

# *Celebrating COL's 25th Anniversary*

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*Remarks at COL's Board of Governors Reception  
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## **Transcript**

Honourable Chair, Members of the Board of Governors, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for joining us for our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Twenty five years ago the Commonwealth Heads of Government met here in Vancouver and decided to establish an organization that would use distance learning and technologies to promote education and training in Member States and to strengthen Commonwealth cooperation. Today we can say that COL has fulfilled that vision and become a well-respected organization that helps governments and institutions to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning that leads to development.

COL is what it is today because of the tireless efforts of the many from around the Commonwealth. Some of these wonderful people are here today and I pay tribute to them for the strong and stable foundations they have laid. If COL is well-regarded today, it is due largely to the outstanding guidance of its distinguished Board, the valuable legacy of its former Presidents and the dedication and commitment of its staff, a group of world class professionals. We are very grateful to our host country Canada and to the several governments around the Commonwealth that have the confidence to invest in COL.

Though COL is small, it is an important organization. Former Board member and famous Canadian writer, Denise Chong, captures this so well in her recent email to me:

*'I have a gift from COL to mark my tenure: a small Inuit carving of a bird. I keep it on a mantle of the fireplace in our kitchen, so that it is a part of my everyday life. It's small and simple, but it has strong lines: its back perfectly aligned with its head and beak, as if size mattered not for its confidence and sense of purpose in this world. Every day I look at it, and it reminds me of COL. I look back and see that we, the board, asked a small organization to think big, to turn its smallness into an asset.'*

We are a small organization that thinks big and has activities in 47 of the 54 member states of the Commonwealth. When I asked Sir John Daniel, my predecessor, for his recollections he told me that he thought one of COL's great strengths, and the reason that it has an impact out of all proportion to its size,

is the longevity of its engagement in its areas of focus. Compared to most international agencies, which tend to abandon their short projects just as they might begin to bear fruit, COL sticks with its partners and its programmes until they can fly with their own wings. He gave two examples. First, the Lifelong Learning for Farmers program and second the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth which took several years to gain traction. Sir John added that attending the VUSSC 'boot camps' or course development workshops are some of the best memories of his time at COL.

Many in the small states share Sir John's enthusiasm for the virtual university. Emma Kruse Vaai DVC of the National University of Samoa sends her warm greetings from the Pacific saying 'This is really our celebration also because we feel we have been very much a part of COL. Through the many COL initiatives and in its effective role as facilitator for the small states, we continue to work towards achieving our common goals.'

Jenny Glennie a former board member from South Africa fondly remembers how some years ago, after an intensive COL Executive Committee meeting, on a cold February evening, at a small hotel in London, we both sat down to refine COL's PI's. She cherishes the memory for two reasons: as an instance of Board-Management collaboration and as an example of the improvised road taken when instituting a new practice, that is, RBM.

It took several years for RBM to get embedded into COL's psychology and continues to be a work-in-progress even though Vijay Krishnarayan, Director of the Commonwealth Foundation says: 'Over a short time, COL has established a reputation for expertise and partnerships. This has been through a disciplined and focused approach, enabled by the early adoption of RBM. We at the Foundation have recently started on a similar path and in doing so we acknowledge your leadership in this field.'

COL has changed constantly to stay relevant to the needs of its stakeholders and as our former President Tan Sri Raj Dhanarajan remembers that, 'as an agent of change, the Commonwealth of Learning seems to have performed well to the expectations of its stakeholders, despite the uncertainties of the early years. As a catalyst and network builder, it brought together educational innovators of the Commonwealth for the common good of its peoples'.

These messages from six very distinguished men and women from around the Commonwealth give you an idea of what we do. It is a different world today from when COL was first established. But, as we go forward we will build on our strengths and continue with our three-R strategy: relevance, responsiveness and results. As we do, we will continue to look forward to your support. Once again thank you for coming.