



CEMCA

COMMONWEALTH EDUCATIONAL MEDIA CENTRE FOR ASIA, NEW DELHI

Minutes of the 24th meeting of CEMCA Advisory Council (CAC) held online on 27 November 2024 at 10:00 Hrs. IST.

Attendees:

Commonwealth of Learning

Professor Peter Scott - Chairperson
President and CEO, COL

Dr Venkataraman Balaji - Vice Chairperson
Vice President, COL

India

Mr. Mrityunjay Behera - Member
Economic Advisor
Department of Higher Education,
Ministry of Education, Government of India,
New Delhi

Prof. K. Seetharama Rao - Member
Vice Chancellor
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University
Hyderabad, India

Maldives

Mr. Ahmed Mausoom - Member
Education Development Professional
Head of Foreign Relations Section
Ministry of Education
Republic of the Maldives

Sri Lanka

Dr. N.D. Wathukarawatta - Member
Director of Education (Foreign Agencies & External Affairs)
Ministry of Education,

Isurupaya, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka

CEMCA

Dr. B. Shadrach Director, CEMCA	-	Member
Mr. Amit Jain Head, Administration and Finance CEMCA	-	Secretary

Mst. Rokhsana Begum, CAC Member from Bangladesh and YBhg Datin Noorazah Binti Omar, CAC Member from Malaysia could not attend the meeting and sought Leave of Absence.

The Chairperson called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone to the 24th meeting of the CEMCA Advisory Council.

1. Chairperson's Introductory Remarks

The Chairperson welcomed all the CAC members: Mr. Mrityunjay Behera, Mr. Ahmed Mausoom, Dr. N.D. Wathukarawatta, Professor K. Seetharama Rao, Dr V. Balaji, Dr B. Shadrach and Mr. Amit Jain.

The meeting commenced with introductory remarks by Professor Peter Scott, who expressed a keen interest in learning about CEMCA's activities in the Asian region. As it was his first time chairing the session, Professor Scott took the opportunity to introduce himself to the CAC members. He joined COL in January 2024. He has been understanding and familiarising himself with the organisation's operations, and activities, as well as that of CEMCA, its regional centre in Asia. Professor Scott also expressed a desire to hear more about CEMCA's initiatives directly from the CAC members, and also sought advice on how COL could better support CEMCA and its activities in the region.

Regarding the timing of the meeting, he mentioned that, currently, he is following the precedence set by the former President and CEO of COL. He suggested that the CAC meeting could be held earlier rather than towards the year-end.

He went on to describe his extensive journey in the academia, which began in the United Kingdom (UK) as an educator at the University of Sheffield. His proficiency in open learning innovation deepened over two decades at The Open University, UK, where he led the Knowledge Media Institute, focusing on Artificial Intelligence and Education. In 2015, he transitioned to the University of Technology Sydney in Australia as Pro Vice-Chancellor, later assuming the role of President at Athabasca University, Canada, in 2022 till his present role as the President and CEO at COL.

Self-Introduction by CAC Members

As it was the first time the President was meeting all CAC members, they began with self-introductions. Mr. Mausoom from the Maldives was the first to speak, sharing that he has served as the focal point for the Maldives for the past three years. Prof. Peter Scott recalled his

interaction with the Maldives' Education Minister during the Commonwealth Education Ministers' Meeting in 2024.

Mr. Mrutyunjay Behera, Economic Advisor to the Ministry of Education, Government of India, highlighted his collaboration with the former President and CEO of COL. He emphasised the transformative potential of India's National Education Policy 2020, at the same time, he noted the critical need for financial resources to realise its goals. India, home to more than 50 percent of the Commonwealth's open universities, has seen significant reliance on the ODL system, particularly among working professionals seeking to upgrade their education and skills. Prof. Scott expressed enthusiasm for engaging with Indian stakeholders to explore opportunities.

Dr. N. D. Wathukarawatta from Sri Lanka extended his gratitude to COL and CEMCA for their contributions to Sri Lanka's education system. Prof. Scott mentioned his familiarity with the former Education Minister of Sri Lanka, reflecting on the country's commitment to advancing education.

In his introduction, Professor Seetharama Rao mentioned the long association that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University had with COL.

