

# **Commonwealth of Learning Stakeholder Survey 2010**

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# Commonwealth of Learning Stakeholder Survey 2010

## Executive summary

The Stakeholder Survey is an inexpensive rapid assessment of views and experiences of COL among a range of stakeholders: partners and staff. It was conducted mostly among participants – 42 in all – at the 6<sup>th</sup> Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF6) held in Kochi, Kerala, India in November 2010. The survey instruments were facilitated group discussions (FGDs) and one-to-one interviews, supplemented with short self-complete questionnaires.

Most of the participants in the survey are actively engaged with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) or have reason to expect to in the future. It is likely that the results are more appreciative than for a survey conducted in a strictly randomised and anonymous manner among a wider group of COL contacts.

### What COL does

The majority of partners see institutional development as the road they are travelling, and they value COL as a helping and guiding hand, often via a combination of contributions such as advice, capacity building and advocacy.

COL's help is usually perceived as capacity building by its partners. Increased capacity in the partner organisation is the legacy that is left, even if other outputs and outcomes fail to live up to their promise.

The survey suggests that COL has successfully mainstreamed quality in its work with partners. Given the historic concerns about quality in open and distance learning (ODL), this would appear to be a major achievement.

Many participants found it difficult to precisely pinpoint the difference COL made. With them there was more of a feeling that COL was a long-term partner, guiding and assisting in a general sense. This is a positive finding for partner relationships; but COL needs to record and report the results it helps its partners achieve in precise terms.

### How COL adds value

COL is valued for the following assets and behaviours:

#### Assets

- Long, deep and broad experience of ODL – and the confidence to apply it
- An unrivalled network of experts and practitioners to call on
- Effective staff
- A direct line to – and credibility with – governments

## Behaviours

- A disposition to listen and build interventions around partner needs, rather than come with its own agenda and impose solutions
- An insistence that its partners have ownership of the programmes on which they collaborate
- The willingness and ability to be a long-term partner
- Accessibility and flexibility – a lack of bureaucracy in its dealings with partners
- Excellent communication
- A business-like, results-oriented approach that rubs off on partners
- An even-handedness towards member states of the Commonwealth

COL is seen as a more effective organisation than three years ago. Its current staff are praised for their experience and energy. COL is also seen to be more focussed and results-oriented.

### *Where COL could do better*

A substantial minority of the survey participants believe that COL still tries to do too much, given the limits of its resources, and ends up spreading itself too thin. A similar number of respondents felt that COL needed to work upstream in all of its initiatives to achieve wider impact.

A frequent comment was that COL does not always leverage the potential of its direct line to governments. This was mentioned in three contexts:

- Where countries had extensive ODL infrastructure but where it was seen intrinsically to be a low quality option.
- In sectors (like farming) or sub-sectors (like TVET) where ODL has less of a track record than in higher education for example.
- In countries with undeveloped ODL infrastructure and policy in general – mainly small states and particularly in the Pacific.

People who had a view on COL's approach to gender thought it was somewhat superficial. They urged more pro-activity.

The Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, while valued without exception, is thought to need a thorough conceptual overhaul. In particular it was seen to be formulaic with little opportunity for deep engagement with new ideas and research findings.

### *The future*

The strongest message was that COL in general was doing the right things and doing them right. There was still a lot to do. It should not change for change's sake.

Nevertheless in COL's next Three Year Plan, the strongest call was for more confident advocacy of ODL with governments. There was also a significant interest in expanded work in technical/vocational education and training (TVET).

## **Introduction**

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) commissioned Dr. Patrick Spaven, a results-based management and evaluation consultant, to design and conduct a Stakeholder Survey, mostly among participants at the 6<sup>th</sup> Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF6) held in Kochi, Kerala, India in November 2010.

The Stakeholder Survey is not an evaluation. COL intends to commission a summative evaluation of its current – 2009-2012 – Three Year Plan (TYP) in due course. This will principally be about the results COL helps its partners achieve. The Stakeholder Survey is different. It is an inexpensive rapid assessment of the views and experiences of COL among a range of stakeholders. These include partners, clients, governors, consultants and staff. It can be seen as a 360 degree feedback exercise. It is more about how COL behaves than what results are achieved. There is more direct accountability for behaviour. With results, attribution is often difficult to make. But an organisation cannot hide from its behaviour.

## **Survey process**

PCF6 attracted a representative range of COL's partners, clients, governors and resource people and was thus an appropriate location to conduct the facilitated group discussions (FGDs), one-to-one interviews and short self-complete questionnaires that were the vehicles for the survey.

In addition, most of COL's Education Specialists and a range of other staff – including several from COL's Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) were present, enabling them to be included in the survey via a dedicated FGD. One non-attending member of COL's Governing Board was interviewed by telephone.

A total of 43 stakeholders engaged with the survey. Three FGDs were conducted, with between seven and nine people. Two were for partners and consultants attending pre-conference workshops on 22 and 23 November. The partners and consultants were selected purposively for their experience of a range of COL's Initiatives. The different regions of the Commonwealth and gender balance were also reflected in the choices. The third FGD was for a structured random sample of staff, and was held on 27 November. Twenty one one-to-one interviews were conducted between 25 and 28 November. In addition a telephonic interview with a member of COL's Governing Board was held on 14 November. The interviewees were purposively selected by COL to represent a range of stakeholders. Table 1 defines their principal relationship with COL. It should be born in mind that some stakeholders have multiple perspectives on COL.

Country Focal Points are people appointed by their governments to act as liaison points with COL. They are usually located in the education sector.

Project partners actively participate in the development of curricula, materials, open and distance learning (ODL) systems, networks or whatever the focus of the project is. They also often gain personal development from the process.

Institutional partners are senior representatives of the institutions that are hosts to projects or are strategic partners with COL.

A commissioning partner is an organisation that contracts COL to undertake a piece of work.

**Table 1**

Type of stakeholder	Number of interviewees
Institutional partner	7
Project partner	5
Consultant	4
Governing Board	3
Country Focal Point	2
Commissioning partner	1

An FGD topic guide was prepared for the first group (Annex A). The questions presumed to be most important were addressed first. There was insufficient time to cover all the others. The guide was slightly amended for the second FGD. The topic guide for the staff FGD (Annex B) was designed to reflect their perspective, although there was substantial overlap with the other guides.

FGD participants were also asked to respond privately to ten statements requiring scores on a *7-point scale* indicating levels of agreement or disagreement. This 'quantitative section' is analysed on page 16.

A standard questionnaire (Annex C) was used for the one-to-one interviews. Some questions were not relevant to certain types of stakeholder, in which case they were skipped. The questionnaire also contained the quantitative section.

Twenty-eight people – including five staff – out of a possible 43 completed the quantitative section: a 65% response.

### **Limitations**

With one exception, the survey was conducted among people attending PCF6. There is no way of knowing whether this in itself introduced bias, although it is possible. For example it would exclude any people and organisations who might have become disillusioned with ODL or with COL. It may also exclude a disproportionate number of people whose institutions could not afford to send them to the Forum, despite the grants that COL made.

Most of the participants in the survey are actively engaged with COL or have reason to expect to in the future. Some were supported by COL to attend the Forum. There may have been a conscious or unconscious tendency therefore to be positive about COL, particularly in the FGDs where anonymity of response could not be guaranteed. It is likely that the results are more appreciative than for a survey conducted in a strictly randomised and anonymous manner among a wider group of COL contacts, past and present.

Most survey participants turned out to have context-specific perspectives on COL. They were therefore unable to make judgments about the relative effectiveness of COL's different strategies and programme work. These questions in the FGDs and interviews yielded little of value. A comparative analysis of COL's strategies and programmes needs to be the subject of a rigorous evaluation.

## Findings

### Outputs and outcomes: the difference COL makes

COL had engaged in programme work with the majority of survey participants – programmes and projects such as constructing policy or creating courses. They were able to respond to questions about the difference COL had made in these partnerships.

From the survey alone it is clear that the range of activities in which COL has engaged as a partner in the last three years or so is diverse. All five “strategies”<sup>1</sup> that COL refers to in its Plan were mentioned by participants; and a sixth emerged which might best be labelled “institutional development”. The majority of partners see institutional development as the road they are travelling, and they value COL as a helping and guiding hand, often via a combination of contributions such as advice, capacity building and advocacy.

Capacity building was a unifying theme, referenced by almost all respondents, sometimes in combination with other COL strategies. The most frequent references were to increased capacity for the stakeholders themselves or for staff in their organisations.

This is an interesting finding. COL does not class all of its work as capacity building, but clearly COL's help is usually received and perceived as such by its partners. Capacity building seems to be embedded in most, if not all, that COL does. Increased capacity in the partner organisation is the legacy that is left, even if other outputs and outcomes – like the courses, policies, consortia, etc – fail to live up to their promise.

Below are some examples of what participants were able to say about the difference COL has made:

- *The capacity building for our staff in developing online materials helped us to be a leader in the field.*
- *COL widened our horizon.*
- *COL is catalysing the debate about OERs [open educational resources].*
- *COL has been a trigger for regional collaboration. We are more effective when we pool resources and work together.*
- *COL has helped us tackle the quality enigma in teacher training. It is having a huge impact on the quality of learning.*
- *COL offered us a framework for developing an ODL policy.*

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<sup>1</sup> COL's strategies are defined in their logic model as: policy, partnerships, models, capacity building and materials.

- *COL is a unifying force in ODL in Southern Africa.*
- *COL helped us produce a highly successful teacher education course.*
- *COL has been facilitating the bridge between the national government and the NGOs.*
- *Without COL there would have been no VUSSC [Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth]. We are making steady progress in developing materials although there is a long way to go to make them fully operational.*
- *They catalyse action that would otherwise take longer.*
- *COL brokers networks of practitioners to share good practice and boost confidence.*
- *They engage experts who are good and available at the right time.*
- *COL brings understanding of the learning dimension to new territory.*

Many participants found it difficult to precisely pinpoint the difference COL made. With them there was more of a feeling that COL was a long-term partner, guiding and assisting in a general sense. This is a positive finding for partner relationships; but COL needs to record and report the results it helps its partners achieve in precise terms.

