More than 600 delegates from 70 countries attended the sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF6), held in November in Kochi, India. The four-day conference addressed the theme “Access and Success in Learning: Global Development Perspectives”.

Many conference delegates were attending a Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning for the first time, explained COL President Sir John Daniel in his opening remarks. Most of the conference’s sponsorship funds are directed to first-time participants, ensuring that new voices are heard.

“It is no longer enough – and it never was – to pride ourselves on the role of open and distance methods in widening access to learning,” Sir John told delegates. “We must judge our efforts by the success of those who engage in the learning that we facilitate.”

Sir John saluted PCF6’s honorary chair, Professor M.S. Swaminathan, saying he could think of no one in the world who exemplifies COL’s motto, “Learning for Development”, better than Dr. Swaminathan. Known as the “father of the Green Revolution in India”, he is the founder and Chairman of the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation.

India needs to focus on nutrition, food security and education, said Dr. Swaminathan in his inauguration address. Education, social motivation and regulation are required to conserve the environment; regulation alone won’t ensure protection, he explained. “Nutrition and basic education are two legs of a human being – once these two components are in [place], nutritional security is achieved and this is what I plan to achieve in this Decade of Innovation realising the Millennium Development Goals.”

In his welcome to conference delegates, IGNOU Pro-Vice Chancellor and PCF6 Programme Chair, Professor P.R. Ramanujam spoke about the link between the conference’s four themes and global development.

“Global Development Perspectives can be achieved through navigating the four broad themes that PCF6 has envisioned – Formal Education at the bottom leading to knowledge and Skills Development of individuals, and enabling overall Community Development, which will take us to the ultimate goal – Social Justice.”

The state of Kerala, which hosted PCF6 in the city of Kochi, is an example of how tough targets such as the Millennium Development Goals can be achieved through proper planning and a dynamic vision, said IGNOU Vice Chancellor Professor V.N. Rajasekharan Pillai. “From formal education to social justice, from women empowerment to skills development, whatever parameters we are discussing here have been achieved in Kerala.”

**Formal Education: A New Approach?**

In his keynote speech for the Formal Education theme, Professor Steve Maharey, Vice Chancellor of Massey University in New Zealand spoke about Massey’s successes as the university celebrates 50 years of distance education. He also addressed the challenge of ensuring access to quality higher education.
“At a time when the pressure to extend access to quality education is growing, we are discovering the cost may be too high,” Professor Maharey noted.

New technologies and new models of learning may finally change the way we have learned for centuries, he said. Massey’s response is to adopt blended learning, “the best of collaborative face-to-face learning and a rich digital environment that will also support collaborative learning.”

In certain circumstances such as professional learning, open and distance learning (ODL) is not simply as good as other methods: it’s better. This was one of the messages delivered by Professor Frank Banks, Director of International Development in Teacher Education at UK Open University in his speech, “Revamping Teacher Education”. Professor Banks used examples from around the world to demonstrate the effectiveness of school-based training for teachers.

“Programmes that remove a teacher from the classroom to a centre for two or three weeks, gives them the ‘training’ and then says ‘Right, you are trained, now go and apply it in the classroom!’ just don’t work,” Professor Banks said. “They are expensive, and they don’t work.”

Courses for teachers must consider the realities of the school, the pupils’ lives and needs, and what teachers want for their learning, he stated.

Discussions in the Formal Education theme sessions placed strong emphasis on quality assurance, noting that quality assessment in higher education will only be significant if well integrated to that taking place at secondary level.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) has allowed for the local ownership of programmes emanating from a Commonwealth community engaged in developing and delivering courses relevant to small states. Collaborative capacity building has been an essential foundation to the work, and the VUSSC Transnational Qualifications Framework is proving to be a point of reference for establishing national qualifications frameworks.

Participants believed that open schooling will develop strongly in the coming years, with a particular focus on professional and vocational education. It will be important to integrate this development with the more academic curriculum.

Discussions on teacher education stressed the importance of focusing on the classroom, the potential of mobile technologies and quality rather than access numbers alone.

Community Development: Technology and Education

The main role of higher education is to assure continuity for people with basic education, generate knowledge to drive and transform the community, widen access and create equity in higher education, according to Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Antuwar Ali, President and Vice Chancellor of the Open University of Malaysia in his keynote speech about Community Development.

“Communities need universities and higher education more than ever before,” he said. “Universities serve the people; they advise governments in policymaking decisions; they help develop skills, create knowledge and train leaders.”

The digital divide must be transformed into digital equity, Professor Ali stressed. “Without commensurate technological infrastructure, the poor will remain deprived of both education and development. The investment in technologies is an imperative and will be the first step for many nations before they can truly progress in education.”

Discussions in the Community Development theme sessions urged that we emphasise community processes, such as sharing stories and experience, as a way to ground community learning products. Educational institutions do not have a monopoly on learning: they need to adopt models that privilege communication and move beyond top-down approaches to community development.

Participants argued that we must focus less on technology and more on how innovations are used, noting the increasing appreciation of the role of community media and the important task of ensuring that community radio really is an expression of the community.

Social Justice: Expanding Access to Learning

The Social Justice theme was addressed in a keynote speech by Mrs. Chetna Gala Sinha, founder of the Mann Deshi Foundation, which fosters economic development in rural areas through a non-profit co-operative bank, a business school and a community radio station. This innovative group also promotes access to education in a simple but effective way, such as by making it possible for 5,000 girls to have bicycles to transport them to secondary schools in other communities.

Almost every decision made in the creation of the bank and business school was the result of listening to women, Mrs. Sinha told PCF6 delegates. The village women are determined to pay their own way rather than rely on handouts; to train to be entrepreneurs, not merely to be employed. She is constantly surprised by both the simplicity and the sophistication of their views, Mrs. Sinha said.

Participants in the Social Justice theme stressed that if it is to contribute to development, ODL must be placed within an existing development strategy involving participatory processes with stakeholders. Careful strategies are needed to bridge the gap between
policies, which should integrate a gender sensitive framework, and implementation.

