

Critical Success Factors and Risk Management

COL is a small organisation that serves a large and diverse constituency of Commonwealth Member States by helping them innovate in expanding and improving their education and training systems within a perspective of *Learning for Development*.

To succeed in this mission, COL must build on its core strengths and manage the risks inherent in operating in a fast-changing world. The following issues require particular attention.

Financial Stability

Voluntary contributions from Member States account for most of COL's funding. Since 2005, the number of countries contributing annually has increased progressively. This growth in support means that more Member States now have expectations of effective service from COL. Retaining the confidence and the contributions of Member States, at a time when some will experience even greater economic challenges, is critical to the successful implementation of the 2009–2012 Plan.

RISK: Any interruption of contributions by a major donor can seriously compromise

COL's capacity to deliver its programme outcomes, and any falling off in the number of contributors will damage COL's image. In the sequel to the 2008 global financial crisis, some Member States may find it more difficult to fund their contribution to COL.

MITIGATION STRATEGY: Build and maintain a reserve fund by strategic and prudent budget management, seek additional contributions in support of the programme, and be ready to terminate initiatives if necessary. Strategic planning for potential scenarios will increase COL's readiness for any eventuality.

Partnerships

Good partnerships enable COL to leverage its resources and enhance its impact. Its extensive pan-Commonwealth networks enable it to perform effectively in the field. The substantial social capital that COL has accumulated through its partnerships provides considerable leverage to its small budget.

RISK: Working with larger partners can reduce COL's visibility, result in mismatched expectations in terms of speed, quality and timeliness of programme

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delivery, and lead to conflict in attributing credit for achievements. Partners, interlocutors and priorities can change, requiring COL to start rebuilding relationships.

MITIGATION STRATEGY: Identify roles and responsibilities for each partner from the outset, agree on timelines for implementation and ensure systematic follow-up. Continue to nurture a range of diverse partners and to manage stakeholders' expectations carefully.

Visibility

COL must not only implement its programme, but be seen to implement it effectively. Member States and stakeholders must be aware of its work and its impact.



RISK: As a small Commonwealth organisation located in Vancouver, focused on the use of technology to enhance learning and funded mostly by ministries of education, COL cannot expect the profile that bigger agencies enjoy.

MITIGATION STRATEGY: Create additional networks and implement an intelligent communications strategy effectively.

Leadership

Although COL is the only intergovernmental organisation that focuses solely on distance and technology-mediated learning, it must remain at the cutting edge and maintain its leadership by recruiting, developing and retaining the Commonwealth's best professional and managerial talent in the field of open and distance learning (ODL) and educational technology.

RISK: As a small organisation, COL may not be able to attract the thought leaders required to maintain its competitive edge. The rotation policy gives opportunities for adjusting staff expertise to programme demands, but also poses threats of loss of focus and organisational memory.

MITIGATION STRATEGY: Maintain a competitive compensation package, be proactive in succession planning for international staff, and further sharpen COL's professional image to attract high-calibre people. Maintain effective Knowledge Management systems to sustain organisational memory.

Managing Expectations

COL is a small organisation with a large jurisdiction. Over the years, it has also established a reputation for fulfilling its promises and delivering results within record timeframes. This has raised stakeholder expectations. It is important to ensure that COL continues to retain the goodwill and respect of its stakeholders with its modest means.

RISK: Not being able to deliver on the long wish-lists of Member States may adversely affect the reputation and credibility of COL.

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MITIGATION STRATEGY: Keep Member States apprised of COL's specific mission and mandate so that demands are focused on its areas of competence. Use COL's country action plans to help Members stay focused on the initiatives approved for the present Three-Year Plan. Stagger the volume of activities across and beyond the Three-Year Plan to address resource challenges.

Emerging Issues

COL has re-invented itself constantly to respond to the changing needs of Member States and to changing technologies. It must remain abreast of emerging developments and trends and must shape its responses accordingly. The pace of developments and advances in technology on the one hand and the unevenness

of these developments in the developing world on the other require COL to offer low-cost and sustainable technology solutions to Member States.

RISK: Competing demands from different Member States may lead to loss of focus and result in mission drift. Inappropriate use of technology can sometimes widen the digital and gender divides.

MITIGATION STRATEGY: To be an effective learning organisation, staff members must scan both external and internal challenges and trends continually so they can respond appropriately. Integrate monitoring and evaluation at every step and level of planning and implementation. Ensure that interventions using technology suit local needs and cultural contexts (with special attention to the gender dimension) and are sustainable.

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