

A Commonwealth of learning

By **PROFESSOR ASHA SINGH KANWAR**

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ASHA KANWAR

received her undergraduate, Master's and MPhil degrees from the Panjab University in India. Her engagement with distance education began when she joined Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) as a Reader in 1988 of which she became Pro-Vice Chancellor in 1992. She became President & Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) on 1 June 2012. Before joining COL, Professor Kanwar was a consultant in open and distance learning at UNESCO's Regional Office for Education in Africa (BREDa) in Dakar, Senegal. She received the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) Prize of Excellence in 2009.

COL is helping developing nations improve access to quality education and training

Created by the Commonwealth Heads of Government at CHOgm 1987 in Vancouver, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is the world's only intergovernmental organisation dedicated exclusively to promoting the development of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. With its 2015-2021 Strategic Plan, COL transitioned from "Learning for Development" to "Learning for Sustainable Development" to align with the United Nations' post-2015 global Sustainable Development Goals. Through its work, COL achieves local impact on a global scale. Its reach is strengthened by a network of stakeholders and partners who ensure that COL initiatives and resources are aligned with the needs of developing countries, and work with COL to deliver collaborative and innovative programmes.

Through its eLearning for International Organisations programme, COL helps international organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency respond to humanitarian challenges by providing eLearning opportunities for staff members living in conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Working in partnership with the University of British Columbia, COL's Learning through Interactive Voice Education System (LIVES) makes use of mobile phone-based audio learning to overcome barriers to education in conflict regions and post-conflict societies where literacy rates may be low.

To help meet the growing demand for better access to affordable higher education, COL partners with educational institutions to develop MOOCs (massive open online courses) that enable people around the world to gain access to low-cost, high-quality learning opportunities, with important results.



In regions with limited or no internet service, COL's low-cost, offline virtual classroom (Aptus) is enabling learners to benefit from digital resources and learning networks.

COL also promotes Open Educational Resources (OER) as a cost-effective way to expand access to education materials, publishing OER guides and resources for practitioners and policymakers that facilitate collaboration across borders, both within and beyond the Commonwealth.

COL's Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher Integration (CCTI) programme is improving the quality of teaching using information and communications technologies (ICT) as a tool, and teacher leaders are reporting that CCTI is making a difference in their work.

COL also works with governments and local organisations to refine the open schooling model in developing nations throughout the Commonwealth and increase access to quality and relevant education and skills training, especially for girls and women who may not otherwise be able to complete their education.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, coordinated by COL, enables small countries to collaboratively develop, adapt and share courses and learning materials and use ICT to broaden access to education in small states, which represent about two-thirds of the Commonwealth membership.

COL works with its partners around the world to provide meaningful and relevant training to improve livelihoods. With support from COL's Technical and Vocational Skills Development programme, the Dhaka Ashania Mission in Bangladesh developed vocational courses that have helped community members to support their families. Working in partnership with the Makerere University Agricultural Research Institute Kabanyolo, COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) programme is helping Uganda's Batwa community to increase honey collection and strengthen its livelihood.

Education and skills development play a critical role in achieving sustainable development. Through its work, COL is building on its strengths in open learning and distance education, and working with local, national and global partners to transform the idea of sustainable development into a concrete reality.

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