

# 14th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 26-30 November 2000

We, Commonwealth Ministers of Education, at our 14th Triennial Conference in Halifax, Canada, having reflected on education co-operation in the Commonwealth over the past many decades, and the challenges we face at the beginning of a new century, and based on our shared ideals and guiding principles as set out in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991, agreed on the following:

1. We believe in the right of everyone to education. All persons have a right of access to lifelong learning, by every appropriate means, with full opportunity regardless of gender, race, colour, age, socio-economic status, physical and other disabilities, or geographic location. Education, including early childhood care and development, is an essential pre-requisite for individuals to achieve their full potential. It also contributes to a non-exploitative and non-violent society that will facilitate expansion of human capabilities and enhancement of competitiveness in a knowledge-based global economy. Education empowers the poor, safeguards the vulnerable, promotes economic growth and social justice, promotes the values of democracy, human rights, citizenship, good governance, tolerance and pluralism and provides moral and spiritual guidance. Higher education and research are among the important tools through which countries can achieve their development goals. Attention to gender equality, and to the inclusion of the disabled and marginalised, in access and opportunity are essential at all levels of education.

2. Over the years, we have witnessed gains in enrolment in our countries at all levels of education. But progress in many of our countries continues to be constrained by lack of financial and skilled human resources for the development, delivery and management of quality education. The burdens of civil conflict, natural disasters, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and unsustainable foreign debt are making matters worse. Globalisation is enhancing opportunities for networking, knowledge-sharing and entrepreneurialism, but it also creates new challenges to the coherence, integrity and quality of our educational systems. These developments are affecting equity of access and quality of education at all levels. We are deeply concerned that in the contemporary world more than 110 million school-age children, of which two-thirds are girls, do not have access to education, and over 800 million adults,

of which 60 per cent are women, remain illiterate. We are aware that four of the nine high population countries with the lowest education enrolment and literacy levels are member countries of the Commonwealth. We are also aware that the small states, which make up almost two-thirds of the Commonwealth membership, face continuing capacity problems to develop, sustain and manage quality education at all levels.

3. Despite these constraints and setbacks, we live in hope of progress. We are encouraged that some resource-poor countries have been able to make impressive educational gains by adopting sound policies of good governance, careful management of resources and the introduction of innovative educational strategies and practices; and that most small states have achieved or are close to achieving universal access to basic education. We also note the

significant progress made by the high population states. Against this background, we reaffirm our commitment to the spirit of the 1990 Jomtien Declaration on education for all, and the goal of achieving universal access to sustainable quality basic education by 2015, as outlined in the Dakar Framework for Action of April 2000 and reiterated at the UN's 2000 Millennium Summit and the G8 summit. We further affirm that we are committed to the provision of lifelong learning for all, on a fair and equitable basis, through a diversity of appropriate opportunities. In this regard, we are encouraged by the new opportunities presented by modern information and communication technologies for improved access, greater flexibility and enhanced quality in education. We welcome the high degree of international co-operation and support for education, and the pledge made by the international community at Dakar that no country which shows serious commitment and has sensible plans for education will fail for lack of resources. We will strive to ensure that this pledge is honoured.

4. In pursuit of these commitments we pledge to make full use of the unique advantages of the Commonwealth organisations and agencies active in the area of education and training for human development. We believe that the Commonwealth's traditions of sharing resources and expertise offer a platform for collaboration and action that will enhance efforts to promote sustainable quality education for all at every level. Inherent in this belief is the value of academic interchange as well as student and knowledge mobility. The work of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth Institute, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), and the many non-governmental and community-based organisations, teacher organisations and professional networks active in education in the Commonwealth constitute valuable assets that can assist us in the realisation of our goals. We therefore endorse the role of all these agencies, organisations and networks as vital to Commonwealth co-operation and the development of member countries. We also reaffirm our belief that education is pivotal in the work of the Commonwealth as a voluntary association of countries that share similar values and principles.

