



Commonwealth Secretariat Board of Governors

May 2007

Report of the Commonwealth of Learning

Background

Created by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987, COL is the only international, intergovernmental organisation that focuses exclusively on enhancing access to education, training and learning through the use of information and communications technology (ICTs) and open/distance learning.

COL works with governments and institutions to expand the scope, scale and quality of learning in support of development. It assists partners in developing policy, strengthening systems, building capacity, refining models, creating materials and nurturing collaborative networks.

Starting from Amartya Sen's definition of development as freedom, COL considers that knowledge is the royal road to freedom and that expanding human learning is central to development. However, because conventional teaching methods cannot address the scale and scope of the challenge, it is vital to harness a range of educational technologies to promote learning for development.

To guide its work, COL uses a framework for development that blends the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equity and good governance.

As a small and specialised intergovernmental agency, COL emphasises partnerships in all its activities, collaborating with multilateral organisations, fostering communities of practice and nurturing regional bodies.

16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (16CCEM)

In December 2006, at their 16th triennial conference in Cape Town, Commonwealth Ministers of Education endorsed COL's Three-year Plan for 2006–2009, *Learning for Development* and the target of a Cdn\$12 million annual budget by 2008-2009.

At 16CCEM, COL presented its past work and future plans, including a comprehensive report on its work in each Commonwealth country in 2003-2006. Following discussions

with Ministers, COL has now made its Three-Year Plan operational in country-by-country action plans for 2006-2009.

COL's work was well received by Ministers and senior officials. The 16CCEM Communiqué included the following paragraphs:

- 14. Ministers complimented the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) on its work and achievements over the past three years, 2003-06. They endorsed the Plan, 'Learning for Development, 2006-09', and recognised the need to mobilise the proposed level of funding of C\$12 million for the Plan period. Ministers noted with appreciation the United Kingdom's offer to contribute 30% to the total funds provided by other Commonwealth countries for COL in the Plan period as an incentive for increased funding. They also noted the commitment of the Governments of Cyprus, India and New Zealand to increase funding to COL.*

- 15. Ministers acknowledged that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has improved access, and enhanced quality of education and training in many parts of the developing Commonwealth. The implementation of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a step in the right direction as it seeks to bridge the digital divide and encourage collaboration.*

COL's Three-Year Plan, 2006–2009: Learning for Development

COL consulted extensively with stakeholders across the Commonwealth in developing its new strategic plan for 2006–2009. It held 13 consultations involving 400+ people in all regions of the Commonwealth and commissioned six regional environmental scans by outside experts. These inputs indicated that COL should now:

- continue to focus on the global development agenda and “South-South” cooperation;
- pursue fewer activities but for longer periods and improve the monitoring and evaluation of its work;
- intensify its links with governments and strengthen partnerships with multilateral bodies;
- maintain a balance between policy advice and implementation;
- foster the responsible autonomy of staff but strengthen teamwork; and
- maintain intellectual and technical leadership and sharpen its brand image.

The 2006–2009 Plan sharpens the focus of COL's work by using an operational framework defined by sectors and results. It breaks the international development agenda into three broad sectors and identifies five initiatives in each sector as follows:

Education Sector

- Quality Assurance;
- Teacher Development;
- Open/Alternative Schooling;
- Higher Education; and
- eLearning for Education Sector Development.

Learning for Livelihoods

- Learning and Skills for Livelihoods;
- Rural and Peri-Urban Community Development;
- National and International Community Development;
- Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth; and
- Transnational Programmes.

Human Environment

- Gender and Development;
- Health, Welfare and Community Development;
- Environmental Education;
- Good Governance; and
- Educational Use of Mass Media and ICTs.

In each sector, in light of individual country needs, COL seeks results in the form of policies, systems, and models and materials, defining outputs, outcomes and impacts for its work with appropriate performance indicators. These are summarised in the Corporate Logic Model annexed to this report.

www.col.org/colweb/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/docs/COL_Logic_Model.pdf

COL achieves impact by promoting powerful models for applying technology to learning. In 2006-2009 it will help countries create wider access to schooling, improve the health of their citizens, increase farmers' incomes, and link learning to better livelihoods. Continuing analysis and refinement of these models ensure that they can be transferred intelligently from one country to another. COL empowers governments, institutions and individuals to develop learning systems themselves without always relying on donors. The new Plan extends that process of empowerment.

Funding

COL's core budget comes from voluntary contributions of Commonwealth member states. The six largest donors are Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom but COL much appreciates the financial support that it receives from all contributing Commonwealth countries. So far, some 30 countries have made voluntary

contributions in 2006-2007. This is up from 27 in 2005-2006 and COL is particularly grateful for the new and increased contributions recently received. The UK's incentive offer that was presented at 16CCEM continues from past arrangements, and commitments to increase funding from Cyprus and New Zealand had been communicated to COL earlier in the year. India announced at the Ministers' meeting that it would raise its contribution to COL from Rs 24 million to Rs 40 million (about Cdn\$1 million), a 66% increase.

So far COL is on target to achieve the Cdn\$12 million budget approved by 16CCEM by the end of the triennium. As COL approaches its twentieth anniversary it is attracting increased partnership funding from external sources, most recently the Hewlett Foundation and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, but core funding from Commonwealth governments is still vital. The 16th CCEM urged all Commonwealth member governments to renew or increase their financial support to enable COL to continue its strong contributions towards *Learning for Development*.

Examples of COL's work

COL's purpose is to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use a variety of technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development. COL has a particular focus on open and distance learning (ODL) because it has proven its cost-effectiveness in many countries through economies of scale, country-wide geographical reach and flexibility.

The following examples of COL's work are arranged by Commonwealth region although many of them are carried out in countries in several or all regions.

Asia

COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3 Farmers) programme takes aim at the fundamental Millennium Development Goal of poverty reduction. The programme began in India (Tamil Nadu) and is now being transferred to Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and Sri Lanka.

The simple but effective L3 Farmers model starts at the grassroots by getting the farmers to define their vision of a better future and the questions it raises. Local information providers then work together to answer those questions using commercial village ICT kiosks as a communications channel. The prospect of a more prosperous village encourages banks and businesses to get involved.

In one Tamil Nadu village, for example, the farmers decided that better dairying was the way to a more prosperous future. Their first question was how to tell a good milk cow from a poor one. The information providers came up with a checklist which some of the village women, who had learned some web programming skills, put into an instructional sequence on the ICT kiosk.

This generated other learning needs, such as testing the quality of the milk, because the bank, before loaning money for purchasing better cows, got a dairy company in the local town to guarantee regular purchases of good quality milk.

After two years results are good. Loans of \$200,000 have been made with a repayment rate of more than 100% (some are repaid early). Hundreds more loans are in preparation.

The farmers, 60% of whom are women, are visibly more prosperous and more empowered. The best success indicator is that the model is now spreading spontaneously from village to village without COL's involvement.

Africa

COL's Media Empowerment programme addresses the three Millennium Development Goals related to health. It began and continues in Africa (The Gambia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland and Tanzania and) but has now been adopted in Asia (India, Sri Lanka), the Pacific (Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands) and the Caribbean (Barbados, Guyana) as well.

The model is to equip local NGOs, usually identified as effective by the World Health Organization, with video production and editing equipment and to provide them with intensive training. They then shoot and edit videos on health matters (HIV/AIDS education and stigma, malaria, diabetes), which communicate very effectively because they are made by the people for the people.

To reach the audience, the NGOs use mass media where available but have also evolved an approach called "village cinema". They go to a village at night, hang up a sheet between two trees, and show the video using a projector powered by a generator on a pick-up truck. In The Gambia, for example, an estimated 60% of the total population have seen these videos and the Government believes they have had a substantial impact on reducing HIV transmission and increasing the numbers using insecticide-treated bed nets. It is effective and inexpensive. COL refreshes the equipment from time to time but otherwise this is development without donors.

