

The Commonwealth of Learning

The road ahead¹

Values and development priorities for 2009–12

Home to 1.9 billion people of every colour, creed and caste, the 53 Commonwealth nations are united by a commitment to common values, notably peace, democracy, equality, good governance and the resolution of conflicts through mediation and consensus building.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) expresses and promotes these values in its work. Its theme is 'Learning for Development', which it pursues operationally through sets of internationally agreed objectives – notably the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA).

Although access to learning is the key to development, many people still lack the learning opportunities that could empower them and transform their lives. The Commonwealth accounts for half of the world's AIDS sufferers and two-thirds of maternal deaths in childbirth. It is also home to more than half of the 75 million children who do not go to primary school. Numerous Commonwealth countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are unlikely to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by the 2015 target year. COL considers that a resolute commitment to the achievement of education for all is the most helpful response to the daunting challenges facing the world in the 21st century.

From 2009 to 2012, COL will give priority to eight development challenges.

1. Secondary education

Worldwide, 513 million pupils were enrolled in secondary schools in 2005, an increase of 17% over 1999. The world average for the proportion of children enrolled in secondary schools is 59%. The Pacific has a higher figure (66%) but some regions are significantly lower: Sub-Saharan Africa (26%); the Caribbean (42%); and South and West Asia (46%). The introduction of free primary education has created a surge in the secondary intake in some countries, but with a low survival rate. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the secondary school survival rate is only 63%, compared to 87% globally. Survival rates are particularly low in Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda, where fewer than half of the pupils reach the last grade. There is an urgent need to expand access to quality secondary education in three of the four Commonwealth regions. Open and distance learning (ODL) is part of the answer.

2. Teacher education

Although school enrolments and teacher supply have expanded significantly since the Dakar Forum on Education for All in 2000, many challenges remain. Net enrolment ratios in primary school are still in the range 60–90% in developing Commonwealth countries; for example, in India (89%), South Africa (87%), Ghana (69%), Pakistan (68%) and the Solomon Islands (62%). Except in the Pacific, where the school-age population is declining, many more teachers will be required to provide basic education to the millions of children not yet enrolled. The situation is particularly critical in Sub-Saharan Africa, which projects a requirement of 4 million teachers in 2015, up from 2.4 million in 2004. The increased need for teachers is dramatic in some countries over this period; for example, in Nigeria (increasing from 580,000 to 706,000), Kenya (from 150,000 to 192,000), Malawi (from 41,000 to 75,000) and Zambia (from 46,000 to 68,000). Comparable figures for Bangladesh (increasing from 370,000 to 453,000) show that this is not only an African problem. Moreover, a significant proportion of teachers in many countries – particularly Uganda, Nigeria and The Gambia – are untrained or unqualified. Since existing teacher training institutions do not have the capacity to address these major shortfalls in supply, it is urgent to expand the contribution of ODL teacher education.

3. Higher education

Expanding access to quality tertiary education is a critical challenge for developing countries. Kenya is typical: less than 50% of the 50,000 qualified students applying annually for admission are absorbed by its 7 public universities and 20 private universities. Fewer than 10% of people in the relevant age group have access to tertiary education in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Malaysia plans to raise its age participation rates to 40% by 2010, India to 15% by 2012, Trinidad and Tobago to 60% by 2015, and Jamaica to 30% by 2015. Barbados hopes to have one university graduate per family by 2020. Countries are unlikely to meet such targets by conventional means. Commonwealth African countries aim to establish up to seven new open universities within the next three years, and campus universities will need to adopt what is called dual-mode provision by adding distance learning programmes. The University of the South Pacific, which has long operated in this manner, is focusing on increasing student retention and performance.



Students at Lusaka University, Zambia

4. The needs of small states

Although most of the 32 small states of the Commonwealth have one or more post-secondary institutions, their limited programme offerings mean that many students must travel abroad to study. This has a high foreign exchange cost and a proportion of students never return home. The average migration rate of those with tertiary education from these small states is 44% compared to the Commonwealth average of 18%. Strengthening the range and credibility of tertiary offerings is therefore a priority. COL has determined that 70% of the small states have implemented regulatory frameworks for the accreditation of qualifications. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is helping countries expand course offerings collaboratively. Its Transnational Qualifications Framework will provide a mechanism for recognising qualifications and will allow small states to share courses cost-effectively.