There was strong emphasis on quality assurance of ODL as a means to social justice. This means, first, capacity building for staff in understanding and managing quality assurance. Second, quality assurance frameworks should include a social auditing of learning systems and materials in terms of gender, class and environment.

Skills Development: The Potential of Blended Learning

There is an urgent need to provide learners with employable skills, said Dr. Caroline Seelig, Chief Executive of the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand in her keynote speech on Skills Development. “There is no doubt that governments and institutions around the world have reached a critical stage where we must increase our efforts to find creative solutions to world-wide skills shortages, deficits and challenges.

Echoing Professor Steve Maharey’s words two days earlier, Dr. Seelig said one of the solutions to the skills development challenge is for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) organisations to adopt a system of blended delivery: a mix of ODL and face-to-face learning.

“I am not sure, however, that policymakers – and indeed many practitioners in the TVET community – have fully recognised the true potential of this model to meet the global skills development challenges before us,” she stated.

Conference sessions related to this theme discussed how skills development is the next frontier for ODL. ODL is gaining increasing recognition as a way of increasing access to technical and vocational development and the quality of that development. This is particularly true for the large numbers of people who seek non-formal skills development.

The main obstacle to expansion is the need to train teachers in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for vocational teaching and learning. Collaboration between institutions and development partners is vital for the optimal use of resources. One clear aim of collaboration should be the creation, adaptation and use of OER.

“Educate Girls”

Delivering the prestigious Asa Briggs Lecture, noted writer and Indian Member of Parliament Dr. Shashi Tharoor made a strong plea for the education of girls to attain development goals. Dr. Tharoor said when he is asked the single most important thing that can be done to improve the world, he would without hesitation offer a two-word mantra: “Educate girls”.

He referred to research that shows that if you educate a boy, you educate a person, but if you educate a girl, you educate a family and benefit an entire community.

Dr. Tharoor spoke about many issues related to education and development, including the low literacy rate in his own country. “Of all the many paradoxes with which India abounds, the saddest must be that we are a country where nearly half the population is illiterate, but which has produced the world’s second largest pool of trained scientists and engineers,” he said.

Exploring this, Dr. Tharoor said, “What is missing is not just financial resources, but a commitment on the part of our society as a whole to tackle the educational tasks that lie ahead.”

Bridging the Digital Divide

Closing remarks on the final day of PCF6 reflected on the role of Learning in Development. Looking back to the first Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in 1999, COL Vice President Asha Kanwar spoke about how technology has transformed education. “When PCF was born, the world was facing a huge digital divide. Today, content is being generated at the grassroots level and local communities are far more aware of their livelihood and developmental issues.”

The Chair of COL’s Board of Governors, the Honourable Burchell Whiteman, saluted the IGNOU team who “took on a gargantuan task and accomplished it with deceptively apparent ease”. And he encouraged delegates to use the energy of PCF6 upon their return home.

“If we can translate but a fraction of the intellectual energy and the passion which have been present here into continued action in Nairobi, Delhi, Wellington, Vancouver, Port of Spain or Port Moresby, then our sojourn in this most welcoming city and this state, which is a centre of educational opportunity, would have been more than worth it,” said Mr. Whiteman in his closing remarks.

In addition to COL and IGNOU, other PCF6 sponsors included the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), UNESCO, the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS, India), the Commonwealth Secretariat, The Open University (UK) and the University of London.
MOBILES AND COMMUNITY RADIO: TOGETHER AT LAST

By Ian Pringle, COL Education Specialist, Media

One of the most exciting parts of PCF6 for me was the media centre set up to demonstrate appropriate learning technologies by actually putting them to use during the forum. Alongside daily programming, the centre was also the site of a promising marriage: the synergy of mobile telephony and community radio.

At hand were two innovative mobile applications that can act as a complement to radio. Freedom Fone and GRINS enable people to use mobile phones to access content and interact. This has powerful potential for the community learning programmes that COL and its partners are supporting.

Developed in Zimbabwe, Freedom Fone saves audio content on a server that people can access on their phone through an interactive voice response system. Callers can choose the content they want to hear – it could be current market prices, weather forecasts or health tips. They can also listen to past programmes, leave feedback through a voice message and cast their vote in polls.

GRINS (Gramin Radio Inter-Net-working System) was developed by the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi for use by community radio stations. It is a plug-n-play server that enables radio stations to schedule broadcasts, store content, manage phone calls and record live transmissions.

With GRINS, community radio stations are better able to interact with their communities and increase access to their programmes through mobile phones.

The marriage of mobile phones and community radio is a natural one. They both facilitate “anywhere, anytime learning”, but in different, complementary ways. Learning programmes can use phones to interact with learners – register them, provide learner support and assessing learning outcomes – overcoming barriers faced by radio and other traditional media. Learners can access educational content as and when they need it. Radio, on the other hand, provides for an engaging and collective learning environment that can reach large numbers with a single broadcast at a low cost.

Together, mobiles and radio can increase the degree of participation in learning for development, which is key. Communities must be active participants in community learning – by shaping priorities, sharing experiences and providing ongoing input.
COL’s success is due in large part to numerous partnerships with educational institutions, non-governmental organisations and community groups throughout the Commonwealth. These partnerships are frequently formalised in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Three new MOUs will help extend COL’s expertise in open and distance learning.

COL and the new University of Seychelles (UniSey) have signed a collaboration agreement to work together with UNESCO on quality assurance. COL and UniSey will also explore how Seychelles can take advantage of Teacher Education for Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA), a partnership project aimed at improving the quality of teaching.

COL’s regional agency, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) has signed an MOU with Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to develop a Post-Graduate Diploma Programme in Community Media, including scholarships for 50 students. CEMCA and IGNOU will collaborate to develop the programme, which will support the expansion of community radio in India. Largely through the efforts of CEMCA, the Indian government is seeking to increase the number of community radio stations from approximately 100 now to some 4,000 in a few years.

