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3 REFLECTIONS OPEN EDUCATION IS AN ESSENTIAL "PUBLIC GOOD"
7 TOP FIVE TIPS FOR INTRODUCING MICROCREDENTIALING
8 FOCUS: EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS
14 FAIR COMMENT: THERE IS AN INFORMATION CRISIS. DOES EDUCATION REALLY CARE?
16 TECH TRENDS: OPEN-SOURCE LLMS AFFORDABLY UNLOCK GENERATIVE AI

CONNECTIONS

LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



Image provided by the Khomas Directorate of Adult Education, Namibia, a partner in the GIRLS Inspire initiative.

Equity and openness for a more stable world

Since 2019, the United Nations has observed 24 January as the International Day of Education, to celebrate the vital contributions education makes toward peace and development. UNESCO dedicated this year's date to "the crucial role education and teachers play in countering hate speech." The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) wholeheartedly recognises that knowledge and education form the gateway to understanding and countering the negative forces of hate, inequity, and conflict.

The recent World Conference of the International Council of Open and Distance Education, held in Costa Rica (November 2023), was also aligned with this theme: "Joining Hands in Peace for the Futures of Education." In his keynote, COL's Dr Tony Mays reflected on "Riding the Wave, Avoiding the Undertow" (http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5485), noting the critical role of teachers in building rich, positive experiences to counter the negative trends that could so easily be part of our post-Covid world experience.

Equity of access to knowledge and education is achieved most effectively through open learning and training, which technological advances are making possible in increasingly diverse and liberating ways for learners of all ages across their lifespan. More than any other positive act, we believe that open access to quality learning is the key to resisting discord and inequality, achieving fair opportunities regardless of gender or disabilities, and reaching global sustainability while time still remains for us to act.

Covering an array of projects and programmes, this issue of *Connections* provides a small selection of our recent work with partner governments and institutions to drive open learning, enhance climate-aware agricultural practices for livelihoods, ensure women, girls, and persons with disabilities are not left behind in the development process, bridge digital divides, expand access to education and training for out-of-school youths, develop and offer open courses, support climate action initiatives, and a great deal more.

For a stable and equitable world, as rich countries leverage post-pandemic investment to "go digital" in learning, low- and middle-income countries cannot be left behind.

Equity of access to knowledge is achieved most effectively through open learning.

COL's new President and CEO

COL welcomed Professor Peter Scott as its fifth President and CEO on 8 January 2024.

In the world of open learning, Professor Scott is a recognised leader whose career reflects a deep commitment to openness, characterised by innovative leadership in various academic and administrative roles.

He commenced in academia as a researcher and lecturer at the University of Sheffield, UK. His expertise in open learning innovation was further honed during a 20-year tenure at The Open University, UK, where he directed the Knowledge Media Institute, specialising in artificial intelligence and education. In 2015, Professor Scott joined the University of Technology Sydney, in Australia, as Pro Vice-Chancellor, after which he became the President of Athabasca University, Canada.

Across all his roles, he has been a pioneering force in educational change, focusing on new modes of learning and teaching, particularly in the digital realm. His work has significantly contributed to the global transformation of education through technology.

Professor Scott joins COL in a year with substantial opportunities to influence the direction of new global government needs. His understanding of artificial intelligence, his work on designed learning and his recent track record in public–private partnerships in education connect well with the needs of Commonwealth governments and COL's institutional partners.

“My entire working career has focused on a mission to open quality education to all learners at all stages of their learning journey,” notes Professor Scott. “I am driven by a passion for the positive change and outcomes that are created by excellent learning at all levels and am excited by the opportunity that technology provides to enable new forms of access.” As COL’s fifth president in its 36-year history, he says, “I will be building on a great legacy of ongoing impact.”

Towards CCEM 2024, London, UK

As an intergovernmental organisation of the Commonwealth, COL reports to the Commonwealth education ministers. The next ministers meeting (CCEM) will be in London, May 2024, taking issues onwards then to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in Samoa in October 2024. The theme for this next gathering is "Driving Resilience, Equity and Skills for an Inclusive Future."

The last education ministers meeting, in Kenya 2022, focused on the immediate lessons of the post-Covid-19 context, where conventional educational institutions had started to really value the potential of online and distance methods. In the following two years, pivoting back to business as usual, conventional education has sought to include a much stronger "blend" of online methods as it returns to the classroom.

But the CCEM statement in 2022 asked for much more.

Commonwealth education ministers asked, amongst other things, for Pan-Commonwealth work on innovative education financing; multi-sectoral cooperation, especially on blue and green economy growth; advances in non-formal provision; an emphasis on safety and global citizenship; and partnership in digital transformation. The latter three of these requirements fit well into COL's distinctive mission and can be seen in our work over the last two years that addresses those very themes, some of which this issue describes. At the May meeting, we look forward to engaging with ministers on the other areas they highlighted: financing and public–private matters, not normally in COL's purview.

This year's theme again emphasises that education should empower individuals with knowledge, resilience, fairness, and diverse skill sets, enabling them to shape an inclusive and thriving future. Ministers clearly recognise that resilient societies, economies, and innovative technologies are essential for their countries. They have seen that open, digital and distance were critical qualities for education in the acute crisis of the pandemic, but they also know that the chronic crisis of inequitable education remains. COL continues to demonstrate that "open" remains the answer.

In the upcoming meeting, we very much hope for a re-commitment to the energy that drives "a clear, transformative, and innovative vision and mission for education as one of the cornerstones of sustainable growth and stability" (CCEM 2022).

The Right Honourable Brian Mulroney: 1939 – 2024



Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

The Commonwealth of Learning would like to extend its deepest condolences on the passing of former Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Brian Mulroney.

In October 1987, Prime Minister Mulroney was an instrumental figure in the establishment of COL at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Vancouver, Canada. At this meeting, government leaders agreed to create a Commonwealth institution to “promote co-operation in distance education, 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.” One year later, Commonwealth governments signed a memorandum of understanding on the establishment of COL, and the Government of Canada and COL signed an agreement to establish its headquarters in Vancouver.

In the almost four subsequent decades, COL’s legacy remains firmly linked to that foundational meeting in Vancouver, the role Prime Minister Mulroney played as host of the event, and the fact that COL is headquartered in Canada.

Reflections

Open education is an essential "public good"

When educational institutions are concerned about the "bottom line" and "financial sustainability" of everything they do, advocating for open education that needs understanding and financial support is challenging.

Although the United Nations in 1948 identified education as a human right, 773 million adults around the world remain illiterate, most of them women. Nearly 250 million children are out of school. Nigeria alone has 10.2 million out-of-school children at the primary level and another 8.1 million at the junior secondary level. Globally, just 58 per cent of youths complete secondary school. In 2021, about 220 million students were enrolled in post-secondary education. While this figure has nearly doubled since 2020, the tertiary gross enrolment ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa is only 9.4 per cent compared to the global average of 38 per cent. Even for the world's most populous country, India, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) was 28.4 per cent in 2021–22, with aspirations to achieve 50 per cent GER by 2035. It is important to note that the median age of the African continent is 19 years.

While the access issue is manageable with adequate infrastructure, preparation, and planning, the cost of education to learners, along with the lack of learning materials, negatively influences the quality of learning. In the United States, post-secondary students spend, on average, between USD 628 and 1,200 annually for books and supplies. A Commonwealth-wide study conducted by COL in 2019 revealed that learners in post-secondary institutions spent about USD 164 per year on learning materials alone. Another report from Malaysia indicated that 76.4 per cent of students do not buy textbooks because of the high cost. A Global Education Monitoring Report policy brief urging that every child should have a textbook reported that textbook access by school children in Cameroon, Paraguay, the Philippines, and Togo is abysmally low, and lack of textbooks hinders learning. In Bangladesh, while students are dependent on photocopies of textbooks, they also collectively spend about USD 2.3 million on buying textbooks.

With the advancement of technology, one would expect that the costs of accessing education and learning resources would be less. On the contrary, though, the Covid-19 experience shows a vast digital divide among learners, and countries needed to prepare to face the challenge of school closures, resulting in learning loss. A World Bank estimate predicts that "learning loss from Covid-19 could cost this generation of students close to $USD 17 trillion in lifetime earnings." A McKinsey report said that by 2030, automation will potentially displace 800 million workers.

Over time, technology may create more jobs than it destroys. However, the World Economic Forum predicts that by 2030, only 3.3.–6.0 million new jobs will be created. On top of this, the advent of Generative Artificial Intelligence as a common tool in late 2022 has further exacerbated the job challenge. It has been estimated that large language models will impact 40 per cent of all working hours.

Governments worldwide have to face these challenges creatively and design future-proof education systems that focus on flexible and open learning. In the recent book *Higher Education for Good*, we make a case for open knowledge institutions. Established higher education institutions often depend on a financial model based on international students, which was shattered during the pandemic. Governments must rethink and finance education differently as a "public good." Education is an investment not just for the future of a nation but for global sustainable development. What kinds of policies should governments then support and foster? Open education as a model can create lifelong learning opportunities in a digital world. According to Class Central, by 2021, there were 220 million enrolments in massive open online courses, offered by 950 universities. Open universities like the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India provide affordable quality education by adopting open education, a philosophy and practice based on fairness, flexibility, and freedom.

As governments and educational institutions seek sustainable models, adopting open education can support affordable education, as we have seen from the examples of zero textbook cost initiatives in British Columbia and elsewhere. A study by COL in Antigua and Barbuda showed that using open educational resources (OER) not only helped students save money but also improved scores by approximately 5.5 per cent. Considering the advantages of open education, international organisations like COL and UNESCO have been promoting the development of appropriate policies for using OER at all levels of education and training. The Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education and Science and Technology, Mauritius, adopted a national OER policy in 2022 with COL support.

More such adoptions are needed across the Commonwealth and globally to make open education a "public good" – available for joint and non-exclusive use. Governments must invest in the needed digital infrastructure (platforms and repositories) to create an enabling environment for lifelong learning that fosters creativity and innovation in societies.

By Dr Sanjaya Mishra, Education Specialist: Technology-Enabled Learning, 2024. An earlier version of this article appeared on the COL Blog, at https://www.col.org/news/open-education-is-an-essential-public-good/*, where citations and references can also be found.*

Our Commonwealth



Professor Peter Scott and Consul-General Mr Manish at COL headquarters in January.

Showcasing India's voice in open learning

After 36 years of working hard together on open learning, COL in India should have some achievements to be proud of. In a recent visit to COL's headquarters, India's Consul-General in Vancouver met with the team to talk about that long-term picture and discuss what comes next for India.

"India... understands the power of learning for its own peoples and the wider good of the world."

Speaking with the Consul-General about the impressive trajectory of open learning over this time together, COL's new President, Peter Scott, emphasised, "India is a powerhouse of the Commonwealth, representing half its 2.5 billion people, and understands the power of learning for its own peoples and the wider good of the world." The capability and potential of Indian open education is clear, with 18 of the world's 44 open universities based in India, and in 2024 approximately 11 per cent of all Indian post-secondary students enrolled as open learners in that system. In this astonishing success story, COL has played a great part and continues to have a vital role, looking to a yet more open future.

A focus of the discussion was COL's regional centre in India, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA), and its role in driving development through the power of learning. Besides assisting universities and schools in building their faculties' capacities, COL has also helped rural development banks, community-based organisations, and other institutions to mainstream open learning, including digital and distance.

Of course, India's experience of open learning is also one it can share with pride. The voice of India in learning is clearly seen in COL's work in the wider Commonwealth as well. Speaking from New Delhi, CEMCA Director Dr B. Shadrach noted the power of India's National Education Policy and its influence upon the delivery of education and skill development in India and beyond. COL has taken this policy as an exemplary framework for change, including in very recent work with Asia's other Commonwealth countries.

Several of COL's skills and training initiatives have also progressed in India over the last few years, among these the ongoing Skills for Work scholarship programme COL offers in partnership with Coursera, Google, and Udemy. Developed specifically to foster 21st-century digital and entrepreneurship abilities, these training and upskilling scholarships have saved Indian learners many millions of dollars.

A number of critical areas for the next phase of the COL–India partnership are being considered and pursued, such as raising the impact of open education not only to improve access for disadvantaged learners but also to help all post-pandemic mainstream universities and schools increase their reach and quality in the online and hybrid learning modes.

The Ahmedabad Declaration (August 2023) of the vice chancellors of open universities in India acknowledged NEP 2020's transformative nature in fostering learners' all-round development, aligning with 21st century skills, and nurturing rational thought with strong ethics and values. It reaffirmed the national target of achieving a 50 per cent gross enrollment ratio by 2035, emphasising open universities' crucial role in reaching the unreached. Following the Declaration, Dr B. R. Ambedkar Open University launched microcredentials and added new resources to their OER repository.

