

From Modernisation, Dependency and Soft Power Toward a Commonwealth of Learning

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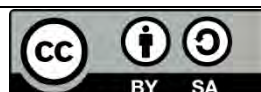
Abstract: This article reflects on some influential theories, concepts and institutions that have shaped the nature and substance of international development since the mid-20th century. In particular, theories of modernisation and dependency are deployed to reflect on the ways in which the International Financial Institutions, such as, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have adopted a ‘Washington Consensus’ concerning the social and economic development of ‘developing’ nations. ‘Soft power’ national agencies, such as, the British Council and USAID are brought into consideration, especially, for their interests and influences over matters of learning for development. The multi-national Commonwealth of Learning’s particular contribution to learning for development is discussed with suggestions made for developing member nations’ capacities to produce new local knowledge and to bring their existing local knowledge to the fore to share as part of a (Lockean) ‘commonwealth of learning’.

Keywords: ‘commonwealth of learning’, learning for development, modernisation theory, dependency theory, soft power, the Washington Consensus.

Introduction

Arguably, learning and development are completely intertwined. Whether the development is personal, social, economic, institutional, or national, learning – formal and/or informal – is always required. Because the world’s population is in a continual state of renewal (people die, others are born) the need for teaching and learning is never-ending but it is ever-changing, too. The rising generations need to learn many of the things their parents and grandparents learned but not everything. They also need to learn the new things that comprise their part of the contemporary world. The so called ‘developed nations’ actually have ‘compulsive development cultures’ (Evans, 2003), cultures which foster research and development to chase continually new ideas, inventions, products and services. The ‘developing nations’ education systems are faced with the challenge of teaching to reproduce their contemporary knowledge, values and skills and striving to ‘close the gap’ with the (rapidly developing) developed nations.

For decades, especially since World War II (WW II), many developed nations’ governments have ‘aided’ developing nations through the provision of forms of ‘technical assistance’, including to the education sector. This aid, however, has typically been significantly about the donor nations’ interests as much as the recipient nations’ needs. A well-known example is the British Council. It originated in 1932 and was formally recognised, by Royal Charter, as the British Council in 1940 (during WW II). Its mission was to promote “a wider knowledge of [the UK] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries”



(<https://www.britishcouncil.org/about-us/history>). After WW II, this became part of the UK's resistance to communism and was also to improve "the UK's international standing, prosperity and security" (<https://www.britishcouncil.org/about-us/history>). Currently, we can see donor nations' political, economic and cultural interests strengthening as their aid agencies are now more directly integrated into their national 'foreign affairs' departments. For example, AusAID (Australian Aid for International Development) is now part of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as Australian Aid, CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) has been merged with Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada as Global Affairs Canada and the UK's Department For International Development (DFID) has been integrated into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

The aforementioned examples are all from (British) Commonwealth nations, there are others from elsewhere, of course. The most powerful example is USAID (US Agency for International Development) which was established in 1960 under President Kennedy. Its history shows that there have been decadic shifts in focus which reflect the US's political imperatives across the decades (<https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/usaid-history>). What is particularly significant here is that this journal (*Journal of Learning for Development*) is an initiative of the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL). Unlike USAID and the other national governmental agencies for development, CoL is a multinational agency. It was established at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 1987. Pertinently, the phrase 'commonwealth of learning' was coined in the late 17th Century by the philosopher John Locke to describe the "body of knowledge developed over time by scientists and other thinkers, for the benefit of all people" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_of_Learning, Walmsley, 2003, pp. 17, 159).

Of course, the 'Commonwealth' is not 'all people', but rather it refers to the association of nations and territories (the Commonwealth of Nations) which mostly were previously part of the British Empire. This amounts to about one third of the global population. The Commonwealth unfolded as a product of Britain dismantling its empire, the most extensive in history, as its colonised nations increasingly gained independence after the mid-20th Century. Britain helped to establish democratic systems of governance in these nations, sometimes with the Queen as Head of State, though, most nations are now republics with their own president. It did so partly to make the Commonwealth a Western bulwark against communism's growing influence, and also as an engine for capitalist economic development across the globe. The Commonwealth was seen as vital for Britain's economic development from the 1960s on and as a means of sustaining its political influence and trade (see, Hennessey, 2019, pp. 178-219).

