COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

20TH MEETING OF THE CEMCA ADVISORY COUNCIL (VIRTUAL)

DECEMBER 1, 2020

Attendees:

Commonwealth of Learning
Prof. Asha Kanwar (Chair)
President and CEO,

Dr. Venkataraman Balaji (Vice Chair)
Vice President,
Commonwealth of Learning

Bangladesh
Prof. (Dr.) M. A. Mannan (Member)
Vice Chancellor,
Bangladesh Open University

India
Dr. B.K. Bhadri
Deputy Education Advisor.
(Representing Mr. Madan Mohan,
Assistant Director General, Ministry of Education,
Government of India)

 Prof. Nageshwar Rao (Member)
Vice Chancellor,
Indira Gandhi National Open University,
New Delhi

Prof. Ashok Ogra (Member)
Adviser,
APJ Group of Institutions,
New Delhi

Sri Lanka
Dr. Jayanta Balasooriya
Director, Ministry of Education
(Representing Dr. Madura M Wehella,

Additional Secretary, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka)

CEMCA
Prof. Madhu Parhar (Member)
Director, CEMCA,
New Delhi

Mr. Dalip Kumar Tetri (Secretary)
Adviser, Administration & Finance,
CEMCA, New Delhi

Regrets:

Mr. Syed Ali Reja, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Education, Bangladesh; Mr. Ahmed Mausoom, Education Officer, Ministry of Education, Maldives; YBhg. Datin Paduka Ir. Dr. Siti Hamisah Binti Tapsir, Director General, Ministry of Education, Malaysia

Call to Order

The Chairperson called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone to the 20th Meeting of the CEMCA Advisory Council.

1. Chair's Remarks

The Chair welcomed the members and expressed her happiness to see everyone safe and healthy in this unusual year with Covid-19 causing serious disruptions to normal life across the globe. Unconventional steps were, therefore, called for to keep the door of education open during these stressful times.

The Commonwealth of Learning had been working hard during the last year. Its performance evaluation had been conducted successfully by external experts. The targets set out in the Strategic Plan 2015-2021 had already been achieved and were expected to be surpassed substantially during the plan period ending in June 2021. The draft Strategic Plan for the next six years, 2021-2027, had been shared with various stakeholders seeking feedback and was posted on COL's website for comments from the public across globe.

During the 30 years since COL was established distance education had developed well and had become accepted as a viable option leaving behind the misconception of being a second-class option. Demand for new access devices, digital and online-delivery of training and programs was rising globally. Most of the teachers in conventional and ODL institutions were not trained to use technology in education. COL had organised large scale training for teachers to help them make use of OER and methods of digital learning. More than half of all teachers in Trinidad and Tobago had been trained this way while there were specific programmes for teachers in the Pacific island

countries. To meet the demand from these countries for OER in STEM topics, COL had launched a Video-on-Demand channel, which is now in use in Fiji, Nauru and Samoa.

Covid 19 led to job losses in many Member Countries. With the aim of helping countries in skilling and re-skilling, COL had entered into a partnership with Coursera, a US-based company that is the largest provider of MOOCs, offering 3,800 courses in over 400 specialisations from top 200 Universities led by highly reputed professors and mentors from across the world. About 115,000 learners from all over the Commonwealth had enrolled in various courses through this partnership.

The Chair also informed of being invited by the Nobel Prize organization to share views on "Future of Learning", which was an indication of how ODL was gaining in importance as a viable option.

2. **Minutes and Matters Arising from Last Meeting**

The minutes and actions from the previous meeting were reviewed and the following was reported:

Action 1. CEMCA to follow up with IGNOU on the process of linking skills development with higher education and prepare a report for stakeholders.

A summary report along with the book had been shared with the stakeholders. CEMCA had engaged with five Higher Education Institutions in the region to build capacity of teachers (around 1800) on various technological skills for better teaching and learning. As a result, institutions were in the process of developing e-Content using synchronous and asynchronous technologies for student support. The Bangladesh Open University, under CEMCA-BOU collaboration, was developing four vocational courses to be offered through their Open Schooling and School of Education.

Action 2. CEMCA to follow up with the BOU for learning materials from the Ministry of Disaster Management, Bangladesh for use in content development.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Govt. of Bangladesh had been approached but there was no response. The activity had been initiated in India and a "baseline study" had been conducted to plan curriculum and develop a training module to link with the grassroot levels. The module was under development and was proposed to be used to enhance stakeholders' capacity for larger benefits to society.

Action 3. CEMCA should prepare an activity plan for 2020-21 focusing on fewer activities with scope for greater outcomes and while including strategies to scale up such activities.

The Activity Plan for 2020-21 had been prepared and was being implemented since July 2020.

Action 4. CEMCA should design and develop an online database of ODL institutions in the region covering multiple parameters including courses, learning materials, enrolment as well as

management information; data already compiled in COL up to 2017 should be used as the basis to develop the database.

The portal and data capture template had been developed. The data had been received from three Open Universities and a report was under preparation. However, CEMCA was also facing difficulties in getting data, which was not readily available with many institutions facing staff constraints due to Covid-19.

Action 5. CEMCA should develop a detailed Communications Plan to improve its visibility as well as to make information on its activities more easily and frequently available to the stakeholders. As a first step, CEMCA should publish a calendar of activities in April 2020 to cover the period from July 2020- June 2021.

CEMCA had initiated a fortnightly digital newsletter and was sharing the activities on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to enhance visibility.

The minutes from the previous meeting were unanimously approved.

3. CEMCA Achievement Report July 2019-November 2020

Prof. Parhar briefly highlighted the achievements of various programmes reaching a large number of stakeholders from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Malaysia, and Pakistan during the last seventeen months.

The salient features of her presentation were:

i. CEMCA had supported 4 Indian Open Universities (NSOU, UOU, UoH and KKHSOU) to provide access to education through various need-based courses. 38,514 learners had enrolled and successfully completed the courses.

ii. CEMCA in collaboration with Bangladesh Open University had organised a two-day workshop on "Impacting Education and Open Schooling through OER" to train tutors of BOU for learners of HSC and Education programmes (B.Ed /MEd). Thirty-one faculty members and tutors had attended.

iii. Life Skills- MOOC for Engineers developed in partnership with the University of Hyderabad and the Osmania University, India had been offered during the year 2019-20. A total of 5,448 learners had enrolled of which 1,158 earned certificates.

iv. CEMCA in consultation with the Ministry of Education, Govt. of India had organised one day meeting for the Vice Chancellors of the Open Universities on "Mentoring Open Universities for Assessment and Accreditation" in which 14 Vice Chancellors or their representatives had participated.

v. CEMCA had supported Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik, Tamil Nadu Open University,

Chennai and Vardaman Mahaveer Open University, Kota, India to develop "Institutional Policy on Open Educational Resource (OER)".

vi. CEMCA had been engaged by the Department of Science & Technology, Govt. of India to organise and coordinate Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (STIP) 2020 activities with twenty-five community radio broadcasters. The outcome would be used to formulate national policies to re-strategize country's priorities for larger socioeconomic welfare.

vii. On behalf of the Ministry of Ayush, Govt. of India, CEMCA was organising an Information, Education and Communication (IEC) campaign namely 'AYUSH for Immunity' with engagement of Community Radio Stations aimed to boost the immunity of the communities through indigenous systems of Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy.

viii. CEMCA had organised a workshop on Virtual Labs for the faculty of Uttarakhand Open University in which, an overview of virtual labs and a variety of experiments under different streams had been demonstrated. Given the positive responses from the participants, similar programmes were proposed for other institutions.

ix. There were many activities under way in CEMCA to support various Sector Skill Councils such as Power Sector Skill Council, Handicrafts and Carpet Sector Skill Council, Furniture & Fittings Skill Council etc. in creating video contents and training the personnel for various job roles.

x. CEMCA was continuing with the development of a database of OU's in Commonwealth Asia as a single integrated information resource.

xi. CEMCA had organised a National Consultation on building a National Repository of Open Courses in collaboration with National Digital Library of India.

4. Activities planned during January – June 2021

CEMCA will support the following institutions and activities in the next six months:

- Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, India.
- National Institute of Education, Maldives.
- HELP University, Malaysia.
- Three Open Universities for OER policy.
- Collaboration with institutions in Sri Lanka and the Virtual University of Pakistan.

5. Any Other Business (AOB): Trends and Priorities

The Chair sought members' priorities and views on the current developments in the region where CEMCA could support and add value.

Dr. B K Bhadri expressed appreciation for the excellent job done by CEMCA and congratulated Prof. Madhu Parhar for the impressive performance through meaningful work as well as by reaching out to various ministries during the challenging times of the pandemic. However, CEMCA had limitations in delivery of programmes to the large stakeholders. He felt that the time

had come for Member Countries of the Commonwealth to review the mandate of COL and CEMCA to align it with the new challenges and to further the objectives of the ODL sector.

During Covid-19, education systems were evolving for the better and technology was playing a prominent role. The Govt. of India, Ministry of Education had taken up a number of digital initiatives to support ODL but the challenges were many, including the vital issue of quality. The biggest problem posed by Covid-19 for the students was online reach, availability of connecting devices and signal strength in remote and disadvantaged areas. He mentioned that the Vice President of India in a recent speech had expressed concerns that Covid-19 had created a new inequality in terms of availability of resources essential to access online platforms, thus worsening the digital divide between the rural and the urban and the rich and the poor. Dr. Bhadri requested CEMCA to prepare a document for parents who were now playing the important role of tutors at home; all of them faced hurdles for access due to lockdown and containment. Towards this purpose, he suggested that CEMCA could develop a MOOC for educated, semi-educated and non-educated parents. Suitable courses and documents could also be integrated with the Swayam platforms in India to benefit millions of parents and learners. He added that the Ministry of Education supported such initiatives to take education to the next level.

Action item 1. CEMCA to work on development of a MOOC for parents to help them support students forced to stay at home because of Covid 19; supporting materials should also be developed as documents.

Prof. Mannan applauded the performance of CEMCA mentioning that despite the pandemic, it had done a commendable job and had maintained good coordination with BOU for which the staff was very happy. There are 50 public and 110 private universities in Bangladesh. The University Grants Commission had introduced policies requiring all universities to go digital, to make teaching and learning activities accessible online. The Government of Bangladesh had also adopted digital and e-learning in a significant way and had initiated distance learning through television and other media to provide education to the students during the pandemic. Using the Banga Bandhu satellite, experimental programs were being run including Video-on-Demand services. The students having internet facility could use recorded programmes stored in the cloud to enhance distance learning.

However, most of the teachers in conventional universities were not ready for this rapid change and were not accustomed to online learning. The paramount need for all teachers of OUs was training in Instructional Design to equip them with the emerging challenges. COL/CEMCA could train teachers of both conventional as well as Open Universities in transitioning to online teaching. Such a training offered by an International Organisation would have more credibility and impact.

He also informed that online education programs in BOU, using LMS developed with CEMCA's technical advice, were being used for students. The BOU was keen also to understand how Artificial Intelligence could be integrated with an LMS in proctored online assessments. There was a need to integrate Google Meet and related services for the virtual classroom with Moodle LMS.

He offered help to contact the Ministry of Disaster Management to elicit information on disaster management in Bangladesh, if required.

Action Item 2: CEMCA to develop training programmes for the faculty of OU's as well as conventional universities to help transition to teaching in the digital and online modes effectively.

Prof. Nageshwar Rao observed that the last one year had a tremendous impact on the mode of learning and now ODL and online learning were accepted all over the world without inhibition. The Ministry of Education, Govt. of India had taken many digital initiatives including Swayam portal providing access to study material up to the PG level. The enrolment under Swayam Prabha and Swayam had gone up by 20% during the pandemic. The gaps between ODL and conventional education were disappearing fast.

The Finance Minister of India had announced in February 2020 that the top 100 universities of the country in the National Institutional Ranking Framework would be automatically allowed to start online education courses. The Govt. policy encouraged institutions to develop their own online programs and recognise and award credit for online programs offered by other institutions. To ensure quality of ODL, accreditation process for these institutions had started. ODL degrees were now considered legally equivalent to the conventional degrees.

The role of ODL institutions had become more important as a number of changes were taking place. The emerging challenges included skills and knowledge of how to use technology to deliver effective teaching, counselling, examination and assessment etc. The ODL system had a prime role to address these problems now faced even by the conventional system due to the pandemic. Course- based learning had become much more important. Multi-disciplinary courses with easy credit transfer would gain prominence. ODL and Online learning could be prime movers in implementing the National Education Policy.

The Chair observed that India had a strong ODL system and improved co-ordination amongst the various stakeholders could generate maximum social and economic impact.

Dr. Jayanta Balasooriya from Sri Lanka shared that the Government of Sri Lanka had taken several initiatives and established a separate "State Ministry of Education Reforms, Open Universities and Distance Learning Promotion" with one of the key objectives being the promotion of digital education and distance learning all over the country.

Sri Lanka used digital-based education, LMS and blended learning to reach students who remained confined at home during Covid-19. The Ministry of Education had taken steps to reserve TV channels for telecasting education programmes in Sinhala and Tamil. Students in Sri Lanka had also encountered some issues such as accessibility to devices. However, the Ministry in collaboration with the relevant agencies and institutions had taken steps to address such issues, enabling smooth delivery of educational programmes to the students., The sudden transition to the online mode in education had also created newer digital divides with students from rural areas lacking adequate access to such devices resulting in significant losses in terms of learning.

He added that the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka welcomed COL/CEMCA assistance for further improvement and promotion of ODL, which would have a direct impact throughout the country.

Action Item 3: CEMCA to increase its activities in all the member countries in the region.

Prof. Ashok Ogra appreciated the course "MOOC on Life Skills for Engineers. He also wished to know the achievement of the learners, quality of course attainment and the reaction of employers under Life Skills for Engineers programme. He suggested development of a short course on mental health for parents, students, and teachers, which could be useful specifically in situations like pandemic. The circulation of E-newsletter should be increased from the current level of 2000 and newsletter should also be sent to the media houses to increase visibility. He felt that in the framework of online education, considerations as to integration of instructional design with video and attention span of students were missing. Community Radio was a vital agent of change and efforts should continue to promote it. There should be effort to ascertain how many CRs had been established with CEMCA advocacy.

Action Item 4: CEMCA to make a more structured effort to increase the circulation of its online newsletter while targeting mainstream media as a special audience.

The Chair thanked Prof. Ogra for the important suggestions and recommended that CEMCA should engage in practical research as advised to achieve results.

6. Wrap up

The Chair thanked the members for their participation, valuable inputs and rich contribution to the deliberations. She hoped to have a face-to-face meeting of the Council in future. The meeting ended with a vote of thanks to the Chair and the members.