



## **A REVIEW OF AN INTERNATIONAL ELEARNING SECTION USING AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK**

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### **Summary**

*This paper is partially based on a report on the work of the Commonwealth of Learning's (COL) eLearning with International Organisations (eLIO) section. COL is an intergovernmental organisation created to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. The COL eLIO section provides technology-enhanced, customised training solutions for international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO. The methodology in this paper was not part of the report and it includes an evaluation framework to define the range of benefits and costs, both quantitative and qualitative, that should be considered in reviewing the section and its programmes. The outcomes of the section initiatives were revealed by the application of the framework showing the principal benefits of the programme, including the knowledge gained and the realization of organizational goals, including realized economic benefits. This paper identified four generic classes of benefits (and related costs) for the programme, namely — new materials (quality and quantity), new partnerships (number and value), open and distance learning (relevance to the COL mandate) and economic benefits (net value of contracts). The investigation concluded that the eLIO achieved their goals developing a distance learning model and met or exceeded identified objectives.*

### **Introduction**

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by the Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. The COL eLearning for International Organisations (eLIO) section is a section that provides technology-enhanced, customised training solutions for international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO. Services include needs analyses, development of customized culture and gender sensitive training materials; and course delivery at a distance using expert tutors. Many international organizations, aware of COL's international reputation for distance education in the developing world, are contracting with the eLIO for their training needs. This paper provides a review of this COL section using an evaluation framework.

### **Methods**

The review was conducted using triangulated data collected from several different pilot and programme evaluations, published papers, a simple survey instrument, and other documents

as well as interviews with a random sample of participants (student, partners, tutors) from eight participating international organizations (World Health Organisation; UN High Commissioner for Refugees; International Labour Organisation; International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; The Joint UN co-sponsorships for HIV/AIDS; World Bank; UNICEF, India Country Office; and the Office of Internal Oversight Services). The COL staff, and a sampling of others were also interviewed using similar questions and interviewing techniques. These included seven COL staff member, five tutors, three partners and 10 learners.

The information collected consisted of documents and previous project evaluations supplied by the COL eLIO, the COL and other relevant web sites, published articles, and from interviews with the COL eLIO staff, other COL personnel and a small sample of participants in the COL eLIO projects. Documents were obtained directly from the eLIO and from Internet searches.

A random sample of representatives from three of the eight participating organizations were contacted and interviewed. A random sample of tutors (five from a list of twenty) were also contacted and interviewed. Thirty students were randomly selected and asked to participate in an online survey using Survey Monkey. Ten responded and one agreed to be interviewed by telephone. The random samples were elicited using the application available at Random.com. The participants in each group were given a number and then the numbers were input into the random.com application, which randomized the total and picked a sample. The participants contacted were sent a consent agreement.

A list of questions was used as the main instrument for the interviews. Other supplementary questions were used as they emerged out of the discussion with participants. The analysis included an examination of the question responses. The interviews were conducted either by telephone or in a face-to-face format in June 2008. These were triangulated with the documentation and survey.

### **Limitations of the study**

This plan is limited to an evaluation of the activities of the COL eLIO and does not address the wider issues associated with the COL organization. The evaluation is for this particular section only and it is recognized that the external validity or generalisability is extremely limited. Reliability is always an estimate. It was addressed by triangulating the data collected using at least three different programme case studies, documents, a survey and interviews with a random sample of participants, COL eLIO staff, and others using similar questions and interviewing techniques.

The validity of the evaluation conclusions, in this case cannot be assured by a control group. There is often a multi-group threat to the validity of an evaluation, when comparing different groups taking the same programme. As this evaluation did not involve comparing the outcomes of the different groups, but rather an overall consideration of the section's activities, including the programmes with different organization, this was not a problem.

### **Planned outcomes and outputs and related success indicators**

The planned outcomes and actual achievements are noted below and in Table 1.

#### ***Planned Outcomes***

- Development and delivery of technology mediated distance learning programmes with international organisations to enable access to learning by a dispersed and diverse international workforce.

