

## Developing Partnerships to Acquire Impact: The Role of Three Regional Centres' Capacity Building Efforts for ODL Adoption in the Emerging World

Kirk F. Perris<sup>1</sup> and Rory McGreal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Commonwealth of Learning, Canada*

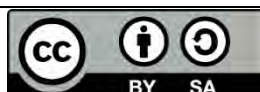
<sup>2</sup>*Athabasca University, Canada*

**Abstract:** Partnerships are central to the awareness, implementation and development of open and distance learning (ODL). It is an attribute that is distinct in the higher education sector, where ODL has made a large footprint by dispelling the notion that university enrolment is reserved for a narrow and elite demographic. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) operates to advance the uptake of ODL amongst the 54 member states of the Commonwealth. COL leverages its work through various channels, and the COL Regional Centres play a pivotal role as partners to COL and, in turn, to acquire new partners that may benefit from COL's technical expertise. The Regional Centres, strategically located across the Commonwealth, engage primarily in capacity building for ODL. Their constituents include governments, institutions, and individual learners. This paper explores the role of COL Regional Centres to grow existing partnerships and to form new ones in the pursuit of ODL expansion. The formation of partnerships is understudied in the ODL space, yet it has been pivotal in augmenting the visibility and importance of ODL around the world. Drawing on data from an evaluation of three COL Regional Centres conducted at the end of 2019, and reporting on follow-up activities to the mid-point of 2021, this paper highlights how the RCs are achieving their mandate to engage partners and, in the process, have achieved short- and long-term outcomes since 2018. Findings provide insight into the effectiveness of RC activities, relative to the number of institutions and individuals reached, complemented with inputs from RC stakeholders, mostly comprised of RC staff. Recommendations are offered, with the paper positing that the role of the Regional Centres should continue and expand to other areas of the Commonwealth premised on their ability to build and sustain partnerships through capacity building efforts.

**Keywords:** ODL, Regional Centres, partnerships.

### Introduction

This paper considers the centrality of partnerships in the adoption of open and distance learning (ODL), an understudied focus that has enabled the widespread adoption and growth of open universities and other institutions around the world. The authors define partnerships as an arrangement between two entities that is mutually beneficial, sustained over time, and carrying the purpose to have impact for each other's stakeholders. The United Nations articulates partnerships as essential to realising its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and includes Goal 17, *Partnerships for the Goals* as a means to, "Revitalize the global partnership for Sustainable Development," with renewed emphasis advocating for, "Strong international cooperation... to ensure that countries have the means to recover from the pandemic." (United Nations, 2020). COL aligns its mandate, *Learning for*



*Sustainable Development*, to the SDGs, and in particular SDG4, focused exclusively on education. It requires, however, a vast network of partners, and the Regional Centres act as invaluable levers to advance COL's mandate, building on an under-reported tradition of partnerships in the ODL space to advance its uptake in institutions around the world.

### **The Open University of the United Kingdom: Early Efforts to Form Bilateral Partnerships in ODL**

From its early days in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) engaged in bilateral arrangements with governments around the world. Through the provision of technical advice, the United Kingdom quickly raised the profile of its ODL model in an international milieu. Early adopters like India made minimal modifications in establishing their national open university effectively replicating the OUUK's decentralised network of study centres. China took a different approach and instead created a vast network of semi-autonomous provincial universities in every major city and province (Perris, 2012). These efforts by the OUUK gave it an international profile and a *bona fide* sense of legitimacy as an institution type designed for educable populations irrespective of background. Consequently, the OUUK model has made a positive contribution to nation building around the world, and that continues in the present day. With the accelerated growth of higher education enrolment around the world, it is not surprising that other institutions that engage in ODL have surfaced to also build partnerships in this expansion.

### **The Rise of ODL-Oriented Institutions: The Expansion of Multilateral Partnerships**

Most ODL-oriented institutions have focused more on building partnerships through advocacy, rather than the capacity building focus of the OUUK. Promoting the merits of ODL multilaterally through declarations, policy briefs and other documents has been the focus of international bodies like ICDE, and UNESCO and regional bodies including the Asian Association of Open Universities, the African Centre for Distance Education and the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa. While important, advocacy is decoupled from coordinated on-the-ground capacity building, which is essential to making ODL 'stick', and what we posit as integral to forging sustainable partnerships. Two multilateral entities that are purposefully oriented toward fostering impact through capacity building efforts are The South African Institute for Distance Education, focusing on the provision of ODL in Southern Africa, and COL, focused on the provision of ODL to the majority of the 54 member states of the Commonwealth. These organisations support policy development, materials production, and on-the-ground (and increasingly virtual) capacity building activities.

COL, though small with an annual operating budget of approximately USD 10 million, is primarily focused on capacity building and leverages its vast networks to run its activities. Among its most important partners are its Regional Centres. The Regional Centres are hosted in dedicated distance, or dual-mode institutions, and like the OUUK bilateral arrangements, the Regional Centres build legitimacy of ODL for their hosting institution and the broader higher education sector in the regions where they are located. The COL RCs engage in capacity building, usually in the form of workshops coupled with ongoing support, and monitoring and evaluation. Activities may be one-off short term engagements, or multi-phased engagements spread over longer periods. Given the geographical isolation of COL in western Canada — far removed from its clusters of partners in the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia-Pacific — it is imperative for COL to forge meaningful partnerships and for its Regional Centres to engage in this outreach throughout the Commonwealth.

Central to this paper is to report on the activities of three Regional Centres (RCs) established by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which have been integral to COL's development of partnerships and uptake of ODL. The investigation draws inferences from the activities initiated by the RCs and provides insights into the scope and relevancy of each RC for ODL, from intervention to pursuing outcomes. While the RCs have faced ongoing resource challenges, they have made progress and this is reflected in the strength of partnerships to effect change, and particularly as it relates to reaching Sustainable Development Goal 4, uniquely focused on advancing access to quality education for all<sup>i</sup>. The RCs include organisations in Nigeria, Botswana, Fiji and Malta<sup>ii</sup>, with activities in Western and Southern Africa, the South Pacific and Pan-Commonwealth. They were established to augment COL's visibility and impact in the field through four strategic areas that, in addition to capacity building and advocacy, include networking, and sustainability in ODL (McGreal, 2020)<sup>iii</sup>. Undergirding these areas is partnerships, and this paper will focus on how such arrangements are essential to grow the uptake of ODL and ultimately widen access to quality learning opportunities. In this sense, the paper serves to illuminate COL's unique role in developing partnerships multilaterally and that this has been greatly enhanced through the operations of its Regional Centres.

### **The Commonwealth of Learning: Origins and Expansion**

The Commonwealth of Learning was established by the Heads of Commonwealth States in 1987. Conceptualised as an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to the advancement of ODL, COL was viewed as an invaluable addition to the Commonwealth organisations to widen educational access to its member states. With headquarters in Metro Vancouver, COL is located in an otherwise isolated area of the Commonwealth with its closest member state being Jamaica, over 5,000 kms away. COL responds to the needs of its member states through a vast network of educational institutions and other partners (governments, agencies, and consultants). In its current strategic plan (2015af), COL is focused on three pillars:

- Improved Sustainable Livelihoods
- Increased and equitable access to, and use of, quality learning opportunities
- Improved organisational capacity to leverage ODL

The origin of COL Regional Centres is varied but rooted in linkages with institutions carrying an ODL focus. RETRIDOL (Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning) is an academic unit of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and engages primarily with integrating ODL into higher education institutions in the five Commonwealth States of the West-Africa sub-Region. SADC-CDE (Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education) hosted by Botswana Open University (BOU), is tasked with capacity building in ODL in K-12 and higher education sectors across 11 Commonwealth states in the SADC region. PACFOLD (Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development), housed at the University of the South Pacific, aims to empower Pacific communities through lifelong learning with the adoption and application of flexible open and distance learning for development (FOL4D). PACFOLD supports the ODL needs of the 11 Pacific Island Countries (PICs) that are also members of the Commonwealth. The 3CL Foundation (Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning), has a Pan-Commonwealth mandate that is largely focused on building digital competencies (e.g., Blockchain technology, digital literacy), with a remit that expands beyond Europe to the broader or Pan-Commonwealth.

The work of the three RCs of focus overlaps in some areas (e.g., higher education), but they otherwise have their own niche or specialisation. In terms of mandate, the RCs engage in advocacy, capacity building, networking, and sustainability. The RCs build on a tradition of partnerships in the ODL space to carry out their work and widen the uptake of ODL. They do so in collaboration with COL staff, who work with the Regional Centres in the areas of governance structures, strategic planning, and activity implementation. COL provides funds to implement activities of the Regional Centres, and the hosting organisation provides funds for staffing, office space and related amenities. This can be otherwise characterised as a close relationship, formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding, usually over three years between COL and each Regional Centre. Weekly, if not daily, engagements between COL and the RCs are essential. This is a reflection of the extensive number of activities the RCs undertake, which will be summarised later in this paper.

## **Literature Review**

The context of ODL is storied and well documented (Moore & Kearsley, 2004, Holmberg, 2005). Its formal establishment can go back to the founding of the University of South Africa in 1949, the first wholly dedicated distance learning institution, or to the extension examinations enabled by the University of London starting in the 18th Century. The global spread of ODL, however, took off after the formation of the Open University in the United Kingdom in 1969. By the 1970s, models of open universities sprang up in Israel, Thailand, Canada and elsewhere (Daniel, 1998). Today there are dozens of open universities – India and China alone are home to over 60 combined when considering their state and provincial open universities. The Open University of China (OUC) and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) were modeled after the OUUK and these Asian Open Universities benefited early on in their formation from technical expertise imported from the United Kingdom (Perris, 2015). The formation of Botswana Open University and the Open University of Tanzania were supported by the Commonwealth of Learning (Tait, 2016; Cutting, 1989), and other institutions provide more supporting roles through advocacy and thought leadership. Both the OUUK and COL continue to play important roles in the expansion of single and dual-mode universities; the former institutional type largely characterised as focused primarily on distance teaching, and the latter institutional type largely characterised as offering both contact and distance forms of instruction, and often delivered concurrently.

The growth in open universities and dual-mode universities is not surprising. Worldwide, participation rates in post-secondary education (PSE) remain highly uneven with ranges from 70% to 5% of the age cohort, defined as the 17-23 year old demographic (OECD, 2020). For countries with lower participation rates in PSE, human and financial resources are the primary constraints, and governments – which remain the primary backers to post-secondary education – continue to recede from funding commitments to the tertiary sector. According to Daniel (2004), compared to the bricks and mortar institutions, ODL systems are far more efficient to run. He argues that the ODL model avoids the pressures to maintain a large institutional campus and gains efficiencies through its ability to scale enrolment. Consequently, costs, including tuition, remain comparatively lower to conventional institutions, and as unit costs are spread across greater numbers of learners, revenue streams correspondingly increase (Daniel, 1996; Daniel, 2004; Datt, 1988).

