

Education and the Commonwealth: saving the jewel in the crown

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The context of this brief essay is the Secretary-General's proposal that education should cease to be regarded as a priority area for Commonwealth Secretariat work and that current work and posts in this area should be phased out; that the Secretariat should in future concentrate on just six areas: peace-building and democracy; governance and the rule of law; human rights; economic affairs and trade; environment and sustainable development; and youth development.

Commonwealth educational co-operation has been supported by a secretariat in Marlborough House for over 50 years. The Commonwealth Education Liaison Unit (CELU), created in 1960, preceded the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965. Indeed the second Commonwealth Secretary-General, Sir Shridath Ramphal, reflecting on 50 years of Commonwealth educational co-operation in 2009, claimed that 'Education was in fact the crucible in which Commonwealth functional co-operation was moulded' and that when the Secretariat was established it 'did not just take over the work (already started by the first three Commonwealth Education Conferences) in education – that work paved the way for the Secretariat and for extensive Commonwealth co-mingling beyond education'.

Well before the start of official co-operation – with the first Commonwealth Education Conference, the launch of Commonwealth Scholarships and the creation of CELU – professional and institutional networks linking Commonwealth education systems had been established. The forerunners of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the Commonwealth Education Trust, the League for Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (now alas defunct) and the Royal Commonwealth Society all came into existence a century or more ago. It is no accident that Commonwealth interchange and co-operation started with education, given the symmetries and linkages between its education systems and the importance of education for personal advancement and institutional capacity-building in new states. Mobility and exchange in the education sector has been at the same time a cause and a consequence of the movement of peoples and the continuing personal and professional links that lie at the heart of the Commonwealth connection.

The strength of Commonwealth infrastructure in education

Commonwealth infrastructure in education is far more extensive than in any other field. Apart from the Secretariat's education team, a huge and vibrant resource is represented by the

Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), Commonwealth civil society (where up to two dozen active organisations have co-operated through the Commonwealth Consortium for Education), Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and Commonwealth Education Trust. The Commonwealth small states in the Caribbean and the Pacific share regional universities and exam boards. There are extensive networks of university partnerships and school links as well as extensive commercial ties in publishing, examining bodies, consultancies and the like. Individual member states invest in the region of £30 million per annum in the CSFP alone – as much as in the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation. It cannot be said that the Secretariat has fully understood, appreciated or proactively nurtured this substantial resource in recent years.

You would think that the depth and breadth of the Commonwealth resource in education constituted 'comparative advantage' of the first order. The Commonwealth has accumulated enviable collaborative structures and a wealth of experience through ACU, COL, CSFP and Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEMs). It would be perverse to look on this well-developed infrastructure not as a major comparative advantage that could be drawn upon to assure the quality of the Secretariat's own work but rather as a reason to withdraw from the field.

Why 'sunset' education?

How has such an extraordinary recommendation to member governments come into the realm of entertainable options, within only ten months of the Eminent Persons Group choosing as the title of its report 'A Commonwealth of the People' (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2011)? Wouldn't 'the people' put education and health (which is also on the closure list) at, or close to, the top of their priorities for collective action? Not only 'the people' but also their governments have strongly affirmed the central place of education in development and Commonwealth activity: this has at least been true whenever the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) has been hosted by the government of a developing country over the last decade – as the extracts from the Abuja (2003), Kampala (2007) and Port of Spain (2009) CHOGM communiqués attest (see Box 1).

Some Commonwealth countries (e.g. The Gambia, Kenya) have populations so young that in 2010 more than half their people were aged under 20. The ratio of people aged under 25 to those 25 and over is 31:69 in the UK (i.e. for every young person in

Britain there are 2.2 adults) and 33:67 in Australia (1 young person to 2 adults). Contrast these ratios with 47:53 in Jamaica (roughly 1:1.1) 56:44 in Tonga (1:0.8), 57:43 in Pakistan (1:0.75), 59:41 in Ghana (1:0.7), and 63:37 in Kenya and The Gambia (1:0.6). Effectively Australia and the UK have three or four times as many adults to support the education and health of each child and young person as do The Gambia and Kenya. Education is overwhelmingly important in Commonwealth developing countries and engages a high proportion of their populations as students, teachers and associated workers.

Commonwealth countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are also among those with the furthest to go in attaining the Education for All goals of universal primary completion, gender equality and literacy for all. Nigeria is the country with the most out-of-school children (11 million) followed in second place by Pakistan and in fourth place by India. The Commonwealth accounts for more than half the world's illiterates, with India alone being home to 35 per cent of them. And even those Commonwealth countries performing

Box 1

Commonwealth commitments to education

Three golden threads beyond all others bind Commonwealth countries together: language, law and learning. Education is not the least of them.

Sir Shridath Ramphal in his 2009 Address, 'Education: Jewel in the Commonwealth's crown'

We affirm that education, whether formal or informal, is central to development in any society and is of the highest priority to the Commonwealth. In an increasingly divided and insecure world, education must play a crucial role for people, both young and old, for them to optimise their opportunities and to bridge divides.

Commonwealth Heads of Government in the Aso Rock Declaration 2003

Heads of Government reaffirmed the fundamental role played by education in facilitating social and economic transformation.

Para 61, CHOGM Kampala Communiqué 2007

Heads of Government noted with concern the effect of the global economic downturn on social sectors such as education, particularly in developing countries and small states, acknowledging that education provides a fundamental tool for self-improvement and national development, and is a basic human right ... They stressed the need to embrace an integrated and holistic vision of education systems, as encapsulated in the theme of 17CCEM, Malaysia, June 2009, 'Education in the Commonwealth: Towards and beyond global goals and targets' ... [T]hey acknowledged the vital role that education can play in conflict prevention and resolution, and requested the Secretariat to explore options to strengthen its education work programme on Respect and Understanding.

Port of Spain CHOGM Communiqué 2009



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well against the global benchmarks tend to suffer serious quality shortfalls with large classes, high drop-out rates and low levels of performance on tests of competence.

So one cannot help wondering if developing countries will support proposals that seem to have been written more from the perspective of London and Canberra than Lusaka and Colombo. The perspective on poverty, employment, illiteracy and digital deprivation may look very different from the latter.

Most knowledgeable observers would agree that, in relation to the resources at its disposal, the Secretariat has been spreading its efforts too widely and that streamlining is necessary. But why pick on central areas of human development such as education and health as prime targets for cutbacks? In the case of education, my own interpretation, for what it is worth, would be that:

- The Secretariat has allowed the balance between democracy and development in its work to get out of kilter, underplaying the important consideration that development is necessary for democracy to flourish. This looks like an 'ABC' (Australia, Britain, Canada) agenda. Whether developing country members of the Commonwealth will agree that two 'developmental areas' only – economic affairs and trade and environment and sustainable development – constitute a sufficient counterweight in future Secretariat work to peace-building and democracy, governance and the rule of law and human rights remains to be seen. (The sixth proposed focus area – youth development – is also

depicted as being as much about politics as about equipping youth to earn a livelihood).

- The Secretariat has a silo structure that obstructs co-operation across sectors. The relevance of education to the promotion of democracy and human rights, to economic development, to 'respect and understanding' agendas (spelled out explicitly in the report itself), to environmental sustainability and to youth development is obvious, but rarely reflected in Secretariat operations.
- There has been misunderstanding of where the Commonwealth's comparative advantage in education lies. This is not in concentrating on service delivery at one particular level of education but is in identifying salient emerging issues across the education sector and working with member countries to find productive ways forward in addressing them.
- A Secretariat whose senior ranks are made up of people from backgrounds of diplomacy, politics and economics – but lacking in scientists and other academic and professional specialists – will always be liable to underestimate the importance of human development, science and technology and professional expertise in applied fields.
- The 2011 Report of the Eminent Persons Group hardly helped (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2011). With its title of 'A Commonwealth of the People', it might have been expected to



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focus attention on the human development dimension of Commonwealth programmes and connections. Yet it confines its educational references to just two themes: the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan and the CCEMs. One searches in vain for evidence of an awareness of the breadth and depth of Commonwealth education links and infrastructure, or for recognition of the valuable work of COL.

The future programme of work

The challenge facing the Secretariat is to develop a forward strategy. Governments should therefore focus on need and potential over the medium and long term and not be distracted by short-term deficiencies of a particular department or programmes. I can attest from personal experience of working in the Secretariat that the Commonwealth is not fated to be ineffective in education. In the 1980s and 1990s, we undertook the staff work for development of COL, pioneered work on integrated human resource development, established a Commonwealth Higher Education Support Scheme with its highly regarded Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service and programmes on career advancement for women academics, and pioneered work on education in small states and teacher management and support that other international agencies were later to emulate.