CEMCA and Uttarakhand Open University (UOU) have agreed to identify avenues for collaboration, including the development of a multimedia course on information and knowledge delivery and capacity building. Established in 2005, UOU is the only open university in the state of Uttarakhand, in northern India.

The new University of Seychelles was formally inaugurated on 30 November by a group of dignitaries that included Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal (The Princess Anne), University of Seychelles Chancellor and Seychelles President Mr. James Michel, the former Vice Chancellor of the University of London, Sir Graeme Davies, and COL President, Sir John Daniel.

Called “the world’s smallest university” by the BBC, UniSey has 300 students this year in programmes offered in partnership with a number of universities overseas, notably the University of London, the Université de Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne) and Edith Cowan University, Australia.

www.unisey.ac.sc

COL’s blog is hosting a discussion about how responsibility for education can best be allocated in federal states. Starting with a blog post by COL President Sir John Daniel about the possible consequences of devolving responsibility for education in Pakistan to the states, subsequent posts from international experts have commented on the situation in Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, the UK, the US and the former Yugoslavia.

COL welcomes short contributions (300-500 words) from readers on federal arrangements for education in other federal states – Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth – either as comments or for postings as guest blogs.

Join the discussion: www.col.org/blog, click on Federalism in Education on the left.
COMOSA TAKES FLIGHT

The Commonwealth Open Schooling Association (COMOSA) held its first Annual General Meeting (AGM) at the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) in Delhi, India in November. The meeting brought together open schooling practitioners from 15 countries and many Indian states. Established in 2009, COMOSA supports the efforts of ODL institutions to co-ordinate, co-operate and collaborate in developing and delivering education for sustainable development that is innovative, high quality, relevant, equitable, gender-sensitive and cost-effective.

COMOSA introduced the first issue of the COMOSA Journal of Open Schooling at the AGM. NIOS hosted the meeting and publishes the new journal. Dr. S.S. Jena, Chairman and CEO of NIOS, is the founding Chair of COMOSA.

“Open schooling is an idea whose time has come,” declared COL President Sir John Daniel in his address to the AGM. “It is education for the 21st century. Therefore it is time for you to raise your game, emerge from the shadows and take your place in the educational ecosystem that is needed to achieve the noble goals of education for all.”

Collaboration and networking aren’t just aspirations; they are already occurring, Ms. Frances Ferreira, COL Education Specialist, Open Schooling told the group. The “OER for Open Schools” initiative (described in more detail on page 7) is an extensive collaboration that involves COMOSA members. And COL has been sponsoring training workshops, meetings and exchanges on open schooling between India and Africa for many years.

The rapidly growing demand for secondary education means business is booming for open schools. The annual enrolment of NIOS, which is currently 300,000, will need to double quickly and could reach 1.5 million pupils this decade, according to Shri S.C. Khuntia, India’s Joint Secretary for School Education and Literacy. Like many open schools, NIOS is being encouraged to expand its vocational skills offerings. COL is working to support this growing demand.

www.comosa.org

PROMOTING RESEARCH IN OPEN SCHOOLS

Having identified that lack of research is holding back the development of open schools, COMOSA held a workshop that focussed on developing a research agenda.

Workshop participants prepared a generic framework that open schools can adapt in order to create a research policy for their institution – and each agreed to submit their research policy at the next COMOSA meeting in 2011.

Delegates also agreed on a global open schooling research agenda based on priorities identified by participating open schools. The 11 priority research areas include curriculum and course development, gender, teacher training/in-service and success factors in online learning. Small groups of open schools have been assigned to collaborate on each research area.

COL is facilitating the process by providing a consultant who will support the research projects.

TAKING OER BEYOND THE OER COMMUNITY

A COL/UNESCO joint initiative aimed at increasing use of open educational resources (OER) has concluded with agreement that as the use of OER expands, quality control must be maintained and developing countries must be creators of knowledge, not just users.

“Taking OER beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity” was launched by COL in partnership with UNESCO’s Higher Education Division in early 2010. The objective: promote the wider use of OER by expanding understanding of OER by educational decision makers and quality assurance experts.

The initiative, which focussed on universities in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, was implemented as part of the COL/UNESCO Joint Work Plan Agreement, with financing from both organisations and the Government of the United States.

“Taking OER beyond the OER Community” involved four capacity building workshops (in India, Mali, Namibia and South Africa) involving more than 140 people representing governments, higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. Three online discussion forums facilitated information sharing among more than 340 participants. An OER Dossier that presents evidence that the use and adaptation of existing OER raises the quality of teaching and/or reduces costs is freely available online at http://oerworkshop.weebly.com. Two additional resources will be published later this year.

The initiative’s 2010 activities concluded with a meeting at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in December that drew experts and delegates from more than 60 countries. They discussed current use of OER, quality assurance, copyright and the need for OER policies.

“Through this initiative, we have taken several approaches to take OER beyond the OER community,” said Ms. Trudi van Wyk, COL Education Specialist, eLearning, who led the initiative in partnership with Ms. Zeynep Varoglu from UNESCO.

“Our challenge now is to continue this work by supporting governments and institutions to develop OER policies and helping educators understand how to use OER.”

Read more about the COL/UNESCO OER initiative, including links to articles about the UNESCO Policy Forum in World University News: www.col.org/OERPolicy
NEW OER AVAILABLE FOR OPEN SCHOOLS

New open educational resources (OER) for 20 secondary courses created through COL’s “OER for Open Schools” initiative are now freely available online. The self-instructional learning materials, developed by educators from Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia, are appropriate for the existing secondary education curriculum. Educators can download, adapt and re-use the OER at no cost.

“OER for Open Schools” was a two-year initiative funded in part by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. It involved building capacity in the effective use of technology in classrooms, development of OER and creating learner support materials. The 100 Master Teachers involved in this training are now providing training to colleagues in their countries.