- By 2009, at least 6 major international organisations active in delivering the MDGs have formed a partnership with COL in customising gender and culture sensitive workplace eLearning programmes.
- An additional 2,000 adult learners (a 6 to 4 ratio of women and men) will be trained by 2009.
- At least two new contextually relevant sets of ODL/ICT-based learning materials for occupational skills development created and each is taken up by at least two major institutions.

### **Activities**

- Actions to achieve the outputs
  1. Analyse and understand the learners' needs, learning objectives and outcomes, the learning environment and technology infrastructure of the organizations.
  2. Design courses and develop materials through customization.
  3. Test all training materials and delivery designs
- Build responsive infrastructure and clear processes for course production and presentation. This includes
  - preparing storyboards/templates;
  - using robust, affordable user-friendly technology and media;
  - recruiting and maintaining cadre of trained, committed tutors;
  - using OERs software as far as possible.
  - Monitoring Data
    - a. pilot evaluation reports;
    - b. monthly progress reports;
    - c. tutor listservs®;
    - d. end of course evaluation feedback; and
    - e. programme evaluation studies.

Table 1 Output indicators and achievements

<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Success Indicators</b>	<b>Achievements</b>
number of participants	+2000 by 2009	1 766 by 2008
number of organizations	6	8
number of regions served	not stated	4
revenue	self sustaining by 2009	US\$100K surplus 2008

### **Activities implemented**

The eLIO team developed and delivered technology mediated distance learning programmes with international organizations in different regions around the world. They formed partnerships with international organizations in order to accomplish this. The learning materials were developed and customized for each organization to promote the learning of relevant occupational skills, based on an analysis of the learners' needs and the capacity of the technological infrastructure available. Qualified tutors were engaged and trained in order to facilitate the delivery of the programmes. Seven international partners participated as partners in eLIO programmes.

## Evaluation Framework

In theory, evaluating the benefits and costs of COL's eLIO should be relatively straightforward. Justification for any COL programme rests on the observation that real benefits exist that make the initiative worthwhile. To provide this, a framework has been adapted from a US National Research Council report (Committee on Benefits of DOE R&D on Energy Efficiency and Fossil Energy, 2001), that hopefully will serve to define the range of benefits and costs, both quantitative and qualitative, that should be considered in reviewing the section and its programmes. Depending on the outcomes of the initiatives undertaken, the principal benefit of a programme, for example, may be the knowledge gained or the realization of organizational goals and not necessarily any realized economic benefits. The matrix shown in Table 2 and discussed below provides an accounting framework for the assessment of the benefits and costs of the programme.

The matrix has been completed based on the eLIO's defined outcomes/outputs. The framework is intended to summarize the net benefits to COL and the Commonwealth community which it serves, to focus attention on the main types of benefits associated with the section's mission. It has been designed to capture two dimensions of the programme: (1) the eLIO is expected to produce benefits that align with COL's mandate; and (2) some benefits may be realized even when it is not perceived directly by either the implementers themselves or the overall COL management team.

The classes of benefits (corresponding to the rows of the matrix) are intended to capture types of benefits appropriate to the objectives of the eLIO section. Based on these stated objectives, this review identified four generic classes of benefits (and related costs) for the programme, namely — new materials, new partnerships, open and distance learning (ODL) and economic benefits:

- *New materials benefits* are evaluated on the quantity and more reasonably, the quality of the learning materials produced.
- *New partnerships* are to be evaluated on the number and value to COL of the partnerships that are established and maintained by the section.
- *ODL benefits* are to be based on the relevance of the new materials and partnerships in supporting the ODL mandate of COL.
- *Economic net benefits* are based on the net value of the contracts that have been awarded after deducting the costs of implementation of the different projects.

The three columns in the matrix are the first step toward a more explicit definition of the benefits/costs to be included. They reflect different types of benefits/costs, certain or immediate, the knowledge benefits and the broader strategic benefits. Rather than attempting to indiscriminately list the benefits, it is better to characterize them in a useful manner such as in the columns of the matrix.

Table 2, below provides this framework and serves to categorise the results of the eLIO activities. The first column, "realized benefits and costs," is reserved for benefits that are almost certain—that is, those for which the results are unambiguous with a focus on outputs from the work performed. To arrive at entries for the cells of the matrix, a logical and consistent set of rules for measuring the results of the individual initiatives is also necessary. These rules define more exactly the meanings of the rows and columns, and they provide a calculus for measuring the values to be entered in each of the cells.

Table 2. Benefits/Costs of the eLIO section

<b>X = achieved XX surpassed</b>	<b>= Certain Benefits/Costs</b>	<b>Knowledge Benefits/Costs</b>	<b>Strategic Benefits/Costs</b>
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<b>P = possible</b>			
New materials	X	X	-
New partnerships	XX	-	X
ODL	X	X	P
Economic	X	-	-

New materials have been developed by the eLIO section for all the organizations, with which they have partnerships. They are universally regarded to be of high quality and therefore can be seen to be a certain benefit, particularly as the stated goal of the development of two such courses has been achieved. On the downside, but in no ways comparable to the strong benefit, the materials are copyrighted exclusively by the agencies, making it problematic for the eLIO to adapt their materials for use outside of the UN system. Another minor issue would be the need to expend some efforts in updating and simplifying the instructions as has been noted by tutors and students.

The course materials also represent a knowledge benefit for COL as the eLIO team and the tutors gain from developing and using these high quality materials. On the downside, because there is no internal instructional designer, the materials are developed under contract and so all the expertise from the course development is not housed in the organization. This limits the course materials as any sort of strategic benefit.

The new partnerships goal was not only achieved but surpassed, with a goal of six partnerships; eight partnerships were formed. So, this is a certain benefit that is proving to be of significant strategic importance with the opportunities that are developing from COL's developing reputation among the different UN organizations. strategic benefits There would be limited but not significant knowledge benefits from the interrelationships with these organizations.

The ODL benefits are certain as they are already in June 2008 within reach of their 2009 goal of +2000 students namely 1766 adult learners (62% female) have received training from the eLIO section.

The experience gained from delivering these courses using technology, if capitalized on can also be a significant knowledge benefit. The caveat is that the eLIO section needs to keep moving forward with new technologies in order to capitalize strongly from this knowledge. The ODL could also become a major strategic benefit to COL if it is able to take advantage of this course delivery expertise and expand it into other areas of COL activity.

The economic benefit is also certain because in the past year, the section has achieved its goal of becoming economically self-sufficient, earning more than US\$700 000 covering all direct and indirect costs of operations, generating a small surplus of c. US\$100 000. There are possible knowledge and strategic benefits in the future if COL can capitalize on making use of this section to support core services in the other sections. This may require a significant policy change. There has been no real rationale developed to inform the present pricing structures. This is a weakness that should be addressed as a means of maximizing revenues and ensuring sustainability.

## Discussion

From the establishment of the COL eLIO a debate has surrounded its role in promoting the organization, with quality materials, developing partnerships, support for ODL, and fund

raising. An important development in the debate has been the evolving understanding of the section's role in supporting COL's overall policy direction, and hence, the section's alignment with the organizations goals. For example the eLIO's efforts in delivering training to UN agencies resulted in offered opportunities for other COL sections from UNICEF and possibly from an African government. These opportunities can relate directly to one of COL's core goals of capacity building in the Commonwealth.

## Conclusion

The eLIO achieved their intended results, yielding significant benefits in their principal outcomes and outputs, developing a model for potential application in a variety of different (but possible) organizational and educational settings or environments with some important additions to the stock of open learning pedagogical knowledge. Perhaps the most difficult analytic problem is assigning to the section a proportion of the overall benefit of the programmes in a manner that properly reflects the section's contribution to it. For example, how much of the partner's and learners' input was responsible for the overall success? There is no reliable way to accurately quantify the section's contribution in most cases, and doing so remains a methodological challenge for the future. For the purposes of this study, the researcher has attempted to specify in his analyses the role that the eLIO section has played. Based on this assessment a conservative judgment was used to characterize the section's contribution for purposes of developing findings and recommendations. What cannot be dismissed in any analysis of the work of this section is the fact that all the stated goals were met and in some cases exceeded, coupled with a rather overwhelming degree of satisfaction expressed by all the participants, including the learners, the partners, the tutors, the COL staff and the eLIO section employees.

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