Dr. V. Balaji introduced himself, noting his 14-year tenure at COL. He was followed by Mr. Amit Jain, who joined CEMCA last year as the Head, Administration and Finance.

After the introductions, Prof. Peter Scott as the Chair, conducted the meeting as per the agenda.

2. Confirmation of the Minutes of the 23rd Advisory Council Meeting held on 7 December 2023

Dr. Shadrach confirmed the approval of the minutes of the 23rd CAC meeting and presented the Action Taken Report. He noted that the previous meeting had generated a wealth of valuable suggestions from the CAC members, which were actively addressed by CEMCA.

3. Action Taken Report

Acknowledging the human and financial resource crunch faced by the organisation, Director CEMCA reported as under:

1. CEMCA should align traditional schooling system with Open Universities to implement the OER policy:

To align the traditional schooling system with Open Universities for OER policy implementation, CEMCA partnered with the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) in New Delhi, India. Together, they organised a five-day online training programme on OER for traditional schoolteachers in July 2024. The English-language session ran from 15 to 19 July, while the Hindi session took place from 22 to 26 July. Approximately 40,000 teachers across India participated in this training programme. This online training remains accessible until the close of the financial year in 2025, enabling teachers to complete it and earn certification after assessment.

2. CEMCA should work with NIOS to align access with equality for skill enhancements as envisioned in the National Education Policy 2020:

CEMCA collaborated with the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) in Uttar Pradesh, India, to advance the National Education Policy 2020's vision of equitable skill enhancement. In April 2024, they hosted a three-day international conference on Open and Distance Learning, addressing seven key topics, including equity and skill development. The conference saw participation from Open Universities across Asia.

3. CEMCA should help the 20 Universities that developed draft OER policy in Bangladesh to adopt it:

CEMCA is working with Bangladesh Open University to encourage the adoption of OER policies by 20 universities that have developed draft versions. While a national event planned for July 2024 had to be postponed due to political instability in the country, discussions are ongoing with Bangladesh Open University, and Bangladesh's University Grants Commission to encourage policy adoption.

4. Support developing course material and capacity building programme in Sri Lanka in the area of foreign language courses - English, Japanese and German. Provide support in developing youth entrepreneurship skills through technical colleges, TVEC and the main schooling system in Sri Lanka:

CEMCA partnered with the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC), the National Youth Services Council (NYSC), and the NGO Together with Youth (TwY) in Sri Lanka to create training modules on spoken English and communication skills. These modules aim to empower young people to embrace entrepreneurship as a livelihood option. With the modules completed, the project's next phase is expected to begin soon.

5. Develop vocational training courses for traditional schools to bring back school dropouts in the age group of 15-18 years in Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, CEMCA collaborated with Bangladesh Open University to train faculty members and teachers involved in educating school dropouts aged 15-18 through the Open Schooling system. A series of training programmes were successfully conducted last year.

6. Develop courses and train experts in Dyslexia, short online refresher courses, capacity building on blended learning for teachers in the Maldives:

CEMCA worked with the Ministry of Education, Government of the Republic of Maldives, to deliver a two-hour capacity-building programme in October 2024. The programme focused on equipping schoolteachers with strategies to create inclusive classrooms and mainstream children with Dyslexia. Over 200 teachers attended the session.

7. Develop course material for girls living in villages in the area of agriculture, horticulture, food processing, etc.:

In collaboration with Joygopalpur Gram Vikash Kendra in West Bengal's Sundarbans region, CEMCA facilitated skill-building initiatives for young girls and boys in sustainable agriculture, aquaculture, and energy solutions. This blended-mode experiment achieved remarkable success, though strategies for scaling it are yet to be developed.

8. Prepare online/offline courses on parenting and caregiving:

CEMCA adapted an online course on Elderly Caregiving to suit the Indian context. This pilot course was accessed by over 1,000 learners. Discussions are underway with the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, to integrate this material into the National Institute of Social Defense's (NISD) online courseware.

9. Build the capacity of schoolteachers in blended learning in Malaysia:

No action has been initiated by CEMCA to build the capacity of schoolteachers in blended learning in Malaysia.

Reflections on the Action Taken Report by the CAC Members

The presentation of the Action taken Report was followed by Professor Scott inviting comments on it from the CAC members.

Mr. Mrutyunjay Behera from India opined that under Dr Shadrach's leadership, CEMCA has made commendable efforts to address the diverse needs of all member countries. Significant progress has been achieved in difficult and remote areas, like the Sundarbans, for which he deserves recognition and applause.

Agreeing to the observation, Prof. Peter Scott mentioned that despite resource constraints, substantial progress has been made by CEMCA. He shared that numerous transformative initiatives are underway at COL. However, funding remains a critical challenge for them as contributions from member countries have decreased. Only 14 out of the 56 member countries contribute to COL's funding and, currently, the major funders are Canada and New Zealand, followed by Australia, and South Africa. There is potential for increased funding from some countries. COL is also actively seeking financial support from international organisations.

As India and Sri Lanka hold representation on COL Board, he is constantly asked about COL and CEMCA activities in the Asian region. Further, Prof. Scott informed the CAC members that COL Board had asked for a review of their operations to ensure alignment with the evolving needs. They have conducted a mid-term evaluation, which provided valuable insights, especially to him as the new President, and helped in identifying some of the key issues. Professor Scott emphasised the following recommendations in particular:

- Reconsidering COL's developmental support in agriculture, food security, and related areas
- Looking closely at gender support as COL has several programmes focusing on women and girls.
- Evaluating COL's physical presence and visibility across the world.

Professor Scott mentioned that COL has also initiated the review of their regional centres in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. He stressed that, over time, regional centres like CEMCA have to demonstrate their effectiveness in serving India and other Commonwealth countries in the region. He felt that the review of CEMCA's physical presence in Asia should be undertaken in a collaborative manner with the involvement of the CAC members and other stakeholders, and experts. CEMCA continues to play a crucial role as a partner in several of COL's central initiatives.

Professor Scott shared that during the 22nd Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in May 2024, he had the opportunity to meet with the Education Minister of the Maldives, who sought support for the digitalisation of the education system in his country. He also engaged with educational delegations during the event. Overall, the focus of this

meeting was on digitalisation, common standards, common practices and common success factors. During the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in October 2024, he was able to present the work that COL has been doing, and met several country delegations. These forums provide an opportunity to meet government ministers and officials, and help in highlighting critical issues where COL can support. It gives an excellent opportunity to work closely with the national governments.

Professor Scott added that COL remains committed to supporting disadvantaged communities in terms of providing access to opportunities, which requires substantial investment of resources and effort. Apart from this, COL supports member countries in creating and implementing national policies, and strategies, which goes down to strengthening institutions by developing institutional policies and institutional capacity building. He admitted that India has significant potential for innovation in education. COL works very hard for establishing connects with the national governments.

4. Annual Report 2023-24 (July 23 to June 24) and Achievement Report (July-November 2024)

Dr. Shadrach presented the Annual Report 2024, and Achievement Report (July-November 2024), providing an overview of CEMCA's initiatives and accomplishments in the Asian region over the past year. His presentation combined insights from both the Annual Report 2023-24 and the Achievement Report (July-November 2024).

He began with a brief introduction of CEMCA, highlighting its operations through eight focal points in the Asian region. CEMCA's activities are primarily funded by COL, supplemented by some external funding sources.

Key Achievements of the Year in India:

1. National Policy on Blended Learning: Developed at the national level.
2. Consortium of Open Universities: Successfully established.
3. AI Course for Schoolteachers: Launched during the GPAI 2023 Summit in New Delhi, India.
4. Ahmedabad Declaration: Convened Open University Vice-Chancellors in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, leading to this milestone declaration.
5. Teacher Development Programme: Collaborated with the Ministry of Education and NCERT to develop programmes on specific learning disabilities (SLD), aligning with the National Education Policy 2020.

Activities Across the Region:

Sri Lanka: Partnered with TVEC to skill youth and conducted an AI workshop for educators.

Bangladesh: Organised workshops on OER and blended learning.

Pakistan: Hosted a workshop on AI for educators in collaboration with Allama Iqbal Open University.

The Director mentioned that during the 23rd CAC meeting, the members also participated in

an exposure visit to CIET-NCERT.

Over the year, CEMCA organised 38 events and contributed to 27 partner events, while also developing several coursewares.

