4. Conceptualising and Delivering Basic Education

Basic education can be challenging to define. In some settings it is seen as being coterminous with primary education, while elsewhere it is taken to include some years of secondary and/or pre-primary education. The concept of basic education is also relevant to adult learning, and in this context refers to content rather than years of schooling. The MDGs stress the objective of universal primary education, but the EFA objectives are broader and include a focus on both early childhood and adult learning. UNESCO (2009b, p. 4) observes that basic education 'covers notions such as fundamental, elementary and primary/secondary education'. It adds that basic education 'is directed to the full development of the human personality' and that the state 'guarantees the right to basic education of good quality based on minimum standards'.

An overlapping concept concerns the period of compulsory education. In Commonwealth small states, compulsory education ranges from six to 12 years of provision, beginning when children are between four and seven years old (Table 3). Most education systems require 10 or 12 years and begin at six years old. In many cases, compulsory education includes mandatory years of pre-primary, primary and lower secondary schooling.[12]

While definitions vary, it is universally agreed that at least some form of basic education is a human right. This was stated in the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) and repeated in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28). The report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding, chaired by Amartya Sen, has drawn further attention to this matter (Sen, 2007). Basic education is also widely accepted in the international literature and policy discourse as essential for development and poverty reduction (see e.g. Lee, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2006; Lewin, 2007). For the purposes of this book, the term basic education refers to

Table 3. Compulsory education in Commonwealth small states

	Years of compulsory education	Compulsory education begins at age
Below 100,000		
Tuvalu	8	7
Nauru	11	6
St Kitts & Nevis	12	5
Dominica	12	5
Antigua & Barbuda	12	5
Seychelles	10	6
Kiribati	10	6
100,000–250,000		
Tonga	9	6
Grenada	12	5
St Vincent & the Grenadines	11	5
St Lucia	12	5
Samoa	10	5
Vanuatu	7	6
250,000–1million		
Barbados	11	4
Maldives	7	6
Belize	10	5
Bahamas, The	12	5
Brunei Darussalam	6[a]	6
Malta	11	5
Solomon Islands	6[a]	7[b]
Guyana	10	6
Cyprus	9	6
1–1.5 million		
Swaziland	7	6
Mauritius	6	6
Trinidad & Tobago	7	5
Above 1.5 million		
Gambia, The	6[a]	6[b]
Botswana	10	6
Lesotho	7	6
Namibia	10	6
Jamaica	6	6
Singapore	11	6
Papua New Guinea	9	6

[a]Number of years of primary education, not total years of compulsory education
[b]Number of years of secondary education, not beginning age of compulsory education
Source: Commonwealth Secretariat.

educational provision for children which, depending on national definitions, may or may not include some years of pre-primary and/or secondary schooling.

Access

The global picture

Access to basic education has been the major priority for education authorities worldwide for many decades. The 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990), gave the agenda particular focus and momentum was maintained by the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal (UNESCO, 2000). Enrolment in primary schooling has greatly increased, with the number of out-of-school children falling by 33 million between 1999 and 2007 (UNESCO, 2010: 1). However, much remains to be done to meet the global goals for UPE, and this is a particular challenge for the poorest countries. The 2010 edition of UNESCO's *EFA Global Monitoring Report* observes (UNESCO, 2010: 1) that 72 million children are missing out on their right to education simply because of where they were born or who their families are, and that 54 per cent of these children are girls. The report indicates that if current trends continue, 56 million children will be out of school in 2015. It highlights the need not only to maintain efforts within existing frameworks, but also to modify approaches and reconceptualise access in ways that capture contextual diversity.

Attention to basic education access was further strengthened by the EFA Fast Track Initiative (FTI), launched in 2002.[13] The FTI is a mechanism that is designed to assist low income countries to develop technically robust sector plans and facilitate additional funding through their implementation. Among the 40 countries endorsed for assistance at the end of 2009, seven were small states and three of these, The Gambia, Guyana and Lesotho, were members of the Commonwealth (Fast Track Initiative, 2010a: 6). Evaluation of the FTI's work at mid-term showed that much remained to be done (Fast Track Initiative, 2010b). From the evaluation report, the annual *EFA Global Monitoring Reports* and other sources it is clear that the issue of access to basic education remains a global priority that requires continued international attention. However, for many small states the picture differs from that in larger countries.

The small states situation

The 2010 *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2010) indicates that 18 of 24 Commonwealth countries with populations under five million for which data were available have reached an 80 per cent primary net enrolment rate (NER) or better, with 11 of these having reached 90 per cent (see Appendix

2). However, in certain Commonwealth small states, such as Solomon Islands, The Gambia and Nauru, access to basic education remains a major challenge, with primary NERs remaining below 75 per cent (Appendix 2).[14] At secondary level, nine of the 26 Commonwealth small states with populations under five million for which data are available have reached the 80 per cent secondary NER or better, with three having reached 90 per cent (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009a). Many Commonwealth small states thus have an early record of achieving universal primary education. According to the first *EFA Global Monitoring Report*, published in 2002, eight of the nine Commonwealth small states (<1.5 million) for which there were data at that time had already achieved 90 per cent+ primary NERs (UNESCO, 2002).

Another indicator that small states are doing well in access to basic education is their longstanding effort to focus on secondary and tertiary provision. While globally many international development agencies are now paying renewed attention to secondary and tertiary education, some Commonwealth small states had begun to prioritise post-secondary provision as early as the 1985 pan-Commonwealth meeting in Mauritius (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986; Crossley and Holmes, 1999). This was partly because of the continuing challenge faced by small states in handling unit costs with small numbers of secondary and tertiary education places and labour markets which are sensitive to small fluctuations in supply and demand.

Retention

While most Commonwealth small states have achieved the major goals of initial enrolment in basic education, continued attention needs to be given to the retention of students throughout the period of compulsory schooling. Issues of drop-out also require focus on repetition, which is often a precursor to dropping out. Retention in basic education, of course, also impacts on students' engagement in secondary and higher education and on their potential for future income generation. Factors determining school retention include participation in early childhood education, health, and respect for indigenous knowledge and local languages (Box 2).

While retention is by no means a challenge exclusive to small states, it is particularly important in this context because of its links to system efficiency and cost-effectiveness when each 'loss' of scarce human resources has a major impact upon society as a whole. The failure to hold children within education systems is considered in economic terms to be a form of wastage (Eisemon, 1997; Brophy, 2006); it is arguable that small states need to use their human and financial resources even more efficiently than do larger states.

Box 2. Factors influencing school retention in Botswana

A 2008 study of the isolated Ngamiland north-west district in Botswana contributes to the research on basic school retention. It argues that factors leading to the poor retention of rural ethnic minority children include policy decisions that fail to recognise the impact of language and identity differences; in-school factors such as infrastructure, the language of instruction and corporal punishment; and out-of-school factors, including community poverty, cultural traditions, illiteracy, age of school entry and early pregnancy (Pansiri, 2008).

Nevertheless, the overall statistical picture for primary school retention in Commonwealth small states is relatively positive. Primary completion rates are also well above the world average and above the more general levels for the respective regions. Furthermore, in cases where rates are below the regional average, significant improvement between 1999 and 2005 has been documented (UNESCO, 2008).

Early childhood education

Recognising the link between enrolment in early childhood education and improved retention for the completion of compulsory education, the record that Commonwealth small states have in providing access to early childhood education and care is reflected in Appendix 2. This shows that gross enrolment rates (GERs) in pre-primary education range from 55 to 125, with many systems at or beyond 100.

While ways of improving retention stand out as priority strategies within this present study, the enrolment data for Commonwealth small states noted above also suggest possible links between a commitment to high levels of provision in the pre-primary sector and 100 per cent NERs at the primary level (UNESCO, 2010). With the EFA 2015 deadline rapidly approaching, policy-makers and planners within systems that have achieved much in terms of access are therefore increasingly prioritising ways of reaching the 'last 10 per cent', to achieve the goal of universal primary education. As indicated above, this includes many Commonwealth small states – whose experience may well prove helpful for other systems, large and small alike. In Appendix 2, for example, small states that have greater than 90 per cent NERs at the primary level can be seen to place a high priority on pre-primary provision. Further research is needed to understand the significance of such relationships, but the importance of sound early childhood education is emerging as a priority worldwide, and it is increasingly clear that high levels of access and retention, in all sectors, are

closely related to issues of quality, secure foundations for learning and the provision of relevant, rewarding and engaging learning experiences for all.

Quality

Conceptualisations of quality

Quality of education can be approached in two different ways. The economic or utilitarian approach to quality of education has strong links with human capital theory and economic notions of development. This tends to measure quality through learning outcomes assessed by standardised examinations. The rights-based approach to quality is linked to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). It stresses child-centred approaches, inclusion and democratic participation, and gives particular attention to equality in monitoring outcomes. These approaches may be blended in forms that can be particularly relevant for the complex quality demands of small states.

Education quality trajectories in small states

In an increasingly globalised environment, many small states recognise the need to position themselves as knowledge economies through strategies examined in the Commonwealth publication *Working Smart and Small* (te Velde and Saeed Qureshi, 2008). National development plans in the Caribbean, for example, aim to create competitive advantage through human skills development, including technological, entrepreneurial and managerial capabilities (Bernard, 2003). Such plans have strong implications for the purposes of education and how quality may be perceived. Education for participation in knowledge economies requires more than the simple transfer of skills and knowledge to students; they must also learn to be critical and creative (Bacchus, 2008). These skills are unlikely to be fully developed during the basic education cycle, so a foundation beyond basic literacy and numeracy is now increasingly prioritised. This allows small states to move away from the common practice of 'importing' entrepreneurs towards a more effective model of delivering entrepreneurship (Baldacchino, 2008). Fostering such creativity and critical thinking is largely dependent upon the nature and quality of education (Wint, 2002). Bacchus, (2008: 142) summarised the complexity of this challenge:

> While innovative approaches are generally necessary in all educational systems they are of particular importance in small states to help them survive, both economically and culturally, by exploiting more fully their already slender resources and not be perpetually dependent on other societies for aid.

This statement points to other dimensions of educational quality which are of great importance to small states – those of cultural relevance and human rights (Brock, 2011). Differences in the quality of education in culturally diverse and multi-ethnic small states such as Fiji Islands, Guyana and Mauritius have implications for the greater inclusion of ethnic subgroups in national educational programmes. Such diversity is certainly evident in larger countries, but its impact on education and social cohesion as a whole can be felt more acutely in small states (Pirie, 2000; Trimikliniotis, 2004).

Sen's capability approach acknowledges economic imperatives but recognises that economic growth cannot sensibly be treated as an end in itself. Development, Sen remarked (1999: 14), 'has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedoms we enjoy'. Sen's approach thus gives space to the incorporation of human capital and economic priorities within the context of sensitivity to local values in a balanced way. Sen has had a considerable influence on pan-Commonwealth policies and his work is as applicable to small states as it is to larger ones.

Education quality initiatives in small states

While conceptualisations of educational quality in small states necessarily vary according to context, some small states have played pioneering roles. At the 2000 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Halifax, Canada, the Commonwealth put special emphasis on the improvement of school quality by launching the School Improvement Programme in Small States (SIPSS). Initiatives launched or strengthened as a result of this programme have included school performance measurement in Seychelles, gender equity initiatives in The Gambia, improvement of school interpersonal environment and culture in Trinidad and Tobago, and literacy and language improvement in Malta (Degazon-Johnson, 2003).

Two core areas for quality are the curriculum and pedagogy. In past decades, internationally inspired initiatives designed to promote curriculum reform as a way to improve basic education quality have often focused on leadership training (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1994) and textbook provision and the production and use of teacher support materials (Crossley and Murby, 1994). While these remain important, today more attention is being given to curriculum reforms designed to focus on ways of knowing and learning, often to prepare students for active contribution to technologically-advanced knowledge economies. Emphases on new forms of creativity and critical thinking may require delivery methods that include the incorporation of information and communication technologies and learner-centred pedagogies. The Commonwealth has priori-

tised teacher training in ICT as part of its *Education Strategic Plan 2010–2012* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2010). Care nevertheless needs to be taken to ensure that curriculum and pedagogic reforms are consistent with local cultural, contextual and professional realities if successful implementation is to be achieved (Crossley, 2010).

Box 3. Curriculum and pedagogic reform in Botswana

A recent critique (Tabulawa, 2009) of Botswana's curriculum reform under the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) stresses the importance of a national approach to educational quality that balances financial and utilitarian considerations with a more culturally sensitive human rights-based approach. While the RNPE made learner-centredness the national pedagogy as a means to preparing students for competition in a new global market, Tabulawa argues that this pedagogy 'may not be congruent with the socio-cultural context of Botswana, making it difficult for teachers to adopt it' (2009: 98). This example reveals how national approaches to educational quality must be capable of balancing local contextual factors with national economic imperatives.

Focus on quality has necessarily required methods of assessment. The most obvious method in the domain of academic achievement is examinations. The Commonwealth Secretariat has sponsored work on policies and practices in examination systems in small states (Bray and Steward, 1998; Bray, 2001). This work has reviewed strategies for conducting external examinations, particularly at the end of the secondary cycle, bearing in mind the balance needed by small states between national relevance and international portability of qualifications, and the technical demands that the organisation of examinations may impose on countries with small bureaucracies. The Caribbean Examinations Council is a very significant body which organises regional examinations in consultation with national authorities; the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) plays a comparable role, albeit in a less centralised way. In Africa, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) serves The Gambia, as well as its much larger neighbours, including Nigeria and Ghana. However, the fact that other regional bodies have ceased to exist, including the East African Examinations Council (EAEC) and the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland Schools Examinations Council (UBLS/SEC), underlines the challenges that regional bodies face. Some small states prefer to use the services of external providers such as the University of Cambridge Local

Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), while others prefer to operate entirely on their own. This diversity shows again that no single model is likely to be uniformly followed by all small states, and that in each setting the authorities must devise arrangements which suit their own needs in the context of political objectives, historical circumstances and available professional expertise.

Box 4. Context sensitivity and curriculum reform in Papua New Guinea

In Papua New Guinea, a new outcomes-based curriculum was introduced nationally in primary schools from 2004 (NDOE, 2003) and in secondary schools from 2008 (NDOE, 2006). The new curriculum was intended to be 'inclusive' and hence was 'designed to meet the needs of all students irrespective of their abilities, gender, geographic locations, cultural and language backgrounds, or their socio-economic backgrounds' (NDOE, 2002: 25).

However, research carried out in primary schools in the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea revealed considerable curriculum non-compliance among teachers (LeFanu, 2011). For instance, rather than giving students significant control over their own learning as required by the curriculum (e.g. by allowing students to select their assignments), teachers tended to retain control of this process.

Interviews with the teachers revealed that there were numerous reasons for the disparity between the requirements of the curriculum and the actual practice of the teachers. First, many teachers admitted they were unable to implement the curriculum. They attributed this to various factors, including lack of access to in-service training and key curriculum documents, including syllabuses and teachers' guides; a serious shortage of textbooks; large class sizes; and tensions between the requirements of the curriculum and those of the national examination system. Second, the teachers did not believe that the new curriculum always represented the best way of meeting the educational needs of their students. In particular, they believed that 'teacher-centred' pedagogical approaches such as teacher exposition and rote learning still had an important role to play, particularly given the resilience of traditional Melanesian attitudes to teaching and learning in Papua New Guinea.

Also worth noting is tension between reforms at national level and implementation at school level. In Papua New Guinea, implementation of curricular and pedagogic reform has been especially problematic at school level. Researchers have shown how international agencies and agendas have dominated national educational policy formation and implementation at the expense of local input and appropriate sensitivity to the contextual factors at national, provincial and school levels (Webster, 1997, 2000; Ako, 2002; LeFanu, 2011).

A further element that is relevant to quality of education concerns the teaching force. Alongside the discussion of retention of pupils examined above are questions about retention of teachers. Iredale *et al.* (2009: 125) examined the implications of this matter for New Zealand, Cook Islands, Fiji Islands and Vanuatu. They noted the growing mobility of teachers and asserted that:

> This is making it more difficult for small countries, especially in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific, to meet the demands of universal primary education under the MDGs and UNESCO's EFA goals.

The Commonwealth is concerned about such international flows of teachers, and in particular the loss of highly-skilled personnel from small states. In 2004, education ministers adopted the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol (CTRP) which seeks to balance 'the rights of teachers to migrate internationally on a temporary or permanent basis, against the need to protect the integrity of national education systems and to prevent the exploitation of scarce human resources of poor countries'. A review of implementation (Ochs and Jackson, 2009) focused strongly on small states, noting that some small states are recruiters rather than suppliers of teachers. Recruiting countries include Antigua and Barbuda,The Bahamas, Mauritius, Seychelles and Swaziland, as well as larger countries such as South Africa and the UK. However, small states are dominantly suppliers of teachers, including Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Lesotho. The Ministry of Education of Guyana has reported that it needed to double the number of teachers trained each year in order to have an adequate supply after loss through migration. Clause 3.2 in the Commonwealth Protocol observes that:

> … the organised recruitment of teachers may be detrimental to the education systems of source countries, and to the costly human resource investments they have made in teacher education. Recruiting and source countries should agree on mutually acceptable measures to mitigate any harmful impact of such recruitment.

At the same time, source countries benefit from remittances, and the Commonwealth has been very mindful that such recruitment and mobility cannot (and arguably should not) be prohibited altogether. This, nevertheless, remains a priority for ongoing attention.

Equity and inclusion

The contemporary priority?

Equity and inclusion increasingly dominate international education agendas and priorities for educational policy and planning worldwide. The EFA agenda

now takes this position by focusing on the marginalised. The 2010 edition of the *EFA Global Monitoring Report*, entitled *Reaching the Marginalized* (UNESCO, 2010), stresses the importance of identifying and providing education for individuals who suffer from mutually-reinforcing disadvantages. The report provides a deprivation and marginalisation in education (DME) dataset and presents an inclusive education triangle to help education systems combat marginalisation. The report calls for equity-based targets and monitoring, while stressing the need for policies that 'address underlying causes such as social inequalities, gender disparities, ethnic and linguistic disadvantages, and gaps between geographic areas' (UNESCO, 2010: 11). Initiatives in Solomon Islands illustrate the potential for community support to reduce disadvantage (Box 5).

Gender equity

The global approach to gender in education is often seen in terms of girls' empowerment. This is evidenced in many programmes, such as the UN Girls Education Initiative, the UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality and the 2010 E4 (Engendering Empowerment: Education and Equality) conference held in Dakar, Senegal. Gender equity priorities focus first upon raising girls' school enrolment. Among Commonwealth small states in

Box 5. Addressing isolation: schooling in rural Solomon Islands

Rurality and its impact upon the education of children in the Solomon Islands was the topic of a paper presented by Stanley Houma at the 2009 Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers, held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Houma noted that 84 per cent of the population of the Solomon Islands live in rural communities, that 31 per cent of students enrolled in Grades 1–3 do not continue to Grades 4–6 and that a further 30 per cent of Grade 6 students do not proceed to secondary education. The majority of students who do not progress live in rural areas. Houma described schooling in the Solomon Islands as closed and unaccommodating. The way to improve education equity for students and communities in rural areas, he argued, is through the creation of community learning centres that are open to 'those beyond the enrolled population', offering a wide range of educational services, including community libraries and distance learning. This, Houma suggested (2009: 69), could lead to the establishment of village learning groups aimed at enhancing 'meaningful community-wide education in rural Solomon Islands'.

which this is a priority are Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, where gender parity indices (GPIs) favour boys at both primary and secondary levels (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009d). Until recently, this was the case in The Gambia, where boys' enrolment was higher than girls' across all education levels – a disparity that was fuelled by 'poverty, fears of pregnancy, high opportunity costs for schooling and unfriendly school environments' (Degazon-Johnson, 2003: 128). Between 1999 and 2007, government initiatives in conjunction with community actions in The Gambia achieved a dramatic change from 0.86 to 1.07 GPI (UNESCO, 2010).

Other small states, particularly in the Caribbean, show a different gender equity picture. According to the Commonwealth Secretariat (2009d), 23 of 31 Commonwealth small states for which there are data have GPIs that favour boys at primary level, but at secondary level 21 of 29 countries for which there are data favour girls. This disparity does not occur as a global phenomenon until the tertiary education level. In fact, at secondary level, the global GPI is 0.92 at primary and only 0.95 at secondary (UNESCO, 2010). While small states do not want to work against girls' empowerment, much of their own gender policy planning needs to prioritise education for boys.

In the Caribbean, one reason for the disparity at secondary level is a high boys' drop-out rate. In Trinidad and Tobago, for example, 2006 and 2008 boys' drop-out rates were higher than those for girls in all but two school districts and 14 per cent higher nationwide (Government of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009; see also De Lisle *et al.*, 2010). Research has pointed to possible explanations for early male drop-out, including 'harvesting' of boys into the workforce; a wage gap favouring males; the targeting of boys for participation in illegal globalised activities such as drugs and small weapons; and a high incidence of boys' engagement in the music and sports industries (Gayle and Levy, 2007; Bailey, 2009). Box 6 presents data for Jamaica.

Beyond priorities for enrolment and retention, evidence is beginning to show that girls, globally, are achieving better at school. Bernard, however, while writing about the Caribbean regional perspective, cautions against viewing 'male underachievement' as being solely gender based and argues that 'this concern needs to be located within the wider context of examining the ways in which gender operates and intersects with other variables to influence educational and eventually life outcomes for both sexes' (Bernard, 2003: 108). These intersecting variables, Bernard argues, include socio-economic status, family structure and socialisation practices. Similarly, Bailey (2009: 103) argues that 'a distinction needs to be made between male underachievement and male under-participation'. While there are fewer boys in higher levels of schooling,

Box 6. The gender challenge in Jamaica

Jamaica has been the focus of much research on boys' educational participation, drop-out and achievement (Beckles, 1996; Jha and Kelleher, 2006). Indicators of both enrolment and achievement favour girls, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture, together with Jamaican sociologists (Evans, 1999; Chevannes, 2002; Bailey, 2003), have identified this gender inequality as based on academic underparticipation, leading to poorer performance. Research has identified boys' survival rates from enrolment to the end of secondary schooling as almost 50 per cent lower than those of girls. According to CARICOM's Commission on Youth Development (2010), a much higher percentage of boys drop out of the school system than girls, with 'drop-out' young people (aged 15–24) – mainly boys – making up 30 per cent of the total youth population (Government of Jamaica, 2009). Of this youth population, 26.2 per cent of males (compared with 7.9 per cent of females) are considered illiterate. Twenty-five per cent of those who drop out of secondary schooling have only reached Grade 9 or less (Government of Jamaica, 2009).

Studies have identified a number of underlying social issues that contribute to this problem, including the historical hegemony of black Caribbean masculinity; a culture of male marginalisation linked to curriculum and student–teacher interaction; absenteeism leading to underperformance; boys' participation in crime and violence linked to socio-economic background; and self-perceptions connected to gendered values of education.

they are clustered in sciences and technical crafts, which she deems the more 'critical areas of the curriculum'. One effort to address these priority areas, which takes into account the concept of multiple variables as raised by Bernard, is the Caribbean Community's (CARICOM) gender mainstreaming strategy. This regional strategy addresses policy and programmatic levels of inequality in the sectors of education, health, and labour (CARICOM Secretariat, 2003).

Looking beyond the Commonwealth to lessons from other small states, a study in the Netherlands Antilles researched boys' underachievement and showed the varied factors leading to male underperformance, the outcomes of which led to recent legislative changes to address these disparities (Narain, 2010). The study showed that multiple factors lead to boys' underperformance, including at-home primary socialisation, female-oriented institutional factors (such as high female staff ratios) and a failure to take account of the difference between boys' and girls' developmental pace. It is argued that this combination of factors, occurring at an early stage of education, can have considerable and negative knock-on effects

throughout and beyond boys' school careers. Outcomes of the study include a data-driven gender policy and change in legislation which extended the age for compulsory education from 6 to 16 years old to 4 to 18 years old.[15]

Reaching other marginalised groups

Achieving EFA at the global level, as shown in this section, is increasingly about the difficulty of reaching the hard to reach. Small states have been prioritising this need for some time now, and there is much that others can learn from their experience. This goes well beyond the issue of gender disparity into other arenas, such as special needs provision (Cohen, 2009; Mitchell, 2009) and cultural and linguistic equality (Coxon and Munce, 2008; Dhanarajan, 2009). Here, small states have an equally strong history of awareness, research and action. This is evidenced, for example, in a recent report on the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education, which have supported 'sharp interventions in line with national educational priorities that may not otherwise have been available through bilateral or other modalities of funding arrangements' (Puamau, 2009: 1). PRIDE national sub-projects have covered a wide spectrum, including inclusive education, language and culture (Box 7).

Box 7. Language, culture and inclusive education: recent PRIDE projects

The Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education was designed as a seven-year project (2004–2010) implemented by the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific and jointly funded by the European Union and New Zealand aid. The project has served 15 Pacific small states and territories, eight of which are part of the Commonwealth. PRIDE projects that have focused on marginalised groups by addressing language, culture and inclusive education include the following:

Samoa: Development of a sustainable system of inclusive education for children with disabilities

Solomon Islands: Support for children and youth who are visually impaired; a vernacular education project; and a study of the supply, demand and deployment of special education teachers

Tonga: Development of a Tongan inclusive education pilot project

Vanuatu: Support for development of language policy and inclusive education

More information can be found on the PRIDE website: www.usp.ac.fj/pride

Extending the boundaries

While basic education has dominated international and national agendas worldwide since the early 1990s, the experience of small states demonstrates how their own priorities have differed from international preoccupations with primary education. As evidenced above, even in the 1990s many Commonwealth small states accorded greater priority to new initiatives in secondary and tertiary education than they did to the primary sector (see also Crocombe and Meleisea, 1998). The case of the Belize Primary Education Development Project (BPEDP) provides a clear example. This seven-year, US$12.64 million initiative funded by the Belize Government, the World Bank and the then UK Overseas Development Administration began in 1992 and aimed to improve the quality and effectiveness of primary education (Crossley and Bennett, 1997). Yet the country had a strong desire at that time to focus on secondary and tertiary education reform. Educational planners in Belize thus had the difficult task of reconciling national priorities for post-primary developments with international agendas that favoured investment in the primary sector (Van der Eyken *et al.*, 1995).

It can also be seen that many small states extended their conceptions of basic education to the lower secondary sector well before this became a global pattern. Their concerns to add pre-primary provision to the basic education equation also often emerged earlier. Moreover, there is much evidence to suggest that many small states have worked hard to retain investment in adult education through engaging with lifelong learning initiatives, consistent with the original Jomtien definition and scope for basic education. In fact, non-formal education was identified as a local priority in the Pacific Islands throughout the 1980s, designed to meet the needs of the rural and urban poor, especially adults and the unschooled (Crossley *et al.*, 1987).

In conclusion, it is argued that small states have long pushed and extended the boundaries of basic education. They have therefore developed considerable experience from which others may learn. Their priorities have ranged across different sectors of education and have not been confined to the narrow concept of basic education that has tended to dominate international discourse.