5. In addition to the above continuing programmes by Commonwealth agencies, we call upon the Commonwealth Secretariat to develop a data bank of existing strengths and resources within the Commonwealth which could be utilised for capacity-building and help member countries identify priority programmes and projects that will enable clusters of countries and agencies to work collaboratively in order to give concrete meaning and practical realisation to this Statement. These priority items should constitute an Action Plan that will respond to change and renewal over the years. We endorse the following activities for Commonwealth countries and agencies to pursue as an initial Action Plan linked to the Halifax Statement. In this regard, the Commonwealth should ensure that gender concerns, specific to females in some countries and males in others, will be mainstreamed into all programmes and activities, as should issues of poverty and inclusion:

a. Resources for Learning: The Commonwealth Secretariat should explore ways of enhancing the capacity of member states to develop their own materials and to access quality teaching/learning materials at affordable prices for schools, to include adult literacy programmes, and tertiary institutions in Commonwealth countries. Resources may include high quality textbooks, audio/video cassettes, films, diskettes, CD-ROMs, and on-line materials as well as equipment and materials and the skills for developing and producing them.

b. **Qualifications, Standards and Equivalencies:** The Commonwealth Secretariat should establish a mechanism to propose accreditation guidelines and processes that will function to increase student and knowledge mobility and protect our citizens against malpractices. The Secretariat should also study on a continuous basis the impact of transnational education on national systems with a view to safeguarding the quality, integrity and coherence of those systems.

c. **School Improvement Programmes in Small States (SIPSS):** The Commonwealth Secretariat in concert with other agencies should support the SIPSS programme of collaboration as recommended by the Seychelles meeting of education experts from Commonwealth small states. The main objective should be to improve school quality, with a focus on participatory school management, teacher-training and professional development, learner-centred improvements and community participation.

d. **Education to Combat HIV/AIDS:** Urgent efforts should be made to formulate and implement policies and strategies leading to an increase in education programmes and interventions for preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and mitigating its impact on education. Education strategies for combating HIV/AIDS should also be intensified.

e. **Education in Difficult Circumstances:** Noting that civil strife, armed conflict and activities which serve to prolong them impact adversely on education at all levels, as do natural disasters, the Commonwealth should strive to strengthen education programmes for preventing conflict and mitigating the impact of conflict and natural disasters on education in disrupted societies. The Commonwealth should develop strategies to ensure that education continues during periods of disruption, both in the country directly affected and its neighbours. Education should be considered an important part of humanitarian assistance in periods of civil strife, armed conflict and natural disasters.

f. **Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education:** The use of ICT should be actively and systematically promoted through strategic initiatives that link countries, agencies, the private sector, teacher organisations and NGOs in key projects to expand access to education, increase flexibility of delivery and improve on quality, while protecting cultural and linguistic identities. These projects should also serve to bridge the 'digital divide' in the Commonwealth. Establishment of a virtual university for small states using existing structures and capacities should be pursued by COL.

g. **Scholarships, Fellowships and Exchange Schemes:** The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan should be expanded and diversified so as to include more flexibility such as short term and split-site programmes along with traditional awards and, where appropriate, those which focus on developmental and poverty reduction objectives should be encouraged. The growth of other schemes designed to increase student and knowledge mobility, such as the Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium should also be encouraged.

h. **Commonwealth Values Education:** The use of education to promote values of democracy, human rights, citizenship, good governance, tolerance, etc., as espoused by the Commonwealth in its key declarations of principles should be strengthened. This should include development of life skills curriculum and training of teachers in this area.

i. Teacher Training and Professional Development: The pivotal role of teachers should be strengthened through project activities that focus on teacher training and development, as well as enhancing the status, professionalism and motivation of this most vital component of the education system.

6. We call on the Commonwealth Secretariat, COL, the Commonwealth Foundation, the ACU, the Commonwealth Institute and all other agencies and private organisations that share the Commonwealth's values to work together with us in implementing these commitments. We are encouraged by the excellent work at present undertaken by the relevant Commonwealth institutions.

We have requested the Commonwealth Secretary-General to provide us with an interim progress report and a comprehensive final report on the implementation of these decisions at our next triennial meeting.

Halifax, Nova Scotia,  
Canada  
30th November 2000