This matters because COL's funding from country stakeholders is – or should be – dependent on their ability to demonstrate value in these terms. COL has made important strides in monitoring and evaluation (M&E). It needs to continue to populate its M&E system with tools for capturing the difference it makes. COL's results-based management system anticipates the results they aim to achieve and measure. This is part of the logical planning process. It is important that actual results – both anticipated and unanticipated – are recorded and reported. Participative monitoring and evaluation processes with partners are probably the best way to do this.

Not all activity that COL is engaged in leads to good results. The evaluations of COL's last two strategies highlighted interventions that have not lived up to expectations. This survey also painted a picture that is not entirely unblemished. Mostly people blamed programme environments where there was insufficient progress in their partnerships with COL. But a small number of informants pointed to weaknesses in COL itself. This perspective will be examined below.

The quantitative section of the survey contained two statements which addressed what COL does.

The first – *COL's work is relevant to the achievement of the relevant MDGs* – scored an average of 6.0 out of 7. Two people gave it an equivocal 4; otherwise all respondents agreed with the statement to some degree.

The second, a negative statement – *COL tends to work at too local a level to achieve large scale impact* – attracted some agreement. The score was 3.2 out of 7, which when turned into a positive score for comparison with the others, would read 4.8. Five respondents – including two staff – agreed with the statement to some extent.

## The drivers: how COL makes a difference

In the last section we looked at what the survey tells us about the results of COL's interventions. In this section we look at what people said about how COL helped to make these things happen. We will see what the survey tells us about the characteristics of COL – its assets and behaviours – that enable it to add to value.

From what people said, COL's bow is a multi-stringed instrument. The strings that stand out are:

### Assets

- Long, deep and broad experience of ODL – and the confidence to apply it
- An unrivalled network of experts and practitioners to call on
- Effective staff
- A direct line to – and credibility with – governments

### Behaviours

- A disposition to listen and build interventions around partner needs, rather than come with its own agenda and impose solutions
- An insistence that its partners have ownership of the programmes on which they collaborate
- The willingness and ability to be a long-term partner
- Accessibility and flexibility – a lack of bureaucracy in its dealings with partners
- Excellent communicators
- A business-like, results-oriented approach that rubs off on partners
- An even-handedness towards member states of the Commonwealth

These assets and behaviours were consistently although not universally observed.

COL – both the organisation and many of its staff – self-evidently have long and deep experience of ODL. This however was rarely mentioned by informants in the survey, possibly because this feature of COL does not distinguish it from other organisations working in ODL, such as teaching and research institutions. It is taken for granted. We can probably include it with safety in COL's list of assets.

### *Breadth*

What *was* mentioned by several informants was the *breadth* of COL's experience, both in geographic and sectoral terms. COL works with partners – including resource people – across the Commonwealth. No other institution of a similar size – possibly of any size – has such geographic scope in its ODL activity.

COL works across several sectors, and within its main sector – education – in secondary, technical and vocational, and higher sub-sectors. This breadth is also unusual among institutions with a focus on ODL.

This breadth of experience and diversity of application in ODL were seen as an important asset by informants. They referred in particular to the potential for COL

to apply lessons from one country, region or sector to others. There is plenty of evidence that COL takes steps to leverage this potential. It has regional (such as the Commonwealth Open School Association, COMOSA), and inter-regional (e.g. the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, VUSSC) programmes. It encourages knowledge sharing among its staff who work in different sectors, although this has not always been the case.

One informant said that COL's ability to work across sectors could produce synergies in very small countries where the boundaries between sectors were not so clear-cut and cooperation – resource pooling – across sectors was needed.

There are however dangers in this diversity. One is that experience may be inappropriately transferred geographically and sectorally. What works in one environment may not work in another. COL's use of "models" should be made with rigorous pre-implementation appraisal and post-implementation monitoring.

The other danger is that COL's breadth works against depth and length of engagement, introducing strains and stress to the organisation. Getting the balance right is an on-going pre-occupation for COL. People answering the quantitative questionnaire on balance thought that COL did not spread itself too thin. But the average score was 4.4 out of 7, only marginally on the positive side. The COL staff respondents produced an average score of 3.4, slightly on the negative side. Nine out of the 27 respondents thought that COL did spread itself too thin.

### *Networks*

One informant referred to COL's "unrivalled network of experts and practitioners". There were other references to COL's convening power and to its ability not only to draw on existing networks but also to create new ones. Informants see COL's facilitation role as very important.

### *Staff*

It is probably more important than the direct application of its own technical expertise, although COL does have a fund of in-house expertise and experience in ODL. A few informants referred explicitly to this when asked about COL staff.

- *They are experts and opinion formers in own right.*
- *They have solid grass roots experience.*

But most comments about staff referred to what they do

- *Very effective.*
- *Hard-working.*
- *I can't believe how small a group can have such an amount of reach.*
- *The President and VP are very visible.*

One experienced member of a focus group referred to passion as a key driver. Where both COL staff and partner were passionate about their programme, most progress tended to be made. But in his experience the passion was not always evident.

