

Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



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Honourable Ministers, Colleagues. Thank you for the opportunity to brief you about the Commonwealth of Learning. I'll share some examples of our recent work in your countries.

As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government at the 1987 CHOGM. Canada came forward to host the organisation and we've been in beautiful British Columbia since.

What do we do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to quality education and training.

As per the MOU agreed by Commonwealth governments, COL is required to report to Education Ministers at their triennial meetings and to Foreign Ministers at CHOGMs. We also report to the COMSEC board and our own board. We are required to report to major donors and you'll be pleased to note that for the year 2015-2016, DFID has given us an A++ rating which means we've substantially exceeded expectations in outputs and outcomes.

We present reports of our work in each country at the CCEMs. We circulated a report of what we have done in your countries during 2012-15 and the highlights of our work during the financial year 2015-16.

Thank you for nominating Focal Points who are our direct link to your ministry. Our Focal Points meet once every three years in each of the four regions of the Commonwealth and are a valuable resource for shaping our agenda.

We have developed a Strategic Plan 2015-21 after wide consultations around the Commonwealth entitled 'learning for sustainable development'.

This aligns us with Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to three things: one, economic growth, two, social inclusion and three, environmental conservation.

Based on the priorities of Member States, we have organised our work in two sectors: Education and Skills with gender as a crosscutting theme.

How do we propose to achieve impact, scale and sustainability? By harnessing the potential of existing and new technologies.

First, how has COL supported economic growth?

Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in developing countries. COL offers a new approach called the Lifelong Learning for Farmers. This unique programme has lifted thousands of farmers out of poverty. Research shows that for every dollar invested, income and assets worth \$9 have been generated among farming communities in India. This programme is also being implemented in Ghana Jamaica Kenya Tanzania and Sri Lanka.

In Kenya, COL supported women to start agri-enterprises and a recent study concludes that learning leads to empowerment and for every 1% increase in empowerment, there is a 2.3% increase in profits.

COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered in 11 countries, including Malaysia and Mauritius. Raymond Loh, an alumnus of Wawasan Open University, Malaysia completed this programme in his early fifties and started a moving and relocation service which now has a presence in 40 countries.

Two, how does COL's work to support social inclusion? As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education, particularly girls. Open schools provide flexible learning opportunities by using a range of technologies from print to the internet. This young woman from Bangladesh was married at age 12 and went back to an open school at 22 so that she could help her children with their school work.

COL has been working with the Namibian College of Open Learning to promote open schooling. Open schooling costs well below formal secondary schools. A COL study shows that the Namibian College of Open Learning costs one fourth of what it costs to put a student through a government school. NAMCOL will be offering the COL Graduate Diploma in Open School Operation and Management online from next year to anyone anywhere in the world.

COL's study on the social return on investment of an open school in Belize shows that every dollar invested resulted in \$ 8 worth of benefits to students in terms of skills and employability.

Solomon Islands National University has worked with COL to integrate distance learning to reach the unreached in remote islands and is offering the VUSSC Bachelors in Business and Entrepreneurship programme.

COL has worked with the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development in St Lucia to develop an ICT in Education policy and to develop skills development courses as Open Educational Resources or OER. As we know OER can cut costs, improve quality and enhance access to education. St Lucia has also developed an Open Math Textbook.

We know that not everyone in the Commonwealth has internet connectivity. The Commonwealth average for internet use is only 30%. The real growth in the last decade has taken place in mobile use, which stands at 83 per hundred. To overcome this, COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. Aptus been deployed in Kiribati and Vanuatu. Fiji and Samoa are planning to adopt this.

Allama Iqbal Public School in Swat, Pakistan is using Aptus since January last year and a study shows that the learning outcomes of the students have improved as have the practices and motivation of their teachers.

Third, what is COL's contribution to environmental conservation?

Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). All 31 small states of the Commonwealth are active members of this consortium. Environmental sustainability is a central concern for all the states. VUSSC is offering online courses in eco-tourism, sustainable fisheries and students have graduated in Sustainable Agriculture from the National University of Samoa. All the students who graduated already have full-time jobs.

COL has also helped the Centre for Environmental Education, India to develop a Green Teacher programme which ensures that teachers inculcate environmental concerns amongst school children.

Working with the Blue Economy Institute in Seychelles, COL has developed a course on this emerging field and this forms part of a programme in Bachelors in Environmental Management for sustainable development. The University of the Bahamas will offer this programme from this year, a nice example of Commonwealth cooperation.

I would also like to share some new projects that have been made possible by additional contributions.

Even today we find a wide prevalence of early child and forced marriage across the Commonwealth. Thanks to grants from Canada and Australia, COL is using distance learning and technology to support the schooling and skilling of 45,000 girls and women to prevent this. They will have the opportunity to either complete secondary school or be trained in skills for employment or entrepreneurship over the next three years in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania. In the first year itself, 14758 girls have been trained and 1281 are found employment.

While there are trillions of pages of content on the internet, access to quality content is still out of the reach of many in developing countries. For instance, a UNESCO report found that in Cameroon in 2012, there was one reading textbook for 12 students and one maths textbook for every 14 students. COL has been promoting the use of free content or OER and organised the first World OER Congress in 2012 in partnership with UNESCO. Thanks to a grant from Hewlett Foundation, COL is leading six regional OER consultations in partnership with UNESCO and the government of Slovenia, in the lead up to the 2nd World OER Congress to be held in Ljubljana this September. You can see that COL's leadership in OER is well recognised on to the global stage. We are grateful to the Minister of Education, Malta who has agreed to host the regional consultation for Europe and to the Hon Minister, Mauritius who will host the regional consultation for Africa.

Hon Minister, the University of Mauritius implemented the COL Review and Improvement model to successfully improve internal Quality Assurance mechanisms.

Gender underpins all our work at COL and we signed an MOU with the Executive Director of UN Women to collaborate on gender equality in education and skills development for women and girls.

We also recognise that boys' underperformance is assuming alarming proportions in some Commonwealth countries. If not dealt with appropriately, this could become a serious challenge ten years down the line. COL commissioned a study on 'Boys Underperformance: revisiting the issue in the Commonwealth' and we will send it to you as soon as it is printed.

These, in short, are a few examples of how learning leads to sustainable development. COL is widely acknowledged as a leader in technology innovations and develops replicable models to scale up its impact. Every three years COL organises a Pan Commonwealth Forum on Education, the eighth edition of which was held in Kuala Lumpur in November 2016 in partnership with the Open University of Malaysia. It attracted over 500 participants from 59 countries.

One important outcome of this conference was the KL Declaration which provides a clear roadmap of how distance and technology-based learning can lead to sustainable development.

COL is your organisation and it works for you. It is small and flexible and can respond readily to your needs. COL is a source of world class expertise in open distance and technology based approaches and in these times of economic difficulty, these approaches will become more important than ever before.

With that let me thank you for your contributions, both financial and intellectual, and for your kind attention.