The 20 print-based OER are available as PDFs on the COL website, the COL Wiki, WikiEducator and on CD ROM by request. eLearning versions will be available later this year.

www.colwiki.org
www.col.org/OpenSchooling

VUSSC LAUNCHES LEARNING PORTAL

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) has introduced a new online Learning Management System that makes it easier for learners and educators to access and contribute to VUSSC courses.

The new VUSSC website offers free online materials and tips for learning online. Educators can access learning materials, information about how to adapt learning materials to their needs and other resources. The VUSSC website features the Moodle Learning Management System. Moodle is an open source web application for producing, offering and managing online courses. VUSSC is also offering an offline platform, Poodle, which is Moodle from a memory stick. Poodle can serve as a backup for a course being developed on Moodle and enables course delivery without Internet access. The VUSSC Learning Portal is freely available to all VUSSC participating institutions.

The Learning Portal was unveiled at the second VUSSC Management Committee Meeting, held in Kochi, India, prior to COL’s Sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF6). Management Committee members agreed on three areas of focus for the coming year:

• establishment of the VUSSC Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) Portal,
• implementation of the TQF, and
• development of new courses.

Senior government officials from participating countries who serve as VUSSC Interlocutors also met in Kochi prior to PCF6. They discussed the need to further address quality assurance, copyright issues, transferring credits among countries and new funding sources. The Interlocutors also identified priority areas for VUSSC course development.

VUSSC is hosting the ninth International Training and Materials Development Workshop in Lesotho in March in collaboration with COL, the National University of Lesotho and the Lesotho Ministry of Education. Participants will collaborate on the development of courses for a degree-level Business/Entrepreneurship programme.

VUSSC is a partnership of 32 small states of the Commonwealth dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education. All VUSSC course materials are freely available online for adaptation and re-use.

www.vussc.org

A COMMUNITY OF BROADCASTERS. MR. IAN PRINGLE, COL EDUCATION SPECIALIST, MEDIA WITH COL PARTNERS, MS. GAIL WHITE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MEDIA AND TRAINING CENTRE FOR HEALTH (SOUTH AFRICA) AND MR. PATRICK PRENDERGAST, LECTURER AND COORDINATOR, CARIBBEAN INSTITUTE OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES (JAMAICA) AT AMARC 10, THE GLOBAL CONFERENCE OF COMMUNITY RADIO BROADCASTERS. COL SPONSORED A CONTINGENT OF COMMUNITY RADIO REPRESENTATIVES TO ATTEND THE WEEK-LONG CONFERENCE IN LA PLATA, ARGENTINA.

COL PRESIDENT SIR JOHN DANIEL (FRONT ROW) AND COL EDUCATION SPECIALIST MR. JOHN LESPERANCE (BACK ROW, SECOND FROM LEFT) JOIN MEMBERS OF THE VUSSC MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE AT THEIR MEETING IN KOCHI, INDIA IN NOVEMBER.
IN FOCUS

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

COL’s Excellence in Distance Education Award programme honours individuals and institutions that have made contributions to open and distance learning (ODL). The awards recognise excellence in four categories:

- at the institutional level,
- in the development of learning materials,
- in student accomplishment, and
- for a lifetime achievement in and contribution to ODL.

The 2009/10 Excellence in Distance Education Awards were announced and presented at COL’s sixth annual Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF6) in Kochi, India on 26 and 27 November 2010 in ceremonies emceed by COL Vice President Professor Asha Kanwar.

AWARD OF EXCELLENCE FOR INSTITUTIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Three institutions received this award for their significant achievements in the innovative and effective application of learning technologies and ODL methodologies to reach students who might otherwise not have participated in the learning or training experience.

Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada

Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada has been serving the educational needs of citizens in Newfoundland and Labrador for 50 years. Memorial University’s Distance Education and Learning Technologies (DELT) contributes to more than 1,000 technology-enabled courses on campus and assists over 47,000 student registrations involving online learning.

Memorial University and its four campuses have developed an innovative partnership to provide a distributed learning technology platform with two other institutions. In 2008, Memorial’s teaching and learning support services were certified with the International Organization for Standardization for ISO 9001 Quality Management System. Memorial and DELT demonstrate clear evidence of being at the forefront of social engagement with, and relevance to, provincial, national and international priorities and concerns.

Open University Malaysia

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is a self-supporting consortium of 11 public universities. Since 2001, it has experienced phenomenal growth in students, programmes, printed modules, learning centres and graduates. Forty of those programmes have been accredited by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, which has also acknowledged OUM as the National Referral Centre for Open Entry in Malaysia.

Polytechnic of Namibia

Polytechnic of Namibia was established in 1994 and currently has 11,500 students. Its Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) is a dual-mode institution and operates through nine regional centres across Namibia. Course enrolment has increased by more than 150% since 2002. Technologies used include wireless Internet connectivity, online library facilities, and radio and DVD tutorials.

In 2007, COLL was audited by the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education in South Africa and was particularly commended for the interactivity of its instructional material. COLL and the Polytechnic are contributing strongly to national goals of constructing Namibia as a sustainable knowledge economy.

AWARD OF EXCELLENCE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION MATERIALS

This award recognises excellence in the development of materials produced by publicly funded or not-for-profit institutions or organisations in Commonwealth countries.

Category A: Materials in print, audio or video, or a combination of these.

Francistown College of Technical and Vocational Education, for the Botswana Technical Education Programme Certificate – The Human Body

The Human Body course is part of the Botswana Technical Education Programme (BTEP) Certificate in Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy. The Human Body distance learning materials display all the best attributes of good instructional design. By placing students at the centre of instruction, the course team ensured that learners would be able to learn from the materials with ease.

The course team understood their target audience, segmented the content into teachable chunks and made it accessible to learners while giving opportunities for learners to check their own progress. The designers showed keen attention to the purpose and goals of the course as well as providing valuable learner support; all the while maintaining high quality standards.

Category B: Interactive, electronically delivered materials, which may be supplemented by materials developed in other media.

