Promoting Learning for Development

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by
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It is a privilege to present the Commonwealth of Learning and its work to you and I thank Vijay Krishnarayan and Nabeel Goheer for the opportunity. Today I will highlight some aspects of 'Promoting Learning for Development' with some concrete examples to give you a flavour of what we do.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and Information and Communication Technologies for expanding access to education and training. Our slogan is 'Learning for Development'.

Following the ideas of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, COL understands development as freedom. Increasing the freedoms that men and women enjoy is a definition of development, and greater freedom empowers people to be more effective agents of development. Learning must enable people to exercise their freedom 'to be and to do'.

Prof Amartya Sen proposes the capability approach which helps us to see that learning and acquiring skills are not an end in themselves but steps that help individuals and societies achieve development outcomes. This approach encourages us to think beyond outputs such as acquiring a degree to outcomes—how this degree will lead to a better quality of life. It also shifts the focus from developing capacity to capability and to the question—now that we have the capacity, what will we do with it? We develop skills or what Prof Sen calls 'functionings'—how can these enable us to overcome the constraints of our daily existence and make a change for the better?

What are the capabilities that learning must impart? Walker, who has worked on the capability approach, investigated the capabilities that girls in school in South Africa thought important and came up with three: personal autonomy and independence of thought; ability to enter the world of work and an identity and a voice that would get respect and recognition.

This is what we mean by learning for development. We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn increases their freedoms 'to be and to do' helps accelerate progress towards

achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

COL's work is located within the framework of the MDGs, particularly the six related to poverty alleviation, education, gender equality and health.

COL also supports Members States in their efforts to achieve four of the six Education For All Goals relating to access, quality, skills development and gender equality.

As a result of the wide consultations across the Commonwealth, COL developed a strategic plan for 2012-15. COL hopes to contribute to a substantial increase in the number of Commonwealth citizens who will acquire the knowledge and skills to lead healthy and productive lives. You will note the shift from developing the capacity in 'knowledge and skills' to the capability that Commonwealth citizens will have to 'lead productive and healthy lives'.

Based on the needs identified, the priority for COL includes education for girls and women, promoting the use of open education resources or OER and skills development.

COL organises its work in two sectors: education and livelihoods & health. These two sectors have seven initiatives and two cross-cutting themes of eLearning and Gender that underpin all our work . COL has identified five core strategies to implement its work: partnerships, capacity, materials, models and policies. As a small organisation, each of these strategies helps us to leverage our impact. Our Vice President, Mr Vis Naidoo from South Africa has the responsibility for directing the programme.

Let me give you examples of each of these initiatives.

As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education - worldwide - 71 million adolescents are not in school. COL works in 26 countries in expanding open schooling to increase learning opportunities for secondary education, particularly for girls, out-of-school youth, and people in remote regions. Frances Ferreira from Namibia leads our work in this field.

Here is what a young woman in Bangladesh had to share. She left school in class five, is now married with three children and wanted to return to school so that she could help her children with their homework. Open schooling provided her with the opportunity to do this at her own pace and convenience

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. 1.7 million additional teachers are needed if we are to achieve UPE by next year ! It will not be possible to rely on only brick and mortar approaches to address the projected deficits. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology. In the last three years, COL collaborated with these institutions to train over 350,000 teachers in 24 countries. This figure includes teachers of marginalised groups such as the nomads in Africa. Dr Jessica Aguti from Uganda leads our work in this area.

COL has trained nomadic teachers in Nigeria in new pedagogic approaches, supported teachers in English Language Teaching in Kenya and built the capacity of teachers to harness the potential of Open Education Resources or OER, which means free content, to improve the quality of their teaching.

Many Commonwealth countries in Asia and Africa have APRs in Higher Education at less than 15% and are trying to improve access to Higher Education. COL is using distance learning approaches to help achieve this. Our colleague Dr Godson Gatsha from Botswana is our specialist in higher education.

Just to take one example COL pioneered the development of a Commonwealth executive MBA and MPA programme which enabled our partner institutions to increase the numbers of trained managers and administrators in their countries. COL's work in Higher Education includes leadership training and institutional quality assessment. COL's certificate in Legislative Drafting is being offered by several institutions in the Pacific, Canada, UK and Nigeria.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for the small states, a network of 31 countries. John Lesperance from the Seychelles leads our work for the VUSSC

Seven institutions, are now offering VUSSC developed courses. As a result of ongoing training programmes, we have built the capacity of more than 11,000 people including educators, policy makers and IT managers. We have also developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to promote learners' mobility and credit transfer between countries and regions. Here is a graduate of the diploma programme in agriculture at the National University of Samoa.

This is Eunice Maganga, a young Kenyan woman, who has had the opportunity to gain skills for improving her livelihood through COL's work. Eunice has always wanted to be a builder like her father. Eunice studied a free course in building technology, made possible by sponsorship of materials from local companies. For their practical work they built a staff house at the college. Eunice now works as semi-skilled labour and has increased her daily income by 150%. Eunice has enrolled for further studies at the college – which she can now pay for – as she wants to become a skilled bricklayer.

This is just one story of how COL's work impacts on improving skills and livelihoods. Alison Mead Richardson from the UK is our specialist in this area.

*The college is Coast Institute of Technology

Here are some learners doing the practical training in the construction course offered in Nauru.

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in the developing countries. The present agricultural extension system based on face-to-face training is inadequate to address the challenges. COL offers a new approach called Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3F. COL catalyses the links between the civil society, institutions and micro-finance institutions to develop multi-media based learning. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is a

learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities. This model, which was first successful in Asia and Africa, is now spreading to the Pacific and the Caribbean. Dr Balasubramanian from India is our specialist for this initiative.

