



BOARD OF GOVERNORS President's Quarterly Progress Report: January – March 2008

1. Meetings of the Executive Committee and the Audit Committee

The Audit Committee met by teleconference on February 14 and the Minutes have been circulated. The main agenda items covered were: a presentation by the new audit firm, Deloitte & Touche, of the preliminary Audit Plan; a review of the interim financial statements; and a status report on the mitigation activities undertaken to manage risk using the critical success factors identified previously.

The Executive Committee met by teleconference on February 21 and the Minutes have been circulated in draft to the Committee. The main agenda matters discussed were: an update on preliminary work on the 2009-2012 Three-Year Plan, noting the organisation of the regional meetings of focal points that will seek input from Member States; agreement that COL management will redraft the Terms of Reference for Board Committees, incorporating members' views, for consideration by the Board at its meeting in June; and a discussion of potential and emerging strategic issues that led to a decision to put the rotation policy for international staff on the next Board agenda. The Acting Chair confirmed that the process of selecting a new Chair is under way. The Secretary-General has written to Heads of Government and Board members inviting them to propose names of suitable candidates but the process will not be completed before the current Secretary-General demits office on March 31, so the Secretary-General-elect, H.E. Mr. Kamallesh Sharma, will bring it to a conclusion.

2. President's Activities

I am pleased to report that in this quarter we have seen new evidence of the influence of COL's work on other international organisations as well as its positive impact on the education systems of our Member States. Having had few travel obligations in this period, I have been able to work with the Vice-President/Programme Director on the processes that will lead to the formulation of COL's 2009-2012 Three-Year Plan. We have begun a series of internal seminars with our Education Specialists aimed both at learning lessons from our previous work and also addressing some of the weaknesses in our approach that were identified in the external evaluation of COL's activity in the 2003-2006 triennium. I report further on these seminars below.

COL's relationship with the World Bank is developing well. When colleagues from the Bank visited COL in 2006, they identified open schooling as a particularly promising element of our work. I visited the Bank to make a presentation on open schooling early in 2007 and was told that although open schooling could be part of the answer to the looming crisis in access to secondary education, the lack of serious evaluative data made development agencies chary of investing in it. COL therefore commissioned a thorough study of open schooling in the rather different contexts of India and Namibia, which I presented at the Bank during a visit in January. Bank colleagues considered that the COL study did much to answer their questions. As a result, COL is being invited to participate in policy discussions on secondary education and teacher training that the Bank is organising.

Whilst at the World Bank, I was also able to discuss COL's work on ICTs in African schools with the *infoDev* group. This led to an invitation for COL to be a partner in an *infoDev* study of the availability and performance of the many cheap laptops that are now available and are sometimes hailed as the answer to the educational problems of the developing world.

I noted in my last Quarterly Report that I had joined the steering committee of the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC). This programme of the World Bank and UNESCO has now distributed some US\$1.2 million to support capacity-building activities organised by the major regional networks of national quality assurance agencies for higher education. COL's involvement is a tribute to our work on quality assurance in higher education over many years. I am also pleased to note that the software supporting GIQAC's work is hosted by COL and that we shall sponsor the participation in the steering committee's annual meeting its newly appointed African member, Professor Narciso Matos (Mozambique).

Our reputation in the field of quality assurance also led to an invitation for me to chair the key session on follow-up actions at a meeting on Degree Mills convened by UNESCO and the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The exploding demand for higher education in developing countries has sparked an increase in the number of bogus colleges, often offering spurious qualifications through ICTs. The international community is countering this trend in various ways, principally by providing tools that will help students choose wisely. I am concerned that some of the Commonwealth's small states and the UK's dependent territories have particularly bad reputations as 'safe havens' for bogus colleges, which could impact negatively on the credibility of the activities of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. I shall try to get this issue on the agenda for 17CCEM.

Quality and credibility is a particular preoccupation for COL in its coordinating role for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). This has led us to work with the South African Qualifications Authority to develop a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) for the VUSSC. An important milestone in completing this task was a meeting in Singapore in February. The fact that it attracted a higher

attendance than any previous VUSSC meeting (37 senior officials from 27 countries) is evidence of a high level of interest. The Government of Singapore has now hosted and paid the local accommodation costs of attendees to four VUSSC meetings covering a period of over five weeks. I offer special thanks to Singapore for its generous support for this initiative.

The Transnational Qualifications Framework will help build credibility for small states that offer programmes internationally. Agreement was reached in Singapore that programmes listed on the VUSSC website will carry national and where applicable, regional accreditation. Learners who are looking for online programmes will be able to clearly see the level of legitimacy of programmes and the associated accreditation, both of the programmes and the offering institutions.

