

Small states' priorities

Learning from and across Commonwealth small states: Priorities for educational planning and research

 **Michael Crossley and Mark Bray**

Introduction

Among the Commonwealth's 53 member states, 30 have populations below 2.5 million and 23 of these have populations below a million. Small states therefore comprise over half of all member states. The Commonwealth has a strong mandate to give special attention to small states, and a considerable history of having done so.

In the education sector, a milestone in this work was a 1985 specialist meeting in Mauritius. The participants noted wide diversity in the societies, economies and geographies of the Commonwealth small states, but nevertheless identified commonalities arising from smallness and the need for approaches that differed from those suited to large states. The report of the meeting (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986, pp.5–6) noted that:

The style of educational development ... is too frequently modelled on what is appropriate and fashionable in large states. Small countries are not simply a scaled-down version of large countries. They have an ecology of their own. We believe that there is a cluster of factors which suggest particular strategies in the smaller states of the world.

The report analysed ways in which in the societies of small states might lack economies of scale, for example in providing specialist higher education. More positively, it noted that small states may have certain assets because they *are* states rather than just parts of larger entities. The report also considered the benefits and challenges of intimate societies, which have multiple overlapping relationships and in which it sometimes seems that everybody knows everybody else. The commentary included a focus on strategies for partnerships in which small states could address challenges in regional or other groupings, possibly with the collaboration of larger states.

New challenges and opportunities in the 21st century

A decade into the 21st century, partnerships are as important as they were in previous eras. In some respects, however, both contexts and modalities have changed. The increased intensity of globalisation is especially evident, which brings both challenges and opportunities. As noted by Bacchus (2008, p.141), getting the best from these developments is something that small states cannot do by themselves 'because they are usually "takers" rather than "makers" of the world economic policies'. The global economic crisis, which commenced at the end of 2008, has hit at least some

small states with disproportionate severity, especially those that relied heavily on the banking sector and tourism.

More positively, small states have greatly benefited from the technological advances associated with globalisation. Previous generations felt that small states were disadvantaged by a lack of ability to establish and maintain specialist libraries, for example, and to gain access to specialist professional advice. The internet has meant that a household or institution in a small state can have the same access through this medium as a household or institution in a large state. Moreover, small states are using technology to make links over vast areas. Perhaps especially exciting is the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), the seeds of which were sown during the 2000 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Halifax, Canada (West and Daniel, 2009). The initiative, which has been spearheaded by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), was launched in 2004 and within four years served 32 countries. The VUSSC is not so much an institution as a network. Various short courses at the post-secondary level have been prepared on such themes as tourism, fisheries, disaster management and construction.

Other changes over the decades have included expanded demand for education. As states achieve first universal primary education and then universal secondary education, demand increases for expansion of tertiary education. Further, expansion of tertiary education is widely considered very desirable in the global knowledge economy of which small states, like their larger counterparts, wish to be a part. Some of this demand for tertiary education is met by the private sector, and small states have been part of the significant shift of balance in this domain (Altbach and Levy, 2005; Raby and Valeau, 2009). This growth in tertiary education in small states has been facilitated not only by the rise of the internet but also by the advent of low-cost travel, which allows institutions to serve wider geographic areas. However, small states may also be vulnerable to entrepreneurs who aim to market sub-standard and fake credentials to larger states. The number of 'degree mills' seems to have greatly expanded, and such enterprises can damage the reputations of the host countries (Hallak and Poisson, 2008).

Educational planning and research priorities for small states

Such considerations highlight the demands set for planners in small states, who may need additional or to some extent different skills from their counterparts in larger states (Bray, 1992; Atchoarena,



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Currently, with a student population of about 36,000 (in the 2007/08 session), the University offers a range of programmes from the full-time certificate, diploma and degree programmes to part-time evening and weekend degree programmes. The University offers post-graduate studies up to a doctoral level. A staff/student counselling centre, an e-learning centre, student accommodation and sporting facilities amidst others are available support services.

Main Campus, Abraka

With three sites less than one kilometre apart, it houses the:

- Arts;
- College of Health Sciences (Dentistry, Basic Medical, Clinical, and Health Sciences Faculties);
- Education;
- Pharmacy;
- Post-Graduate School;
- Science; and
- Social Sciences.

Institutes

- Education;
- Information and Communication Technology; and
- Science Laboratory Technology.