The presence and impact of ODL is strongest in the emerging world context (Perraton, 2000). UNISA, as noted above, was the world's first dedicated distance teaching university, predating the Open

University by 20 years. The Open University of China (OUC) and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) have a combined enrolment of approximately five million learners, making them, by far, the largest universities in the world by enrolment (Perris, 2015). South America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Pacific-Asia all are home to Open Universities, Dual-mode Universities, and related institutions. Similarly, there are dozens of open school initiatives spread across South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, along with formal ODL or related bodies in each of these regions. The formation of these institutions would have been hampered without the sharing of sustained technical inputs derived from experienced partner institutions.

Interestingly, partnerships are not only between institutions, but within institutions as well. While open universities, for example, conduct research, their primary role is teaching and learning at a distance. The physical separation of teacher and learner presents challenges and learning materials, coupled with other supports, aim to ameliorate challenges presented by distance (e.g., learner isolation). The formation of learning materials, and curriculum in particular, is usually devised through course teams rather than individual academics. Daniel describes this as, “one of the highest expressions of scholars being scholarly” (Daniel, 2001, p. 22). Course materials are outcomes of multiple perspectives, debate, and consensus building. In addition to augmenting quality, the process creates an atmosphere of collegiality that is largely lacking in academic circles, yet open universities have modeled this for years, bringing in subject matter experts from other institutions with regularity. The model is consistent in many Open Universities, and the sharing of resources also strengthens partnerships domestically. Both IGNOU and the OUC, for example, serve as central authorities in the development and distribution of materials for their partner institutions in India and China, respectively. State Open Universities in India, often translate materials derived from IGNOU into local languages, promoting IGNOU’s materials in the process (Perris, 2012).

In the international milieu, the Commonwealth of Learning serves as a reputable multilateral organisation that positions capacity building and partnerships as central to its mandate. It does so through varying means. Facilitated and self-paced courses that range from MOOCs to Master’s level degrees (in conjunction with universities) are actively promoted through its partners. These course offerings enrol thousands of learners annually and are an effective means to reach a broad swathe of citizens in the member states of the Commonwealth. Workshops, and related training impacts hundreds of institutions as well, and serve as focused and scalable means to impact learners. The Regional Centres play a role leveraging these efforts through their own networks and linkages to regional bodies. RETRIDOL and SADC-CDE, for example, include The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on their advisory boards. These regional entities offer strategic inputs to the RCs informed by their engagement with Ministries of Education, and other bodies. PACFOLD, located in the Fijian capital of Suva, does not have a direct link to its regional body, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), but plans are in place to bring on PIFS as a collaborative partner. Linkages between the RCs and regional partners are also formed through dedicated distance learning associations, such as the African Council for Distance Education and the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa. Institutional and personal connections also elevate the RCs’ visibility and ability to forge partnerships. COL also has dedicated focal points or country representatives, who serve as designated individuals in a ministry or learning institution that source or recommend new partners for COL and the Regional Centres.

In combination, the focus on partnerships is prominent in the ODL space. The OUUK led the formation of partnerships at an early stage of its development, and this continues in the present day. Its reputation and impact to provide sound technical expertise abroad has been a strong impetus that has grown ODL internationally. The OUUK emulates its building of partnerships abroad with a commitment to forging partnerships within the institution relative to its administration and curriculum. The Commonwealth of Learning has made partnerships central to its mandate, and does so through varying channels, with the Regional Centres playing a pivotal role. The effectiveness of this model is the point of focus in this paper, with the following research question posed, *How far has COL and its Regional Centres developed partnerships through advocacy and capacity building efforts, and is this sufficient to have meaningful impact in the regions they serve?*

To address this question, this paper will outline and share results from two sources. First, an evaluation commissioned by COL and conceptualised and executed by the paper's authors in 2019; and second, a reporting on activities undertaken by the Regional Centres from 2018 to the mid-point of 2021.

## **Methods**

The study was formulated based on two main sources of data; an evaluation of the Regional Centres completed in late 2019, and follow-up data collection reporting on progress of activities and growth of partnerships to mid-2021.

## **Evaluation**

To ascertain the role of COL's RCs in imparting change regionally, the researchers conducted an evaluation commissioned by the Commonwealth of Learning over three months in the fall of 2019. The premise of the evaluation was to illuminate the activities of the Regional Centres, and to acquire a deeper understanding of how they have engaged with COL, the extent of their advocacy, formation of partnerships, and any impact observed from their capacity building activities. Data collection of the evaluation included documents (secondary resources) and survey and interviews (primary resources). A large volume of documents from each Regional Centre were supplied by COL (n = 40) complemented with Web searches to discover other documents or corroborate existing information related to the projects. Documents included minutes of meetings, a constitution, workshop reports, annual reports, articles, and descriptions of the RCs. The researchers composed a list of interview questions relevant to all the RCs. Data collection from primary sources was conducted in two ways: through the survey questionnaire circulated by email, and a purposeful follow-up interview by email with some of the participants to elicit further information and to triangulate data drawn from their responses to the questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire focused on questions related to roles and practices, values, supports and enabling and inhibiting factors for implementation of the programme of each RC. Descriptive data were compiled and listed from the responses to the different questions. Content analysis of the survey questions was conducted with the intention of discerning any categories, concepts, or overall themes, based on the opinions of these RC leaders, thus ensuring that a sufficient variety of contexts and positions were adequately represented. A total of nine surveys were sent out with five follow-up interviews completed with participants from their home locations. The participants include RC Directors, one Vice Chancellor, and an officer who participated from an RC activity.

