

Education – Investing in People

A COMMISSION ON THE COMMONWEALTH

In June 1996, the Commission on Commonwealth Studies under Canadian professor T H B Symons presented its final report, *Learning from Each Other: Commonwealth Studies for the 21st Century*. One year earlier, the Commonwealth Secretary-General had appointed Prof Symons and eight other senior academics to examine the range and scope of studies on various aspects of the Commonwealth in universities and colleges in member countries, and recommend ways of enhancing and strengthening such studies.

The Commission concluded that an 'extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity' existed for Commonwealth countries to learn from the rich experience of other member countries in many fields. It noted, however, that the levels of awareness and understanding of the Commonwealth were 'truly appalling' and called on the academic community and government policy-makers to do more to encourage higher education studies on the modern Commonwealth.

Its report listed 11 principal recommendations for the consideration of Commonwealth Heads of Government and Education Ministers, and a further 32 for the academic community, Commonwealth organisations and the private sector.

Commonwealth countries, the Commission said in its report, face similar challenges in areas of public policy and institutional reform which, if studied, could have great practical and academic value for the next century. These common challenges occur in such fields as economic liberalisation, democratisation and constitutional design, public administration, civil service reform, the provision and funding of health care and social security, taxation, education, population movements, and heritage conservation.

Commonwealth experiences in education differ widely. Some member countries have long since attained universal access to most levels of education; others are still struggling to achieve universal basic education; yet others are taking desperate measures to prevent a decline in enrolment ratios. Some countries are preoccupied with refining the quality of primary and secondary education and maximising access to tertiary education; others still have difficulty achieving minimum standards in basic education.

Among the common concerns of member countries are: restrictive public sector budgets at a time of increased demands on education systems, the need to gear education to a fast-evolving technological world without ignoring the cultural foundations of a country, and the use of education to promote peace and understanding.

Taking all these into account, the Secretariat continues to help Commonwealth members improve the quality of and access to education at all levels, and address their common as well as their particular concerns. These include: the education problems of small states (*see page 90*); raising the quality of science, technology and mathematics education; and the promotion of student mobility and improved access to all levels of education for disadvantaged groups, especially females and out-of-school youths.

Basic Education

The Secretariat recognises that the role of the teacher is central to the educational experience of the learner, especially in basic education. It therefore places great emphasis on improving teacher education and the support and management structures which underpin the teacher's operating environment. Much attention has also been given to head-teacher training, as the proper management of institutions is at the heart of successful basic education.

To this end, a training workshop on teacher management and support was held in Ghana in 1995, and workshops on gender sensitisation and training of trainers were held in Botswana, Swaziland and Tanzania in 1996.

Initially, activities in headteacher training and teacher management and support were concentrated in member states of Africa, where the Secretariat worked closely with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). Much of the 'good practice' developed from this collaboration is now being transferred to other regions of the Commonwealth through training workshops, and through a range of resource materials. A workshop in India in April 1997 enabled Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu to begin adapting these modules and training trainers to use them.

The Secretariat has also launched a new initiative on examinations which will help improve the quality of basic education. Following a



pan-Commonwealth workshop in Barbados in 1995 on examination systems in small states, it was felt that there was a need for greater co-operation in the general area of measurement and assessment of learners. This in turn led to a call for an overarching body to deal with this issue. The Secretariat is therefore helping to establish the Association of Commonwealth Examination and Accreditation Bodies, which is expected to be launched in 1998.

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Non-formal Education

An international meeting in Jordan in 1996 established that while considerable progress has been made towards the goal of providing education for all, progress has been poor particularly in those countries where enrolment ratios have stagnated or declined and gender disparities persist. This problem has been further compounded by the need to train illiterate and poorly educated adults and unemployed youths.

The combined demand for education cannot be met by formal school systems alone. The Secretariat therefore seeks to encourage the integration of the methodologies of formal and non-formal education in pursuit of the goals of universal basic education and opportunities for life-long learning.

In 1996, the Secretariat formed a consortium with the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the Club du Sahel/Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, to increase the delivery of education through non-formal channels, within the framework of the ADEA Working Group on Non-formal Education. Initially, this working group has concentrated on encouraging government-NGO collaboration, stimulating studies of community needs for non-formal education and identifying relevant institutions and specialists in the field.

