



# Meeting of the Commonwealth Secretariat Board of Governors and its Executive Committee

Marlborough House, 16 and 18 May 2006

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**BG1(05/06)3**  
**Provisional Agenda Item 9**

## **Report of the Commonwealth of Learning**

### **Commonwealth of Learning 2003-6**

1. Created by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is the only international, intergovernmental organisation that focuses exclusively on enhancing access to education and training through open, distance and technology-enhanced learning.
2. The Commonwealth of Learning works with governments and institutions to expand the scope, scale and quality of learning by working with partners to promote policies, build models, create materials, enhance capacity and nurture networks in support of development goals.
3. The Commonwealth is a very heterogeneous association and its 53 Member States show diversity along many dimensions. COL's strength has been to design country action plans that respond to local needs as expressed by national governments. COL attempts to maintain a balance between country needs, Commonwealth priorities, international development agendas and its own mandate and competencies.
4. Responding to the needs expressed by the Commonwealth Education Ministers at the 14 CCEM in Halifax, 2000, COL developed a proposal for a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). Following approval at the 15 CCEM in 2003, COL created a consortium of 22 small states that are working together on appropriate policies and mechanisms for content development and delivery. Funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Government of Singapore has enabled COL to convene two key working meetings on the VUSSC in Singapore.
5. As a small and specialised agency COL emphasises partnerships in all its activities, seeking collaborations with multilateral organisations, fostering communities of practice and

nurturing regional bodies. It has an annual budget of approximately Cdn\$9m, \$7m of which is provided by voluntary contributions from over thirty Commonwealth member governments.

6. In the past triennium, COL has worked in the following programme areas:

### **Open and Distance Learning – Policy**

7. A vital lesson that emerges from COL's work is the importance of setting the use of learning technologies within a policy framework. COL has worked in ODL policy development at the national and institutional levels in all four regions of the Commonwealth. At the national level, COL has helped develop ODL policy in The Gambia and in Sierra Leone. Some of the other initiatives include policy development and implementation for SchoolNets in Africa, Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education in Africa and Asia, TVET in the Pacific, Open Schooling in Asia, and Crossborder education in the Caribbean.

### **Open and Distance Learning – Systems**

8. The COL approach to systems development has been to combine professional development with the strengthening of institutions. In addition to supporting the establishment of Regional Centres of Expertise in Southern and Western Africa, namely the Southern African Regional Distance Education Centre (SARDEC) and the Research and Training Institute in Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL) for capacity building in the sub-regions, COL has helped single mode institutions to evolve into dual-mode to expand access, improve quality and cut the costs of education and training. Continued improvement and extension of the capacity of two important ODL institutions such as the National Teachers Institute (NTI) Nigeria, and the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) India have been especially noteworthy. The introduction of ODL capacity in institutions previously delivering training and education through conventional modes such as the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) India, and the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) have extensive reach and multiplier potential.

### **Open and Distance Learning – Applications**

9. This programme has focused on using ODL methodologies and harnessing the potential of technologies to advance food security, reduce poverty, improve livelihoods and train teachers as well as to generate awareness about health and environment issues. The emphasis has been on creating models that are replicable in other jurisdictions. Materials have been developed such as the Green Teacher initiative to generate environmental competence among teachers in India to coincide with national policy. The Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme continues to spread in India and is now being adopted in Africa. Closely linked is COL's Media Empowerment model, through which agricultural extension units can enable many more farmers to learn to diversify their crops and communities can focus on health issues particularly in relation to HIV/AIDS. COL facilitates the preparation, in local languages, of basic training materials related to livelihoods e.g., 'Growing Scotch Bonnet Peppers'; 'Working with Concrete'; 'How to Select a Healthy Cow'.

## **Knowledge Management**

10. This programme underpins COL's role as an information and knowledge provider as well as a think tank in open, distance and technology enhanced learning. The focus on gathering, generating and disseminating knowledge not only supports COL's key programme areas and activities but also helps policy makers and practitioners throughout the Commonwealth make informed decisions leading to the efficient and effective use of ODL. COL remains a leader in this fast-moving field.

## **Evaluation of the Three Year Plan 2003-6**

11. COL commissioned an evaluation of its activities under its 2003-06 Plan. Some of the highlights of this evaluation can be summed up as follows:
- (a) COL aims to be relevant to development priorities in the countries that it serves. It is achieving this aim with its increasing focus on the MDGs which is real and not rhetorical.
  - (b) COL thinks strategically but has not always translated that into robust, practical planning. Its monitoring and evaluation have been weak.
  - (c) COL has a mandate to apply technology to ODL where appropriate and in general it has not allowed this to lead it into inappropriate initiatives. It should however take steps to integrate its technology work with other programmes.
  - (d) COL's specialist staff are a very valuable resource. They are knowledgeable and committed. When they are new to the organisation they bring valuable experience, expertise and networks from one or more field of ODL operation.
  - (e) COL has had difficulties explaining to external stakeholders and even to itself, the logic of its programmes: what value it creates and how. COL needs to develop a more accessible and balanced narrative of its worth.
  - (f) Most of COL's work has been in small interventions rather than large projects, However, there has been a trend during the course of the 2003-06 period to concentrate interventions around themes or institutions. It should continue this trend while retaining a degree of flexibility and agility which are among COL's assets.
  - (g) COL is a consummate networking agency. It has constructed an extensive informal network of networks in ODL spanning most developing Commonwealth countries with appropriate links to expertise in the developed world.
  - (h) COL is sensitive to the environments in which it works. It draws its staff from many of those environments and they travel to them in listening mode.
  - (i) COL engages with ODL at all levels from national policy down to applications. There is a consensus that it should move steadily upstream, engaging more with governments and major agencies over ODL in policies

and development strategies. But this is a matter of balance and COL should continue to work on capacity-building for ODL systems and the application of ODL in capacity building.

- (j) Some interventions have not led to positive outcomes or have not produced sufficient value for the time and other resources invested....Lessons should be learnt. The biggest disappointments in this period have been in COL's work in client-funded projects suggesting that this is an area that should be approached with caution.
- (k) Top-of-mind views of COL among informants were over 90% positive....Its partners expressed a very high level of satisfaction. They regard COL as an organisation of integrity.
- (l) The main groups that COL has to work harder to fully convince, are some of its own Board members and representatives of bi-lateral and multi-lateral donor agencies.

### **The Future – Commonwealth of Learning's Three-Year Plan 2006-2009**

12. *Learning for Development* is the theme for the 2006-9 Plan. It addresses a development agenda that includes the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the goals of Education for All (Dakar), and Commonwealth's objectives of peace, democracy, equality and good governance. Increasing and improving human learning is the key to fulfilling most aspects of this development agenda. Conventional instructional approaches simply cannot expand quickly enough to meet the challenge. COL's role is to help countries use a range of appropriate and available approaches and technologies to foster learning at scale.

13. The 2006-09 Plan further sharpens the focus of COL's work using a more effective operational framework defined by sectors and outcomes. It breaks the international development agenda into three broad sectors: **education, learning for livelihoods and human environment**. In each sector, in the light of the needs of individual countries, COL will aim for one or more of four outcomes: *policies; systems; models and materials; and partnerships*.

14. The proposed Plan will enable COL to do more to enhance *Learning for Development* than could normally be expected in view of its modest resources. This impact is achieved by selecting powerful models for scaling up learning. These approaches can readily be transferred from country to country so that governments and their institutions can maximise the contribution of learning to development.

Please refer to [www.col.org](http://www.col.org) for more information on our work.