

Advancing Research in Commonwealth Africa: some reflections



Presentation Transcript

*Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning
(BOCODOL)*

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*Presented by
Professor Asha Kanwar, President & CEO
(co-written with Dr Godson Gatsha, Education
Specialist – Higher Education)*

It is an honour to be here and I thank Dr Tau and his team for the kind invitation. My topic to day is ‘Advancing Research in Commonwealth Africa’ and I have prepared my presentation with my colleague, whom you know very well, Dr Godson Gatsha.

The Commonwealth of Learning has been closely associated with Botswana, which as a prominent member of the Commonwealth, has been consistent in its contributions both financial and intellectual.

BOCODOL has been a close partner of the Commonwealth of Learning and we have worked on open schooling, higher education, VUSSC and eLearning. COL also works with other partners and has a close collaboration in the area of skills development.

Let me begin by introducing my organisation the Commonwealth of Learning. It was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government, when they met for CHOGM in 1987.

It works in the 53 Member States of the Commonwealth which extend from the Caribbean and North America to Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of open and distance education and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

COL has its headquarters in Vancouver and a regional office CEMCA, New Delhi.

It also supports regional centres—the SADC-CDE hosted by BOCODOL, RETRIDOL by the National Open University of Nigeria and PACFOLD by the University of South Pacific in Fiji and a centre for the Caribbean is under development. These centres serve the needs of the sub-regions in which they are located.

After wide consultations we have developed a Strategic Plan 2015 to 2021 entitled Learning for Sustainable Development.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

Based on the priorities of Commonwealth governments, we work in two sectors: Education and Skills.

Learning for sustainable development aligns closely with the 17 SDGs agreed upon by the global community last month.

Goal 4 on education focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. This will shape the education agenda over the next fifteen years.

The goal has several targets: one, quality education must lead to effective learning outcomes, two, we must focus on developing skills for employment, entrepreneurship and global citizenship, and three, the need for having qualified teachers in place to achieve these targets.

The post-2015 education agenda calls for equitable and quality lifelong learning for all by 2030. There is an emphasis not just on basic but also post-basic education. Quality of teaching and learning will be an important area of focus. Youth and skills development for work are an increasing area of priority for most governments around the world.

In which ways will the phenomenal growth of technology help us to achieve these targets?

Let us look at the context in terms of technology and higher education.

What kinds of technology? While in North America, there are over 80 internet users per 100 persons, in developing countries the average drops to 31% while in the LDCs, the number of internet users is less than 5 percent.

In SSA, mobile devices have grown exponentially over the last decade. Internet access remains at about 20%.

The recent eLearning Africa report asked respondents, what are the most commonly used ICTs? Laptops came first with 19%, smartphone at 14% and PCs at 13%. This is a dynamic field and we would need to watch this space. Mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets may well supersede PCs and laptops in the near future.

The same report surveyed the benefits of ICT in education. The top three uses identified were: one, to enhance learning; two, to equip students with digital skills to prepare them for the workforce and three, to access information.

Given the importance of ICT in education, how many institutions/countries have ICT in Education policies? This slide may be of interest. Eight countries have ICT in Education policies developed over the last decade. You will note that six African institutions have OER policies.

What are the emergent trends in technology globally? The recent Horizon report estimates that in the next two years, blended learning would be used increasingly, and institutions will redesign their learning spaces. Over the next three to five years, the focus will shift to measuring learning outcomes and OER will be available in more subject areas. In the longer term, we will see more innovation and collaboration within institutions (Johnson et al, 2015). And there will be a greater need for higher education institutions to contribute to national development.

As the Chair of the African Union Commission says and its worth quoting in full ‘ HE must help develop the skills to accelerate our development, to industrialise, to build and maintain our infrastructure, to manage our diversity and natural resources, to build shared prosperity, to strengthen and deepen our democracies and to building peaceful societies’. In short, universities must contribute to sustainable development.

The rate of tertiary enrolment has grown substantially in SSA, but the age participation rates (APRs) are less than 10%, well below other regions in the Commonwealth. Africa is the youngest continent in the world with 50% of its people under the age of 25, who will need access to tertiary education and training.

There is a high rate of migration of tertiary graduates. Over 77% of tertiary educated citizens of the Seychelles and 56% from Mauritius emigrate to OECD countries. Botswana is an exception with its migration rate of 5% well below the SSA average of over 12%.

The positive dimension of this brain circulation is the remittances to the home country. Of the \$33 billion that were sent to Africa in 2014, the top six receiving countries were Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Lesotho and Botswana. As development accelerates, there would be incentives to draw back and retain the educated workforce on the continent. As we can already see in India and China, many of the qualified citizens are returning and bringing additional investment into the home countries.

How can research add value to the development process in terms of strengthening livelihoods? How can research support marginalised communities? How can research contribute to national development? For instance in a diamond-rich country such as Botswana, could there be a focus on research in this field? Is there a need for setting up specialist institutions in different regions of Africa?

Let us briefly review the status of research in SSA.

The role of the university is to promote scholarship, extend the boundaries of knowledge through research and support communities through its extension function.