CoL emerged at a time when open and distance education had become a significant provider of education for adults in several Commonwealth nations. Although distance education—in its previous forms of correspondence schooling and education—had already existed for many decades in some parts of the Commonwealth, arguably it was the rise of the UK Open University that had a catalytic effect on the field (see, Evans & Jakupec, 2021, in press). CoL's aim was to spread the benefits across the Commonwealth through "the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies" (<https://www.col.org/about/what-commonwealth-learning>). There were, however, other national and international agencies that entered the business of economic development and, like CoL, promulgated education for development.

Development aid for education has over the last decades gained much attention from multilateral and bilateral development agencies. Notwithstanding the donors' increased interests in aid funding for the education sector, there remain valid questions concerning the success or otherwise of development aid for education at various levels (see World Bank 2018; ADB 2013). There is however one generally accepted agreement across a wide spectrum of academics, policy makers, practitioners, and other relevant stakeholders within the education sector and beyond, namely that education remains a decisive instrument for combatting poverty. Yet despite the compelling arguments in favour of fostering aid for the enhancement of education in developing countries, and the good intentions pursued by International Financial Institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the African Bank, to name but a few, development aid for education remains wanting.

One of the reasons for the lack of overall success of development aid for education is that neither development aid, nor education at systemic and institutional levels, are easy to comprehend and articulate from political, social, economic or cultural vantage points (Jakupec, 2020). At any level, there is a lack of generally acceptable agreements as to what works in education settings through the intervention of Western ideology-based aid. That is, in contrast to, for example, health, social services, infrastructure, finance, agriculture, business development and other sectors, education is a more abstract construct. For example, improvements in health, including mortality rates, life expectancies, and fertility rates are easy to observe, quantify, and project. However, to observe, quantify and to project learning and educational impact on the economic, social, and cultural well-being of individuals, communities and society is more difficult to measure. Thus, it is not surprising that IFIs and other aid agencies focus their aid on providing school infrastructure, equipment and consumables, curriculum, teacher training and continuing professional development with the education sector. These provisions and activities appear as outstanding achievements but are not convincing results culminating in a lasting impact on the aid recipient country.

If these arguments stand to reason, there is a compelling claim to be made for discussing foreign aid for education in a broader context and to address the rationale for utilising education as a catalyst for development. However, for a better understanding of the aforesaid rationale, we assert that there is a need to articulate certain framings. These are the theoretical concepts underpinning the 'education for development' rationale and include the juxtaposition of two development theories and a discourse concerning the political-economic agenda of the IFIs pursuing the hegemonic Washington Consensus (discussed later) and its realisation through the aid conditionalities. Subsequently, we will show the potential of education as a soft-power instrument for enhancing development. This framing permits us to closely examine the multi-faceted and asymmetrical donor-recipient ideologies and rationalities to be found in the current 'education for development' arena.

Before we continue to examine these matters, we should explain our part in the field. We first worked together in the mid-1980s at the (then) Institute of Distance Education at Deakin University (where we currently hold honorary professorial positions). A major part of this early work included the development and teaching of the new Master of Distance Education (MDEd) programme jointly offered by Deakin University and the University of South Australia (Calvert, Evans, & King, 1993). The programme was offered (only) by distance education and was designed for an international

audience. Students were provided with a critical understanding of distance education's foundations, theories and practices. The programme concluded with students learning about research methods and methodologies (Evans & Nunan, 1993) and then practising this in a small distance education research project conducted ethically (Evans & Jakupec, 1996). The programme aimed to strengthen research capacity in distance education by ensuring that graduates had the knowledge and skills to conduct applied research and evaluation and, for some, doctoral research in (and through) distance education (Evans, 2008; Evans & Green, 2013).

With the support of AusAID, the MDEd programme was offered to a group of staff at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in the early 1990s. It was offered at a distance, but also with a one-week residential school each semester held at the main campus of the USP. We taught at these residential schools, which were attended by students from several of the participating nation's USP campuses. The USP venture constituted our first engagement with educational aid. Subsequently, we have (individually) been involved in international aid projects in Bangladesh, Cambodia, PR China, Croatia, Fiji, Georgia, Jordan, Kyrgyz Republic, Maldives, Mongolia, Montenegro, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam. These have been funded by government aid agencies or multinational development banks. These experiences influence our reflections here on the nature, purposes and consequences of educational aid. We commence with some theoretical considerations of aid in terms of modernisation, dependency, and soft power. This leads us to some considerations of shaping forms of educational aid in ways that go beyond imposing external curricula and which value, respect and incorporate recipients' knowledge into the curricula. We suggest this may even extend into research-based learning to increase the stock of local knowledge and to contribute to the commonwealth of learning more broadly.

A Rationale for Education for Development

One of the many questions raised in the literature concerning foreign aid to support education in developing countries concerns the validity of the rationales offered by various aid agencies. We suggest that to consider such questions of validity it is necessary to view educational aid within the broader foreign aid context. The most common contrast in establishing a rationale for development or foreign aid generally is couched in the dialectics between the concepts of *aid for trade* and *trade, not aid*, or foreign aid as a *value for money* paradigm (Jakupec, 2016). However, when it comes to education, it is generally recognised that these concepts are not necessarily applicable. For example, the World Bank (2021) notes:

Education is a human right, a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability. It delivers large, consistent returns in terms of income and is the most important factor to ensure equality of opportunities. For individuals, education promotes employment, earnings, health, and poverty reduction (n.p.)

Furthermore, the World Bank (2021) suggests that:

For societies, it [education] drives long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion. Indeed, making smart and effective investments in people's education is critical for developing the human capital that will end extreme poverty (n.p.).

This delineation rehearses a Lockean ‘commonwealth of learning’ socio-economic rationale for the provision of development aid through education. By receiving aid for education, a developing country may ‘advance’ its social and economic fabric—maybe even for the common good beyond its borders. However, under the provision of the loan or grant conditionalities, such advancements will likely mirror the social, economic, political, and cultural values of the donor. In accepting the aid with its conditionalities, a developing country may create a national mass education system which, in turn, may result in advancing to a *modern* nation state, one which is in the image of the hegemon world view. This may be achieved by using education for the purpose of developing *modern* human resources leading to *modern* economic growth and international and global recognition (Green 2008; Nhema & Zinyama, 2016). Such a general conceptualisation of underpinning notions of the rationale for the provision of education aid prevails amongst the Western ideology-based IFIs and bilateral aid agencies which share similar ideological positions with the Washington Consensus (Jakupec & Kelly, 2019).

Development Aid: Dependency and Modernisation

Over the last few centuries development economists have articulated theoretical constructs to explain ‘underdevelopment’ of developing countries, more recently focusing on Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and South America (see Stiglitz, 2008; Sachs, 2005; Easterly, 2005; Krugman, 2008). From a historical perspective, we have seen the ascent and decline of development theories and their proponents’ explanations of the economic, social, and political problems facing developing countries. Unsurprisingly, there is a wide range of competing theories as epistemic constructs of development in the aid context (Nhema & Zinyama, 2016). These include among others, the *world systems theory* (Wallerstein 1979, 2007; Nölke, 2014), *structural adjustment development theory* (Mohan et al, 2000), the *modernisation theory* (Basset, 2017) and the *dependency theory* (Herath, 2008).

Following a review of the development *cum* foreign aid literature and education project documents, especially from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank, and others, we contend that the contemporary development aid for education is couched in the two last mentioned competing development theories (Bull & Bøås, 2012): *modernisation theory* and *dependency theory*. The former underpins the epistemological framework of donors, whereas the latter mainly reinforces the epistemological framework of the recipients in their respective perception of the development aid theory. We now describe briefly these two theories.

Modernisation Theory

Modernisation theory may be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment and became increasingly prevalent following the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944. It gained growing acceptance amongst development economists following the implementation of the Marshall Plan in the late 1940s. Over time modernisation theory progressed further and is today linked to developments of industrialisation, urbanisation and the expansion of education. It is frequently seen by political scientists as a response to the emerging breakdown of the currently existing foreign aid strategies advocated by the prevailing neoliberal school of thought in development economics (Rapley, 2002).

According to Eisenstadt (1966):

.... modernisation is the process of change towards those types of social, economic, and political systems that have developed in Western Europe and North America from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth and have then spread to other European countries and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the South American, Asian, and African continents (p. 1).

Basset (2017) explains further, arguing that "...[d]espite its failings modernisation theory has been one of most influential theories in terms of impact on global affairs" (n.p.) and observes that "...there is of course debate over whether aid is an effective means to development" (n.p.). Proponents of modernisation theory emphasise economic development, political stability and social and cultural change based on neoliberal norms and values. Thus, one of the major contested points of modernisation theory is its substantive pursuit of neoliberal political and economic values. Its main critique comes from the proponents of the dependency theory claiming that Western nations impose their rules, values, norms and politics on developing countries (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Nhema & Zinyama, 2016). Furthermore, contemporary modernisation theory proponents assert that Western neoliberal economic values and norms—such as, market economy, globalisation, Western democratisation and privatisation— are economically and technically superior to any other development aid theory. In short, modernisation theorists assume that development is a universal process, which leads to the same economic prosperity outcomes across all developing nations.

Dependency Theory

Dependency theory emerged in the 1950s in opposition to the modernisation theory of development. The major criticism levelled at the latter is that it is built on classical Darwinian evolutionary theory. In contrast, dependency theory is based on interpreting historical tendencies to rationalise the existing conditions in developing countries (Santos, 1970; Frank, 1966). That is, dependency is an outcome of historical development through power relations (*cf.* Petras & Veltmeyer, 2015) between the donor agency and the recipient country. Thus, dependency analysis tends to be confined to the study of economic relations between the Western 'centre' and the developing world as 'periphery' (Simon, 2011). However, it could be argued that the centre-periphery theorem is equally applicable to the hegemonic IFIs led by developed nations as the centre and the developing nations as the 'periphery' (Simon, 2011; Lind, 2018). Dependency theory is defined in the academic literature as a development theory which goes beyond modernisation theory (see Reyes, 2001; Haque, 1999). Notwithstanding some commonalities between dependency and modernisation theories of development, it can be argued that the former is an antagonist of the latter. Dependency theory addresses the interaction between the developed and developing nations and identities. In contrast, modernisation theory focuses on the discourse concerning the advantages and the disadvantages of the transformation from agricultural to industrial and technology-based societies.

Proponents of dependency development theory hypothesise that the nexus between the Western dominated homogenous IFIs and other like-minded bi-lateral aid agencies on the one side and the aid seeking developing countries on the other, is based on a set of conditionalities externally imposed by the former. Arguably, these conditionalities are economically exploitative, intellectually colonising, and socio-politically incompatible with development (Jakupec & Kelly, 2016). A more contemporary understanding of dependency theory is that 'dependency' is not simply an economic construct but also a socio-political process. In terms of educational aid, one can see that the Western curricula

imposed constitutes a form of curricular colonisation; not only through the imported curriculum but also to the extent that it excludes, replaces or ignores local knowledge, culture and values.

To summarise, dependency defines the development aid world as a multilateral *cum* international system consisting of two sets of actors, described as dominant vs. dependent, and centre vs. periphery (Ettema, 1983). Both sets of actors are characterised by the assertion that external social, economic, political, and cultural forces are of primary importance to the development enhancing activities with the dependent developing nation. In our case the external forces include IFI and other foreign aid institutions, which represent the economic interests of the developed industrialised countries (Kiely, 2009). Finally, definitions of dependency denote that the relationship between the two sets of actors are inclined to not only underpin but also strengthen the unequal relationships. Furthermore, dependency through development aid is historically an entrenched process within the internationalisation of wealthy Western countries and their institutions, such as the Washington Consensus IFIs.

The Washington Consensus and its Impact on Development Aid

The term *Washington Consensus* was coined by Williamson (1990) to refer to the ten economic policy guidelines affirmed by the principal Washington-based IFIs as the benchmark for providing assistance to developing, as well as crisis-affected developed countries. These major Washington agencies are the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United States Department of the Treasury. Historically, the Washington Consensus was a reaction to the mid-1970s government debt crises (Abiad et al, 2011; Williams, 2000). In particular, it refuted Keynesian economics' ability to address the debt crisis and sought to impose neoliberal economic theories (see Hayek, 2001; Friedman, 2002; Jones, 2012). These were advocated by the Reagan (USA) and Thatcher (UK) administrations, respectively. Thus, neoliberalism came to the fore in Western geopolitics and the associated IFIs.

According to Williamson (1990; 2004), the Washington Consensus comprised ten strategies to achieve economic growth: (i) the imposition of fiscal discipline; (ii) the redirection of public expenditure priorities towards other fields; (iii) the introduction of tax reforms that would lower marginal rates and broaden the tax base; (iv) the liberalisation of interest rates; (v) a competitive exchange rate; (vi) the liberalisation of trade; (vii) the liberalisation of inflows of foreign direct investment; (viii) the privatisation of state-owned economic enterprises; (ix) the deregulation of economic activities and; (x) the creation of a secure environment for property rights.

Currently, the Washington consensus prevails, although the economic damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a neo-Keynesian resurgence. One may expect this to influence development aid in the future but to what extent is difficult to tell. Global foreign aid remains dominated by the Washington IFIs, such as the World Bank and the IMF. The important point to note is that as far as development aid is concerned, the Washington Consensus strategies mainly concentrate on their operational objectives of ensuring economic growth—through privatisation, deregulation, decentralisation, fiscal discipline. Furthermore, the IFIs also work backwards from their objectives. That is, in order for a recipient nation to receive aid in the form of a grant or loan, the necessary economic, social and political changes are required of the donor *before* aid is received.

As the Washington Consensus IFIs has grown their aid conditionalities have expanded. Originally, the focus was on economic conditionalities but in the 1980s and 1990s the IFIs' realm extended to

incorporate political matters. In particular, governmental and social engineering conditionalities were added. The IFIs, especially the World Bank, significantly broadened their aid policy boundaries to include 'good governance' as a principal constituent and condition for funding (Weiss, 2010) and are firmly couched in neoliberalism (Babb, 2013; Fine, 2009). In effect, these conditionalities underpinned the donors', rather than recipients', objectives. Thus, the donor, as the *principal*, requires an aid recipient government, as the *agent*, (Jakupec & Kelly, 2019) to implement policies that may be against its wishes.

In the education sector, for example, conditionalities may include requiring privatisation and fee-for-service provisions to enable private education provision or expansion. They may require the introduction of a neoliberal ideology-based curriculum or the advancement of learning methods which are socio-culturally alien in the aid recipient country. Of course, there are other conditionalities which may lead to greater gender and social equity, inclusivity and mainstreaming in the education sector. However, research has shown that there is much scepticism in the developing world about the effectiveness of conditionalities, especially as there is evidence of recipients' policy reversals (Jakupec & Kelly, 2016). On balance, it could be argued that the Washington Consensus-based conditionalities are authoritarian, enforcing donor's economic and political priorities, even if these are not shared by the aid seeking country's social, cultural, economic, or political values and norms.

The conditionalities in the education sector often fail to address the great divide between culture, traditions, the social fabric, and the lifestyle which exists between the developing nations and the Western world. Some developing countries are reliant on fishery, agriculture and/or on horticulture for their sustenance. Arguably, the education system needs to provide curricula relevant to the respective primary industry and its development. That is, not just schooling and technical education but also university teaching and research on the subject. Typically, IFIs use conditionalities to impose the Western education system as a catalyst for developing countries' modernisation. The rationale being that increased Western education across the developing world will accelerate the pace of economic development and produce significant economic growth. There are also other benefits to these Western donors in that it potentially strengthens the 'soft power' of the donor agencies and their governments.

