

The Commonwealth Students' Association

Encouraging students to form a collective voice

CSA Steering Committee¹

Introduction

Education the world over is in a state of reform and many fear whether those reforms will come fast enough to keep up with the rapidly changing needs of the 21st-century student. This is viewed alongside the needs of 21st-century academics, governments, businesses and citizens.

Many also wonder whether reforms will be sufficient to respond to the highly volatile global economic climate and at the same time preserve a sense of cultural identity as communities regionally, nationally and locally. The Commonwealth, with its vast cultural diversity, struggles with this issue on a daily basis.

The symptoms of an education system struggling with its own limitations in the face of a constantly changing world evidence themselves in spiralling tuition fees, student support cuts, stagnant government funding of institutions, and standardisation of performance measurement. Students are the primary stakeholders in the education system and as such should be involved in the decision-making processes of improving education, especially in terms of quality and standard access. This necessitates for an organised students' vehicle to articulate these issues.

Through its strategic plan for 2008–12, the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) committed itself to 'contribute to the re-activation of democratic student movements by co-ordinating secondary and tertiary student representatives and involving them in decision-making about education policies'. By encouraging and facilitating the sharing of information and best practice among students' associations nationally, regionally and internationally, the Commonwealth Students' Association (CSA) and its representatives are working hard to ensure that the Commonwealth student community is well represented and supported in relevant forums across the Commonwealth by partners and stakeholders who are influential, visible, principled and informed.

Visible, sustainable, credible

The CSA aims to raise the profile of student associations and bodies across the Commonwealth by amplifying their voice and promoting greater recognition of their role as partners in education development. Under its visibility work, the CSA propels students' voices to prominence and significance in policy and decision-making, and ensures results of their work are evident across the Commonwealth.

The CSA recognises the voices of all students and, as such, it works to build strong partnerships with student associations and bodies across the Commonwealth. It also supports them by advocating

their concerns and offering services to develop the capacity of students to participate in decision-making.

Under its credibility work, the CSA works at the nexus of policy, advocacy and development for students. In addition, it conducts research and provides reports (including statistics) on the state of student concerns and development work.

The CSA aims to mobilise resources and diversify income that will help it reach its overall strategic objectives. It will also collaborate with partners and stakeholders to help meet these objectives. Under its sustainability work, the CSA has developed a strong network of partners and stakeholders helping to deliver its programmes and has sought out diverse income streams.

The CSA aims to create opportunities for students and members to be active in the delivery of its work. Under its engagement work, the

Box 1

The Commonwealth Students' Association: a summary

The Commonwealth Students' Association (CSA) is the coalescence of the student organisations within the Commonwealth. Its role is to be an independent advocate of students throughout the Commonwealth that brings student concerns to the forefront of educational development. The CSA aims to engage and empower student organisations in an effort to influence key education decisions and policies at different levels in the Commonwealth.

Vision

The CSA works to see a world where students across the Commonwealth: are empowered to effect change in education and contribute to their societies; are engaged as valuable partners in effecting the change they seek in education; and have a credible and representative voice in education.

Mission

Upholding the values of the Commonwealth, the CSA's mission is to unite students, represent them, build their capacities and provide them with opportunities to address issues within the fields of education and global development. The CSA advocates for a world where students have the opportunity to address issues within education and fields of development.

To find out more about the Commonwealth Students' Association please visit www.commonwealthstudents.org



Commonwealth Secretariat

Members of the CSA Steering Committee with Commonwealth Secretariat staff (Youth Affairs Division), Marlborough House, London

CSA builds a strong regional presence and brokers opportunities to enhance the capacity of students in the Commonwealth.

A consultative approach

In June 2009, the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (17CCEM) was held in Malaysia where students stressed the need for greater focus to be given to the role they should take in the decision-making processes of the Commonwealth. The student delegates also recommended that the 'Commonwealth [should] develop standards for the governing of student bodies and organisations', thus making it the remit of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the CYP to support the strengthening of student youth organisations.

During this, regional and pan-Commonwealth consultations focused on enhancing the participation of students, and youth and student leaders across the Commonwealth strongly advocated that students should be meaningfully engaged in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring.

The consultations:

- Provided a clearer idea about the status of student engagement within each region
- Provided an understanding of the needs and aspirations of tertiary students and helped to identify and share best practices

- Explored the possibility of building and strengthening regional and national networks
- Identified the capacity challenges faced by student youth organisations and proposed steps to support an enabling environment for these organisations to function with independence, legitimacy and respect
- Discovered there was consensus among the four regions that a 'student association' was necessary and would have their full involvement and unwavering support

As a result of the consultations, a draft constitution and concept documents were developed for the idea of a student body.

The 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (18CCEM) Youth Forum was held in Mauritius in August 2012. Student leaders aged 18 to 29 from across the Commonwealth gathered to make recommendations on the current issues in education, enhance their capacities and strengthen their role in the Commonwealth education sector. The 18CCEM Youth Forum provided the space for the draft constitution and draft concept papers to be tabled and debated. As a result of a rigorous deliberation process, the CSA was launched and a steering committee was established with a two-year mandate to operationalise the organisation.

QUEEN'S COLLEGE LAGOS

Academics, Leadership and Excellence



VISION STATEMENT

To produce generations of women who will excel, compete globally and contribute meaningfully to nation building.

MISSION STATEMENT

To be the foremost girls' secondary school leading in academics and character, achieved through sound moral, quality and sustainable education.

Queen's College, a public secondary school, is under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of Education. Presently, the curriculum which is developed by the Nigeria Educational Research Development Centre is technologically driven and geared towards meeting the needs of every child's ability as well as the needs of the nation. The emphasis is on Technical and Vocational subjects, ICT, Sciences and Humanities.

In sports, the College won the first overall position in the female category at the Federal Government Colleges Game in 2012. It is the defending champion in female football in the Lagos First Generation Colleges Association games. It partners with Knightsbridge College, UK for the International Inspiration Project of the British Council. The College also collaborates with Achimota School Ghana under King's College/Queen's College Achimota School Tripartite Games.

The College population stands at about 2,800, with 341 members of staff.

*Sustaining
excellence in
girls' education
since 1927*

*Mrs E M Osime is
the 22nd Principal of
Queen's College*



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Africa

For governance purposes, the Africa region comprises 22 Commonwealth states, including the three in Europe (Malta, Cyprus and the United Kingdom). The region's diversity is reflected in the cultures, political environments and economic latitude of its member countries and consequently of its student organisations. Students in the African region face a number of issues and challenges as they try to push for student welfare and student representation at various levels of policy formulation and implementation. Other issues that students face include high tuition fees at institutions of higher learning, accommodation crises on campus, limited government sponsorship, quality of education and marketplace preparation. It can be said that within the African region, various stakeholders, including government and organisations working for the improvement of educational outcomes, do not always place value on student participation.

In tackling this challenge, students through the CSA engage in different forms of discussion and debate with various stakeholders concerning different policy issues on various media platforms; this has helped significantly in changing the way the community, government and other organisations view student or youth participation on policy issues. Students across Africa also take part in various forms of activism, such as social justice, environmental or economic issues.

The student voice in the Africa region still has a long way to go to reach those levels where it will be considered a valuable resource in terms of contributing to the various issues that affect the youth and the nation at large within the different countries.

Asia

Asia is a land of diversity, with countries belonging to different cultures, economies and governance policies – it is also home to the largest proportion of Commonwealth citizens. However, when it comes to education and students in particular, the challenges faced by these countries are not all that different.

In many parts of Asia, there is a lot of disparity in the education systems. Adopting a standard education system eradicating the factor of inequality and providing quality education is critical for youth development; and the role of students in addressing these is important.

It is essential to understand that women should contribute equally to men, since they are affected as much as men by any law. Education is an important tool in delivering this message; and as major stakeholders in education, students are the important drivers in this message.

In India and Pakistan, multitudes of functioning student bodies exist. However, societies in South Asia may often discourage students from giving importance to student activism and fail to consider them as future leaders and potential change makers. Bangladesh faces similar challenges, and in addition also has a negative perception of female students. Sri Lanka, a country with free education and strong student activism, has to deal with a whole new set of problems. There, the government is keen on doing away with state universities and setting up private universities, thereby threatening the country's free education system. Such policies are often the target of student protests in the country.

Since the mission of the CSA is to represent, advocate and build capacities of students and students' organisations across the Commonwealth, the CSA Steering Committee, Asia has set up a Regional Working Group that will carry this mission forward at a regional level and empower students to contribute effectively to development in their societies.

Caribbean

The Caribbean region is diverse and expansive, extending from Canada in North America to Guyana in South America, and is composed of 13 independent territories in total. Students within the region vary in age, level of study and level of participation, but find common ground in some of the issues they face. These include access to education, funding and financing education, commuting, curriculum, programme structure and the school-to-work transition.

The success of the student voice in the Caribbean is partly a matter of due recognition. However, bodies are not always as far-reaching as they need to be; the student voice in the Commonwealth Caribbean region is small, and is restricted to a few national associations or is university or college based, and student bodies do not always serve their functions and represent their constituents.

The CSA has a role to play in unifying and amplifying the voice of students in the region, and creating avenues to influence key education decisions and policies at different levels in the Caribbean. The regional representatives of the CSA specifically aim to help establish national student associations/bodies and to support the strengthening of students' organisations in the Caribbean.

Pacific

Students across the Pacific are coming to grips with the reality that what they need isn't reform at all, rather a rapid reconceptualisation and transformation of what we place value on in society and, alongside that, serious boundary dissolution and movement towards a more collaborative approach to the complex social issues they are up against.

The need to further strengthen student associations across the Pacific region is important to effectively raise and address these issues with their universities, but most of all with their leaders. The interest students have in taking on leadership roles among their peers is often left to some and not engaged with at all by others. Furthermore, student leaders sometimes lack the drive, ability and personality to effectively politicise their work to effect change in the education system within their countries and throughout the region.

Thankfully, through the establishment of the CSA and in turn the Pacific Students' Association, students of the region have a few more tools to wield in the struggle to transform their educational experience. The Pacific Students' Association operates as the working group of the CSA within the region.

For the Pacific Students' Association, it's about promoting equitable access and opportunity to succeed within tertiary education. It's about fostering high quality student experiences and learning environments, and it's about ensuring that students are empowered as valued members of an academic community that contributes to the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth Students' Association has been recognised as an official voice of students in the Commonwealth; its framework documents include a 2013–16 strategic plan and a constitution. The Steering Committee also developed recommendations that have been received by the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group: the Post-2015 Development Framework for Education. The Steering Committee is also in the process of finalising a comprehensive list of student associations in the Commonwealth. In pairs, the regional representatives are gathering information on the various student structures within their respective regions, the role of students in decision-making, notable achievements of students, and the challenges faced by student leaders and activists.

Endnote

- 1 Stanley Njoroge (chair); Danielle Grufferty and Thompson Luzendi (Africa representatives); Ayswarrya Ganapathiraman and Zainab Khan (Asia representatives); Daniel Wilson and Kevin Ramsewak (Caribbean representatives); Jamal Talagi and Pete Hodgkinson (Pacific representatives).