
Foreword

To be considered among the frontrunners in the conceptualisation of educational policy and in the delivery of education provision must be music to the ears of policymakers and planners in the small states of the Commonwealth. They have long lived in the shadow of larger states. As recently as two decades ago, some small state analysts felt that, in spite of their numbers, the world community had not yet thought its way through the phenomenon of small states. Indeed, Sir Shridath Ramphal, a former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, believed that for the most part small states were ignored, imposed upon and generally discounted. Vulnerability and openness were the international community's mantras whenever the circumstances of small states were discussed. Their achievements in fashioning appropriate, workable and affordable responses to the challenges of scale were dismissed by some as making a virtue out of necessity. While it was universally acknowledged that small states have an ecology of their own, the unspoken understanding was that this could not be compared, or at least not favourably, with that of large states. The idea of learning from the South – particularly the small South – was not always palatable or popular.

The work of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the organisations that have contributed to this publication has helped keep the small states issue current over the past two and a half decades. This publication does two important things. First, it meets its stated objective in acting as a 'stimulus for policymakers and other analysts concerned with or engaged in the shaping of educational priorities and strategies for small states' in that it recognises and reassesses the impact and potential of their pioneering work in the field. Second, it helps to redress the imbalance in the published literature on the real scope and nature of educational development in the majority of the small states of the world.

The theme of the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM), 'Towards and Beyond Global Goals and Targets', epitomises the

approach that small states have generally adopted in pursuit of their development agendas – to continually extend their boundaries, look outwards and reach upwards. Educational planners and analysts such as Professor Errol Miller from the Caribbean have always recommended that policymakers in small states should adopt a global perspective, even while they operated at local level to ensure that education responded to small states’ immediate needs. The late Professor Emeritus and Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies (UWI), Rex Nettleford, also talked of ‘outward stretch but inward reach’. The authors of this publication concur with the assessment of these analysts that small states are ‘inherently international’ and therefore more inclined to look beyond their own borders, to think ‘outside of the box’ and to envision what lies beyond their current realities. It should come as no surprise that this study shows that many small states are already looking beyond the global goals and targets expressed, for example, in the Education for All (EFA) objectives and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to search for ways in which they can respond more meaningfully to the major external shocks and challenges of the contemporary global environment.

The educational priorities of the majority of Commonwealth small states are no longer simply the provision of basic education or universal primary education (UPE), or to increase access to education for girls. Today’s priorities also encompass a broader canvas relating to the potential for cross-sectoral and sustainable development. This involves how to incorporate the realities of climate change, migration and global interconnectedness in financial services, for example, into the school curriculum; how to equip citizens to respond to these new economic, environmental, cultural and political challenges within their own societies and in the wider world; how to provide quality higher education opportunities in the face of growing national indebtedness; and how to take advantage of the knowledge-based economy and be competitive in service-based markets. The elements that could make this possible are clearly identified in this study. These include the generation of local knowledge, both through locally driven and inspired research and through external collaboration; the fostering of innovative international partnerships and collaboration; the careful application of external assistance; integration, co-ordination and regulation within higher education; and the harnessing of the power of new information and communications technology (ICT). But for many education systems these still exist as disparate elements. What is also needed is the creativity, the imagination and the expertise to bring these together in realisable and sustainable ways that can benefit the broad range of small states identified in the study.

With the help of new information and communications technologies, small states are continuing to use more and more sophisticated arrangements to deal with the increasingly complex challenges of the new world order. But they are by no means out of the woods yet, as this study demonstrates in its analysis of the gaps that need to be filled and the imbalances between what small states need in order for them to respond meaningfully to changing global realities and the opportunities that present themselves to meet these needs. The challenges are many, the speed at which they present themselves is unrelenting, as the not-so-level playing field shifts and the goal posts keep moving. Against this backdrop, to simply continue to ask small states to implement outward-oriented development strategies and diversify the structure of their economies not only calls on them to take on a task of herculean proportions, but condemns them to a fate not far removed from that of Sisyphus.

This study goes well beyond such thinking to give fresh impetus to conceptualisations of educational policy generated by small states' planners and to reinforce confidence by recognising how small states have something of their own to contribute when educational issues and priorities are being discussed. Small states have challenged global agendas, based on their own tried and tested experiences, and on their own knowledge derived from locally-grounded and contextually-relevant experience and research.

This research and publication initiative is one of several commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat in its continuing efforts to serve its smaller member states and to support their educational advance and development. It gives well-deserved visibility to a group of countries that has long been soliciting consideration as a special constituency by reason of the challenges posed by small size. It will have a significant impact within small states and will bring to the attention of the wider international community what the majority of the small states of the Commonwealth have long contended: that while they must continue to seek external assistance to implement their development strategies, they know best what their own needs are and what their priorities should be. They have much to contribute to the international discourse and to policy deliberations worldwide.

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