Exercising Soft Power through Educational Aid

The concept *soft power* was coined by Nye (1990) and is characterised by three constituents, namely, culture, ideology, and political values. In particular, education can be deployed to change the social, cultural, political, and economic fabric of a nation state as much as it can be used to maintain and strengthen the *status quo* (Jakupec & Meier, 2019). Nye (2004) argues that *soft power* is the ability to get "...others to want the outcomes that you want..." (p. 5) and is characterised by "...the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion" (p. x). In contrast, Nye (2011) defines *hard power* as "...the ability to get others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies..." (p. 11), through coercion, threats, and inducements. Nye (2005) also suggests that there is *smart power*, which brings together soft and hard power (see also Wilson 2008). Nye's basic proposition is that soft power is more important than hard power, especially in international politics, because it facilitates a behavioural change in others by employing persuasion and attraction, rather than competition or conflict.

Soft power has become an important instrument of the multi-lateral and bi-lateral aid agencies enabling them to shape international rules, values, norms, and political agendas of the education sector in developing countries. If we focus specifically on multinational agencies providing educational aid (as distinct from the aforementioned Washington Consensus agencies, such as the IMF) then CoL comes to the fore as a major soft-power player. As described previously, CoL is a product of the rise of the (British) Commonwealth after the demise of the British Empire—achieved through hard power, of course. In effect, British and ‘old’ (pre-1945) Commonwealth nations—Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa—used their soft power to shape the new Commonwealth members as parliamentary democracies, with due regard for individual liberties and using English as the language of communication for Commonwealth governance. From 1961 on, racial equality was a formal requirement. The Commonwealth’s soft power extended into sporting activities where several sports favoured in Britain became popular in most of the Commonwealth (cricket, netball, hockey, equestrian sports, rugby, etc.) all to be amplified and purveyed via the quadrennial Commonwealth Games hosted by one of the nations. Perhaps the most influential and significant element is the Commonwealth nations’ use of English, as this language grew to be the ‘global language’ (see Crystal, 1997), that is, the language most people can use, whether as a first or subsequent language. This meant that CoL also used English for its formal communications and is the dominant language of its educational aid and development work, especially through open and distance education.

Education may be seen as one of (if not) the most successful soft-power instruments in international relations, especially in the multilateral development aid environment. CoL is arguably the most significant multinational educational aid organisation, as such, it wields considerable soft power within its geopolitical embrace. Soft power leads an (educational) aid recipient country to (re-)create its political, social, economic, and cultural fabric, based on the *conditionalities* imposed by the donor (Jakupec & Kelly, 2016). In the case of CoL, however, the donor is its Commonwealth membership of which the recipient nation(s) is/are a part. Therefore, one may assume that there is already a symmetry between donor and recipient(s) and the conditionalities required of a given aid programme may well be a reiteration of what is already accepted and even actively sought by the recipient(s). This places CoL in a different position to those Washington Consensus agencies discussed previously that, effectively, impose the economic and fiscal neoliberal conditionalities. With CoL being focused on education and on serving its member states also distinguishes it from the national aid agencies, such as, Australian Aid, Global Affairs Canada, or USAID.

Concluding Comment: Toward a *Commonwealth of Learning*

It is beyond dispute that education is fundamental for ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ nations to develop and sustain their social and economic well-being. It is difficult to picture a future for any nation which ceased educating its citizens for a generation. Case and Deaton (2020) show that in the USA—the nation with the world’s largest, sophisticated economy—white people (males, in particular) without a university degree are suffering, since the 1990s, from increasing higher morbidity and mortality rates in comparison with those with such a degree. This suggests that continuous economic development may create societies which eventually require a university degree as the ‘basic’ educational standard for their citizens to engage successfully in the economy and, therefore, society. If so, then strategies and solutions will be required to assist those without a degree to participate

successfully. One may expect that forms of education—in particular, open and distance education—may be important contributors. This example indicates that ‘developed’ nations are performing and requiring so much ‘learning for (their) development’ that those, for whatever reasons, who are unable to keep pace with the learning required could be left in ‘despair’ and need to be helped. That is, they need to be enabled to share in the broader ‘commonwealth of learning’; maybe CoL has something to offer here.

