Across borders: Commonwealth education development

The Commonwealth is an extensive international organisational network and an active member of others. Its complexity infuses relations between its member states, governments and non-state corporate and civil society sectors. Inspired by strategy change on the part of Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), this article describes some of the ways in which partner responses have been influenced by their positions in the network. Drawing on direct observation and associated documentation, the paragraphs below refer to events of the last three years as inspired by:

1. The Commonwealth Secretariat’s intention to reduce its support to education and health
2. The Commonwealth Foundation’s adoption of participatory governance as its guiding principle and the reconfiguration of its relations with Commonwealth accredited organisations
3. A threat to Commonwealth of Learning funding
4. The implications of these changes for Commonwealth non-state actors

My concluding thoughts reflect on the implications.

The Commonwealth network

Three IGOs oversee Commonwealth affairs, on behalf of member states. High Commissioners and other dignitaries assure proper governance as key members of their respective boards. The Commonwealth Secretariat supports political engagement and cooperation between members, advising on policy and its implementation, promoting human development across sectors. For many years, the Commonwealth Foundation has supported professional skills and civil society capacity development, primarily through training and information sharing at conferences – all core strands of adult community learning and human resource development. In 2012, it added another, espousing participatory governance and planning as the means of achieving its development objectives. The Commonwealth of Learning (Col) is globally renowned for its work in open and distance learning, online and face-to-face, as means to improving well-being through education, better livelihoods and improved health.

Among others in the Commonwealth family, accredited Commonwealth organisations contribute a lot, though less formally, to Commonwealth advocacy and service delivery, much of which involves training and information-sharing. As non-state actors the accredited Commonwealth organisations include national and international non-government organisations (NGOs) and smaller bodies, often led by volunteers. All the national and sub-national institutions are unaccredited, along with other organisations that contribute to development, stability and the quality of life within Commonwealth member states and regions.

Across this network, communication within and between members, at all levels and in all departments, is sometimes instantaneous, sometimes protracted. Using all media, it ranges from being technical and procedural to the most nuanced, affective and informal one-to-one exchanges. There may be significant generosity and strong support between any combination of partners. On other occasions there is mutual distrust. Seriously underfunded, the IGOs may at times depend on Commonwealth organisations undertaking research and consultancy or playing significant roles in the organisation of prestigious international events. In turn, the IGOs support Commonwealth organisations’ sectoral and public information initiatives. The paragraphs that follow exemplify some of this.

Secretariat reforms

In May 2012, responding to demands for reform, the Secretariat presented its board with a draft strategic plan for the next four years. Complying with an instruction from heads of government, from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2011, to rationalise its portfolio of commitments, it would retain those properly resourced and discontinue others deemed not to offer comparative Commonwealth advantage, and those for which adequate provision was being made by other providers.

Among a list of cuts, the outline plan proposed dismantling the Secretariat’s Social Transformation Programmes Division (STPD), including the closure of the two sections providing professional support in health and education. Triennial meetings of education ministers would continue, while a dedicated ICT hub was to become the principal conduit for Commonwealth-wide health and educational knowledge development and sharing.

The educational Commonwealth organisations mobilised quickly to ascertain high commission awareness and support for the plan to be presented in June. The board refused to accept the plan and successive revised versions, in part because of the intended termination of health and educational support. Over a period of months, in addition to staff concerns, there was continuous opposition from Commonwealth organisations and networking with Secretariat staff and non-state colleagues in other sectors. Exemplifying the soft power of dialogue within and beyond the Commonwealth, emerging alliances advocating the protection of Commonwealth health and educational development led to meetings with parliamentarians and government officials in member states, Commonwealth organisations having audiences with the Secretariat’s Secretary-General, and regular contact with high commissions. A modified plan was eventually agreed in May 2013, a year after it was first presented. It included the introduction of new social development provision in education and health, alongside that already promoting democracy, public institutions, youth and development.
One of South Africa’s strongest performing schools, Benoni High School hasn’t had a student fail their leaving exams for 40 years. The school is located close to Johannesburg in South Africa’s Gauteng province and has a culturally diverse student body of around 1,500.

‘Participation in extramural activities helps students to perform academically,’ says Principal Jake Ceronio, who has been at the school since 1991.

The comprehensive extra-curricular programme includes rugby, soccer, cricket, athletics, hockey, golf, equestrian, cross-country, netball, sailing, tennis, softball and swimming, which compete at the highest level.

The Benoni High Pipe Band participated in the World Pipe Band Championships in 2009, in Glasgow, and came home as world champions. Lack of funding prevented them from returning to defend their title. However, the band has won the national title consecutively from 1992 until 2013.

Sporting prowess

The school is renowned for its sporting successes. Its gymnasium is accredited as a training centre, which offers a broad range of team-oriented and individual pursuits, and a full-time biokineticist to work with individuals and teams to develop warm-up and training programmes. A number of sporting academies in rugby and athletics have been created with the intention to expand to include cricket, swimming and netball. The rugby academy is well established with an international coach and the training programme has been extended to surrounding primary schools to coach them in the skills required at high school level.

The school’s academic programme has recently been expanded to include engineering and graphic design with a view to giving students a head start to include cricket, swimming and netball. The rugby academy is well established with an international coach and the training programme has been extended to surrounding primary schools to coach them in the skills required at high school level.

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Learner leaders

Through its Representative Council of Learners (RCL), Benoni High School offers students the opportunity to develop real leadership skills while upholding the school’s moral and social values. The RCL meets weekly with the school executive and governors, and has significant input into the school’s extracurricular programme and its code of conduct.

The school tries to inculcate the importance of self-awareness, self-discipline, good manners, respect and pride. The ‘Madd’ Society (Music, Arts, Drama, Debating) is very active and pupils are afforded the opportunity to write, produce and direct their own plays annually. The school has an exceptional choir and our debaters and public speakers regularly win bursaries to study overseas.

At Benoni High School we continue to challenge the mundane and seek to be more educationally innovative to bring all our pupils to excellence, according to each individual’s potential.

Quam Optime
– Better than the Best
To be implemented from January 2014, all involved were mindful that the revised strategy would be realised only if adequate resources were allocated to its different components. As foreseen, eventual funding levels foreshadowed sizeable staff reductions across the Secretariat, with significant downsizing of professional expertise in health and education. That they now exist, as a modest unit with a single leader and significantly reduced staff, is in large part attributable to the catalytic advocacy and networking of the Commonwealth’s educational, health and other non-state actors, but this may not have been enough to guarantee quality input to post-2015 Commonwealth agendas.

**Changes in the Foundation**

Also in 2012, the Commonwealth Foundation revised its strategy, introducing changes in its governance arrangements. Maintaining commitment to strengthening Commonwealth civil society, it turned away from supporting Commonwealth organisations, favouring instead non-accredited non-state actors’ development within member states. Backed by an in-house inquiry into priority civil society needs in a number of case study countries, it set out plans for a series of projects to inspire participatory governance as the guiding principle of its work. The Foundation carefully informed the Commonwealth organisation constituency of these changes, justified by what it saw to have been the disappointing comparative advantage accruing from the grants and other support to Commonwealth organisations previously given. To soften the blow, it offered a number of transitional grants, for which Commonwealth organisations were eligible to compete, over a period of months, if they had been regular recipients of the Foundation’s budgetary allocations.

Since then, bids for Foundation grants have been invited biennially, to address specified project themes within a framework of participatory governance and outcomes-based management. Demand has been exceptionally high, with nearly all awards going to non-accredited non-state actors in member states. Commonwealth organisations, formerly reliant on Foundation to non-accredited non-state actors in member states. Backed by an in-house inquiry into priority civil society needs in a number of case study countries, it set out plans for a series of projects to inspire participatory governance as the guiding principle of its work. The Foundation carefully informed the Commonwealth organisation constituency of these changes, justified by what it saw to have been the disappointing comparative advantage accruing from the grants and other support to Commonwealth organisations previously given. To soften the blow, it offered a number of transitional grants, for which

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Commonwealth organisation mobilisation

