



Commonwealth of Learning

Commonwealth countries working together on education and training online

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was established to promote collaboration and partnership between Commonwealth countries to harness open and distance learning (ODL) to expand learning opportunities in support of development priorities.

While COL's role has evolved in line with developments in technology and shifts in priority needs in Commonwealth countries, it has continued to focus on four key tasks: as a partner in capacity building, a catalyst for collaboration, an agent for training in distance education, and provider of knowledge on distance and open learning.

Meeting an ever-increasing demand for education services

When the Commonwealth Heads of Government established the Commonwealth of Learning in 1988, they recognised that traditional approaches to face-to-face education were failing to meet the key challenges for social, economic, and cultural development in poor Commonwealth countries (COL 2003, p.4).

COL's focus has therefore been on innovation in a search for new ways to harness the power of technology to enhance the reach and effectiveness of open and distance learning. It aims to extend learning opportunities in poor Commonwealth countries where illiteracy and other social and economic problems exist as barriers to development.

While COL was given ten substantive functions in its 1988 Memorandum of Understanding, it has tended to focus on four key roles:

- a partner in capacity-building
- a catalyst for collaboration
- an agent for training in distance education
- a provider of knowledge about distance and open learning.

(COL 2003, p.3; Dhanarajan 2001, pp.67-68).

The evolution of the COL role has been strongly influenced by key shifts in the broader context especially the impact of the Internet and new technologies, the pace of globalisation, and an ever-increasing demand for educational services in Commonwealth countries (Dhanarajan 2001, pp.53-55).

COL has moved from projects to longer-term program-based operations, focusing increasingly on building capacity in open and distance learning. (COL 2004, p.3).



Its three-year plan for 2003–2006 outlines three priorities:

- ODL policies which support the capacity building objective
- ODL systems development to strengthen and extend capacity
- ODL opportunities to demonstrate the potential and value of open and distance learning.

The COL Strategic Plan for 2003–2006 (COL 2004, p. 3) involves six areas of operation: advisory, advocacy, capacity building, fostering networks and partnerships, knowledge management and research.

Benefits

COL has a brokering and intermediary role, building alliances, addressing particular issues and taking opportunities. This has led to a community of partners and learners committed to the central objective of harnessing the potential of open and distance learning,



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and addressing educational, social and economic needs in Commonwealth countries.

This community of partners exists at a number of levels. Collaborative networks have developed throughout the Commonwealth: in particular regions such as Africa and the Pacific, and within individual Commonwealth countries. This web of networks upon networks is one of the great strengths of the Commonwealth of Learning, and may be compared to the policies of the European Union in building networks across Europe through a range of social, cultural and economic programs.

The shifting alliances and partnerships which drive COL action take various forms. These include north-south action, south-south groupings and, increasingly, regional cooperation. Other agencies, such as the World Health Organization, are brought in for projects that require their skills.

COL has a range of social networks, both formal and informal, and they are fundamental to its work. They include:

- CENSE—the Commonwealth Electronic Network for Schools and Education facilitates Commonwealth-wide contact between national learning grids, schools and institutions through the CENSE web site. ‘Schoolnets’ similar to those in Europe and Canada are developing throughout the Commonwealth.
- COL’s email-based virtual conferences build networks for dialogue on particular subjects which may lead to ongoing informal networks. In some cases virtual conferences



are linked to special activities or events as, for example, the series of four virtual conferences leading up to the July 2004 Third Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning which was held in Dunedin. Dialogues on topics like latest developments, research and evaluation, best practice, and emerging issues provide a valuable information and knowledge base for the forum.

- The STAMP 2000+ program illustrates network building on a regional basis with eight Southern African countries collaborating with COL to develop distance education training materials to upgrade teachers of upper primary and junior secondary science, technology, mathematics, and general education (COL 2004b, p.1).
- Regional cooperation in the Pacific on skills development programs began with a COL-facilitated meeting of ministers of education, together with senior advisers from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. They discussed the needs throughout the region and agreed to launch two regional cooperation programmes facilitated by COL.

The Commonwealth is a network of countries linked by a common language and history. Collaboration across national frontiers and network building is central to the Commonwealth role and rationale. ICT facilitates these arrangements: COL demonstrates how Commonwealth collaboration can be adapted to the 21st century conditions of the global knowledge society.

The COL role in network building is facilitated by the fact that COL is a transparent organisation with effective information arrangements, and that its work is subject to guidance by Commonwealth education ministers at their regular meetings. These arrangements



build a climate of trust which underpins the COL contribution to building bonding and bridging social capital across Commonwealth countries.

COL has carved a distinctive niche in the world of international development programs. Meeting educational, social, and economic needs in many Commonwealth countries, aligned with a belief in the power of technology to transform the way people learn, underpins the longer-term sustainability of the COL role. COL serves as a valuable catalyst for innovation, collaboration and capacity building in a dynamic context of constant change.

Barriers

While COL encounters some barriers, Commonwealth machinery enables these to be discussed at the highest levels.

Barriers include aspects of telecommunications policy in member countries, cultural barriers to learning such as the spectrum of gender-based issues, and the pervasive effects of poverty. It is inevitable that progress on the more deeply entrenched barriers to the COL role will be slow, but there are also substantial achievements to celebrate (Dhanarajan 2001).

COL has recognised that it is imperative that its work is not technology driven but rather based on a broader vision of the empowerment of communities. The interaction of learning, knowledge, community, and technology is part of an ongoing search for better ways to extend learning and social opportunities for Commonwealth citizens.



Key lessons

- There is a valuable role for an organisation which acts as a catalyst and broker in fostering collaboration and partnership.
- Diversity exists in the form of partnership and network building at various levels of Commonwealth action.
- Technology should be embedded in broader social and political arrangements and infrastructure so that development is not technology driven.
- It is important to maintain flexibility and stimulating an ongoing dialogue in responding to shifting needs and opportunities.
- Effective information arrangements have a key role in supporting collaborative action.

References:

Commonwealth of Learning, www.col.org

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COL (Commonwealth of Learning) 2004b, COL as a Catalyst for Collaboration, COL, Vancouver, www.col.org/programmes/catalyst.

Dhanarajan G 2001, *Reflections on Ten Years of The Commonwealth of Learning*, COL, Vancouver, www.col.org.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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