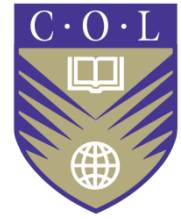


# Lifelong Learning in the Commonwealth: Issues and Challenges

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*Lifelong Learning in the Commonwealth: Issues and  
Challenges*

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## Abstract

*We give examples of how the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is helping countries to expand and improve lifelong learning. After describing COL and its working context we examine some of the issues and challenges in three of its initiatives.*

*Governments are shifting their educational priorities from academic programmes to skills development but conventional institutional approaches to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) cannot meet the huge needs. Countries must adopt flexible methods of skills development that make training available wherever people live (distance learning) and expand skills development in support of the informal economy in which many work. We describe how member institutions of the Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa are facing the challenge of implementing such approaches.*

*Through ten years of action research, COL and its collaborators have developed a successful model for increasing rural prosperity known as Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F). The model works by rendering more effective, for all participants, a value chain that brings together farmers, banks, knowledge providers and communications systems. One issue is to take advantage of new approaches (e.g. to banking) and new technologies (e.g. using cell phones instead of ICT kiosks). The key challenge is to ensure the self-replication of the model. Sustaining current projects is not enough.*

*eLearning is playing an ever larger role in education and training. The small countries of the Commonwealth (a majority of its member states) are working together to strengthen their tertiary institutions by collaborating in the development of programmes to achieve economies of scale and better*

quality. The collaborative mechanism is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), an idea conceived by Education Ministers in 2000. It is being implemented through professional training, course development, new approaches to delivering eLearning, and the use of a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). A key challenge is to embed the VUSSC's outputs in the life of the tertiary institutions.

## Introduction: the Commonwealth of Learning

It is a pleasure to join you at this conference. I am speaking on behalf of three of my colleagues, Alison Mead Richardson, Balasubramanian Kodhandaraman and John Lesperance. Our title is *Lifelong Learning in the Commonwealth: Issues and Challenges* and I shall explore this topic through the initiatives that they are leading.

To set the scene I shall describe briefly what COL – the Commonwealth of Learning – is and does and how this work fits into our overall programme.

I shall then begin with Alison Mead Richardson's work on skills development, continue with Dr. Balasubramanian Kodhandaraman's project of Lifelong Learning for Farmers, and conclude by presenting the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This is facilitated at COL by John Lesperance, although the ministers of the small states conceived the idea themselves.

I start then, a few words about COL itself. Our slogan – and the title of our work programme – is *Learning for Development*. But we are not a teaching institution that offers lifelong learning opportunities to people directly.

COL is an intergovernmental agency set up by Commonwealth Heads of Government to help governments and institutions use various technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development.

We are a small organization of about 40 staff. We are based in two locations, Vancouver and New Delhi. These are my Vancouver colleagues, some of whom you will recognize. But we are also very proud of the work of our unit in India, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, which has a fruitful collaboration with the Open University Malaysia for the quality assurance of multi-media materials.

We achieve far more than these small staff numbers would suggest because our networks of partners across the Commonwealth, including our focal points in each Commonwealth country and our Board whose members are drawn from across the Commonwealth.

Most of our budget comes from voluntary contributions from Commonwealth countries, including Malaysia, and we are proud that the number of contributing countries has doubled in recent years, from 22 to 45, which suggests the governments appreciate our work.

I said that our overall theme is *Learning for Development*. By development we mean a synthesis of the Millennium Development Goals, the goals of Education for All, and Commonwealth values.

We distinguish two sectors in our work. The Education sector concentrates on helping countries expand and improve formal education, whereas our second sector, Livelihoods and Health, helps with more informal types of learning. Of course both formal and informal learning can also be lifelong learning and today we have chosen examples of our work in lifelong learning from both sectors.

The Education sector works on Open Schooling, Teacher Education, Higher Education and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which will be our example of lifelong learning from this sector today.

From the Livelihoods and Health sector we have taken Skills Development and Learning for Farming, but we are also engaged in promoting Healthy Communities, notably through community radio and in facilitating the greater use of eLearning.

## Flexible Skills Development

We start this address with Skills Development, which we refer to as flexible skills development because we believe that existing approaches are too rigid and often do not meet the needs of lifelong learners or those working in the informal economy.

Two-thirds of the population of sub Saharan Africa is under 25 years old and up to 90% of employment is in the informal economy (OECD 2009). Therefore COL's Flexible Skills Development initiative in Africa promotes lifelong learning by supporting the expansion of skills training opportunities for people working in the informal economy, where there is a massive need for skills training.

The challenge is that in most African countries the formal Technical and Vocational Education and Training or TVET system has been losing its identity due to low budget provision, inadequate infrastructure and out-dated materials and pedagogy (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2009). Formal TVET institutions need to become more efficient and responsive to the demands of the labour market.

Our goal is to increase access to skills training for people working in the informal sector so they can improve their livelihoods. COL's approach is to improve on the provision of training for the informal sector through the formal TVET system by focussing on 4 areas:

- policy development, strategic and capacity planning
- organisational development including quality improvement
- ICT infrastructure management
- Course design and delivery through educational media and ICT

It was essential to check whether these formal institutions were ready to adopt new approaches so we tested readiness on four dimensions: strategic, organisational, technical and pedagogic. Eleven institutions showed themselves ready for new, flexible approaches. A critical component of readiness was the vision of the institutional heads and their commitment to the idea of expanding access and improving quality through technology and flexible approaches.

Institutional managers, administrators and teaching staff are participating in a series of capacity building activities which include online training on the COL Moodle learning management system, workshops, institutional visits and experiential learning.

An online community of practice has been established on a social networking platform. Through this *Community Learning Network*, more than 300 members interact with each other, the COL Team and other TVET experts and are involved in discussion, collaboration and informal learning. It is a lifelong learning platform in its own right.

The TVET Institutes and polytechnics involved in the programme in six countries are engaged in various institutional development activities to help them establish an effective flexible and blended approach to TVET programme provision in their own local and national context. These activities include: setting departmental and institutional targets for the introduction of new courses; engaging with national policy makers; enhancing existing technical infrastructure; staff development in the use of educational media and ICT for teaching and learning; market research and feasibility studies amongst their local communities; and developing new short courses.

Institutions have demonstrated a clear commitment to change. There is an acceptance of the principle of ‘National Challenges – Local Solutions’, and through this strategy change at the institutional level, national perspectives and policy are being examined and challenged to improve.

Most institutions have made progress in linking their strategic objectives to flexible skills development. There is a good understanding of the challenges they face, the main ones being the management of technical infrastructure and the strengthening of staff capacity to use ICT in teaching. The local community, national policy makers and other stakeholders all need to be sensitised to these new technology-enhanced approaches.

Given the high cost of internet bandwidth it is a significant technical challenge for most institutions to integrate ICT into learning and teaching. However, some of the barriers are being overcome through pilot activities.

Most institutions do not have the expertise to produce coherent strategies for the development of their ICT infrastructure. This is an area where governments could provide assistance by creating and publishing guidelines for educational institutions on how to develop their own ICT strategies within the framework of the national ICT strategy. It is important to note that flexible approaches are not only about introducing eLearning – COL advocates the use of appropriate technology.

It is good to report that a significant number of teachers have improved their ability to develop curriculum and are now improving their teaching with media-enhanced curriculum components. Many also see that the use of ICT represents a personal opportunity, either through promotion, or the chance for entrepreneurial activities. Teacher competence and their awareness of developments within their own subject area are growing and new courses for the informal sector are being developed.

But it is not all rosy! One of the institutions chosen has not made any real progress with flexible skills development. This is most likely due to a change in institutional head since the activity began. Strong

leadership and commitment from the Head of the institution is proving to be an important factor in the successful integration of ICT in TVET.

The move towards more flexible and blended approaches to skills development is a lengthy and challenging process involving continuing learning and effort to establish what works in each individual institutional context. It is too early to show whether more flexible approaches are impacting positively on access, efficiency or the quality of teaching and learning.

So, to sum up on Flexible Skills Development, COL has helped institutions to use the technology of open and distance learning in TVET. After one year we can see that these new approaches are being embedded in 10 of the 11 key institutions. The most important developments thus far have been in strategic planning and policy frameworks and the management of technical infrastructure.

Institutional managers and teaching staff now understand the issues involved in the use of educational technology for TVET and are developing appropriate strategies. We are continuing the activity by strengthening teachers' capacity to use educational media and technology through instructional design training. New flexible courses which meet local market needs are in development. There is evidence that a considerable attitudinal change has taken place amongst a critical mass of the staff and it is this which is carrying the institutions forward.

Alison Mead Richardson is the COL Education Specialist responsible for this and she will be pleased to engage in online dialogue about it.

I now turn to the work of my colleague Dr. Balasubramanian Kodhandaraman who, very helpfully, insists that we simply call him 'Bala'. His work involves skills development in the vital area of farming and agriculture.

## Lifelong Learning for Farmers

The programme is called Lifelong Learning for Farmers and is based on the following assumptions.

First, farmers need to learn constantly as the physical environment in which they work is affected by climate change and the economic context is one of rapidly evolving markets. Yet at this time the conventional systems of agricultural extension created to help them are collapsing because governments are not investing in them. In some countries there is one extension officer to 25,000 farmers.

Second, although plenty of agricultural research is conducted, few of the results that might help them reach small farmers in the developing world.

Third the linkages between the various players in the rural value chain are weak, making it difficult for farmers to take a holistic perspective on developing their livelihoods. This makes it difficult for them to test the feasibility, financial viability and community acceptability of ideas they might have for improving their livelihoods

This is happening at a time when globalization is impacting on the rural economy as never before, yet farmers have little way of knowing who is determining the markets for their produce and getting timely information about the changing quality standards that affect the market for their produce.

This is a major problem because there are many millions of farmers and pastoral families and millions more agricultural labourers whose situation is even more precarious.

So the bad news is that the conventional extension system, with its didactic mode of training, will not be able reach millions of farmers and agricultural labourers in time and space.

The good news is that the farming community through its own community knowledge system and other forms of social capital has evolved a learning process through self-directed personal-strategic learning. Today's challenge, which is the focus of COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers or L3F initiative, is to enhance the scope of this personal-strategic learning using modern information and communication technology (ICT) and open and distance learning (ODL). This means that the objective of formal learning is to strengthen the self-directed learning.

This approach does not only involve the farmers but, vitally, also engages stakeholders such as the financial and marketing systems and communications providers, allowing them to adopt strategies which promote their business while improving the livelihoods of the farming community.

Dr. Balasubramanian would wish me to expand briefly on the concept of self-directed learning.

Current theory holds that an adult learner interested in self-learning has a number of qualities:

- First, has an independent self-concept and the ability to direct his or her own learning.
- Second, has an accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning.
- Third, has learning needs closely related to changing social roles.
- Fourth, is problem-centered and interested in the immediate application of knowledge.
- Fifth, is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors. (Merriam, 2001:5).

This links naturally to lifelong learning as a process of continuous informal learning where learners choose what they want to learn, either inside or outside a formal organisational setting, which may be once-off, voluntary and not credentialed. Informal learning enhances community capacity building through community ownership; learning for the love of learning, and happens through social and community organisations to meet the needs of individual learners with individual life circumstances (Baker, 2006).

COL believes that such self-directed learning is the route to lifelong learning among the farming community and a key element in the process of attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), most particularly as they relate to poverty and its consequences.

In practice the L3F initiative is being implemented Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius, Jamaica, Sri Lanka and India. Banks, universities and marketing agencies are the partners in the L3F initiative. Using Open and

Distance Learning (ODL) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), the initiative aims to strengthen the learning process among the farmers and create linkages between various stakeholders. The purpose is to provide opportunities for the farming communities to enhance their skill and knowledge in agriculture through self-directed lifelong learning.

The experience of implementing L3F has shown that:

- Vertical learning (i.e. the learning provided by the formal codified knowledge system such as universities and research institutions) helps to define and refine the strategies for self-directed learning.
- Horizontal learning (learning from farmers and within farming community) is an important aspect of self-directed learning.
- Cognitive social capital (such as community based organizations, farmers associations, women's self-help groups etc.) is an essential condition for horizontal learning.
- ICTs such as mobile phones and computers not only help in vertical learning but also strengthen the horizontal learning.

As the project has developed we have come to place increasing importance on the concept of Social Cognitive Capital (or Social Learning Capital) which, according to Baker (2006) 'is the meshing of social capital and lifelong learning that reaches its potential through quality learning conversations'.

In these terms L3F strengthens the lifelong learning process within the social capital which leads to social learning capital. Using ICTs such as mobile phones, L3F has developed a framework of quality learning conversations.

This may sound rather theoretical, but L3F has had some very practical and beneficial results. Around 20,000 women and men in Asia and 4,000 women and men in Africa are involved in L3F through mobile phones and other multi-channel learning. The learning takes place in the context of self-help groups, women's associations, and farmers association and strengthens the community based knowledge system. There is evidence that mobilization and formal learning through ODL promote a self-sustained personal-strategic learning.

ICTs such as mobile phones help in promoting structured audio-based ODL among semi-literate and illiterate population. Such learning leads to better livelihoods and personal empowerment.

Secondary stakeholders such as financial institutions and ICT companies are realizing that such lifelong learning among farmers will also help to promote their business interests. This helps scale up the initiative through replication.

We conclude on this project by noting that by engaging in lifelong learning many poor rural people, mostly women, have substantially improved their livelihoods. What is required to make it work is, first, a strong process of community mobilisation to build on the social capital in place, and second a systematic process to raising that social capital into social learning capital.



COL's aim in this is to show the secondary stakeholders: the banks, the mobile phone companies and the local educational institutions that this model can be successful for them too, giving them an incentive to promote its replication. Once again, I am sure that Dr. Balasubramanian would be delighted to engage in dialogue with you about this model for increasing rural prosperity through learning.

## The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

We turn now to our third and final example of COL's work in fostering Lifelong Learning in the Commonwealth, namely the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, or the VUSSC as we call it. At COL the VUSSC is facilitated by John Lesperance but we stress that it is a facilitative role. This project is a vision of the Ministers of the small states and the small states manage it through a committee chaired by Professor Emma Kruse Vaai of Samoa.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is a new concept that draws on the expertise of post-secondary institutions of the Commonwealth's small states to create learning materials for courses and programmes that respond to the national needs of these countries. It represents a combined effort of Ministries of Education and tertiary institutions of learning to improve the quality and scale of higher education at reasonable cost.

This initiative arose because at their triennial Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) that was held in Halifax, Canada in 2000, they faced two challenges. Their first concern was that the UN's Millennium Declaration and the Dakar World Forum on Education for All had put the spotlight on the imperative of expanding access to education at all levels. They were also worried that the digital divide was also widening, with the developed countries making rapid headway into the 'eWorld'. The hype about the Internet was so great in that year that people used the term "dotcom frenzy" to suggest that the future of business and education lay online.

The ministers were determined that their countries should engage with the online world but doubted that they had the critical mass, in terms of expertise and equipment, to engage effectively with virtual learning as individual countries. However, they did not want to be left behind, as so often in the past, to the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states. They believed that by working together as a network of small states they could create a collective capacity for online learning and harness the e-World for the benefit of their peoples.

They called this network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) although is neither fully virtual, nor a university in the sense of being a degree-awarding body. It is a collaborative network of 32 small states of the Commonwealth.

It is expanding tertiary education in these countries by offering face-to-face courses as well as open and distance learning. Most of the small states do not have their own universities, although some aspire to create them.

For example the University of Seychelles was created last year to serve this country with a population of less than 100,000. I was privileged to be present at the opening ceremony. The University of Seychelles will draw on partnerships with a number of other institutions around the world – and, of course,



partnerships and collaboration are what our Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is all about.

All the other small states have tertiary colleges and many have small campuses of the two major regional universities, the University of the South Pacific and the University of the West Indies are two examples.

The growing importance of lifelong learning has given added urgency to expanding tertiary education in the small states. The changing nature of economic activities puts new demands on working people, which has forced small states to be more innovative in the design of learning, partly because sending people overseas for their continuing education is not cost-effective and partly because training must reflect the reality of the economic activity in each country.

Thus the VUSSC is working to strengthen tertiary level institutions in small states as a network of Ministries of Education. It focuses on the development of human resources, the creation and offering of new courses, and the establishment of a transnational accreditation mechanism. Participating countries, comprising land-locked, coastal and island states, all face issues of isolation and brain drain, and are susceptible to the various impacts of climate change.

Through the VUSSC, COL has provided a new model of collaboration to governments. The model is based on action learning that enables the methodology to be changed as lessons are learned.

The tangible benefits to the VUSSC member countries are: content in various areas that can be adapted and accessed locally; an expanded reservoir of local capability provided by ongoing training from workshop participants; local educators who have become more competent in the use of ICTs in education; students that are empowered through additional open and distance course offerings; and increased access to education through free content.

National institutions are now able to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC provided they are approved by the national bodies responsible for quality assurance and or accreditation and where applicable, the Regional Qualification Authority. The VUSSC has already started to run a few online courses in collaboration with the University of the West Indies (UWI).

## Open Educational Resources

The VUSSC model has enabled it to develop content as Open Educational Resources (OERs). This means that they can be taken, adapted and used by any academic or institution anywhere the world, not just those in the small states. This also makes it part of an important worldwide movement that was initiated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and developed further by the UK Open University. VUSSC is the world's most multi-national open educational resource project and COL is proud to be involved in it.

### *The Transnational Qualifications Framework*

As course materials were being developed VUSSC participants realised that they had to address the issue of quality, credibility and recognition of courses. In partnership with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) they developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF).

The TQF is a ten level framework. It is not meant to replace existing qualifications frameworks in the small states. It is a translation instrument between the systems in different countries and regions to give momentum to the transfer of courses, qualifications and learners between countries. It will also provide a means by which qualifications frameworks can be compared and allow for referencing of all qualifications to the TQF levels.

VUSSC has created a web portal that provides online programmes offered by accredited institutions in VUSSC countries. These institutions, having already received accreditation from their national system, will be able to promote selected programmes to the international market through the VUSSC portal. Once eLearning programmes have been approved by the national and regional structures, they will be posted on the VUSSC website. Posting of programmes on the VUSSC website will signify that the programme is credible, i.e. that it aligns with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the TQF.

Learners will register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the portal will carry the national accreditation of the country in which the providing institution is based. In addition to this, learners will be able to review the comparability of the qualification with their own country by reviewing the qualification's registration in the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

The VUSSC has thus succeeded to create a model that is expanding the scope of lifelong learning and the pursuit of knowledge whether to improve a teacher, an extension officer or an entrepreneur. It is never too young or too old to start learning. VUSSC learning materials can be accessed by anybody on the COL and VUSSC websites at [www.col.org/vussc](http://www.col.org/vussc) and [www.vussc.info](http://www.vussc.info).

## Conclusions

Let us conclude. We have described three ways in which the Commonwealth of Learning is helping to expand and improve the provision of opportunities for lifelong learning. What are the key issues and challenges that emerge? Let us pick one issue or challenge from each project.

The first project aims to expand and improve the provision of Technical and Vocational Education and Training by introducing elements of open and distance learning to create flexible systems for skills development. Since this requires a substantial change of institutional mentality and vision the key issue is leadership from the top of the institution. It is telling that in the one case where a committed leader left the project languished.

The second initiative was the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme. This starts with the mobilisation of farming communities at the grassroots to strengthen social capital in readiness for progressing to social learning capital as learning becomes both an individual and a collective endeavour. Since the model depends entirely on local resources getting the local secondary stakeholders (banks, mobile telephone companies, universities) involved and enthusiastic is essential so that they can replicate the model in other areas where they do business.

Finally, the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth has vindicated the ambition articulated by the Ministers of Education of these countries, when they met in 2000, that

small countries, working together, could develop an effective presence in the eWorld. The eReadiness of these states has been transformed. The current challenge is for the tertiary institutions in these states to take full advantage of the capacity and content that has been developed to expand their curricula and integrate eLearning into their instructional strategies.

What is the common thread that runs through these issues and challenges? It is simply that in implementing technology-mediated approaches to improve and expand learning opportunities, human factors such as leadership, engagement, and readiness to change are at least as important as the technologies and the systems.

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