

Fifty years on

Backwards and forwards in Commonwealth education



I have always believed in the Commonwealth, in the idea of a group of states with no military motives, brought together by shared principles, working jointly on practical programmes for human betterment in a multitude of fields. As an academic and an educational professional, obviously I have always had a conviction about the necessity of education. My starting point was the first Commonwealth Education conference, held in Oxford in 1959.

The Commonwealth is a new experiment in human relationship. It is founded on a belief in the worth and dignity of the human individual and a recognition of the value of freedom and cooperative action. The end of all our Commonwealth endeavour is the good life – material and spiritual – and the happiness of the 660 million individuals who are its citizens. The good life and happiness can only be attained through education in the deeper and wider sense ... Education is thus fundamental to the strength and stability of the Commonwealth, and to social justice and human dignity which must be its inspiration.

This declaration, from the Oxford conference report, still calls out fifty years on, when the peoples of the Commonwealth member states now number about 2 billion (including four of the world's nine most populous states – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria). It speaks to the nature of the Commonwealth – an organisation about *human relationship*, in which business is conducted with more courtesy and less formality than in many other international organisations. It reminds of the *underlying values* of the nations who belong to it. And it stands up for the *role of education* in underpinning the Commonwealth and its values. The report differs from present-day reports in that, although businesslike, it is not in a bureaucratic style and is perhaps more emotional than one of our modern reports would be! In some ways, though, it is quite modern – using non-sexist language quite surprising for that time.

From these beginnings, we have progressed over fifty years, holding in principle to those values, and engaging in co-operative action to forward education in all our countries. As an ordinary observer, I remain impressed by the way in which the education conferences have continued to work. Lionel Elvin commented on the 6th meeting in Jamaica in 1974 that there was an easy relationship between representatives of countries of all sizes, a genuine sharing of opinions and ideas and an atmosphere of collaboration. That collaboration and sharing of ideas has now attained a new dimension with the involvement, in the modern Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEMs), of

civil society representatives and a youth forum as an accepted part of the transactions.

One of the important developments of the past fifty years is undoubtedly the nurturing (often through the Commonwealth Foundation) of trans-Commonwealth civil society organisations, many with an educational focus. The Commonwealth Consortium for Education has 24 member bodies, including large-scale ones like the Association of Commonwealth Universities and small ones like the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit. The oldest member is the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers, founded in 1901, and one of the newest is the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth, set up in 2003.

Sharing experience and ideas has resulted, often with minimal resources, in some achievements in education of which the Commonwealth can be proud. Two key institutions have been the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships Programme – the historic result of the Oxford conference – and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) created in 1987. Both these have been about exchange and diffusion of knowledge and have worked more easily because the Commonwealth has a common working language. I greatly admire both these institutions.

Much of the value of Commonwealth education activity continues to be about generating innovative ideas for members to canvass. Among these have been an early recognition of gender issues, the idea of Science for All, a recurring concern for the status and education of teachers and, recently, flexible education for nomadic populations. The substantial publications programme by which many of these ideas have been diffused is often not well acknowledged; I can testify to their value as someone who often lived far away from a metropolis.

These are important aspects of Commonwealth education work. But there have been and still are ways in which the rhetoric about values has not stood up. One is the way in which education became less recognised in the other Commonwealth fora. It was a shock when one Secretary-General made a move to delete education from the work of the Secretariat, though interesting to see how civil society advocates changed his mind (and I think his heart as well); but also education figured quite seldom in the transaction of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), except in the Abuja meeting of 2003, with the Aso Rock declaration.

Secondly, there was the regrettable saga over foreign students' fees. As is well known, some of the rich countries of the

Commonwealth started charging international students 'full-cost' university fees, giving no preferential treatment to Commonwealth students. This was seen by many of the poorer members as a betrayal and a long and painful effort was made to sort matters out through the Standing Committee on Student Mobility and Higher Education Cooperation, which operated from 1981 to 1994. I was a member of this committee for a number of years and present at the last meeting, which we reported under the title 'The Final Frustration'.

The experience revealed upsetting flaws in the attitude of the richer members and a blindness to the purpose of student exchange, other than for money-making. Even at that time, however, the legacy of the committee lay in a number of other initiatives for higher education exchange – a testimony to the ultimate faith in the Commonwealth as an institution with a role in educational activity of all kinds.

What will it do in education in the future – fifty years on from the present? Immediately, there will continue to be economic strictures; and I believe there may be a need for the poorer Commonwealth countries to work to ensure that all who pledged funds for Education For All – the international agencies and the rich Commonwealth members – do not renege on those pledges. Because of their close working relationships, they could act as a very strong pressure group. This is crucial to the survival of many member states' educational ambitions. In the longer term and in hopes that the recession recedes, there are several lines of development.

My wish list would start within the Secretariat. It is extraordinary how much is done in Commonwealth education with such a tiny professional staff at its heart. In my observation over years, they have mostly been committed and highly competent people, but the demands made on them are burdensome. For such a small team to service the whole of the Commonwealth's educational programme, as well as major events such as the CCEMs is almost laughable, when one compares the size of the team to say a department in the European Union. This is hard to put forward in tight economic times, but I hope that in the future we could see double the number of education professionals in the Secretariat – perhaps with some of them stationed away from London.

What about programmes? Firstly, obviously one line of continuing development would be the further application of new technologies in education, already given a flying start by COL initiatives. Secondly, the world and the Commonwealth is committed to Universal Primary Education and it is a goal worth sticking to, although it might make sense to renegotiate some of the timescales. Thirdly, I would like to see a renewal of interest in the education of adults, especially given that the majority of illiterate adults are in Commonwealth countries. And finally, one of the reasons we have these rifts over such matters as student fees is that many people, even in high positions in many countries, rich and poor, know little about the Commonwealth. That was clearly one of the reasons for the British change of policy over the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). There are already some interesting experiments among young people with, for example, Commonwealth clubs and essay competitions about the organisation. Sustained education *about* the Commonwealth in all member countries would help us to come closer to the ideals of that ringing declaration of 1959.

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