## **Data from RC Activities**

To complement the 2019 evaluation, data from workshops and other activities was compiled from the period of 2018 to mid-2021. This included courses offered by the RCs and training offered by COL to the RCs. The data includes the number of institutional partners and individuals reached.

## **Methods Deployed**

The methodology used for this investigation includes triangulation. Validation is important but triangulation helped researchers to understand implementations better by eliciting different perspectives on the same phenomena. In this investigation, researchers identified and used the following three methods. First, an analysis of documents provided by the RCs, COL, and from an Internet search; second, the creation and distribution of a survey and, third, follow-up interviews with the respondents conducted to dig deeper into their responses to provide more insights. Fourth, data was shared by COL on activities from 2018 to mid-2021 and a descriptive analysis is provided.

## **Findings**

### **RETRIDOL**

RETRIDOL was established in 2003 as a COL Regional Centre. Over its existence, it has engaged in a range of activities centred on widening the adoption of ODL in higher education institutions. Since 2017, it has primarily focused on supporting the transition of traditional universities to dual-mode course delivery (face-to-face and distance) in western Africa. Given that this region has among the lowest participation rates in the world, there is an acute need to widen enrolment through differentiated pathways, and ODL has become widely accepted as a viable alternative to campus-based solutions. Nigeria, for example, has a dedicated ODL unit in the National Universities Commission, charged with dual-mode accreditation.

### **RETRIDOL Activities**

Although successful transitions cannot be guaranteed, the RC is increasing awareness of and advocating for ODL through varying channels. RETRIDOL embarked on a two-country sensitisation workshop in Ghana and the Gambia in 2018, but progress was delayed due to inadequate funds from institutions and a developing model for the project, that has since matured. Over time, it was realised that the model had to support institutions in policy development, pedagogical training, course development, online platform (or learning management system) training, and utilising open educational resources (OER). To 2021, RETRIDOL has conducted in-person and virtual workshops on these topics in all five Commonwealth states of WASR<sup>iv</sup>, and there are now 26 partner institutions involved in the dual-mode project. RETRIDOL also ran workshops on OER development, and gender mainstreaming. In total, the Regional Centre has developed partnerships with 46 institutions in WASR. To date, the product of this work has been the accreditation of dual-mode provision of three universities in Nigeria, and the formation of policies in OER, ODL and gender by 15 institutions. Over 800 individuals have been trained as a result of participation in 15 workshops since 2018.

In addition to its capacity building efforts, RETRIDOL also publishes a twice yearly journal entitled, the *West African Journal of Open and Flexible Learning (WAJOFEL)*, and hosts symposia and participates in conferences annually.

RETRIDOL is staffed with four professionals, of which three are full professors, and an administrative complement of four others, including a driver. The resource constraints they face are more aligned to funding activities, as NOUN has been able to adequately fund its on-the-ground operations.

### **Challenges Facing RETRIDOL**

Several challenges to successful transitions to dual-mode in this region have been identified. These include the high cost of setting up an online platform and significantly, the dearth of programmers and other technicians able to implement one. These reasons, combined with low human capacity to maintain sustainable operations in dual mode, and a lack of demand from potential students for ODL courses despite unmet demand for higher learning, all contributed to the reticence of universities to make the change.

### **Moving Forward, Post-Pandemic in Western Africa**

However, the COVID pandemic forced major changes, including the closing of all schools in Nigeria and other countries in the region. Traditional methods of teaching employed by university and library systems in Nigeria have collapsed since students left their campuses on account of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ifijeh & Yussuf, 2020). Many Nigerian universities have been forced by the pandemic to begin adopting online teaching and learning methodologies. Such scenarios are opening new opportunities for RETRIDOL as unmet demand for learning persists. The growing numbers of qualified secondary school graduates, as well as working adults who wish to upgrade their skills requires just-in-time interventions to which ODL is designed to accommodate. RETRIDOL's capacity building expertise in ODL is essential to support institutions wishing to address the growing demand for education using online technologies in western Africa. It has laid an important foundation to continue working with partners, balanced with seeking new ones, without over-extending resources.

### **SADC-CDE**

Botswana-based SADC-CDE has been a major regional leader in building the capacity of institutions to deliver quality ODL courses and capacity building for adoption of technology-enabled learning (TEL) and related activities. SADC-CDE was established in 2007 with the dual support of Botswana Open University (then Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning) and the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (then the Ministry of Education). Over time, SADC-CDE has provided training in ODL to eleven Commonwealth countries in the Southern Africa region<sup>v</sup>. Thousands of students in this region have earned academic credentials through ODL in colleges and universities located in Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Mauritius, Tanzania, Eswatini, and Mozambique, and COL and SADC-CDE have been important contributors to this work.

### **SADC-CDE Activities**

Since 2018, SADC-CDE has run workshops on non-formal education, gender mainstreaming, and open schooling, mainly in capacity building for TEL. SADC-CDE has also sponsored learners to enrol in the Certificate for Distance Education Practitioners, offered by Botswana Open University. Currently there are 33 learners enrolled, emanating from Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Seychelles and Eswatini. The focus of SADC-CDE has returned to Open Schooling, and it is also supporting a Teacher Education initiative underway in the region that is centred in South Africa. In the Open Schooling activity, there are four institutions building programmes for TEL and they are located in



Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Tanzania. Since 2018, 19 institutions have participated in workshops and nearly 700 individuals have been trained.

