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Commonwealth Education Co-operation: Looking to the Future

(Background paper for the session prepared by Peter Williams, Hon Sec CCfE)

Commonwealth education co-operation in its inter-governmental form effectively began nearly 50 years ago in Oxford at the time of the first Commonwealth Education Conference in 1959. Civil society had of course got there first: through their antecedent bodies today's Association of Commonwealth Universities, Commonwealth Institute/Commonwealth Education Trust, Royal Commonwealth Society and League for Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers all have histories stretching back more than a hundred years.

The official mechanisms established in 1959 included the Commonwealth Education Liaison Unit, the forerunner of the Education Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat established in 1965; and the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan which will also celebrate its 50th birthday in 2009. In June next year in Kuala Lumpur the seventeenth in the series of education ministers' conferences, the '17CCEM', will be held and will afford an opportunity to review both past achievements and future possibilities.

This session of the PCF5 in London, introduced by a panel of experienced Commonwealth educators from different parts of the Commonwealth, provides an early opportunity for an exchange of ideas about the future of Commonwealth education interchange.

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Fifty years ago, in 1959 Commonwealth membership comprised only ten independent countries. Now in 2008 there are 53 members, many of them small states in the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Over this period populations and economies have grown significantly, but differing political and economic fortunes have meant that gaps between prospering and struggling countries, and between individuals and groups within countries, are as wide as ever. A significant number of middle-income countries have emerged, including several in South and South-east Asia, whose new-found prosperity provides an opportunity to share leadership roles in Commonwealth co-operation hitherto filled by Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

In education, Commonwealth nations have made dramatic advances in the last half-century. Enrolments have expanded at all levels (though population growth has curbed enrolment-rate rises), and the range of course provision has widened appreciably in every country. Open and distance learning have become a recognised part of overall learning provision. At central and state level, specialist units for curriculum development, education planning, research and valuation, and examinations have been established. International relations in education have assumed a new importance as a means of exchanging experience, promoting student and teacher mobility, securing the mutual recognition of qualifications, and delivering development assistance.

Commonwealth Education Infrastructure – A Health Check

Commonwealth infrastructure in education is surprisingly diverse – the CCfE's Directory of Commonwealth Education lists over 40 education organisations and programmes bearing a Commonwealth name. But a health check on Commonwealth education co-operation in 2008 provides mixed readings. The programmes and institutions that together constitute the extensive infrastructure of Commonwealth education co-operation have experienced varying fortunes in recent years

- Some parts, like the Commonwealth of Learning, have probably never been in better health.

- Some give cause for anxiety: for example the decline over the last fifteen years in the strength of the Commonwealth Secretariat's professional staff in education has acted as a constraint on its activities.
- The 'flagship' Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan struggles to sustain and expand its range of donors. Britain's announced intention to suspend Commonwealth awards to more developed countries after 2008/09 is a blow to the integrity of the Plan, which the UK has hitherto supported on a generous scale unmatched by her partners. In the light of this the commendable aim to reach 2009 awards in 2009, backed by a new endowment fund to support scholarships in developing countries, looks quite ambitious.
- In some instances the infrastructure has partially crumbled. The disappearance of the Commonwealth Institute, for example, has left a hiatus in responsibility for education about the Commonwealth. Some Commonwealth civil-society bodies have closed their doors or given up their independent existence. The Commonwealth Education Fund is now being wound up after six years. In December 2000 the rather successful Commonwealth Education Management Service at the Association of Commonwealth Universities closed its doors after six years of operations.

Growth and renewal

There are however signs of growth and renewal. Developments in the past decade have included

- ❖ Agreement on a Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol at Stoke Rochford in 2004.
- ❖ The launch of the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth.
- ❖ The Good Practice Awards Programme first launched in connection with 16CCEM and now in a second phase.
- ❖ The appearance of successor bodies to the Commonwealth Institute. Hopefully the Commonwealth Education Trust and Centre for Commonwealth Education will, once fully established, be able to play a creative role in Commonwealth education development and co-operation.
- ❖ The fuller participation of civil society organisations in Commonwealth education co-operation as reflected in
 - Lively civil society, teachers' and youth forums parallel to Ministerial discussions at the triennial Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers
 - The creation of the Commonwealth Consortium for Education as a grouping of two dozen Commonwealth associations with an education focus
 - The recent launch of the Commonwealth Teachers' Group bringing together many of the major teacher unions in Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth's strengths, role and focus in education

Different factors impel countries to co-operate in the education sphere and only in some cases will the Commonwealth represent the most appropriate and advantageous framework. It behoves member countries to consider the Commonwealth's comparative advantage and limitations in deciding whether to use Commonwealth mechanisms, in preference to others, for co-operative purposes in education.

The Commonwealth's comparative advantage lies in such things as

- A common language, English;
- A shared inheritance of similar institutions, organisational patterns, examination structures which facilitate mobility of students and teachers and the exchange of experience;
- The Commonwealth's non-threatening nature and absence of coercive power relationships: upholding values of mutuality and reciprocity; of respect for difference and diversity; of recognition of the contribution each has to make; of reaching agreement by consensus;
- The depth of experience of long-established bodies like ACU;
- The many different facets of its composition making it attractive to different groups of states (a) as a forum for the small island states that make up half its membership to concert efforts and policies (b) as focus for regional and sub-regional co-operation where there are several contiguous member states

with shared interests – in Southern Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, the Pacific (c) but also as a global meeting place where nations of different culture and religion, of contrasting size and levels of wealth, of differing political philosophy can learn for each other and make common cause.

- Particular areas of well-developed expertise such as in open and distant learning where individual Commonwealth institutions have been pioneers and COL has provided international leadership.
- Generally speaking Commonwealth organisations are accessible, and their procedures relatively informal and non-bureaucratic.

The Commonwealth does however suffer from a number of disadvantages, many of them associated with inadequate access to resources. This is true of Commonwealth institutions (Secretariat, Foundation, COL) which have tiny staffs and insignificant budgets when compared with other international institutions. Moreover, the Commonwealth is not home to large bilateral donors apart from the UK. And because of the small scale of its resources and operations, the Commonwealth's visibility has been impaired by its tendency to concentrate organisational headquarters in London (perpetuating the misapprehension that it is a British-based organisation) and its inability to afford local representation in member-states' capital cities.

In light of the above in what circumstances might countries engaged in international co-operation in education choose to use the institutions of the Commonwealth, acting independently or in association with others?

Access to financial resources and technical assistance. The Commonwealth is not, at multilateral level, a significant source of finance. Its role has to be more that of

- a broker, helping member countries to identify sources of funds and expertise
- a negotiator on behalf of its members for improved, more generous, regimes of education aid.
- a source of technical and professional assistance, sometimes funded by other international agencies.

Sharing experience

Because of the close 'kinship' of education institutions in different member countries, Commonwealth sharing of experience of e.g. managing examinations, incentives to teachers, multigrade teaching, parent-teacher associations, inspection and supervision, counselling, special education provision etc can be particularly fruitful in a Commonwealth context. At tertiary level Commonwealth universities have been helped by the ACU to improve their operations by engaging in 'benchmarking' with peers.

Securing economies of scale

For small countries the co-operative sharing and funding of services and institutions offers clear advantages. There are several examples of successful regional education boards and universities in the Commonwealth. The VUSSC illustrates the potential for small states to work together.

Mobility of students and teachers

There is a dual agenda of encouragement and safeguards. On the one hand, countries may wish to encourage two-way student mobility: their own nationals to study abroad, and in turn international students to come and study, so as to strengthen domestic education programmes and to raise revenue from fees. International teacher exchange may be promoted for similar reasons. The Commonwealth is a natural arena for such exchange and has useful experience to share on ways to attract students and teachers from abroad. On the other hand there is a need to protect national education systems, and internationally mobile students and teachers, against exploitation by recruiting institutions or employers based abroad. The Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol illustrates the Commonwealth's capacity for action. Regulation and quality control over courses offered at a distance is an area where Commonwealth co-operation can pay dividends.

Access to educational resources

Ensuring low-cost or free access by poor countries and by impoverished students to course materials and other learning resources, in the face of providers' concerns with profitability, is an area where the Commonwealth can make a useful contribution, in the light of plentiful experience on the part of COL.

In terms of *focus*, Commonwealth co-operation has in recent years been driven by the Education for All (EFA)/ Millennium Development Goals (MDG) agendas concentrating on universalisation of primary education and gender equality in education. This has been the focal theme of the last three Education Ministers' Conferences in Halifax, Edinburgh and Cape Town. Several of the African and South Asian

countries of the Commonwealth, which account for a high proportion of the ‘global deficit’, have made been dramatic advances in primary-school enrolment in recent years, but there is still far to go.

The Commonwealth must continue to mobilise efforts to assist all of its members in their efforts to attain the MDG targets. But for many reasons it is now timely to move on to a wider agenda for Commonwealth co-operation in education. The Education for All agenda that emphasises quality, the importance of adult literacy and pre-school learning, and skill development for youth and school leavers represents a more comprehensive approach to education development than the MDGs alone and offers a better chance of making UPE sustainable in the longer term. The holistic nature of education development, and the complementarity of different levels and modes of education is now increasingly recognised – success in primary education will be better achieved if other levels and branches of education are working together in support of the goal. In turn a sound basic education is the foundation for academic progress and skill acquisition at other levels.

For these reasons the decision that the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers should take as its theme *Education in the Commonwealth: towards and beyond global goals and targets* is particularly welcome. This opens the way for member countries to engage with the difficult issues of secondary school provision; specialisation and vocational preparation; selection and funding of provision at tertiary level. Already the decision in Cape Town that the Commonwealth should explore the possibility of creating a Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility portends a willingness to re-engage with these issues.

Commonwealth education co-operation a forward agenda

This PCF5 session provides an opportunity for participants briefly to identify, with the help of an experienced Panel, some of the more promising possibilities and opportunities for constructive Commonwealth co-operation in the next half century. This exchange of ideas might generate suggestions that could be worked up into more concrete proposals for consideration by 17CCEM in Kuala Lumpur. For example

- With what outstanding issues of international relations in education could the Commonwealth most constructively engage in the interests of member states’ development? Promoting access to open education resources? Intellectual property rights/ copyright issues? Open markets in education services? Quality control of distance education programmes? International recognition of qualifications? Brain drain and return home of scholars? High cost of study abroad?
- Can the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) be made more truly multinational? What would encourage more countries to offer awards?
- Given the reservations some countries appear to feel with regard to multilateral institutions and programmes, is there scope for applying CSFP’s formula – of bilateral co-operation within an agreed multilateral framework – to other areas of potential co-operation?
- Would Commonwealth education co-operation benefit from some kind of continuing ministerial oversight as envisaged in the Cape Town Communique, or from making more use of expert groups?
- Could and should Commonwealth agencies supporting and promoting Commonwealth education co-operation – governmental/inter-governmental/and non-governmental – work to a common set of Commonwealth priorities? or should they set their goals independently?
- What scope may there be for more effective mobilisation of civil society and the private sector behind Commonwealth education co-operation? Can Commonwealth professional associations and teachers’ unions play a larger part?
- There has been renewed interest in school and college linking for promoting friendship, imparting and international dimension to the curriculum and for supporting development. What is the potential?
- Commonwealth Heads in 2008 received the Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding chaired by Professor Amartya Sen *Civil paths to peace*. What role could education systems in the Commonwealth play in advancing social cohesion, mutual respect and understanding?