

COL in the Commonwealth: Promoting Learning for Sustainable Development



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Chair, Colleagues,

It is a privilege to present the Commonwealth of Learning or COL to you.

As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver for CHOGM 1987.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to education and training.

We have given you a USB which carries some of our recent publications including an account of our work entitled COL in the Commonwealth: Country Reports 2015-18. This compendium of what COL has done in each Member State is a substantial document and for that reason we have only given you printed copies of reports relating to your country. I hope you are pleased with the results.

After wide consultations across the Commonwealth, we developed our Strategic Plan 2015-2021, entitled 'Learning for Sustainable Development'

Based on your priorities, we have organised our work in two sectors—education and skills with gender as a crosscutting theme.

We try to achieve impact by harnessing the potential of existing and new technologies. COL's role is help you make full use of this potential.

Our Strategic Plan aligns us closely with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. Let me demonstrate this with some examples of our work.

First, how has COL supported economic growth? COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme is offered by universities in 11 countries. This high quality distance learning programme enrolled over 30,000 learners, of whom 14,000 have already graduated.

A recent study conducted at the Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan indicates that the graduates of this programme saw an increase of 38% in their monthly income, increased their chances of promotion by over 28% and every \$ invested resulted in \$ 3.40 direct returns for the learners.

Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). All small states of the Commonwealth are active members of this consortium. Small states developed courses collaboratively that are available as Open Educational Resources not just to the members but to anyone anywhere in the world. 23 institutions in 14 countries are offering these courses.

As a result, tuition fees for the VUSSC students has been reduced by 69% as compared to a campus institution in Botswana. The majority of VUSSC learners combine work and study and by saving the opportunity costs are able to get more benefits than campus students in any one year.

Non-formal learning is equally important. These women in India are part of COL's L3F project, under which they have learnt agriculture and enterprise development skills using basic mobile phones. Every dollar invested has generated assets worth \$9.

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.

Two, how does COL's work 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. Open schools can provide flexible learning opportunities through the use of open and distance learning. These young students go to a COL-supported open school in Belize. Research shows that every \$ invested has resulted in \$ 8 worth of benefits to students.

A COL study shows that open schooling costs well below formal secondary schools. The National Institute of Open Schooling, India costs one tenth and the Namibian College of Open Learning costs one fifth of what it costs to put a student through a government secondary school. It is for this reason that 27 Commonwealth countries have established open schools to expand access to secondary schooling.

We know that not everyone in the Commonwealth has internet connectivity. 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 with effective outcomes in Pakistan, Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu and could be a useful tool for you to reach the last mile.

Even today we find a wide prevalence of early child and forced marriage across the Commonwealth. Thanks to grants from Australia and Canada, COL is training girls and women in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania for employment and entrepreneurship.

In the last two years, more than 34,000 girls have been trained, over 7000 have new sources of income and nearly 500 child marriages have been averted. A recent study found that as a result of this training, the probability of being employed had increased by 50% and income had increased fivefold.

Third, what is COL's contribution to environmental conservation? Environmental sustainability is a central concern for everyone, particularly the small states. A recent study conducted in Botswana showed that the carbon footprint of a VUSSC distance learning student was only one third of that of a campus-based student.

Working with the Blue Economy Institute in Seychelles, COL supported the development of an online course in this emerging field which was offered free by the University of Seychelles last year. It attracted 247 learners from 24 countries worldwide.

COL is working with the National Teachers Institute, Nigeria, to develop a Green Teacher course which will ensure that teachers inculcate environmental concerns amongst school children from an early stage.

You'll be pleased to note that for 2015-16, we received an A++ rating from DFID for substantially exceeding expectations in outputs and outcomes. Over the past two years more than 370,000 learners have been reached, 50% being women. Over 110 institutions around the Commonwealth have adopted COL models and materials and we supported the development of over 2200 curricula and learning resources. How was this possible? By working with 280 partners in 42 countries and harnessing appropriate technologies.

These, Colleagues, are a few examples of how learning leads to sustainable development. As we conclude thirty years of service to the Commonwealth, we have constantly renewed ourselves over the years to remain relevant to your needs. COL is your organisation and it works for you. COL is a source of world class expertise in open distance and technology based approaches and in these times of limited resources, these approaches will become more important than ever before.

Let me conclude by thanking you for nominating Focal Points who are our direct link to your ministry and are a valuable resource for shaping our agenda.

More than three fourths of Commonwealth countries make voluntary contributions to COL's budget. We consider this an important indicator of your confidence in us. Thank you for your contributions, both financial and intellectual, and for your kind attention.