Small States in the Commonwealth, Malta's compact geography, combined with its status as the most densely populated country in the EU (316 square kilometres with over 574,000 inhabitants), provides a distinctive testbed for innovation in digital education.

Conceived as a LearnTech catalyst, 3CL serves as a hub where ideas, policy, and research converge to explore how technology can empower rather than exploit learners. 3CL's work has consistently highlighted how small states, with their agility and close-knit communities, can pilot and refine educational models that later find global relevance.

Malta's position as both an EU and Commonwealth member has enabled 3CL to collaborate across regions and policy frameworks. Initiatives launched in Malta have often scaled beyond its shores, such as the development of a nation-state blockchain system for verifiable, self-sovereign credentials, research on critical digital literacies and resilience to information disorders, and ongoing investigations into how generative AI reshapes the multigenerational workplace. Such initiatives reflect 3CL's belief that small states are not peripheral actors, but pivotal contributors to global EdTech and open learning ecosystems.

Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, 3CL's new Chair and a leading scholar on small states, reminds us that when confronted with knowledge and data, many citizens face four threats: apathy, cynicism, illiteracy, and monopoly power, just like the four ghosts chasing the video game Pac-Man. This 'race' must contend with at least four nuances for small states: politics is up close and personal; voter turnout is high when elections are held; specialisation must be nimble and grounded in lived reality, and everyone is at most one degree of separation away from everyone else.

The Commonwealth's Small States share these dynamics, but they also bring a remarkable capacity to experiment, adapt, and collaborate. Their scale enables them to implement systemic innovations more quickly than larger nations, often hindered by bureaucracy or fragmentation. They can model approaches to connected learning that are participatory, inclusive, and grounded in community trust. Such an approach also aligns with Collective Action 7 of PCF11's Gaborone Statement, which speaks to cross-cutting commitments — strengthening the resilience of small and vulnerable states and supporting the skills, knowledge, and systems needed to advance Commonwealth principles.

> **Malta's position as both an EU and Commonwealth member has enabled 3CL to collaborate across regions and policy frameworks.**

The 3CL Strategic Plan reflects this spirit of collaboration. It focuses on interoperable systems of learning, supports trustworthy digital identities, and promotes digital literacy as a civic right. 3CL also continues to explore the reflexive relationship between emerging technologies and society, including how tools like AI, blockchain, and open platforms reshape power relations and knowledge access across generations and geographies.

As COL renews its commitment to openness and lifelong learning, it is worth recalling that innovation often flourishes where constraints are greatest. Small states, from Malta to the Maldives, Barbados to Lesotho, offer fertile ground for testing the future of education: agile, connected, and human-centred. The Commonwealth can lead by recognising and amplifying these models, ensuring that scale never limits ambition, and that learning, wherever it happens, remains open, ethical, and transformative.

Looking ahead, 3CL is eager to deepen its collaboration with COL and its Commonwealth and European partners to ensure that small states continue to shape the future of connected learning. The lessons learned in intimate, agile contexts, such as Malta, can illuminate pathways for transforming education systems at any scale. ■

For more information on the 3CL's operations, visit www.3CL.org.

# The Caribbean

## Expanding access to quality learning-opportunities

Commonwealth Small States continue to demonstrate that their size does not limit capacity to influence global development, especially when they work together to strengthen their education systems and utilise information and communication technologies. A case in point is the Caribbean, where countries align their regional education priorities through a coherent set of intergovernmental policies and instruments that guide collaboration in education. This focus was also reflected at PCF11, where Caribbean and small states helped shape session conversations that uniquely impact their education and skills agenda.

Central to these efforts is the Caribbean Community Human Resource Development 2030 Strategy, which was endorsed by Heads of Government in 2017. The strategy outlines a seamless human resource development system built around four pillars: access and participation, equity, quality, and relevance — across basic education, lifelong skills, and tertiary education. It also calls for regional action within the framework of UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the 2030 Agenda, with implementation organised through three Regional Action Plan cycles extending to 2029.

COL has a long history of collaborating and partnering in the Caribbean to support Commonwealth Member Countries in the development and implementation of open learning that supports country policies and institutional development. An example of this is the MOU signed in August 2025 with the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, aimed at working together to build flexible and resilient education systems, covering a wide range of COL strategies, such as developing knowledge infrastructure and creating and sharing Open Educational Resources. COL also signed an MOU with the Caribbean Examination Council in 2024 (CXC), allowing both organisations to work together in the region in areas of mutual interest and expertise, including in the development of a regulatory approach for a Caribbean Micro-credentialing Framework.

The Caribbean will also have a significant opportunity in 2026 to showcase its educational leadership when it hosts the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda. From 1 to 4 November 2026, Ministers and other leaders will reaffirm Commonwealth values, strengthen collaboration to drive sustainable investment, and advance shared prosperity across the Commonwealth, under the theme 'Accelerating Partnerships and Investment for a Prosperous Commonwealth.'

## Small states leading together

In September 2025, ahead of PCF11 in Botswana, the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) convened its pre-forum seminar. Organised by the VUSSC initiative, the seminar brought together the VUSSC Management Committee, VUSSC Voices presenters, and project leads, to plan the next phase of VUSSC's work for a new youth worker initiative.

The session invited participants to reflect on current VUSSC projects, align efforts across Commonwealth regions in support of youth and inclusion, plan collaborations for 2025 to 2027, and shape a framework for youth worker micro-credentials. Integrated into the wider PCF11 experience, its outcomes were intended to inform both the Forum and the VUSSC Implementation Plan directly. Meeting face-to-face for the first time in several years, Management Committee members from across the Commonwealth reviewed VUSSC's portfolio, considered the findings of COL's mid-term evaluation, and clarified where the Committee can add value in the next cycle of implementation.

This work has resulted in an updated Implementation Plan for 2025 to 2027. The plan builds on initiatives such as the VUSSC Voices series, policy and AI reviews in ODL, inclusive education work with institutions, such as NAMCOL in Namibia, and the Advancing Caribbean Teachers (ACT) in Mathematics project.

The Management Committee is positioned as both a governance body and a practical mechanism through which Commonwealth Small States can advise on priorities, share experiences, and help ensure that VUSSC remains aligned with COL's wider education programme. Their work and the decisions made in Gaborone exemplify a style of leadership that is collaborative, evidence-informed, and grounded in the realities of small states, as evidenced in their paper, *Changing Mindsets for Inclusive Open Education: The VUSSC Leadership Initiative*.

The pre-forum session helped to identify a set of related workstreams for the


VUSSC pre-forum seminar at PCF11, convened to bring together the VUSSC Management Committee, VUSSC Voices presenters, and project leads for the youth worker initiative at BOU.

Implementation Plan. One focuses on transplanting an earlier VUSSC youth worker project from the Pacific to Southern Africa for rollout by Botswana Open University. Another scales the ACT in Mathematics project beyond its first cohort in St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines to new cohorts in Barbados, Dominica, and Grenada, building a wider community of practice in technology-enabled mathematics teaching.

The plan also sustains the Farmer Field School Project with the Kalinago people in Dominica as a reference model for skills, food security, and AI-supported agriculture, and deepens collaboration with CXC and Caribbean ministries of education on leadership development, AI integration, ICT in education policies, and a micro-credential credit transfer framework. In parallel, the Management Committee has endorsed a Pacific portfolio that draws on these Caribbean experiences in areas such as re-engaging out-of-school boys, strengthening mathematics education, and AI for teachers.

Taken together, these workstreams link classroom practice, institutional capacity building, and system-level policy work. They demonstrate how approaches initially tested in one region can inform planning in others, with the Management Committee accompanying implementation, advising on adaptations, and facilitating connections across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Americas, and the Pacific.

Within this broader picture, the youth worker initiative was a focal point of the seminar. Two courses, Youth Rights, Civic Engagement and Political Participation, and Youth Employability and Entrepreneurship, were presented for feedback and refinement to be delivered as micro-credentials by BOU starting January 2026. These courses are designed to strengthen youth workers' capacity to support young people's participation in civic life and to facilitate pathways to decent work in Botswana and small states in Southern Africa.

The first course introduces key concepts related to youth and labour rights, supporting youth workers in designing activities that encourage meaningful civic and political engagement. The second focuses on entrepreneurship in local contexts and offers practical tools for guiding young people through the steps involved in starting and sustaining small enterprises. Both courses are competency-based, and on successful completion, participants will receive digital badges issued by BOU as a portable record of achievement within emerging qualification frameworks.

As the Commonwealth moves towards CHOGM with renewed attention to small states and VUSSC, the experience in Botswana offers a useful reference point. It demonstrates how small states can utilise collaborative structures, such as the VUSSC Management Committee, to establish direction, co-design programs, and ensure that regional priorities remain visible within COL's broader agenda. The workstreams agreed upon in Gaborone, particularly those centred on youth, inclusive education, micro-credentials, agriculture, and institutional capacity building, are already shaping VUSSC's projections for the next phase of COL's programme, as well as wider Commonwealth discussions on education and skills.

## Open learning as the business of resilient learning

Prior to 2024, COL began a programme with the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech-Ja) to build resilience through open and distance learning (ODL). We kicked off with a status review study, as an essential first step to ground subsequent actions. The study recommended an explicit ODL policy with disaster-ready strategies; tools and protocols to protect assessment integrity; reduced reliance on synchronous delivery; sustained faculty development; clear student requirements and systematic use of open educational resources (OER). Based on these findings in 2024, COL developed a policy together to consolidate institutional commitment and an implementation plan to support teaching excellence and scale learner-centred delivery.

For 2025, we extended our support with capacity building, culminating in a deep-dive October workshop on instructional design and OER to drive policy implementation to the next level. To begin this phase, we focused on understanding contemporary learner needs; configuring Moodle course shells; storyboarding one lesson for flexible delivery; discovering, licensing and adapting OER. For UTech-Ja this involved understanding contemporary learner needs in the context of flexible delivery. Initially, this involved leveraging the power of OER to discover, license, and adapt them for the new context. Next, the focus was on applying motivational and inclusive design.

Motivational design allows for the use of simple additions such as badges, conditional release, leaderboards and quiz tools to connect learners to outcomes. Inclusive design requires attention to accessibility checklists, such as captions, alt text and contrast levels.

> **UTech-Jaand COL are building an Open Education ecosystem that is resilient, equitable, and future-ready.**

Two notable implementations in UTech-Ja sessions signalled rapid transfer to practice. One participant launched a student-facing chatbot to clarify content and deadlines, and another produced an interactive video with embedded questions to monitor engagement in real time. UTech-Ja is now finalising a list of 15 pilot courses spanning health sciences, education, business, law, architecture, and computing. Next steps after this work will turn capability gains into institutionalisation. Priorities include finalising and adopting learner support guidelines tailored to UTech-Ja's student profiles; finalising and operationalising the business model with clear cost structures, revenue streams, and reinvestment for quality and embedding quality assurance loops that connect programme design, delivery, assessment, and improvement.

COL Adviser: Higher Education, Professor Jane-Frances Agbu reflects, "UTech-Ja and COL are building an open education ecosystem that is resilient, equitable, and future-ready, capable of sustaining learning continuity, maintaining academic integrity, and expanding access to high-quality, flexible education across Jamaica and beyond."

# TOP 5 Tips for leveraging digital technologies ethically and equitably

The Gaborone Statement, adopted at PCF11, calls for the ethical use of the digital dividend and the promotion of Open Learning as Digital Public Goods (DPGs) within *Collective Action 3*. DPGs are open-source artefacts, such as software, data, and content, that adhere to privacy and legal standards, do no harm, and advance the SDGs. This vision also intersects with Collective Action 4: Teachers as Skilled Agents of Change, which focuses on creating flexible, technology-enabled pathways for teaching and learning. With these principles in mind, the following five tips offer useful guidance on how to leverage digital technologies ethically and equitably.

### 1 START WITH ACCESS AND EQUITY

Consider who can utilise and benefit from open educational technologies. Digital public goods should be designed to work across different internet bandwidth conditions, devices, and levels of digital literacy, ensuring that going digital does not inadvertently exclude marginalized communities.

### 2 THINK BEYOND CONTENT TO INFRASTRUCTURE

Open education is more than access to high-quality or low-cost open educational resources. Consider the underlying platforms, tools, and systems that enable creation, distribution, and collaboration, and whether adopting open-source infrastructures can empower communities.

### 3 RECOGNISE THAT "OPEN" IS NOT NEUTRAL

Openly licensed learning resources and technology platforms still embed cultural perspectives, pedagogical approaches, and assumptions about learning. Encourage critical engagement with open resources and support localisation efforts that enable communities to adapt materials and platforms to their contexts.

### 4 EMBED PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION

Implement robust data governance frameworks that give learners transparency and agency over their personal information. Question what data is necessary for learning versus what serves commercial interest. This is especially crucial when working with vulnerable populations, such as children and marginalized communities.

### 5 EMPOWER TEACHERS AND LEARNERS WITH DATA LITERACY AND AGENCY

Include digital citizenship and data rights education as part of open education initiatives. Help teachers and students understand what data they are generating, who has access to it, and how to make informed choices about sharing their educational data.

# Mauritius launches national OER repository at PCF11

The Honourable Dr Kaviraj Sharma Sukon, Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research, officially launched the national OER repository of Mauritius at PCF11, an important milestone in the country's commitment to expanding access to quality education and open learning for all. Dedicating the repository with 88 open courses, Minister Sukon said, "Knowledge is no longer a privilege, it is a right. Our national OER repository puts quality education just one click away for learners who need it the most. He also thanked the COL for the support provided in the development of the repository."

The Mauritius OER Repository offers courses across a range of topics, including science, technology, literature, and even music. Six higher education institutions of Mauritius have contributed to the platform, which is coordinated by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and maintained by the University of Mauritius.

Professor Romeela Mohee, Mauritius Higher Education Commissioner, delivers opening remarks at the launch of the Mauritius National OER Repository, 2025.

The availability of the national repository is a result of the sustained efforts of the Ministry and COL to improve access to quality education and training for all. With the support of COL, Mauritius first developed a national OER policy that supports the achievement of SDG 4. The policy development work was coordinated by the Honourable Dr Sukon while he served as the Director-General of the Open University of Mauritius. Following the adoption of the policy, COL's Education Specialist, Dr Sanjaya Mishra, facilitated a 'training of trainers' workshop on OER to help build local capacities, promote an understanding of open licenses and copyright issues, and to create and adapt OER.

COL also supported the development of the repository at the University of Mauritius and trained local staff to maintain the platform using DSpace technologies. The major boost in OER creation came with the implementation of TEL in six higher education institutions, facilitated by the HEC. This led to capacity building of teachers in developing blended courses, creating OER, and integrating OER into the courses.

In the words of Dr Sukon, "The launch is not the end, it is the beginning of a global wave of change. The future of learning is open and the future of opportunity is limitless with the use of OER and the Mauritius OER Repository."

# The frugal dividend: Ethical AI, frugal innovation and the Gaborone vision

#TECHtrends

Delegates at PCF11 collectively adopted a call to 'leverage the digital dividend ethically' and to 'expand equity with quality at scale,' ensuring that access does not compromise standards.

## THE AI TEST: A CRISIS OF ACCESS AND ETHICS

Today, the rapid rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) presents the first major test of this mandate. The promise is undeniable: personalised tutoring, 24/7 support and enhanced teacher productivity, with the potential to bridge educational gaps.

Yet, the dominant model of AI — large-scale, 'brute-force' systems — can be incompatible with the foundations of the Gaborone Statement. Can we afford an AI future that widens divides? For many Commonwealth countries, this model creates a brute-force access trap and presents profound ethical risks.

The **access trap** highlights how these systems are enormously expensive, straining institutional budgets while requiring massive computing infrastructures and high-bandwidth connectivity that deepen the digital divide. **Algorithmic Bias** emerges when these opaque models trained on vast, unvetted datasets perpetuate historical bias and algorithmic discrimination. At the same time, **data privacy** and student surveillance raise urgent concerns and require strict safeguards. Finally, **pedagogical dependency** becomes ethically concerning when institutions procure 'black box' technologies that can override local pedagogical needs and cultural values. This is not the 'ethical dividend' the Gaborone Statement envisioned at PCF11.

## COL IN ACTION: THE TEACHER AS THE GUARDRAIL

This frugal, ethical model is not theoretical. COL is actively implementing it through the Teacher-in-the-Loop AI (TiL-AI) project. This initiative empowers teachers and TVET trainers to use GenAI to adapt open educational resources (OER) to align with national and local curricula.

This model exemplifies a strong, human-centric approach to ethics. It leverages existing, high-quality OER as its data foundation, using lightweight AI to assist teachers, not replace them.

Most importantly, it is inherently ethical because the teacher serves as the essential human guardrail. Generic AI platforms are not designed with pedagogical knowledge in mind. The TiL-AI model, piloted through co-creative workshops in Ghana, India, Kenya, and Jamaica, ensures that teachers provide the pedagogical alignment, peer review, and cultural resonance that AI alone cannot.

This approach directly supports the Gaborone Statement. It leverages the digital dividend ethically by placing human oversight at the centre and positions teachers as the primary agents of change, ensuring that AI strengthens rather than substitutes their expertise. It achieves equity with quality at scale by creating aligned OER that can be shared as 'digital public goods.' The philosophy underpinning this success is Frugal AI.

## FRUGAL AI: AN INHERENTLY ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The TiL-AI project is a practical application of an alternative, sustainable, and equitable path: Frugal AI.

This approach is more than 'AI-lite'; it is a design philosophy focused on creating systems that are high-performing yet lightweight, cost-effective and accessible, even when resources are limited. Rooted in frugal innovation and resourceful improvisation, it strikes a balance between innovation, sustainability, and equity.

Frugal AI prioritises resource efficiency. Instead of brute-force data harvesting, it practises 'data parsimony,' using only essential, high-quality data. It applies lean algorithms and techniques like transfer learning, which adapts existing models to new contexts, much like repurposing a proven lesson plan — dramatically reducing the energy and data needed for training.

For policymakers, the most powerful aspect of Frugal AI lies in its design principles, which serve as ethical guardrails, demonstrating that trustworthy AI and Frugal AI go hand in hand. These principles include protecting privacy through lightweight deployment that allows AI to run on low-power devices or within a secure AI enclave, ensuring student data remains within the institution or country. Therefore promoting equity by being cost-effective and suited to areas with limited connectivity, helping bridge the digital divide and mitigating bias by relying on smaller, auditable datasets, such as an institution's curriculum or OER, rather than opaque, internet-scale data.

## A 'FRUGAL AND ETHICAL FIRST' AI

There is no dichotomy between innovation and equity. By adopting frugal-and-ethical-first procurement policies and investing in human infrastructure, our teachers, can harness AI to build a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable educational future.

Institutions can begin implementing the Gaborone Statement in the Age of AI with this framework in mind.

- **Prioritise Human Capacity**: Invest in sustained, high-quality teacher training so educators become champions for effective AI integration, not passive users.
- **Mandate Data-Secure Enclaves**: Establish robust data governance protocols, including secure AI enclaves, to safeguard student privacy and promote their well-being.
- **Require Transparency and Audits**: Require AI tools used in education to meet transparency and content-verification standards and undergo regular, independent audits to mitigate algorithmic bias.
- **Champion Frugal Procurement**: Choose AI solutions that are lightweight, cost-effective, and proven in low-connectivity environments, treating OER and digital public goods as core infrastructure.

With these considerations in mind, this balance is not a barrier to progress — it is the compass that ensures technology strengthens, rather than sidesteps our core values while staying true to equity, integrity, and the public good.

# People

## BOARD

We would like to thank Her Excellency **Dr Hajo Sani**, Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Nigeria to UNESCO, who represented the Government of Nigeria on COL's Board, for her guidance and expertise.

## COL STAFF

**Dave Jackson** completed his work at COL as Communications Manager in August 2025. Dave joined COL in advance of PCF10, and supported key initiatives across the organisation. COL thanks him for his dedicated service and we wish him all the best in the future.

**Sayora Abatova** finished with COL as Project Assistant in October 2025. She has been instrumental in supporting the ODFL Pacific Partnership Project and we greatly appreciate her hard work and dedication to this project as Phase 1 comes to a close.

## NEW FOCAL POINTS

**MAURITIUS**
**Mrs Chandanee Jhowry**
Permanent Secretary
Ministry of Tertiary Education, Science and Research

**NAMIBIA**
**Mr Mzingisi Gqwede**
Director, Adult Education, Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture

**NIGERIA**
**Dr Maria Ada Amedu**
Assistant Director, Bilateral Agreements, Commonwealth and African Affairs, Branch of Education Support Services Department, Federal Ministry of Education

**SIERRA LEONE**
**Ms Sia Fasuluku**
Director, Research, Planning and Development, Ministry of Technical and Higher Education

**TUVALU**
**Mr Fineaso Tehulu**
Director, Education Education Department, Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development

**ZAMBIA**
**Mrs Inutu Kalumiana**
Director: Open & Distance Education
Ministry of Education

# Resources

## RECENTLY PUBLISHED

COL has recently published the following resources to support Commonwealth countries and stakeholders in strengthening policies, practices, and systems across the Commonwealth.


### PCF11 Proceedings

Papers accepted and presented at PCF11 following a rigorous external blind peer review process are now available online.

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5747


### Towards a Micro-credential Framework for the Commonwealth

Based on a desktop review and several regional workshops, this report provides key principles and guidelines for implementing micro-credentials across the Commonwealth.

https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5742


### Open Schooling in the Digital Era

Presented in two volumes: Volume 1 featuring case studies and Volume 2 offering reflective essays, this resource examines why selected developing Commonwealth countries are investing in open schooling, the progress made, and the themes emerging from practice.

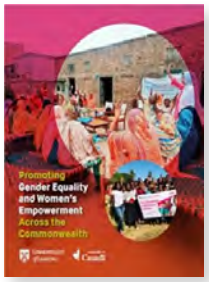
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5734


### Review of Open and Distance Learning for Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Based on research across the 56 Commonwealth countries, the study explores the status, challenges and developments in open and distance learning and technology-enabled learning, with a focus on equity, policy frameworks and dual-mode provision.

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5745

## Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Across the Commonwealth




Providing an overview of progress and achievements, this booklet highlights the Global Affairs Canada–funded Empowering Women and Girls project, which supports gender equality and women's empowerment in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mozambique, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5963

## Final Evaluation of the Partnership for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning in the Pacific


Serving as the concluding assessment of a five-year New Zealand–supported initiative, this final evaluation reviews efforts to strengthen education sector capacity and efficiency in nine Pacific Commonwealth countries through innovative and technology-enabled delivery mechanisms.

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5959

## Advancing Caribbean Teachers (ACT) in Mathematics Education: A Case of Three Eastern Caribbean Countries


Through a blended case study of the ACT in Mathematics Education project, in collaboration with the Ministries of St Kitts & Nevis, Saint Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines, the report explores persistent challenges in primary and lower-secondary mathematics performance and approaches to address them.

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5732

## Skills Online Certificate Scholarship Programme (2021–24): Understanding the Profiles and Experiences of the Learners

Commonly referred to as the Skills Online programme, 94,804 learners from at least 25 Commonwealth countries were engaged over three years, registering in courses funded by COL through Google, Udemy and Coursera. This report is based on an online survey to understand the profiles and experiences of the people who received support in the form of free access to courses.

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5743

## Understanding User Satisfaction and Experience with COLCommons


Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of user perspective, this report presents an evaluation of the COLCommons platform, featuring COL's award-winning micro-courses.

https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5964

## Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL) Case Studies

COL's technology-enabled learning initiative has produced six case studies from field experiences of implementing transformational change. Working with partner institutions, COL shows how systematic interventions can generate a significant impact. These case studies highlight institutional successes, national advancements, and large-scale results.

TEL Implementation at MIER: A Transformative Journey
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5966

Guiding Change: Mainstreaming TEL through a National Agency
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5967

Mainstreaming TEL: Strategies from UMS
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5968

Integrating Technology into Teaching and Learning: Lessons from JOOUST
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5969

TEL at the National University of Samoa
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5970

Digital Education Leadership Training in South Africa: Learning from SchoolNet
https://hdl.handle.net/11599/5971

## JL4D Vol 12 No 3

The July issue of the Journal of Learning for Development included a review of the first ten years of the journal. The latest issue and all archives are always available at https://jl4d.org/

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