

COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION BRIEFING NOTES

Prepared by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education

A grouping of voluntary and professional bodies committed to education development in the Commonwealth

No. 4. COMMONWEALTH CO-OPERATION IN DISTANCE LEARNING

A precondition for human, social or economic development is an education and training system accessible to all—as recognised by the United Nations' eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the six Education for All (EFA, Dakar) targets.

The basic development agenda of improving health and reducing poverty and hunger calls for learning on a massive scale, with the focus on improving livelihoods and fostering a healthy population. Recruiting and training teachers is a major obstacle to the achievement of the vital “universal primary education” MDG; Africa alone must recruit and train five million additional teachers in the next 10 years to reach that goal.

Open and distance learning (ODL) helps enable people to learn or train at the location, time and pace of their choice, for less money and with improved results.

Over the past decades, governments and learning institutions have recognised that the financial resources available for conventional schooling cannot increase commensurately with population growth, or adequately cope with the need to train human capital through face-to-face education methods alone. Some three million Commonwealth citizens are already engaged in some form of distance learning today, undergoing education, training, retraining, learning and reskilling in a variety of disciplines through a multitude of providers, and these numbers are rapidly rising.

Historically, the Commonwealth is a pioneer in the development and growth of ODL. In the 1970s and 1980s, large and successful Commonwealth institutions such as the UK Open University, India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (now the Open University of Hong Kong), the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Canada's Athabasca University transformed the old-style “correspondence course” into quality education and training systems, using a learner-centred and learner-supported approach to instructional design. These and other Commonwealth institutions utilised information and communications technology (ICT) such as radio, television and recorded media for education and training, and today remain early adopters of the latest computer and Internet-mediated learning technologies.

Alongside such “single-mode” distance learning institutions, more and more traditional education institutions have been offering distance learning alternatives and technology-enhanced programming, converting to fully-fledged “dual-mode” facilities.

In 1987 Commonwealth Heads of Government received a report entitled, *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning* (Commonwealth Co-operation in Distance Education and Open Learning, a Report by a Commonwealth Group of Experts, chaired by Lord Briggs of Lewes). Based on the report's findings, leaders agreed to establish a Commonwealth institution to encourage the development and

Defining open and distance learning

In recent years the definition and application of open and distance learning have been evolving in parallel with the arrival of newer and intelligent technologies. Today, and in the foreseeable future, open and distance education embraces any or all of the following:

- *Open learning* – policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning. These policies need not be part of a distance education system but are complementary to it.
- *Distance education* – the delivery of learning or training to those who are separated mostly by time and space from those who are teaching or training. The teaching is done with a variety of “mediating processes”^{*} used to transmit content, to provide tuition and to conduct assessment or measure outcomes.
- *Flexible learning* – the provision of learning opportunities that can be accessed at any place and time. Flexible learning relates more to the scheduling of activities than to any particular delivery mode.^{*}
- *Online learning and e-learning* – terms that have emerged to describe the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance distance education, implement open learning policies, make learning activities more flexible and enable those learning activities to be distributed among many learning venues.^{*}
- *Virtual education* – includes aspects of both online and e-learning but goes somewhat further. While it is largely web-centric it does not necessarily limit itself to learners outside a conventional classroom. It uses multimedia and, besides delivering content, also enables a high level of interaction among learners, content, teachers, peers and administration both synchronously and asynchronously.

^{*}Farrell, Glen (ed.). 2003. *A Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*. Vancouver: The Commonwealth of Learning.

sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies—the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). Their vision was that this agency should be in the vanguard of using ODL and ICT developments to meet the Commonwealth’s education and training needs, helping member states optimise their potential and develop their human capital through extending quality education access to remote regions, and to people with limited or no face-to-face learning options.

COL became operational in 1989. From the beginning, COL has received a significant overall level of funding, co-operation and support from developing countries. More than a decade since COL’s inception, Commonwealth Heads of Government and Ministers of Education recognise that it is in part due to the efforts of COL and a wide international network of partners, that distance education is now part of the mainstream of education and training. Today there is at least one distance learning operation in each of the Commonwealth’s member states, including middle and lower-income countries.

More recently, Commonwealth leaders pledged to strengthen their networks of co-operation to promote greater development for developing member countries at the 2005 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malta. The *Malta Declaration on Networking the Commonwealth for Development* reaffirms using ICT to bridge the digital divide among the Commonwealth’s developed and developing countries, recognising that developing countries face challenges in using technology effectively. In a separate Communiqué issued at the end of CHOGM 2005, Commonwealth leaders expressed appreciation for the work of Commonwealth agencies such as COL, specifically noting COL’s efforts toward establishing a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

As more governments have realised the importance of distance education and have begun to implement ODL strategies and systems, COL’s work has evolved to reflect their changing priorities:

- Whereas advocacy and policy development for ODL was a priority in COL’s first decade of operations, COL now helps governments implement and maintain ODL systems.
- An earlier focus on formal education has expanded to a broader concern for learning for development that includes attention to health and livelihoods.
- With distance learning relatively well established in higher education, COL now focuses particular attention on open schooling at the secondary and primary levels.

