

**NOTES ON THE STAFF/BOARD RETREAT**  
**TUESDAY, 17 JUNE 2008 – 09h00-12h30**  
**AMBLESIDE ROOM, MARRIOTT HOTEL**

**PRESENT**

**COL Staff**

Sir John Daniel, President  
Professor Asha Kanwar, Vice President  
Mr. Paul West  
Ms. Doris McEachern  
Ms. Frances Ferreira  
Dr. Krishna Alluri  
Mr. Ian Pringle  
Dr. Tanyss Munro  
Mr. Joshua Mallet  
Dr. Wayne Mackintosh  
Dr. Willie Clarke-Okah  
Mr. Dave Wilson  
Ms. Angela Kwan  
Ms. Helena Fehr

**Board of Governors**

Mr. Ransford Smith, Acting Chair  
Ms. Denise Chong  
Shri R. P. Agrawal  
Dr. Linda Sissons, CNZM  
H.E. Professor Michael Omolewa  
Ms. Jennifer (Jenny) Glennie  
Dr. David Levesque  
The Honourable Dr. Dame Carol Kidu  
Dr. John Tarrant  
Ms. Laura Griggs

**Note-taker**

Ms. Lydia Meister

**1. Welcome – Sir John Daniel**

Sir John welcomed all to the meeting, and explained His Excellency the Honourable Burchell Whiteman's absence. He thanked Mr. Ransford Smith, Deputy Secretary-General for stepping in as Acting Chair at short notice. A special welcome was extended to two new board members: the Honourable Dr. Dame Carol Kidu, Minister for Community Development, Women, Religion and Sports in PNG has joined COL's Board as the Regional Representative for the Pacific; and Dr. Linda Sissons, Chief Executive Officer of Wellington Institute of Technology, representative of New Zealand. Sir John also welcomed the Secretary-General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, Professor John Tarrant, as an Advisor to the Board.

Sir John outlined the day's programme, noting that at Mr. Ransford Smith's request, he would be acting as the master of ceremonies.

**2. COL's Third Decade – Sir John Daniel**

Sir John talked to his PowerPoint [presentation](#), noting the following ten key points:

1. COL is a small, strong and effective organisation.
2. "Radical Incrementalism", which means: start from where you are and find new approaches for the future, is a useful principle for COL.
3. COL's Three Year Plan (TYP) is robust, but there is a need further to refine the models that COL uses.
4. COL's goals are a combination of Millennium Development Goals (MDG's), Education For All (EFA) and Commonwealth Values.
5. COL's work in the field is based on the use of local resources and making systems work well.

6. COL is already working in newly topical areas like Food Security and Climate Change and already has a track record.
7. COL has a reputation as a thought leader in development areas such as: L3Farmers, Open Schooling, Open Educational Resources (OER).
8. There is a tight focus on applying learning technologies through new models and networks.
9. COL is well positioned for addressing the Small States now that all but two of 32 Small States are involved in VUSSC.
10. COL is a leader in new technologies such as Web2 – the Interactive Web.

His vision is that Commonwealth countries will instinctively turn to COL as a preferred and trusted partner for using learning technologies to contribute to development.

### **3. International Development Priorities in Education – CIDA, DFID, NZAID, ComSec**

*Ms. Laura Griggs, CIDA*

CIDA's three overall priorities are:

1. Strengthen focus: streamline programmes; reduce the number of partners and streamline operations – looking at sectors where CIDA can have the greatest impact.
2. Greater efficiency: reduce administrative costs and improve operations – look at how and where CIDA is working.
3. Accountability: enhance the evaluation process and improve reporting to the citizens of Canada.

These three core areas will form the basis on which COL will be looked at:

1. Strengthen focus: what are COL's comparative advantages?
2. Efficiency: how is COL going to achieve its next TYP? How can COL improve its expenditure in the field and its operational costs?
3. Accountability: log framework is the most important area. COL's logframe and its Results Based Management (RBM) approach needs to be further improved.

Where has COL come from and where is it going? How does COL situate itself within the group of Commonwealth organisations? CIDA is looking for a coherent picture.

*Dr. David Levesque, DFID*

David started with a caveat that he was speaking from DFID's perspective as a development agency.

The present UK Prime Minister is very interested in education. He is fully committed to the MDG's and is working to get the world community to deliver on the promises that have been made. He has issued a Call to Action to accelerate progress and so far 45 countries have signed up. The group is being broadened to include faith based organisations, private sector companies and civil society. These issues will be on the agendas of a meeting of the European Commission in September, the G8 summit in Japan, and the high-level meeting of the UNESCO EFA group in Oslo.

Specific priorities may vary over time, but the core of poverty reduction and sustainable development remains. Currently four key areas are being emphasised:

1. Economic growth.
2. Climate change.
3. Conflict and fragile states.

4. Improved international systems: we need a more harmonised UN and Commonwealth. The emphasis is on trying to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

In education, DFID has committed to \$15 Billion (US) until 2015. DFID is looking at the whole sector and providing support through the ministries. The focus is on improving access, quality. Education priorities include:

1. Ensuring that all children have access to primary education.
2. Better quality throughout all parts of the education system.
3. Linking education with the world of work through skills development.

**Issues for COL:** Technology is considered a magic bullet by ministries. COL has a role in explaining the pros and cons of technology, and in particular how it could be linked with skills development:

1. Review the link between development agencies and Commonwealth agencies and make it explicit.
2. Review whether DFID and CIDA are best placed to support COL or could we think of other ways to support COL.

*Dr. Linda Sissons, NZAID*

Linda noted the following key points:

1. Cooperation between NZAID and COL in the Pacific region is key.
2. Emphasis is on focus, efficiency and measurable results.

NZAID's key priorities are:

1. Governance.
2. Gender issues, which are particularly important in the Pacific.
3. Basic Education, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy.
4. Tertiary Education and vocational education.

*Mr. Ransford Smith, Commonwealth Secretariat (ComSec)*

Ransford noted that COL is a valued partner and that ComSec is interested in building synergies with strengthened collaboration. He noted that for ComSec, the emphasis on education relates to the high proportion of Commonwealth citizens below 18 and below 30 years of age.

ComSec's focus is on:

1. MDGs, Universal Primary Education (UPE), and eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education.
2. Quality in education to overcome barriers, and increased use of distance education.
3. Supporting education in difficult circumstances.
4. Harmonising work plans with COL and ACU and the Social Transformation Programmes Division (STPD) in the Secretariat.

Ransford noted the following challenges:

1. Implementing the 2008-2012 Plan requires flexibility to meet challenges effectively.
2. Increased demand for access and quality in UPE and secondary education.
3. Reform of tertiary education with importance on socio-economic development.

4. Recommendation of appropriate Commonwealth facility to address needs of tertiary education.

Ransford discussed ComSec's strategic plan for the next four years, noting that the Secretariat would have a mid-term review of its plan for correction:

1. Greater focus by reducing the number of programmes from sixteen to eight.
2. Democracy and development are the two key pillars that are supported by Education, which are essential to meet ComSec's goals.
3. The four areas in development are:
  - a. Public;
  - b. Economic;
  - c. Sustainable development;
  - d. Human development.
4. Youth, gender and human rights are the key policy areas that cut across these four strands.
5. Champion concerns of 32 small developing states and link with VUSSC; VUSSC will be a very important collaboration.
6. Other areas of potential collaboration include Food Security and L3Farmers, particularly in the area of environmentally sustainable development due to the impact of climate change.
7. The Victoria action plan on Climate Change was adopted at CHOGM and will be an important focus in the coming years.
8. Using ICT as a vehicle to raise awareness in farm communities and geographically dispersed island states of the impact and implications of climate change.

Sir John closed the session noting that the Edinburgh committee brings together four Commonwealth agencies involved in education, which will lead towards greater harmonisation.

#### **4. Highlights of Regional Focal Points Meetings – Caribbean and Africa – Professor Asha Kanwar**

Asha talked to her PowerPoint [presentation](#); the following comments were noted:

1. Focal Points are a one-window stop for COL in each country and are expected to coordinate with other ministries that COL works with. Focal points brief Ministers about COL and provide intellectual advice and guidance to COL.
2. Country Action Plans act as progress reports. COL provided Focal Points with updated reports and sought feedback for the next TYP for planning and increased collaboration.
3. Key areas of focus in both the Caribbean and African regions are: Teacher training, Higher Education, Open schooling, Livelihoods training, eLearning, Educational use of mass media, ODL policy and Quality Assurance.
4. Areas where the two regions differed were that in the Caribbean there was more emphasis on VUSSC and Gender, while in Africa the need for Open Educational Resources (OER's) was stressed.
5. In both regions, Focal Points requested that COL set up Base Camps for on-going discussion among the Focal Points and the African Base Camp is relatively more dynamic.
6. The key conclusions of the two meetings were that i) the Focal Point strategy is successful; ii) the current TYP is endorsed as appropriate and iii) a need expressed to continue in the same direction during 2009-2012.
7. Since the Asia-Pacific Focal Points have yet to meet, some priorities were identified from the current Country Action Plans. In Asia these are likely to be in the areas of Quality, expanded

access to Livelihoods, Capacity building in ODL/ICTs, women's empowerment and environmental education.

8. In the Pacific, the emphasis will be on VUSSC, Livelihoods, Community development (health and gender), Governance and Teacher Training. One of COL's challenges will be how to optimise the media infrastructure established in the region for health to include COL's work in governance, environment and gender.
9. COL will construct its next TYP with inputs from: Focal Points, selected activities carried forward from the current TYP; Lessons from Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), feedback from partners and other stakeholders and global trends.

## **5. Discussion - All**

*Shri R. P. Agrawal* provided the following thoughts for consideration:

1. COL has a limited budget; its mandate and goals are too diverse.
2. Bring a sharper focus to the Plan; limit COL's programmes to education and lifelong learning.
3. eLearning and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) are the most important tool for developing countries in achieving their goals. The missing link is good ODL materials. COL can play a bigger role; COL can collate, bring together, and act as a repository of good quality eLearning materials. COL can provide linkages with Governmental eLearning materials available from institutions, i.e., MIT's free materials. COL can act as a facilitator of information.
4. COL can provide guidance and intellectual inputs on virtual laboratories for technical training and technical education.
5. COL can facilitate the convergence of conventional and ODL systems. Models are available, but they must be made available to developing countries. CEMCA has started work on quality standards which is positive.
6. Teacher Education is in demand; ODL models are needed to improve Teacher Education.
7. Voluntary contributions seem to be coming down from 85% to 75%, which means EBF could be increased. An action plan should be developed to ensure that voluntary contributions as well as EBF could be increased.
8. There is no good system of mutual recognition of qualifications within the Commonwealth. Perhaps ComSec needs to take steps to facilitate the recognition of Commonwealth qualifications.
9. COL should offer its materials and services free of charge to member countries.

*H.E. Professor Michael Omolewa* commended COL for hosting the retreat, and thanked Denise and CIDA for their suggestion that the Board should spend time on broader issues other than those listed on the agenda of the Governing Board. He made the following comments:

1. The idea of the Focal Points is to engage people in debate and take ownership of COL and its activities.
2. While COL may not be able to do everything, eLearning and ODL are the focus areas that COL could build on. COL can improve its accountability and efficiency.
3. COL's emphasis on Higher Education is not sufficiently encouraging. While ACU and ComSec are both focusing on Higher Education, COL doesn't seem to have acceptable levels of visibility. Both EFA and MDG goals are emphasising Basic Education. There is a need to go beyond Basic Education towards Secondary Education. Next year UNESCO is convening a World Congress on Higher Education to increase the potential of human capacity. Service oriented products will be the outputs if we limit education to Basic and UPE. Use of

eLearning and ODL contribute to Higher Education. COL needs to link with other partners and actually add more partners like with the World Bank, drawing attention to Higher Education.

4. COL may be small in its budget; but it is big in partnership building. It engages ministers, ministries and Heads of Government and its resource base should be increased.

*Dr. John Tarrant* noted the need for convergence between Commonwealth agencies. He noted that the ACU is a membership organisation with no funding from government. It was established in 1913 and today has over 500 members across the Commonwealth. The ACU advocates on behalf of members to the government; but is limited by its mandate as a membership entity.

COL must be relevant to the world's big issues, such as food security and climate change:

1. Food security: there has been a food crisis every decade since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is a constant cycle of either too much or too little food. COL can help support the small scale producer respond to this fluctuating cycle, bearing in mind that the cycle will not go away.
2. Climate change: there are four themes: mechanisms, magnitude (where and how), impact, and adaptation, with too little emphasis on adaptation. Despite differing views on the mechanism, academics and scientists agree it will get warmer. The governments emphasise short-term solutions; we must look at the longer term. Many of the Commonwealth states are highly vulnerable: Africa will get drier and hotter, and countries with sea level rise are at risk. COL must focus on adaptation.

*Ms. Jennifer (Jenny) Glennie* commended COL on how far it had come since her participation in the 2002 Mid-Term Evaluation. COL has focused its strategic planning, which is steadily improving. She made the following comments:

1. Focal Point strategy is a good one; however, it needs further strengthening.
2. What is the role of the regional centres, such as CEMCA, SADC-CDE, RETRIDAL?
3. Teacher Education is one of the most critical ways to contribute towards development, however, actually changing teachers' practice in the classroom is very difficult. One third (100,000) of South Africa's teachers were engaged in ODL with rote learning that had a negative effect on quality. Distance education has added to content, but the actual practice of teaching in the classroom has not improved. Therefore it was important to pay more attention to pedagogic practise in teacher training programmes.
4. The link between Open Schooling and Livelihoods is a difficult issue as it requires large resources.
5. If the L3Farmers is scaled up, it will make an important contribution.

*Ms. Denise Chong* made the following observations:

1. She was struck by Asha's expression of systematic approach to the planning process and noted Michael's emphasis on engaging countries.
2. She wondered how COL could manage the tension between demand driven programmes from its members, and the need for focus, referring to Sir John's comments about COL working for the agenda of its members.
3. It was not clear what "harmonisation between agencies" means: is this a harmonisation of workplans, or a harmonisation of funding sources? She suggested the emphasis should be on how the top leadership unite efforts for greater impact.

4. She suggested the Focal Point network should be strengthened, and questioned how COL could link beyond education ministries to other ministries like Finance, or other Regional Bodies.
5. She suggested harmonising by piggy-backing on other ComSec and regional meetings, rather than COL initiating these missions. This would reduce costs and lead towards greater efficiency.
6. COL must concentrate on what is relevant rather than topical, i.e., Food Security and Climate Change may be topical, but are they relevant for COL? Despite new issues, COL's flagship programmes remain relevant.
7. Accountability and efficiency: working with faith-based and private sector organisations. How can COL deliver on all the expectations and remain accountable to both small and large donor countries?

Sir John thanked the group for their insightful comments and valuable input.

### **6. Elements of the Three-Year Plan, 2009-2012 – Professor Asha Kanwar**

Asha talked to her PowerPoint [presentation](#), highlighting elements of COL's next TYP. She ended the session by asking the group to respond to five questions:

1. What are the new development trends since 2006?
2. Does the proposed plan respond to these trends?
3. Have important areas been missed?
4. Are the existing outcomes adequate?
5. Is the proposed plan sufficiently focused?

### **7. Breakout groups: Refining Focus and Outcomes**

Each of the four groups presented their findings through the group reporter.

*Table 4: represented by Dr. John Tarrant*

John qualified his statements by noting that as an academic he doesn't always answer questions. His group made some general suggestions:

1. The strategic plan should address COL's role of either being responsive to or influencing the agenda of its member states. Should COL choose to be responsive, then it might be asked to respond to Food Security or Climate Change issues. COL's position must be publicly stated, with an eye towards balance.
2. The trend in ODL is that ODL is linked to development. The concept of Distance Learning is universal. Face-to-face institutions are using Distance Learning; what is new is "open" and open source learning and OER's.
3. Emphasis should be on quality and 'open-ness'; COL should include "quality" in its strap-line
4. There needs to be clarity in linking outcomes to Performance Indicators (PI) and those that could be measurable both at the individual and team levels within the TYP framework.
5. There should be recognition between the 3-year planning period and the life time of COL's programmes, which can be one-year, 3-year and beyond.
6. Would it be better for COL to focus on Technical Education and Agricultural Education?
7. COL should not excessively focus on Least Developed Countries (LDC's) but instead take advantage of partnerships – triangular partnerships – the South-South-North Triangle approach.

*Table 3: represented by Ms. Denise Chong*

Denise echoed John's remarks in stating that her table did not focus on the questions. She made the following comments on her colleagues' behalf:

1. COL should not allow its agenda to be determined by the MDG's, nor should it choose which MDG's to focus on. COL should be guided by all of the MDG's. One of COL's virtues is flexibility, and COL should not lose this quality.
2. COL's strap-line should read "Learning for Development" rather than "Access to Learning for Development."
3. Link between the pillars and programmes depends much on wording. If you took the concept of "learning" as the basis for each of the three sectors, how would it look?
4. "Learning for development" speaks to the obvious: the acquisition of skills.
5. "Education" – how could COL bring "learning" into the title? Perhaps COL should focus on "Academic" or "Formal."
6. "Human Environment" – what is it? Anything and everything. It deals with health, climate change and governance. It is far too broad suggesting an overly ambitious reach. What does this sector deliver on? It transmits information directly to recipients with needs. Perhaps the focus should be on community development: focus on the link with partnerships – link with agents of development within the community.

*Table 2: represented by Ms. Laura Griggs*

Laura confirmed that her table did not answer the questions either. She brought the following comments forward on her colleagues' behalf:

1. Development trends should not be the driving force for COL to determine its TYP.
2. The present focus of COL's mission is on ODL and ICT. It might be time for COL to return to the Ministers to seek their inputs on COL's mission – in other words, to renew COL's mandate.
3. COL should seek a balance between Commonwealth issues and Global issues.
4. A challenge for COL is that it is responsible to all the Commonwealth member states and not just the development agencies.
5. COL needs to define its international priorities. Where does it fit with other international organisations? What is unique about COL? Where does COL add value? For example, where in the mobile phone development does COL position itself?
6. In the three sectors that COL is considering revising, is COL reducing activities or re-packaging the activities?
7. The full Board of Governors should be engaged in the process of approving the next TYP. The Board will require time to review it in order to approve it.
8. Commonwealth agencies involved in education should demonstrate involvement in relevant areas of common interests.

*Table 1: represented by The Honourable Dr. Dame Carol Kidu*

Dame Carol noted that it would have been easier to refer to points made during Asha's presentation if a document had been in hand. Dame Carol made the following comments on behalf of her group:

1. COL's visibility in Commonwealth nations must be increased. The focal point concept is good, but it could be used more effectively. The Focal Points should be used as catalysts within their countries. For example, in PNG, COL needs to work with the Focal Point to determine how it can exert influence beyond education ministries.

2. Following the Prime Minister of Britain's lead, how could COL facilitate working with churches and beyond traditional partners?
3. COL can act as a catalyst for partnerships – not an implementer but a facilitator. The COL Focal Points need to work towards institutionalizing successful models and go beyond the project mentality.
4. COL needs to raise awareness of disparity between nations and regions which are significant.
5. COL needs to take a strategic approach in linking with the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) and other Commonwealth agencies in the Pacific.
6. The question of whether COL should be responsive to the Ministries of Education or coming with a cutting edge approach needs to be considered. It might be dangerous for COL to continue responding to needs alone. So where should COL focus?
7. Education sector: continue as is, but incorporate eLearning for the more developed nations. eLearning is not as relevant for underdeveloped nations, such as PNG.
8. L4L sector: focus on learning and skills in agricultural, technical and entrepreneurial skill set; include virtual laboratories concept.
9. Human Environment sector: focus on community development, governance and eGovernance.
10. Focus should remain on livelihoods rather than Food Security and Climate Change, and it should be both topical and relevant to particular nations.
11. An issue that has not been raised is the obsolescence of knowledge. How does COL respond to this issue?

Sir John thanked the group for participating in the discussion, and opened the floor for further discussion and comment.

### **8. Discussion and wrap-up**

The following general comments were made from the floor:

1. The issue of obsolescence is very important. When does knowledge become irrelevant?
2. Perhaps COL and ComSec should consider aligning their plans and have combined commitments for presentation at the next CCEM.
3. There are some new development trends in the use of satellites for education. Satellites are becoming more available. In India there could be 1000 TV channels available for mass education in which the programmes will be different from conventional educational programmes.
4. How can COL facilitate access to satellite knowledge in poorer countries – how can COL facilitate the bridging of the Digital Divide?
5. COL needs to sharpen its focus on its message and its activities in order to have greater impact.
6. Harmonisation could also refer to merged objectives between agencies which will cascade into efficiency and accountability.

Sir John thanked all those present for their helpful comments. The retreat ended at 12:30 pm.