### **Challenges Facing SADC-CDE**

Adequate human resources and funding for activities were considered to be the main challenges to the growth of the RC and the sustainability of its activities. The RC Director, as one of two staff in SADC-CDE, also serves as the COL Focal Point for the dissemination of ODL activities nationally in Botswana. This additional role has provided new partnerships for the RC and COL. One project recently concluded with the Human Resource Development Council under the federal government of Botswana.

To sustain and develop new partnerships, there are important issues around infrastructure to be addressed by governments and the telecom industry. The Internet is considered to be “the bedrock” of ODL, so its availability and reliability are very important. There is limited Internet connectivity and limited access to computers in many countries in the SADC region, so ODL through Internet delivery has not always been feasible. SADC-CDE staff felt that, as part of their mandate, there was a need to lobby for ODL by advocating for improved Internet reliability and accessibility in the region in order to reduce inequality and support for SDG4.

In this sense, print distribution is still important, yet this poses other challenges for the RC. There is a significant disparity among the different countries and institutions, so there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to ODL adoption. In this sense, SADC-CDE needs to be agile in how it engages with partners, and to ascertain the level of infrastructure within a given institution. Bringing together institutions with varied infrastructure has been problematic in some projects (e.g., non-formal education), despite affirmation, for example, that Internet connectivity in institutional contexts was reliable.

Another challenge was the variance in understanding of concepts of ODL. Most regional workshop participants came from conventional educational backgrounds. OER, Open Pedagogies and Open Access are not adequately known among faculty and institutions in the region even though a regional policy on ODL has been adopted by SADC Ministers of Education (SADC, 2012). These are being introduced as new concepts. Workshops and short online courses have been suggested as a means of transferring knowledge on openness. To date, the RC has only engaged in limited work to develop or use OER. One suggestion from the authors is to focus more on developing national policies and strong advocacy to prioritise and institutionalise OER.

Respondents to the survey felt that ODL should be a work in progress and so believed that capacity building activities such as face-to-face workshops were important, as compared to running some workshops online. They also felt that the networking opportunities of these face-to-face workshops helped RC staff to target specific supporters, and, ultimately, fortify partnerships.

### **Moving Forward, Post-Pandemic in Southern Africa**

SADC-CDE leaders believed that any move towards blended learning by institutions in the SADC region would be a welcome development, so the recent COVID-inspired impetus to ODL by institutions throughout the regions has been viewed favourably. Online learning is considered to provide learners with greater autonomy and more opportunities for interaction in comparison with classroom-based education. Respondents also believed that ODL can make teaching easier and can be

more cost-effective than classroom-based education. To what extent can the RC bring in new partners, will continue to pose challenges. Given it is to respond to the needs of 11 countries in the region, with a staff complement of two, clearly indicates SADC-CDE has overachieved since 2018.

In other contexts, SADC-CDE respondents felt that the criteria for assessing the quality of ODL courses should be similar to those used in face-to-face courses in all respects but need not be the same. A parity of standards is needed rather than attempting to make them the same. For example, “online courses can take advantage of simulated/virtual environments with relative ease,” was a comment from one interviewee. Some criteria for evaluation could therefore be different.

Research, particularly with a focus on Southern Africa, is also considered to be an important focus for the RC. There are plans to introduce research dissemination forums in support of ODL research in the region. However, respondents felt that the shift to a research emphasis could sideline capacity building needed by partners, and so a careful consideration of research focus will be needed.

### **PACFOLD**

PACFOLD was established in 2013 and is a collaboration between COL and the University of the South Pacific (USP). It has the vision of empowering Pacific communities through lifelong learning. Its goal is to promote the adoption and application of flexible open and distance learning for development (FOL4D) and to use methods and technologies to address the challenges that face the Pacific Island countries and their people. PACFOLD is focusing its attention on the adoption of FOL4D methods for capacity building in technology-enabled learning for sustainable development in their region. In addition to capacity building, these efforts encompass advocacy, communication, innovation, and research supporting all subject areas and educational levels. This includes training faculty, while providing human and technical resources. Four priority areas have been identified: 1. To create awareness of FOL4D; 2. To build capacity in FOL4D to increase access to relevant non-formal and formal learning; 3. To support FOL4D policy development; and 4. To provide a platform promoting research in FOL4D.

### **PACFOLD Activities**

The PACFOLD goal is to use methods and technologies to address the challenges that confront Pasifikers. Its mission is, “To be a network of networks to facilitate flexible and open learning for sustainable development in the Pacific”, with a focus on capacity building, advocacy, innovation and research. Over the past three and a half years, PACFOLD has engaged in capacity building for uptake of TEL, developed courses, and engaged in research. Capacity building has been focused on formal and non-formal learning, specifically in the K-12 sector. In 2021, PACFOLD and COL collaborated on a research publication addressing out-of-school-children in the Pacific (Narayan et al, 2021). Contributors hailed from all nine Pacific Island Countries (PICs) of the Commonwealth, and COL and PACFOLD have engaged in a knowledge mobilisation activity, workshopping the major findings of the book toward developing country-specific interventions. COL and PACFOLD also engaged in capacity building amongst eight PICs to develop a suite of courses on youth work, of which six have been offered. Another course offering has been on developing numeracy skills amongst young people. In total, these courses have reached over 3,000 learners. Capacity building has reached all nine PICs, and partnerships have been forged with each Ministry and five educational institutions. Given the aggregate total of inhabitants amongst the nine PICs is approximately ten million, the number of institutional partners is comparatively smaller than the regions covered by RETRIDOL and SADC-

