



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

DRAFT  
**STRATEGIC PLAN**  
**2021-2027**

*Learning for Sustainable Development*

**10 November 2020**

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# 1. CONTEXT

## 1.1 Foundations

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was established in 1987 by Commonwealth Heads of Government ‘...to create and widen access to opportunities for learning, making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education. COL’s activities will...strengthen member countries’ capacities to develop the human resources...’ (MOU, CHOGM 1988, amended 1995).

Giving people the opportunity to learn helps accelerate progress towards achieving global development goals and contributing to the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

COL has established its reputation as a relevant, responsive and results-oriented organisation by re-inventing itself to meet the needs of its stakeholders. In its first decade, the primary focus was on expanding and improving access to higher education using open and distance learning (ODL). COL aligned itself to the Millennium Development Goals in its second decade, when the focus was on achieving universal primary education and reducing poverty. This involved training more teachers while also expanding informal learning opportunities for improved livelihoods and better health. In its third decade, marked by the global commitment to sustainable development, COL advocated the use of distance learning and technologies to achieve improved outcomes in education, skills development and lifelong learning for all.

Over the last 30 years, COL has undergone a clear progression from higher education, teacher training and secondary schooling in the formal education sector to non-formal and informal learning related to skills development, farming and gender equality. COL has responded positively to global trends and the evolving needs of its stakeholders.

Using various technologies, COL promotes ‘learning for sustainable development’. Learning must lead to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. In its fourth decade, marked by pandemics, natural and widening inequalities, COL will utilise technologies that are available, accessible and affordable to close the digital divide. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the acceptance of technologies as a viable means of keeping the doors of learning open and the future will be digital. COL will build on these foundations to provide bold and imaginative solutions to Member States for building robust and resilient systems of education and training ready to withstand future risks and uncertainties. A targeted approach tailored to suit specific contexts will be deployed. Innovations will be key to achieving both speed and scale.

## 1.2 Key Issues of Our Time

The magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis caught the world unawares. As institutions closed and in-person teaching was disrupted, alternative and innovative approaches were needed more than ever before. Member States are facing a shared set of challenges, brought about by demographic changes, social and economic inequities, technological disruption, climate change and lack of progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The Commonwealth is home to 2.4 billion **people**, half of them female. Sixty percent is under 29 years, and youth unemployment is high and likely to be further exacerbated. COL will need to develop strategies for skilling and reskilling diverse constituencies for the changing world of work. Lifelong learning which takes place in formal, non-formal and informal settings will become a key priority.

The growing social and economic **inequality** affects people's ability to access learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the need for equitable access to education and training. UNESCO estimates that 11 million girls may drop out of school because of the pandemic. Persons with Disabilities (PWD) are expected to be further marginalised. COL's tested models of ODL will provide viable options to address issues of social justice.

Rapid developments in **technology** have the potential to transform teaching and learning or further widen the digital divide. Artificial Intelligence, AR/VR and online tools can provide personal support and at the same time reach large numbers. COL will promote digital transformation by using technologies that are appropriate to the context and affordable to those at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

**Climate change** is resulting in a range of disasters across the Commonwealth, especially in the small states. Climate change has an adverse impact on education systems, and educational infrastructure too can contribute to increasing carbon emissions. ODL can combat this negative influence as a distance learner has about one third the carbon footprint of her campus counterpart. COL will provide training for 'blue' and 'green' economies and work with partners to promote environmental conservation and build resilient systems able to withstand natural disasters.

COL believes that ODL will be key to achieving **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)** which aims to '*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*' by 2030. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major setbacks to achieving the targets of SDG4 and the existing 'learning crisis' is expected to become worse than ever. Better systems of education that lead to improved learning outcomes will be needed if the targets of SDG 4 are to be achieved.

As a response to the pandemic, the world had to pivot overnight to distance education without adequate preparation, resources or capacity. COL will play a crucial role by building on its expertise and experience to support Member States to integrate a blend of distance and in-person learning into their systems for increased access, improved quality and lower costs.

Even as many more players in technology have emerged today, COL will maintain its unique leadership position by developing innovations and solutions that address the needs of the most remote and marginalised communities in the Commonwealth.

### **1.3 Developing the Plan**

Local, national and regional consultations around the Commonwealth have enabled COL to identify needs and priorities that are critical to Member States. Different stakeholders have diverse needs according to their own goals and agenda. By consulting these different constituencies, COL is able to make strategic choices to achieve maximum impact.

