

Opening Remarks

30 August 2018

COL Focal Points Meeting – Caribbean Region
New Kingston, Jamaica



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Hon Minister; Distinguished Focal Points, Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to be here in Jamaica for the Caribbean Focal Points meeting. We are very grateful to the Hon Minister for agreeing to host the meeting and for making the time to be with us today. We also appreciate the support of our Focal Point Dr Phylisia Marshall in organising this regional event. Thanks to each and every one of you for travelling long distances to be here. I am pleased to note that we have 9 Focal Points from the 12 Member States.

Jamaica is a very important member of the Commonwealth and over the years has been a consistent supporter of COL. We were very fortunate to have had the Hon Burchell Whiteman, your former education minister on our Board first in his capacity as a representative of the Caribbean and then as the Chair of our international Board of Governors. Thank you, Jamaica for your contributions, both financial and intellectual.

As you know COL was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 to help Member States institutions and organisations to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by harnessing the potential of technologies. Over our 30 years of service to the Commonwealth, we have constantly renewed ourselves to remain relevant to your needs.

Today most governments are accelerating efforts to achieve SDG 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. We need more trained teachers as only 70% primary teachers in the Caribbean region are trained. Most countries in the LAC guarantee 12 years of free and compulsory education—how can we encourage boys to complete secondary school? All these interventions require innovative approaches and that is where COL has a role. The theme of COL's current strategic plan is 'learning for sustainable development'. COL believes that learning must lead to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. And this can be achieved at speed and scale by harnessing the potential of technologies.

As we are at the mid-point of our six-year Strategic Plan, we are organising four regional meetings this year. These Focal Points meetings are very important events in the life of COL, which is why you see four of us here. This is usually not possible as we have only a small group of specialists.

All the Commonwealth small states in the Caribbean are members of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC. The idea for VUSSC was proposed by Ministers of Education and COL was assigned the responsibility of implementing this initiative. Today VUSSC has grown into a robust network dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education. It has been a powerful forum for connecting the Commonwealth and promoting Commonwealth collaboration. This network of 31 small states is supported by a Management Committee in which Karen Best from the Bahamas and Pauleen Finley of Grenada play a key role. The small states decide what courses are to be developed and shared.

Antigua State College, Barbados Community College, Belize Teachers College, RADA, Jamaica, Open Campus, UWI and the Police Academy and Caribbean Public Health Agency in T&T all offer VUSSC-developed courses. These relate to disaster management, business and entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism and agriculture, to name a few. Please make full use of these free quality-assured resources. You'll be interested to note that a COL-study in Botswana showed that the carbon emissions of VUSSC students were 1/3rd compared to that of campus-based students.

In addition to this pan-Commonwealth initiative, COL has been making special efforts to deepen its work in each of your countries and this targeted approach is beginning to deliver results. COL has several activities in our host country Jamaica. Let me refer to just three. In partnership with the Rural Agricultural Development Authority, COL facilitated the skills development of over 600 farmers in Irish potato production and marketing through the use of text messaging. Ninety teachers and managers from HEART Trust/National Training Agency participated in a COL online capacity-building course in flexible skills development. COL's Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA is offered by the University of the Commonwealth Caribbean.

In Antigua & Barbuda, COL has worked with the Ministry to develop and implement an OER policy. As a result, students in Antigua State College saved ECD 704 per semester in costs and learning outcomes improved by 5.5%. COL has supported capacity building in OER for Dominica, Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent & the Grenadines

COL's open/innovative school model is being implemented in Belize and Trinidad & Tobago. In Belize, COL is working with the Ministry of Education, Youth, Sports and Culture to expand access to secondary schooling. Resources are being developed for 14 school subjects. In an open school in Belize, research shows that every dollar invested has resulted in \$ 8 worth of perceived benefits to students. The first cohort of out of school youth in a remote fishing village in Trinidad & Tobago graduated through a COL-supported open school. The entire curriculum was structured around fisheries which addressed the livelihoods needs of the young people.

Skills development is a major priority for most Commonwealth governments and there is a need to increase the number of trained and certified Assessors in the Caribbean. The Barbados TVET Council, the NTA T&T and Grenada partnered with COL to develop online resources for CVQ Assessor Training and 26 persons from these three countries completed the programme. Another training workshop on sustainable development in TVET attracted 42 participants from 7 countries including St Kitts and Nevis.

COL recently organised a symposium on Boys' Education with the University of Guyana, UNICEF and CARICOM which deliberated on the under-representation and underperformance of boys and the solutions for empowering boys. This resulted in a Communique which we will share with stakeholders in the region. Hon Minister, your idea of the Primary Exit Profile to assess academic and critical thinking capabilities could encourage more boys to continue into the secondary stream.

These are some examples of COL's partners and our work.

What do we hope to achieve at this meeting? Let me outline four key objectives.

One, we need to hear from you what your priorities are and how these can be addressed by COL.

Two, this is also an opportunity for us to present a summary of what we have done in your countries since 2015 and we have given you an interim report. The final report will be presented to Ministers of Education at the 21st CCEM.

Three, these face-to-face meetings are an excellent forum to remind you of COL's purpose, its organization and its programmes. Since you are our ambassadors in the field, it is important that you know what we do.

Four, as a Commonwealth organization, it is part of our mission to promote Commonwealth-wide cooperation. The Commonwealth is often referred to as a family of nations that works through consensus, respect and understanding. These meetings serve to remind us of our shared values and our common identity as citizens of the Commonwealth.

In addition, these meetings allow us to introduce our staff to you. We have a policy of rotation, under which old staff members leave making way for new colleagues from other Commonwealth countries. Let me then introduce you to our Vice President Dr Bala—Dr Mairette Newman from the host country who joined us recently to lead our work in VUSSC and Dr Johannes Hendriks from South Africa our Senior Advisor, Open/Innovative schooling.

Let me thank you all once again for your presence and for being COL's voice and visibility in the field. We are very grateful to the Hon Minister and his team for their warm hospitality and support. Let me extend a warm welcome to each one of you.