



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

Learning for Sustainable Development

BOARD OF GOVERNORS

President's Quarterly Progress Report:

April – June 2018

The Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning met on June 14, 2018 in Canada. In lieu of a Quarterly Progress Report from the President for April – June 2018, the President's Report was provided to Board members for this meeting.



COL at Thirty

Thirty years ago, Commonwealth Heads of Government established COL to:

‘create and widen access to opportunities for learning...making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education.... to strengthen member countries’ capacities to develop the human resources required for their economic and social development....’
(MOU, 1988, amended 1995, 2014)

This visionary document is as relevant today as it was when first written. The world needs distance and technology-enabled learning more than ever before if it is to achieve the objective of providing equitable and quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030 (SDG 4).

COL started out with the mandate to strengthen higher education using open and distance learning. With the adoption of the MDGs in 2000 and the SDGs in 2015, COL understood the need to align its work to the global development agenda. There has been a clear progression from the formal education sector to include non-formal learning covering the entire spectrum of lifelong learning. The theme of our current strategic plan ‘learning for sustainable development’ focuses on how education and learning adds value to the development process. This approach encouraged COL to make a transition from outputs to outcomes and impact. COL has evolved to remain relevant to the needs of Member States and enjoys the reputation of being an effective and innovative organisation that is responsive, results-oriented and accountable.

Former Secretary-General Sridath Ramphal refers to COL as ‘a jewel in the crown of the Commonwealth. Commonwealth Heads had believed in the 1980’s that media and technology, particularly Open and Distance Learning, had an important role to play in advancing education, training and learning generally. Everything that has happened since indicates that they were right. Today millions of people around the Commonwealth are involved in all kinds of technology-mediated learning’ (*Glimpses of a Global Life* Toronto, 2014 p. 301).

This is particularly significant where COL was created under his watch. As technologies reshape the future of work, COL’s role will evolve and expand to support governments in their search for cost-effective solutions to skill and reskill their citizens. We have a young Commonwealth with 60% of the population under the age of thirty in need of lifelong learning opportunities.

In order to equip these constituencies for learning and livelihoods, COL has been promoting alternative and innovative approaches to change existing paradigms.

Over the years, the six key shifts that COL has led are:

The first shift: technology enabled learning can break open the ivory towers of tertiary education. Open and distance learning can reach the unreached, cost one third as compared to campus education, without compromising quality. There has been a phenomenal growth in the number of institutions offering distance education in the developing Commonwealth, with 27 open universities alone providing access to 4.4 million learners in 2016.

The second shift: if the child cannot go to school, the school can come to the child. Open schools provide flexible learning opportunities for secondary education. The Namibian College of Open Learning costs one fifth of what it costs to put a student through a government secondary school and attracts 65% girls because of flexibility and low costs. It is for this reason that 27 Commonwealth countries have established open schools.

The third shift: Open Educational Resources are the answer to closed and costly textbooks. OER based textbooks reduce costs while at the same time enhancing quality. In Antigua & Barbuda a student saved ECD 750 per year in buying textbooks and learning outcomes improved by 5.5% through the use OER. COL resources are OER and have been translated into Arabic, Chinese and French, among others.

The fourth shift: the digital divide can be transformed into a digital dividend. Not everyone in the Commonwealth has computers and connectivity. COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. Its deployment in Pakistan, Samoa and Tonga, resulted in better motivation of teachers and improved learning outcomes for students. Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs have been tailored to suit the needs of developing countries and thousands of learners have been reached through basic mobile phones.

The fifth shift: literacy is not a precondition for learning. In India, illiterate women entrepreneurs at the bottom of the pyramid established a farm producers company with COL support. The women learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones. In the past two years alone, 137,000 women in 11 countries have been

lifted out of poverty and every dollar invested has resulted in assets worth nine dollars.

The sixth shift: the social capital of the mother is the most important determinant in bringing girls to school. In order to skill 35,000 girls, over 200,000 family and community members had to be sensitised. Empowered mothers and sensitised communities can be the most powerful stakeholders for ensuring that each girl completes 12 years of school, a commitment made by Heads at CHOGM 2018.

Today, COL is regarded as a thought-leader in education and development. COL's strength is its people, partners and networks. Its focus is on the last person in the queue as it believes equity and inclusion are fundamental to achieving sustainable development.

As COL enters its fourth decade, it will build on existing strengths and balance continuity with evolutionary change. This will involve addressing three key issues. First, the access to new technologies has blurred the distinction between distance education and campus provision—most institutions offer some form of technology-enabled learning. COL can provide expertise and advice not just to distance learning but to all educational institutions. Second, COL will have a significant role to play in supporting Member States to operationalise lifelong learning by leveraging the potential of technologies. Third, in today's networked world, COL is poised to add value on an international scale which will mean closer collaboration with development partners and non-Commonwealth countries as well.

Anchored firmly in its values and principles, COL will face the 'brave new world' with confidence and continue to make a difference.

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June 2018