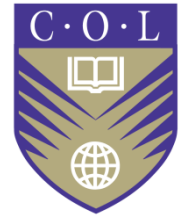


Gender Mainstreaming for the Public Sector: Using Open and Distance Learning to Scale Up Training



*21st July, 2008
Marlborough House, London
Opening Remarks*

*By Asha Kanwar,
Commonwealth of Learning*

Secretary General, High Commissioner for Papua New Guinea, Director, GIDD, Acting Director, STPD, Colleagues

It gives me great pleasure to represent the Commonwealth of Learning at this very important meeting for two reasons. First, by collaborating with you on the gender mainstreaming initiative, we are contributing to the overall objective of harmonizing the efforts of Commonwealth sister-organisations towards achieving our collective development goals. Second, we at COL believe that 'access to learning is the key to development'. We do this by harnessing distance education and information and communication technologies to increase the scale and scope of learning at different levels. This is an area where we have both the experience and the expertise to make a contribution.

Since 'open and distance learning' is COL's core business and a key theme of this meeting, it may be appropriate to say a few words here. Distance education has had an existence of over 150 years, yet it is only in the last forty years that its growth has been phenomenal and it has emerged as a serious alternative to the formal education system.

What then is distance education? Distance education is the delivery of learning or training to learners who are separated, mostly by time and space, from their teachers.

The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. For example, when the Open University in the UK was created in 1969 it based its claim to be 'open' by abolishing all academic prerequisites for entry. Potential learners did not have to show any evidence of having been to school or having passed any examinations.

While distance education refers to the methodology by which the learners are reached, open learning refers to the philosophy underlining open entry and access to learning opportunities. Though the two are

conceptually distinct, distance education and open learning are often complementary. Opening up learning without introducing some elements of distance education is not always possible and introducing distance education inevitably opens up learning in new ways for many people. For this reason it is quite usual to bring these two terms together in the expression open and distance learning or ODL.

Throughout history, education has been constrained by the iron triangle of quality, access and cost. If access is increased, there is the danger of lowering quality. If this is to be avoided, then the costs would have to be raised. ODL is revolutionary because it does allow, through division of labour, specialization, and economies of scale, to reconfigure the access-quality-cost triangle. Access can be increased, quality can be improved and costs can be cut, all at the same time.

But this is by no means an automatic process. While research shows that there is 'no significant difference' between distance education and traditional classroom instruction in relation to student outcomes, there are still the issues of quality and the recognition of qualifications that need to be addressed constantly. This is one of COL's major challenges as it works with governments, institutions and individuals to ensure that quality in distance education does not become a casualty to quantity.

The key to the academic strength of an ODL system is the learning materials. Equally important, however, is the effectiveness of the delivery systems that connect the students with their institutions. So when we develop the curriculum during this workshop, we will also need to give some thought to how the course materials will be delivered, what technologies will be used and how we will support the learners.

Content development is resource-intensive and the OER movement provides a unique opportunity to developing countries to access global knowledge flows. In the coming years, there will be a greater need to collaborate on free content development and sharing resources. I hope that the materials resulting from this collaboration will be freely available in all Commonwealth jurisdictions. This will help us scale up quality training opportunities for thousands of personnel at a fraction of the costs associated with face to face workshops.

Finally, what experience does COL have in gender mainstreaming? After conducting a gender audit, we have developed a policy that seeks to mainstream gender at both the organisational and the programme levels. We have developed a Gender Action Plan that helps to keep the concerns of girls/women and boys/men, central to our planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes-though I must admit its still work-in-progress!

You may be interested to note that at the recent PCF 5 held last week, of the 313 abstracts listed, only 16 dealt explicitly with women. Why should this surprise us? Because three of the four conference themes dealt with livelihoods, health and social justice and we all know how closely these are linked to women. This and other indicators signal the need for more attention to the gender agenda. How do we ensure that 'mainstreaming' works? What strategies do we need to put in place? What lessons have we learnt? How do we ensure that our efforts are sustainable?

In the past, we have worked with COMSEC colleagues on the Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit. More recently, Dr Jyotsna Jha of STPD conducted gender mainstreaming training for our staff in Vancouver and helped us develop a Tool for a deeper analysis of gender in our programme area. Even though we are

across the Atlantic and geography has not yet become history, technology will help us to overcome the distances as we develop this critical training resource, which will be yet another step towards closing the gender divide. As Kofi Annan reminds us: 'Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.'

The Secretary General's presence and personal interest assures us that our gender mainstreaming efforts will receive the profile and priority that they deserve.

With that, let me thank you for your attention.