Chapter 6
Development of eLearning in the Commonwealth Countries

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ABSTRACT

The Commonwealth is home to 2.4 billion people (almost one-third of the world population). The countries of Commonwealth, 54 in number, are spread across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific. The Commonwealth countries are amongst the world's biggest and smallest states in terms of population and size, with about 32 of them having less than 1.5 million people. Over the years, the Commonwealth countries have emphasized using distance education and technologies to improve access to quality learning opportunities. In this pursuit, online learning or eLearning has been adapted in many Commonwealth countries, although in varying degrees. This chapter provides an overview of eLearning in Commonwealth countries by looking into the developments that emerged as various policies, projects, and practices in the four regions of the Commonwealth (i.e., Commonwealth Africa, Commonwealth Asia, Commonwealth Caribbean, and Commonwealth Pacific).

BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth is home to 2.4 billion people (almost one-third of the world population). The countries of Commonwealth, 54 in number, are spread across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific. The Commonwealth countries are amongst the world's biggest and smallest countries in terms of population and size, with about 32 of them having less than 1.5 million people. In economic terms, Commonwealth countries include both advanced and developing economies (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020a). The notable point is that out of 54 countries of the Commonwealth, 44 are low and middle-income countries. Over the years, the Commonwealth countries have emphasized distance education and technologies to improve access to quality learning opportunities. In this pursuit, online

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learning or eLearning has been adapted in many Commonwealth countries, although to varying degrees. eLearning is often associated with computerized electronic learning, online learning, Internet learning, virtual learning, distributed learning, networked or Web-based learning. Claiming that the term eLearning comprises a lot more than these terms, Naidu (2006) observes:

As the letter "e" in eLearning stands for the word "electronic", eLearning would incorporate all educational activities that are carried out by individuals or groups working online or offline, and synchronously or asynchronously via networked or standalone computers and other electronic devices (p.1)

Simply stating, eLearning may be understood as courses or activities delivered via the Internet to benefit those who are often outside the boundaries of a traditional classroom. eLearning offers multiple opportunities for practitioners ranging from educational to economic gains. eLearning is supposed to bring many benefits like reducing costs, providing access to different types of educational materials (e.g., audio, video, simulation, interactive games, augmented reality, virtual reality, etc.), and providing education to people living in distant places. eLearning has also been seen as a viable means for skills acquisition in different sectors and is supposed to help countries increase competitiveness and employment and foster a business and entrepreneurial culture adapted and catering to local needs (Andriotis, 2015). Therefore, it is obvious to assess and analyze how Commonwealth countries promote and practice eLearning. The present chapter provides an overview of eLearning in Commonwealth countries by looking into the developments emerged in the form of various policies, projects, and practices.

This chapter is mainly based on reviewing and analyzing policy documents, research reports, articles, projects, practices, and other available literature and statistics related to eLearning in the Commonwealth countries. Our approach is to provide a critical perspective of the developments and not to provide an exhaustive outline of projects. So, we have used specific examples from the activities of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), wherever possible. We have selected two countries in each of the Commonwealth regions to present the developments adopting an analytic framework.

Access to ICTs in Commonwealth Countries

On average, 90 percent of the population in low-income Commonwealth countries is covered by a mobile-cellular network, and 16 percent of the population has access to the Internet. The average proportion of households in Commonwealth low-income countries with access to computers and the Internet is between 5-10 percent. On average, 63 percent of the population in low-income Commonwealth countries is covered by at least a 3G network. Still, the international bandwidth per Internet user is roughly 40 times lower than Commonwealth high-income countries (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020b). Detailing the access to ICTs in Commonwealth countries, a report titled 'The state of the digital economy in the Commonwealth' observes (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020c).

In both basic and intermediate digital infrastructure indicators, the Commonwealth performance is weaker than non-Commonwealth countries. Furthermore, there is a significant digital divide within the Commonwealth. On average, 85 percent of the population in high-income Commonwealth countries has access to the Internet, compared to just 18 percent in low-income countries in the Commonwealth. Only 5 to 10 percent of households in Commonwealth low-income countries have access to computers and the