You can see that about 5000 women have increased food security through this programme in Kenya. And as research shows, that for every dollar invested by the farming community in this programme in India, there was a return of $9.

The Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. Our Canadian colleague Ian Pringle leads this initiative.

These photographs are of a learning programme called the Bag of Life in a district of Malawi with extremely high rates of maternal and child mortality. The programme is a collaborative venture between a community network of some 15,000 women, a local health NGO, the district hospital and a community radio. The Bag of Life centres on 60 minutes of weekly audio content that combines information about maternal and child health, i.e. vetted by doctors and nurses, with the voices of local women and their real life stories. Our evaluation shows that 2/3 of active participants have learned the importance of simple key messages, e.g. to deliver in the hospital or clinic. In perhaps the most powerful illustration of the value of the Bag of Life, over 150 women's groups contribute their own money to keep this programme going.

Our work in elearning cuts across all initiatives. The Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher ICT Integration or CCTI is an advanced course for teachers and school leaders in integrating ICT into school management and teaching and learning. This was localized for Guyana and is being deployed in 5 Caribbean countries. Dr Mark Bullen, a Canadian colleague is our specialist in elearning.

COL has developed a prototype for developing open textbooks through the use of OER and this is being piloted by Antigua and Barbuda, to be taken up by the other OECS countries.

COL maintains an online directory service for OER from the Commonwealth countries. We have identified free courses from different Commonwealth institutions that can be used by other stakeholders in four areas—higher education, secondary schooling, teacher education and skills development—all priority areas for Commonwealth member states.

Looking at the data from the Commonwealth, we find that universities from developing countries are publishing large quantities of OER. We find that open universities in India, Nigeria, South Africa and Pakistan are significant producers.

But we are aware of emerging opportunities. One is the Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs. COL in partnership with IIT-Kanpur offered a MOOC on mobiles-for-development. This interdisciplinary open course attracted over 2200 registrants from 116 countries, 62% of whom were active participants. The six-week course was completed by over 400 participants. The next MOOCs will be offered for training teachers in the use of OER and ICTs in collaboration with the NCERT, India and the African Virtual University.

Gender is another crosscutting theme that underpins COL's work. Rosanne Wong, another Canadian is our Gender Equality Manager.

Women hold just 20% of the parliamentary seats across the Commonwealth. Leymah Gwobee, the Nobel laureate from Liberia said that one way to stop the increasing violence against women was to put more women in power. Providing more educational opportunities for girls and women would be one way of supporting this.

Since technology underpins most of our work, COL tries to harness the use of emerging technologies to close the digital divide. Let me give you one example of Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls. Our director, Dr V Balaji from India is responsible for technology-based innovations at COL.

This scene may be a typical learning situation for many children in developing countries. Classes such as these are far from electric power grids. Internet access is not even thought of as a possibility. Would tech-supported or e-learning mean anything in circumstances like this?

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Our answer is yes. The sudden rise of affordable Tablet computers has made it possible to connect learners even in remote areas to experience the power and advantages of connected learning.

Today, there is enough computing power in Tablets to make them function as servers. They can run a Learning Management System such as Moodle. Learners can access materials in the server using hand-held tablets.

In the picture here, the white device serves as power source and WiFi hot spot for the black device which is actually a PC. Together these two devices cost just under $100 and form the core of our "Classroom Without Walls'

This is also being used by approximately 12000 rural women for financial literacy training and financial transactions in collaboration with a cooperative bank in India.

We have seen that through its work, COL has been promoting learning that leads to development, especially among the most deprived and marginalised. As the deadline of the internationally agreed goals draws near, COL has a two-fold agenda—one, to support the progress towards achieving the MDGs and to position itself for a post-2015 world. Let me outline 3 elements of our strategy.

First, we follow a strategy of minimum intervention maximum impact. We do this through developing replicable models, forging partnerships and coalitions to leverage our impact and using distance learning methodologies for human resource development

Two, harnessing appropriate technologies such as mobile devices and promoting innovations to reach the unreached.

Three, continue to focus on Africa, South Asia and the small states

What are COL's strengths? Its expertise in learning for development and technologies; because its small it can be nimble and responsive to the needs of member states; its flexibility; the network of partners it has nurtured over the years and its ability to be the bridge between global goals and country priorities.

What are our challenges? One is that we don't reach the threshold level of operations to really achieve scale and impact. The coordination between ministries of education, health and agriculture. Managing stakeholder expectations and not losing our focus within the imperatives of competing demands

If we review some of the sustainable development goals identified by the UN High Level panel, we find that these resonate closely with what COL is already engaged in and would indicate that COL must continue on its present course.

Similarly, UNESCO's post-2015 education agenda calls for equitable and quality lifelong learning for all by 2030. COL can contribute to global efforts by promoting the use of distance learning and technologies to accelerate the achievement of the proposed targets.

The Commonwealth inter-ministerial working group proposed access, quality and equity and the three overarching goals of education.

Finally to be ready to respond to the emerging goals on education as we move beyond 2015—the consensus both at COMSEC and UNESCO seems to emerge in favour of access, quality and equity, all three areas in which COL is already active.

As the world gets ready to adopt the next set of goals, COL's strategic plan for 2015-21will be entitled 'Learning for Sustainable Development', one which will promote inclusive development that leads to livelihoods and environmental sustainability

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention.