

# THE COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING

In many Commonwealth countries, there is a desperate need to educate children and train adults for employment. Finding qualified teachers and materials, however, is costly and difficult, especially in countries with poor economies or small populations. In 1988, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was set up to help meet this challenge. Based in Vancouver, Canada it is the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organization located outside of Britain.

Its goal is to widen opportunities for learning through cooperation among institutions in different parts of the Commonwealth. The emphasis is on what is called "distance education." That means applying modern methods of communication to education: satellites, teleconferencing (where several people in different locations have a joint telephone conversation), videos, audio tapes, computerized lists of resources and information, and desktop publishing. "You can teach almost anything by distance once you have the resources," says a COL spokesperson.

For example, in Guyana, students are enrolled in distance English, science, and math courses. Their local high schools were not equipped to prepare them for university.

In Jamaica, men and women are trained as automobile me-

chanics without leaving their villages. The program and learning materials were originally developed to train First Nations people in outlying areas of Australia.

In Zimbabwe, so many children have graduated from primary schools that secondary schools can't keep up with the demand. Thousands of students complete their secondary education in study groups using correspondence materials. They pass the same examinations as their friends in regular schools.

On campuses of the University of the West Indies, lectures given in Jamaica are beamed via satellite to classrooms in Barbados.



Distance education is useful in upgrading the qualifications of teachers. In Jamaica, for example, several hundred primary school teachers have completed distance courses de-

signed to improve their skills. Distance learning is also being used in the health field. Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada, has developed a program for doctors across the province using teleconferencing, while four medical schools in East Africa set up a network for sharing expertise.

Cost-saving measures of distance education are attractive to countries where funding is scarce. There are many other advantages to distance education: the best teachers can be used, all students get the same well-developed curriculum and package of print, audio, and video materials, and distance learning can be mixed with regular classroom activities.

COL does not itself give courses, but it does assist educational institutions around the Commonwealth. For example, COL makes material available to train writers to prepare course materials, to teach educators to use the available technology, and to help teachers obtain educational videos.

COL also helps make educational productions. For example, it supported a video, made in India, to encourage women to learn to read, and it made a co-production with the CBC entitled "Sustainable Development." The latter video showed how individuals and nations can protect the environment without sacrificing development. ∞