The African Union calls for more PhDs who can generate new knowledge and contribute to economic development. McGregor identifies some challenges: most governments are still struggling to provide basic and secondary education for all. Doctoral studies are therefore not a top priority. Scarce resources are diverted to other pressing areas such food, health, infrastructure. Most higher education institutions in

SSA were established after independence in many countries, that is, after the 1960's and have yet to build a research culture. PhD supervisors are often inexperienced. While Africa accounts for 12% of the world population, it accounts less than 1% of global research.

This Slide gives you an idea of the number of PhD students across some countries in Commonwealth Africa. The numbers are uneven and data scarce. Research has doubled between 2003 and 2012, with South Africa and Nigeria being the main contributors.

One reason could be attention to policy and funding to promote research. The SADC Protocol on Education seeks to encourage research among Member States by supporting students whose research proposals have been accepted by South African institutions. Students from SADC countries are given the same benefits as South African students.

One way forward could be to allocate more funding for research and offer bursaries and scholarships. The SADC Protocol model could be adopted/adapted by ECOWAS and EAC for the West African and East African regions where many Commonwealth African countries are located.

COL has activities in all Commonwealth Member States in Africa. How have we contributed to research? Let me share some examples.

Research capacity needs to be strengthened. COL has developed materials on Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training (PREST), which is available on our website. What is this about?

It has two sets of Modules and one User Guide. The Core Modules are generic and can support capacity building in research skills. These include quantitative, qualitative and mixed research methods as well as how to report on research. The second set of Handbooks deals specifically with distance education research.

COL also offers a CEMBA/MPA programme, which has two basic courses on 'Quantitative Techniques' and 'Research Methodology'. These are included in the USB, which has the complete PREST materials.

The PREST materials were developed ten years ago and are being revised in Botswana. The revised materials will focus on research in education. It will reflect current practices in research including the use of ICT and OER. The target audience: practitioners, educators, and those wishing to pursue a doctoral degree. Since it will be available as OER, it can be adopted/adapted by any institution.

PREST has been accredited by the Botswana Training Authority and the one year programme focuses on training researchers in SADC countries. Here is the first cohort of graduates.

COL supports a programme of Chairs in ODL and OER and this is often implemented jointly with UNESCO. COL-UNESCO Chairs have been established at Mzuzu University, Malawi, Open University of Tanzania and National Open University of Nigeria.

Another strategy for promoting research is COL's Pan-Commonwealth Forums which happen once every three years. The previous one was organized in collaboration with the National Open University in Nigeria in Abuja in 2013. These forums move to different regions of the Commonwealth. Significantly,

the next PCF will be organized in partnership with the Open University of Malaysia and will be held in Kuala Lumpur during 27 Nov-1Dec, 2016. COL's objective is to promote research and to train a cadre of future leaders to take forward the baton from the previous generation of gurus and stalwarts.

COL also offers Excellence in Distance Education Awards during its triennial conferences—these are meant for institutions, DE materials, the use of OER and for DE learners. BOCODOL is the proud recipient of this honour.

COL brings out several publications to provide a platform for scholars from around the Commonwealth to share their research. COL brings out an online Journal of Learning for Development which provides a forum for the publication of research with a focus on innovation in learning, and its contribution to development. It welcomes articles on theory, policy and practice.

The way forward would be to promote international and regional collaboration in research; strengthen research capacity through a targeted approach and harness ICTs for research.

What else can be done to promote research in SSA?

Research shows that even if we provide all facilities and infrastructure, without proper mentoring, all the inputs will not prove to be effective. Panda suggests that research capacity could be built through a mentoring relationship which can either be face to face or at a distance.

What can we learn from the industry? In this study carried out to determine what factors contribute to research and development in industry, senior managers believed that research and innovation is driven primarily by the corporate culture of an organization. How do we define this enabling corporate culture? This means staff have autonomy and freedom, there is a system of recognition and rewards in place and a culture where failure is not a stigma but is accepted as a lesson learned. The junior staff had a slightly different perspective on what drives research and innovation. They believed that research and innovation depended largely on the right people. So we find the importance of people as critical to driving research.

In a recent paper, Bland et al identify 15 institutional characteristics that promote research in German institutions. These sum up what we have already discussed: careful recruitment and selection of the right people, clear goals, an emphasis on research within the institution, adequate resources, and mentoring.

In short the German model for building an institutional culture of research emphasises the importance of collegiality, where people can taste out their gut-of-the-box thinking without the fear of being ridiculed. It means that staff have enough time earmarked for research rather than having to fit it in within over-committed teaching schedules. It also means that each institution needs to identify and build on existing strengths.

No discussion of trends in research today can be complete without a reference to Open Access policies and practices. Open Access means that a user is able to copy, use and distribute a piece of research with proper attribution of authorship. This is beginning to get ground and in 2013, a European Commission study found that half the new published research was now open and free, According to another 2014

study, of the 114 million publications on the web, 27 million were open access. Qnce this is a growing trend, the research community cannot ignore the open access option.

This Slide gives you a range of open access policies from the US, UK and the European Commission and this is a useful resource for institutions wishing to adopt this approach.

Institutions in Africa are embracing the open access route and have established their own collection of peer-reviewed scholarly journals.

The way forward emerging from this section is that Universities can adopt open access publishing policies and share Good Practice. Our regional office CEMCA developed an Open Access with UNESCO.

To sum up, if we need to promote quality research, universities will need to do three things: foster an environment of creativity and innovation; value and reward research and use the research to inform both policy and practice in relevant and meaningful ways.

Thank you for your kind attention.