

FROM OXFORD TO EDINBURGH: 43 YEARS OF COMMONWEALTH CO-OPERATION IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

With 2003 being the year of the triennial Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM), this paper presents an historical overview of the 43 years of co-operation between Commonwealth countries in the field of education. Edinburgh will be the fifteenth conference in a series that began in the 1950s with the first Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford in 1959¹. Although, from today's vantage point, it may seem as if that first Conference took place in another age altogether, there are fascinating parallels between the fifteenth and the first conferences. Some of these parallels are curious oddities, others perhaps of greater potential significance. Most particularly, the importance of drawing on Commonwealth resource capacity is as much an issue in 2003 as it was in 1959. This paper addresses the centrality of education resource capacity as the Commonwealth as an international organisation, locates in new fora of political, social, educational and economic decision-making.

PART ONE: THE BEGINNINGS OF CO-OPERATION FOR EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH

There has been an international change of mood in considering the relationship of government to society. The role of players other than central government—of local and provincial governments, of the private sector, of voluntary and non-government organisations, of professional bodies—has had increasing recognition. This was given expression at 13CCEM in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1997 when a Symposium parallel to the Ministers' Conference took place; a symposium was held again in 2000 in Halifax, enabling Ministers to interact with partners and to infuse their Conference deliberations with insights drawn from non-governmental colleagues.

Throughout these years, the focus of concern has been the relationship between education and the economy. Ministers in Montreal in 1958 (just before the first CCEM) saw education and training as key motors of development. The context of their Montreal decisions was the growing interest in the economics of education, and increasing recognition that educational expenditure was an investment in economic growth and that high-level manpower was one of the keys to economic and social development. Concern with this relationship between education and development has continued, but in the last decades of the twentieth century a new dimension was added to the debate about education and the economy. This is the awareness that in some senses educational services are commodities that can be bought and sold, which takes one into the debates about privatisation, tuition fees for domestic and international students, and the marketing of education goods and services.

In spite of the many connections and continuities between Oxford and Edinburgh, the context of this account of educational co-operation in the Commonwealth is a world undergoing evolution and change. This is true of the international community, of the Commonwealth itself, of international co-operation, and of education systems.

The changing world

Since the late 1950s the international political and economic scene has changed dramatically. Scores of countries, including a number of very small and barely viable new states, that were still under colonial rule in 1960, have attained independence

from Britain and other European powers. The break-up of federations, such as those of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, has helped to increase the number of independent countries. Within the world community there have been important shifts of power. While the United States has become more dominant, there has also been a dramatic rise in wealth and power of Japan, Germany and China; the development of the European Union and the strengthened economies of Italy, Spain and several northern European countries; an enormous accretion of wealth to oil-producing countries especially in the Middle East; and the economic 'miracle' achieved by the countries of South-east Asia. For Commonwealth developing countries their external relations and commercial links, once dominated by the former colonial powers, have been greatly diversified, and they now have a much wider choice of economic and trade partners. The big new players in the world economic league have not in the main been Commonwealth countries, so that in terms of global economic and political power, the Commonwealth now pulls relatively less weight than in 1959.

While unprecedented prosperity has been experienced by many countries, where income per head has risen sharply as they have moved through the 'demographic transition', other countries have faced economic hardship. Growing indebtedness, adverse movement in their terms of trade, and deterioration in the value of their currencies have left some developing countries in dire economic straits, and in the face of rapid population growth they have endured periods of declining income per head. In a global perspective income inequalities between countries have widened. It is as yet unclear whether the communications revolution, which has over the 40 years in question 'shrunk' the world by means of improved transport links and revolutionary developments of telecommunications by radio, television, telephone, fax, internet and e-mail, will narrow or further widen this gap.

Meanwhile the balance of national economies has shifted in significant ways. One trend has been from primary (agriculture) to secondary (manufacturing) production and, especially in the more developed economies, from manufacturing to the 'tertiary' service sector of communications and media, marketing and advertising, financial services, leisure and tourism. In consequence the quality of human resources has become ever more important to profitable production. A second shift has been economic decentralisation, away from the state 'command and control' economy to a market economy where prices, incentives and privatisation are the watchwords. One set of complementary changes flowing from the changing role of the state has been the economic squeeze on the generally labour-intensive but non revenue-producing public sector. Reluctance on the part of democratically elected politicians to increase the burden of taxation has meant that greater economic prosperity in society as a whole has been accompanied by severe financial constraints in the public sector. These in turn have been reflected in diminished resources put at the disposal of international organisations.

The changing Commonwealth

These global trends have their reflection in individual Commonwealth countries and in the Commonwealth as a collective entity. Membership has grown from 10 members in 1959 to 54, ignoring temporary suspensions, today. Many of the newer members are very small countries: about half the Commonwealth countries have populations of one million or fewer. One consequence of increased membership is that Commonwealth meetings have lost some, though certainly not all, of the informality that used to be considered one of their main advantages compared with the United Nations and its agencies. To have 20 countries round the table is one thing; to have 54 is quite another.

Economically, the Commonwealth has certainly become more diversified. Britain is no longer the dominant player. The economies of Canada and Australia have grown

considerably, while India has developed a major scientific and technological capability despite its average income per head still being low. Some of the newer economies such as Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and Hong Kong (part of the Commonwealth only until 1997) have overtaken Britain in income per head. But these last are not very populous countries and a problem for the modern Commonwealth is imbalance in its composition: it is under-represented among the industrialised countries of Europe, the oil-producers of the middle east, and the larger economies of east Asia: and over-represented among populous low-income countries.

In organisational terms the Commonwealth has changed greatly, having created and developed an institutional machinery of its own in the shape of a Secretariat, a Fund for Technical Co-operation, and the Commonwealth Foundation. Patterns of regular consultation in Heads of Government Meetings, Ministerial Conferences, expert groups and working parties have evolved and affect the education sector as much as others.

Changing patterns of co-operation

Over the forty-year period many changes have shaped the environment in which co-operation takes place, applying not just to the education sector. One may note:

- the emergence of major multilateral players like the World Bank, other development banks, and EU/EDF: and of new bilateral donors like Germany, Japan, and the Nordic countries.
- the increasing significance of non-governmental and charitable organisations in co-operation activities, especially in emergency relief.
- the many intermediary commercial contractors specialising in management and delivery of assistance, that have occupied the 'space' between donors and users of assistance. Some are located in the private commercial sector, some are consultancy arms of public institutions, and others are not-for-profit NGOs.
- the increasing gap in prices and costs between industrialised and developing countries, making it less and less cost-effective to move developing-country nationals for study and training in developed countries, or citizens of industrialised countries to serve as long-term teachers in developing countries. This has put a premium on (a) using developing country resources and locations in co-operation programmes (b) developing South-South co-operation and (c) exploring the potential of short-term exchanges of personnel, of short- and split-site courses, and of interaction at a distance using modern communication technologies.
- There has been more interest in institutional development and emphasis on capacity-building and on long-term sustainability of assisted projects.

Changing education

Finally, education systems have changed significantly. Most obviously they have greatly expanded as a result of population growth (in some countries the population is three or four times as big as in 1959), of higher enrolment ratios, and of system-development and diversification to include more specialist and tertiary provision. Many Commonwealth countries have achieved universal basic education, even though achievement of Education for All is still far away in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and the number of new colleges and universities has multiplied manifold. Education systems which were once basically elitist have been democratised. In all but the smallest states they can no longer be centrally managed

by small cadres of civil servants personally well known to one another. Systems and bureaucracies have taken over and education management has assumed much greater importance. The focus today is largely on pursuing organisational efficiency, on setting objectives and monitoring their achievement, and on keeping costs under control.

Education, being labour-intensive, has been particularly vulnerable to economic crises. This has impacted on teacher salary-levels, producing an adverse knock-on effect on teacher motivation and the quality of education. In many countries the maintenance of school buildings has been neglected, books and materials have been short, and the supervision and advisory services have been run down. In several systems of public education tuition fees have been introduced or reintroduced, increasing the disposition of those wealthy enough to patronise private schools or out-of-school private tutoring.

The development of new communication technologies for transmission of knowledge and information, and for use in interactive learning, has offered the potential for revolutionising the way education takes place. The possibility of more independent study, and for the transformation of the teacher's role to that of learning facilitator, implies major change for education systems in future. They promise both to make schools different kinds of institution, and in selected instances to obviate the need for institutional attendance in order to learn. They also open up possibilities for engaging in international study while remaining at a home base. As indicated below, the Commonwealth has been among the first to recognise this potential.

PART TWO: SUBSTANTIVE THEMES OF CONSULTATION AND CO-OPERATION

Over the past forty years, Ministers of Education have been engaged in and attend to two types of subject matter. First there have been the joint Commonwealth co-operative programmes and institutions in education, and second there have been themes on which they have wished to exchange experience and concert views.

Co-operative institutions

Commonwealth co-operative programmes in education were launched with the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). This was supplemented in the 1980s by the creation of new institutions and programmes of co-operation at tertiary level. For good reasons, tertiary education is the level where collaboration has been most developed. The specialisation of branches of knowledge and technology means that national higher education systems cannot be self-sufficient. Higher education takes place in English in most member countries, making interchange easier. The exchange of relatively small numbers of academics and researchers can make a significant contribution to institutional development. There are strong professional networks through the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and professional bodies. Senior academics have played an influential role in developing Commonwealth education co-operation, and the Secretariat invariably designated one or more staff members as responsible for tertiary education.

When the first steps in official Commonwealth education co-operation were taken, the staffing of emerging national education systems was a serious challenge. Particularly in Africa, there was a shortage of secondary-school teachers and of college and university staff, and the need to establish systems for staff training and development. Because of this, attention was given to elaborating frameworks for the recruitment of expatriate teachers, and on the training side Britain launched a major assistance programme in the form of Commonwealth bursaries to train tutors for teacher training colleges. Training places in Britain under the Bursaries Scheme were as numerous as Commonwealth Scholarships, reaching 500 at a time.

This was bilateral assistance in a Commonwealth framework. Early Conferences devoted considerable attention to teacher supply and teacher training, normally establishing a committee of the Conference to discuss them. By the end of the 1970s, however, teacher supply and training bursaries had disappeared from the agenda of joint Commonwealth programmes of collaboration, reflecting the substantial progress made by developing countries in localising the teaching service, and the Commonwealth Bursaries were discontinued by Britain.

A third area in which co-operation has been institutionalised is distance education. Commonwealth countries were pioneers in correspondence education and external degree programmes but it was only in the 1980s that their common interest crystallised as the Commonwealth of Learning. A number of factors, including rapid development of new information and communication technologies, combined to bring about the creation of this new organisation. The increasing cost of physical mobility of students directed the attention of the Commonwealth Standing Committee to new approaches to learning across national frontiers: one of its members was Anastasios Christodoulou, Secretary-General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities who brought to the Committee his experience as founding Secretary of the Open University in the UK. In 1984 for the first time the Secretariat appointed a specialist in distance education to its staff. Canada's interest in distance education, and the happy coincidence that, as host to the Heads of Government Meeting in Vancouver in 1987, she was glad to sponsor a concrete new initiative in Commonwealth co-operation all helped to bring the new institution to life. Imaginative proposals by a Committee chaired by Asa Briggs (Lord Briggs), strong advocacy by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, generous pledges from Brunei Darussalam, India and Nigeria to supplement promises from the governments of Canada and British Columbia all combined to turn dream into reality.

Themes of consultation and joint activity

The institutions described above are independent of the Commonwealth Secretariat even though generated through inter-governmental conferences and enjoying support from the Secretariat and Commonwealth Funds for Technical Co-operation (CFTC). But the Secretariat has launched a wide array of other co-operative initiatives for exchange of experience and joint activity in education, using its own staff and modest budgetary resources to bring Commonwealth representatives together and to mobilise Commonwealth action. The range of mechanisms available to the education branch of the Secretariat for such purposes has been limited, consisting mainly of consultative meetings, training workshops and seminars, and working groups, very occasional study visits and attachments, and the publication of directories, studies, surveys and reports, frequently in the form of resource manuals for use by practitioners or of handbooks of good practice. Direct funding of follow-up operational activity has always been the responsibility of governments, with support where appropriate of consultancies and training provided by CFTC.

Commonwealth student mobility

A subject that dominated the last two of the four decades was Commonwealth student mobility. This issue gave rise to a sharp conflict of views, but at the same time generated creative ideas about the potential for practical co-operation in education among Commonwealth countries.

The initial fateful shots in the battle over student mobility were fired at the time of the first Wilson Government in Britain, in the aftermath of the 1963 Robbins Report on Higher Education in the UK. It was decided for the first time to charge differential tuition fees for students from abroad in British higher and further education. A high

proportion of the students affected were from newly independent Commonwealth countries, which had been accustomed to sending students to Britain for courses not available at home. At one level of analysis the introduction of differential charges for students from abroad can be seen as a question of education finance, of reducing the public subsidy to higher education; but it was also part of an on-going process of differentiating Commonwealth from British citizens and turning the former into part-aliens in what they had hitherto regarded as the 'mother country'. The level of the British differential charge rose over the next decade and was substantially increased by the Wilson-Callaghan Governments from 1974 to 1979. In 1979 the Conservatives were returned to power under Margaret Thatcher and resolved on introducing full-cost fees for students from abroad. European Community students were exempted from paying more than the home-student tuition fee. Eventually, after concerted lobbying through the Overseas Students Trust and others, a series of partial relief measures (the so-called 'Pym Package') in the form of additional scholarship awards was introduced.

The Commonwealth response to the new fees was one of dismay and the Secretary-General set up a Consultative Group on Student Mobility under the chairmanship of Sir Hugh Springer, the retiring Secretary-General of the ACU. When this Group reported in 1981 it was decided to establish a Standing Committee on Student Mobility under the chairmanship of Sir Roy Marshall. The Committee, with ten to twelve members drawn from different Commonwealth regions, met annually between 1982 and 1986, and again in 1989 and 1992. Although greater supply of scholarships was forthcoming after 1984, the Standing Committee failed to secure any significant changes in the fee policies of the principal Commonwealth host countries: to the contrary, it had to witness the introduction of full-cost fees in Australia, followed later by New Zealand, and the raising of fees in some Canadian provinces. In the lifetime of the Standing Committee only India among the major Commonwealth host countries refrained from discrimination against students from abroad and from substantial rises in the level of tuition fees in its higher-education system. What the Committee called the 'final frustration' was the rejection at its Seventh Meeting by the group of Commonwealth industrialised countries of a package of five modest measures proposed by the Secretary-General as constituting 'a favourable fee regime' which would give relief to developing-country students.

The effect of full-cost fee regimes on Commonwealth student mobility was initially dire, causing a sharp decline in Commonwealth students going to Britain. Later however, mainly in the period after the Standing Committee was disbanded in 1994, there was a surge in the number of international students in Australia and Britain, including a rise in Commonwealth students. It would seem that provision of strong financial incentives to cash-strapped higher education institutions to undertake international student recruitment caused them to market their courses vigorously and effectively.

Among the less desirable effects of making international study expensive have been difficulties experienced by countries that are low on the UN's human development index in participating fully in Commonwealth student mobility. Intra-Commonwealth flows have been heavily concentrated on a few countries as hosts (Australia, Britain, Canada and to a lesser extent India and New Zealand) and a few countries as senders. Nearly two thirds of Commonwealth student mobility has involved student flows from four relatively wealthy countries in South-east Asia to those five host countries. Moreover, in each of the four industrialised countries, the proportion of students from abroad who originate in other Commonwealth partner-countries has fallen sharply - in Britain's case, for example from 51% to 31%. Between 1978 and 1995/96 the number of Commonwealth students in Britain increased by 6% while the number of non-Commonwealth students increased by

147%! At the beginning of the period Commonwealth students numbered six times as many as students from the European Community: by 1995 European Community students were 40% more in number than the overseas Commonwealth students in Britain. Australia and Canada have also been focusing efforts on recruitment from other non-Commonwealth 'markets' and have experienced similar drops in the share of the Commonwealth in their international student intake.

PART THREE: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CO-OPERATION

What conclusions might one draw about the overall effect of the official programmes of Commonwealth educational co-operation described, and about the extent to which they have had a beneficial impact on education in member countries?

Any assessment has to take account of the broad context of international activity and resource flows. External influences and resources are small in relation to the complete range of influences and expenditures on education by Commonwealth member countries. Moreover, the Commonwealth's own contribution, within the total international flow of resources for development, is tiny. The combined budgets of Commonwealth official institutions, for all sectors and purposes, amount to the equivalent of about \$50m p.a., compared with annual World Bank resource commitments one hundred times as large, and a British Government aid budget eighty times as big. The United Kingdom is the largest aid donor among the 54 Commonwealth countries but only channels 1% of its multilateral contributions to and through Commonwealth institutions. For these reasons, the separate and specific impacts of Commonwealth initiatives are likely to be difficult to disentangle from other influences, and are likely to be small in relation to the problems targeted.

In this regard, one should distinguish between influence and resources. The Commonwealth has not been a major channel for resource flows compared with other agencies. The only real exceptions to this are the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) and, while it lasted, the Commonwealth Bursaries Scheme. Each of these activities, it should be noted, has been bilaterally funded within a multilateral Commonwealth framework. The opportunities provided by CSFP for advanced study, particularly in the period when university development was in its initial stages in Africa and other developing areas, and when postgraduate study provision was limited, were exceedingly valuable and a significant proportion of senior staff in the new universities of former British colonies was able to benefit.

As university systems have developed and grown, the relative significance of CSFP in quantitative terms has naturally diminished though it remains as one of the larger scholarship programmes benefiting the developing world. In the same way the education bursaries were, while they lasted, of real significance in building up the cadres of education professionals, particularly in teacher education but also in curriculum development and management and administration of Commonwealth developing countries at a critical period. Any survey of senior professional staff in the education systems of Commonwealth Africa, the Caribbean, Malaysia and the South Pacific would have shown that large numbers of them had acquired professional qualifications and experience through the Bursaries Scheme.

In the 1990s the Commonwealth of Learning has occupied a 'niche' position as a source of technical assistance and advice in distance education. Its resources are not substantial, but COL is visible, specialised, and today relatively well known. In its own field it has had considerable impact in helping countries to take the early steps in familiarising themselves with, and exploiting, the potential of distance education.

In much of the rest of its work, the Commonwealth's influence on educational development has been less in terms of resources than in providing a forum for creating awareness about international issues and in giving leadership in developing

new thinking. This is indeed the proper role for any secretariat which is potentially well-endowed with professional expertise but short of programme funds.

At the policy-making level of Ministers and Ministries of Education, the Commonwealth contribution has probably been most important in making developing countries aware of common problems and shared interests and in helping them to articulate their views on international issues in education. In that regard the work of specialist groups on student mobility and higher education co-operation, on distance education, and human resource development were especially useful. The Secretariat analyses on major conference themes like education financing and resource use, vocational orientation of education, quality of education, and the changing role of the state in education were highly regarded by policy makers, as have been the syntheses of country experiences.

In a number of areas of professional work, Commonwealth activity has been influential. In the 1970s and early 1980s highly-regarded resource books were produced on, for example, low-cost publishing, teachers' centres, in-service teacher education, community libraries and non-formal education. A later series of publications on community contributions to education and shift schooling, and particularly the resource materials on teacher management and support and headteacher training, have been widely disseminated.

Also notable has been the work of the Standing Committee over more than a decade in addressing both Commonwealth student mobility and capacity-building in Commonwealth universities and the follow-up work leading to the creation of Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC). Another tangible result has been the work on distance education, leading to the creation of COL. Higher education co-operation activity involving collaboration with ACU has been important as has work with UNESCO on staff development for women. There has been an extensive series of activities on education development in small states of the Commonwealth; and the substantial work, mainly in Commonwealth Africa, on teacher management and support.

PART FOUR: CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

From many points of view Commonwealth education co-operation gives the appearance of being in good health. Commonwealth Heads of Government regularly affirm their commitment to education and its importance to the Commonwealth. Education Ministers' Conferences are well attended and produce a warm glow of approval for the principle of education collaboration among Commonwealth countries, enunciated more formally through the Halifax Statement on Education in the Commonwealth, *Education for our Common Future*, in November 2000.

There is an array of institutions and programmes bearing a Commonwealth education label, both inter-governmental and non-governmental. The creation of the Commonwealth of Learning just 12 years ago, followed by Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS) and Commonwealth Universities' Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC), represents further development of the co-operation infrastructure. New initiatives are being taken in the area of school networking via electronic links. The number of students moving between Commonwealth countries appears to be at record levels.

The Commonwealth has significant comparative advantage in educational co-operation. Common possession of English as the major world language, and a heritage of shared institutions make the interchange of experience and personnel both fruitful and relatively easy. Many of the Commonwealth's institutions like the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, and Association of Commonwealth Universities are envied in other parts of the world and provide

a platform for building future developments. There is also a strong Commonwealth infrastructure for educational collaboration at regional level, in the shape of shared university institutions and examination bodies in Africa, the Caribbean and the South Pacific.

The official multilateral Commonwealth picture is reinforced by strong traditions of co-operation through bilateral relationships and by the activities of NGOs. The United Kingdom, particularly, has sharply increased bilateral educational assistance, mainly at basic education level, to individual Commonwealth recipients like India, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and South Africa and has recently announced her intention to establish a fund which will ensure that access to basic education for every child in the Commonwealth. Canada and Australia are also important sources of assistance. Of particular significance for the future are the smaller but growing assistance programmes of countries like India, Malaysia, Nigeria and South Africa, which are simultaneously recipients and donors. Non-government agencies like Oxfam have also become much more heavily involved with education in recent years. There are active pan-Commonwealth NGOs in the education sector which provide professional networks with a potential to serve as partners with official agencies in international co-operation. In both Gaborone and Halifax the Ministers' Conference deliberations have been enhanced by dialogue with other parts of civil society through 'parallel events' in the form of a Symposium and Trade Fair.

However, the very structure of the Commonwealth could be seen as a problem, containing as it does only a small proportion of industrialised countries and few sizeable middle-income countries. As a result the 'ABC' countries (Australia, Britain, Canada) are asked to carry a high proportion of the burden of Commonwealth educational and other co-operation. Britain and Canada, just two out of 54 Commonwealth members, provide 90% of the CSFP awards, 60% of the funding of CFTC and two thirds of the resources available to COL. In such circumstances it is tempting to argue for 'no representation without taxation' particularly in relation to CSFP with its ten donors in the latest year; and perhaps even in the case of COL, despite its success in attracting 23 donors in 2000.

The biggest challenge to co-operation in education is uninterest in the Commonwealth and in educational co-operation. In part it results from historical processes of closer regional integration in Europe, in Asia and the Pacific, in Africa, diverting attention and interest from the kind of association that the Commonwealth represents. The low level of representation of some industrialised countries at CCEMs may reflect a sense that their peers in education are other OECD countries, rather than their Commonwealth partners. In part uninterest reflects a failure to engage young people with the Commonwealth and its values, a neglect of Commonwealth studies and of teaching and learning about the Commonwealth in schools. Some have observed that CHOGMs give less attention than global political fora like the G8, UN Assembly or World Bank/IMF to education issues. It seems anomalous that education should be near the top of national agendas and yet apparently so low in the list of the Commonwealth's collective priorities.

In the Halifax Conference Communique it was affirmed that "Ministers intend to make a formal representation to the High-Level Review Group and in so doing emphasise that the promotion of Commonwealth education co-operation should remain a key and discrete function of the Commonwealth Secretariat". This case, that education is at the heart of Commonwealth concerns and of crucial importance to Commonwealth survival, will need to be made strongly by the wider education community in member countries, by youth and business leaders. The erosion of so many institutions concerned with education co-operation, and with education about the Commonwealth, shows how real is the danger.

PART FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that Commonwealth co-operative institutions cannot survive on the basis that they will be funded voluntarily by a handful of wealthier countries. Developing countries must carry a greater share of responsibility for the budgets of Commonwealth programmes and must do their bit in the CSFP. It is a case of 'casting one's bread upon the waters'. The effect of substantial developing-country donations to a cause found to be important was shown in Vancouver in 1987, when the readiness of Brunei Darussalam, India and Nigeria to promise substantial financial support to the establishment of COL gave a significant boost to Canadian and other efforts to get that organisation off the ground.

Ministers and others need to confront and debate the issue of whether Commonwealth co-operation in education is essentially a form of development aid or is based on interchange between equals and the concept of sharing. Current financial structures make far more resources available for direct assistance to individual member countries and not enough for consultation, analysis and the development of common positions through working groups and studies as the basis for action. Lying behind this is an uncertainty as to whether the Secretariat exists mainly to facilitate bilateral exchange between its members, or to promote collective Commonwealth action and institutions.

The commercialisation of education and of other public services represents both a threat and an opportunity. The CEC/UKCOSA report on Commonwealth student mobility² shows how on the one hand commercial incentives have been important in expanding mobility, but have on the other also given rise to growing inequality. In the important area of information technology, too, there will be a need for safeguarding of the common public interest in the face of commercially-driven developments. On such issues Commonwealth institutions are well placed to orchestrate consultation and identification of acceptable common ground.

The opportunities for the Commonwealth in educational co-operation stem from its comparative advantages of shared language and institutional forms and its potentially strong institutional framework for advancing its common interests. Its inclusiveness in terms of countries of different sizes, cultures and levels of income mean that it is well placed to exploit the dynamics of diversity. In seeking to advance and protect the public interest of a wide international community, these are valuable assets.

The Commonwealth has special experience in regional co-operation in education, bringing about economies of scale and a sharing of costs and benefits. This has been most apparent in regional universities and examination arrangements and in the shared consultations on regional education issues. This experience should be analysed and more widely shared with a view to exploring its applicability elsewhere. It has a particular value in the context of small states, of which the Commonwealth has an abundance, making it especially well placed to explore the particular challenges that small-country education systems face. But successful experiences of regional co-operation have lessons for relationships among larger states too.

As well as having many small states, the Commonwealth also has large multi-jurisdictional countries in membership. Exchange of experiences between such countries about interrelating and co-ordinating the work of different authorities would be valuable.

The possibilities of further developing co-operation in the application of distance education and new communication technologies are immense, and a field where the Commonwealth has special strengths, both at national level and in the Commonwealth of Learning. The new information and communication technology are prominent among the areas where the Halifax themes of 'expanding access' and ensuring 'opportunities for diversity' need urgently to be put into practice.

The obverse of the coin of commercialism in education is that private sector companies involved in manufacturing and publishing, providing services to public education, or running parallel independent systems of non-government schools, have expertise and resources to share with public systems. Commonwealth countries have much experience of private sector involvement in education and the Commonwealth would be well placed to develop protocols and guidelines on beneficial partnerships between public and private sectors, and to generate case studies of best practice.

What is clear is that there is great latent energy and potential among the various public and civil-society agencies engaged in promoting Commonwealth co-operation in education. As the fifth decade of such co-operation opens, an attempt to chart a new course seems timely. At the 15CCEM, Ministers of Education may take the opportunity to map out roles and productive relationships between the different agencies and programmes in the Education sector with the capacity available throughout the Commonwealth. It would be an ideal opportunity to do so.

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CCEM = Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers)
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