### *Inter-government*

COL is an inter-governmental organisation and therefore has an open door to address Commonwealth governments in its field. This does not necessarily mean that governments will listen and act; but several survey informants felt that COL's "foot in the door", combined with its credibility as an international hub of expertise in ODL, was a valuable asset that could be used to garner support for their ODL ambitions.

- *Working with COL gives you credibility.*

However not everyone was satisfied that COL leveraged this asset enough. In fact this was one of the most common criticisms of COL – that it did not put enough pressure on governments to force the pace of ODL.

### *Working with partners' agendas*

One of COL's two hallmark characteristics<sup>2</sup> – its behaviours that are almost universally valued and top of mind with stakeholders – is its disposition to listen and build interventions around partner needs.

- *They don't impose, they listen.*
- *They support without directing.*

In this sense, COL is compared favourably with other organisations – donors in particular – who, some informants said, come with their own agenda and impose solutions.

In the quantitative section of the survey, all but one informant disagreed to some extent with the statement that COL worked more to its own agenda than partners'.

Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3 Farmers) is an interesting example. Learning is said to "happen through the community. It's about what they need....The expertise does not come down from expert academics....This instils confidence in the community."

In the quantitative section, participants were asked whether they thought that COL had a good understanding of the countries it works in. All but two respondents agreed with the statement. One interviewee cautioned that COL administrative staff sometimes don't understand the challenges faced in developing countries for example when they set deadlines.

COL is said by some to have a holistic approach rather than a single focus.

- *COL responds when the country triggers the need for assistance, they are open to listen to various projects.*

Looking at COL's Three Year Plan, it is difficult at first to see how this works. Individual Education Specialists have their own programmes, defined to match their experience and expertise. However it is clear that some informants have

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<sup>2</sup> The other is its responsive communications.

experienced an openness to solutions that does not come pre-packaged. Whether this comes about through initial contact with the President or Vice-President – whose briefs self-evidently span the whole range of COL's capabilities – or through Education Specialists being empowered to appraise needs beyond their own programmes, it is clearly a useful and valued aspect of COL's behaviour.

### *Partner ownership*

Informants readily used the word 'partner' and 'partnership' in reference to COL suggesting that this is a legitimate descriptor for the relationship.

- *They are truly collaborative.*

Whether or not this comes naturally for COL, it is a necessary approach because COL does not have large amounts of money to disburse. It typically funds short-term technical inputs, travel and capacity-building event costs, and little else. This, in the words of one informant, "forces people to take responsibilities for themselves". Partners have to find the principal funds for the programmes COL helps them with. This relationship is said to be "good for sustainability".

### *Long-term partners*

Another dimension of COL's partnerships is their length. Some informants have experienced COL as a long-term partner, again contrasting them with some other organisations.

- *At the end of five years they washed their hands off, but at COL they take care of you throughout.*

This is not universally true of COL, but it seems to be a growing phenomenon. COL's current major programmes – like VUSSC, L3 Farmers, and Open Schooling – transcend three-year planning periods. In these programmes COL repeatedly interacts with some institutions over a period of several years. This could of course be either good or bad for sustainability. Long-term partnership may promote the conditions for embedding development, but it can also lead to dependency. There is no evidence from the survey that this happens, but it is something COL needs to monitor case by case.

### *Accessibility*

The survey leaves the impression that COL in many respects is more user-friendly than most development partners. Despite being an inter-governmental organisation, partners can approach them directly with a minimum of bureaucracy. They were said by one informant to behave to him more like a local NGO despite their international reach.

- *There's give and take. If we don't like their ideas we can tell them. If their deadlines are unrealistic, we renegotiate them unlike some donors who tend to be inflexible.*
- *COL makes you feel like family.*

In the quantitative part of the survey, the statement that received most support contained the notion that COL is an accessible partner.

### *Communication*

COL's record of communicating with partners was the subject of a separate question in the survey. Informants were almost universally positive about this aspect of COL's behaviour. They mentioned in particular the promptness, attentiveness, and informality of COL's communications.

- *Always on tap.*
- *They reply to every detail. Sometimes they make you feel it's only you they know.*
- *In a few email exchanges you will get to the bottom of the matter.*

There was however criticism from three informants – two of them consultants – of COL's contracting process which was said by them to be slow and inflexible.

It seems from the survey that COL is not just a friendly listening partner. There was an impression – providing an interesting contrast to other valued behaviours – that COL is businesslike and results-oriented, and that this rubs off on its partners.

- *They help you concretise – produce action plans.*
- *They are outcome driven.*
- *COL has a clear sense of direction and can therefore respond confidently to situations.*
- *They force you to be systematic and to stick to deadlines.*

At first sight, this may seem at odds with the picture of COL the listener. But it is probably a question of the stage reached in the development of the collaboration. Once a line of collaboration has been agreed, COL reveals its business face and results-orientation. There was no sense from the survey that this was a contradiction. It was seen in a positive light – something that may be uncomfortable at times, but ultimately necessary and helpful. Again, communication is probably the key to ensuring that expectations do not get out of step.

