

---

# Summary

The Commonwealth classes 33 of its member countries as small states,<sup>1</sup> adopting a broad definition which includes, alongside countries with a population of less than 1.5 million, those larger states that share many similar characteristics – Botswana, The Gambia, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia and Papua New Guinea. Small states thus comprise over half of the total membership. Within the group, most are at the lower end of the population scale: 28 have populations below two million, 22 have populations below one million, and 13 have populations below 250,000. The Commonwealth thus has a strong mandate to give special attention to small states, and a considerable history of having done so.

The 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2009. The fact that this was 50 years after the first conference in Oxford, UK, in 1959 provided a good reason to look back before looking forward. The Commonwealth Secretariat has taken a leadership role in identifying distinctive features of education in small states. The Ministers recognised that this work contains much of value that could usefully be revisited and extended.

The Ministers also recognised that circumstances and modalities have changed significantly over the decades. Changing global contexts that have created dramatic challenges for small states include those relating to climate change, to financial markets and their interconnectedness, to patterns of international migration and to the ongoing intensification of globalisation. With regard to the opportunities brought by globalisation, the internet is seen by all to have significantly reduced the isolation of small states and has created previously unimaginable opportunities to access expertise.

The theme of the 17th CCEM was ‘Towards and Beyond Global Goals and Targets’. Drawing on pre-planned consultations and discussions with ministers of education and senior officials from small states, combined with a detailed programme of original research, this book revisits the pertinence of early

---

Commonwealth work, examines the impact of changing global contexts, documents the changing nature and significance of recent and contemporary education policy priorities, and advances the case for new or strengthened initiatives for education in small states, including those supported by the Secretariat and other organisations.

Key findings highlight how:

- Previous conceptual and theoretical work on education in small states sponsored by the Secretariat remains pertinent for new generations of policy-makers and planners. This includes work on school leadership, management and planning, teacher education and supply, and qualifications frameworks.
- Contemporary priorities are especially concerned with how small states can respond to major external shocks and challenges within the environmental, economic, cultural and political domains. In the light of this, future priorities for attention include work on: (i) innovative ways in which education systems in small states can contribute to combating and mitigating climate change; (ii) monitoring the impact of global economic downturns on the provision of basic education in small states; (iii) studies of aid to education in small states – its volume, predictability, forms, culture, reporting requirements, benefits and the extent to which it heightens levels of dependency and obligation; and (iv) more detailed studies of education, training and the labour market in the context of international skills migration.
- Commonwealth small states are relatively advanced in their progress towards basic education global goals and targets.
- The EFA targets and MDGs remain relevant for small states, though their pressing priorities often lie beyond those that currently command the attention of larger states and international development agencies.
- Most small states have achieved almost universal access to basic education.
- Many small states have either achieved or are close to gender parity in primary and secondary schooling. In some, the disparity, especially at secondary level, lies in favour of girls. This is a distinctive priority for future attention.
- Small states have been some of the first countries to shift educational priorities towards issues of retention, quality, equity, inclusion and skills training, and in doing so they have generated much insightful and valuable experience from which others can learn.
- International support for education in small states remains strategically important if existing achievements are to be consolidated and sustained.

- 
- Increased flexibility in the direction of external support is necessary if it is to target small state strategies and priorities that focus upon ways of improving retention, quality, equity and inclusivity in basic education, skills development strategies for youth and adults that are consistent with local needs, and increased commitment to higher education.
  - The rise of the knowledge economy has underpinned the expansion and strengthening of higher education, with related implications for the harnessing of ICT, the creation of quality-assurance mechanisms, and improved co-ordination, integration and regulation. The realistic application of ICT in small states can do much to help to transform the future development, management and reach of higher education.
  - The potential of locally grounded research to inform educational policy and practice deserves increased attention – as does the strengthening of educational research capacity within small states.
  - National, regional and international partnerships and collaborations continue to hold much potential for the success of future developments.
  - Commonwealth agencies, including the Commonwealth Secretariat, have a strategic role to play in supporting small states in realising their contemporary educational priorities.
  - In pursuing the Secretariat's *Education Strategic Plan 2010–2012* some priority should be given to the generation of appropriate financial and human resources, to cross-sectoral co-ordination and to strengthened focus, in line with input and feedback from well grounded stakeholder groups within small states, including those involved in relevant research.
  - The successful track record of the Secretariat in education in small states gives it a clear focus and comparative advantage in ongoing support of such work in the future.