Consultations were held with the COL Board of Governors who represent key stakeholders within the Commonwealth. Regional meetings were convened to consult Focal Points nominated by Ministers of Education. An external evaluation of the current Strategic Plan (2015-2021) provides recommendations for future directions for COL.

#### **Board of Governors**

The Board recommended that COL retain successful elements of the Strategic Plan 2015-2021 and focus on the immediate needs of Member States as they recover from the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Members encouraged COL to explore new paradigms and establish coalitions and partnerships to bring together the public and private sectors to achieve scale.

#### **COL Focal Points**

Four regional meetings were held for Africa & the Mediterranean, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. The following needs were expressed:

- The African and Mediterranean Focal Points recognised the renewed importance of ODL and the need to support policies and build the capacity of teachers in online and technology-enabled learning. COL support would be required for improving the quality of education and establishing open schools which would be a viable option for achieving universal secondary education.
- In Asia, a holistic approach to human resource development was identified as a regional priority. Linkages between industry and the academy would lead to new models of skills development for the future of work where special emphasis should be placed on schooling and skilling women and girls.
- The emphasis in the Caribbean was on addressing boys' underperformance, providing education for migrant and displaced communities, building resilience for climate change and promoting sustainable agriculture.

- The Pacific highlighted the need for skills development for employability; youth development; the education of women and girls particularly in science subjects and training in agriculture and food security.

The common concerns that emerged across the regions were: mitigating the impact of COVID-19, building the capacity of teachers, integrating ICT into teaching and learning, skilling and re-skilling the workforce for livelihoods and reaching the unreached.

## External Evaluation

External evaluators conducted a meta-evaluation to assess the impact of the Strategic Plan 2015-2021 and concluded ‘...that COL programming over the period assessed ...was relevant, effective, and efficient. COL is having an impact in many dimensions and across several initiatives; and in many cases, where government has taken interest and is assuming more leadership, there are good reasons to believe some of the changes at the institutional and government levels are sustainable’ (p.viii).<sup>1</sup> The key recommendations relevant to the strategic planning process are:

- Setting up a new framework for achieving scale to help countries progress towards SDG 4
- Building on three pathways of change by working with governments, institutions, individuals
- Promoting gender equality with partners
- Considering long-term and larger budget projects
- Implementing longitudinal studies of impact
- Building capacity in Results Based Management (RBM) internally and with partners

In light of the consultations and recommendations COL will i) build on its expertise in ODL, TEL and play a more influential role in national policy development; ii) support the digital transformation of institutions and organisations; iii) strengthen its work in gender; iv) expand the circle of partners and v) establish a rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) implementation plan.

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<sup>1</sup><http://connect.col.org/VPOffice/Shared%20Documents/Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation/Evaluation%20Reports%20and%20Studies/COL%20Evaluation%20Report%20Stage%201-June%202020.pdf>

## 2. PROGRAMME

Within the framework of SDG4 and the priorities of Member States, COL has developed a programme that promotes ‘learning for sustainable development’. COL’s mandate is to help governments, institutions and organisations to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by using ODL and appropriate technologies.

The programme will be guided by the following goals and priorities:

### Strategic goals

- Quality education and lifelong learning for all
- Sustainable livelihoods to meet the needs of Member States
- Commonwealth cooperation

### Priorities

- Promotion of ODL, technology-enabled learning (TEL) and Open Educational Resources (OER)
- Education and training for women and girls and Persons with Disabilities (PWD)

### Programme sectors

COL will organise its work in two sectors: Education and Skills, with Gender as a cross-cutting theme.

The **Education** sector supports formal education from secondary to tertiary levels:

- Open Schooling
- Teacher Education
- Higher Education
- Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

The **Skills** sector supports formal, informal and non-formal learning:

- Technical Vocational Skills Development (TVSD)
- Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL)
- Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F)
- GIRLS Inspire

**Gender** is a cross-cutting theme that underpins the activities of both sectors.

## 2.1 Education

### Open Schooling

*‘At secondary age, students might have some subjects taught in a conventional way and others through the Open School. Every student would have a much richer range of learning opportunities than those offered by their own school’s timetable. What better way to address the motivation challenge of the adolescent years?’ (Tim Brighouse and Bob Moon, 2020)*

Globally, gross enrollment ratio at secondary level is still about 76 percent and, if universal secondary education is to be achieved, there is a need to go beyond brick and mortar solutions. Open schooling is an effective response to the rapidly increasing demand for secondary education, both as an end itself and as a route to tertiary education. It can provide skills for employment and entrepreneurship and can be conducted cost-effectively and at scale. Open schooling uses open, distance and online methods to scale up access to secondary schooling for reaching the unreached. Open Schooling is a powerful means of addressing issues of social justice by reaching out to girls, out-of-school youth and providing second chance opportunities for adults. In order to advance universal secondary education, COL will use evidence-based advocacy to mainstream this tried and tested model in more countries.