University of Mauritius, for the Diploma in Web & Multimedia Development, Virtual Centre for Innovative Learning Technologies

This programme of online courses aimed at professional development in the field of information technology was recognised for:

- appropriateness for identified learning needs,
- reflecting sound learning and robust instructional design,
- appropriate selection, use and integration of media and method in the study materials, and
- its high impact and ample evidence of benefits derived.

AWARD FOR AN ELEARNING EXPERIENCE IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Mr. Osman Ali Gema Eshag, UNHCR, Habillah, Sudan

Distance learning can be both challenging and difficult, especially for some working adults. In recognition of this, COL has established the award for an eLearning experience under difficult circumstances. This award identifies and celebrates learners from international
organisations who have overcome significant challenges to successfully complete COL’s professional development eLearning courses.

Osman Ali Gema Eshag works for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He is based in Habillah, a remote field office without electricity or a telephone in the West Darfur region of Sudan.

This is an area of armed conflict. As Mr. Eshag’s supervisor explains, “threats of car-jacking and kidnapping are constant”. During the time Mr. Eshag studied Writing Effectively for UNHCR, he travelled frequently on field missions to assess significant influxes of refugees. In addition, he shared a computer and email account with a colleague in his Habillah office.

Despite these challenges, Mr. Eshag successfully completed his programme of study. His report writing has become so highly skilled that, as his supervisor explains, “his findings are often read aloud, and subject to roundtable intra-office strategy discussions”. Mr. Eshag has recently been promoted, and he has taken on further study by distance education, a Masters in Peace and Development.

Mr. Eshag clearly has the passion for education coupled with the desire to improve the human condition through his assistance to refugee and displaced person communities.

AWARD FOR DISTANCE LEARNING IN A DEGREE-GRAINING PROGRAMME

Professor Chan Lai Keng, School of Biological Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Professor Chan Lai Keng is a strong and determined person who has faced many learning challenges in her life. Her future would have been very different if it were not for the opportunities provided by the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Dr. Chan was the first person in her village to complete high school education. Although she was accepted at a prestigious university, she was unable to pursue her studies due to financial difficulties. Instead, she trained as a nurse. While working as a state-registered nurse, she enrolled in the School of Distance Education at Universiti Sains Malaysia and graduated with honours. She went on to pursue graduate studies, some of which were completed at a distance. This allowed her to continue to support her family and pursue her career as she evolved from practicing nurse to a nationally recognised researcher.

Professor Chan’s distance education experiences have helped her become a valued and contributing member of her community and her institution. As a university professor and researcher, she has contributed to the wider community, both through presentations, academic writings and support to government and other universities. She has also supported dozens of graduates and PhD students and encouraged them to become contributing members of their society.

HONORARY FELLOWS OF COL

The designation of Honorary Fellow of COL acknowledges individual contributions to ODL through a lifetime of leadership/service, published works (including courseware, lectures/presentations), international/national presence and mentorship.

COL conferred the title of Honorary Fellow upon five distinguished individuals as part of the 2010 Excellence in Distance Education Awards:

Professor M. Aminul Islam, Bangladesh

A champion for ODL and an expert in resource management, Professor Islam led tremendous growth at Bangladesh Open University while Vice Chancellor. COL recognises the wisdom and dynamism of Professor Islam, who motivated and inspired all to work sincerely for the cause of ODL, enabling Bangladesh Open University to fill the gaps left by the conventional system and provide educational opportunities to people of all ages.

Dr. Roger Mills, UK

Known for his dedication to expanding access to higher education through ODL and promoting quality, Dr. Mills was a leader during a career at the UK Open University that spanned more than 30 years. COL recognises Dr. Mills as the quintessential ODL advocate, practitioner, manager and academic whose impact and influence traverse all the regions of the Commonwealth and indeed all parts of the globe.

The Honourable Naledi Pandor, South Africa

Currently South Africa’s Minister of Science and Technology, Minister Pandor’s experience includes serving as the country’s first female Minister of Education. COL pays tribute to Minister Pandor’s contributions to education in South Africa, the African continent and the Commonwealth, particularly her efforts to advance education opportunities for women and girls. Ms. Debora Balatseng of the South African High Commission to India accepted the award at PCF6 on behalf of Minister Pandor.

Ms. Peecheeta Spencer, Antigua & Barbuda

As the Principal of Antigua State College, Ms. Spencer ensured staff were trained in ODL and mobilised resources to immerse the College in the latest digital technologies. COL recognises Ms. Spencer for her contributions to nation building and expanding access to post-secondary education in the Caribbean.

Professor John Tarrant, UK

Known for his ability to rebuild troubled institutions and organisations, Professor Tarrant served in leadership roles at the University of East Anglia and the University of Huddersfield before being appointed Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities in 2006. Professor Tarrant is recognised by COL for his efforts to promote innovation and increase the international recognition of the importance of education.
A meeting of stakeholders in COL’s Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme drew an estimated 6,000 people in Tamil Nadu, India in November 2010. Comprised mostly of self-help groups and farmers, the predominantly women participants also included representatives from universities, banks and mobile phone companies.

At the meeting in Bodinaikanur (Bodi), Tamil Nadu, organisers presented senior bankers with a petition signed by more than 25,000 people who work in agriculture. The petition requested the Reserve Bank of India and other banks to consider four suggestions to help improve the livelihoods of people working in agriculture:

1. Banks and financial institutions should invest 2% of their total agricultural and self-help group (SHG) credit portfolio in providing credit-specific learning packages to the borrowers of agricultural credit as well as to the SHGs, which would not only help the borrowing poor community but also enhance the repayment rates to the banks.

2. The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development’s Assessment of Self-Help Groups is based on nine principles. We suggest that NABARD should include capacity building as the tenth principle. SHGs with well organised capacity building should be given a better assessment.

3. Appropriate institutional arrangements involving various stakeholders such as universities, NGOs, private sectors, banks, telecom companies etc. should be evolved for the delivery of the capacity building process through ODL mode using modern ICT, and certification procedures need to be established.

4. Community banking (which is based on social capital, community-based organisation, joint liability and responsibility of the community) is not the same as microfinance institutions (which are managed by external institutions). Community banking needs a distinctive recognition by the government and the financial institutions.

“The immense support for this petition reflects the recognition that learning is an essential part of farming today,” explained Dr. K. Balasubramanian, COL Education Specialist, Agriculture and Livelihoods. “We are hopeful that the banks and policy makers will consider the constructive suggestions put forward in the petition.”

In his address to the large crowd in Bodi, COL President Sir John Daniel explained COL’s role in promoting learning for development.

“Our role is not to give you money and tell you what to do, but to help you do what you think is best in a way that creates sustainable improvements in your livelihoods and prosperity,” Sir John noted. “At that point, COL is happy to move on and help other communities, knowing that you are on a secure path to better lives and richer communities.”

Bankers who attended the meeting in Bodi are bringing forward the suggestions to their organisations. The petition has also been forwarded to the Prime Minister of India and other key policy makers in an effort to generate discussion at the national level.

Close to 70 percent of the estimated 6,000 people who attended the L3 Farmers meeting in Bodi were women farmers, according to a COL survey conducted at the event. More than a quarter of them (27 percent) have had no schooling and only 24 percent have attended school beyond primary grades. Most (71 percent) had participated in L3 Farmers, and of that group, all of them said it is making a difference in terms of improving their income.

“A copy of the petition is at www.col.org/L3Farmers. Sir John Daniel’s blog post on the meeting in Tamil Nadu: www.col.org/blog77”
A cohort of 250 students from banks across Sri Lanka has graduated from the first Microfinance for Rural Bank Staff course. Originally a face-to-face learning programme developed by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the course was converted into a multimedia open and distance learning (ODL) course by the Open University of Sri Lanka.

The availability of credit is essential to the success of L3 Farmers. In India, where the model was first developed, commercial banks have been under pressure to increase lending in rural areas. They found that farmers who participated in L3 Farmers had a good record of repaying loans.

The Microfinance for Rural Bank Staff course seeks to bring about a similar trend in Sri Lanka. The course is helping to build awareness and capacity in microfinance in Sri Lanka. The ultimate goal is to enable farmers to get credit from commercial banks, which strengthens links in local communities. By tapping into the infrastructure and ODL expertise developed by the Open University of Sri Lanka, the Central Bank can provide “anywhere, anytime” training in microfinance to large numbers of people at an affordable cost.

After a second cohort of students completes the microfinance course in 2011, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and other banks will assess the impact of the course and decide about further offerings.

Sir John Daniel’s speech to the graduates: www.col.org/RuralBanking_Daniel

FLEXIBLE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

COL has begun work with ten technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions in Africa to develop strategies to introduce more flexible delivery methods into their programmes. Principals from flexible skills development (FSD) Key Institutions met for a workshop in Kochi, India prior to the Sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF6). The workshop focussed on potential challenges to FSD, management issues and technical infrastructure. Workshop activities included looking at methods to address and meet national policy directives, as well as monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

In preparation, all the Principals at the Kochi workshop had recently completed an online course in the management of flexible skills development on the COL Moodle platform. Forty institutional managers and policy makers took part in the four-week course, which helps participants to engage with the issues of managing change from traditional to more flexible teaching approaches through eLearning and discussion forums.

Following the workshop, the Principals attended PCF6, which was “a wonderful welcome into the ODL family of COL,” according to Mr. Yona Okidia of Kenya Technical Teachers College. “We met so many people who are really bringing flexible learning to life. They greatly added to our knowledge and to our motivation to make this work in our own institutions.”

The Key Institutions that COL is working with to build capacity in flexible skills development are:

- Auchi Polytechnic, Nigeria
- Coast Institute of Technology, Kenya
- Gambia Technical Training Institute, The Gambia
- Kenya Technical Teachers College, Kenya
- Koforidua Polytechnica, Ghana
- Masai Technical Training Institute, Kenya
- Mbeya Institute of Science & Technology, Tanzania
- Mombasa Technical Training Institute, Kenya
- Technical & Vocational Teachers College, Zambia
- Zambia Institute of Business, Zambia

COMMUNITY LEARNING NETWORK LAUNCHED

An online platform that promotes learning and discussion about flexible skills development was launched at the biennial Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa (CAPA) conference in Lesotho in December. A partnership between COL and CAPA, the Flexible Skills Development (FSD) Community Learning Network provides information and resources to facilitate the use of information and communication technology (ICT) by technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions.

The CAPA conference was attended by more than 140 people from TVET institutions in nine African countries. The FSD Community Learning Network was introduced during a one-day workshop devoted to Flexible Skills Development. At the end of the workshop, Ms. Rose Kiiru from Thika Technical Training Institute spoke about the changes in her work since she has “switched on” to ICT.

“The use of ICT tools was never an important thing to me until I attended the Flexible Skills Development introductory workshop in June 2010 at Mombasa Technical Training Institute. It was amazing to realise how the use of ICT tools can influence teaching and learning as well as social life, leading to quality service delivery and increased access.”

Although focussed on TVET institutions in Africa, the Community Learning Network is open to anyone in the Commonwealth. To find out more or to join the Flexible Skills Development Community Learning Network, contact the COL FSD Team at flexibleskills@col.org.
Thirty-two teacher educators from 13 countries took part in a one-day teacher education workshop prior to the Sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF6) in Kochi, India. The workshop was facilitated by Dr. Bob Moon, Professor Emeritus at the UK Open University and Founding Director of Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA). Discussions focussed on three aspects of teacher education: shortfalls in teacher supply, low teacher quality at the basic education level in developing countries and how to harness the potential of technology and ODL to address these challenges. Although the participants did not agree on all the issues, a consensus on existing teacher education provision and the way forward emerged. Workshop delegates issued a Communiqué that identified factors influencing teacher development, policies and practices requiring reform, and an agenda for future collaborative efforts.

www.col.org/TeacherEducation

Dr. Umar’s blog post about the workshop: www.col.org/blog91

The first cohort of 18 students from Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe completed the course last year. The PREST participants were sponsored by COL through the Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE) as part of ODL capacity building in the region and by BOCODOL as staff development. The course was facilitated by Dr. Stanley Modesto and Dr. Godson Gatsha from SADC-CDE.