Fostering digital transformation

Embracing technology in education is about more than utilising new tools; it involves creating an environment of continuous learning and innovation, which empowers educators to meet the evolving needs of their learners in a rapidly changing world. Across the Commonwealth, COL strives to cultivate environments for digital change, working with ministries, institutions, and individuals to develop policies, build capacities, and promote innovative technology solutions and models that are affordable, accessible, and gender-responsive.

> **Embracing technology in education is not merely about utilising new tools but more about creating an environment of continuous learning and innovation, thereby empowering educators to meet the evolving needs of their learners in a rapidly changing world.**

As transformative agents in the lives of students, teachers are crucial components of educational ecosystems, something Barbados emphasises in its new Education Transformation Agenda. In response to the government's proposed curriculum reforms, COL recently conducted a visioning workshop at Erdiston Teachers' Training College for tutors to discuss the current status of technology-enabled learning at the college, and the potential for open and distance learning to expand the quality and reach of teacher training. Several areas were identified as requiring adaptation and innovation, including policy and course development, along with capacity building in open educational resources (OER), artificial intelligence, and other aspects of open technology-enabled learning.





Capacity-building workshop at the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, 2023.

With OER becoming more firmly established as valuable materials for enhancing courses in post-secondary education and training, increasing numbers of institutions are seeing the need to develop, validate, and implement their own OER policies. COL continues to play a pivotal role in these endeavours, responding to requests for consultation, guidance, and training. After an OER policy engagement with stakeholders at the University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID), Nigeria, in early 2023, COL assisted with a capacity-building workshop to equip staff with the necessary skills for implementing the OER policy. Hands-on activities were particularly focused on instructional design, course material development, and using OER to enhance and update existing course materials. UNIMAID is one of eight pilot institutions in Nigeria that COL is supporting in the implementation of institutional OER policies.

Small states in the Commonwealth face unique challenges when seeking to embrace digital transformation. COL's Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a robust network of small states committed to bridging the digital divide, including through the collaborative development and sharing of free content resources to promote learning for sustainable development. As part of an ongoing collaboration with VUSSC to develop policy that will advance the use of OER, The University of the West Indies (UWI) in St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, hosted a four-day workshop on integrating OER and open educational practices (OEP) in higher education. Interactive sessions taught the participating faculty and managers how to access, create, and share quality educational content using OER and OEP. Work has since been underway at UWI to develop ten new course modules, demonstrating the university's commitment to using OER for addressing inequities and fostering education that is inclusive, open, and participatory.



OER training for 90 STEM teachers in the Solomon Islands. Dr Rajni Chand, the Director of USP's Centre for Flexible Learning and co-facilitator of the workshop, expressed her appreciation for the support provided by MFAT and COL, noting that the workshop's achievements demonstrated the power of collaboration and the potential of open education.

Access to digital education skills platform empowers teachers

Digital education for teachers is essential in preparing learners for the digital age, enabling innovation in education, and ensuring teachers are equipped with the skills and tools needed to provide high-quality learning opportunities.



Siyafunda Community Technology Centre (Siyafunda CTC) in South Africa recently implemented COL's Commonwealth Digital Education Learning Training in Action (C-DELTA) programme. It focused on encouraging digital education competencies and providing a transformative learning experience for teachers and learners in the Limpopo and Gauteng provinces. The eight-month process resulted in 1,006 teachers (65 per cent female) undergoing comprehensive training sessions, which in turn impacted 5,000 learners.

Mr Ahmed Ismael (Smiley), Director of Siyafunda CTC, expressed his enthusiasm for the programme, stating, "At Siyafunda, our mission is to bridge the digital divide and empower communities. The C-DELTA programme aligns seamlessly with our goals."

There are over 35,000 enrolments from 75 countries (including 41 Commonwealth countries) with a 49 per cent successful completion rate. The platform has been adopted in several educational institutions as a non-credit course and is also being adopted through ministries of education and civil society organisations throughout the Commonwealth. Key countries include: Bangladesh, Belize, Malaysia, Mauritius, Saint Lucia, South Africa, and Sri Lanka.

https://cdelta.col.org/

Equipping teachers to apply open learning strategies

COL harnesses the potential of open learning and technologies to build the capacity and capability of institutions and individuals in formal and informal environments, so that learners from disadvantaged groups gain access to lifelong learning opportunities. Ensuring teaches are well trained and able to keep pace with change is crucial, and open learning offers numerous avenues for improving the quality of teacher training and professional development globally. It also enables diverse, flexible, and scalable learning.

In Antigua and Barbuda, COL has for many years supported various institutions in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. During a recent visit, COL's Specialist in Teacher Education met with the education minister to discuss partnerships for encouraging more students to pursue STEM subjects and strengthening teacher professional development in these fields. She also met with faculty at Antigua State College, where COL is supporting the implementation of technology-enabled learning, and The University of the West Indies at Five Islands, to discuss an upcoming project that will train 500 mathematics teachers in the region using a massive open online course developed by COL. The initiative is a testament to the power of collaboration, as the course integrates contextual content with global courses to promote access to open educational resources in mathematics.

Across the Atlantic, COL recently offered an ODL course development workshop at the Tamale College of Education, in Ghana, leading to the creation of 12 courses for in-service teachers that will significantly advance the country's teacher training and professional development. To fully harness open learning's potential in training and education, relevant national and institutional policies and strategies are needed. In Ghana's capital, COL supported a workshop for assessing the status of the country's ODL policies, as well as practices in teacher training and professional development. The workshop marked an important milestone in Ghana's educational reforms and led to a draft national ODL policy for teacher training.

At the institutional level, COL recently worked with staff at Sierra Leone's Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology to train them on course enhancement and develop the university's ODL policy. Maasai Mara University, in Kenya, held a COL-facilitated workshop to enhance its policy statements on ICT in education and open educational resources; a baseline study was also conducted to assess how well the university's blended learning practices are aligning with its policies in that area. And in partnership with the Teaching Council of Zambia, COL engaged in workshops to develop and finalise an ODL strategy for in-service teacher training, based on the Technology-Enabled Learning Competency Framework for Teachers in Zambia that COL published in 2023.

Advancing flexible education with microcredentials

Since 2019, COL has been exploring the space of microcredentials through the development of guidelines, partnerships, and course offerings. *Designing and Implementing Microcredentials: A Guide for Practitioners* (2019) provides a clear roadmap to plan, design, and implement microcredentials and badges in diverse contexts, ensuring greater flexibility in the journey of the new learner–earner through a skills and capability framework. Courses available on COL's platforms colcommons.org and pacificpartnership.col.org/resources offer badges and certificates for multiple exit points. COL has also worked with partners to develop microcredentials aimed at professionalising aspiring or practising youth workers. These are individuals on the front lines who engage directly with youths, mainly through government, non-government, and civil society organisations. A brief but valuable resource on this topic is the workshop document "Evaluation and Lessons Learned from Professionalising Youth Work Microcredentials in Fiji and the Bahamas: A Comparative Analysis" (http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4370).

Technology is the backbone of microcredential provision as a means of verifying the quality of the credentials awarded by linking back to the original assessment criteria and evidence. So policymakers must ensure the required digital tools are affordable and accessible, and that equity and inclusion exist not just in policy but in practice. Assessment in microcredentials should be authentic, and with the criteria oriented to provide evidence of learning. As assessment forms the basis of any system of education, there is also a need to rethink ways of certifying learners.

Increasingly, leading companies are not looking for full degrees when recruiting staff but instead are seeking evidence of smaller skills sets. Microcredentialing therefore demands attention from policymakers. For example, Australia has adopted a microcredential framework that supports outcomes-based training responsive to industry needs. As set out in the Australian Qualifications Framework, courses are at least one hour and are tailored to support lifelong learning. Canada encourages microcredentials that are relevant, accredited, standardised, flexible, and assessed for credit. In New Zealand, there is a microcredential equivalency register for courses/training worth five to 40 credits (where one credit is ten hours of student learning time). It focuses on skill gaps as well as industry-oriented continuing professional development.

In January 2024, COL signed a memorandum of understanding with the Caribbean Examinations Council to work together in several areas, including to promote microcredentialing in the region and strengthen regulatory capacity to support the use of microcredentials. A scoping activity is currently underway to ascertain what already exists in terms of policy or practice in the region.

More recently, the University of the South Pacific's Centre for Flexible Learning recently co-hosted a workshop with COL to raise awareness about the potential of microcredentials for advancing flexible and open education in the Pacific. By exploring this exciting field, COL anticipates creating more employment and professional development opportunities in the region. The workshop involved key players at institutional, national, and regional levels, in acknowledgement that microcredentials can facilitate more flexible learning pathways and recognition at all three levels – within a single institution, between institutions, and between countries as more people migrate between countries to follow employment opportunities.

TOP 5 Tips for introducing microcredentialing

Learners are starting to question whether the direct and opportunity costs of spending years in full-time study are worth the investment. Offering shorter, portable learning opportunities in the form of microcredentials, which can be aggregated over time, is a means of satisfying just-in-time learning needs while building towards larger credentials in ways that all stakeholders will find more manageable.

1

ALIGN THEM TO INSTITUTIONAL, NATIONAL, AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

It is important that the microcredentials make sense alone but also offer stepping stones to something larger by being transferable into other qualifications. Successful completion could be recognised for credit against other qualifications offered by the institution, other institutions, and/or workplaces.

2

DESIGN COMPETENCY-BASED MICROCREDENTIALS

Many countries have moved towards competency-based curricula, which require evidence of knowing something (knowledge competence), being able to do something practical with that knowledge (practical competence), and being able to develop that competence through further learning, practice, and reflection (reflexive or reflective competence).

3

ENSURE THEY ARE ASSESSED AUTHENTICALLY

It is essential to award a microcredential based on adequate evidence that the learner can demonstrate the desired competencies. Reviewers of the microcredentials should be able to follow an evidence trail showing how and why the microcredential was earned. This can include evidence related to recognition of prior learning and experience.

4

CLOSE THE FEEDBACK LOOP FOR IMPROVEMENT

In a changing context, it is important to regularly review and update the microcredentials offered to ensure they remain relevant, responsive, and future-directed. This requires reviewing what is offered, how it is offered, and the extent to which the microcredentials continue to be accessible to and valued by all stakeholders.

5

REGULATE MICROCREDENTIALS PROVISION

Anybody can offer a credential, but not everybody should. To protect both users and the microcredentialing system itself, provision needs to be regulated and limited to providers with proven capacity, quality, and commitment.

Contributed by Dr Tony Mays, Director: Education, COL

FOCUS

Empowering women and girls across the Commonwealth

Improving the realisation of human rights

Since its creation in 1988, the Commonwealth of Learning has had a strong partnership with Canada. Starting in 2015, Global Affairs Canada has invested in COL's work to provide women and girls with education and skills development, first through the GIRLS Inspire project and subsequently in the Empowering Women and Girls project.

Between 2023 and 2026, CAD 6 million in funding will assist women and girls from disadvantaged communities in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mozambique, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Specifically, this project will directly reach 75,000 women and girls, while building the capacity of 20,000 men and boys. Using a context-specific and holistic approach, with co-ordinated interventions operating at the individual, household, community, and societal levels, the project will also engage government officials, community leaders, women's rights and civil society organisations, financial institutions, and employers to create a safe and enabling environment for the project's successful implementation and sustainability. In total, 400,000 community members will be reached through public campaigns.

These five stories illustrate the impact during the project's first eight months and the partnerships helping COL reach these women and girls.

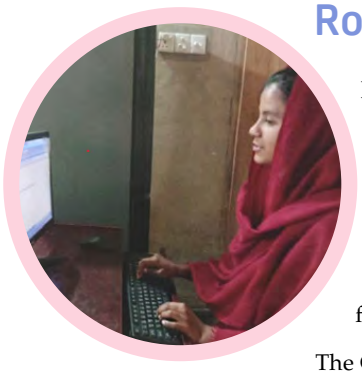


A new start for Ivete (Mozambique)

COL's work includes raising awareness about and preventing child, early, and forced marriages. Ivete Augusto lives in the southern district of Manhiça. When pregnancy and marriage at 17 forced her to abandon her education, she became a mother while still a child herself. Facing violence and infidelity in her marriage, Ivete and her daughter returned home to help her widowed mother with subsistence farming.

After Ivete attended a community sensitisation event conducted by Aid for the Development of People for People (ADPP), she joined the project and has since attended classes and sessions on sexual and reproductive health as well as the prevention of gender-based violence. She has also enrolled in the project's three-month tailoring course, with plans to improve her family's financial situation.

Through encountering ADPP, Ivete became a member of a women's support group that combats the stigma of early pregnancy. She says that by learning about and exercising her rights as a person and a woman, she feels better equipped to combat gender stereotypes, bias, and discrimination, challenge gender norms, and enjoy equality in her relationships.