5. Skills development

Youth unemployment is a global challenge. Forty five per cent of the world's young people without work, many of them young women, live in the Asia and Pacific regions. In Africa, the challenge is to find productive employment for 7 to 10 million new entrants to the labour market every year. In Kenya and Tanzania, for example, the annual number of young people joining the labour forces is respectively 500,000 and 700,000. Eighty per cent of jobs worldwide require technical and vocational skills, yet skills training

is 14 times more expensive than general secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Fiji, only 0.36% of the education budget is devoted to technical and vocational education and training. The challenge is to provide cost-effective and flexible learning opportunities to large numbers of people. Successful ODL models can be replicated and shared in other jurisdictions.

6. Learning for farmers

Of the 1.1 billion people living on less than US\$1 a day, 75% live in rural areas and rely on agriculture for both food and income. In developing countries, 80% of farm work is done by women. Yet, women farmers receive only 5% of agricultural extension services and are under-represented in training programmes. COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers model promotes prosperity by blending social capital and banking services with the innovative use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This model can enable many thousands of poor farmers, men and women, to learn and earn.

7. The health challenge

The international community has declared its commitment to reverse the spread of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. However, infection rates continue to rise globally, debilitating productive capacity. The rate of HIV infection in Commonwealth countries is twice the world average. Six African Commonwealth countries lose an average of 4% of their teachers to AIDS each year. Some 500

million people develop malaria each year, 90% of them in Sub-Saharan Africa and 6% in India, and as many as 3 million – mostly children – die of it. Newer health threats are equally serious: the International Diabetes Federation and the World Health Organization predict that 380 million people will develop diabetes by 2025. In Kiribati diabetes already accounts for 8% of deaths. There is clearly an urgent need for more learning about health. Most resource-poor communities in the Commonwealth have inadequate access to the Internet as a facility for learning. Local community-based media, however, can be a powerful means of promoting learning for health.

8. The digital divide

Connectivity, rather than access to computers, is now the defining feature of the digital divide. Across the Commonwealth, the proportion of people connected to broadband ranges from 89% in Canada to a mere 2% in Malawi and less than 1% in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu. Mobile technology is the fastest growing aspect of ICTs in the developing world, where 2.5 billion users are forecast by 2010. The benefits of being connected are increasing steadily, notably with the multiplication of open educational resources – materials held electronically that are freely available for adaptation and use. COL is thoroughly engaged in this movement through the VUSSC, which is playing a major role in bridging the digital divide in the small states.

Planning for 2009–12

COL's comprehensive pan-Commonwealth consultation and environmental scanning for the 2006–09 triennium remain relevant. To refine its practical responses to the above eight development challenges, COL convened meetings of its country Focal Points and consulted hundreds of stakeholders from all regions.

Results of the Focal Points meetings

Three meetings were organised in 2008 for the Caribbean, African and joint Asia-Pacific regions.

- In the Caribbean, all countries rated teacher development as the top priority, with technical and vocational education and training being identified as another key area. They flagged gender as a crucial area of intervention, requested capacity building in all areas of technology-mediated learning, and sought course materials in professional fields. The VUSSC has a prominent profile in the region.

- The African meeting applauded COL's focus on higher education, teacher development, open schooling, e-learning and open educational resources. Seven countries sought help with establishing open universities. COL should continue developing learning and training materials, which are highly regarded, and give greater support to research, capacity building and closer south-south linkages.
- The Pacific asked for more capacity building in technical and vocational education and training, and expressed interest in the use of community media for development.
- Increasing access to higher education was a high priority for Asia, which also requested more support for e-learning and Web 2.0 technologies.
- Both the Asia and Pacific regions also stressed the importance of training more teachers, bridging the growing digital divide, increasing quality assurance capacity, and capitalising upon open educational resources.

Future commitments and challenges

The main challenge facing COL is to scale up its impact; for example, by ensuring the replication of its initiatives in rural livelihoods and media empowerment. It should select its partners carefully, analyse the feasibility of new projects thoroughly before undertaking them, base its reports on evidence, and develop better strategies for dissemination and advocacy.

COL aims to improve its focus still further by working in fewer sectors with fewer projects. The eight initiatives chosen for 2009–12 are areas of special importance for development in which COL has already demonstrated its strength. COL will develop strategies for scaling up its outcomes and ensuring the sustainability of its interventions in these areas with an emphasis on innovation.

Endnote

- 1 This article is a summary of the Commonwealth of Learning's new Three-Year Plan, which can be accessed on www.col.org/3yp.