The Singapore meeting was followed immediately by the fifth in our series of VUSSC course development workshops (sometimes called “boot camps” because they include basic training in IT skills for collaborative working). This was held in Seychelles with Fisheries as the course topic. The timing and location were particularly appropriate since it was exactly five years ago, in March 2003, that the then Minister of Education of Seychelles, the Honourable Danny Faure (now Minister of Finance), hosted the ministerial working group that finalised the proposal for the VUSSC that was presented and endorsed at the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (15CCEM) held in Edinburgh later that year.

I took advantage of the occasion to recall the history of the VUSSC and give statistics for the participation of governments and institutions in its work (see www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/5203). Perhaps the most striking figure is that whereas the original proposal called for the expenditure of \$20 million over the first five years, the actual expenditure to date is only \$2 million. This has been covered by grants from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, the Government of Singapore and participating countries through the salary costs of their representatives at VUSSC events. While it is still too early for a full cost-benefit analysis, Member States say they are getting value for money in terms of learning materials, IT training, and the sense of a successful collective endeavour that the VUSSC has generated.

While in Seychelles, a UNESCO colleague and I had the privilege of an audience with President James Michel and a long planning session with Education Minister Bernard Shamlaye. The Government of Seychelles feels that COL has been responsive to its needs and is pleased to see COL working closely with UNESCO in addressing future priorities, such as the project to create a University of the Seychelles for which COL, UNESCO and the African Development Bank are coordinating their efforts.

From Seychelles I went to Jamaica, where we convened the COL focal points from the Caribbean countries for the first of our regional planning meetings. I report on this below. Finally, on the way back to Vancouver, I stopped off in Pittsburgh for a meeting of

an advisory committee to the Hewlett Foundation. This was preceded by a grantees meeting at which I gave an after-dinner speech on the topic *Open Education* (www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/5236). COL has benefited considerably from Hewlett's support and I am proud of the partnership that we are developing with the Foundation, which may well lead to a further grant.

3. Programme

3.1 General

This has been a particularly busy quarter for the Education Specialists and all programme staff. In addition to the work in the field, they have: i) provided a mid-year review of their initiatives; ii) prepared budgets for 2008-2009; iii) commissioned evaluations for specific activities, which will contribute to the overall evaluation of COL's programme for the current triennium; iv) completed achievement reports on their work from July 2006 to December 2007 for presentation to the Board of Governors at their annual meeting; and v) contributed actively to the development and organisation of the key themes around which PCF5 is structured as well as to the adjudication of the Excellence in Distance Education Awards (EDEA).

I highlight below some of the activities undertaken in the three sectors during this quarter. The focus has been on capacity-building, partnerships and collaboration.

3.2 Education

I referred above to the evaluative study on Open Schooling that COL had commissioned as part of its strategy to promote alternative schooling to meet the growing demand for secondary education. As a follow-up to that work, we are now developing a Handbook on Open Schooling for those who are in the process of setting up alternative provisions for out-of-school learners. The Handbook will provide guidance and advice on best practice in the management of this specialised sub-sector. Rather than inviting experts to write scholarly articles on the subject, we brought key practitioners from around the Commonwealth to Vancouver in early February to contribute to the development of a practical guide which will be a valuable resource for the setting up of robust open school systems.

Quality Assurance in Distance Education has been a key concern for COL in this triennium. COL, in collaboration with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) of India, has developed a QA Toolkit for Teacher Education. A three-day Forum around this was organised jointly by COL, UNESCO and the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) at Abuja, Nigeria in late February. Twenty-eight teacher education policymakers and senior administrators from The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone took part. The four countries have identified the activities that will be undertaken to implement the Toolkit in order to improve the quality of Teacher Education in the sub-

region. The Honourable Hajiya Aishatu Jibril Dukku, Minister of State for Education, Federal Government of Nigeria, addressed the Forum on the last day and congratulated COL for its work in the country and looked forward to further cooperation with us.

3.3 Learning for Livelihoods

In collaboration with the two Ministries with responsibilities for education in Trinidad & Tobago, COL organised a Workshop in mid-February to discuss the framework of a national ODL policy. This policy will have implications for the development of distance higher, teacher education, TVET and open schooling in the country.

Twenty students in Grenada have completed the Special Diploma in TVET offered jointly by COL and the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech).

A consultative workshop on *Using Media for Education for Livelihoods* was organised at Ocho Rios, Jamaica, in early March to take advantage of the presence of COL staff at the Caribbean Focal Points meeting. The aim was to develop new strategies and plans for providing learning and skills development opportunities for improving livelihoods through the use of ICTs.