Roksana's newfound skills (Bangladesh)

For young people in Bangladesh whose families' income cannot cover post-secondary education costs, employment prospects are often limited. Roksana Akhter, in the northeast district of Sylhet, was in this situation but decided to learn computer skills so she could increase her family's well-being.

The Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES) works with disadvantaged adolescents in Bangladesh "to empower them economically through skill development" using science and technology. After learning about training offered by CMES, she completed their computer course in November 2023 and attended sessions about human rights, sexual and reproductive health, political participation, legislation protecting women's rights, empowerment, and public healthcare services.

CMES then connected Roksana with Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service, a local NGO, where she is now employed as an online data entry clerk earning RDT 8,000 a month. Roksana continues to pursue part-time studies outside of work and is optimistic that as her skills improve, the salary will increase, enabling her to help the family while also achieving her own economic independence.

Courageous Renuka fighting for rights
(Sri Lanka)



The Women's Development Centre in Sri Lanka offered an awareness programme at a village in the Ulapane area, where Renuka Bulugoda, a woman in her 20s with a husband and three children, volunteered to become an Equality Facilitator with the project. The three days of training explored human rights, women's rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, women's political participation, available legislation, and other relevant topics. The programme also focused on women's entrepreneurship and provided self-employment training, which prompted Renuka to learn about the production of homemade detergent and organic soap. Subsequently, she set up her own business, which now generates LKR 25,000 to 35,000 a year.

Renuka credits the programme with offering her the tools not only to be an independent businessperson but also to communicate with her husband about equality of opportunity for women. "I am enjoying my rights to participate in economic activities on my own wish. This was a struggle for me for a long time; now I know how to encourage and support other women and girls in my community." As an Equality Facilitator, she has conducted training in the village, and she participates in local activism against gender-based violence.

Rose unlocking her potential
(Malawi)



The motto of Malawi's Concerned Youth Organization (CYO) is "Live for Success, Not Regret." CYO made training opportunities available in Mtenje village, offering courses in producing juice, soap, peanut butter, cooking oil, and petroleum jelly, as well as baking. Each aimed to provide participants with livelihood skills for generating their own income and becoming self-sufficient. CYO also facilitated training sessions on financial literacy and small business management.

Before attending the training, Rose Nambuma had wanted to start her own business but lacked the necessary capital and skills. Equipped with new knowledge and abilities, she and three other participants embarked on an entrepreneurial journey, pooling their resources to establish WaliWali Soap. Reflecting on the significance of the CYO programme, Rose said: "The livelihood skills provided gave me capital, and I am now thriving in the soap production business. We will work hard to ensure this business grows and will continue strategising to grow further."

Empowering dreams for Nayab (Pakistan)



COL's partners include organisations that enable open learning in places where traditional routes are unavailable or financially inaccessible. In Pakistan, the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child exists "to promote and protect the rights of children and to empower them." One of its open schools played a crucial role in rekindling a 16-year-old girl's educational aspirations.

Nayab had left formal education due to financial constraints, but dropping out left her feeling hopeless, disconnected, and depressed. So when her mother learned of an open school in their area, providing books and a safe learning environment, she persuaded Nayab to enrol.

The school's teachers took a keen interest in Nayab's well-being, adopting personalised teaching techniques to accelerate her learning. Through innovative teaching methods, including activity-based learning and group work, Nayab was able to break through her emotional isolation, interact with classmates, and make remarkable academic progress, as well as recognise her own resilience and determination.

> Canada's contributions to the Commonwealth include the Commonwealth of Learning, an organization based out of British Columbia, which uses innovation to make high-quality education readily available across the world.
>
> Statement by the Prime Minister of Canada on Commonwealth Day 2024

People

COL STAFF



Paying tribute to **Professor Asha Kanwar**, whose term as COL's President and CEO ended on 31 December 2023, His Excellency, Danny Faure, Chair of COL's Board of Governors, said: "Professor Asha Kanwar … has led the organisation for over 11 years to critical acclaim. Her achievements and ability to build relationships and drive programmes of real impact for women, girls and many others across the Commonwealth is something that the Board is immensely proud of. It is likely that her leadership of the small team at COL has touched hundreds of thousands of people and made a real difference in improving the livelihoods of those most in need.... Her contribution has been vast, and this acknowledgement does not do justice to her commitment and dedication. We thank Professor Kanwar for all that she has done for COL and more broadly across the Commonwealth."



Dr Tony Mays was appointed Director: Education in January 2024, having served as Education Specialist: Open Schooling since 2019. In his current role, he continues to lead and manage the Open Schooling initiative.



COL acknowledges former Education Specialist: Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) **Dr Mairette Newman** for her contribution to COL since 2018; she completed her tenure in January 2024.



COL is grateful to **Soyeon Kim** for her valued support since 2019. She has been instrumental in co-ordinating the Pacific Partnership project, and we wish her all the best.

NEW FOCAL POINTS



GUYANA
Ms Indrani Ramnarine
Ministry of Education



MALAYSIA
Associate Professor Dr Azidah Abu Ziden
Ministry of Higher Education



MOZAMBIQUE
Mr Tinga Fernando Abrão
National Institute of Distance Education (INED)

BOARD



COL is grateful to outgoing board member **Senator Kay S. McConney**, Minister of Education, Technological and Vocational Training, Barbados for her valuable contributions to COL. Senator McConney served on the board from 2021 to 2023.



Congratulations to **Dr Caroline Seelig ONZM**, who was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the 2024 King's New Year Honours.

COL continues to win awards

COLCommons, a micro-course platform, offers 11 short courses where about 55,000 learners have enrolled. It continues to win many rounds of the US-based Brandon Hall awards.

The value of COL's courses and platforms has appreciated since the Covid-19 lockdown. Our platform for massive open online courses (MOOCs) was used to train almost 50 per cent of teachers in Trinidad and Tobago during the lockdown, and about 30 per cent of teachers in Fiji. In the underserved sphere of food and agriculture, COL's MOOC platform has been useful in delivering about three dozen courses by partners to over 200,000 students in undergraduate programmes. A unique feature is the number of veterinary courses offered. A series of Blue Economy courses are also available.

CHECK OUT COL'S FREE, OPEN ONLINE COURSES

https://colcommons.org

https://www.mooc4dev.org/courses

Transforming education for climate change

The climate crisis presents an unprecedented global challenge and an opportunity for leaders to demonstrate how science-driven, justice-centred, and civic-minded climate leadership can put small island developing states and other climate-vulnerable countries on a path to resilience and fairness.

