

Evaluation Report on Three Regional Centres Established by the Commonwealth of Learning

Author: Professor Rory McGreal

Date: December 2020¹

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)



¹ The report was completed in December 2019 and some changes have been included to reflect updates in 2020.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction and Purpose.....	6
<i>Limitations</i>	8
<i>Conclusion and Recommendations</i>	8
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	8
Methods	9
<i>Data Collection Strategies</i>	9
<i>Limitations of the Study</i>	10
RETRIDOL	11
<i>Management and Implementation</i>	11
<i>Insights on Management of the Regional Centre</i>	12
<i>Achievement of Intended Outcomes – Dual Mode University Project</i>	12
<i>Insights on Dual-Mode Project</i>	14
<i>Unexpected Outputs/Outcomes</i>	15
SADC-CDE	17
<i>Management and Implementation</i>	17
<i>Insights on Management</i>	17
<i>Achievement of Intended Outcomes</i>	17
<i>Insights on Project</i>	18
<i>Unexpected Outputs/Outcomes</i>	19
PACFOLD	20
<i>Management and Implementation</i>	20
<i>Insights on Management</i>	20
<i>Achievement of Intended Outcomes</i>	21
<i>Insights on Project</i>	22
<i>Unexpected Outputs/Outcomes</i>	22
Conclusions and Recommendations	23
<i>Conclusions</i>	23
<i>Challenges</i>	24
<i>Recommendations for RCs</i>	25
<i>COL Recommendations</i>	25
Appendices	26
<i>Appendix A Evaluation Plan</i>	26
1. Purpose of the Evaluation	26
2. Execution of the Evaluation.....	26
3. How Results from the Evaluation will be Used.....	27
4. Limitations of the Evaluation.....	28
Literature	28
<i>Appendix B Input/Output/Outcomes Table</i>	29
<i>Appendix C List of Documents consulted and References</i>	31
<i>Appendix D Questionnaires</i>	33
<i>Appendix E Letter to Interviewees</i>	39

Executive Summary

This evaluation report considers the activities of three Regional Centres (RCs) established by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and regional partners. These Regional Centres engage in capacity building and expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in their respective regions, and to complement COL initiatives, particularly those relating to Technology Enabled Learning, Teacher Education, Technical/Vocational Education, and Higher Education. These RCs include the following: the Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDOL) in partnership with the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN); the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD) in partnership with the University of the South Pacific (USP), based in Fiji; and the Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE) in partnership with Botswana Open University (BOU).

The evaluation aims to provide COL and the RCs with an improved understanding of operations and to clarify the objectives and focal areas of the different projects in their respective regions. The COL Regional Centres were established to augment COL's visibility and impact in the field through four strategic areas: **capacity building, networking and expansion, advocacy and sustainability** in open and distance learning (ODL), and related areas. The remit of the Regional Centres is the regions or sub-regions where they are situated throughout the Commonwealth. See the Evaluation Plan (Appendix A).

The Regional Centres operate as centres of excellence in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). They engage in advocacy, capacity building, and networking by hosting seminars and workshops, while participating in, or collaborating with, other regional bodies (e.g., Distance Education Association of Southern Africa, Economic Community of West African States). They also support research into ODL. This evaluation will investigate how RC activities are in alignment with COL's long-term outcomes (LTO) for improved sustainable livelihoods; increased equitable access to learning opportunities; and improved organizational capacity to leverage ODL.

RETRIDOL

RETRIDOL was founded in 2003, in collaboration with COL to meet the growing demand for training and research in ODL in the west Africa region. It is an academic unit of NOUN. As part of this project, up to 16 Nigerian universities are to transition to dual-mode and six others are in the final stages of preparation for accreditation as dual-mode. To date, three universities have gained NUC accreditation, having made the transition to dual-mode. The primary measure of success will be the beginning of enrolments by students in each of these universities.

RETRIDOL respondents felt that the transition of a traditional university to a dual-mode institution is not guaranteed, but it is possible. RC programmes are all geared towards advocacy for such ODL delivery in established universities, training faculty in ODL, for example in MOOCs and OER. RETRIDOL's efforts in sensitising policymakers to the importance of ODL has also been a major challenge, but with some success. RETRIDOL has focused on informing, training, and advising regional universities in their attempts to become dual-mode. These efforts have included working with the NUC to hasten the transition processes. Workshops have been designed specifically to build capacity for faculty in implementing online learning in these universities. More than 300 faculty have been trained thus far. These activities have increased awareness of ODL around the region.

In the West African Sub-Region (WASR), several challenges came to light for universities wishing to transition to dual-mode. These include the high cost of setting up an online platform and the dearth of programmers and other technicians to implement it. These reasons are combined with low human capacity to maintain operations in dual mode. These reasons, and a lack of demand by potential students for ODL courses, have all contributed to the reticence of universities to make the change.

Although dual-mode universities are now present in WASR, there are not enough to meet the increasing demand for access to courses and programmes by qualified secondary school graduates, as well as from working adults who wish to upgrade their skills. Advocacy in support of online learning capacity building is important to support institutions wishing to address the growing demand for education using online technologies.

SADC-CDE

SADC-CDE is hosted at the Botswana Open University and is supported by a partnership between COL, Botswana Open University, and the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research, Science and Technology (MoTE). The focus of SADC-CDE, which is tasked with responding to the needs of the eleven Commonwealth states in the southern African region or Southern African Development Community (SADC), has been capacity building in ODL. As well, its Director serves as COL's focal point to Botswana, and the Director is therefore tasked with the dissemination of COL's activities nationally in Botswana. The Director also serves as the Executive Secretary of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), which provide an advantageous position for SADC-CDE to better understand and enhance its operations in the region.

From 2015 to 2017, the number of countries receiving assistance from the RC increased from five to ten along with an increase in DEASA membership. In 2018, the RC broke new ground, with workshops on Gender and Non-Formal Education. These and other workshops in Non-Formal education and open schooling included representatives from ten Commonwealth States in the region. Thousands of students in the region are now earning academic credentials through ODL. The RC has been a major regional leader in building the capacity of institutions to deliver these quality ODL courses.

PACFOLD

PACFOLD is a collaborative project between COL and the University of the South Pacific (USP). It is located at the Suva, Fiji campus of USP. It has been in operation since 2013 with a vision of empowering Pacific communities through lifelong learning. Its goal is to promote the adoption and application of flexible open and distance learning for development (FOL4D) and to use methods and technologies to address the challenges that confront the Pacific Islands and its people.

PACFOLD is focusing its attention on the adoption of FOL4D methods for capacity building in technology-enabled learning for sustainable development in their region. These efforts encompass advocacy, communication, innovation and research supporting all subject areas and educational levels. Capacity building includes training faculty, while providing human and technical resources. Four priority areas have been identified: 1. To create awareness of FOL4D; 2. To build FOL4D capacity to increase access to relevant non-formal and formal learning; 3. To support FOL4D policy development; and 4. To provide a platform promoting research in FOL4D.

Methods Deployed

The consultant was provided with documents related to the workings of the different centres and he conducted web searches to discover other information related to the projects. These included minutes of meetings, a constitution, workshop reports, annual reports, articles, and descriptions of the regional centres. These papers were examined by the consultant who then composed a list of questions relevant to all the centres. These questions were then emailed to the interviewees who were all identified by the COL Adviser: Education. Further, data was collected in two ways: through the survey questionnaire circulated by email, and a purposeful follow-up interview with each of the participants to elicit further information working from their responses to the questionnaire and for triangulation of the data to better ensure validity.

Limitations

This approach was limited to the documents that were provided or were found online. The limited number of participants interviewed could also be considered a limitation of this investigation. The interviews and follow-ups were conducted remotely using email. This is also a limitation as the verbal and visual clues available in oral and video interviews were not available to the researcher. This circumscribes the ability of the researcher in understanding the context and situational phenomena. The deadline for the report was also a factor in limiting the research. Respondents were given only a short time to respond to the initial questions and the follow-ups. There were also many documents to peruse in this short time period.

Conclusions

What is clear from all of the interviews is the expression of consistently strong support for COL from all the interviewees in all the regional centres and their partners. The objectives and goals of the three RCs as noted in the documents and reinforced in the interviews, demonstrated alignment with COL's strategic plan including emphases in the RCs on regional capacity-building through advocacy activities, promotion, networking and expansion within their respective regions. While desires for sustainability of the projects was made clear, there were no plans evident that centred on how to go about ensuring the ongoing operations other than continuing in the same way with institutional and COL support. For example, an overall theme was, not surprisingly, a call for COL to provide more funding in order to sustain and expand their present activities.

Recommendations for RCs

- 1.** RCs should maintain and build on their partnership with COL.
- 2.** RCs should transition, holding less face-to-face and more online workshops and other training sessions.
- 3.** RCs should arrange for bi-annual teleconferences with each other and COL to update their partners on activities.
- 4.** RCs should take advantage of opportunities with government and the private sector to lobby for funding for specific projects.
- 5.** The role of the Advisory Boards must be clarified, either by reinforcing their advisory status or renaming them as governing or management boards.
- 6.** The membership of the Boards should be chosen to maximise influence through key individuals, with connections to funders and government officials.
- 7.** RCs should maintain the websites and keep them up to date as plans and activities become known. The websites should also list links to the other RCs, to COL and other relevant organizations.
- 8.** RCs should take measures to arrange for ODL champions in each partner institution in their region who could serve as a point of contact and report on outcomes within their universities. A list of partners for regular contacts should be established. I would not recommend a conferencing site as they are seldom used. Emails are a simple and effective means of maintaining communities.
- 9.** The emphasis on print journals is out-of-date. Scholarly journals in the 21st century are digital and they are increasingly open access and openly licensed. RCs in Africa should consider collaborating on an African scholarly journal in educational technology, sharing costs.
- 10.** Gender sensitivity should be integrated into all aspects of the work at the centres and continue to be supported among partner institutions through online workshops.
- 11.** RCs should take full advantage of their memberships (and partners' memberships) in OERu. OERu has a suite of scalable open source applications that support online learning at little cost. They are open to working with institutions in training and implementations. They also offer an award winning OER set of modules for ODL training.

COL Recommendations

- 1.** COL, to the extent possible, should continue to support these exemplary projects and seriously consider working with the RCs to secure external funding to expand their operations, and ultimately, impact.
- 2.** COL should work with the RCs to lobby government for more affordable, accessible and robust internet connectivity as a means of helping achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 3.** COL should maintain its new funding approach releasing funds for the year promptly and in one major payment. The prompt release of funds from COL helps the RCs to meet their targets.
- 4.** Based on its outcomes-based focus, COL should provide the RCs with a template for reporting annually on input/output/outcomes and on impacts two- three years after. This should better ensure alignment of RCs with COL strategic goals.

Introduction and Purpose

This Regional Centre (RC) Evaluation Plan involved the production of a final evaluation of three Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Regional Centres: The Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD); the Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL); and the Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE). Each RC is responsible for capacity building in ODL in their respective region. The evaluation of the general progress made to date in each RC as well as the focus on a specific activity, namely the RETRIDOL dual-mode project, form the bulk of this evaluation. The RCs are meant to enhance COL's presence and impact in the different regions. COL uses Results Based Management (RBM) to evaluate and monitor projects. Using the RBM format provided by COL, this report by Professor Rory McGreal of Athabasca University examines and analyses the accomplishments and challenges faced by these three Regional Centres (RC).

RETRIDOL is based at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in Abuja and serves five Commonwealth countries in the West African Sub-Region: Nigeria, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Ghana. Currently however, there is no formal agreement between COL and NOUN (the last agreement expired in 2018), though COL has informed the RC's current strategic plan (2018 - 2021).

PACFOLD is based at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva, Fiji and serves the Pacific Region of nine Commonwealth countries: Kiribati, Nauru, Tuvalu, Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea. Australia and New Zealand participate as developed countries. The Memorandum of Agreement with COL expired in 2015. It was renewed October 2020.

SADC-CDE is based in Gaborone, Botswana at the Botswana Open University (BOU) and serves eleven Commonwealth countries in the Southern African Development Community: Tanzania, Seychelles, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, Mauritius, South Africa, Lesotho, eSwatini (formerly Swaziland), Botswana, and Namibia. The Memorandum of Agreement was signed with COL in September 2018 and will expire in June 2021.

Each RC receives an annual operating budget from COL. This can vary from year to year. In the past two years, the RC programme has been allotted CAD300 000: \$95 000 to RETRIDOL; \$75 000 to SADC-CDE; \$85 000 to PACFOLD; and another \$ 45 000 was awarded to another project that is not part of this evaluation. COL does not provide funding for the salaries of the RC staff. The hosting university is responsible for the staff salaries, office space, and equipment. COL provides the operating budget to run projects using Contribution Agreements. For example, when an RC hosts a workshop COL provides the funds for the venue, refreshments and participant travel, if local. Other COL funding taken from the COL operating budget is used to fund the travel for international delegates, contracting consultants, and for dealing directly with conference/hotel venues. There are no COL or institutional policies or any defined organisational structure for the RCs. However, the de facto arrangement has been that the participating institutions appoint a Director. Other personnel vary from several staff at RETRIDOL, to two at SADC-CDE and one at PACFOLD, which at present is unfunded for staffing purposes.

Each RC is located in an area with an organisation supporting regional cooperation and economic development. These bodies are potential sources of further funding. RETRIDOL can apply to The Economic Community of West African States ([ECOWAS](#)); SADC-CDE can apply to [SADC](#); and PACFOLD can apply to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat ([PIFS](#)). Moreover, ECOWAS and SADC hold observer status on the RETRIDOL and SADC-CDE boards, respectively, and so for these RCs the regional organization should have some familiarity with the projects.

The intended outcomes and related success indicators for all three projects focused on regional capacity building in open and distance learning (ODL). These RCs were established to augment COL's visibility and impact in the field and to serve as centres of excellence in ODL. Four strategic areas were identified by COL as intended outcomes for the RCs. These included **capacity-building, networking and expansion, advocacy** and **sustainability** in ODL and in areas relating to ODL in their respective regions (Perris, K., 2019). This evaluation focuses on RC productivity, with a view to identifying challenges and recommending future strategies.

The evaluation draws inferences from the projects initiated by each RC and provides insights into the scope and relevancy of these projects for their respective regions. One key project is highlighted, specifically the dual-mode university project implemented by RETRIDOL. Other projects will also be examined to provide insights into the relationship between outputs and outcomes as well as other strategic areas, namely advocacy, networking and expansion.

As reported by the participants and the partners involved in the interview process, the RCs are gaining relevancy in their respective regions. They have developed networks and partnerships, significantly increasing ODL capacity in their regions. The PACFOLD is only just ramping up again and it can be expected that their importance for ODL in the South Pacific region will increase.

The primary area of improvement as perceived by this interviewer is to increase ODL awareness and training of partners' staff, by providing workshops not just face-to-face, but also online. To properly introduce faculty in the regional universities to ODL, then they must experience online learning in practice. It is recognized that this is problematic for some institutions in some, if not many of the regions in question. It was also apparent that the use/reuse of OER was not significant, even in the South Pacific (other than USP) where institutions are adopting policies supporting OER.

There are significant opportunities to raise awareness and increase ODL capacity by taking advantage of the affordances of OER. The host institutions are all partners of the OERu, which is an international consortium that originated with COL. Also, several regional partner universities are also OERu partners, including UNISA, NorthWestern University (South Africa) and the University of Namibia. OERu has made available an open source learning platform that supports online delivery of courses at little cost. See: <https://docs.oeru.org/s/fXQk2rJbzWck8ia#pdfviewer>. OERu has also piloted a COL award-winning course *Learning in a Digital Age* that could be effectively used to promote ODL in all the regions. See: <https://oeru.org/courses/>

In the most recent strategic plan, COL has changed its focus from outputs to outcomes. The table in Appendix B shows that the RCs have partially adjusted to this in their activities. They are focused on outputs with limited follow up by monitoring the outcomes or the impact of the activities, which have been primarily face-to-face workshops, that they have conducted. There is some anecdotal evidence of real outcomes, with faculty implementations of ODL in their institutions.

Limitations

This evaluation was limited to the documents that were provided, the questionnaire and follow up interviews. The documents were used to form the basis of the interview questionnaires and follow-ups. The interviewees were the actual participants in the centres under study. The interviews were, with one exception, conducted over email. This is a limitation, as the verbal and visual clues available in oral and video interviews are not available to the researcher. The deadlines for the report were also a factor in limiting the research in that respondents had little time for reflection after receiving the questionnaire there were many documents for the evaluator to peruse and consider in a short time period.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The RETRIDOL and SADC-CDE projects are achieving their objectives in capacity-building in ODL in their respective regions. PACFOLD is at a crossroads with limited institutional support and will need to negotiate a new agreement with COL with assurance of support for staffing. In order to improve their alignment with COL strategic objectives, the RCs need to setup a process for monitoring the outcomes of their workshops and other interventions as well as the broader societal impact in order to measure the effectiveness of their approaches. They also need to expand, within the capacity of their region, the use of ODL rather than relying solely on face-to-face workshops to deliver training to faculty in regional universities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank COL for the opportunity to conduct this evaluation and learn what is happening in the RCs and in particular Dr Kirk Perris, Adviser: Education at COL for his patience and support in the investigation. The participants were also very co-operative and helpful in helping to better understand the documentation and grasp the realities of life on the ground in ODL in Africa and the Pacific.

Methods

It is evident that the readers of this report will have some familiarity with COL and with the projects that are being evaluated. For those who would like more background information, I would refer them to Appendix A, The Evaluation Plan. The evaluator, who is conducting this evaluation is Professor Rory McGreal from Athabasca University in Canada. His role is to finalise and implement the Regional Centre Evaluation Plan and conduct an evaluation of three Regional Centres (RC), namely the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD); the Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL); and the Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE). The evaluation of the general progress made to date in each Regional Centre as well as the identification of a specific project form the bulk of this evaluation.

Data Collection Strategies

The consultant was provided with documents related to the workings of the different centres and he conducted web searches to discover other information related to the projects (See Appendix C). These included minutes of meetings, a constitution, workshop reports, annual reports, articles, and descriptions of the regional centres. These papers were examined by the consultant who then composed a list of questions relevant to all the centres. This list was then reviewed by the COL Adviser: Education, who recommended changes and several additional questions. The questions were then modified to include other questions specific to individual centres (See Appendix D). These questions were then sent out to the interviewees. The accompanying letter is available in Appendix E with a response date of December 5th, 2019. In the initial survey stage of this study, following the structure of the survey questionnaire and themes identified in collaboration with the COL Education Adviser, the results were divided into general questions and those specific to a particular centre. The four main areas are general information, workshops (aligned to capacity building, partnerships, Inputs/outputs/outcomes/impact), as well as smaller sections on research, open educational resources and peripheral activities.

The interviewees were initially identified by the COL Adviser: Education. These included the Directors of the three regional centres and their Vice Chancellors. In the case of PACFOLD, the Vice Chancellor was not available and so the Director was asked to name someone else who was involved in working with the RC. This person was not available, so the Director provided the name of a previous PACFOLD Director who participated in the questionnaire with a colleague as well as with the follow-up. A separate group of interviewees were drawn from senior management of three universities in Nigeria engaged in conversions to dual-mode institutions.

Email messages were sent out with questionnaires that were general to all respondents, and contextual to each centre or to the position of the interviewees. All participants were informed that, although we would not be using their names in reporting the original responses, their identities could become known because of the small number of interviewees and the gauging of responses in the final report

Data was collected in two ways: through the survey questionnaire circulated by email, and a purposeful follow-up interview with each of the participants to elicit further information working from their

responses to the questionnaire. Originally, the follow up interviews were to be oral, using audio conferencing, but after two different problematic oral interviews (one with constant line breakages, the other with missed appointment) it was decided in consultation with the COL Adviser: Education to follow up the remaining interviewees with email questions. Specifically, the follow-up interview questions were based on the themes derived from the analysis of the survey responses. The interviews conducted with the questionnaire respondents provided an opportunity to probe more deeply into the survey responses and invite additional participant insights. Analysis of the interview responses led us to the main themes in relation to Regional Centre activities. Five participants responded to the follow-up questions and whereas they did provide some useful insights, their opinions ran parallel to those of the other participants. In this case, I infer that the lack of follow-up from the other respondents would not significantly alter the reporting found in the evaluation.

The survey questionnaire focused on questions related to roles and practices, values, supports and enabling and inhibiting factors for implementation of the programme of each Regional Centre. Descriptive data were compiled from the responses to the different questions and then listed by the consultant. Content analysis of the survey questions was conducted by the consultant with the intention of discerning any categories, concepts or overall themes, based on the opinions of these RC leaders, thus ensuring that a sufficient variety of contexts and positions were adequately represented. A total of nine surveys were sent out with five follow-up interviews completed with participants from their home locations.

The methodology used for this investigation is based on triangulation. This refers to collecting data from more than one source and/or using more than one research approach to investigate the same subject. Triangulation can help to ensure the validity of the research through the use of a variety of research methods in collecting data. Validation is important, but triangulation can also help a researcher to understand implementations better by eliciting different perspectives on the same phenomena. In this investigation, the consultant identified and used the following three methods. First, an analysis of documents provided by the RCs and the COL Adviser: Education and from an Internet search. Second, the creation and distribution of a questionnaire in collaboration with the COL Adviser: Education. Third, follow-up interviews with the respondents were conducted to dig deeper into their responses to provide more insights.

Limitations of the Study

The methodology included an examination of documents, mainly provided by COL, the participants as well as an Internet search using Google. So, this approach was limited to the documents that were provided or were found online. However, this limitation was addressed to some degree through triangulation in the questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The small number of participants (9) interviewed could be considered a serious limitation of this investigation. However, the interviewees were not sampled. Rather, they were the actual participants in the centres under study, or with whom they have close professional ties (e.g., a VC or project participant). The interviews and follow-ups, except in one case, were all conducted remotely using email. This is a limitation as the verbal and visual clues available in oral and video interviews are not available to the researcher. This circumscribes the ability of the researcher in understanding the context and situational phenomena. The problem with real-time internet connectivity in the different regions convinced the researcher to forego the oral/visual interviews. The deadline for the report was also a factor in limiting the research. Respondents were given only a short time to respond to the initial questions and the follow-ups. There

were also many documents to peruse in this short time period. It is problematic to assess and maintain rigour as the volume of data makes analysis and interpretation time consuming. Finally, the format of the study was provided to the researcher by COL, which could also bias the findings, skewing them to fit the required format. Nevertheless, these limitations only peripherally affect this investigation because the purpose is not to generalise the data to other implementations, but rather to provide information to decision makers on the value and effectiveness of the RCs.

RETRIDOL

Management and Implementation

RETRIDOL (Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning) was founded in 2003 at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), in collaboration with COL, to meet the growing demand for training and research in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the west Africa region. ODL is taking on great importance in the region because of the exponential growth of high school graduates wishing to take university courses in the region. In Nigeria, it is estimated that there is annual demand by more than two million students for 750 000 places in the country. In the last few years only 26% of the ten million applicants gained admission. To meet this challenge, as an open university, NOUN teaches more than 450 000 students, and this is expected to rise to 700 000 in the next few years (Parr, 2018).

RETRIDOL is an academic unit of NOUN. The NOUN VC is the Chairperson. NOUN is also the sole funder of the RETRIDOL staff with project funding primarily coming from COL. There are nine members of staff, including the Director. These include a Deputy Director, a Senior Research Fellow and assistant, an administrative officer, a secretary, an assistant executive officer, a driver, a cleaner and as of 2019, two temporary staff. The professional staff and faculty are assessed by the University Appointment and Promotion committee annually and promoted every three years. Academic staff have 75% release time from their teaching and research duties to support their RC work. Some of the partner institutions also have DL institutes. University partners in the region have expressed enthusiastic support for the management and activities supported by the RC.

The RETRIDOL Advisory board consists of members drawn from COL, Ghana, the Gambia, Sierra-Leone, Nigeria, the Nigerian Ministry of Education, National Universities Commission (NUC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the other Regional Centre in Africa (SAC-CDE). The NOUN VC is the Chairperson. NOUN is also the sole funder of the RETRIDOL staff with project funding primarily coming from COL. NOUN submitted the original proposal to COL for the establishment of this RC. It is the only Commonwealth university in west Africa that is uni-modal delivering ODL to learners throughout the region.

As agreed with COL, the RETRIDOL project to include in this Evaluation focuses on promoting the development of dual-mode institutions in the west African region. It is felt that in addition to NOUN, dual-mode universities that offer both on site and distance or online learning can be instrumental in meeting the demand of students for university placement. As part of this project, up to 16 Nigerian universities are to transition to dual-mode. The primary measure of success for this initiative will be the beginning of enrolments by students in each of these universities.

Insights on Management of the Regional Centre

As noted in previous evaluations and reports, RETRIDOL was formed based on a proposal from NOUN specifically to meet its training needs and building capacity in ODL within the institution. While its mandate has expanded to include other regional universities, it still continues to serve as a NOUN centre. As previously noted, the Director and the staff are all NOUN employees. So, despite references to the RETRIDOL Advisory Board making “decisions”, in reality NOUN management continues to remain in full control. There is no evidence that staff of three partner universities in the region, that were included as interviewees in this evaluation, have a problem with this arrangement. The partners consulted have all provided very positive feedback on their relationship with RETRIDOL, from which they have benefited. Having a legal agreement with only one entity simplifies processes and as the leading ODL institution in the region, it seems eminently appropriate to maintain the agreement with NOUN. Currently however, there is no formal agreement between COL and NOUN (the last agreement expired in 2018), though COL has informed the RC's current strategic plan (2018 - 2021).

Achievement of Intended Outcomes – Dual Mode University Project

Dual-mode institutions are those that operate a centre for distance learning apart from its campus-based operations. These institutions provide blended learning opportunities to their students. Blended learning can be defined as providing both online and traditional classroom-based education, requiring the physical presence of an instructor on site with the students, but with additional online activities that can be completed at home, in study centres or wherever the students choose to be and at whatever time that they choose. So, students in these institutions participate in lecture format classes either face-to-face in a classroom or study via distance learning, consisting primarily of print-based lessons in the west Africa context. Respondents see blended learning as commendable and the most suitable context for ODL in the region with the ability to reach far more learners, noting that when the technical infrastructure is lacking, blended approaches help “to fill the gap”. Blended learning with ODL activity is apparent in regional universities that do not have independent institutes or centres for ODL. These depend on the continuing support of their VCs for operations.

RETRIDOL respondents felt that the transition of a traditional university to a dual-mode institution can be achieved, although this is not guaranteed. Transition is possible if it is properly managed even when the administration or some faculty members are not particularly supportive of online delivery of courses. RETRIDOL programmes are all geared towards advocacy for ODL delivery, training faculty in ODL, for example, in MOOCs and OER. RETRIDOL efforts in sensitizing policymakers to the importance of ODL has been a major challenge. Networking and advocacy are hindered by bureaucratic processes such as requesting permissions and acquiring signatures. However, it seems that efforts have borne fruit as many, if not most, universities in the region engage in online learning to some extent, despite these obstacles. Partners testify to the benefits of the training in ODL provided by RETRIDOL. RETRIDOL efforts in sensitising policymakers to the importance of ODL has also been important.

Before making the transition to dual-mode, universities in Nigeria must gain the approval of the National Universities Commission. The applicant universities must meet several criteria such as having a separate department with its own policies, staff and offices in a separate building along with fully developed course materials and adequate physical and technical infrastructure. This includes provision for a physical library/e-library, a hall with internet-ready work-stations for Computer-Based Testing (CBT), video conferencing facilities, audiovisual systems and smart boards-dedicated exclusively to the use of the Distance Learning Centre. Before submitting to the recognition process, some institutions have implemented short online courses that are not acceptable for formal credits.

RETRIDOL has focused on informing, training, and advising regional universities in their attempts to become dual-mode. These efforts have included working with the NUC to hasten the transition processes. Workshops have been designed specifically to build capacity for faculty in implementing online learning in these universities. More than 300 faculty have been trained since RETRIDOL was founded, improving their digital literacy and ODL capabilities. These workshops and training activities have increased awareness of ODL around the region, which is considered to be very timely as the student population is growing very rapidly. RETRIDOL partners have noted the lack of awareness as being an important challenge, as well as the lack of outreach initiatives by affiliate institutions. They recognized the important role that RETRIDOL is playing and request more direct relations to increase awareness of what the RC can offer.

There are dual-mode universities in Nigeria, e.g., Distance Learning Centre at the University of Ibadan; Centre for Distance Learning at the University of Maiduguri; UNN Center for Distance and e-Learning at the University of Nigeria Nsukka (for the full list, see: <http://nuc.edu.ng/distance-learning-centers/>). However, there are not enough to meet the constantly increasing demand for access by qualified secondary school graduates. Advocacy in support of online learning capacity building is important to support institutions wishing to address the growing demand for education using online technologies.

The Dual-Mode ODL Policy Formulation Workshop, hosted by RETRIDOL in 2017, in which the participating institutions developed policies for their institution, has resulted in some of which are operational at present. Participants were required to create ODL related policy documents for their home institutions to be presented to their respective VCs for consideration as a first step toward becoming dual-mode. Three universities have been accredited by NUC, subsequent to the workshop: Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU), University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID) and Moddibo Adama University of Technology, Yola (MAUTECH).

RETRIDOL partners referred to the challenges involved in transitioning to dual-mode, including the high cost of setting up an online platform and the dearth of programmers and other technicians to implement it. These reasons are combined with a low human capacity to operate in dual mode. The poor remuneration paid to online facilitators was also considered an obstacle. These reasons, combined with the lack of demand by potential students, have all contributed to the reticence of universities to make the change.

Although, dual-mode universities are present in Nigeria, there are not enough to meet the constantly increasing demand by qualified secondary school graduates, as well as from working adults who wish to upgrade their skills, for access to courses and programmes. Advocacy in support of online learning capacity building is important to support institutions wishing to address the growing demand for education using online technologies.

In addition, in May 2019, 16 Vice Chancellors and their deputies from Nigerian universities participated in a COL-sponsored workshop on strategies for dual-mode implementations. Since then, all of these universities are at various stages of transition to dual-mode. The University of Benin is currently awaiting final NUC approval; the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education is in the preparatory stages while Babcock University is completing their dedicated ODL building, the final requirement for their NUC approval.

The RC has also applied to NOUN for a diploma programme in Distance Learning, namely the Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (Learning) (PGDDE). The proposal is now awaiting approval by the university senate. Many of the participants from previous training workshops will serve as suitable students in this diploma programme.

Insights on Dual-Mode Project

RETRIDOL staff are monitoring the 16 institutions that participated in the May 2019 workshop as they proceed with their transition to dual-mode. The 2019 OER workshop also led to 12 other universities to develop their own OER policies and courses. Ultimately these would populate an OER repository that may be housed by RETRIDOL. These universities are also being monitored by RETRIDOL staff.

Quality of courses is controlled internally within each university and by the National University Commission in Nigeria. According to partners, dual-mode transitions have helped to improve the quality of the teaching and the content. As teachers gain experience, they share their knowledge, helping colleagues to stay relevant in the digital economy. It is also becoming apparent that significant cost savings can be achieved in the long run while increasing the quality of both the content and the pedagogy. The initial capital investment in resources, equipment and applications can be very high, but these costs can be amortised over time.

As a result of these and previous activities, universities are establishing Distance Learning Centres. Eleven Nigerian universities have been approved to operate as dual-mode institutions, beginning with three: the Distance Learning Centre at the University of Ibadan, the Centre for Distance Learning at the University of Maiduguri and the UNN Center for Distance and e-Learning at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. There are now 11 universities that have received NUC approval for DL centers (National Universities Commission, 2019). Several other Nigerian universities are in the final stages of preparations to transition to dual-mode operations. Many more Nigerian universities are at different stages of seeking accreditation to offer degree programmes by distance education. Outside of Nigeria, RETRIDOL was also instrumental in providing the impetus for the establishment of Laweh Open University (Eya, Shaibu & Amini, 2019). Although dual-mode universities are present in Nigeria, there are not enough to meet the constantly increasing demand for access by qualified secondary school graduates. Advocacy in support of online learning capacity building is important to support institutions wishing to address the growing demand for education using online technologies.

Gender sensitivity and support for gender equality is integrated into the work of RETRIDOL and is considered critical in all aspects. A workshop on gender sensitisation was delivered in January 2019. Results are currently being generated with two institutions having created an institutional gender policy as an outcome of the workshop.

Unexpected Outputs/Outcomes

Discussions are now ongoing with ECOWAS and the Tertiary Education Fund in Nigeria on funding possibilities. Not surprisingly, respondents see this lobbying for funding as part of their outreach to stakeholders to assist in reaching marginalised groups, allowing them access to education.

Although NOUN policies require that course materials be licensed as OER with an open licence in print, CD-ROM and cassettes, this OER policy has not yet been wholly implemented into university operations. NOUN's OER repository has remained offline for approximately one year and the NOUN online repository for digital course content has not been openly licensed (National Open University of Nigeria, 2019). Nevertheless, respondents felt that more workshops on OER, open licensing and open education in general are needed.

The RETRIDOL workshops have all been conducted face-to-face because, as some respondents reported, there was no guarantee that the trainers had the wherewithal to engage in online training. This was surprising as in ODL, students are expected to be able to engage online, so why wouldn't faculty also be required to experience online learning first-hand? It is surprising that no respondent or partner suggested this, even when recognizing the limitations of their face-to-face workshop model in reaching small numbers from each participating campus. One suggestion was to send trainers to the different campuses to advocate for ODL and train more faculty, rather than bringing together a small group of representatives from multiple institutions that have varying needs. Nevertheless, these face-to-face workshops have had immediate results in instigating subsequent workshops at the participants' home universities. Several universities have formed pairs to involve each other in "replica" workshops. "Outside" faculty were invited from the paired universities to facilitate each other's workshops. Each paired university was required to involve the partner institution in its replica workshop. For example, Babcock University was paired with the University of Ado Ekiti University.

Another rationale for face-to-face workshops is the poor Internet connectivity in many regions, where access could not be guaranteed, and reliability can be sporadic. Reliable connections were only possible within NOUN. The low bandwidth accompanied by high prices has also had its impact on the introduction of ODL, requiring institutions to rely on print for circulating content to students. The respondents supported a stronger emphasis on lobbying to ensure improved connectivity throughout the region.

Annual research grants on ODL have been approved for NOUN faculty. Respondents indicated a need for research on planning for ODL in African institutions, needs assessment and for policies and systems in Nigerian universities in order to determine and disseminate information on best practices and the success (or not) of different strategies. Approaches to capacity building must be based on empirical data – on what works.

Some of this research output has been published in the NOUN supported and RETRIDOL run West African Journal of Open and Flexible Learning (WAJOFEL). Surprisingly, it is a print-based journal that is not open access. With NOUN's new open access policies, it can be expected to appear not only in print, but also online in the future with an open license. There is now a skeleton website displaying use of the Open Journal Systems Public Knowledge Project (OJS / PKP) opensource software. This year RETRIDOL has published four issues of WAJOFEL (National Open University of Nigeria, n. d.).

Surprisingly, only one respondent described online learning as “the future of learning” observing that youths can learn assignments etc. on the go using smartphones, iPads, tablets and laptops “without the encumbrances of coming to sit down in a classroom to be taught by a teacher.” Mobile devices provide students with enhanced capabilities to ask and receive responses from their teachers and from other sources on the internet. With such mobile learning, ODL has become the “new bride”. Rather than focusing on the need for this 21st century approach to education, most respondents are still “defending” ODL as if it is simply an alternative to face-to-face rather than an enormous improvement that is needed for students wishing to participate in the digital economy and society. Respondents feel that the affordances of ODL can require a specific pedagogical philosophy, when ODL can support a wide range of approaches and methodologies including, for example, traditional lectures.

There also seems to be an assumption shared by ODL proponents and university administrators that there is a need for a huge capital outlay in order to implement ODL for studios, computer hardware and software, updating, maintenance, etc., as well as major outlays for specialist personnel such as programmers, multimedia specialists, webmasters, e-tutors, mobile device experts and instructional designers. While these large outlays can be helpful, ODL initiatives can be implemented much more rationally without these huge upfront expenses. The OERu, for example, has successfully initiated an open source delivery platform that can be maintained for less than US\$10 000 per year (Lane & Good, 2019).

Respondents noted the importance of distance education in this large region. There are large numbers of students who must travel long distances to attend face-to-face classroom sessions. ODL helps to alleviate this problem, but not completely because students must converge on examination sites at specified venues each semester. The distance to these centres is often far for many students.

There are many francophone countries in the west Africa region. Respondents remarked that the francophone post-secondary participation rates are lower than those in the anglophone countries skewing the overall west African participation rate downward. Support for online learning in these countries can help to increase their participation levels in tertiary education, which is complementary to the RETRIDOL mission and vision. The lack of funding combined with the language barrier represent significant challenges. Nevertheless, RETRIDOL has approached ECOWAS with the view of creating a partnership to improve collaborations and build capacity in the Francophone region, particularly in Cameroon, which is a member of the Commonwealth and is bilingual (French/English).

Conspicuous by its absence is any sign of a RETRIDOL website. A website is very important for profiling any organization aiming to lead in ODL. Information about the RC and its activities as well as links to appropriate partners and resources are needed. There is an older RETRIDAL website that appears defunct: <<http://www.nou.edu.ng/directorates/regional-training-research-institute-open-and-distance-learning-retridal>>.

SADC-CDE

Management and Implementation

SADC-CDE is supported by a partnership between COL, Botswana Open University and the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research, Science and Technology (MoTE). COL provides financing to support projects. BOU contributes staff emoluments, equipment, office space and local travel funding to BOU centres. SADC-CDE staff assist in training and organizing events and supporting regional consultants. The MoTE holds an oversight role with SADC-CDE but has no official function in the Centre's day-to-day operations.

SADC-CDE staff include a Director and one officer (Administrative Coordinator). Operations have been ongoing for thirteen years. Their time is devoted to RC activities and BOU management. Staff performance is evaluated twice annually using a performance management tool. The Director also serves as Executive Secretary of DEASA; and is part of the senior management of Botswana Open University, which houses SADC-CDE and has a signed 3-year agreement with COL that will expire in June 2021.

Insights on Management

The focus of SADC-CDE, which is tasked with responding to the needs of the eleven Commonwealth states in the southern African region, has been capacity building in ODL as well as serving as a focal point for the dissemination of COL and other ODL activities nationally in Botswana. This RC has a constitution that is considered to be outdated because it has not been reviewed since 2006. However, it is felt to be important because it defines the RC relationship with the SADC Secretariat. In addition, the constitution makes the RC more visible in the different member states. There is also an Advisory Board consisting of country representatives from the SADC region along with a UNESCO representative. Although called an Advisory Board, it acts more like a governing board, being responsible for the strategic plan and budget including audited accounts. The title should be revisited to better reflect the obligations and duties of the Board members.

Achievement of Intended Outcomes

SADC-CDE considers that any move towards blended learning by institutions in the SADC region would be a welcome development. Online learning is considered to provide learners with greater autonomy and more opportunities for interaction in comparison with classroom-based education. Respondents also believed that ODL can make teaching easier and can be more cost-effective than classroom-based education.

Respondents felt that the criteria for assessing the quality of ODL courses should be similar to those used in face-to-face courses in all respects, but not need be the same. A parity of standards is needed rather than attempting to make them the same. For example, “online courses can take advantage of simulated/virtual environments with relative ease,” was a comment from one interviewee. Some criteria for evaluation could therefore be different.

From 2015 to 2017, the number of countries receiving assistance from the RC increased from five to ten along with an increase in DEASA membership. In 2018, the RC broke new ground with workshops on Gender and Non-Formal Education. These workshops brought together representatives from ten Commonwealth States in the region. Later in May 2019, SADC-CDE hosted another workshop that included Tanzania (the 11th Commonwealth State in the SADC region, along with Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda representing the states of the East Africa Community). It also offered another iteration of the BOU Certificate for Distance Education Practitioners (CDEP), which currently enrolls 13 learners from four countries in the region. Overall, thousands of students in the region are now earning academic credentials through ODL. The RC has been a major regional leader in building the capacity of institutions to deliver quality ODL courses.

Insights on Project

As in the other RCs, adequate human resources and funding for projects were considered to be the main challenges to the sustainability of the RC and its activities. Respondents felt that at least two more staff members are required for the attainment of strategic goals.

COL support is considered to be important and essential. COL is considered to be “extremely supportive” of SADC-CDE. While COL funding has led to growth in initiatives, the need to focus on research in ODL and other inputs to grow enrolment in ODL (and commensurate infrastructure) requires greater funding sources. Respondents felt that funding is “difficult to justify” against the contribution regional governments have made to COL and other entities, especially because of the need to focus research on ODL, which is expensive and exceeds COL’s contributions when its other priorities are considered. Respondents felt that regions should identify their own ODL capacity building projects based as much on their development priorities as those of COL.

Besides the financial support, COL has been active in skills development, and since the engagement of the COL Advisor: Education, the RC has a defined working relationship, which has improved the reporting structure. SADC-CDE staff also appreciate COL helping them in learning about and appreciating the work of other RCs including RETRIDOL in West Africa (where the Director is a Board member), The Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning in Malta², and PACFOLD in Fiji. Links with the other RCs through communities of practice are seen to be a way forward and therefore desirable. Staff are very interested in more skills training for regional faculty and for themselves, particularly on measuring implementation processes such as input/output/outcome/impact.

However, respondents felt that COL has been focusing more on its own core mandate, which is not always in alignment with regionally-generated ODL issues. COL emphasis on input/output/outcome/impact is appreciated as these are demanded by the COL funders. However, SADC-CDE should be determining its own needs and should have the ability to run semi-autonomously, rather than having to conform to COL’s “tight grip”, which apparently has met with some resistance from participants, though no details were provided. Regional issues should take priority as Commonwealth-wide policies at the same level are inappropriate. Therefore, a better mix of COL and context-based regional aims would be ideal. Allowing more flexibility in the determination of what the RC should focus on would be an improvement.

² The Malta Regional Centre was excluded as it was at an early stage of operations when the evaluation was carried out.

Internet is considered to be “the bedrock” of ODL, so its availability and reliability is very important. There is limited internet connectivity and limited access to computers in many countries in the SADC region, so ODL is not always feasible. In this sense, print distribution is still important to the region. There is a significant disparity among the different countries and institutions, so there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to this issue.

The SADC-CDE website needs to be monitored and updated. It should serve as a news and information source for all things ODL in the region.

See: <<http://www.sadc-cde.com/>>

Unexpected Outputs/Outcomes

Most workshop participants come from conventional educational backgrounds, Respondents felt that ODL should be a work in progress and so believe that face-to-face workshops are important, as compared to running some workshops online. They also felt that the networking opportunities of these face-to-face workshops helped RC staff to target specific supporters and learn from each other for greater impact. Nevertheless, the RC did support a Project Management online course in 2017-2018, with an enrollment of 98 people with a 72% successful completion rate. The course title was *Achieving Project Success*, created and delivered by a Canadian consulting company.

SADC-CDE staff feel that, as part of their mandate, there is a need to lobby for ODL by advocating for improved internet reliability and accessibility in the region in order to reduce inequality and support for SDG4: to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The RC is actively lobbying for ODL in other forms of education such as Non-Formal Education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The SADC Secretariat has been lobbying the African Development Bank for seven years now for an ODL advocacy and capacity building project that leverages previous efforts in the region. The European Union is another potential funding source because of its interest in supporting the UNESCO SDGs in Africa and also having recognition of the limitations of conventional education.

OER, Open Pedagogies and Open Access are not adequately known among faculty and institutions in the region even though a Regional policy on ODL has been adopted by Ministers of Education. These are being introduced as new concepts. Workshops and short online courses have been suggested as a means of transferring knowledge on openness. To date, the RC has only engaged in limited work to develop or use OER. One suggestion is to focus more on developing national policies and strong advocacy to prioritise and institutionalise OER.

Research, particularly with a focus on Southern Africa is considered to be an important focus for the RC. It is supported through workshops with aid from sponsors and through the DEASA annual conferences. A decade ago, the RC, in collaboration with DEASA, introduced a Regional Research ODL Journal, in 2007, namely the *DEASA-SADC CDE International Journal of Open and Distance Learning*. According to the website <<http://www.deasa.org/index.php/journals>> however, it has not published any issues since 2013. Discussions with DEASA, however, are underway with an advert drafted to recruit a managing editor to revive the journal.

The RC also assisted in the re-mobilisation of the SADC ODL community through DEASA. There are now plans to introduce research dissemination forums. Respondents felt that any shift in research emphasis to open schooling would sideline research into capacity building associated with higher education, and that careful consideration of research focus will be needed.

There is a three-year project on Gender Mainstreaming across tertiary ODL institutions, responding to the need to eliminate gender disparities in the region. To date, a workshop on gender sensitisation was held including 17 participants from eight universities. Results are being generated and outcomes are expected in 2020.

PACFOLD

Management and Implementation

PACFOLD (The Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development) is a collaborative project between COL and the University of the South Pacific (USP). It is located at the Suva, Fiji campus of USP. It has been in operation since 2013 with a vision of empowering Pacific communities through lifelong learning. Officially there is an Advisory Board to provide advice to PACFOLD on regional priorities and relevant activities; ensuring a broad perspective; approving the annual work plan and ensuring operational and financial accountability.

Its goal is to promote the adoption and application of flexible open and distance learning for development (FOL4D) and to use methods and technologies to address the challenges that confront the Pacific Islands and its people. Its mission is “To be a network of networks to facilitate flexible and open learning for sustainable development in the Pacific through advocacy, communication, innovation and research”. RC activities include brokering between countries and institutions; facilitating connections; advocating for and researching and innovating in FOL4D; and providing knowledge. The RC is also creating a platform to serve as a role model for implementing FOL4D. The 2017-2020 strategic plan prioritises human resource capacity development, quality assurance, policymaking, research, and capacity building in FOL4D.

Insights on Management

At present, there are no PACFOLD staff. The RC is being held together by a Pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC) of USP, who estimates that his commitment to PACFOLD takes up one-third of his time. He describes this as “doable but not sustainable”. The Director’s primary responsibility, as PVC (Flexible Learning), is to run the USP Centre for Flexible Learning. He is requesting support for a Project Officer (preferably at an Academic Level – Senior Lecturer) with high-level skills in FOL4D, as well as project management support. Respondents have found COL to be very proactive and supportive, and a signed agreement between USP and COL was ratified in October 2020. There is also no functioning Advisory Board at present. Also, the terms of the board indicate that it is a governing board rather than one with only advisory status.

Achievement of Intended Outcomes

PACFOLD is focusing its attention on the adoption of FOL4D methods for capacity building in technology-enabled learning for sustainable development in the region. These efforts encompass advocacy, communication, innovation, and research supporting all subject areas and educational levels. Capacity building includes training faculty, while providing human and technical resources. Four priority areas have been identified: 1. To create awareness of FOL4D; 2. To build FOL4D capacity to increase access to relevant non-formal and formal learning; 3. To support FOL4D policy development; and 4. To provide a platform promoting research in FOL4D.

PACFOLD hosted and coordinated a Youth Workshop sponsored in partnership with COL in June 2019. The goal of this workshop was to develop a series of short courses for the professional development of youth workers with the help of a suite of courses developed by the University of the West Indies and the Commonwealth Secretariat. This work is continuing and progressing well. Three modules have been completed and the first was launched in November 2020. The others will be rolled out in 2021. Given the preliminary success of the project, COL and Lakehead University in Canada, with USP, submitted and won a grant application to the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to replicate this work in the Caribbean. This will help support PACFOLD's goals in the expansion of the project. A MOOC on numeracy was also launched in 2020 with two iterations offered in February and May. Other MOOCs are to follow (e.g., climate change).

A Skills Development workshop was held at the Shangri-La Hotel in Fiji in partnership with COL and MFAT (the NZ Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade) in August 2019. This workshop for TVET trainers brought together representatives from the Pacific Islands to identify issues and areas that need attention and help. Seven projects have been identified as a result of this workshop. COL and PACFOLD have applied for funding to MFAT to support this programme.

At the 8th Pan Commonwealth Forum (PCF8) in 2016, PACFOLD participated in the development of the Pacific Open, Distance and Flexible Learning Framework (PODFLF). It was formulated in response to the endorsement by the Pacific Heads of Education System (PHES). Partners included the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the South Pacific Community (SPC). This framework is meant to address social and economic challenges in the region due to the lack of successful inclusive and equitable access to quality education. The framework is now under review working with PIFS.

In February 2018, the RC hosted the COL Pacific Focal Point Meeting that centred activities around advocacy and awareness of COL functions, ODL needs and priorities, creating awareness and securing country contributions to COL. At this meeting, the PACFOLD Advisory Board was formed.

There is a functional PACFOLD website that needs more information and should be updated as needed. See: <https://pacfoldlearn.org/>

Insights on Project

It seems that in the Pacific region, traditional face-to-face education is already giving way to blended learning as is the case in most developed countries, although there are still problems of connectivity and access in the small island states. Respondents felt that classroom-based learning is considered best for tactile learning and that sometimes face-to-face is efficient. On the other hand, in ODL, questions and answer formats that need reflection and discussions work better online. This explains PACFOLD's emphasis on flexible learning, which is an important part of their mandate, focusing on choosing the most appropriate technologies for the different teaching/learning approaches. They feel that the same quality and criteria should apply to any mode of learning and teaching.

In one specific initiative, supported by COL, PACFOLD has been working with Ministries across four Commonwealth States to promote the use of TEL, OER and COL's Aptus device, along with developing courses in youth work and numeracy, mentioned above.

The PACFOLD approach to workshops is to only hold the first one face-to-face. All subsequent meetings of groups are virtual. This approach makes allowances for learners who are new to ODL, while ensuring that they gain experience in online communications using real-time teleconferencing and time-delayed messaging. In the Pacific region, connectivity among Ministries and educational institutions is not a serious problem. Robust, reliable connectivity is important for ODL, but this cannot be a focus of PACFOLD. This is a much bigger issue for the region and beyond the scope of the RC. In fact, the wide variance in time zones (i.e., +6 including half hour zones) and the international date line is a more significant challenge when arranging for real-time ODL sessions or even simple communications. There is no shortage of content and skill in the world but accessing this knowledge in the Pacific region can be problematic.

Respondents expressed the view that the shortage of staff prevents them from making effective use of the funding that is available. At present, staffing is a larger concern than accessing funding. COL provides project funding, but does not support staffing, which is the responsibility of the partner institution. There is a need for greater involvement from the VC's office and the signed agreement in 2020 with COL is a step forward in this regard.

The lack of staffing is a serious impediment to any research efforts. Once alleviated, there are many opportunities for research and dissemination in educational technology and ODL.

Unexpected Outputs/Outcomes

USP is well advanced in its use/reuse and assembly of OER. It is among the first universities in the world to mainstream OER with a specific policy that requires OER and monitors the implementation. See: <<https://policylib.usp.ac.fj/form.readdoc.php?id=736>>. All USP course developers are now required to search for OER in the first instance, only considering other options after a thorough search. Respondents also believe that OER and open licensing awareness is not widespread in the region, but it is just "a matter of time" before OER become more widely adopted regionally.

The Pacific region has moved ahead in developing Regional Open and Distance Learning Quality Assurance Guidelines and aims to make effective use of the COL Transnational Qualification

Framework, which the member states are expected to domesticate and align to (Commonwealth of Learning, 2015). These measures will help to promote more regional collaborations and promote standardisation allowing for greater flexibility for students in choosing online courses and programmes.

Gender sensitivity is recognised as a cross-cutting theme that is present in all the operations of the RC. PACFOLD respects and proactively supports diversity, including gender equality. This is a central focus for their work in a region with a wide range of different cultures and ethnic groups.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

What is clear from all of the interviews is the expression of consistently strong support for COL including from all the interviewees in all the regional centres and their partners. Interviewees specifically pointed to their support of COL's new funding approach to pay out fully in one payment generally, as being very helpful for their implementations. The objectives and goals of the three RCs as noted in the documents and reinforced in the interviews, demonstrated alignment with COL's strategic plan including emphases in the RCs on regional capacity-building through advocacy activities, promoting, networking and expansion within their respective regions. While desires for sustainability of the projects was made clear, there were no plans evident that centred on how to go about ensuring the ongoing operations other than continuing in the same way with institutional and COL support. For example, an overall theme was, not surprisingly, a call for COL to provide more funding in order to sustain and expand their present activities.

Whereas face-to-face learning has been the priority workshop format among all the RCs as reported, primarily because of the unfamiliarity of the participants with ODL, future efforts must include more online training and communications. Face-to-face classroom learning is all too often supportive of passive learning and traditional learning styles, with information being fed to the participants. Online learning is typically more interactive where the participants must work to acquire the knowledge or skills required. It cannot be expected that participants can effectively be introduced to ODL, solely with face-to-face workshops. Students are being encouraged to take more online courses with or without prior experience online. Is it not reasonable to expect that faculty in the universities should also step up to the challenge of ODL? The approach of the PACFOLD workshops, to begin with a face-to-face gathering so that participants can better get to know each other, but to then continue with online training can be considered as most appropriate.

The RCs can claim success in meeting their strategic focuses in building regional capacity in ODL. Their efforts have led to positive awareness of ODL along with ODL skills training in their respective regions, based on their workshops. This partially aligns with the COL strategic focus supporting capacity building. However, there needs to be more attention paid to the COL strategic focus on outcomes rather than limiting activities to inputs and outputs. (See Appendix B.) This requires efforts to assign deliverables (as was done in several of the workshops) and monitor the post-workshop activities of the participants in their home institutions to ensure outcomes are realized in the partner institutions.

The RCs need to become more visible in their respective regions, especially among key decision makers in government and the private sector. RC representatives should make more efforts to participate with and lobby ministers in donors' meetings to lobby for funding to support their ODL activities. The RCs have a reasonable track record of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and financial accountability. With increased funding, RC sustainability and leadership in ODL can be ensured.

Challenges

In implementing ODL, it is essential for the RC proponents to understand and be very clear in their understanding of ODL in relation to classroom-based education. In the email surveys, it was clear that ODL is perceived by some of the participants as simply “a viable alternative” to face-to-face education. It is not seen to be an essential aspect of 21st century learning, but rather as an adjunct to, or an equal approach to classroom-based learning. This rather “defensive” attitude regarding ODL can prove problematic when discussing with faculty and policymakers. More and more, ODL is becoming ESSENTIAL for learning. It is not just an add-on or an equal contender with traditional classroom-based education in the 21st century. The world economy is online. The world's social environment is becoming increasingly online. To maintain that contemporary education need not be online is simply not defensible. Is the whole world to be online EXCEPT for education?

There is no evidence that classroom-based learning is any better than ODL. Quality criteria for education should be the same, no matter the technology used. There should not be separate criteria for ODL. Research shows that there is “no significant difference” in educational outcomes regardless of the technology used for delivery (Russel, 1999).

Antediluvian attitudes toward ODL, such as those expressed by educators who perceive ODL as “a last resort” are not only outdated but also wrong and so should be challenged forcefully. There is no evidence supporting their views. The argument in favour of ODL and digital learning in general becomes unassailable when one considers that the vast number of jobs today demand online digital skills. How better to master them than by participating in ODL? ODL is essential for 21st century learning. The traditionalist protectors of 19th century learning environments must be challenged forcefully and lead to accepting the realities of the modern world. There is no modern education without online components, whether that be fully online or blended or any combination of the two. Modern education does not include uniquely classroom-based learning with no online components. ODL proponents should be more proactive in advising their communities of the serious outdated inadequacies of traditional, colonial educations and profile ODL, not as the education of the future, but as a necessity for citizens in today's digital world.

The RCs should take full advantage of their memberships (and partners' memberships) in OERu. OERu has a learning delivery platform that supports online learning at little cost. They are open to working with institutions in training and implementations. They also offer an award winning OER set of modules for ODL training.

In conclusion, the following recommendations are offered for the RCs and for COL.

Recommendations for RCs

1. RCs should maintain and build on their partnership with COL.
2. RCs should transition, holding less face-to-face and more online workshops and other training sessions.
3. RCs should arrange for bi-annual teleconferences with each other and COL to update their partners on activities.
4. RCs should take advantage of opportunities with government and the private sector to lobby for funding for specific projects.
5. The role of the Advisory Boards must be clarified, either by reinforcing their advisory status or renaming them as governing or management boards.
6. The membership of the Boards should be chosen to maximise influence through key individuals, with connections to funders and government officials.
7. RCs should maintain the websites and keep them up to date as plans and activities become known. The websites should also list links to the other RCs, to COL and other relevant organizations.
8. RCs should take measures to arrange for ODL champions in each partner institution in their region who could serve as a point of contact and report on outcomes within their universities. A list of partners for regular contacts should be established. I would not recommend a conferencing site as they are seldom used. Emails are a simple and effective means of maintaining communities.
9. The emphasis on print journals is out-of-date. Scholarly journals in the 21st century are digital and they are increasingly open access and openly licensed. RCs in Africa should consider collaborating on an African scholarly journal in educational technology, sharing costs.
10. Gender sensitivity should be integrated into all aspects of the work at the centres and continue to be supported among partner institutions through online workshops.
11. RCs should take full advantage of their memberships (and partners' memberships) in OERu. OERu has a suite of scalable open source applications that support online learning at little cost. They are open to working with institutions in training and implementations. They also offer an award winning OER set of modules for ODL training.

COL Recommendations

1. COL, to the extent possible, should continue to support these exemplary projects and seriously consider working with the RCs to secure external funding to expand their operations, and ultimately, impact.
2. COL should work with the RCs to lobby government for more affordable accessible and robust internet connectivity as a means of helping achieve the SDGs.
3. COL should maintain its new funding approach releasing funds for the year promptly and in one major payment. The prompt release of funds from COL helps the RCs to meet their targets.
4. Based on its outcomes-based focus, COL should provide the RCs with a template for reporting annually on input/output/outcomes and on impacts two- three years after. This should better ensure alignment of RCs with COL strategic goals.

Appendices

Appendix A Evaluation Plan

1. Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of the Evaluation is to ascertain the strengths, challenges and areas for improvement of the Regional Centres benchmarked against their mandate to augment COL's presence and impact.

In this regard, there are two complementary areas to which the Evaluation should *consider*; the efforts made to increase the visibility of COL in a given region through the growth of its network (i.e., Advocacy and Networking and Expansion) and established links internationally and the commensurate impact of the key projects / initiatives the Regional Centres are running.

2. Execution of the Evaluation

The Evaluation will require accessing and analysing documents and conducting interviews. As part of the document analyses, COL will provide the following documents for review:

Part I: Document Analyses

- Constitution
- Strategic Plans
- Advisory Board Documents
- Project / Workshop Reports
- Past Evaluation Reports
- Other documents as deemed necessary (e.g., past Centre evaluations)

Based on synthesising the information provided, COL will work with the Evaluator to chart a path for acquiring empirical data from stakeholders connected to the Regional Centres. The aim is to probe stakeholders on areas emanating from the document analyses, and to seek additional information on past experiences working for / with the Regional Centres, along with their insights on future direction of the Regional Centres.

The stakeholders will include a mixture of the following personnel:

- Regional Centre personnel (e.g., Director, Education Officers)
- Institutional personnel (e.g., VCs or DVCs)
- COL Focal Points
- Institutional Partners
- Regional Partners (e.g., SADC, ECOWAS)

These individuals may be contacted by email / called by the Evaluator / COL to participate in the evaluation via email or web-based questionnaire and/or real-time interviews via teleconference. COL will work with the Evaluator to support the design of instruments and soliciting stakeholder participation.

The Evaluation will culminate in the drafting of a report to be submitted by COL. The report should be approximately 15 pages (single-spaced), excluding title page, table of contents and appendices. Guidelines on the format and length are as follows:

- Executive Summary (1-2 pages)
- Introduction and Purpose of the Evaluation (2 pages)
- Methods (1 page)
- Results (up to 7 pages)
- Conclusions (1-2 pages)
- Recommendations (1-2 pages)

COL will review the draft report and provide one round of comments to the Evaluator for his / her review. The Evaluator will then submit a final report to COL. Based on COL's review of the Report, it may or may not be released for public consumption. If released, the Report will be distributed under a Creative Commons license.

3. How Results from the Evaluation will be Used

The results from the Evaluation will be used as one measurement to ascertain the impact of the Regional Centres relative to their / COL's mandate, and in particular the latter's long-term outcomes. The overarching questions to assist COL's next strategic plan will be as follows:

- *Are the Regional Centres adequately meeting the educational needs of the region relative to expansion and sustainability of programmatic interventions?*
- *How far have the Regional Centres come to achieving COL's long-term outcomes and enhancing the Regional Centres' visibility in the region with institutional partners, regional bodies, ministries and so on?*

Data from the evaluation will support decision-making by COL to consider strategic priorities for the Regional Centres based on the following questions:

- *Should the focus of the Regional Centres be re-calibrated to minimize, expand, or re-direct initiatives?*
- *Are there adequate resources (i.e., human and financial), capacity, institutional support / recognition for the Regional Centres to optimize their operations?*
- *What are reasonable expectations / what planning is needed of the Regional Centres relative to long-term sustainability?*

The above information will inform COL's subsequent six-year Strategic Plan, as the current Strategic Plan ends in June 2021.

4. Limitations of the Evaluation

The Evaluation will be executed by an Evaluator who will require sensitisation to the existence, operations, and effectiveness of the Regional Centres. Having familiarity with COL and perhaps some of the Regional Centres will lend itself to the Evaluator having a relatively grounded understanding of a given Regional Centre's mandate, etc.

The presence of an outsider conducting an evaluation, particularly as it relates to the performance of a given entity, may present challenges as it relates to recognition of otherness, and the sensitivities of the exercise on the part of participants who are subject to the Evaluation. Undergirding such sentiments are cultural factors and the methods by which participants interpret and provide information.

Qualitative research scholars refer to this notion of disconnect between researcher and subject as an etic perspective (Creswell, 1999; Spiers, 2000), meaning the interpretation of social phenomenon from an outsider's perspective, carrying the aim to provide generalisations that are to be theoretically culturally neutral. As an outsider, the etic perspective recognizes the researcher as being removed from the cultural context of the participants and their lived reality.

Given the current Evaluation will cover three distinct geographical areas, cultural nuances will inevitably surface. To ameliorate potential disparities, COL will provide the Evaluator with a degree of structure to conduct the Evaluation (i.e., documents, instrument design). While the Evaluation will require areas of interest particular to a given Regional Centre, the Evaluation will also be expected to provide generalisations that capture areas of interest across the Regional Centres.

The other limitations of the study are relative to the time to carry out the study, reliance on convenience sampling and finite resources. Time constraints posit that the Evaluation needs to be completed in the calendar year. The availability and location of participants (i.e., differing time zones), and amount of resources COL can provide to the exercise also pose limitations to the study.

Amidst these limitations, the selected Evaluator will be an expert in ODL, have good familiarity with COL, and be of international repute. COL has its own expertise in monitoring and evaluation and will work closely with the Evaluator relative to planning the Evaluation exercise. This will serve to minimize ambiguity and gaps in data that could otherwise hinder the ability of the Evaluator to conduct a proper evaluation.

Literature

Creswell, J. W. (1998), *Qualitative Enquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*, London, UK: Sage.

Spiers, J. (2000). New perspectives on vulnerability using emic and etic approaches. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 31(3), 715-721.

Appendix B Input/Output/Outcomes Table

RETRIDOL Project s	Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact on SDGs
Dual Mode Workshop May 2019	VCs 15 + 15 Sr. Managers universities	Dual-mode transition training	Institutional action plans forthcoming	
Mat. Dev. Workshop March 2019	32 participants; 17 institutions 3 instructors?	Learn OER	OER in progress	
Gender Workshop Jan 2019	17 female 12 male	Gender Sensitisation training	Action plans forthcoming	
ODL Nigeria May 2017	22 participants 10 Unis	ODL training	Policy documents	
ODL Ghana June 2018	19 participants Unis in Ghana	ODL training	Policy documents forthcoming	
ODL Gambia Jun 2018	21 participants 8 institutions	ODL training	Policy documents forthcoming	
TEL Workshop April 2018	23 participants 9 institutions	ODL training	Pairing of Unis	
PACFOLD Projects				
Capacity Building in Skills Development Oct 2019	30 participants 6 countries + NZ & COL	SD training	Enrolment forthcoming	
Capacity Building & Youth Workshop July 2019	32 participants	Training for youth workers	Course enrolment planned for 2020 - forthcoming	
COL Focal Point Meeting Feb 2018	No data	COL support; update Ministry on PACFOLD Advisory Board	HRCBTEL4Pac Workshop	
PODFLF 2018	PCF8, EddMM, PHES, SPC, USP,TAFE, PIFS	PDFLF created	Under review by PIFS	
HRCBTEL4Pac Workshops on Aptus devices 2018	Participants Tonga 12 , Samoa 18, Solomon n.d.,	Skills training	Local training by trainees input into national	

	Kiribati 8		policies, plans	
Pacific OER TVET Workshop 2017	PNG, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Samoa	OER training	7 Agreements many actioned	
Pacific Region OER Consultation May 2017		OER training		
PHES Consultation 2017		PODFLF introduction	Under review by PIFS	
SADC-CDE Projects				
TEL Workshop	UofB faculty	IS Model training	To be revived in 2020	
Open Schooling Rwanda May 2019	18 participants 4 countries	ODL learning Action plans	Moved to OIS Initiative	
Gender Sensitisation Feb 2019	17 participants 8 countries	GS training	Action plans in progress	
Non-formal Ed Workshop Jan 2019	19 participants 7 countries	Awareness of TEL	Action plans in progress	
COL Focal Point Sep 2018	15 FPs	COL Strategic plan & priorities		
L3Farmers 2018	Govt, private sector, academics, farmers, media	Raised awareness		
Project Mgmt APS course 2018	14 practitioners 6 countries (98 since 2014)	PM training		
ICT Workshop Namibia Apr 2018	21 participants	Radio production		
Materials D&D eSwatini June 2018	15 participants	MD&D training		
M Ed ODL Tanz. 2018	15 practitioners	9 grads		
CDEP course 2018	17 practitioners 3 countries	10 grads; 13 current enrolment		
COL QA Workshop April 2018	7 countries	QA training	Draft guidelines	
NoteMaster platform 2014	8 countries	Awareness raising	Platform implementations	

Appendix C List of Documents consulted and References

- Amini, C. M., & Oluyide, O. (2016). Building Capacity for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in West Africa Sub-region: The Pivotal Role of RETRIDAL. *Open Praxis*, 8(4). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312871385_Building_Capacity_for_Open_and_Distance_Learning_ODL_in_West_Africa_Sub-region_The_Pivotal_Role_of_RETRIDAL
- Botswana Open University, & Commonwealth of Learning. (2018, September 18). *Memorandum of Agreement between the Commonwealth of Learning and Botswana Open University*: COL.
- Botswana Open University, & Commonwealth of Learning. (2019, January). *Integrating Open and Distance Learning into Non-formal Education Programmes: Workshop Report*: COL.
- Commonwealth of Learning. (2015, April). *Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Procedures and Guidelines* Retrieved from <http://oasis.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/501/TQF.pdf?sequence=4>
- Commonwealth of Learning. (2018, August). *Human Resource Capacity Building in Technology Enabled Learning (TEL) Workshop for the Open Schooling Initiative*: COL.
- Commonwealth of Learning. (2018, September 18). *Memorandum of Agreement between the Commonwealth of Learning and the University of the South Pacific* COL.
- Constitution of the Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education*. (n. d.).
- Eya, P. E., Shaibu, M. E., & Amini, C. M. (2019). *Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) – Commonwealth of Learning Partnership: A 16-year Journey in Pursuit of Opening up Access to Education*. Retrieved from http://oasis.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/3329/PCF9_Papers_paper_108.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Gangopadhyay, P. (2011). *Regional Training & Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL): Evaluation Report*. Retrieved from <http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/200>
- Lane, D. C., & Good, C. (2019). *OERu's Delivery Model for Changing Times: An Open Source NGDLE*. Paper presented at the World Conference on Online Learning, Dublin, Ireland. <https://docs.oeru.org/s/fXQk2rJbzWck8ia>
- Murangi, H. (2019, May). *Report on the Commonwealth of Learning Workshop on Open Innovative Schooling (OIS)*: Commonwealth of Learning.
- National Open University of Nigeria. (2019). NOUN e.Courseware. Retrieved from <http://www.nou.edu.ng/courseware>
- National Open University of Nigeria. (n. d.). *West African Journal of Open and Flexible Learning*. Retrieved from <https://wajofel.org/>
- National Universities Commission. (2019). NUC List of Approve Distance Learning Centers. Retrieved from nuc.edu.ng/distance-learning-centers/
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2014). *STRATEGIC PLAN 2014-2015*.
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2016). *Annual Plan 2016-2017*.

- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2017). STRATEGIC PLAN 2017 - 2020.
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2017). Annual Report 2017.
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2017). *Pacific Region OER Action Plan*. Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific.
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2018). Annual Report 2018.
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2018). Advisory Board Minutes May 26, 2014.
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (2018, July). *Human Resource Capacity Building in Technology Enabled Learning for the Pacific Workshop*.
- Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD). (n. d.). *Pacific Open Distance and Flexible Learning Framework (PODFLF)*. Suva, Fiji: U. of the South Pacific.
- Parr, C. (2018, June 29). 2 million applicants for 750K places: Nigeria’s bid to tackle its capacity issue. *The Pie News*. Retrieved from <https://thepienews.com/analysis/two-million-applicants-for-750k-places-nigerias-bid-to-tackle-its-capacity-issue/>
- Perris, K. (2018, September 26). *Terms of Reference*.
- Perris, K. (2019). *COL Regional Centres Evaluation Plan*.
- Perris, K. (n. d.). *SADC-CDE Evaluation 2015-2018: Interim Report Summary*: COL.
- Pluim, G. (2019, June). *Capacity Building and Professionalising Youth Work in the Pacific Workshop Final Report*: Pacific Center for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD),.
- Rasesigo, G. (2019, February). *Gender Sensitisation Workshop Report*.
- RETRIDOL. (2017). *Overview of Open and Distance Learning Workshop Report May-June 2017*.
- Russel, T. L. (1999). *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon: As Reported in 355 Research Reports and Summaries and Papers ; a Comparative Research Annotated Bibliography on Technology for Distance Education*. Retrieved from https://books.google.ca/books/about/The_No_Significant_Difference_Phenomenon.html?id=bmOvnQAACAAJ&redir_esc=y
- SADC-CDE. (2015). *Advisory Board Minutes September 14, 2015*.
- SADC-CDE. (2018). *Advisory Board Minutes September 26, 2018*.
- SADC-CDE. (2018, August). *Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC - CDE) ANNUAL REPORT 2017/2018*.
- SADC-CDE. (2019). *SADC-CDE Strategic Plan 2018 -2021*.
- SADC-CDE. (2019, August). *Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC - CDE) ANNUAL REPORT 2018/2019*.
- Sushita, G.-K. (2014, August). *Evaluation of the SADC-Centre for Distance Education*: COL

Appendix D Questionnaires

RETRIDOL

1. What do you think is the reason for the lack of dual mode institutions in your region?
2. How do you perceive dual-mode universities?
3. Can dual-mode transition bring about quality improvements and cost savings? With blended learning? With separate online courses?
4. Can a few trial online course be implemented without major permissions?
5. Why consider francophone countries? What benefits? What challenges?
6. What is the focus of the Regional Centre? How do you feel about how well it is meeting its mandate?
7. What peripheral agenda can be dispensed with or minimized?
8. What is your opinion of the quality of online learning in relation to f2f?
9. Do you believe that classroom-based courses should meet the same quality standards as online courses? Do you believe that separate criteria are needed? Which?
10. Does your centre have an advisory or governing board? Which?
11. Can you highlight two major successes/outcomes of the RC's efforts from: 2015 to 2017? 2018 to present?
12. Can you identify two major challenges that limit your RC's ability to fulfill its mandate? What suggestions do you have to ameliorate such challenges?
13. How well has the RC been supported by COL? What has it done well?
14. How can COL improve its support to enable the RC to fulfill its mandate?
15. The Workshops (aligned to Capacity Building and Advocacy in the Evaluation Plan)
16. Should policy recommendations include an emphasis on building improved internet reliability and accessibility?
17. How do you view blended learning?
18. What lobbying have you conducted on behalf of the Regional Centre? (e.g., with regional bodies, government, private sector, etc)? What is the prospect of acquiring external funding, and to which entities would likely apply and be successful?
19. Are there other approaches to its interventions that your Regional Centre should engage to advance its capacity building efforts? Is there anything that has hindered your Regional Centre from pursuing such approaches or intervention(s)?

Partnerships (aligned to Networking and Advocacy in the Evaluation Plan)

20. How can the Regional Centre increase its network? How can the Regional Centre enhance its advocacy for ODL? What are the biggest challenges in networking and advocacy?

Inputs, Outputs, Outcomes, Impacts

- 21.** Do you feel the funding for the RC is adequate? Why or why not? If not, what could be done to narrow the funding gap?
- 22.** What kind of impact has your Regional Centre made on education in your region? On society? An increase in student enrolments? Graduations? Retention?
- 23.** Can a focus on input/output/outcome/impact help simplify and/or standardise implementation and reporting?

OER

- 24.** What are the prevailing obstacles to prioritize digital over print delivery?
- 25.** Do you feel the use and adoption of OER can be mainstreamed? How?
- 26.** In your region, do you feel there is adequate knowledge about open licensing? What is needed to better sensitise your stakeholders to the benefits of OER, open licensing, etc.?

COL Report Questions

Rory McGreal

SADC

1. What is the focus of your Centre? How do you feel about how well it is meeting this mandate?
2. What peripheral agenda can be dispensed with or minimized?
3. Does your centre have a constitution? Is it needed? Why? Does it need updating?
4. Why support f2f and/or online courses rather than blended courses? How do you view blended learning?
5. What is your opinion of the quality of online learning in relation to f2f?
6. Do you believe that classroom-based courses should meet the same quality standards as online courses? Do you believe that separate criteria are needed? Which?
7. Does your centre have an advisory or governing board? Which?
8. Can you highlight two major successes/outcomes of your efforts from:2015 to 2017? 2018 +?
9. Can you identify two major challenges that limit your RC's ability to fulfill its mandate? What suggestions do you have to ameliorate such challenges?
10. How well have you been supported by COL? What has it done well?
11. How can COL improve its support to enable the RC to fulfill its mandate?

The Workshops (aligned to Capacity Building and Advocacy in the Evaluation Plan)

12. Why are all the workshops conducted f2f?
13. Are any online training sessions possible? Does Internet connectivity in the region limit such an option? Are there other obstacles to holding online training sessions?
14. Should policy recommendations include an emphasis on building improved internet reliability and accessibility?
15. Do you feel this is part of your mandate, why or why not?
16. Are there other approaches or interventions that your Regional Centre should engage to advance its capacity building efforts? Is there anything that has hindered your Regional Centre from pursuing such approaches or intervention(s)?

Partnerships (aligned to Networking and Advocacy in the Evaluation Plan)

17. Who are your partners? Others?
18. How are you engaging with partners?
19. What is the contribution of your partners?
20. How can your Regional Centre increase its network? How can your Regional Centre enhance its advocacy for ODL? What are the biggest challenges in networking and advocacy?
21. What lobbying have you conducted? (e.g., with regional bodies, government, private sector, etc.)? What is the prospect of acquiring external funding, and to which entities would your Regional Centre likely apply and be successful?

Inputs, Outputs, Outcomes, Impacts

- 22.** Other than what is received from COL as an annual operating budget, what finances do you receive? How much? From whom? Is it adequate?
- 23.** Describe the Human Resources in your Centre. How many employees are there? Who do they report to? How long have they been with the Centre? What metrics are used to gauge employees' performance? How frequently is it measured?
- 24.** What proportion of your work annually is devoted to COL operations? What proportion for your staff? Do you feel this is apportioned appropriately? Why or why not?
- 25.** What inputs are required for the attainment of strategic goals? Financial or Human resources?
- 26.** What outputs have you delivered?
- 27.** What have been the outcomes?
- 28.** What kind of impact has your Regional Centre made on education in your region? On society? An increase in student enrolments? Graduations? Retention?
- 29.** Can a focus on input to impact help simplify and/or standardise implementation and reporting?

OER

- 30.** Why do you prioritise print over digital delivery? What are the prevailing obstacles?
- 31.** Do you feel the use and adoption of OER can be mainstreamed? How?
- 32.** In your region, do you feel there is adequate knowledge about open licensing? What is needed to better sensitise your stakeholders to the benefits of OER, open licensing, etc.?
- 33.** What OER have you assembled/adopted/adapted, created?

Research

- 34.** How does your Centre support Research into ODL? What is needed for your RC to start/better engage in research?
- 35.** What outputs in research? (e.g., readership, replication, or continuation studies) have you achieved in research?
- 36.** What plans do you have to increase research activity in your region?

Peripheral

- 37.** What is your approach or strategy to promoting gender equality?
- 38.** How do you handle it as a central or peripheral activity?
- 39.** What more can COL do to support your efforts?
- 40.** In general, what is your view of SADC-CDE in relation to advancing open and distance learning in your region? How about the Commonwealth of Learning?
- 41.** What do you mean by "self-sufficiency"? Funds from where?
- 42.** What post workshop evaluations have you conducted?
- 43.** Has there been a follow up on participant Action Plans?

COL Report Questions

Rory McGreal

PACFOLD

- 12.**What is the focus of your Centre? How do you feel about how well it is meeting this mandate?
- 13.**What peripheral agenda can be dispensed with or minimized?
- 14.**Does your centre have a constitution? Is it needed? Why? Does it need updating?
- 15.**Why support f2f and/or online courses rather than blended courses? How do you view blended learning?
- 16.**What is your opinion of the quality of online learning in relation to f2f?
- 17.**Do you believe that classroom-based courses should meet the same quality standards as online courses? Do you believe that separate criteria are needed? Which?
- 18.**Does your centre have an advisory or governing board? Which?
- 19.**Can you highlight two major successes/outcomes of your efforts from:2015 to 2017? 2018 +?
- 20.**Can you identify two major challenges that limit your RC's ability to fulfill its mandate? What suggestions do you have to ameliorate such challenges?
- 21.**How well have you been supported by COL? What has it done well?
- 22.**How can COL improve its support to enable the RC to fulfill its mandate?

The Workshops (aligned to Capacity Building and Advocacy in the Evaluation Plan)

- 23.**Why are all the workshops conducted f2f?
- 24.**Are any online training sessions possible? Does Internet connectivity in the region limit such an option? Are there other obstacles to holding online training sessions?
- 25.**Should policy recommendations include an emphasis on building improved internet reliability and accessibility?
- 26.**Do you feel this is part of your mandate, why or why not?
- 27.**Are there other approaches or interventions that your Regional Centre should engage to advance its capacity building efforts? Is there anything that has hindered your Regional Centre from pursuing such approaches or intervention(s)?

Partnerships (aligned to Networking and Advocacy in the Evaluation Plan)

- 28.**Who are your partners? Others?
- 29.**How are you engaging with partners?
- 30.**What is the contribution of your partners?
- 31.**How can your Regional Centre increase its network? How can your Regional Centre enhance its advocacy for ODL? What are the biggest challenges in networking and advocacy?
- 32.**What lobbying have you conducted? (e.g., with regional bodies, government, private sector, etc)? What is the prospect of acquiring external funding, and to which entities would your Regional Centre likely apply and be successful?

Inputs, Outputs, Outcomes, Impacts

- 33.** Other than what is received from COL as an annual operating budget, what finances do you receive? How much? From whom? Is it adequate?
- 34.** Describe the Human Resources in your Centre. How many employees are there? Who do they report to? How long have they been with the Centre? What metrics are used to gauge employees' performance? How frequently is it measured?
- 35.** What proportion of your work annually is devoted to COL operations? What proportion for your staff? Do you feel this is apportioned appropriately? Why or why not?
- 36.** What inputs are required for the attainment of strategic goals? Financial resources? Human resources?
- 37.** What outputs have you delivered?
- 38.** What have been the outcomes?
- 39.** What kind of impact has your Regional Centre made on education in your region? On society? An increase in student enrolments? Graduations? Retention?
- 40.** Can a focus on input/output/outcome/impact help simplify and/or standardise implementation and reporting?

OER

- 41.** Why do you prioritise print over digital delivery? What are the prevailing obstacles?
- 42.** Do you feel the use and adoption of OER can be mainstreamed? How?
- 43.** In your region, do you feel there is adequate knowledge about open licensing? What is needed to better sensitise your stakeholders to the benefits of OER, open licensing, etc.?
- 44.** What OER have you assembled/adopted/adapted, created?

Research

- 45.** How does your Centre support Research into ODL? What is needed for your RC to start/better engage in research?
- 46.** What outputs in research? (e.g., readership, replication or continuation studies) have you achieved in research?
- 47.** What plans do you have to increase research activity in your region?

Peripheral

- 48.** What is your approach or strategy to promoting gender equality?
- 49.** How do you handle it as a central or peripheral activity?

Appendix E Letter to Interviewees

Dear xxxx

I have been contracted by COL to conduct an evaluation of the regional centres in Nigeria, Botswana and Fiji. I have completed a comprehensive review of the documents related to the centres, including reports, strategic plans, minutes etc. From this exercise I have created a list of questions that have been vetted by COL. They are intended to help open a follow-up discussion with you. These questions are to be answered candidly to the best of your knowledge and are not to be considered judiciously. If any question is not applicable, it is fine to so indicate with N/A. The purpose of these questions is to improve how COL operates in partnership with the regional centres. The responses from interviewees will be aggregated. COL will be privy only to my report, not to the raw data/answers. However, because of the low number of persons to be interviewed, there can be no guarantee of anonymity.

This evaluation is an exercise taken with each COL initiative as part of informing/conceptualising the next COL Strategic Plan, premised under the following question: How can COL better support its initiatives and therefore work more efficiently and effectively toward the Sustainable Development Goals (and specifically SDG4 on Education)? To be clear this is not an evaluation of job performance.

In order to expedite the evaluation, I would respectfully request that you respond to the questions by **December 5***. If you need clarifications, please follow up directly with me or with Dr K. Perris at COL.

Please find the questionnaire attached.

- Note that this was originally November 25th but was changed to allow more time. Rmc