Commonwealth of Nations

Advancing Technology and Education Access Across the Commonwealth Nations

Backgrounder Guide

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Dear Delegates,

My name is Marco Zhang, and I have the honor of serving as your Committee Director for the Commonwealth of Nations. On behalf of my Dais team, I would like to welcome you warmly to this committee for SPAMUN 2025. This year, I will be joined by your Chair, Joshua Pham, and your Assistant Director, Myla Sangha.

Entering my 4th year of Model United Nations, my experience has been nothing short of a transformative journey. I vividly remember walking into my first conference, anxious and utterly unfamiliar with my surroundings. Ever since then, I have been captivated by the collaboration, confidence, and critical thinking that MUN has imposed upon me. This conference will provide a platform for you to try new things — to make mistakes, to learn, and to succeed.

The Commonwealth of Nations (abbreviated as CW) is an international association of 56 member states, the majority of which were previously under the rule of the British Empire. This organization exists as a tool to promote collaboration, preserve cultural heritage, and support mutual development. In key global issues such as trade, technology, education, and human rights, the Commonwealth is a significant actor, especially as a platform for smaller states to express their sentiments and values on the international stage. As the Commonwealth continues to foster equality, democracy, and security, it plays a pivotal role in the development of small island states (of which the Commonwealth is mainly composed), alongside strengthening economic ties and global standards.

“Advancing Technology and Education Access Across the Commonwealth Nations” is a pressing topic, fueled by the rise of digitalization. In our world, technological breakthroughs are being made in various technological sectors, including AI, Healthcare, and Automation. These are invaluable tools in the fight for economic growth, innovation, and equality. As we bear witness to such advances, it is the responsibility of the Commonwealth to promote such digital skills across all member states. Many developing countries face significant barriers, including a lack of internet access, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to cyber-education. It is also important to note that many of these issues are linked by causation (i.e, a lack of digital resources leads to inefficient education procedures and curriculum). These issues only further widen the digital divide between developed and developing countries. It is only by focusing on this topic and actively debating the issues at hand that we can find solutions to empower youth, educate citizens, and implement necessary policies to bring digital access to our populations.

Therefore, I am looking forward to the debate that will take place within the CW. I hope each one of you benefits from this iteration of SPAMUN, where debate will be founded upon diplomacy, creativity, and professionalism. Also, please be reminded that position papers are due on October 7 for feedback or October 14 for final submission, and are mandatory for those wishing to be eligible for awards. If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out by emailing cwspamun@southpointe.ca. Finally, I urge you not to limit yourself to this

backgrounder. A plethora of sources await your exploration on the internet. Take initiative, and delve deep!

Committee Description:

The Commonwealth of Nations (CW) is a political association of states, initially based on the historical ties created through the expansion of the British Empire. Over time, these British colonies achieved greater levels of autonomy while still maintaining their allegiance to the British monarch. Such states were known as "Dominions." Starting in 1887, Dominion leaders began participating in conferences with Britain. At the 1926 Imperial Conference, Britain, alongside its Dominions, agreed to an equitable alliance within the British Empire. This agreement, known historically as the Balfour Declaration of 1926, marked the inception of the British Commonwealth of Nations, later to be more commonly referred to as the Commonwealth.[1] In 1949, India was granted the right to remain in the Commonwealth as a republic, leading to a significant shift in the association; eligibility for the CW no longer required allegiance to the Crown.

Within the CW, all countries remain fully sovereign and independent. Subsequently, the Commonwealth has no legal or political authority over its members. Due to its equitable nature, decisions and policies made by the CW are enforced through consensus and cooperation, rather than binding law; however, suspension from the CW is possible at the discretion of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG).[2] Although it lacks the official power to make judgments for its member states, all CW countries still uphold a framework of agreements and principles, such as the Commonwealth Charter.

Historically, the CW has made declarations, signed treaties, and held summits to pursue socioeconomic improvement within its member states. Core components, such as development, democracy, and equality, have been reaffirmed in declarations, including the Harare Declaration (1991). The core ideology promoted refers to how technology and education serve all three aforementioned aspects. Firstly, educated citizens make informed choices, leading to a surplus in democratic elections across member states. Secondly, technological access empowers citizens to create and foster infrastructure, digital and physical, that positively impacts the quality of life among populations. Thirdly, sufficient access to technological tools and education facilitates the achievement of more equitable opportunities for citizens.