### *Even-handed*

The final value proposition referred to by several informants was COL's perceived even-handedness towards member states of the Commonwealth. With the tendency for donor resources to be directed towards the poorest countries, two informants argued that middle income countries may miss out on technical assistance which is difficult to purchase and which could make a critical difference. COL was said to meet that need in ODL.

Another informant praised COL for ignoring the size of member contributions in deciding where to provide assistance.

## **What COL could do better**

The narrative so far presents a picture of an organisation which appears to be making a difference in a range of contexts where ODL has the potential to contribute to development. COL is also highly appreciated for the way that it operates – in particular how it engages with partners.

However, informants in the interviews and focus groups were asked explicitly about areas of deficit – concerns about COL, ways in which they could improve. As with the appreciative comments above, what are reported below are perceptions and not rigorously evaluated findings. In all cases they are comments made by a minority, and therefore not a consensus. The issues may therefore be confined to particular areas or types of partner.

We have already touched on some of these in passing. For example there is the feeling among a substantial minority of the survey participants that COL tries to do too much, given the limits of its resources, and ends up spreading itself too thin. “COL may not be able to run after every area”. There is also the concern that COL may need to move more upstream to achieve wider impact in some areas of its work. People had Healthy Communities principally in mind in this sense.

Apart from these issues, which were prompted by the quantitative part of the survey, the most frequently mentioned concern was that COL does not always leverage the potential of its direct line to governments. This was mentioned in three contexts. The first was where countries had extensive ODL infrastructure but where it was seen intrinsically to be a low quality option. Here COL’s role was to demonstrate that quality teaching and learning were possible through ODL and that resources needed to be channelled into improving quality.

A second context where some felt COL should be more active in advocacy with governments was in sectors (like farming) or sub-sectors (like technical and vocational education) where ODL has less of a track record than in higher education for example.

A final context was in countries with undeveloped ODL infrastructure and policy in general – mainly small states and particularly in the Pacific.

Linked to this was a perception that COL’s policy work with governments had not generally been as successful as some of its other strategies. Policy advocacy however was still seen to be important. The problem was with the failure of governments to follow through on policy. COL needs to continue to work with governments on implementation of policy – in particular to support champions.

There were two other areas of deficit mentioned by more than two informants. One was COL’s approach to gender and the other was monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

### *Gender equality*

Gender equality is one of the cross-cutting themes in COL’s TYP. The plan asserts: “it is implicit that all outcomes will be characterised by quality open and distance

learning, gender equality, and achieved through the employment of appropriate technologies”.

The Stakeholder Survey explicitly addressed these three themes, and with gender, the responses were mostly less positive than for any other question. The exception was with survey participants engaged with COL in Healthy Communities initiatives. COL’s work in this sector was said to be “intrinsically pro-women”.

Generally people who had a view on COL’s approach to gender thought it was somewhat superficial. The perception was that COL was predominantly concerned with balanced gender representation in workshops and similar events.

- *A little weak – they should take it to another level; develop better indicators.*
- *The 50:50 rule is not enough.*

Most informants did not express strong opinions about alternative approaches, but a few advocated a more proactive stance.

- *They don’t push it strongly enough.*
- *Gender mainstreaming is what needs to be worked on.*

COL would probably point to their efforts to mainstream gender. But it seems they are not visible to most partners.

#### *Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)*

Several people commented that COL did not place much emphasis on monitoring and evaluating its work. This view was balanced by other informants who thought that COL has improved in this area in recent years. It is probably a question either of patchy application of M&E, or a partial deficit in communicating what they are doing.

An interesting related comment, expressed with conviction, was that COL “should take [its] success stories further”. This referred to the need not simply to monitor and evaluate, but to learn and develop from these processes.

There were several other comments about things COL could do better, but as none was expressed by more than one informant, they are not included in this general report. However the section on advice for the next Three Year Plan (page 17) refers more obliquely to ways in which COL could become more effective in the future context.

The survey – either the quantitative or qualitative parts – explicitly addressed a number of aspects of COL’s work or its organisational behaviour. Several have been covered already. Of COL’s three cross-cutting themes, gender has been mentioned as a perceived area of deficit. The two others – quality and technology – were viewed more positively.

## Quality

COL's TYP commits it to outcomes that are characterised by quality ODL. Comments in the survey suggest that informants take for granted that COL promotes quality in ODL – both through quality assurance programmes and more generally. The survey suggests that COL has successfully mainstreamed quality in its work with partners. Given the historic concerns about quality in ODL, this would appear to be a major achievement.

## Technology

COL's TYP states that all outcomes will be achieved through the employment of appropriate technologies. In the survey, people were asked to what extent the use of technology advocated by COL has been relevant to the outcomes they seek.

Respondents readily identified COL with the application of technology in ODL. There was a broad consensus that COL promoted technology appropriately, although several respondents were critical of the emphasis COL had placed on WikiEducator – a particular open educational resources (OER) technology.

Appropriateness was interpreted differently by different partners. Several informants from countries with limited Internet access felt that the technology COL advocated was at times premature for their situation.

- *Sometimes it comes too early and we don't have the hardware and the infrastructure, to support or sustain it.*

But everyone agreed that they needed to look to the future, technologically speaking, and were grateful to COL for showing them what to aspire to.

- *We don't want to be left behind.*
- *We need to be there and catch the bus.*

As one informant put it:

- *We are not children – it's the institution's responsibility to decide.*

## Knowledge resources

The survey asked people what use they made of COL's knowledge resources – most of which are available through the website or a weekly news service. COL also sends a hard copy version of its newsletter through conventional mailing.

Some people were very positive about COL's knowledge resources. Several said that COL's website was their first "port of call" for information about ODL. It was described by one as the "most useful hub" for ODL information. Another said that she and her colleagues looked forward to the weekly news service email. "It has the right kind of information".

These informants tended to be relatively new to ODL. More experienced practitioners used COL more selectively alongside other sources such as UNESCO.

COL's newsletter was singled out by two informants. One said that it was very useful as benchmarking tool – providing regular up-to-date snapshots of what is going on around the Commonwealth. Another said that it was very useful for advocacy.

In case it is assumed that everyone has easy access to COL's website, there was a grounding comment from an African participant: "We are not online enough to use it regularly".

### **The Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning**

Not surprisingly, everyone had a view of the Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. All informants saw value for the ODL community in a regular event like the Forum. There is only one other periodic inter-regional forum that focussed intensively on ODL and few regional events. Networking, benchmarking, exposure to new thinking, and orientation for newcomers were seen as the main advantages. Most thought that two years was the right frequency. A minority thought it should be less frequent. No-one suggested an annual conference.

Most people however had reservations about some aspects of PCF6. Apart from criticism of the specific organisation of PCF6 – in particular of the lack of advance information – there was a consensus that the sessions were generally too formulaic and contained too many papers for thorough engagement with any of the issues. People wanted more hands-on engagement, particularly with up-to-date research and innovative experience.

- *It needs more practical sessions on research results.*
- *The PCF doesn't provoke and catalyse.*
- *Most of the papers have little value – there needs to be more rigour in selection.*
- *Fewer, longer presentations; more workshops.*
- *Too much institutional marketing.*

Given the paucity of regional conferences, many informants thought that regional sub-forums, within the PCF would be very useful. The Pacific participants in particular were in favour of this.

Several pointed out that, considering ODL is increasingly a technologically-enabled form of teaching and learning, there was little of a demonstration effect in the conference. Forum speakers talked about innovation in the Forum but there was little opportunity to see it in action.

Several respondents asked if COL would be evaluating the Forum and reflecting on the findings. This survey is a contribution to an assessment of PCF6 but by no means a full evaluation.

## The quantitative results

Some of the results in the quantitative section of the survey have already been presented. Table 2 contains the complete set.

**Table 2**  
**Levels of agreement and disagreement with 10 statements about COL**

	Average score out of 7 (with scores for negative statements converted to positive for ease of comparison)
COL is a reliable and accessible partner	6.3
COL is transparent and accountable in its use of resources and the results it achieves	6.1
COL is well led	6.1
COL is not good at explaining its purpose and objectives	6.1
COL works more to its agenda than ours	6.0
COL's work is relevant to the achievement of the relevant MDGs	6.0
COL is efficient in the use of its resources	5.8
COL has a good understanding of the countries it works in	5.8
COL tends to work at too local a level to achieve large scale impact	4.8
COL spreads itself too thin	4.6

Levels of agreement with the positive statements, and of disagreement with the negative, were mostly high. The proposition that COL is a reliable and accessible partner received particular endorsement.

There were, however, minority reservations about COL trying to do too much, and in some areas not working at a level where large scale impact could be achieved.

Among the different types of stakeholder, the Focal Point and institutional partner participants were the most positive in their response to the 10 statements. Staff and the commissioning partner were the least positive.

### Is COL more or less effective than three years ago?

About 25% of respondents felt able to compare COL's effectiveness now with the previous planning period. All of them thought that COL was at least as, or more effective now. In discussion with those who thought COL was more effective, five aspects of its performance emerged.

The one mentioned most frequently was the quality of staff. People felt that in general COL's staff had more useful practical experience, and worked more energetically, than in previous periods.

Two other features of COL were mentioned by several informants – particularly by those with a strategic view of COL, such as Board members. These were COL's increased focus and results-orientation. There was reference to the reduction of sectors from three to two, but also a sense that COL's interventions were more purposefully planned. This is, as has been mentioned, not easy to reconcile with a listening and responsive posture. But somehow COL seems to be successfully combining the two approaches.

Two other aspects were mentioned by more than one informant:

- Greater ambition and preparedness to be innovative
- Increased visibility, in ideas forums for example

### **Advice for the next Three Year Plan**

Both FGD and interview participants were asked to give COL one piece of advice for its next Three Year Plan. This could be something new, something to cease doing, or do differently. It could be simply to continue doing something. Many respondents understandably focussed on the work COL was helping them with. A minority were able to be more strategic.

In terms of what COL does, a plea for more advocacy with governments was the most pervasive advice, particularly from African informants and those from small states.

- *Be more aggressive with governments – not just Ministries of Education.*
- *Get governments involved in the ODL agenda to leverage resources.*
- *If COL pursues policy, it must follow up.*

There was a clear assumption that COL's voice would be listened to in these environments. Advocacy for ODL in technical training and for community-level livelihoods was the most urgent context for these efforts.

COL was requested to put more of its resources in other ways into ODL for technical training, e.g. for developing the capacity of secondary teachers in this sub-sector. In its community-level livelihoods work, COL was urged to be more joined-up trans-nationally and trans-regionally. The VUSSC participants urged COL to stay involved and to help the network operationalise their content.

Several people urged COL to focus resources on the most needy, even if they were in middle income countries. The ethos of COL's Healthy Communities work was admired by many respondents and some urged COL to further develop this, focussing on "the human being" and rights-based approaches.

Most of the other recommendations were about how COL should work. They are many and varied, with little consensus. One theme did emerge from a small group who had the most experience of ODL and of COL. It is the realisation that achieving strategic change in ODL – at the level of policy, institutional turn-around, new

systems like open schooling, or the introduction of ODL to new sectors – takes a long time, usually much more than COL's three year planning horizon. COL was urged to adopt longer time frames for its most strategic programmes.

The other recommendations were:

- *COL should continuously review its focus areas – not wait for the next TYP.*
- *COL should focus on fewer institutions and work with them more intensively.*
- *COL needs to be strategic in its use of quality frameworks. We should not give away hard-earned products too easily.*
- *COL needs to have more influence with other development agencies.*
- *COL needs to market its innovations more vigorously.*
- *COL should press for more responsive focal points. They need more teeth.*
- *There should be regional coordinators.*
- *There should be regular regional video conferences for ODL practitioners, facilitated by COL.*
- *COL should work with specialist organisations in information and communications technology (ICT) and media – don't try to be experts in everything.*
- *COL should have a closer relationship with its consultants.*
- *CEMCA operates too separately.*
- *COL needs to work harder to make a difference in the Pacific.*

COL will soon be embarking on a round of consultations for the next TYP. This list of recommendations does not represent a consensus even from one region or type of stakeholder. But each one was what a respondent felt was the most important single piece of advice. Some of them may therefore be useful as subjects for further discussion in the coming round.

## **Conclusions**

The Stakeholder Survey suggests that COL is helping its partners achieve good results in a wide range of ODL environments. In some cases, particularly in education, COL is contributing to programmes that are achieving large scale impact. In other sectors, it is working innovatively, but in many cases not yet at scale.

Partners perceive COL primarily as a capacity builder – directly or indirectly through consultants and network effects. Many see COL's interventions as important contributions to institutional development.

Most see COL's policy work as important, but some see it as often not achieving its full potential. COL is urged to be more assertive and persistent in its advocacy work with governments.

COL is a sought-after partner for a number of reasons. It has the ability to deploy relevant technical inputs from consultants, to bring together people and organisations in communities of purpose, and to give advice directly from its own expert resources. It is also said to be an accessible and reliable partner, one that can be approached with a minimum of bureaucracy and relied upon to communicate in a timely and effective way.

One of COL's hallmark characteristics – one that sets it apart, particularly from donors and larger international organisations – is its disposition to listen and build interventions around partner needs.

COL's ability to look at ODL solutions across regions and sectors is seen as a unique asset, one that COL should leverage as much as possible.

COL was not generally seen to demonstrate its commitment to gender equality in its outcomes.

The Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, while valued without exception, is thought to need a thorough conceptual overhaul. In particular it was seen to be formulaic with little opportunity for deep engagement with new ideas and research findings.

COL is seen as a more effective organisation than three years ago. Its staff members are praised for their experience and energy. COL is also seen to be more focussed and results-oriented. Nevertheless, a minority of respondents thought that COL spreads itself too thin.

For COL's next Three Year Plan, apart from the call for more confident advocacy of ODL with governments, the area that should receive more resources than now was technical and vocational education.

## Annex A

### COL Stakeholder Survey 2010 – Outside Stakeholders (Group)

#### Topic Guide for Facilitated Group Discussions

Please introduce yourselves – name, organisation and position.

Tell us in 2-3 sentences about the engagement you have had with COL over the last 3 years.

From what you know or have heard about COL, in what programme area do you think it makes most impact? Why do you think that is?

In its TYP COL singles out four areas as specific aims:

- increasing the number of trained teachers
- opening up access to secondary school to larger numbers of pupils
- assisting in the development of tertiary education
- supporting skills development to improve the livelihoods of communities

Let's take these one by one and see what we think about COL's effectiveness in relation to these four aims.

What is it about COL that enables it to make a difference?

Is COL's work always relevant to the achievement of the MDGs?

What other organisations provide the kind of assistance that COL offers?

How do they match up?

What is COL's USP in relation to the others?

Which areas of their work do they have less impact?

Are there ways in which it operates that reduce its effectiveness?

Does COL have more impact in some parts of the developing Commonwealth than others? Why do you think that is?

Does COL spread itself too thin – try to do too much in too many places?

Is it focussed enough?

In terms of the *way it works* what does COL do best?

COL's TYP mentions a number of ways of working – it calls them strategies.

- creating networks and consortia and brokering partnerships for ODL
- promoting policy in ODL
- developing and promoting models (full proven approaches) for ODL
- developing capacity in ODL
- creating materials for ODL

What does it do best? Which should it focus on to achieve most impact?