COL Mission Statement

The Commonwealth of Learning helps governments and institutions to expand the scope, scale and quality of learning by using new approaches. COL promotes policies and systems to make innovation sustainable and works with international partners to build models, create materials, enhance organisational capacity and nurture networks that facilitate learning in support of development goals.

While much has been achieved, there is still tremendous need. As defined in the EFA and MDG declarations, education is one of the best development strategies to break the human cycle of poverty, misery and violence. ODL, coupled with the strategic application of ICT, can play a central role in delivering education at every level to all, and in providing them with the necessary tools for a more productive future.

About COL

Headquartered in Vancouver, Canada, COL is the only official Commonwealth agency located outside the United Kingdom and is the world’s only intergovernmental organisation solely concerned with the promotion and development of distance education and open learning. COL helps developing Commonwealth countries increase their access to learning using distance education and appropriate technologies, particularly in the areas of higher education; teacher training; schooling; and non-formal learning. COL’s goals also include maximising the transfer of information, ideas, innovations and resources to support the ongoing, rapid evolution of ODL itself.

Programming

All 53 Commonwealth member countries benefit from COL’s work, which addresses the key learning and development challenges associated with the UN’s MDG and EFA targets such as gender equity, sustainable development, environmental protection and civil rights; as well as the Commonwealth objectives of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

COL’s greatest impact is in giving the Commonwealth’s citizens more access to quality education and training through open, distance and eLearning, thereby enabling them to benefit from improved livelihoods, greater gender equity, and overall economic, social and cultural development.

Since becoming operational, COL has:

- helped introduce, or enhance, hundreds of teaching/training programmes;
- influenced the development of open schools and universities;
- conducted training seminars and studies on specific educational needs;
- established an extensive network of education and technology specialists around the world; and
- facilitated systemic changes in the delivery of education, including related government policy.

Going forward, COL will:

- work on behalf of giving developing countries greater input to international ICT networks and resources, currently dominated by the interests of more developed countries;
- prioritise promoting open, affordable access to education materials, including addressing issues of copyright related to distribution and availability of education resources;
- provide cost-effective, quality distance education options for developing countries dealing with a proliferation of for-profit distance education organisations, not all of them legitimate; and helping establish local, national and regional quality assurance standards;

- continue to champion the implementation of emerging ICT such as affordable, portable personal computers and alternative power sources such as solar power, in providing education access to remote or less developed regions;
- continue to focus on the global development agenda and South-South co-operation, intensifying COL's links with governments and strengthening partnerships with multilateral bodies;
- maintain a balance between policy advice and implementation, pursuing fewer activities but for longer periods and improving the monitoring and evaluation of COL's work;
- foster the responsible autonomy of staff but strengthen teamwork, maintaining intellectual and technical leadership and sharpening COL's brand image.

While often drawing upon the experience and expertise of the Commonwealth's industrialised countries, COL strives to develop South-South co-operation. Its streamlined core staff allows it to target resources and activities more efficiently to the needs of individual countries, using collaborative networking to foster regional co-operation and exchanges.

COL helps countries develop policies and systems that extend the benefits of education to more of their citizens. It works with institutional and individual partners to give policy advice and to implement programme activities in consultation with governments, and provides best practice examples that demonstrate how ODL can help education opportunities expand more rapidly. COL is not itself a funding body.

In the area of knowledge provision, COL strives to "level the playing field" by developing and running systems that enable policy-makers, educators and learners in the world's poorest countries to access information and knowledge on par with that available to people in the wealthy G8 countries. COL produces research publications, start-up guides and online resources for governments, institutions and practitioners.

Partners

COL works in close association with Commonwealth governments in a spirit of equality and participation, and operates through a wide range of partnerships. It seeks to create mutually beneficial linkages, especially of a South-South character, between Commonwealth countries. Key partners are the organisations linked to the United Nations (e.g., UNESCO, WHO and the World Intellectual Property Organization) and the Commonwealth, including the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Federation of Commonwealth Open and Distance Learning Associations (FOCODLA); as well as regional governmental organisations such as the Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Southern African Development Community (SADC).