[1] thecommonwealth.org/history
[2] thecommonwealth.org/commonwealth-ministerial-action-group

Regarding education, the CW has established an international framework that enables citizens across member states to achieve their dreams through the provision of university scholarships and fellowships; over 38,000 students have been able to attain postsecondary education through this program.[3]

Topic Overview:

According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, education is a right, especially in the fundamental stages.[4] Yet in many nations, millions of children and youth lack the resources to exercise that right. Approximately 128 million boys and 122 million girls worldwide are out of school.[5] As a result, affected countries suffer from a decline in innovation and workforce productivity, perpetuating poverty cycles and exacerbating inequality. When searching for the root cause of such a widespread issue, a disparity arises. In developing nations, approximately 33% of school-age children remain outside the formal education system, assuming such a standardized governmental framework even exists. Conversely, when reviewing the data for more affluent nations, the percentage drops to just 3%.[6] Furthermore, when reviewing technological access across low-income Commonwealth nations, only about 16% of the population has internet access, whilst only 5-10% have access to both the internet and a computer.[7] Conclusively, there is a chronic under-investment in education, paired with a scarcity of learning tools that would otherwise alleviate economic pressure on families.

The aforementioned challenges lead to technological developments that are disproportionately accessed and utilized among many Commonwealth states. For example, small island states are more vulnerable to the "digital learning divide", as outer islands often lack the same resources that the capital enjoys.

This scarcity can be attributed to the extortionate prices of digital connectivity within rural and poverty-stricken areas. Even for schools that possess a budget for technological investment, the required digital infrastructure is often inaccessible. Broadband coverage, electricity, and data centers are all essential prerequisites for fostering digital literacy. Unfortunately, such resources only add to the economic cost of enabling youth with technology, oftentimes leading to inaction. Furthermore, teacher shortages are becoming increasingly prevalent, as the lack of post-secondary and professional education, paired with inadequate education budgets, leads to youth becoming disillusioned with the career path, and existing teachers are strained to continue their work. Recursively, the teacher shortage is expected to continue intensifying.

In the contemporary world, employers increasingly require digital literacy; without action, youth unemployment and underemployment will continue to escalate. Only by mitigating these issues can the Commonwealth reduce inequality, increase opportunity, and support democratic

[3] www.acu.ac.uk/our-work/international-mobility/csfp/
[4] www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
[5] thecommonwealth.org/news/chogm2024/commonwealth-countries-urged-tackle-out-school-youth-crisis
[6] www.unesco.org/en/articles/251m-children-and-youth-still-out-school-despite-decades-progress-unesco-report
[7] thecommonwealth.org/connectivity-agenda/physical

participation within its member nations. It is imperative that delegates engage with the issue of “Advancing Technology and Education Access Across the Commonwealth Nations”, for the policies made today will shape the landscape in which future generations will exist across the Commonwealth.

Timeline:

1492-1600s: Establishment of Colonial Empires along the “New World.”
European colonial powers competed against land territory and vast resources, which the so-called “New World” offered, resulting in colonial conflicts and devastating crimes against inhabitants.

1670: The East India Company:
The East India Company established settlements across Southeast Asia and India, engaging in commerce and shipping valuable resources, such as cotton and silk. The company played a crucial role in acting as a de facto representative for Britain and extending its political dominance.

1776: The American Revolution
The Thirteen Colonies seceded from the British Empire, followed by their declaration of independence, marking the first British Colony to gain independence.

1885: Scramble for Africa
Major European Colonial Powers met in Berlin to discuss the regulation of colonial activities in Africa. As a result, the pace of European colonization in Africa continued to increase. This set up the foundation of neglect and imbalance in socioeconomic life amongst former African colonies today.

1887: Canada achieved confederation.
Through the British North America Act, the Province of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick united to create “The Dominion of Canada.” While not officially leaving the British colony, it gained some autonomy, signaling hope for possible independence from the British Empire.

1887-1926: Rapid Nationalism.
Over time, the British Colonies slowly shifted to semi-independent dominions, and nationalism began to take hold. The Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Irish Free State, and India attended the 1926 Imperial Conference, affirming their desire to gain equal status and some sovereignty while also reaffirming their loyalty to the British Crown.

1947 onwards, Increasing Independence.
Both dominions and colonies within the Commonwealth slowly gained autonomy. In 1947, India and Pakistan were granted complete independence. The remaining colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean were moving towards self-governance, which Britain accepted as inevitable.

Historical Analysis:

Early Foundations (1987–2000):

The Commonwealth's actions towards this issue began with recognition: geography, scale, and cost should never dictate opportunity. At the 1987 Vancouver meeting, leaders within the CW agreed to establish an institution to promote cooperation in distance education, with significant funding pledges from countries including Brunei, Canada, India, and Nigeria. This institution would later become the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL). The Commonwealth of Learning proposed a new approach to mass education: open and distance learning.[8] This ideology of utilizing technology to expand the number of youth reached by educational efforts has revolutionized how access to education and technology is approached today. In the early stages, the CoL focused on expanding the reach of global curricula, developing new media to transfer information (i.e., radio and television), and gradually implementing digital tools to lay the foundation for digital literacy. The early years demonstrated the capability for small organizations to leverage pre-existing curricula and expertise among CW nations to overcome structural constraints. This organization showed that when sound policy and institutional support are combined with manpower investment, structural constraints and limits on influence begin to collapse.

Small States, Shared Solutions (2000–2010):

In the early 2000s, remote and small island states began to highlight their vulnerabilities, particularly due to their geographical isolation and limited resources. In response, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth was founded to address the issue of limited domestic capacity for post-secondary and professional education. Due to the infeasibility of countries building everything from scratch, this institution drafted open education resources (OER) in fields that aligned with economic needs—for example, business, agriculture, technology, and youth work.[9] In tandem, the recognition of one's learning was supported by the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF), allowing for complexity-based differentiation (i.e., undergraduate vs. post-graduate).[10] This period solidified the principle that remains prevalent in the modern day: regional cooperation is necessary to utilize resources such as OER in the pursuit of lowering costs and creating reliable pathways for employment.

[8] www.col.org/about/
[9] vussc.col.org/
[10] vussc.col.org/index.php/tqf/

Policy Consolidation and National Platforms (2010–2019):

By the 2010s, governments across the Commonwealth began to integrate technology into their educational systems. For example, countries such as Rwanda introduced information and communication technologies (ICT) into their schools, albeit with concerns related to inequitable access and stagnant pedagogical practices.

At the foundation of these operations were trial runs that enabled systemic changes across teacher training, provisioning, and the procurement of digital curricula. Meaningful progress in this direction was made during the 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, as all heads of government endorsed the Declaration on the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment. This declaration included clauses regarding connectivity, regulatory reforms, and inclusive frameworks that sustain education, trade, and development. Within the same context, the "Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda Action Plan," also known as the CCA, was established during this meeting. This plan explicitly states how digital connectivity enables members to participate in digital trade, bolstering their economies and facilitating further development in these areas.

The COVID-19 Shock and Escalation (2020–2022)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems were disrupted like never before. This event highlighted the significant gaps in the preparedness of national systems to sustain learning during times of crisis. In low and middle-income countries, "learning poverty", which refers to the percentage of children aged 10 years and below who cannot read or comprehend a single text, increased from approximately 57% to an estimated 70% by mid-2022, highlighting the extent of lost learning opportunities.[11]

Only a handful of households had digital devices, and the quantity and quality of internet access were notoriously expensive and limited.[12] Learning losses worsened, and this digital divide solidified into a more severe learning deficit. Simultaneously, there was increased attention in the region on the intersection of digital connectivity and resilient education, which accelerated interest in this area. As a result, governments and international bodies framed access to the internet not just as a means for social good, but as an essential component for economic development and social stability.[13]

[11] worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/23/70-of-10-year-olds-now-in-learning-poverty-unable-to-read-and-understand-a-simple-text
[12] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9759655
[13] www.unicef.org/media/122921/file/StateofLearningPoverty2022.pdf

Current Situation:

The disparity in global connectivity is a significant challenge, with 5.5 billion people having access to the internet in 2024, while 2.6 billion remain without access. Hence, the universal use of the internet is still a distant goal.[14] Moreover, the education systems remain in limbo due to the damage inflicted during the pandemic, as 1.6 billion students were affected by school closures, once again highlighting inequalities.[15]

The concept of "learning poverty" blossomed during the pandemic. For example, the statistic mentioned above, "In low and middle-income countries, an estimated 70% of 10-year-olds cannot read a simple text," proves the necessity for foundational literacy to be at the center of recovery plans.[11]

Currently, one of the most applicable agencies to this issue is the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA). Established during the 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), this agency is a member-led platform that streamlines trade and investment, with a dedicated Digital Connectivity sub-division aimed at sharing practices, pursuing regulatory reform, and leveraging digitization to drive inclusion.[16]

In addition, during the 2018 CHOGM, an operational "Action Plan" was approved, providing ministries with a delivery model that can be utilized to sustain digital policy and connectivity workstreams that underpin online learning ecosystems.
However, this large-scale delivery depends on the Ministry of Education and the ICT regulatory bodies. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) supports these systems with technology-enhanced learning (TEL) toolkits to facilitate the planning of pedagogy, platforms, and quality systems in scalable systems.[17]

[14] www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2024/11/10/ff24-internet-use
[15] www.unesco.org/en/covid-19/education-response
[16] thecommonwealth.org/connectivity-agenda
[17] oasis.col.org/entities/publication/b727fa53-87b2-4718-9dc6-88a6f9109359

UN/International Involvement:

International organizations, specifically the United Nations (UN) and the Commonwealth of Nations, have worked to provide higher-quality access to education and technology for millions of people across their member states. These initiatives are built on the principles of teaching and learning, and digital access can change lives, help numerous young people find employment, connect rural communities to diverse opportunities, and promote greater equality for everyone. While progress has been made over the years, challenges such as limited and unstable internet access, inadequate funding for basic needs, and the widening gap between wealthier and poorer members continue to persist.

UN and Global Frameworks:

The UN has supported Commonwealth countries through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically the goals related to quality education and innovation. For example, UNESCO has collaborated with numerous governments across multiple countries to train teachers and enhance digital literacy. At the same time, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has facilitated growth through internet access in Africa and the Pacific. These projects have enabled more students to access classrooms and online learning, but many remote and conflict-affected areas remain unable to do so.

Commonwealth and Regional Initiatives:

The Commonwealth itself has been a driving force in closing the education gap. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), established in 1987, has supported a large number of people. Their primary focus was on women and commonly excluded groups, to teach skills through online courses. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) enables some of the smaller nations to share resources, allowing students in areas such as the Pacific Islands to access the same level of education as those in larger and wealthier countries. The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) has also improved lives by allowing thousands of students from developing nations to learn abroad and bring back knowledge to their communities. Regional groups, such as the African Union (AU) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), have collaborated with the Commonwealth to implement reforms and expand access to education.

NGOs and partnerships:

Two examples of NGOs are Plan International and Save the Children, which have provided access to schools and communities through the use of laptops, digital libraries, and internet connectivity. They have also partnered with large companies, such as Microsoft, to integrate digital learning in various countries, including India, as well as some areas in Africa. However, this has favored some countries over others, indicating that inequalities persist.

Impact and challenge:

Such initiatives have led to a growing rate in literacy and access to online education during the pandemic; however, a vast disparity remains between high-income groups, such as those in Canada or the UK, and low-income groups, such as those in Malawi or Sierra Leone, who are still deprived of widespread internet access to this day. In certain countries, persistent political instability and funding setbacks hinder their ability to achieve long-term results.

Conclusion:

Much of the equity in technology access among Commonwealth members has been achieved through the efforts of the United Nations, the Commonwealth, NGOs, and regional organizations. The major success of the Commonwealth of Learning demonstrates what collaboration can achieve. Still, a well-prolonged and sustained investment, along with more infrastructure, is required to provide equitable access for all member states.

Possible Solutions:

Although this topic is vast and a diverse range of solutions has the potential to be explored, each one should be built upon four pillars: teacher capacity, infrastructure, inclusive content, and financing & partnerships.

To elaborate on the first pillar, “teacher capacity”, one must identify the core concept: Technology can only improve learning when the educators themselves are educated on how to use learning technologies effectively. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was established to enhance access to open, distance, and technology-enabled learning, making it a natural means to achieve professional development and modernize classroom toolkits.

When addressing the issue of infrastructure, a likely solution could be prioritizing reliable power, school connectivity, and shared device libraries. The Commonwealth’s Connectivity Agenda already includes a Digital Connectivity cluster, where members share practices on infrastructure and regulation, allowing delegates to follow suit in developing resolutions that support mutual funding and coordination in empowering schools with connectivity toolkits.[17]

At the center of the third pillar is the ideology of accessibility. One plausible approach that delegates can take is to reflect on the barriers that hinder accessibility. In many cases, curricula are not updated or lack inclusivity regarding factors such as language, curriculum pacing, and urban-centric methodologies. However, members can modify OERs to suit local languages,

allowing for embedded accessibility from the start. Furthermore, governments may choose to distribute offline versions for radio, TV, and local servers, in areas where bandwidth is limited.[18]

Finally, the fourth pillar is financing and partnerships. During the 22nd Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in May 2024, ministers reaffirmed their commitment to reducing inequities and adapting education to rapid technological change, indicating that leaders are aware of the benefits that matched grants, mutual funds, and licensed aid (such as zero-rating national learning portals) can provide.[19]

Bloc Positions:

High-income and tech-advanced members:

Delegations such as those from the United Kingdom, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada are likely to express their support, given their financial capacity to back ambitious goals for school connectivity and teacher certification. They can offer technical assistance and standards guidance through Commonwealth forums, although they may request reliable statistics/data after committing significant funds.[20]

Large emerging economies:

Members in this bloc support the efficient use of resources alongside effective delivery, emphasizing mobile-first and offline delivery, local-language content, and teacher capacity. They may also demand data sovereignty and practical procedures that guarantee power and connectivity before advanced tools. Countries applicable to this bloc include: India, Malaysia, Pakistan, and South Africa.

African group:

Priorities among this group may include early-stage electrical infrastructure, school connectivity, and the expansion of STEM and “Technical & Vocational Education & Training” (TVET) programs.[21] Nations that may choose to join this bloc include: Nigeria, Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, Botswana, Uganda, Mauritius, and Malawi. Additionally, members may choose to take a united stance when debating the necessary actions that the Digital and Physical Connectivity clusters should take, such as emphasizing the importance of financial aid/device affordability to combat the logistical challenges faced by remote or landlocked districts.[22]

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[18] www.col.org/what-we-do
[19] shorturl.at/YKO6o
[20] thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-ministers-commit-urgent-actions-achieve-education-goals
[21] atlas.unevoc.unesco.org/research-briefs/african-tvet-systems-and-the-changing-world-of-work-the-digital-transformation
[22] gaid.org/publications/africa/nearly-100-million-children-in-africa-out-of-school-and-450-000-schools-without-electricity

Geographically isolated small states:
This bloc will prioritize disaster-resilient school buildings and offline content for outer islands. A core concept of this group is that the effectiveness of pooled bandwidth purchases and standardized "school connectivity kits" can overcome the barriers presented by low-market economies. Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea may opt to form a bloc. At the same time, countries such as Australia and New Zealand could place a heavy emphasis on supporting blocs with this ideology.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the most significant barriers that prevent technology-enabled learning in the Commonwealth (for example, power, internet, teacher skills, language, cost), and which should be tackled first?

2. Throughout the background guide, numerous solutions have been proposed, including teacher training, school connectivity, device libraries, OERs, and digital infrastructure. Which combination best serves students, teachers, ministries, telecoms, and NGOs?

3. How should members fund and roll out these measures at scale, and what simple indicators (such as the percentage of schools with power/internet and the percentage of teachers trained) should be used to track progress?

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