PCF11
Gaborone Botswana

10-12 SEPTEMBER 2025

Innovative Open Education:
Fostering Resilient Societies for Sustainable Economic Development

COMMONWEALTH of LEARNING

REPUBLIC OF BOTSWANA
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Botswana Open University

Concept Note

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) will hold PCF11 in Gaborone, Botswana from 10-12 September 2025 in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MESD) and its implementing agency Botswana Open University. The first Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF) was convened in Brunei Darussalam in 1999. Since then, PCF has been organised around the Commonwealth in South Africa, New Zealand, Jamaica, United Kingdom, India, Nigeria, Malaysia and Canada.

The focus of the Forum is to provide an opportunity for the open, online and flexible learning community to meet, share knowledge and experiences, identify important trends and explore applications of open and distance learning in widening access, bridging the digital divide and advancing the social and economic development of communities and countries. The event is particularly important for policy makers, practitioners and researchers from developing countries.

Over the years, PCF has moved from a purely academic conference to one providing a platform to share the successes and challenges in finding local solutions through research and innovations. It has also become a leading voice in improving capacities and capabilities. PCF11 will offer unparalleled networking opportunities for participants to connect, collaborate, and build partnerships across sectors and regions. A typical PCF attracts policy and practice such as:

1. Policy makers and development practitioners

2. Academics and researchers

3. Technology innovators

4. COL stakeholders and partner institutions.

The previous PCFs have mainly focused on the interconnection between learning and development, with learner support and technology as the common dimensions to provide equitable access to quality educational opportunity and achieve the developmental goals of the member countries. PCF10 responded in part to what had been learned during the pandemic and focused on Innovations for Educational Resilience. It was the first PCF to have a hybrid format with both in-person and online participation and it culminated in The Calgary Communique.

PCFs have attracted large participation due to their innovative, as well as contemporary, focus on issues that are important to the stakeholders in open, online and flexible learning. Post-pandemic, governments and educational institutions are focused on building more resilient systems that can withstand future disruptions. While distance and online learning remained the main way to keep the door of teaching and learning open during the pandemic, it also presented an opportunity to adopt innovative practices in local contexts. There has been a surge in demand for online learning, for example which has highlighted the need to develop the self-directed learning capacities that are essential for lifelong learning. Questions of quality and equity have also emerged during this period, as many learners have limited access to technology, bandwidth and mobile broadband, especially in rural and remote areas. At the same time, those with access to the internet now have access to a growing

number of generative AI tools which can contribute to all aspects of ODL provision from curriculum and content development to learner support and assessment to data analysis and automation. There is a need for a change in the mindset of stakeholders as to the how and what of education and learning in general. It is important to discuss, debate, share and learn from our experiences to accelerate progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

Learning has a pivotal role in supporting a resilient society with direct correlations between educational investment and measures of social stability, productivity and peace. Conventional models of teaching and learning provide excellent tools to drive economic prosperity for those with access, but inevitably tend to replicate existing social inequalities. In contrast, alternative Open models of teaching and learning offer the same economic benefit but accompanied by a narrowing of the gap between those with access and those without, while increasing quality and collaboration.

The data is clear that education is vital for economic success and demonstrates that every dollar invested yields many more in direct and indirect benefits. But these valuable investments in the conventions of education: more classrooms, more teachers, more exams, can also increase stratification, raise barriers and fuel inequity. The conventions of education invest most in those who can succeed, because their parents have already been successful. The alternative, Open Education, creates social resilience by reaching into the huge reservoir of learning access inequity, creating successful parents.

The Open movement, including themes such as Open Research, Open Data, Open Source, Open Licensing, Open Publishing all recognise the value of sharing and collaboration to drive change. Open is not the same as free, nor is it the opposite of good business. Indeed, post-Covid many global institutions are leveraging open solutions, with great business models that have accepted the power of this approach. As technological changes in telecoms, online, mobile and artificial intelligence combine with social and climate shocks, the Commonwealth is perfectly placed to change also. Innovative open models, with creative and collaborative practices derived from distance, and now, online learning have the capacity to address those chronic challenges.

At a time of shocks, change and fear it is increasingly important for the Commonwealth to have a common voice which advocates for and embraces openness in all its forms.