CDE. There are only a few educational institutions which PACFOLD has yet to engage, and given its progress, further outreach is promising. The University of the South Pacific, where PACFOLD is housed, is also well-positioned to enhance its partnership with this Regional Centre. USP, for example, is well advanced in its use/reuse and assembly of OER. It is among the first universities in the world to mainstream OER with a specific policy that requires OER and monitors the implementation (See <https://policylib.usp.ac.fj/form.readdoc.php?id=736>). All USP course developers are now required to search for OER in the first instance, only considering other options after a thorough search of existing OER materials. Respondents also believed that OER and open licensing awareness was not widespread in the region but it is just “a matter of time” before OER become more widely adopted regionally. Such progress is relevant beyond the Pacific, and PACFOLD is well positioned to leverage the progress made by USP in OER and flexible learning, to other regions of the Commonwealth.

The Pacific region has also moved ahead in developing Regional Open and Distance Learning Quality Assurance Guidelines and aims to make effective use of the COL Transnational Qualification Framework, which the member states are expected to domesticate for use nationally (Commonwealth of Learning, 2015b). These measures will help to promote more regional collaborations and promote standardisation allowing for greater flexibility for students in choosing online courses and programmes. PACFOLD is well-positioned to develop such guidelines and create a harmonised qualifications network with USP guidance.

Gender sensitivity is recognised as a cross-cutting theme that is present in all the operations of the RC. PACFOLD respects and proactively supports diversity, including gender equality. This is a central focus for their work in a region with a wide range of different cultures and ethnic groups.

### **Challenges Facing PACFOLD**

Like SADC-CDE, PACFOLD has a small staff complement. The Director’s primary duties are to oversee the Centre for Flexible Learning, and staff from this Centre are occasionally seconded to work on PACFOLD activities. Without consistent staffing, however, the growth of PACFOLD will remain largely dictated by COL and its pool of consultants. This should be addressed as on-the-ground specialists dedicated to PACFOLD work is needed at a time when there is more and more attention devoted to these small island states.

### **Moving Forward, Post-Pandemic in the South Pacific**

COVID-19 did not have the deleterious effects in the South Pacific region as it did elsewhere. The Pacific Island Countries were quick to impose lockdowns, and the spread of infections was minimal. Amidst the lockdowns, however, institutions scrambled to go online and many struggled to minimise disruptions to learning. The outcome has been an elevated sense of acquiring more digital competencies and getting up to speed with other regions in the world to deliver digital learning.

The most acute challenges facing the South Pacific region are climate change adaptation and disaster risk management. Sea levels are rising impacting these small island states relative to land erosion, salination of crops, flooding and other negative effects. The region is also subject to cyclones that wreak havoc in the region each year, causing immense damage to infrastructure, including schools and other educational institutions. Moving more learning online would be an effective means to minimise such disruptions, and institutions would benefit from sharing resources and expertise for

digital learning, as it develops, to create sustained learning environments when such deleterious weather events occur.

### **A Major Challenge for COL, the Regional Centres and their Partners**

In implementing ODL, it is essential for the RC proponents to understand and be very clear in their understanding of ODL in relation to classroom-based education. In the email surveys, it was clear that ODL was perceived by some (if not most) of the respondents as simply “a viable alternative” to face-to-face education. It was not seen to be an essential aspect of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, but rather as an adjunct to, or an equal approach to classroom-based learning.

This rather “defensive” attitude regarding ODL can undermine meaningful advocacy and capacity building efforts with partners. More and more, ODL is becoming ESSENTIAL for learning as is being shown now with the pandemic and the pivot towards online learning by institutions globally. ODL can no longer be seen as an “add-on” or an “equal contender” with traditional classroom-based education. The COVID-19 response by institutions, pivoting to online or blended forms of learning, aligns them more with the world's social and economic activities that have become ubiquitous online. To maintain that contemporary education need not be online is simply not defensible.

Despite the reticence of institutions to implement ODL, there is no evidence that classroom-based learning is better than ODL. Quality criteria for education should be the same, no matter the technology used. Research shows that there is “no significant difference” in educational outcomes regardless of the technology used for delivery (Russel, 1999). The RCs agree that there should not be separate evaluation criteria for ODL.

Antediluvian attitudes toward ODL, such as those expressed by educators who perceive ODL as “a last resort”, are not only outdated but also wrong and so should be challenged forcefully. There is no evidence supporting their views. The argument in favour of ODL and digital learning in general becomes unassailable after COVID, a point that is reinforced by the fact that the vast number of jobs today demand online digital skills (World Economic Forum, 2020). How better to master them than by participating in ODL? ODL is essential for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. The traditionalist protectors of 19<sup>th</sup> century learning environments must be challenged forcefully and led to accepting the realities of the modern world. There is no modern education without online components, whether that be fully online or blended or any combination of the two. Modern education does not include uniquely classroom-based learning with no online components. ODL proponents should be more proactive in advising their communities of the outdated inadequacies of traditional, colonial education and profile ODL, not as the education of the future, but as a necessity for citizens in today's digital world.

### **Limitations**

The methodology included an examination of documents and corresponding data, mainly provided by COL, the participants and an Internet search using Google. This approach was limited to the documents that were provided or were found online. However, this limitation was addressed to some degree through triangulation in the questionnaire and follow-up interviews.