In addition to the distance learning component where students read materials, completed assignments and took part in online discussions, participants attended a one-week workshop in Gaborone, Botswana in March 2010. Led by senior researchers from the University of Pretoria, University of Swaziland, Zimbabwe Open University and BOCODOL, the workshop explored the research process, publishing issues, presenting conference papers and quality issues in research. It culminated in a one-day research conference and award ceremony for best research work.

A second cohort of students will complete the PREST training in May 2011.

www.col.org/PREST
COMMUNITY LEARNING IN CAMEROON

Radio to develop a community learning programme that involves a consortium of partner groups working in media, maternal and child health care and community mobilisation. The goal is to make an impact on development indicators by reaching at least 1,000 learners through face-to-face sessions and 20,000 listeners through Lebialem Community Radio.

The five-day radio workshop in November resulted in the design and production of several radio programmes for the series. The partners will produce 30-60 minutes of original radio content each week for the next year. The COL-Cameroon Link partnership will also use video and mobile telephones to engage learners. Issues to be addressed include HIV/AIDS, nutrition, family planning and malaria.

http://camlinknews.blogspot.com

ICT SKILLS FOR WOMEN

Empowering female academic staff with information and communication technology (ICT) skills was the aim of a workshop hosted by COL and delivered by SchoolNet South Africa at Tanzania’s Institute of Adult Education (IAE) in November. The week-long workshop, which involved 24 women who work at IAE, built capacity in ICT use for academic purposes. In addition to helping participants improve their skills and knowledge about software and applications that can be useful to ODL programmes, the workshop enhanced gender equality by focusing exclusively on the needs of women.

UPCOMING EVENTS

2011 Global Forum on Borderless Higher Education
Hosted by The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education
25-27 May 2011, Vancouver, Canada
Theme: “Levelling the International Playing Field”
www.obhe.ac.uk

The Fourteenth Cambridge International Conference on Open, Distance and e-Learning 2011
25 - 28 September 2011; Madingley Hall, Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
Theme: Internationalisation and Social Justice: the role of Open, Distance and e-Learning
Presented by the Centre for Educational Research and Development, St Edmund’s College, Cambridge UK in association with The Open University and the Commonwealth of Learning.
http://www2.open.ac.uk/r06/conferencecamcon@st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk

MS. ALISON MEAD RICHARDSON, COL EDUCATION SPECIALIST, SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (STANDING), VISITED THE STATE RESOURCE CENTRE KERALA, INDIA FOR DISCUSSIONS ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE THE USE OF NEW MEDIA IN THEIR SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMMES. IN ADDITION TO OFFERING DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES AS AN INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY (IGNOU) COMMUNITY COLLEGE, THE STATE RESOURCE CENTRE DELIVERS SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMMES THROUGH VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKERS.
The World Bank and UNESCO are leading an initiative to build national capacity for quality assurance in higher education worldwide. The Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) provides funding for regional networks of quality assurance agencies around the globe.

GIQAC has made an impact on QA in higher education in a relatively short time, according to COL President Sir John Daniel, a member of the GIQAC Steering Committee:

“The increase in maturity of the regional QA networks is palpable, particularly those in Africa, the Arab world and the Caribbean that started from a low base. The number of countries with their own national QA agencies is growing steadily and it is clear that those starting up such agencies benefit enormously from the contacts with more seasoned practitioners in the region that the networks facilitate.”


Sir John Daniel’s blog post from 8 December: www.col.org/blog89
“An partnership between the World Bank and UNESCO is like putting a rhinoceros and an elephant in harness together.”

RADIO SCRIPTWRITING COMPETITION

Ten African broadcasters have been named winners in Farm Radio International’s radio scriptwriting competition on healthy communities. The ten award-winning scripts told stories about initiatives that are contributing to community health such as purifying drinking water, composting and nutrition.

More than 400 people who work in radio in Africa registered for an online scriptwriting course prior to the competition. Held over 10 weeks, the course taught essential skills for writing scripts for radio. Five African facilitators assisted participants, many of whom had never taken online training before. Participants who had poor Internet access received CD-ROMs so they could work offline.

After the online training course, 128 scripts from 23 countries were submitted to the competition. The 10 winners received Olympus LS-10 audio recorders. Their scripts are posted on the Farm Radio website and will be distributed to the Farm Radio’s network of 500 radio broadcasters in Africa.

Organised by Farm Radio International, an Ottawa-based non-governmental organisation that works with African radio broadcasters to combat poverty and food insecurity, the scriptwriting course and competition are sponsored by COL, the Canadian Public Health Association and the Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA).

www.farmradio.org

ICT IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

“While ICT is no substitute for formal education, the role of technology can support educational goals and widen the reach of teachers and school systems,” according to a new paper from infoDev, a global development partnership that supports sharing of information about information and communication technology for development (ICT4D).

ICT in School Education (Primary and Secondary), an infoDev-commissioned paper by Price Waterhouse Coopers India, examines the key issues and challenges in the effective implementation of ICT in school education and provides suggestions to address these challenges.

www.infodev.org/en/Article.650.html

SUPPORTING OPEN SCHOOLING IN GHANA

A new report funded by COL is supporting the establishment of open schooling in Ghana. “A Sustainable Open Schooling System for Ghana” by COL consultant Mr. Ed Du Vivier provides recommendations for how the Centre for National Distance Learning & Open Schooling (CENDLOS) can function as a national body that advocates, coordinates and assures quality of opening schooling programmes at all levels.

