

Opening Remarks: OOSC Book Launch



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Address to Focal Points and Other Contributors for the *Out of School Children: A Contemporary View from the Pacific Island Countries of the Commonwealth* Virtual Book Launch

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Colleagues and Friends

I am delighted to be part of this virtual launch, for the book entitled, *Out of School Children: A Contemporary View from the Pacific Island Countries of the Commonwealth*. This is a joint effort by my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning, and the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development at the University of the South Pacific. PACFOLD, as it otherwise known, is one of four COL regional centres, the other three being in Botswana, Malta and Nigeria, and this publication is emblematic of the regional work it was established to do. In the days, when in person events were still possible, PACFOLD was formally inaugurated in Samoa in the presence of their minister of education. Since then, it has become a regional hub for capacity building in open distance and flexible learning. I am really pleased to see that both the former Director of PACFOLD, Dr Som Naidu, who served as an editor of this book, and his successor, Dr Rajni Chand, are here today.

We are grateful to the many who have contributed to this book, and some of them are present. All nine Pacific Island Countries of the Commonwealth responded to the survey that was sent out one year ago. At the time, the intent was to conduct an environmental scan of the situation of out of school children in the region. We were not sure how many countries would get back to us! You will be happy to note that all nine countries responded! This is a testimony to the dedication of our nine COL Focal Points in the region. Either directly, or by approaching your colleagues, each one of you invested time and energy to do the necessary research to compile data for this important work. Several of you also agreed to participate in interviews, adding a level of richness to the publication. Dear Focal Points and contributors, please accept my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation.

At the time of collating all the survey data, my colleagues at COL, Dr Kirk Perris, Adviser: Education and Dr Tony Mays, Education Specialist: Open Schooling, engaged with our PACFOLD counterparts to consider compiling a collection of case studies as a book. The aim was to provide a comprehensive view of the situation of out of school children in the region – a significant departure from an environmental scan! Without hesitation, they agreed, and Dr Naidu nominated Ms Sharishna Narayan, Project Officer to accept this major task. It was Sharishna who devoted all her energies to do the desk research, conduct interviews and ultimately write each case study and develop the content into a book. Thank you Sharishna for your hard work and dedication.

Let us now reflect on the social realities that this book captures in the nine Member States. The Pacific is a young region with half the population under the age of 25. This demographic dividend can only be realized if young people have access to learning opportunities. As we all know, education is the surest

pathway to social mobility and a better quality of life. Most countries have made tremendous strides in primary education and trends indicate that this progress will be sustained. What of sustainable access to secondary school and the school leavers who missed out on completing their formal schooling? The numbers of out of school children remains a significant problem. We know that limited resources often restrict opportunities and innovative approaches are required to ameliorate disparities. Many learners are dispersed in remote geographical regions with limited access to resources and connectivity. COL and PACFOLD focus their efforts on leveraging technological solutions to enable access to quality learning to such learners. We believe that open schooling can provide flexible options for quality secondary education at lower costs. At least 27 countries in the Commonwealth are implementing different models of open schools. Based on its unique context, we hope that new models will emerge in the Pacific that could have relevance for the Caribbean.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted over 90% of the students worldwide resulting in learning losses and massive dropout rates. Girls are at a higher risk of dropping out in the post pandemic period—how can we provide both boys and girls with flexible learning opportunities? We have learned some hard lessons during this time, but this may lead us to modernise and overhaul our education systems fit for the 21st century. Governments will need to invest more in technology than in brick-and-mortar solutions. During the pandemic, a range of technologies were deployed—print, radio, TV and the internet. While there is an uneven development of technology in the different countries in the Pacific, access to the internet is increasing rapidly.

One insight from the pandemic is that technology-enabled learning will be an integral part of the teaching/learning landscape and blended approaches will be the new norm. Education systems will need to adopt open distance and flexible learning, build the capacity of educators, strengthen infrastructure, and develop supportive policies. The pandemic has also underscored the importance of equity considerations at all levels of education and training. Because of the digital divide, technology must be placed in an appropriate social, cultural, and political context. Governments and institutions need to develop policies that address the needs of the last person in the queue—out of school youth, those in remote regions and persons with disabilities.

These are big challenges but together, they can be addressed. We look forward to further strengthening our partnership with PACFOLD to make a difference in the region. COL is your organisation, and it works for you. Please make full use of our expertise and resources to develop open schools so that every child has access to 12 years of quality education. The book we launch today, will be the basis for a targeted and informed approach to make this a reality.