Commonwealth countries reflect the diversity and complexity of both the underlying drivers of the climate crisis and the system of transformative solutions needed to address climate change and its impacts. Education is an integral component of this system, and as a global agent of learning for sustainable development, COL works continually to develop real-world educational tools for climate action. As underscored in its 2022 report to Commonwealth Ministers of Education "Transforming Education for Climate Action," building climate literacy and climate leadership across societies is vital, and achieving this involves every member of the education workforce.

Adopting improved technologies for climate-smart strategies in fish and vegetable production

COL promotes needs-based continuous learning to communities that farm the land and the oceans. Through its Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) initiative, it uses ICT and ODL as effective ways to address issues of gender, climate change, food security, and self-sufficiency at all levels, from families to the fish and agriculture sectors.

In Nigeria, for example, where fish and the fish value chain are important sources of livelihood, government stakeholders have expressed a desire to scale up fish production to achieve national fish self-sufficiency. COL's L3F team partnered with the National Open University of Nigeria to organise a training workshop for 50 participants from state ministries of agriculture and the Agricultural Development Programme in five states. With their training, these stakeholders now serve as contact persons for farmers in their various communities, supporting them to adopt improved technology and apply ICT in the fish sector.

Elsewhere in the country, COL is supporting Obafemi Awolowo University and the Agricultural and Rural Management Training Institute to organise training on digital agriculture for vegetable farmers, with a focus on women. A recent workshop was centred on climate-smart vegetable production, processing, and marketing, particularly through tapping into the strength of digital transformation. Participants were exposed to climate-smart agricultural strategies for coping with the effects of drought, flooding, extreme temperatures, strong winds, pest and disease attacks, and other adverse conditions. As part of the post-workshop downstream activity, the farmers' learning is being reinforced with real-time, short, precise messaging in text, audio, and video formats, keeping them up to date on various farming tasks for their action today and into the future.

The Gender Green Teacher programme

The Gender Green Teacher programme (GGT) is an ICT-enabled, in-service professional development opportunity for teachers wanting to seamlessly incorporate gender and environmental content into their teaching–learning processes. The programme is a blend of theory and practice. In addition to providing theoretical knowledge on gender and sustainable development, it builds teachers' skills in using workshop-based activities and practical strategies to integrate gender and environmental concerns into their students' education paths.

COL initially developed GGT in English in partnership with India's National Institute of Open Schooling. Starting in 2023, the programme is being adapted and implemented by other teacher education institutions in the Commonwealth for their specific linguistic and cultural contexts, with COL providing support. Most recently, Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique has become the first to launch GGT in Portuguese. The Education Faculty's Deputy Director commented that the programme "provides a crucial platform for dialogue to deepen our comprehension of the interconnectedness of gender and environmental relations. The contextualised programme is poised to transcend borders and make a profound impact on society."

Climate literacy for community media

In many parts of the developing world, community radio remains a vital educational tool, capable of fostering lifelong learning among listeners. At the 2024 Radio Festival, held in New Delhi, an important new curriculum was unveiled by its joint creators: CEMCA and the NGO Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation. *Climate Literacy for Community Media: A Systematic Learning Curriculum* will help community media professionals and communities understand the science behind climate change and undertake concerted actions to mitigate and adapt in climate-vulnerable zones. The curriculum is seen as an exciting opportunity to leverage radio and audio communication for spurring grassroots action.

Online climate courses

The latest online course is Climate Literacy for All, developed in partnership with the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. This course provides the fundamental knowledge needed to understand the science of climate change, identify climate change solutions, and take action at an individual level, especially in the context of small island developing states. Feedback from course participants has been excellent. One learner from Samoa described the course as "a revelation … a vibrant tapestry woven with scientific data and compelling case studies tools. It filled the gaps in my own knowledge, deepening my understanding of the complex web of factors driving climate change, its diverse impacts on earth, and ways that mankind can help our earth to survive."

Other courses in this series are Becoming a Climate Champion: A Climate Emergency Course for Young People, and Teaching for Climate Action.

Strengthening skills training for resilient TVET in Africa

The resilience of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems is closely tied to enhanced skills training. COL is actively assisting TVET ministries and regulators across Commonwealth countries to formulate policies, strategies, and standards for open and distance learning in TVET to promote more accessible, affordable, and quality learning opportunities. Commonwealth countries in Africa face persistently high unemployment rates and significant gaps in the affordability and accessibility of education. TVET is widely regarded as key for increasing employment, and open learning in TVET can go far toward closing educational gaps. In a continent as vast and diverse as Africa, collaborations and partnerships will play vital roles in strengthening TVET systems through enabling better skills training.

In late 2023, COL partnered with the African Union Commission and AUDA-NEPAD to host the Africa TVET Regulators Conference. Held in Nairobi, Kenya, the event brought together heads of regulatory bodies and commissions from across Africa, as well as representatives from the International Labour Organisation, UNESCO, the German Development Cooperation, and 15 African countries. Under the theme "Strengthening Digital Transformation and Governance of TVET Systems in Africa," attendees considered the current state of TVET in Africa, reviewed blended TVET as part of the initiatives to implement the African Union's Digital Education Strategy, advocated for various approaches, models, and tools to strengthen skills development systems, and created a roadmap for harmonising TVET regulations, qualification standards, and microcredentials across the continent.



Adjacent to traditional TVET is technical, entrepreneurial, and vocational education and training (TEVET), which also stands to benefit greatly from open, distance, and flexible learning (ODFL). Introducing ODFL approaches and technologies to enhance skills training within an institution involves strategic development and implementation. In December 2023, a COL workshop brought together TEVET leaders from several training colleges in Zambia that have developed institutional strategies for ODFL, to help them create action plans for implementing the strategies. COL emphasises the necessity of adopting an ecosystem approach to increase the availability of accessible, high-quality, affordable skills training opportunities that are both gender-responsive and inclusive, with a focus on climate-smart initiatives.

Recognising that the most successful open learning in T(E)VET requires effective leadership, COL also recently implemented a leadership training programme for institutional leaders in select Sub-Saharan Commonwealth countries. The programme's purpose is to develop the strategic and high-level operational capabilities of designated personnel, who can then lead initiatives within their institutions for the uptake of digital learning and teaching technologies.

Focus on Bangladesh: outcomes from Skills Online scholarships

Through its Skills Online initiative, COL partnered with Coursera and Udemy to offer scholarships for lifelong learners from Commonwealth countries to access skills training required for meaningful employment and entrepreneurship. Since the lockdown, COL has provided over 200,000 of these scholarships, including the Grow with Google courses available on the Coursera platform.

In Bangladesh, Better Future for Women implemented the scholarship programme, with over 8,000 learners benefiting. Social media channels are designed to reach potential participants from local communities, government agencies, and universities.

Syed Nazmus Sakib, a resident of Sylhet in the northeastern part of the country, stated that "the programme provided high-quality, free e-learning courses, arming me with programming and coding skills and paving the way for a career in the digital economy sector. I now work with a software company as an Associate Software Engineer."

Sakhawat Hossen, a student from rural Birganj, completed a course in MERN Stack Development. "This learning experience surpassed what my university could offer," Sakhawat reported, attributing his career progression to the knowledge and skills he acquired through the programme.

Nadira Ahmed from Dhaka confirmed that "the programme equipped me with essential skills in Search Engine Optimization and Web Content Creation that prepared me to navigate the digital landscape and assist businesses in achieving online success."

Action for improving boys' engagement in education

Gender equality is primarily associated with women and girls, but in parts of the Commonwealth, high dropout rates for boys and transitions to secondary and tertiary education have also become matters of concern.



Through our partners in the Boys' Education and Underperformance project, COL is providing learning opportunities and resources for male youths that build positive relationships, leadership skills, mentorship opportunities, and approaches to education, allowing their voices to be heard in their communities and education systems. This includes working with the Jamaican Teachers Council on a programme to improve boys' participation in education, and supporting the Institute of Gender and Development Studies Mona Unit at the University of the West Indies, who recently conducted a research study to develop a strategy for increasing educational and skills training opportunities for boys and men aged 16 to 24.



Micky Mael, a 20-year-old from Vanuatu's Ambrym Island, dropped out of school and was looking for an opportunity to support his family. After completing an internship through one of COL's partner NGOs, he accepted an offer of employment with that organisation. "My advice to young people who are not able to continue their formal education is that no matter what situation or experience you encounter in the past or present, it is not the end. Never give up!"

Empowered youths in the Pacific

The Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development, one of COL's regional centres, has been working with local non-government organisations (NGOs) in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu to skill young people for employability. Over 3,500 youths have been equipped with industry-specific training that can lead to meaningful employment. Feedback from a survey confirmed that training significantly boosted their employability and entrepreneurial spirit. COL plans on continuing to augment ongoing collaboration with more NGOs, amplifying these outreach activities in wider areas of the Pacific.

Online provision to educate and train out-of-school children and youths

Open schooling involves using open distance learning (ODL) methods to provide learning opportunities for students who are unable to access traditional brick-and-mortar provision or who dropped out of the traditional system. COL provides extensive support to long-standing partners in Botswana, Eswatini, and Papua New Guinea, and we are starting a new Open schooling journey with The Gambia.

In Eswatini, the Emlalatini Development Centre (EDC) provides out-of-school children and youths with an opportunity to participate in education and training. EDC reaches out to these learners through the distance education mode of delivery. To harness technological advances, the centre has adopted the technology-enabled learning (TEL) route towards blended learning provision. During an intensive five-day session with 53 stakeholders from the centre late last year, COL's Director of Education, Dr Tony Mays, observed, "It has been a long journey with EDC from 2019 to get to the point at which blended open schooling provision is poised to take off in the new year. The new institutional TEL/OER policy aligns with national policy and formalises EDC's new identity. Once ratified by the ministry, an implementation plan and budget will be needed by EDC to sustain its upward trajectory."

In Maun, Botswana, COL has focused on enhancing key resources. Dr Tommie Hamaluba, Subject Specialist and Programme Developer at Botswana Open University (BOU), who recently facilitated a materials development "boot camp" for BOU course developers, explained that the training was about "enhancing our Senior Secondary School Hospitality & Tourism and Accounting." For many reasons, including staff turnover and variable access to digital devices, materials development is an ongoing and iterative process, and this message was one of the training's takeaways.

In Papua New Guinea, COL for the last three years has supported the Flexible Open and Distance Education (FODE) division within the Ministry of Education in making a gradual migration towards blended and online learning provision. In 2024, FODE will begin offering Grade 11 subjects through its new platform while starting work on content for Grade 12. Online provision is a new initiative for FODE, and it has taken time for classroom-based teachers to learn how to develop online course content, initially focused on text and graphics but then progressively adding video content and digital interactivity. It also required time to then develop appropriate books, and a small pilot group of volunteer learners helped identify and rectify gaps in the materials.

In The Gambia, COL is supporting the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) in developing a national ODL policy for schooling, as a precursor to establishing The Gambia School of Open Learning (GAMSOL). Meeting recently in Banjul at the Curriculum, Research, Evaluation and Development Directorate, 13 officials from different directorates engaged with stakeholders to create the national ODL policy. The workshop resulted not only in the draft of a new national ODL policy for basic and secondary education, but also a formal draft charter to establish GAMSOL. Elsewhere, MoBSE's content development team, with an open schooling expert provided by COL, successfully completed the development of Grade 10 materials in mathematics, English, general science, auto mechanics, metalwork, woodwork, history, electrical installation, fisheries, and home science.



In-country training workshop for FODE curriculum developers and facilitators.

Fair Comment

There is an information crisis. Does education really care?



Professor Alex Grech leads the Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning Foundation (3CL) and teaches new media at the University of Malta.

"Continuing to advocate for better information and media literacy in schools, workplaces, and homes is the only solution."

In a recent Wired article, Steven Levy described as bizarre the idea that in 2024, anyone might believe a digital image is evidence of anything. After all, the current panic about tech-influenced deep fakes is simply the latest of numerous incidents in a long-running information crisis that we continue to endure and ignore.

Like other early advocates of the transformative potential of the Internet and social technologies, I have come to temper my enthusiasm for the power of technology. Media scholars have gradually identified the root cause of the problems associated with new media: the attention economy, surveillance capitalism, big data algorithms, Silicon Valley platform business models, rogue politicians, and echo chambers. The film The Social Dilemma did a good job of sounding alarm bells.

With the rise of "fake news," the credibility of traditional gatekeepers such as journalists, public intellectuals, and educators has been questioned, ridiculed, and dismissed. Mis- and disinformation, which lie at the heart of the post-truth crisis, hinge on the belief that certain individuals possess the authority to speak the truth and have earned the right to be trusted. In times when the death of expertise, rationality, and enlightenment values are celebrated online, the education sector suddenly appears particularly vulnerable.

