Learning from Commonwealth small states

Educational policies and priorities beyond 2015

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Introduction

For all those involved in education development in small states, Mauritius is a particularly significant location for the 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (18CCEM). In 1985, Mauritius hosted a seminal Commonwealth meeting in which key individuals concerned about small states convened for the first time to collaborate in the development of a pan-Commonwealth strategic programme for educational development (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986; Bacchus and Brock, 1987). The influence and impact of this meeting continues to this day, in the work of the Commonwealth and beyond, and it is to the potential outcomes of recent and ongoing developments that we turn here.

In the *2011/12 Commonwealth Education Partnerships* volume (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2011), we reported on the publication of research initiated at the 17CCEM that was designed to identify and analyse emergent educational policies and priorities in Commonwealth small states (Crossley et al., 2011). In the present article, we consider the implications of that study for all Commonwealth member states beyond 2015. In doing so, we demonstrate how the experience of small states in the development of their education systems and practice has much to offer the wider international community.

Full circle: from Mauritius to Mauritius

The influence of the 1985 pan-Commonwealth meeting of experts on education in small states is widely recognised in the international literature and among related stakeholder communities (Bray and

Packer, 1993; Atchoarena, 1993). In the years following, a sequence of national and regional consultative meetings and workshops led to the production of a series of Commonwealth reports, books, training materials and activities that provided direct support for Ministries of Education and the strengthening of educational policy and practice across Commonwealth small states (see, for example, Baldacchino and Farrugia, 2002). Details of the nature and scope of this material, along with an assessment of its impact, were presented in a 1999 review published by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Crossley and Holmes, 1999).

The more recent study carried out by our own team brings the story up to date, identifies major changes, and re-assesses the nature and extent of educational policy priorities in Commonwealth small states.

Changing priorities and emergent themes: looking beyond 2015

In carrying out the research that informed our 2011 publication, the greatest emphasis was given to identifying and reporting educational and development priorities as seen and experienced by those working in small states. At the broadest level, this revealed that while much of the earlier conceptual, theoretical and professional work on education in small states remains pertinent for today, 'contemporary priorities are especially concerned with how small states can respond to major external shocks and challenges within the environmental, economic, cultural and political domains' (Crossley et al., 2011, p. xviii).

It was also clear that many small states were 'relatively advanced in their progress towards basic education goals and targets' (p. xviii). They were often among the first to 'extend the boundaries' of the Education For All (EFA) agenda, and to pioneer initiatives relating to issues of quality improvement and equity. In addition, this included keenly felt priorities for strengthening skills training and tertiary education, often through harnessing new technologies for distance and flexible learning.

While the details of these emergent patterns, including case studies of innovative practice, are available in the publication itself, here we wish to reflect upon the overall nature and trajectory of this experience in the light of what others, within and beyond the Commonwealth, can learn for the future. The year 2015 is a major benchmark and target for the EFA objectives and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and policy-makers, planners and analysts are already looking to what lies beyond (Barrett, 2011; UNESCO, 2012).

Commonwealth small states

The Commonwealth classes 32 of its member countries as small states, adopting a broad definition that includes, alongside countries with a population of less than 1.5 million, those larger states that share many similar characteristics – Botswana, The Gambia, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia and Papua New Guinea. Small states thus comprise over half of the total membership. Within the group, most are at the lower end of the population scale: 28 have populations below 2 million, 22 have populations below 1 million, and 13 have populations below 250,000. The Commonwealth thus has a strong mandate to give special attention to small states, and a considerable history of having done so.

Since many small states have long held an extended conceptualisation of basic education, and have necessarily looked beyond EFA and MDG parameters, they have generated a great deal of insight and original experience in policy arenas from which other countries and systems, which are now moving in similar directions, can learn. Key examples include:

- Experience relating to the quality and cultural relevance of basic education (Thaman, 1993; Degazon-Johnson, 2003; Moeaki, 2008).

- Caribbean expertise in attending to gender issues concerning boys' underachievement (Jha and Kelleher 2006; Bailey, 2009; DeLisle et al., 2010).

- Innovative work on education for sustainable development in Pacific island nations (Nabobo-Baba et al., 2007; Koya et al., 2010).

- New developments in tertiary education (Martin and Bray, 2011; Louisy and Crossley, 2011).

- Extensive experience of the small states of the South Pacific and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) in distance and flexible learning (West and Daniel, 2009; Chandra et al., 2011).

One further area for priority attention for the post-2015 debate is workforce mobility and migration in an ever-globalising world. Small states have much to contribute to these debates, particularly regarding the effects of brain drain and brain rotation (Baldacchino, 2006). This kind of mobility has increased as small states have progressively participated in the global knowledge economy

(Bacchus, 2008).The Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol (CTRP) discussed elsewhere in this volume of CEP (see articles by Penson; Ochs and Yonemura) is a clear example of larger states learning from the experience of small states.

All Commonwealth member states and the wider international community can learn much from small states about the importance of contextual differences in both educational policy development and implementation. The 'question of scale' helps greatly in demonstrating the limitations of simplistic educational policy transfer, or 'borrowing/replicating best practice', from one context to another. At the same time, the small state experience shows how they have much in common with each other, and much to benefit from the support of the 'Commonwealth factor' and from ongoing Commonwealth partnerships and collaborations within and between regions.

Connecting cultures and working together

As a group, Commonwealth small states can be justly proud of their educational achievements. What is evident from our own collaborative research is that they should not only showcase these achievements but also strengthen their creative and analytic capacities. This can benefit not only the small states themselves but also other Commonwealth states and beyond.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has done much to support existing analysis, and it has the comparative advantage to do more. By connecting cultures, listening to a diversity of needs and working together, the Commonwealth continues to demonstrate why

A broader canvas for small states

As recently as two decades ago, some small state analysts felt that, in spite of their numbers, the world community had not yet thought its way through the phenomenon of small states. Indeed, former Commonwealth Secretary-General, Sir Shridath Ramphal, believed that for the most part small states were ignored, imposed upon and generally discounted. Vulnerability and openness were the international community's mantras whenever the circumstances of small states were discussed.

Their achievements in fashioning appropriate, workable and affordable responses to the challenges of scale were dismissed by some as making a virtue out of necessity. While it was universally acknowledged that small states have an ecology of their own, the unspoken understanding was that this could not be compared, or at least not favourably, with that of large states. The idea of learning from the South – particularly the small South – was not always palatable or popular.

The educational priorities of the majority of Commonwealth small states are no longer simply the provision of basic education or universal primary education (UPE), or to increase access to education for girls. Today's priorities also encompass a broader canvas relating to the potential for cross-sectoral and sustainable development. This involves how to incorporate the realities of climate change, migration and global interconnectedness in financial services, for example, into the school curriculum; how to

equip citizens to respond to these new economic, environmental, cultural and political challenges within their own societies and in the wider world; how to provide quality higher education opportunities in the face of growing national indebtedness; and how to take advantage of the knowledge-based economy and be competitive in service-based markets.

With the help of new information and communications technologies, small states are continuing to use more and more sophisticated arrangements to deal with the increasingly complex challenges of the new world order. But they are by no means out of the woods yet, as the 2011 study demonstrates in its analysis of the gaps that need to be filled and the imbalances between what small states need in order for them to respond meaningfully to changing global realities and the opportunities that present themselves to meet these needs. The challenges are many, the speed at which they present themselves is unrelenting, as the not-so-level playing field shifts and the goal posts keep moving. Against this backdrop, to simply continue to ask small states to implement outward-oriented development strategies and diversify the structure of their economies not only calls on them to take on a task of herculean proportions, but condemns them to a fate not far removed from that of Sisyphus.

Pearlette Louisy, Extract from Education in Small States *(Crossley et al., 2011)*

Photo: Commonwealth Secretariat

Teacher training in small states – Brunei is debating new learner-centred approaches

sustainable international development prospers best in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect (Sen, 2007). From the small states perspective, this distinctive spirit of Commonwealth education partnerships is invaluable, for while they continue to seek and benefit from external collaboration and assistance, 'they know best what their own needs are and what their priorities should be. They have much to contribute to international discourse and to policy deliberations worldwide' (Louisy, 2011, p.xv).

Acknowledgement

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