The report, which provides strategies for organising, regulating, staffing, managing and financing open schooling, has been presented to the Ministry of Education in Ghana. This represents part of COL’s work to expand open schooling to meet growing demand for education resulting from the introduction of Universal Basic Education.

www.col.org/OpenSchooling

COl VICe PRESIDENT PROFESSOR ASHA KANWAr WAS ONE OF THE SPEAKERS IN THE “IMPROVING EDUCATION SYSTEMS” THEME AT THE WORLD INNOVATION SUMMIT FOR EDUCATION (WISE) 2010 IN DOHA, QATAR IN NOVEMBER. MORE THAN 1,200 INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION LEADERS FROM 100 COUNTRIES TOok part IN WISE 2010.

www.wise-qatar.org
mLearning: A Platform for Educational Opportunities at the Bottom of the Pyramid is a new publication released by the GSMA Development Fund, an association of the world’s mobile communications companies. This research report explores the current landscape of mLearning in the developing world, how mobile devices are being used for learning and the future potential. It documents eight case studies from around the globe and makes four conclusions:

- The business case for mLearning (i.e., who pays) is still under debate,
- Scalability and replicability are a challenge because content must be locally specific and current,
- There are significant handset and technological limitations, and
- mLearning is still an emerging and fragmented market.


Professor Madhulika Kaushik has joined COL as the new Education Specialist – Higher Education. Professor Kaushik was most recently Professor of Management, School of Management Studies at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India. She holds a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) and a PhD from Jodhpur University. Professor Kaushik has held a wide range of positions at Jodhpur University, IGNOU and Wawasan Open University, Malaysia. www.col.org/mkaushik

Dr. Kaushik succeeds Dr. Willie Clarke-Okah, who retired after more than four years at COL and a distinguished career in international development.

“During his time at COL, Willie introduced a number of activities that met with excellent response from our partners. The Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA and Legislative Drafting programmes came into maturity under Willie’s direction. But Willie’s greatest achievement is probably his contribution to quality assurance for higher education institutions. He oversaw development of the Quality Assurance Toolkit for Higher Education and the COL Review and Improvement Method (COL RIM), an innovative and cost-effective approach to institutional audits.

“Willie was seen as a leader among his colleagues at COL. We often relied on his advice and respected his extensive experience in all regions of the Commonwealth. He made many valuable suggestions about how we can measure and improve our outputs, and most importantly, how we can achieve the greatest impact. Willie will be greatly missed by all of us at COL, as well as many partners around the Commonwealth.”

By Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, COL Education Specialist, Teacher Education Sir John Daniel’s tribute to Dr. Clarke-Okah: www.col.org/blog93

PROFESSOR OLUGBEMIRO JEGEDE, formerly Vice Chancellor of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), has been appointed Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities (AAU).

Professor Wong Tat Meng, Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer of Wawasan Open University in Malaysia, has been appointed President of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU).
As use of smart phones proliferates, so too is the use of “apps”. Here are answers to a few common questions about this major development in the world of information and communication technology.

What are apps?

“App” is short for “application software”. An app is computer software that facilitates specific tasks for smart phone users.

How many apps are there?

As of early 2011, there were more than 300,000 apps just for the iPhone and more than 200,000 available through the Android Market. They range from custom exercise programmes and organising personal finances to recipes and games.

How much do apps cost?

Some apps are free; most are available at a low price (US$0.99-$4.99).

Are apps installed on the mobile phone?

No. One of the big selling points of apps is that they run in the browser; only a small number of them need to be installed on the phone. Since programmes are running on the web and not the phone, they require less computing power from your mobile than they would on a computer. This also means you can have a large number of apps available for use on your mobile.

What are the most common apps?

Games are the most popular apps; the 10 top-selling apps in 2010 were all games, led by Angry Birds, Doodle Jump and Skee Ball in the top three spots.

How do people get and use apps?

Apps are created by third-party software developers and sold through online stores such as Android Market and the Apple Store. Users download and purchase the app (if it’s not free) for use on their smart phone or tablet. Users of iPhones can only use apps from the Apple Store; other platforms can download apps from any website.

Are apps just bookmarks?

No. Although some companies will try to pass off a bookmark to their home page as an app, these are not really apps.

UPDATE: MIT OPENCOURSEWARE

One of the leading sources of open educational resources (OER), OpenCourseWare provides free online access to virtually all courses at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Introduced in 2002, OpenCourseWare consists of syllabi, lecture notes, problem sets and solutions, exams, reading lists and video lectures from more than 2,300 MIT courses.

Statistics from 2010 reveal some interesting trends:

- Increase in visits over 2009: There were 17.5 million visits (up from 15 million in 2009) and 9.6 million visitors (up from 9.1 million) to the OpenCourseWare website (ocw.mit.edu) in 2010.
- iTunesU and YouTube preferred for content delivery: While 1.9 million zip files were downloaded, users showed a preference for downloading files from iTunes U (11.8 million) and viewing videos on YouTube (7.3 million).
- Reach extends far beyond MIT: Only one percent of visits (275,000) were from the MIT community, indicating that the programme is fulfilling its mission of “open sharing of MIT teaching materials with educators, students and self-learners around the world”.

The OpenCourseWare project has launched OCW Scholar, which puts video lectures, homework problems, simulations and readings into a structured curriculum. The OCW Scholar courses are more complete than typical OCW courses and include multi-media. The five initial OCW Scholar courses cover subjects in physics, chemistry and calculus.

Are there eLearning apps?

There are many educational apps. Apps are well-suited to very specific tasks, such as learning a language. An important consideration for developing countries is the availability and affordability of Internet connectivity. If users can’t go online easily, apps are of limited use.

Are apps the future of eLearning?


FREE ONLINE VIDEO LESSONS

The video sharing site Vimeo has launched an online video school to help videographers learn about creating quality videos. Vimeo’s Video School is a collection of “how-to” lessons created by Vimeo employees. The lessons are organised by difficulty levels and categories, ranging from storyboarding and slow motion to animation and audio tricks. In addition to several dozen lessons, the site offers user-generated video tutorials.

http://vimeo.com/videoschool