

Open Equity and the Power of Small Things to Make Big Changes



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Hello. Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

I am Peter Scott, the President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), presenting to the 8th International Conference on Research and Practices in Education, which is running in Pakistan from British Columbia here in Canada. I'll be talking to you in this presentation about “open equity and the power of small things to make big changes”.

The Commonwealth of Learning believes that openness is a truly powerful force to finally reach out to the large pools of chronic inequity (in lack of access to quality education) for so many in our world.

I describe this challenge as chronic, not because the solutions are not there, but that the solutions we have chosen to historically apply - the instruments of conventional, formal, education - currently serve to replicate rather than overcome the challenge. Our “business as usual” in learning, must change.

But fortunately, new instruments are increasingly viable and more readily available. There are a number of things we can do to ‘disrupt and then change’ that business as usual. AI, for example, is a major disrupter for our future and indeed, our ‘right now’. In this talk, I won’t speak to AI but instead look at the power of small things (microcredentials). BUT it is important to note my second point, since I mention AI and technology as a disruptor.

From our perspective, here in the Commonwealth of Learning, it's critical to recognize that humans have to be critically involved in any learning-loop we create. Learning is about us, and the transformation of us (as people and the relationships we, have, make and change. Learning must focus on the learner, not the technology or even the institution. The tools we create can sustain or disrupt our processes - and it's important to know when to do either of those things.

Finally, I'll be tapping into the critical change that we can make today, which is a recognition of our increasingly digital world. Digitalisation (networks, connectivity and smarter devices) helps us to create together powerful things that change our old “cost equations” about what can make sense to easily do.

Add OPEN to digitalisation and there is the promise: to increase quality, drive down cost and improve equity. I will talk about COL's current push to help our world to use new small things to genuinely start to change our world.

A little bit about me first. I am a lifetime educator, having spent my entire career in universities until very recently. I started teaching in the United Kingdom, working at the Open University at the University of Sheffield. Then I moved to Australia to be Pro-Vice-Chancellor of education at the University of Technology in Sydney. And then I was the president of Athabasca University, Canada's 'Open University'. And I am now moving out of education into the world of policy and governance for development; I'm the president and CEO of an intergovernmental organisation representing the 56 nations of the Commonwealth.

So a little bit about COL first before we dive in.

COL works for the Commonwealth of Nations. That's around 2.5 billion people across the world in 56 countries. Headquartered in Vancouver in, Canada, with a team in India. And bound by a memorandum of understanding with our 56 nations that was signed in 1988 to drive learning innovation, particularly leveraging open education.

One interesting feature of our community of Nations is that many of our nations share traditions and practices that come from a common root, so are potentially more easy to integrate anyway; and we host the majority of the world's 'small states'. So for many of our countries it is in theory much easier to find the right person to agree how to get something done, and to provide those smaller countries with a bigger voice on the global stage. Whatever we do, it is to make nations stronger together and national institutions (equally) stronger together and their learning communities, better served.

We're probably best known for the media that we create. COL produces (in collaboration with our country partners) an awful lot of courses, typically small courses, typically short and focused. All are targeted to an individual need and specific country requirements.

Here, for example, you can see a few short forms of learning related to Youth in the Pacific.

Everything we do is done together (in a partnership) and is designed from scratch to be shared. When we work in the Pacific to do something, then it is intended to be just as useful when tuned to the needs of the Caribbean, or Africa, or wherever. What we've generally done over the last 37 years is to build capacity in "low-capacity contexts" where conventional education isn't working and isn't affordable and isn't equitable. Increasingly in our world - that's kind of everywhere! Despite huge continuing investments, no country has wiped out educational inequity.

We work to enfranchise the disadvantaged learners in our world.

But it is not the content / the courses that most matter to us. It's actually policy.

The way you get to scale innovation is by having governments lead on it, to regulate and to encourage each nation's learning system to get to those disenfranchised learners. Where you can

create a policy that is actually used - that can then drive OPEN, and you can scale the change it embodies.

Education is a highly structured process.

At every level of learner, the institutions that every government regulates manage pathways that we call “curriculum”. The curriculum is measured, by and large, by assessments that give credit, and it is credit that measures progress towards a skill or competence.

But at the minute, all of those things are in very large, very inflexible, very-institutional-and-teacher-centric pathways.

Credit in curriculum.

And the cost of running the system is essentially the cost of the credits that we're working with learners on, or whatever level it is, really. Whether IMPLICIT or EXPLICIT - credit is the currency of learning. Credit creates credentials (of various sorts) and marks learners' success.

Unfortunately, CREDIT is hard to exchange, and it doesn't flow freely.

Indeed, it is often created with the opposite intention - designed to be locked into how an institution thinks about what learners' experience should be. And that's pretty inflexible.