Open schooling will:

- Support the development of policies and strategies
- Develop and enhance sustainable and effective open schooling models relevant to different contexts
- Promote quality OER, including for persons with disabilities (PWD)
- Build capacity in course development, delivery and assessment
- Lead and disseminate evidence-based research

### Teacher Education

*‘Nearly 19 million more teachers are needed across the Commonwealth by 2030....’ (20<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, 2018)*

The quality and numbers of teachers remains a challenge globally. The greatest teacher shortages are in sub-Saharan Africa where about 17 million teachers are required to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030. Many Commonwealth countries are facing a ‘learning crisis’ where children are in school but not acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills. Large numbers of trained teachers are critical to addressing this challenge. Campus-based systems have not been able to accommodate the numbers of trained teachers

required. Open and distance learning can scale up quality teacher training at lower costs. Pre- and in-service teachers need constant updating of skills in curriculum, pedagogy and technology integration to improve learning outcomes. Working with partners, COL will develop innovative approaches and replicable models that can be scaled.

COL will:

- Strengthen institutional systems to use ODL, TEL and OER for scaling teacher development
- Build the capacity of policy-makers, pre- and in-service teachers and teacher-educators
- Develop quality learning resources
- Train teachers who work with Persons With Disabilities (PWD)
- Integrate gender and environmental issues into teacher education programmes

## Higher Education

*'The economic returns for higher education graduates are the highest in the entire educational system — an estimated 17 percent increase in earnings as compared with 10 percent for primary and 7 percent for secondary education.'* (Montenegro, C. E., & Patrinos, H. A., 2013).

With low participation rates in tertiary education in most Commonwealth countries, governments are seeking to improve access to quality higher education for all. The key challenges are growing demand, limited resources and relevance to contemporary needs. Open universities, online and blended approaches are viable options for increasing access and equity, improving quality and cutting the costs of education. However, these systems require thoughtful and systematic planning. Governments and institutions will need support to transform their policies and strategies to make the higher education sector more responsive, relevant and agile. Teachers will need focused capacity building in ICT integration and the adoption of new pedagogies and assessment techniques. Learners will need a curriculum that prepares them for the jobs that do not yet exist.

COL will:

- Provide support for national and institutional ODL policies and quality assurance systems
- Support the development and implementation of employability frameworks
- Build capacity to transition to online and blended delivery
- Promote the rapid design, development and delivery of quality programmes as OER
- Assist in the development of authentic assessment practices to support ODL

## Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

*‘Small states are characterized by a small population, limited human capital, and a confined land area. They face labor market and capacity constraints... and few in-country education facilities means a dearth of adequate specialization. A small workforce can affect institutional capacity, and multiple aid programs may overstretch the countries’ implementation capacity.’*

(World Bank, 2016)

The small states of the Commonwealth are diverse and most of them are vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. For most small states, a key driver for economic development—provision of and access to quality post-secondary education and training—is limited. One reason is the digital divide with unequal access to devices and connectivity. Such conditions further disadvantage marginalised groups such as learners with disabilities and those living in far flung areas. VUSSC is a unique network where small states collaborate, share resources and build capacity for strengthening their tertiary education systems.

VUSSC will:

- Develop and deliver short professional courses in skills for livelihoods especially in the blue economy sector
- Build capacity in programme design, delivery and assessment
- Support professional development in quality assurance for educators in blended and online learning
- Provide technical assistance and training in disability awareness, policy development, inclusive design and the use of assistive technologies to serve PWD
- Promote the implementation of the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF)

## 2.2 Skills

### Technical and Vocational Skills Development (TVSD)

*‘Closing the global skills gap could add US\$11.5 trillion to global GDP by 2028. Education and training systems need to keep pace with the new demands of labor markets that are continually challenged by technological disruption, demographic change and the evolving nature of work.’* (World Economic Forum, 2020)

In many Member States, unemployment and low employee productivity are chronic issues, especially for youth, PWD, and women. COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate the challenge leading to an increase in the demand for skilling and reskilling. The TVSD initiative works in

the formal, non-formal and informal sectors to support policy development and capacity building. This involves a range of stakeholders including ministries, institutions and community-based organisations. COL facilitates partner institutions to work collaboratively with industry to offer blended, online and work-based training to achieve scale and reduce costs. The nature of work is changing and online training programmes have become a viable means of skilling and reskilling the work force for the future. TVSD must be viewed as an essential element of lifelong learning.

TVSD activities will:

- Support national and institutional policy development for the use of distance and blended learning for increasing access
- Build institutional and teacher capacity for the use of online and blended learning approaches
- Support the development of quality OER
- Promote the recognition of credentials and mobility of learners across formal and non-formal sectors
- Promote skilling and re-skilling for employment and entrepreneurship, especially for youth, women and PWD.

### **Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F)**

*‘L3F is... a long-term sustainable business proposition with a great amount of social and economic returns to the clients, banks and society. This demonstrates the power of inclusive lifelong learning ...reflecting in self-confidence, self-reliance, higher quality of life and upliftment of the society.’ (NIBM, 2020)*

COL’s L3F model is based on a holistic approach to building the capacity of farming communities, especially women. It does this by linking them to institutions for upgrading their knowledge and skills, to financial institutions for accessing loans and to markets for selling the produce. As technology is central to this process, COL catalyses the linkages with providers for affordable services as most farmers learn using their basic mobile devices. This learning becomes the collateral for accessing finance. The L3F approach in Africa and South Asia shows that using ODL and ICT can build the capacity of large numbers of farmers at lower costs than conventional approaches. Social capital is central to the success of this initiative which has demonstrated that every \$1 invested has yielded a return of \$9 for the participant. These results have attracted the attention of major government and international agencies, the private sector and financial institutions. The L3F focus is to scale up at the provincial, national and regional levels to reach more farming communities and to provide them with opportunities for enhancing their livelihoods in a sustainable manner.

L3F will:

- Work with governments, the private sector, financial institutions and civil society to replicate and scale up the L3F model
- Promote sustainable farm practices with an emphasis on food security, gender equality and environmental sustainability
- Develop technology innovations for reaching the unreached with quality learning
- Establish a system of credentials to recognise informal learning
- Lead and disseminate research on the impact of L3F

### Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL)

*'We need innovation in how we deliver and teach, in how we support learners, and how we prepare our instructors, and above all in how we use technology for teaching.'* (Tony Bates, 2020)

Online platforms were the most used means by governments to deliver education while schools remained closed during the COVID-9 pandemic, with 83% of countries using this method. However, this approach potentially reached only about a quarter of school children worldwide. While the rapid advancement of digital technologies continues, many developing world citizens continue to be left behind or have low levels of participation in education and training. World Bank<sup>2</sup> data notes that only 20% of individuals in South Asia use the Internet, with 33% in Pacific small island states and 19% in Sub-Saharan Africa. The priority for COL is to develop innovative technology solutions to reach the last mile. Technology will have to be affordable, accessible and pedagogically sound. This initiative aims to i) build capacity and resources in TEL to support partners in strengthening their institutions and organisations for digital transformation and ii) train citizens in digital skills for livelihoods. This will be done through replicable models, innovations and partnerships.

The TEL initiative will:

- Support integration of ICT and OER in teaching and learning through national/institutional policy development
- Promote the adoption of innovative online programmes including the Commonwealth Digital Education Leadership Training in Action to foster digital skills

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2018). <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS>

- Support educational institutions/organisations to build their capacity in technology integration through just-in-time learning and massive open online courses (MOOCs)
- Provide digital skills training for livelihoods, including for women and girls and PWD
- Support research and innovations and document models and lessons learned.

## GIRLS Inspire

*‘...the multi-component livelihoods-centred approaches for adolescent girls which combine vocational/technical training, life skills...with building their social networks appear to hold out the greatest promise for building the subjective, cognitive and practical capabilities that will allow girls to participate more fully in decisions that affect their lives.’ (Naila Kabir, 2018)*

In the Commonwealth, significant inequalities exist between women and men in four critical areas: economic participation; educational attainment; political empowerment; and health and survival (World Economic Forum, 2014). Compared with boys/men, girls/women generally have a limited voice in decision-making and less control and access to resources. This greatly hinders the ability of women and girls to realise their full human potential. Girls are expected to be more severely disadvantaged due to the COVID crisis. GIRLS Inspire aims to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment through skills development for livelihoods. COL works with partners to build the capacity of women and girls in technical and life skills, financial and digital literacy. This holistic approach i) engages the local communities to support women and girls to undertake the training, ii) provides linkages with employers for internships and employment opportunities and iii) catalyses access to financial institutions for credit to start businesses. This initiative aligns with local and national development priorities to address gender inequality.

GIRLS Inspire will:

- Support skills training for employment and entrepreneurship
- Sensitise communities on equitable access to education/training for women and girls by raising awareness among men, boys and traditional leaders
- Train advocates to address policy gaps in gender equality and women’s empowerment
- Build capacity in social protection
- Promote links with policy makers for sustaining and scaling the project.

## 2.3 Cross-Cutting Theme

### Gender

*‘...women and men must enjoy equal opportunities, choices, capabilities, power and knowledge as equal citizens. Equipping girls and boys, women and men with the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills to tackle gender disparities is a precondition to building a sustainable future for all.’*  
(UNESCO, 2018)

Gender is a cross-cutting theme and underpins all initiatives. COL believes that targeted interventions are required to address the needs of women/girls and men/boys, where they are most disadvantaged. COL will work with ministries and institutions in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific to address the issue of boys’ academic underperformance and high drop-out rates. In some regions, such as Africa and Asia, women/girls have a limited voice in decision-making and less control and access to resources as compared to men/boys. In COL’s experience, gender mainstreaming can be an effective strategy for addressing gender inequality. Gender mainstreaming ensures that the views, interests and needs of both women and men shape policies, plans and programmes. Policy support, capacity building and advocacy using technologies are key elements for achieving gender equality especially for the most marginalised.

COL will:

- Support the development and implementation of gender mainstreaming policies in ODL
- Build capacity in gender mainstreaming
- Implement leadership training for women/girls in ICTs
- Provide training to address gender-based violence through the use of technologies
- Undertake research and develop policy briefs on gender in ODL/TEL

## 2.4 Regional Support

Recognising the diversity and spread of the Commonwealth, COL promotes the development of leadership and ODL expertise in the field through various regional centres. The activities of these centres contribute to the achievement of COL’s programme outcomes and serve to enhance COL’s visibility. COL has a regional office, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) in New Delhi. In addition, four Regional Centres are hosted by institutions in Botswana, Fiji, Malta and Nigeria, with COL providing support based on annual work plans aligned to its programme.

## **Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA)**

CEMCA promotes the use of appropriate media and technologies to serve the education and training needs of Commonwealth Asia. CEMCA aligns itself with the COL programme while retaining its regional focus. CEMCA works with a range of technologies including community radio which is an appropriate medium for reaching marginalised and remote groups.

CEMCA will:

- Build the capacity of institutions and staff in ODL, TEL and OER
- Promote the use of micro-credentials and technology-based assessment methods
- Facilitate skilling and reskilling using blended learning, especially for women and girls
- Advance the processes for recognition of prior learning in skills development with an orientation towards industry certification
- Implement innovative uses of community radio for reaching the last mile

## **Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning (3CL)**

The focus of 3CL has been on advancing connected learning through open access, digital literacy, AI, blockchain and technology-mediated solutions. Supported by the Government of Malta, 3CL leads in research in advanced technologies and builds capacity in a range of Commonwealth countries, especially small states. It is a bridge between the Commonwealth and the European Union.

## **Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD)**

Hosted by the University of the South Pacific (USP), PACFOLD aims to empower Pacific communities through lifelong learning using flexible learning approaches. The priorities include i) advocacy, capacity building and policy development in open distance and flexible learning; ii) skills development for livelihoods and iii) research.

## **Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL)**

RETRIDOL works in the five Commonwealth States in West Africa to promote the use of ODL to increase access to higher education. It is hosted by the National Open University of Nigeria in Abuja. It focuses on i) capacity building in ODL; ii) providing expertise in ODL, TEL and OER and iii) research.

## Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE)

SADC-CDE supports ODL capacity building in the Commonwealth States of the SADC sub-region. Hosted by the Botswana Open University, the Centre focuses its work on open schooling, higher education and TEL. Its activities include i) capacity building in the efficient management of ODL institutions; ii) advocacy for ODL, TEL and OER and iii) promoting collaboration and sharing of resources.

In partnership with the Regional Centres, COL will:

- Build capacity in ODL, TEL and OER
- Develop regional and national policies in ODL and flexible and blended learning
- Provide innovative models for skills training
- Support research and innovations
- Facilitate regional cooperation

### 2.5 Core Strategies

COL will employ five key strategies to enhance its impact:

- **capacity building** must result in capability development of policy makers and practitioners. It pervades all COL activities and contributes to achieving sustainable development;
- **policies** at the regional, national and institutional levels to provide an enabling framework for implementing ODL, TEL and OER;
- **models** which are tried and tested in specific contexts and are replicated further for scale and sustainability;
- **resources** include course materials, guidelines, toolkits and research publications that are available as OER;
- **partnerships** are fundamental to everything that COL does and help leverage its resources and impact. COL's circle of partners, both strategic and implementing, will be enlarged in the Commonwealth and beyond.

### 2.6 Measuring Results

COL follows a results-based management (RBM) approach to promote efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and transparency. COL will use an adaptive approach to RBM, which will allow the organisation to be flexible and responsive to evolving needs in a rapidly changing global environment. Integral to COL's RBM approach is a common 'theory of change' which will support the alignment of COL's initiatives with corporate goals.

## Theory of Change

### *The Challenge*

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) aims to achieve quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Education and skills development plays an important role in economic growth and social development, yet a large proportion of the population in developing Commonwealth countries— particularly marginalised communities, women, youth, and persons with disabilities—lack access to formal education and non-formal learning opportunities. A learning crisis exists: a large number of children are out of school; those in school are not learning; the curriculum is not aligned to contemporary needs; assessment techniques are outdated; teachers need continuous professional development. The targets of SDG4 are far from achieved<sup>3</sup> and the digital divide continues to widen inequalities.

### *The Opportunity*

The COVID 19 pandemic has forced the global community to embrace distance learning using online delivery. Historically, ODL was promoted to address issues of social justice by using technologies that were available and affordable such as print, radio and TV. Countries which already had ODL systems in place were better able to respond to institutional closures by providing distance learning materials and learner support. ODL has proved to be a solution to strengthen the resilience of education and training ecosystems in the Commonwealth, and address longstanding issues of equitable and inclusive access. COL's experience shows that open, distance and technology-enabled learning can be leveraged to increase access to quality education, skills development, and lifelong learning in times of stability and in times of crisis. There is a tremendous demand for capacity building, innovative models, enabling policy, and resources in ODL for both formal and non-formal learning. With the increased adoption of technologies, COL is well-positioned to respond to the emerging and future needs of Commonwealth Member States, institutions, and citizens.

### *The Change*

COL will focus on three pathways of change to achieve impact:

*Building National Resilience:* Enabling environments are crucial for transforming educational systems for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the recent demand for ODL, evidence-based advocacy will continue to be important. For ODL to be replicated and scaled at the national level, COL will work with governments to develop policies and strategies for harnessing the potential of ODL for education and training.

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<sup>3</sup> 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report.

*Strengthening Institutions:* Institutions and organisations are key partners in delivering education and skills training and will need capacity building in ODL, TEL and OER. Innovations will be needed to increase access to quality learning opportunities at lower costs with an emphasis on equity and inclusion.

*Improving Livelihoods:* Quality education and training enhances employability, productivity and incomes. Advocacy, awareness and targeted training helps empower communities and shifts social norms. COL will enable learners, especially from marginalised groups, to access learning opportunities and resources for livelihoods.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

The results framework provides an overview of expected outcomes and impact over six years. COL will use a participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation and work closely with partners and stakeholders to generate data and evidence. COL will put a stronger focus on research to contribute to development discourse and provide evidence for advocacy. Lessons learned will be shared internally and with stakeholders to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

### *Monitoring*

Logframes capture details of how activities and outputs lead to outcomes and impact. Data will be collected through various mechanisms for robust reporting. Regular critical reflection will lead to course-correction and a dynamic review of targets as projects evolve. The data collection approach is gender-sensitive, inclusive and follows best practice in data privacy and protection. COL will continue to build the capacity of staff and partners in RBM.

### *Evaluation*

Evaluation will be integral to each initiative to assess results and will feed into a formative mid-term evaluation to be conducted at the programme level in the third year of the Plan. COL will also undertake a summative evaluation in the fifth year of the strategic plan, to report on progress to the Board and other stakeholders and to inform the next planning process.

## **2.7 Stakeholder Engagement**

Effective stakeholder engagement enables COL to leverage its resources and to enhance its impact. COL maintains close links with a diverse range of stakeholders that include Member States, development partners, institutions, organisations, the private sector and civil society. To ensure a systematic and interactive relationship with Members States, COL has established a network of key stakeholders and platforms to increase its visibility.

## **Focal Points**

Focal Points are senior officials nominated by ministers of education to be the primary contact for COL and keep ministers briefed about activities in their respective countries. The Focal Points provide guidance on country priorities to enable COL to respond effectively. Regional and in-country meetings are held with Focal Points to keep them apprised of COL's work.

COL will align its work with national priorities by regular engagement with Focal Points.

## **COL Chairs**

COL Chairs supplement COL's programme through academic and intellectual contributions by conducting research in COL's fields of competence. The Chairs are renowned experts and serve as ambassadors and advocates of COL.

COL will strengthen this network to promote innovation and thought leadership for quality education and training.

## **Youth Internship**

COL supports young citizens of the Commonwealth to augment their knowledge and gain valuable work experience in preparation for careers in education/ international development. COL in turn will benefit from their contributions to assigned projects. The internships can be taken up either remotely or in-person at COL headquarters in Canada or its regional office CEMCA, India.

Cultivating the talent of the next generation of professionals will help secure our common future.

## **CommonwealthWiseWomen**

CommonwealthWiseWomen is a mentorship platform that links eminent and successful women professionals with girls and women in underserved communities across the Commonwealth. The aim is to empower girls and women to succeed in their field of interest and take up leadership roles. Empowering women and girls will be critical in achieving sustainable development.

## **OpenDoor**

COL created OpenDoor, an international partnership to support ministries and institutions to access innovative solutions to ensure that learning continues even in the face of pandemics and natural disasters. This network of partners which includes institutions, organisations and the private sector has become a major platform for online training, pooling resources, sharing expertise and facilitating collaborative projects.

OpenDoor will strengthen partnerships and promote resource-sharing through a common gateway.

## Country Reports

Country Reports summarise COL's work in each Member State and are prepared every three years and presented at the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers. Programme data is disaggregated country-wise to prepare the reports which are a valuable source of information on what COL has done in each country. These reports help COL to balance in-depth country activities with regional and pan-Commonwealth coverage.

COL will provide these reports at the mid-term and the final year of this Strategic Plan.

## Communications

In communicating with its stakeholders, COL leverages a range of approaches to promote its brand and boost engagement. The Communications Strategy aims to advance COL's global reputation and leadership in ODL, technology and sustainable development. COL is continuing to increase its use of media to reach diverse audiences with differential access to technologies. An important element is to ensure that stakeholders know what COL does and understand how to benefit from COL's expertise and resources. This involves communicating clear and targeted messages.

COL will:

- Engage ministries and development partners on an ongoing basis
- Build the COL brand by focusing on disseminating results and innovations
- Create a lively communications culture at COL
- Harness the potential of a range of media to reach unreached stakeholders
- Promote Commonwealth values and cooperation.

## Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning and COL Awards

COL's flagship event, the Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF), held every three years, is recognised as one of the world's top international conferences on learning for sustainable development. Co-hosted with local partners in different regions of the Commonwealth, the Forum attracts hundreds of delegates from across the globe. A key highlight is the presentation of COL's Excellence in Distance Education Awards (EDEA) to institutions and organisations that have made outstanding contributions to education and development. COL also recognises eminent men and women from the Commonwealth and confers the title, Honorary Fellow of the Commonwealth of Learning.

COL will continue to support PCF for increased collaboration, networking and exchange of ideas and innovations.

## 3. MANAGING FOR RESULTS

COL values and maintains an organisational culture that is respectful, ethical and fair. COL has zero-tolerance towards incidents of violence or abuse against children or adults, including sexual exploitation, committed either by employees or others affiliated with its work. COL is committed to creating a safeguarding environment where potential risks are identified, considered and minimised with clear processes and procedures in place for redressal.

In order to achieve the expected results in this Plan, COL needs efficient and effective governance combined with prudent financial management, dedicated human resources and state-of-the art technology services to meet future needs. High-level risks have been identified and will be monitored and mitigated on an ongoing basis.

### 3.1 Governance

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) by Commonwealth Governments under which COL was established provides for a Board of Governors with general responsibility for determining the principles, policies and practices that guide its activities. Membership consists of a maximum of 17 members—the Chair, up to nine major donors’ representatives, one regional representative from each of the four regions—Africa, Asia, Caribbean and the Pacific, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Secretary-General’s appointee and the President of COL (ex-officio). Current membership on the Board of Governors is shown in Appendix (to be added).

In fulfilment of its accountability to Member States, COL reports to the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) held triennially and to the foreign ministers at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings (CHOGM) held biennially.

### 3.2 Financial Resources

COL is funded by voluntary contributions from Member States and has seen a gradual increase in its funding over the last decade. However, this level of support cannot be taken for granted and COL must continue to merit the confidence of its stakeholders by delivering effectively on its strategic plan. Global pandemics, economic recessions and natural disasters make resource planning a high-risk proposition and the continued support of Member States will be critical in achieving the results proposed in this Plan.

Additional contributions is another revenue stream for specific projects and fee-for-service activities. These enable COL to advance its mission and deepen its work in-country. Over the last six years, additional contributions comprised 15% of total revenues and COL will aspire to maintain this proportion going forward. In-kind contributions from partners support

activities in the field and expand COL’s reach and impact. Adequate reserves will be maintained to respond to unexpected events.

Through prudent financial management, value for money and operational efficiencies COL will seek to do more with less. COL will continue to address the education and training priorities of Member States for sustained contributions.

Table: Funding Received for the 2015-2021 Strategic Plan (figures to be finalised)

Source (CAD) in millions	Total Received for 2015-2021 to date*
Voluntary contributions	\$60
Additional/miscellaneous	13
Total	\$73

*Figures to September 30, 2020\**

### *Project Coordination Unit*

COL will build on its reputation of quality service, reliability, and value for money to diversify its additional contributions. The project coordination unit will coordinate externally-funded projects and seek new sources of funding. This will include eLIO, which partners with international organisations to meet their human resource development needs by providing customised learning services on a fee-for-service basis. Designated teams will be assigned the responsibility for implementing projects and fee-for-service activities. A Steering Committee will have oversight of the projects, its finances and timely implementation.

Delivering on COL’s Strategic Plan will require stable levels of voluntary funding from Commonwealth Member States, especially major donors, where multi-year funding agreements will be mission-critical.

### **3.3 Human Resources**

Human resources are COL’s greatest asset. COL is committed to recruiting talent from around the Commonwealth with professional merit as the primary requirement. COL also draws on expertise in the field through short-term consultancies to achieve its objectives. COL will continue to operate with a small core staff at its Headquarters in Canada and CEMCA, India within the framework of a rotation policy. A focus on succession planning, ongoing professional development and effective knowledge transfer will be key to smooth transitions. COL recognises the need to be flexible and will adjust its recruitment policies to the changing requirements of the global workplace.

COL will continue to promote a culture of performance by implementing a robust Performance Management framework. HR Policies and Procedures will be reviewed regularly to ensure that COL remains an employer of choice that can attract and retain the best available talent.

COL adheres to non-discrimination and equal opportunities in all its recruitment policies. COL ensures a safe working environment based on inclusion and respect for diversity.

### **3.4 Technology and Innovation**

As a specialised organisation, COL invests in innovations and alternative approaches to achieve scale, equity and inclusion. Affordable and appropriate technologies are used in innovative ways to ensure that no one is left behind. Cloud computing, AI, AR/VR and blockchain have major implications for teaching and learning and COL will remain ahead of these developments to provide context-specific advice and support to stakeholders. The value chain from innovation to impact passes through different phases that include research, testing, implementation and dissemination. COL's unique contribution will be to 'domesticate' advanced technologies to serve the learning needs of the most disadvantaged communities around the Commonwealth.

COL will:

- Identify, build and deploy innovations in learning technologies to reduce inequities
- Engage in research and analysis on emerging technologies
- Provide technical advice to stakeholders in adopting learning technologies
- Facilitate access to resources and information services
- Deploy appropriate technology, platform solutions and services at COL and for partners.

### **3.6 Risk Management**

As an organisation funded by voluntary contributions from Member States, COL operates in a high-risk environment. This is further exacerbated by the emergence of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters. The four categories of risk identified—strategic, operational, financial and external—will continue to be assessed regularly to mitigate the possibility of negative long-term impacts to the organisation.

*Strategic risks* could arise from the inability to achieve COL's mission and mandate and lead to serious disruptions to the organisation's work and viability. COL will achieve impact as a high-performing and ethical organisation with a robust safeguarding policy, maintain strategic communications with ministers of education, development partners and key stakeholders and demonstrate thought leadership in emerging technologies.

*Operational risks* could result from inadequate or failed internal processes, people or systems. COL will recruit and retain talent, have a succession management system in place and nurture a network of experts in the field by maintaining a rewarding and safe work culture and flexible approach. Systems will be updated regularly to ensure that COL remains fit for purpose.

*Financial risks* are associated with funding, financial transactions and compliance requirements. COL will aim to maintain current sources of funding, diversify where possible and ensure adequate reserves are available. A clear tone from the top, due diligence and effective controls which are monitored regularly will serve to address financial risks.

*External risks* are those that arise from events outside the control of the organisation but can have a negative impact. These include disruption to services due to pandemics, political upheavals or natural disasters. COL will be agile and responsive in dealing with such crises. As a resilient organisation, with a strong base of people and resources, COL will be prepared to face an uncertain future.



# Results Framework 2021–2027

**Vision:** To be the foremost global agency that promotes learning for sustainable development

**Mission:** To help governments, institutions and organisations to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by using open, distance and technology-enabled learning

**Strategies:** Partnerships, capacity, resources, models and policies

