

An Inclusive Commonwealth



14 March 2016

Video message delivered for Commonwealth Day 2016

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Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning. The words of the poet John Donne are as true today as they were when he was writing them four centuries ago: "No man is an island...and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee."

Even though our Commonwealth is scattered and farflung, an inextricable connection binds us all—this goes beyond the ties of history or language—and is based on the shared human values of respect and understanding. Each Member State, no matter how big or small, rich or poor has an equal voice and value. How can we channelise these disparate voices and values to become our collective strength?

Let us look at some concrete examples of how COL contributes to an Inclusive Commonwealth. Thirty one small states are working together to provide quality higher education to their citizens through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC. The Commonwealth Open Schooling Association or COMOSA includes 21 Member States and collectively develops quality materials to increase access to secondary education. INVEST Africa is a consortium of polytechnics in ten countries that provide skills development for livelihoods. All the learning materials that they develop collaboratively are available as Open Education Resources or OER to all members of the Commonwealth family and beyond.

Such consortia are possible today because of technology. We at the Commonwealth of Learning use technologies that are appropriate accessible and affordable, to reach the last mile. We know that everyone in the Commonwealth does not have internet connectivity. To overcome this, COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that allows learners in isolated islands in Kiribati and remote mountains in Pakistan to access digital resources. Using radio programmes and mobile phones, Batwa communities in the dense forests of Uganda learn about beekeeping and honey collection in their local language, and this has led to food security.

On this Commonwealth Day, let us reflect on what more we can do to make our Commonwealth truly inclusive.

We dream of a Commonwealth where women are treated with dignity and respect; where young people have the opportunities of achieving their highest aspirations; where no family goes to bed without a square meal; where in spite of our religious, cultural and ethnic differences we understand and support each other. Our inclusive Commonwealth will be a place where as the poet Tagore said, 'the mind is without fear and the head is held high, where knowledge is free'. We at the Commonwealth of Learning believe that this is no utopian fantasy, but a realizable goal, that can be achieved through education, and lifelong learning for all.