However, over recent years, institutions have been driven to think about the process of freeing credit, to move - even creating ways to exchange credit amongst institutions. That's typically an acronym with words like Prior learning and recognition. But it is fair to say that progress has not been fast towards more flexibility. In many institutions, getting credit to move between departments of that institution is hard, never mind between different and competing institutions. And as for crossing state borders... well, that's often much harder.

More and more institutions and countries have become interested in the idea of the smaller opportunities to make credit change in a more micro way, looking at individual small things that could make the extent of that credit much more easy. Historically, we've looked at this over the years, and our latest report was about five years ago where we looked at how countries are now starting to measure credit in a simple way that allows transfer across those borders, transfer across those communities. Our report in 2019 here looked at countries like Malawi, Namibia, and Zambia as case studies with this starting to happen. And then, in regions like the Caribbean and Southern Africa, we could start to see five years ago, the government started to regulate how credit could (in theory) flow across the region.

Bringing that bang up to date - our work this year has now noted a lot more now of an attempt to look across the globe at different countries, in areas that have become very sophisticated, and understand how credit needs to be regulated, how the learning experience needs to be quality assured, and that the common regulation - should make a credit exchange experience more doable. And all of that helps us to reach into areas where credit cannot flow, where there is inequity, and where access is not available. Most strikingly, countries like Australia and NZ have a very strong qualifications framework which works right the way down. And now, some like these, include very

short forms of learning (microcredentials and short courses) in the regulatory framework themselves.

The definition of those small things has become much more reliable as well. So, for example, UNESCO in 2022 provided a very good definition of what it means to be a very small credential. UNESCO's definition talks about a record of focused learning achievement, verifying what the learner knows, including assessment. You have to be able to verify that, that the learning is there, that skill, that competence is owned by the learner, and that it is connected to the definitions of a trusted provider, generally a national institution. A micro must have a standalone value and contribute and complement to other things, which can be called my credentials or even macro credentials, and can flow through prior learning credit. Then, it has to meet the standards required by the relevant quality assurance of that nation or authorising body.

COL adds but a few things to that simple definition. We also recognize the idea that learning can be badged and trackable - recognising the verifiable tie between the individual and the verifier. And it can now be actually also provided by non-academic providers, including employers. And it can be shared using social media techniques and technologies.

Most importantly, as very short forms of learning, the focus on authentication of assessment is very, very important.

An assessment verifies that the learner has the skill or competence, and the badge shows that. I've done some work at the University of Technology in Sydney, as here (these are some of their badges), but more and more, it should be possible to bring in, small credentials from others even non-institutional providers, known universities, non-schools, and other institutional providers into a richer mix to allow learners to more flexibly change and augment their learning pathway or just simply demonstrate an important skill.

For our purposes, that's not just good for learners directly, it is also a kind of structured, disruptive force inside institutional thinking that should allow us to reach out beyond the institution.

If credit can flow from one institution to another and count towards different types of qualification, and can be managed by a learner themselves; if it's clearly defined with respect to the learning outcomes and the skills associated to it, then it could become part of an even broader view of what learning even IS.

But that clearly raises a whole bunch of issues that have yet to be resolved. And that's what COL is currently working on. We're currently looking at the nature of a framework and how you could scale it. How can it be transferred to resources that, etc., etc.

The work program we're currently engaged in, is an ongoing research project with select governments. And our intent is to go through a consultation phase and a series of meetings this year. We will report our initial findings at our conference in September and set the new programme of work from there. We aim to look at how we could nationally implement that in a select range of countries through 2026 and then scale with institutional partners in 2027.

As we look at the areas in which we work, all the way from universities through skills-based providers in TVET down into schools, we can see the need for a much more flexible education system working area by area. We can start to see how open, more flexible use of credit could be significantly powerful.

You kind of have to start at the university level because the impact of tertiary education flows all the way out through the skills sector into schooling.

For School learners, bridging that gap to groups of excluded learners starts with a disaggregation and a rethinking of how we run our curriculum, reaching through into what constitutes critical skills for employment and how those can be pulled together in more creative, learner-centred ways.

In the vocational landscape, using technology to think differently about empowering our youth is a significant opportunity to grasp right now. We've been working on a skills framework for TVET through small things for many years.

I'm delighted to invite you to our Pan-Commonwealth Forum conference, which will be running in Botswana, Africa, this September, where we'll be talking about "this framework and the small things change agenda" in much more detail.

So, thank you very much for allowing me to sketch out quickly where we are today.

What I leave you here with is a message we provided to the 56 heads of government of the Commonwealth in Samoa last year.

Learning innovation is critically needed now to reach chronic systemic disadvantage.

Conventional education has failed to do that and will continue to fail to do that.

But open education, together with technology innovation, has the opportunity to make that change, NOW.

Finally, we hope to bring a large number of international voices together into a common learning policy to sustainably change our planet and the lives of learners.

Thank you very much.