PCF11 Theme
Innovative Open Education:
Fostering Resilient Societies for Sustainable Economic Development

Sub-Themes

Changing mindsets for inclusive open education

Focus on underpinning philosophies/pedagogies/approaches for inclusion, access and success through ODL provision – the 'why' of learning.

Gender, technology and innovation in open education

Focus on issues of gender, technology and innovation in open educational practices – the 'how' of learning.

Skills development through lifelong open education

Focus on skills/TVET development for more people more flexibly for sustainable development – part of the 'what' of learning.

Sustaining communities of learning and practice in innovative open education

Focus on resilience and working, sharing and learning together in local communities and as a pan-Commonwealth community – the 'who' of open learning practice.

Special Focus

Emerging technologies for education and training

Technological advancements, particularly digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, are opening new opportunities for educators to support high quality learning at scale. PCF11 will have a special focus on integration of appropriate technologies and innovations in teaching and learning, including approaches such as flipped classrooms, learning analytics, mobile learning, massive open and online courses (MOOC), artificial intelligence, blockchain, augmented reality/ virtual reality/ mixed reality etc. Suggested topics of interest would be technological innovations for delivering and managing large, as well as small, flexible learning opportunities that are based on principles of quality to create new ways to promote lifelong learning through, for example, microcredentials.

Education for Girls and Women

Considering that education for women and girls is strategically important for social and economic recovery and in achieving the SDGs, PCF11 will have a special focus on Women and Girls. Many girls drop out of school, thereby creating a permanent loss in human capital and narrowing their chances of improving their living standards. The Forum will ensure increased opportunity for their participation and focus on research and presentations related to innovation in offering programmes leading to skills and employability of girls to improve their livelihoods, measuring the quality of learning in programmes for women and girls, especially from the perspectives of programme effectiveness, and creating specialised lifelong learning environments for women to support sustainable development.

Youth

We must emphasise the vital role of youth in driving sustainable development and tackling global challenges. With over 60% of the Commonwealth population under the age of 30, there is an urgent need to empower this demographic through education and skills training. But further, to achieve deep social change the educational agenda must be also opened to a lifelong learner, to empower parents and young workers as we empower youth. With a signature team of powerful IGOs and NGOs the many nations of the Commonwealth - particularly the small, more agile states - can innovate with new forms of education no longer on the horizon, but here, now.

What to expect

The participants in the Forum will be engaged in one or more of the following to discuss, debate and learn from each other's experiences:

- Making paper and poster presentations
- Participating in plenary sessions covering key topics of the sub-themes and the Asa Brigg's Lecture
- Participating in panel discussions
- Participating in short workshops to learn from peers
- Sharing innovations in the marketplace
- Making new connections and nurture existing networks.

Additional Forum activities

High-Level Ministerial Forum

There will be a high-level Ministerial Forum of Commonwealth Education Ministers during the main conference to discuss how the use of open, online, and flexible learning can strengthen their efforts to build resilient educational systems to support achievement of the sustainable development goals.

Forum Session Types

Keynote Presentations: There will be a keynote on each of the four sub-themes of the Forum. COL will identify key speakers for these sessions.

Paper Presentations: These are research papers, case studies, etc., from the participants that will be presented in parallel sessions.

Poster Presentations: There will be one Poster session, where all the Forum posters will be displayed.

Workshops: This is a 60 or 120-minute session, where a presenter or team demonstrates the finding of a key research project or guides the participants to develop certain skills in a step-by-step manner. This would be a participant-proposed session and would be decided based on the relevance of the proposal to the Forum theme and sub-themes.

Panel Discussions: This is a 60-minute session, where 3-4 experts make presentations facilitated by a moderator for questions and answers. Proposals are submitted by the participants, who also take the responsibility of identifying the speakers.

Marketplace: This is a place for one-to-one conversation with Forum participants, where delegates can demonstrate and talk about their technology, OER or innovative services and practices.

Exhibition: This is a space for paid exhibitors, who would present educational technology-related products and services to the Forum participants.

Important Dates

10 October 2024

Call for abstracts and proposals

30 January 2025

Last date for submission of abstracts and proposals

1 March 2025

Notification of abstract/proposal approval

15 April 2025

Last date for full paper submission

1 May 2025

Notification for full paper acceptance

10 September 2025

PCF11 starts