Anwai-Asaba Campus

This campus is situated in the state capital Asaba and houses the Agriculture and Management Sciences Faculties.

Oleh Campus

This campus houses the Faculties of Law and Engineering.

Vision

To become a centre of excellence recognized as one of the leading Universities in Nigeria, in Africa and the world at large through teaching, research, scholarship, innovation, community service, and the dissemination of knowledge.

Mission

To promote quality education, character and cultural transformation, to meet the challenges of our time through exemplary scholarship and professionalism for the purpose of addressing local, national and international issues in key areas so as to contribute to the improvement of the global community.



Contact:

Professor John Okpako Enaohwo (Ph.D),
JP (F.N.I.M; M.N.A.E; M.I.P.M.)
Vice-Chancellor
Delta State University,
P.M.B. 1, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria.
Tel. +234 806 440 2503
Email: jeyannah@yahoo.com



For further information please contact:

Prof. Martin 'Gbemi Ogbe
Director Data Integration Services
Tel. +234 803 301 3825
E-mail: ogbegbemi@yahoo.co.uk

1993; Baldacchino and Farrugia, 2002). Planners need to provide strategies to benefit from the fact that small states are sovereign bodies, while handling the demands that this might bring for participation in international meetings and other events. Planners in small states may also need to be more multifunctional than their counterparts in larger states, who are more easily able to specialise in aspects such as curriculum, financing and aid negotiation. Small states may be more responsive to reform, since a single actor can have a greater proportionate influence than would be the case in a larger state; but this may also bring challenges of volatility if they are not carefully managed. Planners in small states may face stronger issues of dependency than their counterparts in larger states. These and other issues need further investigation in a range of contexts to identify commonalities across small states while also recognising the diversity arising from specific economic, cultural and socio-political contexts. Planners in small states may also benefit greatly from international networks and training programmes.

The research needs of small states may also have a wider focus as they may even touch upon the paradigms for research. Louisy (2001, pp.435–36) raised this matter from the perspective of the small Caribbean island of St Lucia:

It is not easy to avoid the dangers of 'uncritical international transfer' if one lacks the national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research or investigative enquiry necessary to 'customise' the experiences of others ... The region's continued dependence on external financing for its development projects further strengthens the control of the development agencies (many of whom find it easier to adopt a 'one size fits all' policy), making it extremely difficult to bring its own perspective to policy decisions taken on its behalf.

Small states will always be constrained in this domain, but one avenue to resolve the problem lies in collaboration with counterparts in larger states (Crossley, 2008, p.249).

It is in the light of the above issues and global developments that a team of researchers, from the specialist Education in Small States Research Group (www.smallstates.net) at the University of Bristol in the UK and UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Paris, is working in collaboration with educational personnel from small states worldwide. Building upon and extending the review by Crossley and Holmes (1999) of the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat in this domain, the team is examining the nature, impact and implications of changing global trends on educational policy and practice in the small states of the Commonwealth. The work involves a conceptual and theoretical reconsideration of the benefits and challenges of the small states' 'lens' and categorisation; original statistical work, drawing upon government and international surveys and databases; in-depth interviews with policy-makers, planners and practitioners within small states; consultative feedback processes; and theoretically informed and critical reviews of the related international literature. The work is designed to generate new knowledge in this arena, to inform future educational policy debates in small states, and to examine the case for new or strengthened co-operative initiatives for education in small states, notably for the Commonwealth Secretariat and other Commonwealth organisations.

Given the cross-cultural and contextual sensitivities stressed in this paper, the potential for such small states work is considered within

a framework that acknowledges how small states themselves have considerable differences. This work also recognises how improved understanding of similarities and differences can generate valuable insights that help to 'tutor our judgement' (Stenhouse, 1979, p.5) and promote mutually beneficial co-operation across small states. The implications of this form of analysis, for strengthening local research and evaluation capacity within and across Commonwealth small states, also deserve concerted attention by all engaged in education and international development co-operation within and beyond the Commonwealth.

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MICHAEL CROSSLEY is Professor of Comparative and International Education, joint Co-ordinator of the Research Centre for International and Comparative Studies at the Graduate School of Education, and Director of the Education in Small States Research Group (www.smallstates.net), University of Bristol, UK.

MARK BRAY is Director of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Paris. Prior to taking this post in 2006, he was Chair Professor of Comparative Education and Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong.