

Open and Distance Learning in Africa



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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present this report on the ways that the 15CCEM Action Plan has been implemented in the area of open and distance learning. During my first eighteen months as President of COL I have had the privilege of meeting most of the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth states of Africa in your own countries and it is a pleasure to follow up on those discussions here in Freetown.

My professional colleagues at COL also travel the Commonwealth extensively and work all over Africa. Three of them are here with me in Freetown: Asha Kanwar, who leads our work in Higher Education; Joshua Mallet, who guides our activities on Learning and Livelihoods; and David Walker, who is responsible for our work in Health and Media Empowerment.

There were six elements in the Action Plan that Commonwealth Ministers of Education developed during their 2003 Conference in Edinburgh. One of those six elements is Using Distance Education to Overcome Barriers. But, of course, distance education is not just a distinct sector for action. It is a means to make progress on each other five action areas, and that is how I shall interpret it.

You do not engage in open and distance learning for its own sake. You use it as a way to make progress in the other areas. In many cases distance learning is the only way to achieve the scale, the scope and the impact required to tackle the challenges of education and training that you face.

So in reporting on what COL has done in support of your Action Plan I shall look at each of the six areas in turn. My COL colleagues and I have tried to summarize our work in the chart that we have distributed, which is too detailed to reproduce on the screen. Down the left-hand side it lists the particular themes of COL's work in each action area. Across the top it lists the Commonwealth countries of Africa so that you can see what we have tried to do in each of your countries.

In the next few minutes I simply want to comment on the themes of our work. My colleagues and I will

be pleased to discuss with you individually the ways that we are working on these themes in your own countries.

Universal Primary Education

First then, I look at Universal Primary Education and make two preliminary comments. The first is that COL is directing its efforts not just at the Millennium Development Goal of achieving UPE but at the fall-out of success in achieving UPE. For example, one consequence of success in attaining UPE will be to send a tidal wave of children towards secondary school. That is why COL is helping some African countries to set up open schools and I'll come to that in a moment.

My second comment is that we do not think that distance learning has much of a direct role to play in primary education, which must be based essentially on contact between children and teachers. However, it has a major role to play in creating the context for success in Universal Primary Education and in improving the quality and the relevance of school systems generally. For this reason COL conducts five types of activities under the general heading of Universal Primary education.

First, we are assisting the development of SchoolNets in four countries. The African experience shows that the value of SchoolNets goes well beyond their role as a vehicle for bringing ICTs into schools. They are also an important stimulant for the professional development of teachers and a means of increasing communication between schools. Closely related is COL's task, along with InfoDev, of monitoring and evaluation the NEPAD eSchools Pilot Project that is underway in sixteen countries.

I beg those Ministers whose countries are involved in this pilot to urge their people to respond to our requests for information. Only by evaluating the NEPAD eSchools Pilot properly we have a solid basis for a much wider roll-out after the pilot. If we can demonstrate beneficial effects conclusively that will also make it easier to find the resources for moving to scale.

Also directly related is our work in helping five of your countries to develop policy for ICTs in schools. In all of its work COL believes that it is most important for governments to establish a policy framework first rather than moving directly to setting up systems or implementing applications.

The most crucial area where distance learning supports the drive for universal primary education is teacher training. You can see from the chart we gave you that we are helping in this area in all African Commonwealth countries in one way or another. Africa will need to recruit and train 5 million new teachers to achieve UPE and many, if not most of the teachers already in service need opportunities to improve their skills. Distance learning is the best way of providing it.

Lastly, as I mentioned earlier, we are helping twelve of your countries to learn from the Indian experience of open schooling, as a basis either for setting up an open school, as in Nigeria, or for reinforcing existing operations, as in, for example, Botswana, Malawi and Lesotho.

Eliminating Gender Disparities

Your second action area is Eliminating Gender Disparities in Education, which is inspired by the two Millennium Development Goals of achieving equality of access this year and equality of outcomes by 2015. COL is contributing to this action area in three ways.

First, we are pleased to have worked with the Commonwealth Secretariat on a Gender Management System Toolkit, which was designed to assist Commonwealth governments in ensuring that awareness of gender issues informs their decision making at all levels.

Second, COL has worked with UNESCO and others on the barriers that women and girls encounter in using ICTs in education and training. Reports on this work are being given at the World Summit on the Information Society that is now taking place in Tunis.

Third, we are pleased to have worked with FAWE, the Forum for African Women Educationalists to create a virtual library of gender resources. This is available on the Internet to assist practitioners in working towards gender equality.

Improving Quality in Education

Your third action area is the vital task of Improving Quality in Education. COL is tackling that in two ways. First, there is a developing consensus around the world that strong and competent institutional leadership is an important foundation for the quality of the institution's work. Over recent years COL has run two series of training workshops for senior staff.

The first, addressed to the leaders of teacher education colleges, has been co-sponsored by the Government of Singapore. The second, targeted at African university leaders, has been carried out at the University of Abertay, Dundee, in Scotland and co-sponsored by the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Over the last five years all African Commonwealth countries have sent people to these training sessions. A longitudinal evaluation is now underway for both sets of workshops.

The other area of COL's work on improving quality in education involves a whole variety of approaches, usually at the national or institutional level. This work has been particularly intensive in six African countries. A specific example is COL's work on strengthening the Learner Support System at the National Open University of Nigeria. A more general approach is the Pan-Commonwealth Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Teacher Education that we are developing with input from a number of African experts. Please talk to my colleague Asha Kanwar, here present, to find out more about this work.

Using Distance Learning to Overcome Barriers

I come now to your fourth action area, namely Using Distance Learning to Overcome Barriers. In this account I am concentrating specifically on barriers related to education and training in all your action areas. However, COL is also helping governments and institutions to use the techniques of distance

learning in the achievement of all of the Millennium Development Goals.

Here I mention four areas, national forums on open and distance learning, lifelong learning for farmers, the application of ODL to the education of nomadic people, and community radio.

I noted earlier that COL encourages governments to develop policy for the use of ICTs and Open and Distance Learning. In this triennium Policy, along with Systems and Applications, is one of the three major thrusts of COL's work. This reflects the rapidly increasing interest of governments in developing policy. Back in 1997 only four countries in Commonwealth Africa had policies for ODL and ICTs, whereas in 2005 the number has increased to twelve.

Recently, for example, The Gambia has developed policy for distance higher education, whilst Sierra Leone and Kenya are in the process of doing so. Over that same eight-year period there has also been a substantial increase in the number of institutions using open and distance learning in all 18 Commonwealth countries in Africa. I am particularly pleased to note that this mainstreaming of ODL in recent years is reflected in references to ODL as one strategy for poverty reduction in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of The Gambia, Zambia, Cameroon, Ghana, Mozambique and Tanzania.

One example of the use of technology-mediated learning in poverty reduction is COL's programme of Lifelong Learning for Farmers. Motivated by the belief that improving the rural economy is essential to the achievement of all development goals, COL is developing ways of using technology to link farmers and smallholders to the information that can help them to a better livelihood. We have made a start on this in ten African countries.

Our work on Nomadic education is much less advanced but we shall see it develop in 2005. So far discussions have mainly taken place with Nigeria.

Finally, under the heading of using distance learning to overcome barriers, I note that COL has facilitated the use of community radio for a variety of development purposes in nine African countries.

Supporting Education in Difficult Circumstances

Moving on to your fifth action area, which is Supporting Education in Difficult Circumstances, we are now seeing the fruits of a meeting that COL held in Uganda in 2001, where participants from fifteen African countries developed curriculum outlines for courses for caregivers working with orphans and vulnerable children. ODL learning materials for a module on Counselling are now being pilot tested in Nigeria and Zambia.

Mitigating the Impact of HIV/AIDS in Education

Your final action area is Mitigating the Impact of HIV/AIDS in Education. Here, the basis of COL's work, which extends to the prevention of other diseases such as malaria, is our programme of media empowerment. It is based on the simple principle that messages about health are more likely to have

impact if they are developed by the people for the people.

Our work, which has reached eleven African countries, consists of equipping a local group, usually an NGO, with media equipment, usually video, and training them to use it at a sophisticated level. My colleague David Walker, who is here with us, stays in touch with each group over the years, renewing the equipment and refreshing the training as necessary. We are proud of the impact of this simple and inexpensive programme which is credited with reducing infection rates in some countries.

Honourable Ministers that is a brief account of COL's work in your six action areas. My colleagues and I would be pleased to try and give you the background to any cross on the chart that indicates work in your country in a particular area. If the four COL representatives here cannot recall all the detail we shall get in touch with our colleagues to find out more.

Before closing I would like to mention three other initiatives that are linked less directly to the six action areas, but which will be of interest to you.

The first is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This was an initiative of the Education Ministers of the small states at the 14CCEM in Halifax, Canada in 2000. COL was asked to work up a proposal with a reference group of Ministers, and this was endorsed at the 15CCEM in Edinburgh. Since then I have canvassed all the small states to determine which of them wish to participate and asked them to name a contact person and tell us what educational or training objectives they wish to achieve through this means.

I am delighted to say that all seven of the Small Commonwealth States in Africa have elected to participate. Their representatives took part in a very successful planning and orientation session that was held in Singapore in September. Groups of states are now working together on the production of learning materials in three key development areas that the small states identified, namely professional development in education, life skills for youth, and business, management and entrepreneurship.

I emphasise that you should not think of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth as a new institution trying to establish its brand in competition with those of existing institutions, but rather as a network that enables countries to work together on the creation of open educational resources on topics of mutual interest. I am pleased to report that the Singapore meeting generated great energy and enthusiasm. I am optimistic that this Ministerial initiative will deliver real benefits.

The second new initiative that I must bring to your attention is a new programme, which we are calling Learning and Livelihoods, that has evolved from our previous successful work in Technical and Vocational Education and Training. My Ghanaian colleague Joshua Mallet will be able to tell you more. This is of particular interest here, because Africa will be the major focus of this work for the time being. The basic idea is to extend training in livelihood skills to a much larger proportion of the population and so do so with a clear eye on the occupations that are likely to be economically interesting in particular places.

Finally, Honourable Ministers, I need hardly tell you that Vancouver, where COL is based, is a long way from Africa. My colleagues travel the Commonwealth extensively. Indeed, if I am asked what is the difference between my COL colleagues and God I would reply that God is everywhere, but my colleagues are everywhere except in Vancouver. That's unfair, of course, they maintain an excellent balance.

However, we are trying to find ways of making assistance for the development of technology-mediated learning more available locally in Africa. Some of you will have observed the experience of UNESCO when it overstretched itself in the 1990s in the creation of regional and country offices. COL is a tiny organisation compared to UNESCO and we simply do not have the resources to set up satellite units of COL around the Commonwealth.

What we have done is to provide programme support to two regional centres for distance education here in Africa. I refer to RETRIDOL, the Research and Training Institute for Distance and Open Learning based at the National Open University of Nigeria; and SARDEC, the Southern African Distance Education Centre based at BOCODOL, Botswana's College of Distance and Open Learning. RETRIDOL serves West Africa and SARDEC serves Southern Africa. It is very important that the countries served by these centres see them as 'their' centres, and support their work. They are a very important force for building up a strong African capacity of professional expertise in open and distance learning, the application of ICTs and the use of technology to enhance learning.

I conclude, Honourable Ministers, by thanking you for your attention. I hope you agree with me that for a very small agency the Commonwealth of Learning punches well above its weight. I trust that you perceive our interventions effective and, above all, supportive of your own policies and ambitions for education in your countries.

If you do find our work useful we should have no objections if you were to communicate that assessment to your colleagues the Foreign Ministers, who will hear the report on COL's work at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting that will take place in Malta next week.