

Making the leap

Expanding secondary education in the Commonwealth

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While notable successes in basic education enrolments over the last decade are being cautiously applauded in light of the fact that 61 million children are still not in primary school (UIS, 2012), the importance of expanding secondary education has now also become a focus. The arguments for this are persuasively straightforward: first, secondary education is also a fundamental right and gives young people the skills that are vital for well-being, employment opportunities and achievement; second, it is crucial to the cycle that reproduces the education system itself, such as through the preparation of qualified teachers and other professionals needed within its structures; and third, basic education alone cannot deliver the overarching outcomes on which countries depend for successful human development and economic growth.

The terminology used to describe different cycles and streams of secondary education varies from country to country, but in its simplest form secondary education can be defined as an education level between primary education and higher education/employment, where pupils enter as children and depart as young adults (16–18) ready to enter higher learning or start looking for work and to become responsible citizens¹.

Globally, the number of adolescents outside the formal education system has been declining and was calculated at just below 74 million in 2008, albeit with large regional variations (UNESCO, 2011). Yet, despite the ambitious commitments of the Dakar Framework for Action to address the learning needs of young people and adults, these arguably lacked sufficient detail. This has led to an absence of quantifiable targets and, consequently, a lack of rigour in monitoring progress. This, in turn, has led to weakened scrutiny of government actions and commitments in this area (UNESCO, 2011). In addition, many Commonwealth countries have been understandably prioritising the push to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), within which universal primary education (UPE) was the focus. As a result, while primary school enrolment rates are now much higher, the same commitment has yet to extend to secondary schooling (*ibid.*).

Commonwealth overview

For the Commonwealth, making the leap towards full-fledged support for secondary education will come with a plethora of national and regional nuances. However, in general, there is a consistency among developing country members in having much lower enrolments at the upper secondary level. To some extent this reflects progress towards universal basic education (UBE), which in

many countries includes grades in lower secondary education². There are, however, significant disparities between Commonwealth regions, with member countries in Africa and South Asia more likely to find the push towards universalising secondary education the biggest challenge.

Disparities within regions are also evident. For example, in the Pacific small states, Tonga has 103 per cent gross enrolment ratio (GER) for all secondary grades, Samoa has 76 per cent and Solomon Islands has 35 per cent (UNESCO, 2011). Interestingly, gender trends within these varied GERs appear to either show relative parity between the sexes or in some cases a disparity against boys. A further trend in the available data shows that countries with good lower secondary access rates are struggling with transitions to upper secondary.

In the Caribbean, the median GER for total secondary is 97.5 per cent, with Antigua and Barbuda having the highest rate at 114 per cent (UNESCO, 2011). As with the Pacific, when the GER is disaggregated between upper and lower secondary, issues with retention and transition are implicit between these levels. Meanwhile, of the seven Commonwealth Caribbean countries that had a gender parity index (GPI) available, six had higher girls' enrolment rates.

Most South Asian countries have problems with offering universal secondary education. The average enrolment rate in the region is 54 per cent and gender parity sits at 0.87, a figure that is bolstered by Maldives with a GER at 84 per cent, substantially higher than other Commonwealth South Asian countries (UNESCO, 2011). Maldives has a literacy rate of 98 per cent for both females and males as of 1998 (COL, 2012). This has been attributed to a number of factors, including the fast expansion of secondary education and secondary teacher education across the country, as well as the development of pathways through its university and tertiary education provider (Azza, 2008). Otherwise, secondary enrolment rates in the region range from Pakistan at 33 per cent to India at 57 per cent, with Bangladesh in the middle at 44 per cent (UNESCO, 2011). The statistics here show some complexity: while the percentages overall are low, the drop at the upper secondary level is more significant, with all three countries almost halving their access rates at transition. Gender disparity against girls is also a concern for India and Pakistan.

Sub-Saharan Africa has struggled to increase secondary education numbers. This is partly because population growth has counteracted increases in secondary school enrolment (UNESCO, 2011). Behind the regional averages are large inequalities between

countries, with attendance patterns strongly linked to wealth, parental education and other factors (ibid.). A few anomalies exist, including Seychelles and Mauritius, which have had huge changes in policy and resulting successes in education in their recent history. Additionally, Botswana has a high enrolment rate at 80 per cent, near gender parity and a competitive pupil-teacher ratio at 14 pupils to every teacher. This is somewhat surprising since secondary school is neither free nor compulsory, two factors that have been attributed to secondary school enrolment success elsewhere³.

More typically, Commonwealth African countries are likely to find ensuring quality provision the hardest, partly because, although the greatest acceleration in primary enrolments has been made within the continent as a whole, that endeavour in itself has been a taxing one. In Nigeria, 2008 enrolment data at the secondary level show GER at just 30 per cent (UNESCO, 2011). Although Kenya shows an impressive performance in lower secondary at 93 per cent – no doubt reflecting the country's successes in enrolment with UBE – by upper secondary, the GER has dropped significantly to 40 per cent (ibid.). Sub-Saharan Africa also has the lowest gender parity among Commonwealth regions.

Challenges and considerations

Many factors need consideration when appraising the challenges that young people face as they struggle to access and stay in secondary education. Among these are incomplete universalising of primary education, challenges associated with internal inequalities that already affect UPE, and the associated drawbacks of poor quality and standards.

Incomplete UPE

Countries face ongoing challenges with fulfilling and sustaining UPE, making the expansion of secondary education an ambitious prospect. Africa and South Asia in particular will have to grapple with increasing and maintaining numbers at both levels.