3.4 Human Environment

A Round Table on *Gender Friendly Schools* was convened in late March in Bangalore in collaboration with the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Ramakrishna Hegde Chair in Decentralisation & Governance, Institute of Social and Economic Change (ISEC). Many stakeholder groups have the ability to influence the quality of schools in relation to gender and these include teachers, policy makers, school management committees and parents. The purpose of the Round Table was to identify factors influencing gender-friendly schools in order to develop indicators for each of the stakeholder groups. We hope that these indicators will be used widely across the Commonwealth for creating enabling environments in schools for both boys and girls.

3.5 CEMCA

Our Delhi unit has trained 75 faculty members in the development of multi-media and eLearning materials in the Open University of Sri Lanka, the YCMOU (Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University), Nashik, India, and the Bangladesh Open University. The workshops were funded in part by UNESCO, Paris.

4. Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning

Organisation and planning for COL's Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF5), in partnership with the University of London, continues to go well. Preliminary allocation of available sponsorship funds to-date has provided for over

100 very qualified applicants, none of whom had received subsidies through COL previously. Deadlines for full paper submission and lower, early-bird registration rates are both March 31. All indications are that it will be a well-attended, successful event. The Forum will be held from 13-17 July 2008 at the University of London (www.col.org/pcf5).

5. 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers

The Commonwealth Secretariat has confirmed that the 17th triennial Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (17CCEM) and parallel fora will be held from 15-19 June 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, hosted by the Government of Malaysia. We have taken part in various planning meetings, some including our Malaysian host. COL will present its next Three-Year Plan to Ministers at 17CCEM.

6. Stakeholder Relations

6.1 New Board Members

The Honourable Dame Carol Kidu (Papua New Guinea) has been appointed as the Regional Representative for the Pacific. The Acting Chair has contacted the Secretary-General about making new appointments for Africa and Asia.

6.2 Member Governments' Support

During this quarter, we received contributions from Ghana, Grenada, Guyana, Kiribati, Malaysia, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Seychelles, Tuvalu and the United Kingdom. Thirty-three countries have contributed to COL thus far this fiscal year, while thirty countries had contributed at this time last year. I hope that the reminders sent to the countries that have not contributed yet will yield results in the final quarter where 38 countries contributed in 2006-2007.

6.3 Focal Point Update

The first meeting of the Focal Points for the Caribbean region was held on 10-11 March, 2008 at Ocho Rios, Jamaica. I inaugurated the meeting which was attended by the Vice President & Programme Director and four Education Specialists, who used the opportunity to organise meetings immediately preceding and following this event. Thirteen Focal Points from the twelve Commonwealth countries in the region participated.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- (a) Review the progress on the Country Action Plans 2006-2009 for the Caribbean region.
- (b) Obtain feedback and inputs for COL's Three-Year Plan 2009-2012.
- (c) Provide a platform for networking and future collaboration.

I consider that these aims were achieved because:

- (a) Each participant was given a mid-term update of the Country Action Plan 2006-09 for their country, which provides an overview of what COL has done so far this triennium.
- (b) We gained a good sense of the regional and national priorities that should be taken up in the next Three-Year Plan.
- (c) It was a productive networking opportunity for COL and also helped the Focal Points to make useful bilateral links.

The content and tone of the meeting were a powerful vindication of our Focal Point strategy. It is working well and deserves to be strengthened. The next Focal Point meeting, for the Africa and Mediterranean region, will take place in Lilongwe, Malawi on 22-23 May, 2008. The venue and dates for the Asia-Pacific region meeting have yet to be finalised.

7. Finances

7.1 Revenues

Member Governments contributions totalled \$7.6 million by March 31 with \$2.4 million of this amount received in the third quarter as follows: Ghana - \$60,660; Grenada - \$4,996; Guyana - \$14,529; Kiribati - \$35,000; Malaysia - \$48,960; St. Lucia - \$18,398; St. Vincent & the Grenadines - \$5,550 (second instalment); Seychelles - \$15,000; Tuvalu - \$30,000; and United Kingdom - \$2,173,930.

Receipts to-date represent over 88% of forecasted member government revenues for the 2007-2008 year. Nigeria's pledge of \$750,000 for this year combined with its arrears from 2006-2007 of \$500,000 will make up the balance when received.

