

The Commonwealth of Learning



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It's good to see everyone in person after such a long gap! Thank you for the opportunity to introduce the Commonwealth of Learning, the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation in Canada.

COL was established in 1987, when Heads of Government met for CHOGM in Vancouver. COL has a headquarters agreement with Canada, and the immunities and privileges extended to UN Agencies.

In his Commonwealth Day message this year, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau acknowledged the role of COL, saying: "The Commonwealth also helps our countries work together to overcome the challenges of today and create a better future...an example of this work...is the Commonwealth of Learning...which helps further girls' education around the world."

COL was set up to support Member States to use distance learning and technologies for human resource development. This visionary idea has grown and flowered especially during the pandemic when distance learning was embraced globally. Our mission is to promote learning for sustainable development. COL works with governments to develop policy-level interventions. But we also work with institutions and grassroots communities.

We are fortunate to have our headquarters in beautiful British Columbia with a regional office, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi. Given the diversity of our Commonwealth, we support regional centres for West Africa in Nigeria, for the SADC sub region in Botswana, the Pacific in Fiji, and Malta hosts the Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning.

COL is funded by voluntary contributions from Member States—the seven major donors are Canada, India, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria and South Africa. Every year we receive contributions from about 45 countries. A network of Focal Points in all 54 Member States keeps us apprised of their priorities. We report to Commonwealth Education Ministers at their triennial meetings and to Ministers of Foreign Affairs at CHOGM—we hope to do this when Commonwealth Heads are expected to meet in person in Rwanda next year.

COVID-19 has caused the greatest disruption in education in history, with over 95% students impacted globally. Institutional closures led to the need for emergency remote learning. Most institutions found the greatest challenge related to technology. Teachers were not prepared for the sudden transition to online learning. Existing inequalities were further exacerbated. 60% of the population in the Commonwealth is under the age of 30 and youth unemployment is high. Let me share examples of how COL is addressing each of these issues.

First, not everyone in the Commonwealth has Internet connectivity. To overcome this, COL has developed Aptus, a low-cost server which works with a wireless router and solar charger to create an offline virtual classroom—this is particularly useful in reaching remote communities with high quality digital courses as was done recently in the Maldives. Building the capacity of teachers across the Commonwealth was a top priority and several online courses targeting teachers were offered on topics such as blended and mobile learning. As teachers looked for quality content, COL developed a video-on-demand service, suitable for low bandwidth contexts, aligned to the curriculum of Fiji, Nauru and Samoa. When announcing a partnership for the Pacific, New Zealand’s prime minister the Rt Hon Jacinda Arden said: “We are pleased to be able to draw on the considerable expertise of the University of the South Pacific and the Commonwealth of Learning to increase access to high quality secondary and tertiary education in the Pacific.” We are implementing this project in nine Pacific countries.

Second, when crisis strikes, it is the most vulnerable who are further disadvantaged. Estimates suggest that 11 million girls are likely to drop out of school as a result of the pandemic. COL is promoting open schools as a flexible and cost-effective means of scaling up learning opportunities for girls and out-of-school youth. BC has several open schools and COL has catalysed a partnership with the open school in Belize. In an effort to help young women and girls remain motivated during this difficult time, COL launched CommonwealthWiseWomen.org. This mentoring programme links eminent women to girls in remote regions using a range of technologies, including WhatsApp. In order to address the issue of gender-based violence, which increased substantially during the pandemic, COL developed a Mobile App to provide women in The Solomon Islands with information regarding services available for education, health and safety.

Third, the issue of youth unemployment. COL partnered with Coursera, the global online provider, to skill and reskill 150,000 youth around the Commonwealth. Even though connectivity was often a challenge, learners used mobile devices or library facilities in what has been a life-changing experience for many. The greatest uptake was in the Caribbean—where the prime minister of Barbados, the Hon Mia Mottley announced on May Day that her government was scaling up this initiative at the national level for the next three years. COL trained over 40,000 women and girls in skills for livelihoods in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique, Sri Lanka and Tanzania in financial literacy and technical skills using smartphones and basic mobile devices. COL’s ‘Lifelong Learning for Farmers’ project in 11 countries has lifted thousands of women out of poverty. In India, illiterate women continued to learn about agriculture and financial literacy on their mobile phones.

In addition to the pandemic, we have seen an increase in climate-related disasters. The climate crisis is one of the defining issues of our times, especially for the Commonwealth, with a disproportionate impact on its 32 small states. COL’s online course on the blue economy raises awareness about the economic potential of oceans in an environmentally sustainable manner. In Nigeria, COL’s Green Teacher course trains teachers to inculcate environmental concerns amongst school children from an early stage. Working with a partner in Dominica, COL raised awareness and built local capacity for disaster preparedness within the community.

Collaboration and partnership are fundamental to everything that COL does. As institutions had to close, we initiated Open Door, a platform for resource sharing and collaboration where over 200 online courses were shared by partners.

Next year we will organise our 10th Pan Commonwealth Forum—a conference we hold every three years—this time in Calgary, jointly with Athabasca University. This is the first time in Canada and we expect stakeholders from around the Commonwealth and beyond to enrich the event with their diverse and unique perspectives. You are most welcome to join us in September 2022.

I hope this has given you a flavour of what we do—and I look forward to more in person rather than virtual occasions. As Dickens would say ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’ with hope in the words of Shelley ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind?’