I approached the information crisis with the conviction that better media, technology, and education may address some of the worst excesses of the post-truth society – but equally aware that they also have the potential for extreme harm. At the 3CL, our activist approach includes organising events for people from different disciplines, cultures, and age groups, and developing books and manifestos on information targeting technology, educators, and policymakers. In the process, we challenge our own misconceptions about technology and generation divides, since young people increasingly blame Boomers for the challenges they navigate online and in the labour market.

With generative AI, mainstream education systems are facing another information crisis, prompting confusion, ambivalence, and resignation. The academy struggles with workable strategies, from assessments to essay writing to accreditation. It has been left to think tanks and organisations such as UNESCO and COL to forecast what the new learning landscape may become. It is not an accident that these organisations have less vested interest in retaining the status quo. In my part of the world, the EU is attempting to regulate AI, but only time will determine its effectiveness.

The promise of the Internet was freedom from information gatekeepers. Yet higher education institutions continue to operate as gatekeepers of a different form – from education credentials to Victorian models of instruction and assessment. If we are to embed critical thinking into the understanding of any AI process, then higher education needs to take the lead, as opposed to playing the waiting game. The fear of pocket calculators in classrooms has been replaced by dystopian tales and suspicion of cheating c/o ChatGPT. It is often left to lone organic intellectuals within the system to explore co-learning and personal learning pathways and determine how we can use new tools.

The education system's disconnection from its stakeholders will persist unless there is internal change. Continuing to advocate for better information and media literacy in schools, workplaces, and homes is the only solution that I see. We must also reflect on how educational institutions may remain relevant beyond the value attributed to current accreditation regimes.

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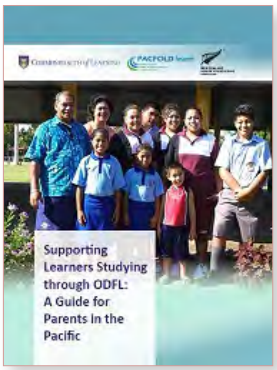
What to Read

NEW RESOURCES

Supporting Learners Studying through ODFL: A Guide for Parents in the Pacific

This guide addresses the adaptive and supplemental support parents can offer their children who are engaging in forms of open, distance, and flexible learning, either as part of their in-class learning or in a fully online medium of instruction, whether by choice or in response to school closures or emergency circumstances.

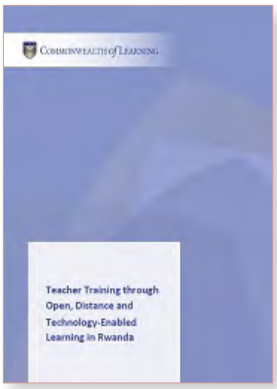
http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5507



Teacher Training through Open, Distance and Technology-Enabled Learning in Rwanda

This baseline study focuses on analysing policies and practices related to open, distance, and technology-enabled learning for in teacher education in Rwanda.

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5506



Gender Country Profiles

Curated by COL and available for all countries in the Commonwealth, each profile outlines the country's available data and rankings that are relevant to gender equality.

http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/1717



Open textbooks

COL's Open Textbooks collection is a repository of Creative Commons licensed course material. Hosted on PressBooks, this open-source platform simplifies the sharing of digital textbooks in various formats, including EPUB, PDF, and accessible webbooks, meeting the diverse needs of learners.

opentextbooks.colvee.org

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Transforming Education for Climate Action: Report to Commonwealth Ministers of Education (2022)

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A Guide for Implementing a Quality Assurance Institutional Review Tool for Blended Learning (2021)

http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3734



oasis.col.org

OAsis, COL's open-access institutional repository: a source of high-quality research and educational content.

#TECHtrends



Open-source LLMs affordably unlock generative AI

The field of generative AI has witnessed remarkable progress since the launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT in late 2022, particularly in the ability of AI services to understand and generate complex, nuanced content. This has unleashed new possibilities for content creation and evaluation, with a recent McKinsey Global Institute report suggesting that generative AI could contribute up to USD 4.4 trillion to the global economy. For university leaders in developing countries, these advancements offer valuable tools to drive significant changes in education and research.

"Open-source LLMs present a significant opportunity for universities in developing countries to harness the power of generative AI."

Generative AI services like ChatGPT rely on large language models (LLMs) that use vast amounts of data to answer questions and perform complex tasks. However, training LLMs can be an expensive process, often costing hundreds of thousands of dollars even for a limited domain, which is why popular AI services charge users various fees, including subscriptions.

Open-source LLMs, such as LLaMa 2, Falcon, Bloom, and Mistral, offer a cost-effective alternative for universities. This rapidly evolving landscape sees new models and variants emerging regularly, with leaderboards like Chatbot Arena helping compare their performance. Particularly in the developing world, open-source LLMs provide benefits such as reduced costs, customisation, transparency, collaboration, and better data sovereignty.

Open-source LLMs can help universities improve their online presence and engage students and faculty through interactive chatbots or virtual assistants. These AI-powered conversations can guide users through various aspects of university life while fostering a deeper understanding of LLMs' potential and limitations. Universities can also use low-cost, one-shot training to fine-tune pre-trained LLMs, generating informative and contextually-relevant website content without extensive manual effort.

To effectively deploy open-source LLMs, universities in developing countries may collaborate and pool resources, sharing expertise, best practices, and computational resources to refine models. Integrating these LLMs into university ecosystems can further advance digitalisation, as institutions share models and best practices to enhance their digital infrastructure and provide better services to their communities. For example, a collection of regional networks or consortia for generative AI supported by Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth members could be envisioned and implemented.

Exposure to open-source LLMs can inspire students and teachers to explore natural language processing and contribute to the development of localised language models that cater to the specific needs of their regions. By fostering a culture of innovation, universities can position themselves at the forefront of generative AI research and development.

Open-source LLMs present a significant opportunity for universities in developing countries to harness the power of generative AI. By leveraging these models to enhance university services, collaborate with peers, and inspire future innovations, institutions can become leaders in the rapidly evolving field of generative AI while better supporting their students and faculty.

While open-source LLMs offer immense potential for universities in developing countries, their successful deployment requires a thoughtful and comprehensive approach. Data sovereignty and privacy are emerging priorities in developing countries. By prioritising them, promoting responsible AI practices, learning from others, and embracing a mindset of continuous improvement, institutions can unlock the transformative power of these tools and drive meaningful change in education and research.

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