The small number of participants who responded to the survey (nine) and who were interviewed (five) could also be considered a limitation of this investigation. The interviews and follow-ups were conducted remotely using email. This is also a limitation as the verbal and visual cues available in oral and video interviews were not available. This circumscribes the ability of the researchers to

understand the context and situational phenomena. However, the interviewees were not randomly sampled. Rather, they were sampled from staff of the Regional Centres under study, or with whom they have close professional ties (e.g., a Vice Chancellor or project participant).

The problem with real-time Internet connectivity in the different regions led to the decision to forego the oral/visual interviews. No irony is lost on the notion of our position on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, and research efforts being hampered by inadequate 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and connectivity. Technology is essential to modern day life and participation. The point extends to governments and the private sector to coordinate efforts to build the needed infrastructure for its citizenry.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The paper posed the research question, *How far has COL and its Regional Centres developed partnerships through advocacy and capacity building efforts, and is this sufficient to have meaningful impact in the regions they serve?*

In moving toward answering this question, it is important to reflect on data that informs the challenges the RCs face to carry out their work, which is a direct link to effectively working with their partners.

What became clear from the survey and interviews of RC staff and other stakeholders was the expression of consistently strong support for COL. The objectives and goals of the three RCs as noted in the documents and reinforced in the interviews, demonstrated alignment with COL's strategic plan, including emphases in the RCs on regional capacity-building, advocacy, networking, and expansion within their respective regions. Although the formation of partnerships is not explicit, it falls under the areas of networking and expansion, and the RCs have done an admirable job to grow their network of partners since 2018, when COL made a concerted effort to enhance its support to the Regional Centres. The RCs, however, remain a work-in-progress, and at this point growth appears less important than sustainability.

While desires for sustainability of the projects was made clear, there were no RC plans that focused on how to go about ensuring the ongoing operations of the Regional Centres other than continuing in the same way with institutional and COL support. For example, an overall theme was, not surprisingly, a call for COL to provide more funding in order to sustain and expand its present activities. Resource constraints will continue to limit the impact of the RCs unless other funding complements can be sourced. This expands to the provision of adequate staffing, as noted particularly in SADC-CDE and PACFOLD.

Face-to-face learning has been the priority workshop format among all the RCs, primarily because of the unfamiliarity of the participants with ODL. However, future efforts, especially now due to the pandemic, must include more online training and communications, and the RCs have an emerging model to move in this direction. Since August 2020, two RCs have remodeled the generic three- or four-day workshop into a six-week online engagement that melds synchronous and asynchronous activities. This has proven successful as participants, working *in situ*, meet with their facilitator for a two-hour weekly online workshop and then perform varying activities asynchronously in between these weekly sessions. The exit activity of an action plan to demonstrate the knowledge learned and its proposed application to a given institution has been universally adopted in this new model. It is a

contrast to the outcome of the conventional workshop where participants efforts are curtailed when they return to the office and other work has piled up. The workshopping online facilitates the capacity building into their everyday office work, and this has proven to yield more tangible results than the conventional in-person intensive workshop experience.

As well, face-to-face learning in a workshop setting is all too often supportive of passive learning and traditional learning styles, with information being fed to the participants. Online learning is typically more interactive, where the participants must communicate to acquire the knowledge or skills required and having this stretched over time enables better absorption of ideas and time to reflect on its relevance to a given institutional environment. It cannot be expected that participants can effectively be introduced to ODL, solely with face-to-face workshops in a short three- or four-day span with competing interests of travel, meeting new individuals, and being in unfamiliar surroundings. Some of these realities also apply to the university lecture hall, particularly due to the lack of interactivity that characterises the didactic orientation of knowledge purveyor to knowledge receiver. Students, now because of the COVID pandemic, are being forced to take more online courses with or without prior experience online. Indeed, growing pains have occurred and to ameliorate these changes, faculty in the universities now must step up to the challenge of ODL.

The RCs have been achieving success in building regional capacity in ODL. Their efforts have led to positive awareness of ODL along with ODL skills training in their respective regions. However, there needs to be more attention paid to achieving long-term outcomes. This requires efforts to assign deliverables and monitor the post-training activities of the participants in their home institutions to ensure outcomes are realised in the partner institutions. The new model identified above, that requires action plans as an exit activity in capacity building workshops, bodes well for acquiring tangible long-term outcomes from the RCs' activities.

As reported by the participants and the partners involved in the interview process, the RCs are gaining relevancy in their respective regions. They have developed networks and partnerships, significantly increasing ODL capacity in their regions. However, the RCs also need to become more visible in their respective regions, especially among key decision makers in government, inter-government and private sectors. RC representatives should make more efforts to participate with and lobby Ministers in donors' meetings to secure funding to support their ODL activities. The RCs have a reasonable track record of conceptualising suitable activities, building partnerships, and generating short-term and some long-term outcomes, and, as a result, sustainability, and leadership in ODL can be ensured.

The primary area of improvement noted was the increase in ODL awareness through the training of partners' staff, by providing workshops both face-to-face and online. To properly introduce faculty in the regional universities to ODL, then they must experience online learning in practice. It is recognised that this is problematic for some institutions in some, if not many, of the regions in question, yet we view this as largely temporary as infrastructure is improved and Internet data becomes more affordable.

It was also apparent that the use/reuse of OER was not significant, even in the South Pacific (other than USP) which is adopting policies supporting OER. There are significant opportunities to raise awareness and increase ODL capacity by taking advantage of the affordances of OER. The RC host

institutions are all partners of the OERu, which is an international consortium that originated with COL that offers free courses online as OER that can be used for credit at partner institutions. Several Southern African regional partner universities are also OERu partners, including UNISA, North-West University (South Africa), Botswana Open University, the University of Namibia, and the Open University of Zimbabwe.

OERu has made available an open source learning platform that supports online delivery of courses that can be maintained at little cost (Lane & Good, 2019). OERu has also piloted a COL award-winning course *Learning in a Digital Age* that could be effectively used to promote ODL in all the regions (See: <https://oeru.org/courses/>). The RCs can take full advantage of their memberships (and partners' memberships) in OERu. OERu has a course delivery platform that supports online learning at little cost. OERu staff are open to working with institutions in training and implementations. They also offer an award winning OER set of modules for ODL training.

Overall, the RCs have reached dozens of institutions and thousands of individuals through capacity building, training and course activities. The formation of partnerships has been instrumental, and the RCs, largely under-resourced, have made important inroads in their work. To have meaningful impact in the region, however, more work is needed, and this is largely rooted in their governance structures and availability of resources. Despite progress, it is impractical for a two-person operation to have sustained impact in a region of 11 countries, as is the case in SADC-CDE. The challenges are very similar in PACFOLD. RETRIDOL has proven most effective, and a direct link can be drawn to the number of its administrative and professional staff. It should also be reminded that RETRIDOL has been in operation since 2003. It has had both time to mature, and, with a smaller remit of five countries, has enabled greater progress, by comparison to the other RCs. Of course, Nigeria, with a population of 200 million demands more attention than small states like Eswatini with a population of one million in SADC, or Nauru with a population of 10,000 inhabitants in the South Pacific. Yet, in RETRIDOL's case, population size has not overburdened this Regional Centre. In fact, RETRIDOL has been able to scale its activities, and the dual-mode project continues to grow. How far COL and its Regional Centres may expand will remain a question of investment, and, frankly, a bit of patience.

The Sustainable Development Goals are the spawn of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, and other edicts such as Education for All in 1990 (the Jomtien Declaration), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The focus of these documents persists as quality education remains elusive for millions. The recognition of partnerships as integral to making progress, as has been outlined under Goal 17 of the SDGs, indicates how important the sharing of resources, expertise and networks are to reach development objectives. The ODL space has had a legacy of leveraging partnerships, and the success is evidenced by the dozens of ODL institutions established and millions of individuals reached. COL and the RCs must continue this work, and not just grow, but nurture partnerships toward a path for sustainability.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are offered for the RCs in order to build their capacity building efforts to widen partnerships and ODL adoption in the emerging world. While the findings of this study are not generalisable, they could be relevant to other organisations implementing or considering partnering in ODL interventions in developing country contexts.

- O1. RCs should transition, holding less face-to-face and many more online workshops and other training sessions.
- O2. RCs should arrange for bi-annual teleconferences with each other and COL to update their partners on activities.
- O3. RCs should take advantage of opportunities with government and the private sector to lobby for funding for specific projects, including building of infrastructure for online learning.
- O4. RCs should take measures to arrange for ODL champions in each partner institution in their region who could serve as a point of contact and report on outcomes within their universities. A list of partners for regular contacts should be established. A conferencing site is not recommended as these are seldom used. Emails are a simple and effective means of maintaining communities.
- O5. Gender sensitivity should be integrated into all aspects of the work at the RCs and continue to be supported among partner institutions through online workshops.
- O6. RCs should take full advantage of their memberships (and partners' memberships) in OERu. OERu has a suite of scalable open source applications that support online learning at little cost. They are open to working with institutions in training and implementations. They also offer an award winning OER set of modules for ODL training.

Over time, and outside of bilateral arrangements, modeling open and distance learning (ODL) activities has been largely limited to advocacy work. The Commonwealth of Learning manifests its work in ODL primarily through capacity building. The RCs leverage this mandate as dedicated entities in strategic areas of the Commonwealth. The Regional Centres carry a mandate for capacity building with a focus on building partnerships and achieving outcomes that are sustainable. Measures of success are emerging as evidenced from some long-term outcomes, and by a new virtual model to engage in capacity building. The COL Regional Centre model is unique in the field of ODL and should be expanded to enhance the uptake of ODL in the emerging world.

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## Authors:

**Dr Kirk Perris** is Adviser: Education at the Commonwealth of Learning and oversees its Regional Centre initiative. He has worked with distance teaching and research universities, as a faculty member, researcher, and consultant and his areas of specializations are quality assurance, technology-enabled learning, and open education. Email: kperris@col.org

**Professor Rory McGreal** is the UNESCO/International Council for Open and Distance Education Chair in Open Educational Resources (OER) at Athabasca University, Canada. He is charged with promoting OER internationally, particularly in developing nations in support of UNESCO Strategic Development Goal 4: Education for all. Email: rory@athabascau.ca

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i The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established by the United Nations and a host of other partners in 2015. There are 17 SDGs.

ii The paper will not focus on Malta, as it remains in the early stages of development.

iii There is a fourth regional centre, the Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning, located in Malta. At the time of the evaluation, on which this paper is based, this regional centre was at an early stage of operations, and therefore has limited focus in this paper.

iv The Commonwealth States of WASR include Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

v The Commonwealth member states of SADC include Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia.