The theme for the fiftieth anniversary of the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Ministers (17CCEM) is ‘Education in the Commonwealth: Towards and beyond global goals and targets’. The 17CCEM will bring together a diverse range of educational stakeholders, including education ministers, senior officials, representatives from national and international agencies, academics, teachers, non-governmental organisations, youth and the private sector.

An opportunity to influence ministerial decisions

The Commonwealth Foundation and the Government of Malaysia’s Institut Aminuddin Baki are jointly hosting the Stakeholders’ Forum in the run-up to the 17CCEM. The Stakeholders’ Forum is an integral part of the CCEM alongside the Teachers’, Vice-chancellors’ and Youth Forums and will focus on the theme of ‘Making connections and building partnerships: Towards and beyond global education goals and targets’.

The Stakeholders’ Forum brings together civil society, the private sector, academia, and other non-state actors, providing them with a platform to discuss and debate priorities and challenges in education. It is also a chance to build partnerships and to give new direction to discourse and action in education. In addition, it will give delegates the opportunity to meet ministers and officials, as well as delegates of the other 17CCEM forums.

Past forums have successfully influenced the outcomes of the ministerial meeting. Typically, statements are considered by ministers and senior officials and integrated into the final ministerial communiqué, which forms the basis of policy on Commonwealth education. The Forum’s overriding goal is to formulate recommendations to influence the outcome of the ministerial meeting.

Bringing about greater change

Four sub-themes will be explored in a series of workshops and panels held over three days at the Stakeholders’ Forum. The theme and sub-themes of the Forum reflect issues central to Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It was civil society’s view that to sustain progress and bring about more far-reaching change, the agenda needs to be broadened beyond these global goals and targets both in developing and developed countries.

Delegates will look at examples of good practice as well as areas for concern and discuss ways in which problems can be tackled.

The effects of the global financial crisis on the developing world

The 17CCEM takes place against the backdrop of a global financial crisis posing even greater challenges for development. The developing world did nothing to cause this crisis, yet progress in meeting development objectives may be dramatically halted by it. In Africa alone, an estimated US$50 billion in income could be lost over the next two years.1 Achievement of the education MDGs could be severely affected by the crisis, and already an estimated 30 million children remain out of primary education in Commonwealth countries despite education being one of the most important ways of achieving personal growth and community development.2

Through the workshops and panels taking place under the four sub-themes, delegates will look at the priority issues. They will review initiatives to determine their effectiveness. Achievements will be highlighted and participants will share experiences, and suggest actions and recommendations to bring about further change.

The sub-themes in detail

Making inclusive access and learning a reality

Exclusion from education can be the result of many factors. In some countries, gender bias is a cause, although other developing countries are making headway in enrolling and retaining girls in education.

Overall progress is still erratic. Of the 30 million children not receiving primary education in Commonwealth countries, 57 per cent of these are girls.3 A workshop led by the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the Commonwealth Secretariat will address the problem of gender exclusion.

Gender is not the only factor threatening access to education. During other sessions, panellists will discuss how chronic poverty and environmental disasters affect education in marginalised and vulnerable communities. They will look at strategies and initiatives for those living in refugee camps and post-disaster areas. Then they will highlight priorities that need urgent attention and make recommendations for action.
More than 25 million people in Commonwealth countries live with HIV and AIDS. This is over half the world total. Forum participants will have the chance to look at the successes and challenges of HIV and AIDS prevention education; particularly successful initiatives by governments and civil society; and the lessons that have been learned. They will discuss whether the successful initiatives can be established within education policies.

Disability, too, is a factor in exclusion. A workshop run by Leonard Cheshire International aims to promote understanding of the fact that inclusive education and provision for disabled students are interlinked. Delegates will explore ways to improve the training of teachers and adapt the school environment to students with special needs and those with disabilities.

Achieving a continuum in education

This sub-theme will examine education provision from pre-primary and primary, through to secondary and higher education. The UNESCO-led global movement, Education for All, aims to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015. The numbers of entrants to secondary education have increased as a result of the movement, and delegates will review how this has affected government responsibility, financing and quality.

Panellists will review and compare strategies for early childhood care and education (ECCE) provision as well. They will share their experiences and highlight the benefits of ECCE programmes. As well as furthering initiatives and improvements, the goal is to strengthen the case for investment in ECCE programmes.

Education is about much more than classroom learning: it is the pathway to dialogue, mutual respect and understanding. This is why the theme of continuous, lifelong learning is an important aspect of the Forum.

Panellists will also explore innovations in education systems and curricula that promote good citizenship and ethics. They will look at how policy- and decision-makers can be helped to promote education as a valuable tool for dialogue and citizenship.

The value of informal and real-world learning methods will also be examined and participants will discuss ways to promote them. For example, non-governmental organisations could make a real contribution to non-formal education initiatives. Discussions will focus on what governments can do to provide regulatory and supporting frameworks that encourage them to take part.

Lifelong Learning for Farmers is a good example of real-world education. The programme helps rural communities find appropriate technology-based open and distance education methods to improve their livelihoods. Other strategies will be discussed that encourage a self-sustaining process of lifelong learning.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is an important area for the continuous education theme and participants will hear about current trends and issues. In addition, panellists will discuss the new skills needed for a globalised world and how they are being integrated into vocational and technical education curricula.
Redefining quality in education

There have been many positive steps to increase levels of education provision, but there is concern about the quality of teaching in many Commonwealth countries.

Poor teaching quality, combined with the pressures of poverty, can affect continuing education. For example in Bangladesh, where considerable progress has been made in achieving gender equality in education and free primary education, the dropout rate is 47 per cent.6

This sub-theme aims to demonstrate that, while primary education targets such as the education MDGs and EFA are important, quality needs to be maintained. Panels will look at whether quality is being achieved in relation to the MDGs and EFA.

However, quality can have different meanings depending on context, perspectives and different cultural environments. Redefining quality is critical if education is to play a more relevant and instrumental role in the social and economic development of a country. Defining quality and discussing how it can be assessed and monitored will be central to this sub-theme. The role of leadership and management in achieving quality education will be examined.

Participants will share developing and developed country experiences, as well as highlighting examples of good practice. They will also discuss the importance of literacy and education as a way of empowering marginalised and vulnerable communities, and removing gender disparity.

A discussion on contemporary challenges for public education in the Commonwealth will focus on maths, science and technology, and environmental education.

There are many excellent ICT initiatives around the Commonwealth that address quality and access in education. The ‘best practice’ methods they use to bridge the digital gap will be explored and shared. A project is underway in Africa to determine whether open source or proprietary software is more cost-effective for public access centres such as schools and libraries. The open source versus proprietary debate will be on the agenda for discussion under the sub-theme ‘Redefining quality’.

Realising the potential of non-state actors

The public and private sectors both have an important role to play in education provision. Equally important is how well and how much they collaborate. Collaboration, together with partnerships and knowledge sharing, will be emphasised across all the workshops and panels running under this sub-theme.

The relationship between the two sectors and how the private sector can become more involved, particularly within higher education, will be examined. For example, the economic crisis is likely to have an impact on financing for education.

Participants will look at the current worldwide financial system and explore gaps that need to be filled by international non-governmental organisations and the private sector. They will discuss how civil society can support education as public funding declines. Successful private–public ventures that could be adapted for other countries will also be highlighted.

Rapid changes are taking place in technology, creating both opportunities and threats for the Commonwealth’s many small states. For example, digital publishing could have an adverse effect on traditional publishers while at the same time it could open up new, cheaper possibilities for education such as technology-based distance learning, open learning, and the development of virtual knowledge repositories.

The impact and opportunities created by these new trends, and how they can best be harnessed to advance education in the Commonwealth, will be debated.

The sub-theme will also question whether or not multicultural education can be used as a positive force in building nations and encouraging social cohesion. Successes will be highlighted alongside the challenges that need to be overcome by governments and school authorities. The role that civil society can play will be discussed across all the sessions.

Stimulating debate and action towards education and beyond MDGs

We are now more than midway to the target date of 2015 for achievement of the MDGs. With some exceptions, the picture is not encouraging, reinforcing the conclusions of the UN Report published in September 2008.7

Recurring problems include the failure of conventional economic growth to relieve poverty, extreme regional disparities, inadequate spending on health and education, and insufficient aid.

Through the series of focused workshops under each of its sub-themes, the Stakeholders’ Forum aims to stimulate debate, and highlight successes as well as areas of concern. It will enable participants and policy-makers to take stock of success but, more importantly, to define ways of meeting education challenges.

The ultimate goal is to achieve recommendations that will influence and help ministers to formulate effective policies that will take the Commonwealth closer to achieving the education MDGs.

The Forum will create a positive environment for delegates to share a wealth of experiences, ideas and successes that will provide valuable learning for all.

Endnotes

4 Commonwealth Secretariat, http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/34040/34041/14251/0aids_in_the_commonwealth/
6 http://uk.oneworld.net/guides/bangladesh/development