Does COL work at a high enough level – to achieve large scale impact?

I'd like your views on two other services it offers.

- Knowledge resources and information provision
- Pan Commonwealth Forums

COL has a brief to encourage the use of technology in ODL. Does it advocate appropriate and relevant use of technology? What examples can you give?

Gender equality is integral to all COL's work. How in your experience does COL live up to this policy? What examples can you give?

How transparent and accountable is COL in its use of resources and the results it achieves?

How good is COL at communicating what it does and what difference it makes?

Is it efficient? Well managed?

Is COL more or less effective as an organisation than it was 3 years ago? What are your reasons for saying that?

If you had to give COL just one piece of advice for the future, what would it be?

## **Annex B**

### **COL Stakeholder Survey 2010 – Staff (Group)**

#### Topic Guide for Facilitated Group Discussions

What does COL contribute that is different from other organisations operating in a similar field?

Is COL's work always relevant to the achievement of the MDGs?

Does COL have more impact in some parts of the developing Commonwealth than others? Why do you think that is?

Does COL spread itself too thin – try to do too much in too many places?

Is it focussed enough?

Does COL work at a high enough level – to achieve large scale impact?

Is COL more or less effective as an organisation than it was three years ago? What are your reasons for saying that?

What changes in its programme work would make it more effective vis a vis the MDGs?

Gender equality is integral to all COL's work. Does COL live up to this policy? What examples can you give?

What is your view on COL's emphasis on ICT in learning? Has it struck the right balance, in this period, between ICT and non-ICT approaches to ODL?

How transparent and accountable is COL in its use of resources and the results it achieves?

How good is COL at communicating what it does and the difference it makes?

How efficient is COL?

What internal changes would make it more effective?

What is the value of the Pan Commonwealth Forums? Should COL continue with them? If so, in what form and how frequently?

## Annex C

### COL Stakeholder Survey 2010 – One-on-One Interviews

Topic guide for one-on-one interviews

#### PART1

#### YOUR DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF COL

1	Tell me about the engagement you have had with COL over the last 3 years	
2	Over this 3 year period, in what ways has COL made a difference to you and your organisation?	
3	Which of these is the most important to you? What did COL do to make that difference?	
4	If COL had not been available, could you realistically have obtained this sort of help from any other organisation?	
5	Why did you choose COL over the alternatives?	

<i><b>If you have not mentioned these factors above, can you tell me about your experience, in the last 3 years, of these aspects of COL's strategic purpose</b></i>	6	To what extent has COL contributed to the <b>quality</b> of your ODL design and delivery?	
	7	To what extent has COL's help advanced <b>gender</b> equality in your context?	
	8	To what extent has the <b>use of technology</b> advocated by COL been <b>relevant</b> to the outcomes you seek?	
	9	To what extent do you think the results of your collaboration with COL will be sustainable?	

10	What do you think about COL's communications with you?	
11	What is your opinion of the COL staff who have engaged with you?	

## PART 2

### WHAT YOU KNOW AND BELIEVE ABOUT COL GENERALLY

12	From what you know or have heard about COL, in what programme area do you think it makes most impact?	
13	What is it about COL that enables it to make that impact?	
14	Are there any <b>areas of their work</b> where it has little impact?	
15	Are there <b>ways in which it operates</b> that reduce its effectiveness?	

<i>Let's look at some of COL's specific aims, strategies and activities, and see if you have any views on COL's effectiveness in relation to them.</i>	16	Its aim of increasing the number of trained teachers	
	17	Its aim of opening up access to secondary school to larger numbers of pupils	
	18	Its aim of assisting in the development of tertiary education	
	19	Its aim of supporting skills development to improve the livelihoods of communities	
	20	Its strategy of promoting policy in ODL	
	21	Its strategy of brokering and supporting partnerships, consortia and networks	
	22	Its strategy of developing and promoting models – proven approaches – for ODL	
	23	Its strategy of developing capacity in ODL	
	24	Its strategy of creating materials for ODL	
	25	Its knowledge resources and information provision	
26	The Pan Commonwealth Forums		

27	Is COL more <u>or</u> less effective as an organisation than it was 3 years ago? What are your reasons for saying that?	
28	Do you have any concerns about COL, other than those already discussed?	
29	If you had to give COL just one piece of advice for the future, what would it be?	

### PART 3

#### 10 QUICK SCORE QUESTIONS

<b><i>How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about COL. Use a scale of 7, ranging from 7 for strongly agree down to 1 for strongly disagree – with 4 as the neutral point.</i></b>	30	COL is transparent and accountable in its use of resources and the results it achieves	
	31	COL works more to its agenda than ours	
	32	COL is well led	
	33	COL's work is relevant to the achievement of the relevant MDGs	
	34	COL tends to work at too local a level to achieve large scale impact	
	35	COL is a reliable and accessible partner	
	36	COL is not good at explaining its purpose and objectives	
	37	COL is efficient in the use of its resources	
	38	COL spreads itself too thin	
	39	COL has a good understanding of the countries it works in	