Science, Technology and Mathematics Education

High priority is given to strengthening the teaching of science, technology and mathematics, as the mastery of these disciplines is essential for modernisation and economic development. The Secretariat continues to support the efforts of individual governments through the training of trainers and laboratory technicians, and the improvement of teachers' competence to assess learners. Between 1995 and 1997, six training monographs on technician training have been developed for use in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, and published with assessment modules for the training of trainers.

The Secretariat has also, in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning, helped Open Universities in Asia and some polytechnics in Africa to develop curricula, delivery mechanisms and assessment strategies for laboratory technician courses offered through distance learning. In May 1996, a training workshop was held in India for the science faculties of Open Universities in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. A similar workshop was held in Zambia in November 1996 for staff of polytechnics in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

In the area of gender equity in science, technology and mathematics education, the Secretariat organised a pan-Commonwealth meeting in Ahmedabad, India, in January 1996, on mathematics as a barrier to learning science and technology among girls. This identified such barriers as poor gender sensitivity in packaging and presenting curricula and in methods of teaching and assessment. The Secretariat participates in the Female Education in Mathematics and Science project initiated by the Forum for African Women Educators by, among other things, helping to develop tools for case studies and the design of data analysis.

In May 1997, the Secretariat brought together a group of experts under Professor Joan Solomon in Singapore to explore concepts, issues and strategies for training to popularise a scientific and technological culture. Experts were drawn from Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Vanuatu.

Member countries receive assistance to improve the quality of and access to education at all levels



Higher Education

The Secretariat has a three-pronged approach to promoting sustainable development in higher education: developing the Commonwealth Higher Education Support Scheme (CHESS), encouraging greater student mobility and improving the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP).

Initiated in 1990 to strengthen higher education institutions in developing countries, CHESS has focused on collaborative initiatives for improving quality. Increased access to books, learning materials and libraries was facilitated by an inventory prepared for the Secretariat by the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications and widely distributed to university libraries in developing countries.

In the area of staff development, CHESS has focused on enhancing management skills of senior women administrators in higher education. A core network of senior women managers and trainers is being identified, training materials are being developed and pan-Commonwealth workshops have been conducted in South Africa and Sri Lanka for senior women managers.

The Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS), which provides consultancy services to strengthen higher education management, has undertaken 35 consultancies for governments and universities throughout the Commonwealth since its inception in 1994. In addition, it is developing a list of reference materials on relevant subjects.

Student mobility continues to be of concern, as intra-Commonwealth student flows are still in decline. At their meeting in 1994, Commonwealth Education Ministers agreed that the future thrust of student mobility initiatives should focus on seeking new partnerships and working towards institutional development and capacity-building to encourage academic links, joint degree programmes, staff visits and exchanges. The Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC) continued to work towards student mobility, internationalisation and institutional strengthening.

Currently comprising a group of 45 universities, CUSAC is committed to creating opportunities for their students to study for a period of up to a year in another Commonwealth university. Current work has focused on the preparation of a development and funding plan for the future stable and sustainable development of CUSAC in partnership with governments, NGOs and the private sector.

The CSFP remains one of the major avenues of student mobility, with more than 20,000 scholars having studied in other countries under the Plan. A report prepared for the Auckland CHOGM indicated that in 1995, although over 1,700 CSFP awards were given, there was some cause for concern: awards were offered by a relatively few countries – with Britain alone accounting for 60 per cent of the awards, Canada 10 per cent, followed by Australia and India. Pledges by other governments to offer new or additional awards have not yet been fully realised, in spite of the pledge by ministers in 1994 to strive to reach an agreed target of 2,000 CSFP awards by the year 2000. Consultations with a number of the current main awarding governments also indicate that budgetary constraints may lead some to cut back on the number of future awards.



Awards for three whose innovative projects sparked an interest in young people in science, technology and mathematics ... (from top) Chandrawathie Warakadenya (Sri Lanka), A Y Ravindran (Seychelles) and K M Bhatt (India)