

# Virtual Graduation Address



29 June 2023

Graduation Ceremony: Assistive Technology for Special Education Needs (SEN)  
Organisation for Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), St Lucia

Dr Mairiette Newman  
Education Specialist - Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth  
Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

His Excellency, Director General OECS Dr Didicus Jules, other distinguished ladies and gentleman, graduands

Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver Canada! It is a pleasure to be part of this hybrid graduation which marks an important milestone in the COL-OECS shared effort to build a more inclusive world.

COL recognises and congratulates these 50 Special Education teachers and educators graduating today, firstly for stepping up and choosing to engage in professional learning during what is a notoriously busy term in the school year; and secondly, for not just completing the training, but excelling; this cohort has performed exceptionally well.

Support for learners with disabilities and their teachers has long been a neglected area. UNESCO's 2020 GEM Report indicates that children with disabilities are less likely to complete primary and secondary education compared to their peers without disabilities. UNDP, IDB data and recent OECS data for the Caribbean bear this out. Among the many challenges that learners with disabilities face is inadequate access to technology. World Health Organisation estimates (2021) are that only 1 in 10 persons with disabilities in developing countries have access to the assistive technologies that they need.

Both COL and OECS want to change this picture - so training teachers to select and use appropriate Assistive Technologies, is a step in the right direction. Some features of this training that I would like to highlight are first, its inclusive design - it is suitable for mainstream and special education teachers as well as teachers with disabilities. Second, the training is solutions-focussed - it introduces teachers to an array of technologies, each of which can be tailored to support individual learners. Third, it is practical - it focuses on technologies that are accessible and affordable, so that we do not widen existing inequalities.

This project has been made possible because of a very productive partnership that the Commonwealth of Learning and the OECS have forged. Partnerships flourish when they share common objectives and values. Let me thank Mr Rafer Gordon and his team for their hard work and commitment to this project. I must also acknowledge Diversity and Ability UK without whose expertise, these proceedings might not have happened.

In closing, I once again congratulate those of you graduating today. Please do not stop here: apply what you have learned; share your new knowledge and skills with your colleagues; continue learning; and nourish, what today's guest speaker described as, your heart and your passion. Together, we can create a more inclusive world!