We have shown that CoL has been, and continues to be, one of the most significant multi-national organisations addressing education for development. Its membership states comprise some with the richest advanced economies, and also large and small strongly developing nations, and some which are relatively poor nations. Its Commonwealth of Nations heritage provides it with a rich and bountiful array of human, cultural and natural resources on which to sustain education for development. The 2016 Kuala Lumpur Declaration and the 2021–2027 Strategic Plan, *Learning for Sustainable Development*, document CoL’s achievements and goals and its commitment to good governance, planning and monitoring. This Plan states that:

[i]n light of the consultations and recommendations, CoL will: i) build on its expertise in ODL, OER and TEL to play a more influential role in national policy development and implementation; ii) invest in innovations and research; iii) support the digital transformation of institutions and organisations; iv) promote gender equality; and v) implement a rigorous monitoring and evaluation plan (p. 9).

It is worth noting that there are those who question the impact and intentions of educational aid, in general. Recently, Butanu (2021) reviewed some of the literature on this matter and found that educational aid is often focused on short-term, not enduring, solutions and funds outdated institutions. She also found that educational aid was criticised for maintaining outdated curricula stemming from old, colonial legacies. As an example, Butanu cites the World Bank as concluding that “that although there has been a dramatic increase in school attendance by girls in Cambodia, there has been no proof of any influence on learning achievement.” (<https://www.developmentaid.org/#!/donors/view/118363/wb>).

In contrast, CoL reports that a meta-evaluation of the impact of the Strategic Plan 2015-2021 concluded “...that CoL programming ...was relevant, effective and efficient. CoL is having an impact in many dimensions and across several initiatives; and in many cases, where government has taken interest and is assuming more leadership, there are good reasons to believe some of the changes at the institutional and government levels are sustainable” (Casely-Hayford & Branch, 2020, p. viii). This evaluation provides confidence in CoL’s educational aid efforts having sustainable effects. Our previous discussion of dependency theory and soft power leads us to suggest that CoL, notwithstanding its aforementioned strengths due to its broad range of member states, may need to consider some future issues related to education and the commonwealth of learning. The latter, in Locke’s conceptualisation, as we noted previously constituted “the body of knowledge developed over time by scientists and other thinkers, for the benefit of all people.” (Walmsley, 2003, pp. 17, 159). Locke’s thinking was rooted in the Enlightenment, but it suggests still, that science and thinking is required to produce the ‘commonwealth’ of future knowledge.

Our experience in Australia leads us to conclude that British colonisation— largely through ignorance but sometimes maliciously— swept aside indigenous knowledge constructed over millennia and supplanted it with its own. In recent decades a gradual understanding of the damage done and of the value of this knowledge has emerged. We understand that similar understandings are evident in other CoL members states, such as Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand. Maybe CoL needs to reflect on whether its Western curricular and learning activities through open and distance education as ‘soft power’ may be ignoring the importance of local knowledge, language and culture for the recipient member states. Furthermore, maybe the commonwealth of learning within the Commonwealth of Nations might be enriched through the explicit recognition and sharing of member states’ knowledge. That is, courses developed in those nations from which others (especially, the old Commonwealth nations) learn.

A further related matter is that the CoL’s work in higher education and research, may also benefit from boosting the research capacity of developing nation member states so that they can produce new knowledge—some of which may be related to discovering their ‘lost’ indigenous knowledge(s)—for the benefit of humanity, that is, for the global commonwealth of learning. A useful step here would be for CoL to consider encouraging, developing, and supporting PhD programmes through distance education (see Evans, 2008; Evans & Green, 2013) based on local research topics where the candidates produce useful knowledge for their communities and nations, as well for the commonwealth of learning more generally.

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