COL also has strong networks of partners in its various areas of activity. In education, these include the Commonwealth's distance-teaching universities, open schools, SchoolNets, and regional centres for distance education such as the Regional Training and Research Institute for

Examples of COL's work, 2003-2006

- Introducing ODL capacity in institutions previously delivering training and education through conventional modes, such as the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) in India and the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT).
- Improving and extending the capacity of the National Teachers Institute (NTI) in Nigeria and the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) in India, and mobilising NIOS as a resource for the development of open schooling systems in other countries.
- Establishing the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, a collaborative network for creating open educational resources for work-related learning created at the request of Commonwealth Ministers of Education.
- Brokering proven distance learning programmes already offered around the Commonwealth, including COL's eLearning for International Organisations programme that is assisting a growing number of major international organisations to solve training challenges by employing the power and flexibility of distance and technology mediated learning.
- Developing and delivering eLearning courses to staff in agencies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Bank, and transforming technical guides developed by these organisations into effective learning materials.
- Developing and administering distance education scholarship programmes, as well as technical /vocational and business development scholarship programmes, with partners such as the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).
- Helping improve the rural economy with initiatives such as COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3 Farmers) programme, which implements projects that combine the social mobilisation of villagers; use of commercial ICT kiosks; organisation of information providers into consortia; and integration of commercial banks.
- Working with World Health Organization (WHO) country offices in South Africa, Swaziland, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Sri Lanka to identify local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) committed to improving the health of disadvantaged groups. COL supplies ODL skills with cost-effective audio and video production technology to enable the NGOs to reach all levels of society with culturally and linguistically appropriate health information, through radio, television and village cinema events.
- Increasing capacity for distance learning in countries as diverse as The Gambia, India, Lesotho, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. In Zambia, COL worked to formulate a strategy for using ODL and ICT in both pre- and in-service teacher development.
- Sponsoring an annual workshop series in Singapore on teacher education, for administrators from all countries of the Commonwealth.
- Raising education standards, by developing Commonwealth quality assurance guidelines with partners in Asia and Africa.
- Developing and implementing ODL policy development in The Gambia and Sierra Leone.

Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDOL) and SADC Distance Education Centre (SADC-CDE). For its work on rural livelihoods, COL has productive links with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and its associated bodies. It sustains links with NGOs in many countries and has an important relationship with the Hewlett Foundation for developing open educational resources.

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Structure

COL is governed by an international Board of Governors chaired by Mr. Lewis Perinbam, a former Vice President of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) who has represented the World Bank at the United Nations and was sometime Secretary General of the Canadian National Commission for UNESCO and the World University Service of Canada.

The current President and Chief Executive Officer is Sir John Daniel, formerly Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO and Vice Chancellor of the UK Open University from 1990 to 2001.

With some 40 employees distributed between its headquarters in Vancouver, Canada and the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi, India, COL reflects the cultural diversity and breadth of the Commonwealth. Senior staff members, who serve on rotation, are recruited from around the Commonwealth in a wide range of distance education and administrative fields.

COL's core operations are financed by voluntary pledges of funds from Commonwealth governments. It is hosted in Canada by the Government of Canada. The six major voluntary contributors, currently Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom, have representatives on COL's Board of Governors.

COL's annual budget remains modest for a Commonwealth institution tasked with its broad mandate. COL obtains resources for its work in two ways. Its core financing comes in the form of voluntary contributions from Commonwealth governments. However, the sum of the voluntary contributions from governments has never reached the notional level of CDN\$9 million endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government in Durban in 1999. For this reason, COL augments its budget from other sources. There is also significant "in kind" support from COL's partners.

Three-year Plan, 2006–2009

Learning for Development is the theme for COL's Three-year Plan, 2006–2009. Predicated on the concept of development as a process of increasing the freedoms that people experience, the plan's overall objective is to increase and improve the quality and quantity of human learning as key to addressing development targets

The Three-year Plan incorporates specific country action proposals, crafted in consultation with each government to match national priorities with particular COL initiatives. This process provides greater transparency, and gives stakeholders a better understanding of COL's contribution.

COL assesses proposed activities with a "6R" filter, namely by examining the relevance, results, reach, regions, resources and relationships involved with a particular activity, matched to Commonwealth priorities, COL's mandate, and current Three-year Plan.

COL's work is grouped into three activity sectors:

- *Education* – helping countries increase access to quality education at all levels by focusing on quality assurance, teacher development, alternative forms of schooling, new approaches to higher education, and the creation of expertise in eLearning.
- *Learning for Livelihoods* – helping countries identify where livelihoods can be improved, and create matching learning opportunities. Successful approaches to improving rural and peri-urban economies draw on COL's close relationship with international agricultural bodies. COL also brokers proven distance learning programmes already offered around the Commonwealth, such as developing and delivering eLearning courses to staff in international development agencies, and transforming technical guides developed by these organisations into effective learning materials.
- *Human Environment* – helping countries use learning technologies to make a difference in the areas of gender, health, environment and governance and advising on the educational use of media and ICT.

The themes of gender equality and knowledge management inform COL's work in all three sectors; technology-mediated learning is particularly helpful for women and girls, and access to knowledge is central to development.

More information

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Acknowledgments

The Consortium thanks the Commonwealth of Learning (www.col.org) for drafting this briefing note, and the Commonwealth Foundation for financial assistance.

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