

COL in the Pacific - Promoting Learning for Development



2 April 2014

Delivered at the Forum Education Ministers' Meeting

Cook Islands

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Hon Ministers, Senior Officials, Colleagues

It is a real privilege to be at FEdMM and I thank the organisers for the opportunity to present the Commonwealth of Learning and its work.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and 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?

We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn increases their freedoms to be and to do and helps accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace equality, democracy and good governance.

In addition to placing our work within the context of internationally agreed development goals, we have a strong country focus and tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Ministers of Education in 51 countries and this network identifies the priorities that COL can address. The Focal Points for the Pacific at their meeting in 2011 believed that COL should make TVET materials available; bring best practice to the region, provide technical advice in ODL and OER. Our next Pacific Focal Points meeting will be co-hosted by the Hon Minister of Education, Samoa at the end of September.

Technology and distance education have an important role to play in scaling up access to education and training. It is for this reason that COL has consistently advocated for the use of distance learning methods to be adopted not just for formal education but also for formal and non-formal learning. This is an important contribution that COL has made—to extend the potential of ODL beyond academia to the domain of development.

As a result of the wide consultations in all the four regions of 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. 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. 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.

Let me give you examples of each of these initiatives at in the Pacific.

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.

In the Pacific, COL initiated its open schooling work by commissioning a 12 country report to identify the need for open schools. As a result, COL in collaborations with the USP supported the establishment of open schools in Tonga Kiribati and the Solomon Islands. COL has facilitated a twinning arrangement between the Te Kura Correspondence College, Wellington with Vanuatu Open School. The 22-country consortium of the Commonwealth Open Schools Association has six members from the region which include New Zealand and Australia, a nice example of a Commonwealth cooperation.

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology. COL's work in teacher education in the Pacific has been related to building capacity in Quality Assurance, Curriculum Development and MultiGrade teacher training.

Many Commonwealth countries in Asia and Africa are trying to improve the APRs in Higher Education. COL is using distance learning approaches to help achieve this. In the Pacific, COL's Legislative Drafting programme is offered through the Vanuatu campus of USP. COL provides scholarships and we have learners from many countries including the Cook Islands.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for the small states, a network of 31 countries. Nine institutions, covering all Commonwealth regions are now offering VUSSC developed courses. As a result of ongoing training programmes, we have built the capacity of thousands of educators, policy makers and IT managers.

The first cohort of students of the sustainable agriculture course has graduated from the University of Samoa under the VUSSC arrangement and a common Transnational Qualifications Framework is in place The NUS, UPNG, Vanuatu Institute of Technology and the Tonga Institute of HE are active participants of VUSSC. .

COL's work in skills development builds the capacity of institutions to offer new, flexible courses for people working in the informal sector, especially women. COL has developed 5 courses in Basic Trades and in Vocational literacy and these are being used in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, PNG, Tuvalu and Nauru. A strategic plan for the TVET Division, Department of Education, PNG was supported by COL.

Working with the Ministry of Education, COL supported a training programme on working with concrete and 167 young people qualified to work with concrete as a result of this training.

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in the developing countries. COL offers a new approach called the 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 also a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities.

Here are the participants of a recently initiated L3F programme in PNG. This model, which was first successful in India and Sri Lanka, is now spreading to the Pacific.

The Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. 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 women, a local health NGO, the district hospital and a community radio. The community develops programmes in the local languages that reach thousands of learners and has resulted in health-seeking behaviours in the community. In perhaps the most powerful illustration of the value of the Bag of Life, over 150 women's groups representing over 2,000 women contribute their own money to keep this programme going.

Building on consistent advocacy and capacity building, the Isabel Province Government had accepted the proposal to support technology mediated learning through the Isabel Learning Network, comprising 8 village based communication centres including radio and email stations. Capacity building initiatives include participants from PNG; Kiribati; Solomon Islands; Cook Islands; Vanuatu

Our work in elearning cuts across all initiatives. In the Pacific, we have established a Chair in OER at Otago Polytechnic that is occupied by Dr Wayne Macintosh. We have an agreement with the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand to offer their Certificate in elearning to stakeholders in Africa and the Pacific.

COL's Directory of OER has a consolidated list of open and free courses in HE, TE, skills development and secondary education that we can adopt and adapt.

Gender is another crosscutting theme that underpins COL's work. Leymah Gwobee, the Nobel laureate from Liberia said that one way to stop the violence against women is to put more women in power.

Women hold just 21% of the parliamentary seats across the Commonwealth. In the Pacific, without including Australia and New Zealand, the figure drops to a mere 4%. COL is in the process of discussing how to develop a multi-media leadership training course for women in the region. This could then be adapted for other Commonwealth regions.

We are also in the process of establishing a Regional Centre for advocacy and capacity building in ODL. Key stakeholders met in Vanuatu last year to identify the role of the centre. This will be located at the Centre for Vocational & Continuing Education, USP and we are very grateful to the Vice Chancellor Prof Rajesh Chandra for providing personnel and space. COL will provide capacity building support. There will be a regional advisory council to provide overall direction to the Centre. We have two such centres in

Africa—one in Botswana to serve the needs of the SADC sub-region and the second in Nigeria meant for West Africa. The Pacific Centre will be formally launched in September 2014, when we are in the region for the Focal Points meeting in Samoa.

The Commonwealth of Learning looks at developments in technology from the point of view of developing Member states. Thanks to the rapid diffusion of mobile devices, today we can talk about a global digital dividend. Aptus or the Classroom Without Walls is a good example. It is developed by using readily available and low cost components. Open source software is used and the total cost is less than \$ 100 in all

Aptus does not require power from the mains. We can use solar chargers instead. It does not require any connectivity. We use a wireless router. All this enables teachers and students to access good quality digital materials through this device. As of now, learners can access the Wikipedia for schools containing over 6000 articles. Or the 2000 odd Khan Academy videos, covering topics relevant to learners in primary schools or high schools. A whole library of free books is also available. To supplement all this, local content can be generated and added quite easily. As Dennis Pack from Kiribati writes, ‘I was very impressed with the speed at which the resources loaded...if we add our own content, I can visualise the Aptus featuring as the main technology on many of our island primary and secondary schools’.

Finally, COL is your organisation and it works for you. COL can provide world class expertise in distance learning and technology based approaches. It develops innovative models for scale and sustainability and build capacity for lifelong learning and development for all. Thank you for your support.