1. New Challenges and Opportunities

A decade into the 21st century, partnerships in international and educational development are at least as important as they were during previous eras. In many respects, however, contexts and modalities for collaboration have changed. Especially evident is the increased intensity of globalisation, which brings both challenges and opportunities. As noted by Bacchus (2008: 141), getting the best from these developments is something that small states cannot do by themselves 'because they are usually "takers" rather than "makers" of the world economic policies'. The global economic crisis which commenced at the end of 2008 hit at least some small states disproportionately hard, especially those that rely heavily on banking and tourism (World Bank, 2009a). Trade liberalisation has been a mixed blessing for many small states, and in some countries the issues of migration and brain drain have become even more prominent than they were before. Climate change has also brought major challenges, especially for island states vulnerable to rising sea levels and intensified hurricanes (Sem, 2007).

More positively, small states have greatly benefited from the technological advances associated with globalisation (Favaro, 2008). Previous generations felt that small states were disadvantaged, for example, by lack of ability to establish specialist libraries and to gain specialist professional advice. The internet permits many households and institutions in small states to have the same access as households and institutions in large states. Moreover, small states are using technology to make productive links over vast areas. Especially exciting is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), for which the seeds were sown in 2000 during the CCEM held in Halifax, Canada (Daniel and West, 2008; Daniel, 2010). Other changes include an expanded demand for education. A few small states are still some way from achieving the goal of universal primary education, but most are well advanced and indeed many are close to achieving universal secondary education. As a

result of this progress at primary and secondary levels, demand has expanded for tertiary provision. Further, the expansion of tertiary education is now increasingly prioritised in the global knowledge economy of which small states, like their larger counterparts, wish to be part.

Such considerations highlight the demands on policymakers and planners in small states, who may need additional or to some extent different skills from their counterparts in larger states (Bray, 1992; Atchoarena, 1993; Baldacchino and Farrugia, 2002; Puamau and Teasdale, 2005). Policymakers and planners need strategies to benefit from the fact that small states are sovereign entities, while handling the demands that this may bring for participation in international meetings and other events. Professionals in small states may also need to be more multifunctional than their counterparts in larger states, who are more easily able to specialise, e.g. in aspects of the curriculum, financing and aid negotiation. Small states may be more responsive to reform, since a single actor can have a greater proportionate influence than would be the case in a larger state; but this may bring challenges of volatility (Box 1). Planners in small states are also more likely to face issues of dependency than their counterparts in larger states. These and other issues need further investigation in a range of contexts to identify commonalities across small states, while also recognising the diversity arising from ongoing changes in specific economic, cultural and socio-political contexts.

In tune with the Commonwealth's respect for and understanding of difference, it is important to note the diversity of small state contexts. Any search for common 'best practice' can underplay the significance of differing contextual factors across small states in shaping educational policy and practice. This highlights the dangers that can result from uncritical international transfer of policy models, and the benefits that can be gained from more subtle, mediated and contextualised ways of sharing experience and learning from elsewhere (Crossley and Watson, 2003). At the same time, small states have much in common, and this generates distinctive perspectives and planning priorities that often differ from those in global frameworks. Thus, one may ask how well current global educational agendas and discourses deal with the needs of small states, and to what extent small states look towards or beyond global goals and targets.

There are also differences between the factors shaping global agendas and those driving small state priorities. Commonwealth Secretariat work during the 1980s and 1990s on the distinctive features of education in small states focused largely on the internal workings of education systems. Today, priorities are more concerned with how small states can respond meaningfully to major external

Box 1. Small states and sensitivity to reform

In small states, the role and impact of individuals may be greater than in larger states. Remarks by Schweisfurth (2008: 69–70) with reference to The Gambia illustrate this point. 'Even a single teacher,' observes Schweisfurth, 'can gain the attention of a wide audience more easily than in a more populated system with more bureaucratic layers.' Impact can be extended by the polyvalent roles demanded in small states. 'For example, head teachers often function additionally as inspectors and advisors. This means that one person attending a workshop could potentially have a dual impact, both within their own schools and more widely.' Single institutions, especially at the level of higher education, can also have a much greater impact in small systems than would be the case in large systems.

These features, of course, have other implications. Sensitivity to the impact of individuals can increase volatility, and small systems may lack the checks and balances that are more evident in larger systems. In addition, the fact that individuals must play polyvalent roles may limit the extent to which they can secure depth in specific functions. These are among the challenges with which policymakers and planners in small states must grapple.

shocks and challenges – economic, environmental, cultural, and political (Briguglio and Kisanga, 2004; Pillay and Elliot, 2005). Small states need to secure the human and financial resources to enable their citizens to meet these challenges in their own societies and in the wider world. Co-operation and education are important means of addressing such challenges.