Over 80% of COL's target of \$2 million in extrabudgetary funds for 2007-2008 has been confirmed or received to-date from grants and contract services where \$450,000 of the revenue deferred (\$340,000 in grants and \$110,000 in contract services) at June 30, 2007 will be recognised in this year towards the target. Other sources of grants and contracts include: £250,000 from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (second year of a four-year grant for VUSSC); £15,000 from the Commonwealth Secretariat for the Commonwealth Computer Navigator Certificate; US\$100,000 from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for a *Learnng4Content* activity; Rs.39,52,000 from the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India (to CEMCA) for capacity building through community radio; US\$30,000 from UNESCO (Paris) for training in mixed-media courseware (to CEMCA); US\$20,000 from UNESCO (Jamaica) for an evaluation study; US\$80,000 from the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan to organise a study tour for visiting senior officials; and over US\$350,000 in contracts awarded since the July 1 for COL's eLearning for International Organisations programme.

In addition, interest revenue earned on cash and cash investments for the year to date is \$176,484.

7.2 Cash Flow

COL estimates that cash on hand at March 31 is about \$8.5 million (before the cash reserve of \$1.6 million held in accordance with the cash reserve policy). The cash on hand will be used to meet current liabilities and support operations in the fourth quarter where an estimated \$4.5 million (before extrabudgetary expenditures) will be required based on the accrued liabilities and approved plan of expenditure.

COL's cash reserve policy also calls for it to have enough cash on hand at the beginning of each fiscal year to meet approximately four months of activity of that year. Any surplus cash remaining at June 30, 2008 will be counted toward this requirement for 2008-2009 where current projections indicate that a minimum of \$4.0 million will still be available.

COL continues to hold cash in the form of US dollars (USD), Great Britain pounds (GBP) and Indian rupees with over 70% of the cash on hand held in these currencies. COL is exposed to the risk of loss depending on the relative movement of these currencies against the Canadian dollar. The Canadian dollar has weakened slightly in relation to the USD and GBP at the end of the third quarter which will result in a net foreign exchange gain for the quarter and offset some of the losses booked previously.

7.3 Expenditures

The annual budget for 2007-2008 was approved at a level of \$10.26 million, inclusive of extrabudgetary expenditures of \$2 million. At March 31, approximately \$6 million or 60% of the approved budget is estimated to have been spent (final March figures in progress) or committed through contractual obligations with 85% of these expenditures attributed to the programme for the year. Indications are that the budget will be close to fully utilised by year end.

8. Human Resources

8.1 Staff Changes

8.1.1 Arrivals

Mr. Ian Pringle, Education Specialist – Media, joined COL on January 1, 2008.

8.1.2 Departures

Mr. Nick Gao, Information Resource Centre Manager, left COL in February 2008 to pursue other interests.

8.1.3 Recruitment

Recruitments are currently under way for the following positions: Education Specialist – Teacher Education and Education Specialist – VUSSC at COL; and Programme Officer and three administrative positions at CEMCA.

9. Knowledge Management and Information Technology

COL has converted its IRC Bulletin/Open & Distance Education News into a *COL News Service* which carries up-to-date news on open and distance learning. The news service is generated using an online service called Yahoo Pipes and is available as a link on COL's homepage (www.col.org see *COL News Service*). It is updated automatically 24/7 through a combination of COL-designed searches using Google News and the ability of Yahoo Pipes to filter out the unnecessary items. The News Services carries some 100 to 200 news items at any time, with the newest items always being included at the top. There are also specialised topic news services throughout our website, such as one on copyright matters www.col.org/copyright (see "Copyright News Feed").

10. Publications/Resources

Connections/EdTech News, February 2008, Vol. 13, No. 1 (www.col.org/connections).

The *COL News Service*, (news feeds) is now provided for general interest and special topics throughout our website (www.col.org/newsfeeds).

The second issue of the Commonwealth Secretariat's new online quarterly magazine, *Commonwealth Quarterly*, was published in March. This issue featured an article on COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme ("The Commonwealth of Learning harnesses the potential of technology to help improve livelihoods"). We are endeavouring to place articles about COL in as many issues as possible. The first issue, released in October 2007, contained an article on PCF5 (www.thecommonwealth.org/EZHomePage/171029)

11. Visitors

Visitors to our Vancouver office this quarter included:

- Pan-Commonwealth participants in a workshop to develop an Open Schooling Handbook.
- Pan-Commonwealth VUSCC team leader meeting (for the Fisheries course development workshop in Seychelles).

- Professor Uma Coomaraswamy, Distance Education Modernisation Project, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka (former Vice Chancellor of the Open University of Sri Lanka).
- Dr. Paul Grimwood, Chief Executive, The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (TOPNZ).
- His Excellency R.L. Narayan, High Commissioner of India to Canada, and Mr. Ashok Kumar, Consul General, Consulate General of India, Vancouver.
- Mr. James H. Marsh, Editor in Chief, The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historical Foundation of Canada.

All currencies are in Canadian dollars unless otherwise indicated.

*Sir John Daniel
President & Chief Executive Officer
March 31, 2008*