

Promoting excellence in education through Commonwealth teacher exchange

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The unique value of the Commonwealth is that it is ideally placed to share expertise, resources and best practices in education as a vital component in attaining the individual and collective goals and aspirations for countries (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004).

One of the advantages of the Commonwealth is the pivotal role accorded to education, arising from countries sharing similar values, principles and traditions. The many Commonwealth organisations, agencies, professional networks and civil society organisations active in the area of education represent an immensely valuable asset. The Commonwealth also has very strong traditions of sharing resources and expertise, creating platforms for collaboration, partnership and action in order to help bridge gaps in attaining education for all. Indeed, education has always been seen as important for our 'common future' and for the future of

the Commonwealth itself. Arguably, the Commonwealth's potential to promote change in the wider world as it seeks to be a greater collective force for growth, good governance and global consensus-making springs from the foundation stone of education.

At the core of all of this is a belief in the value of academic and professional interchange, as well as youth, student and knowledge mobility (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2000). Commonwealth Education Ministers have long recognised the crucial link between opportunities to develop teachers' skills and professionalism and the improvement of achievement among students:

The pivotal role of teachers should be strengthened through project activities that focus on teacher training and development, as well as enhancing the status, professionalism and motivation of the most vital component of the education system (ibid.).



Australian exchange teachers and their children at the Commonwealth Day Service, Westminster Abbey (2012)

The challenge of the global future

Many schools include in their mission statements a phrase about 'preparing students to become global citizens'. There is recognition that, given the interconnectivity of nations and the importance of the global economy and trade, young people will need to possess a high level of global understanding and be able to exchange ideas and work successfully with people around the world. Teachers throughout the Commonwealth therefore need to be able to prepare their students for a global future. But there is a problem. How can teachers properly prepare students to be informed, productive members of a global society if they themselves are not confident about their skills and knowledge of the world outside the boundaries of their schools and wider society? Clearly, teachers must also be engaged in an exchange of ideas with colleagues around the globe and given the opportunity to expand their own horizons as educators.

Additionally, if the Education for All target of universal primary education is to be met, it is essential that teachers are appropriately trained in order to allow them to employ the strategies necessary to reach this important goal, and in particular that they are able to observe at first hand the approaches other countries and teachers have used in, for example, promoting literacy and challenging educational exclusion.

Continuing professional development

Looking back over a decade of final communiqués from previous conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers, a consistent message has been a concern with improving the quality of education and the vital links to leadership in education and with continuing professional development (CPD) for primary and secondary school teachers:

There is little point in providing access to education if the quality of the education delivered by the teacher is not all that it could be, perhaps through a lack of focus on professional development. The continuing professional development of teachers was identified as a key element in ensuring quality in educational systems. It was seen as important for teachers to recognise that CPD is a prerequisite of their professional careers and as part of the battle against ignorance and poverty. It was recognised, also, that the Commonwealth has a key role to play in supporting this (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004).

Teacher exchange programmes and study visits provide an important element to schools' CPD opportunities. They can be a more relevant, practical, intensive and cost-efficient method of professional development than other mechanisms. A small UK research study concluded that:

Teacher exchange can be a worthwhile, fulfilling and cost-effective alternative to the more traditional forms of in-service training, and one which offers significant benefits to the school and the education service in terms of a more motivated teaching force with a broader perspective of the profession in which they work, and hence more receptive to organisational change. Exchange was found to be particularly valuable for teachers in mid-career who did not seek or were not destined for further promotion (Stringman, 1989).

The Commonwealth Teacher Exchange Programme

One of the oldest interchange schemes in the world is the Commonwealth Teacher Exchange Programme (CTEP). With origins dating back to 1916 (see Box 1), the programme has been designed to enhance mutual understanding, strengthen education relations and provide a mutual opportunity for professional and personal development for Commonwealth teachers. The aim of the programme is to contribute to excellence in education through developing, promoting and supporting:

- International educator exchanges
- International collaboration and linking
- Sharing experience and good practice
- Enhancement of the professional status of teachers.

This is being achieved via one-year and one-term fully reciprocal post-to-post exchanges, study visits and work-shadowing programmes. Countries that have participated have included Australia, Canada and the UK since the earliest times, but also India, Jamaica, Malawi, New Zealand and South Africa as well as non-Commonwealth countries in Europe and Asia and the United States.

Well over 40,000 educationalists have benefited from the CTEP. It has enabled teachers to experience the Commonwealth ideal at first hand by meeting with their colleagues in different countries and discussing important professional issues. They can reflect on their own practice and look for ways in which they can become better teachers and school leaders (see Box 2).