The Caribbean and the Pacific regions have their own regional and national specificities to contend with. For example, regression in UPE in some countries – such as Dominica where primary net enrolment ratios (NER) dropped from 94 per cent in 1999 to 74 per cent in 2008 (UNESCO, 2011) – has led to secondary education expansion not delivering as had been hoped. An overflow of unprepared pupils in lower secondary – bringing back those who had previously dropped out at primary – only leads to further drop-outs as students struggle academically to move up the system. Similarly, there is a need to focus on policies and programming that aid transition and retention to secondary education in Samoa, where stable primary enrolment rates are not converting beyond basic education and drop-out among students is a major issue.

Equity issues

As with UPE, expanding secondary education is compounded by challenges that ultimately stem from inequities related to poverty, rural/urban divides, gender, and other types of marginalisation. These of course vary between and within nations, but the consistent rural/urban divide is one that is relatively ubiquitous in the Commonwealth's developing regions, albeit with different levels of gravity and nuance. Africa and South Asia face challenges associated with extreme poverty; in many cases, the growth in



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urban poverty will be a further obstacle, as will the delivery of education in emergency and conflict situations. These circumstances are compounded for those living in rural and remote areas with no access to basic services – a situation that is also keenly felt by those living in geographically remote parts of Pacific member countries. Throughout the Commonwealth, the most marginalised communities and groups – from pastoralist populations to pupils with special needs/disabilities – need to be specially targeted by any secondary expansion initiative.

Where gender is concerned, just as the drive for primary education has been heavily characterised by a focus on girls, so secondary expansion will likely need to have a girl-child/adolescent girl focus. In sub-Saharan Africa the gender gap is significant at the upper secondary level, with 8 million boys enrolled compared to 6 million girls (UIS, 2011). Girls also face significant barriers in South Asia, although the situation is improving. However, this trend is far from uniform throughout the Commonwealth, with drop-out rates at the primary and secondary level in some countries connected to boys' underachievement (see, for example, Jha and Kelleher, 2006).

Quality

Perhaps most crucial to any secondary expansion drive is quality. UPE and UBE have arguably suffered where there has been a trade-off in this area, leaving many countries fire-fighting new challenges at those levels, in turn hampering any serious plans to expand secondary education provision. Integral factors within the quality debate include qualified teacher provision and management and effective quality assurance systems that can monitor and bring accountability to all other areas from curricula and examinations to monitoring and evaluation.

Global figures show that the number of secondary school teachers actually rose by 50 per cent between 1990 and 2009, from 20.3 million to 30.4 million (UIS, 2011). This increase is significant, particularly as it is larger than that of primary teachers in the same period. However, severe shortages persist, alongside composition, qualifications and salary issues of teaching workforces. Quality challenges in other areas are also achieving greater focus, particularly as secondary expansion initiatives gain momentum. Ultimately, the quality issue takes the debate back full circle to the realities of unconsolidated UPE (see Box 1).

Box 1

Transition to secondary level: examples of challenges

In Uganda, where the government introduced universal secondary education in 2007, issues surrounding capacity and quality at the secondary level have meant that only one in four children can go on to secondary school because of a lack of places (PEAS, 2010). Similarly, increases in secondary access in India are hampered by poor quality and competency levels of primary education that are being tested only at the secondary level through the state-wide or nation-wide examinations, with large number of students promoted to the next class based only on attendance (without considering the competency levels); this, in turn, gets reflected in very low completion and success rates (Geetha Rani, 2007).

Taking the agenda forward: policy and practice

Commitments towards universalising secondary education (such as extending the removal of fees to this level) are still far from widespread globally and within the Commonwealth. Robust policies still need to be developed in many countries, though initiatives exist, such as the World Bank's Secondary Education in Africa (SEIA) initiative, which has been working towards the development and improvement of national strategies for secondary education and training within the overall post-primary strategy of individual countries (World Bank, n.d.).

But policy formulation alone does not translate into results, with success reliant on a strategic commitment towards effective implementation and increased funding. Arguably, countries need to provide more diversified pathways of learning that respond better to their economic and social needs for growth and human development (World Bank, 2008). Many countries may need to revisit the relevance of their post-primary structures in the larger context of these national development goals, ensuring that secondary expansion sits within a multi-sectoral overview.

Conclusions

Despite the varied experiences and capacities in the membership, expanding secondary education is very much a Commonwealth priority and one for which governments are going to need major support if the Commonwealth is to fulfil its social, economic and political aspirations. Many countries are struggling with expanding and sustaining secondary education even when primary-to-lower-secondary transition initiatives have been relatively successful. Regions will need different approaches: the Commonwealth Caribbean and Pacific, where secondary enrolments are generally higher due to longer experience of UPE, present an opportunity for addressing transition bottlenecks. Many South Asian and African countries must complete and consolidate recent efforts in UPE and UBE while also responding to the increasing pressure for universal secondary education. Overall, expansion drives alone will not be enough to achieve sustainability; the quality imperative must work in tandem with speed and volume. A whole system approach will be needed, with simultaneous quality improvement programmes at both primary and secondary levels.

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Endnotes

- 1 Definition taken and partially augmented from Caillods (2010).
- 2 Variances in the classification of upper and lower secondary between countries means that the ages of pupils when they transition between these two levels differ depending on country context. However, upper secondary can be broadly categorised as when a young person enters adolescence at around 13 or 14.
- 3 This could be due in part to international drives to recruit Western teachers to Botswana as well as the country's lucrative relationship with mining companies. Out of every US\$5 made from the DeBeers Botswana partnership, \$4 remains in Botswana (see Lute, 2003).

The views expressed in this work are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

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