Caribbean

On behalf of Commonwealth Ministers of Education, COL is coordinating the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). Ministers conceived this idea at 14CCEM and endorsed a proposal for it at 15CCEM. Twenty six countries are now actively engaged in making the VUSSC a reality. Those in the Caribbean include Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Vincent & the Grenadines and Trinidad & Tobago. COL particularly appreciates the support of Mauritius, Singapore and Trinidad & Tobago, which have hosted the 'boot camps' that are held to launch programme development in each new subject area.

VUSSC countries have chosen to focus on creating postsecondary, skills-related courses in areas such as tourism, entrepreneurship, professional development, disaster management and a range of technical and vocational subjects. These non-proprietary, electronically-held course materials, which can readily be adapted to the specific context of each country, are used in the offering of credit-bearing qualifications in the countries' postsecondary institutions, strengthening their educational capacity and outreach. Small states thus become active contributors to global development and leaders in educational reform through the innovative use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). The VUSSC is throwing a wide bridge across the digital divide.

Pacific

Pacific countries are also involved in the initiatives listed above (L3 Farmers – Papua New Guinea; Media Empowerment – Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands; and VUSSC – Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tuvalu, Vanuatu).

In addition COL has facilitated the creation of the Pacific Association for Technical and Vocational Education and Training and the creation of some basic skills courses which are being passed from island to island with whatever translation and versioning is required. Courses in 'Working with Timber' and "Working with Concrete' are already in use in a number of countries. A new course, 'Working with Small Engines (Outboards)' has just been completed. These courses are in simple formats but they have had a very positive impact. Again, the model is effective and inexpensive.

Pan-Commonwealth

COL's Pan-Commonwealth initiatives facilitate the development of an important programme by local institutions and then encourage its adoption elsewhere.

The Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme was developed with COL's help by the four open universities of South Asia and is now being offered in Malaysia, being adopted by Nigeria and attracting interest from the Caribbean and Papua New Guinea.

A Diploma Programme for TVET teachers developed in Jamaica has been completed by teachers in the Bahamas and St. Kitts and has now been adapted for Ghana.

Sharing know-how is equally important. Here COL is helping to promote two developments that are vital for advancing the educational agenda defined by the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All framework. To improve teacher education (both at a distance and face-to-face) it has developed Pan-Commonwealth Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Teacher Education. Given the rapidly growing demand for secondary education, COL is documenting the experience of open schooling to help countries and development agencies assess its potential for responding to this need.

COL is recognised as a foremost source of knowledge on open, distance and technology-mediated learning. As a leader in the fast-evolving field of knowledge management, COL also continues to develop its internal systems to organise information from its own work and support partners. COL also maintains an information resource centre and publishes ODL resources through a variety of media.

COL works with international experts and agencies to provide suggestions and information on copyright so that Commonwealth Governments may take action to implement education-friendly legislation that makes access to learning content affordable for more people. It is also supporting the use of free and open source software (FOSS) and has established a learning object repository (LOR) which, when searched, automatically includes a number of learning content databases from around the world.

This year, COL has launched WikiEducator (www.wikieducator.org) and its use is growing rapidly with the number of registered users passing the 600 mark and number of visits per month now exceeding 20,000. WikiEducator creates online communities whose members participate from remote locations to create educational content collaboratively (e.g. the VUSSC and other free educational content), and to plan conferences and other events. The site provides an online transnational workspace for a variety of educational purposes and is free for anyone to use. All materials submitted to WikiEducator are licensed under the Creative Commons CC-BY-SA 2.5 copyright license which permits copying, editing and free reuse of the materials, with attribution.

Conclusion

Although it is a tiny intergovernmental body, not a donor agency, COL has helped Commonwealth countries give millions of people new opportunities to learn over the two decades of its existence. The secret of its success is to empower governments, institutions and individuals to develop learning systems themselves without relying on donors.

Further information:

www.col.org

www.col.org/3yp0609

www.col.org/reporting

www.thecommonwealth.org/document/157817/cape_town_communique.htm

March 30, 2007