Box 1

CTEP: improving the standard of education by developing teachers professionalism

The Commonwealth Teacher Exchange Programme was established, paradoxically, during the First World War, while European nations and many of their then colonial subjects fought a long and bloody war that took millions of British, Commonwealth and European lives. It was during that terrible conflict that the first steps were taken to establish the programme, bringing together teachers across the then Empire in one of the first and now one of the longest-established international professional exchange programmes in the world. The mission today remains unchanged from that of our predecessors: to improve the standard of education across the Commonwealth by developing the professionalism of teachers. Fundamentally, the teachers who step on to planes today to travel to their exchange or study destination are doing exactly the same thing as the teachers who boarded the boats that took them on exchange in 1916 – they are undertaking a professional development experience that will stay with them throughout their careers, will inform their teaching and will make a difference to the many hundreds of students across the world they will teach and influence throughout their careers.

Source: Nichol and Tomlinson, 2006.

Exchanges also provide a means to examine effective ways to help teachers bring international learning experiences into their teaching, so enriching learning in classrooms and helping equip young people for a global future. It enables teachers to develop new approaches that extend beyond the scope of their immediate classroom and develop ways to incorporate a more international focus in their work with students.

The benefits for the education system

The best continued professional development programme my staff have become involved with – both from the mentoring perspective and the learning perspective (Head teacher).

The CTEP provides an added value element to school CPD programmes:

- Participants have the opportunity to work in different education systems, exchange ideas and knowledge and observe different teaching practices while living in another culture.
- Students benefit from being taught by visiting overseas teachers, who bring to the classroom new ideas and experiences from different educational systems and cultures.

Box 2

Personal development benefits: some reflections

Collaborating with my Australian colleague had a profound impact on my own professional development and educational growth. I was curious about the Australian system and what I could bring back to enrich my teaching in the Canadian context. The experience is reciprocal as the visiting teacher will enrich the local school culture. It makes you appreciate and reflect about what is good in your education system and what new strategies you return with that will further augment your teaching presence. The benefit is a greater appreciation for the world in which we live and how we fit in it.

Nathan Freed, Canada to Victoria, Australia 2010

The Teacher Exchange Programme is a gift to educators, students, families and the far-reaching connections that are made each and every time an exchange takes place. It is a year of the most invaluable professional development imaginable, both personally and professionally. However, the value of the programme certainly doesn't stop when you board the plane to return home. The memories, new pedagogy, travel experiences, hilarious stories and of course amazing friendships will possibly last a lifetime.

Sandi Morris, Western Australia to Alberta, Canada, 2010.

The professional development I have gained is immense; it was not merely the acquisition of theoretical knowledge but the actual performance of educational methodologies in real and authentic situations. During the exchange I had the chance to observe, to explore, to ask, to experience and to compare.

Teacher, Australia to UK.

- Teachers and schools gain access to new ideas and teaching methods by working closely with teachers from other countries or states and education systems.
- Visiting teachers provide valuable input into curricula within schools by contributing knowledge and asking questions about education in the host country.
- The availability of international experience constitutes a valuable recruitment and retention tool.
- Teachers normally undertake a personal research project during their exchange placement.

Through exchange programs, educators gain opportunities to share the strengths and best practices of each other's education system, and provide their partner's students with unique cultural perspectives (Government of Alberta, 2012).

The future

In July 2011, the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC)/Xchange Partners took over management of the CTEP from the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT). CYEC has a track record of promoting Commonwealth youth mobility and development since 1970, including school linking and exchange. The CTEP is a collaborative Commonwealth partnership, and currently we are working with long-established CTEP programme partners in the states/provinces of Australia and Canada. However, one of the challenges is to widen activities to create teacher development opportunities more consistently within the wider Commonwealth where appropriate CPD is not available, so supporting the wider aims of the Commonwealth. This will require development and experimentation with different models of interchange, particularly at the bilateral and regional level. Going forward, programmes should fit into a conceptual framework that sees a direct and powerful link between the following (Nichol, 2001):

- The improvement of teacher skills across the Commonwealth, leading to,
- An improvement in the educational achievements of children and young people within the Commonwealth, leading to,
- A raising of opportunities for future generations to develop wealth and resources, leading to,
- The elimination of extreme poverty from the world.

This requires Commonwealth education partners to expand their efforts to provide greater opportunities for teachers to continue their professional development across the Commonwealth.

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