Highlights from Achievement Report:

Despite reduced funding, CEMCA maintained its momentum in organising regional activities by:

- Extending the SLD workshops to Sri Lanka and the Maldives.
- Launching SLD modules, now accessible on the UGC's Malaviya Mission Teacher Training Programme portal.
- Signing an MoU with Association of Indian Universities (AIU) for a baseline study assessing the effectiveness of online education programmes.
- Training Open University educators in creating micro-credentials.
- Developing an AI Literacy Course for Farmers, to be piloted among 10,000 farmers in Maharashtra.
- Finalising an AI Course for School Educators in partnership with CIET-NCERT.
- Training Bangladesh tutors in blended learning to re-engage school dropouts.
- Rolling out a Spoken English Course in Sri Lanka in partnership with Together with Youth.
- Launching the Teacher-in-the-Loop AI Project in India.

In all, from July to November 2024, CEMCA organised 18 meetings, workshops and events in the region, contributed to 12 partner meetings and is actively engaged in two projects with COL.

Hence, despite staff shortages, CEMCA has successfully delivered impactful programmes, maintaining its commitment to innovation and capacity-building in the Asian region.

The Annual Report 2023-24 and the Achievement Report (July-November 2024) will be available online at:

CAC Members' Reflections on the Annual Report 2023-24 and Achievement Report, July-November 2024

Professor Peter Scott commended CEMCA for its remarkable accomplishments over the past year and invited CAC members to share their observations on CEMCA's activities.

Professor Seetharama Rao appreciated CEMCA for demonstrating exceptional performance despite financial and human resource constraints.

Professor Peter Scott agreed that funding reductions for CEMCA and other major COL projects are significant challenges, and expressed hope that the COL Board recognises these

limitations. COL is reinforcing its presence by aligning its work with national priorities of the member countries. He invited CAC members to reflect on four aspects:

1. What is the best way to be of support to you in realising your national aspirations/goals/priorities? Professor Scott felt that the national priorities and aspirations of the member countries should be reflected in COL and CEMCA's work.
2. What process would be helpful to develop your country-level strategy, and how would you like to, as the Focal Point, provide your valuable input?
3. What is the best model that would work in the implementation of the identified interventions? Should it be through a partner institution identifying them, or should it be direct programming by COL/CEMCA in the identified interventions? COL's partnership model extends from coordinating with the highest level of government down to the grassroots level.
4. What is the Advisory Council's advice for the terms of reference for a 2025 review of COL's Asia presence to best support your priorities?

He also referred to the standing on conventional institutions, and how to reach out to the government for active collaboration and support.

Professor Seetharama Rao proposed establishing a Consortium of Open Universities to enhance efficient and optimal utilisation of limited resources, including physical infrastructure, human resources, and study materials or courseware. He emphasised that such collaboration would not only help in reducing costs, but also facilitate the creation of courseware accessible to students online, advancing the vision of open societies and inclusive open learning systems. Professor Rao also sought support to drive this initiative forward. In response, Professor Scott highlighted India's leadership in open education, citing its 18 Open Universities and robust IT infrastructure as a strong foundation for such efforts.

Mr. Behera opined that with the introduction of the NEP 2020 and dual-mode education, more students and professionals are turning to ODL institutions to enhance their qualifications. Indian Open Universities, for example IGNOU, have a vast student base. He suggested that COL should initiate the compilation of ODL best practices around the world, which can be adopted by other ODL institutions.

In this context, Professor Scott highlighted that traditional universities are increasingly recognising the value of ODL institutions. Drawing from strong models like the UK's Open University, and countries framing national policies, such as India and the UK, can serve as examples for others.

Mr. Mausoom from Maldives noted that CEMCA is well-positioned to support education and skills development in the Maldives. He suggested that establishing stronger connections with the Ministry of Higher Education would be beneficial.

Dr. N.D. Wathukarawatta from Sri Lanka shared that with 3.8 million students in government schools, Sri Lanka faces challenges in providing technical devices to students in remote areas. CEMCA can play a pivotal role by reflecting on how to bridge this gap.

Dr. Balaji from COL commended the proposal for a Consortium of Open Universities by

Professor Rao and the emphasis on benchmarking best practices by Mr. Behera. He noted that Commonwealth countries, including the UK, possess a wealth of OER. Generative AI, he suggested, can play a transformative role in enabling educators to access and customise these resources according to their needs, thereby facilitating the creation of readily usable teaching content.

Dr. Balaji also highlighted Aptus, a device developed by COL to support offline eLearning in remote and disconnected regions. He shared its success in the Maldives, where it was deployed to enhance learning opportunities in underserved areas. However, given COL's limited capacity for large-scale production, he proposed training technology experts in member countries to develop similar devices locally. He encouraged CEMCA to take the lead in advancing this initiative in Sri Lanka by collaborating with the government to drive technology empowerment efforts.

Dr. Shadrach expressed his appreciation for the insightful feedback provided by the CAC members. He noted that, as COL focal points operate at the Ministry level, they are well-informed about various initiatives and projects undertaken by the Ministry in collaboration with UNESCO and other international/bilateral organisations. He requested them to facilitate the engagement of COL and CEMCA in these initiatives, so that they can add strategic value to such initiatives in the area of ODL, online and open learning, and OER. The Ministries, especially the Education Ministries of respective countries can see the right opportunity to involve CEMCA in their discourses.

Professor Peter Scott sought advice from CAC members to ensure connecting properly with the governments and partner institutions. He acknowledged Asia's strong representation on the COL Board, where challenging questions about their work in the region are raised. Close cooperation with the focal points and CAC members of the region would help in addressing those concerns.

Mr. Behera suggested that a direct conversation between the COL President and the Indian Education Minister would be invaluable for fostering ideas and identifying priorities. Such bilateral meetings with ministers are essential to align Col and CEMCA's work with national priorities.

Professor Scott shared that during the CHOGM, he met several Pacific ministers and expressed his intention to engage similarly with Asian member countries. Further, he sought advice from the CAC members on what aspects of CEMCA should be reviewed to make it more effective.

Aspects for Review as Proposed by CAC Members

Mr Behera suggested that currently, CEMCA's limited size constrains its ability to create a significant impact at national or regional levels. To enhance its effectiveness, additional resources – both financial and human – are essential. Furthermore, greater participation and collaboration from partner organisations are critical to achieving CEMCA's objectives.

Dr. Wathukarawatta suggested that COL and CEMCA should prioritise visiting member countries to engage with stakeholders, discuss national priorities, and identify areas for

impactful interventions.

Mr. Mausoom mentioned that despite its small size, CEMCA's professional and dedicated staff efficiently manage its day-to-day operations. However, increased funding is necessary to expand its regional activities. While large organisations often face limitations in managing operations, CEMCA can maintain its agility by focusing on recruiting professionals with innovative ideas instead of expanding its size.

Professor Scott acknowledged the inherent challenges faced by large organisations and emphasised the need for adequate support and funding for CEMCA. He highlighted the importance of strategically utilising existing resources to maximise their impact. By fostering collaborations with key resource persons and organisations, CEMCA can efficiently execute its initiatives and expand its influence in the region.

Key Recommendations

1. Strengthening National Collaboration

COL and CEMCA should visit member countries to discuss priorities with stakeholders and identify impactful areas for intervention.

2. Adequate Resource Allocation

CEMCA requires increased financial and human resources to enhance its impact at national and regional levels. Instead of expanding the organisation, engaging professionals with innovative ideas could yield better results.

3. Effective Use of Resources

CEMCA should focus on utilising existing resources efficiently and fostering collaborations with resourceful partners to achieve its objectives.

5. Wrap-up of the Meeting

Professor Peter Scott invited members to share any additional reflections and comments before concluding the meeting. He expressed his gratitude to the CAC members for their active participation and emphasised the importance of fostering closer, more personal connections with the focal points and their respective governments. He commended Dr Shadrach and Mr. Amit Jain for seamlessly organising the meeting despite challenges. He acknowledged that logistical concerns and other commitments prevented an in-person meeting on this occasion. He suggested that the next CAC meeting could be hosted in one of the Asian Commonwealth member countries and assured the members that he would work with the CEMCA team to address any associated challenges.

6. Vote of Thanks

Mr. Amit Jain extended a formal vote of thanks, appreciating the contributions and active engagement of the CAC members.