Secretariat abandonment of its education functions would indeed be quite bizarre in the context of its overall objectives. Education is a fundamental ingredient of any serious effort to promote democracy or to advance development. All the talk today is of 'knowledge societies' and 'skills for development'. The Commonwealth Secretariat website cites the Secretary-General himself: 'Higher education crucial to meeting the MDGs ... it is where the real skills and real motors for development are born.'² Education and skill development are also central to small states' efforts to achieve viable economies. The Commonwealth through the Secretariat and CFTC, COL, the Virtual University for Small States of the Caribbean (VUSSC) and CSFP continues to play a major role in support of these efforts and is seen as the small states' champion in the area of education. And if a focus on youth is rightly a priority in Commonwealth programmes, in practical terms this concern must start from a recognition that the main occupation/preoccupation of young people is education and the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Promoting equitable international relations in the education sector

In addition, there is a whole host of key international issues affecting 'the world education order' and power relations in education where the Secretariat should be intervening on behalf of its member states to promote accommodation of different interests, and where it should be helping to broker agreements and protocols that promote an equitable international relations in the education sector. These responsibilities cannot be shuffled off on to voluntary bodies or private businesses, which lack the appropriate mandates and in some instances have their own business self-interest in the outcomes. Such areas include:

- Adoption of global targets for education and mobilisation of supporting international resources.
- Brain drain and the poaching of skills.
- Equivalences and mutual recognition of qualifications.
- Student and teacher mobility and safeguarding of the rights of mobile students and teachers.
- Consumer protection for students on educational programmes offered across borders.
- General Agreement on Trade in Services in relation to education and the regulation of predatory practices by multinational corporations.
- Copyright and licensing of educational materials, and the promotion of open education resources.
- Education of refugees and displaced persons.
- In future, perhaps, co-operation on recovery of student loans from graduate migrants.

In short, the Secretariat may not be in the business of mass delivery but, by the same token, it is uniquely well placed to critique over-simplified (and compromised) global education agendas on behalf of those who are marginalised by them.

Foremost among these with the rapidly changing role of the state are questions concerning state/non-state relations in education. Where should the boundaries lie between enablement and incentives on the one hand and regulation of private and voluntary education provision on the other? What controls over mushrooming private universities are appropriate and how can systems of primary, secondary and tertiary education with different state, faith-based and private proprietary institutions best be supervised and co-ordinated? What models of regulation have Commonwealth partners found to be most effective? In such areas, with the right professional expertise, the Secretariat could be of real service to its members.

The role of the Commonwealth of Learning

The Paper hints that COL might be a candidate to assume the mantle of the Secretariat in the field of education. COL is an admirable and effective institution that has developed world-renowned expertise in its own special area. But it has had a different mandate from the Secretariat and a number of different issues would need to be resolved. For example:

- Education policy is inextricably linked to politics and economics and, at the international level, to diplomacy. If these last three functions remain with the Secretariat, can education sensibly be hived off to another agency?
- COL could clearly not take on additional functions without extra resources and more staff. Will these resources be forthcoming? And if so, from where?
- Can COL's capacity to fulfil its existing mandate and its special identity be protected or might these suffer dilution?



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- Given COL's location – with an 8-hour time difference from London, 8–11 hours from sub-Saharan Africa and 12–13 hours from Delhi and Islamabad – can the entire gamut of official educational collaboration operate easily and effectively from Vancouver (not a capital city, with attendant diplomatic representations) or would it have to open an office in London?
- It does not seem that COL itself has been adequately respected and consulted – either on this particular proposal or indeed at recent CCEMs and CHOGMs on all the wider issues.

Conclusion

Finally and most obviously, serious damage to the Commonwealth's sense of identity, not to speak of its external reputation and image, will be triggered by any proposal that the Secretariat should divest itself of its education functions. Will Commonwealth associations in education see their own credibility and mission as having been irretrievably undermined? What message will young people glean from the news that the 'Commonwealth of Peoples' has lost interest in education? Will the public as a whole begin to understand why the Commonwealth is seemingly throwing over the legacy of solid achievement built up over decades, a record that Sir Shridath Ramphal (2009) has properly described as the very 'jewel in the Commonwealth crown'?

References

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Endnotes

- ¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author in a personal capacity.
- ² See: <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/news/190663/163077/222861/230410sharmaacuhighereducation.htm>

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