The ability of Commonwealth organisations to respond formally to the events described is weakened by their lack of a representative organisational platform and their individual insecurity. Their distinctive substantive missions (human rights, education, ecology, law, etc) may be a factor in this separation, but as non-state civil society actors within the Commonwealth, they share common institutional concerns. To address this, Commonwealth organisations’ representatives have been meeting since 2013 to explore responses to the new IGO strategic plans and other matters. Uncertainty on numerous counts has deterred consideration of the possibility of creating a representative platform to allow a collective voice for Commonwealth organisations on concerns shared with the IGOs, as over-burdened colleagues express fear for their organisational autonomy and the prospect of costly time-consuming meetings if it came about.

**Concluding thoughts**

The above scenarios describe experiences observed when organisations of different status that are committed, in quite different ways, to social transformation through education and learning, interact in the micro-level complexity of the Commonwealth network. They are far from unique, but replicated...
Universidade Kimpa Vita, Angola
Committed to transforming society and sustainable development

Based in Uíge province, Kimpa Vita University (UniKiVi) was established in 2011 and covers the VII Academic Region of Angola. Kimpa Vita University offers courses in Accounting and Management, Computer Science, Nursing, Economics, Agronomy and Law to its more than six thousand students. The emergence of UniKiVi with its academic units (Faculties, Institutes and Schools) leads to better service delivery to both staff and students.

UniKiVi guarantees the freedom of scientific, cultural and technological perspectives; respects the individual, the community and the environment; ensures plurality and free expression of opinions; promotes the participation of all academic bodies at the University; and provides methods for the democratic election of representatives.

Vision
To be a referral institution rooted in the dynamics of universal knowledge and a vital propellant to economic, social and cultural development of the country and the region in particular.

In line with its mission, the University of Kimpa Vita has the following guiding principles:

- Promotion of academic activity in the sciences, arts and humanities
- Respect for intellectual, artistic, institutional and policy diversity
- Promoting the link between teaching, research and extension

Values
- Respecting and valuing the leading role of people in economic and social development
- Safeguarding academic freedom and the expression of scientific knowledge
- Respecting national and international laws and the application of knowledge in the academic and social justice arena

Schools and Colleges
Uíge Province
- School of Law
- School of Economics
- Higher Polytechnic School of Uíge
  - Management Accounting (Bachelor level)
  - Nursing
  - Computer Engineering
  - Agronomy
  - Veterinary Science
  - Economics

Kwanza Norte Province
- School of Kwanza Norte
  - Management Accounting
  - IT Management
  - Administration Management
  - Clinical Analysis (BSc level)

Co-operation
UniKiVi aims to assist municipalities by offering modular courses for training and professional certification of their local boards to curb the rural exodus. UniKiVi, can by itself or through its organisational units, create and participate in associations, companies or NGOs, provided that their activities are in compliance with statutory requirements. At the international level there are co-operation agreements with countries that have relations with Angola.

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The University has a total of 1,907 students, however, over the next 20 years, the University is expected to have ten faculties, 70 departments, 256 undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and a School of Postgraduate Studies that will be established in the second phase of the University’s development. The total student population is projected to rise to about 32,700 at full maturity.

SLU supports scientific research through a dedicated research grant and international linkages. Presently, the University is a member of the OXONIA University Network, UK, and is working towards securing a partnership/membership with ACU, AAU and IAU. Six research and development centres are envisaged, which will be stimulated by the research policy that is anchored on novelty, originality and excellence in the conduct of research as well as the delivery of excellent quality services.

References


ROSEMARY PRESTON is the chair of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth. She has more than 20 years’ experience of working in international NGOs, including having been a founding chair of the British Association of Comparative and International Education and spells as executive chair of the UK Forum for International Education and Training and director of the International Centre for Education in Development. She is the past editor of two international journals, Gender and Education (1994–2000) and Compare (2001–04), and co-edited the 2012 Palgrave Macmillan book The Capacity to Share: A Study of Cuba’s International Co-operation in Educational Development. Preston has a post-graduate certificate in education in modern languages.