5. Priorities for Higher Education

Planning for higher education

The importance of higher education is increasingly recognised as small states seek ways to cope with and take advantage of the knowledge economy and service-based markets (Bourne and Dass, 2003; Sweeney, 2003; Atchoarena *et al.*, 2008; Bacchus, 2008). Knowledge economies require highly educated citizens to innovate, collaborate, research and adapt within an increasingly complex world. In consequence, many strategy documents of Commonwealth small states contain concepts such as lifelong learning, partnership and the development of science and technology, alongside investment in higher education and research capacity (Malta Policy Unit, 2005; Botswana Tertiary Education Council, 2007; Mauritius Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2008; Nolan, 2008 [Seychelles]; Louisy, 2010).

Demand for tertiary education also comes from the expansion of secondary education, which itself follows the expansion of primary education resulting from the EFA movement. As noted above, in a growing number of countries, including almost all small states, lower secondary education has become part of compulsory basic education. While the world average GER in secondary education was 66 per cent in 2006 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2008: 91), most small states had rates above 70 per cent. The exceptions among Commonwealth small states were Lesotho, The Gambia, Namibia, Solomon Islands and Nauru. Even in these countries, education systems had expanded at the base and were therefore exerting pressures at secondary and post-secondary levels.

Expansion of higher education is accompanied and facilitated by diversification. Initially, secondary or post-secondary colleges were upgraded and integrated into new tertiary institutions, such as multipurpose community colleges (Grant-Woodham and Morris, 2009; Wolff, 2009). In the Caribbean, this was evident in Dominica, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, and

St Kitts and Nevis. Other small states have created or are planning to create national universities based on the amalgamation of existing tertiary education institutions. This is the case, for example, in Samoa, Seychelles, St Lucia, Cyprus, Cape Verde, Maldives, and Antigua and Barbuda. These institutions are a clear expression of national sovereignty and pride, and develop a concept of the university that is tightly linked to national development concerns and the local labour market.

In many small states, higher provision includes a large number of cross-border providers (Hosein *et al.*, 2004; Martin, 2007). In the Caribbean, foreign-owned medical schools are a well-established phenomenon. In recent years, offshore campuses and franchised programmes in a range of disciplines have proliferated in various parts of the world, being offered either as stand-alone enterprises or as partnerships with local institutions. These can be beneficial to both parties, but require careful management. Planning concerns include not only the ways in which external providers serve small states, but also the ways in which small states are used as a base to serve larger states. Concerning the latter, the number of 'degree mills' offering sub-standard and fake credentials has greatly expanded. Because such enterprises can damage the reputations of all involved, they are now emerging as a key focus for planners (Hallak and Poisson, 2008).

Strengthening integration, co-ordination and regulation

The movement to expand and diversify higher education systems to embrace private providers raises delicate issues of co-ordination and control. Small states are responding to these challenges by strengthening national capacity to plan, by creating national co-ordinating bodies and by encouraging mechanisms for quality assurance.

Most states have long included sections for higher education in their overall education plans. In addition, several small states, such as Mauritius, Botswana and Malta, now have stand-alone plans for higher education. The preparation of both integrated and stand-alone documents provides an opportunity to analyse the status and role of the higher education sector, particularly in relation to the labour market.

The increased concern about higher education is also reflected in the development of administrative structures. Countries such as Brunei Darussalam and The Gambia have created higher education divisions in their ministries of education. Other countries have created specialist ministries, such as the Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education in Trinidad and Tobago. Some states, such as Botswana, Fiji Islands, Mauritius, Malta and Papua New Guinea,

have also created higher education commissions as national buffer organisations to take charge of policy development, strategic planning and monitoring of the higher education sector (Martin and Bray, 2009). These organisations are commonly headed by renowned academics and supported by technical secretariats.

Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance schemes are additional instruments for integration and regulation of higher education. Qualifications frameworks allow for better regulation of diversified higher education, both through the provision of level-specific and subject matter descriptors and also through reference statements for quality assurance initiatives. The following example from Maldives in Box 8 explains an accreditation process.

Box 8. Qualifications framework for tertiary education in Maldives

A lack of variety of programmes offered in Maldives has driven an increasing number of students to pursue higher education in foreign countries. Additionally, the expansion of private actors in higher education has driven a need to distinguish between 'degree mills' and legitimate institutions, as well as to protect consumers from fraud. These concerns prompted the creation of the Maldivian National Qualification Framework (MNQF) in 2001 on the recommendation of the Maldivian Accreditation Board (MAB). By way of this framework, qualifications offered by in-country institutions, as well as those offered by institutions abroad, are recognised and validated.

Accreditation of courses and programmes in Maldives is a two-step process. First, institutions must obtain consent from the MAB by submitting course documents for approval. This pre-approval is compulsory for public institutions only; however, increasingly, private institutions are applying for this approval as well. Second, a MAB audit panel visits applicant institutions, typically before the first cohort of students completes the new programme. During this audit, staff qualifications, course delivery, student outcomes, institutional capability and teaching facilities are evaluated.

Such accreditation has created an awareness of quality among all stakeholders in higher education in Maldives and has created further assessment activities in Maldives College of Higher Education.

Source: Adapted from a contribution by Fathimath Shakeela to the IIEP *Online Forum on Tertiary Education in Small States*, 18 October–26 November 2010

As noted in Box 8, quality assurance schemes respond to the challenges posed by the private sector and the need to protect the consumers of higher educa-

tion services from low quality and fraudulent providers. Furthermore, public higher education may also be exposed to external assessment. Small states need to be more sensitive to cross-border providers and foreign qualifications when defining the scope for quality assurance. The size of the higher education sector determines the choices to be made with regard to quality assurance. The basic principles of 'good practice' are the same whatever the size of the sector, but creation of a quality-assurance system in small states encounters challenges of cost-effectiveness. Ways through which small states can address these issues include design of multifunctional and multi-level quality assurance agencies, adoption of regional solutions, building of quality assurance capacities in universities and drawing on the expertise of larger countries (Stella, 2008)(see Table 4).

Initiating discussion to raise awareness and appreciation of quality assurance (QA) among all personnel in higher education institutions is a first step to establishing QA systems, as noted in Box 9 about the beginnings of such a system in Belize.

Box 9. Quality assurance for tertiary education in Belize

In Belize, there is no formal quality assurance system at the tertiary level. The Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize (ATLIB) initiated a discussion on QA among member institutions in 2004 in anticipation of the eventual establishment of an accrediting body. As a result, many institutions now have personnel with some responsibility for QA, and most now have quality control measures in place. There is an active dialogue amongst institutions on QA, and a medium-term project to establish a National Articulation Framework amongst the junior colleges and the national university.

There is a long way to go, however. Quality Assurance must be formalised in all institutions, and even when institutions have personnel with responsibility for QA, it must be a shared institutional responsibility. It is not enough that senior administrators have an awareness and appreciation for QA: everyone in the institution must be educated in its importance and must share in the responsibility.

Source: IIEP 2010: Adapted from a contribution by Arid Cynthia to the IIEP *Online Forum on Tertiary Education in Small States*, 18 October–26 November 2010.

Jamaica provides a strong example of a quality assurance system that reflects the national government's commitment to QA and co-ordination among multiple managing bodies.

Table 4. Structures for quality assurance of higher education in small states

	Multi-functional quality assurance structure	Multi-level quality assurance structure	Regional solutions
Tonga	Tonga National Qualifications and Accreditation Board		Pacific qualifications framework
Maldives	Maldives Accreditation Board		
Barbados	Barbados Accreditation Council		UWI, CARICOM
Mauritius	Tertiary Education Council		Southern African qualifications framework
Seychelles	Seychelles Qualifications Authority		Southern African qualifications framework
Dominica	National Accreditation Board		UWI, CARICOM
Bahrain		Bahrain Accreditation Council	
St Lucia		TVET and Accreditation Unit	UWI, CARICOM
Botswana	Tertiary Education Council		Southern African qualifications framework
Trinidad & Tobago	Accreditation Council of Trinidad & Tobago		UWI, CARICOM
Bahamas, The	National Accreditation and Equivalency of The Bahamas		UWI, CARICOM
Samoa	Samoa Qualifications Authority		Pacific qualifications framework
Belize	National Accreditation Council		UWI, CARICOM
Namibia	Namibia Qualifications Authority		Southern African qualifications framework

UWI: University of the West Indies; CARICOM: Caribbean Community
Source: Martin and Bray (2009), p. 20.

Leadership in higher education is also needed for the agenda of quality EFA, since excellence at lower levels of education systems requires a strong systemic standard of teaching, leadership and research competence that comes through advanced studies available only in higher education. To this end, a number of Commonwealth small states have begun prioritising degree level teacher certification (Bennell and Molwane, 2008).

Box 10. Quality assurance for tertiary education in Jamaica

In Jamaica, there is a well structured quality assurance system which is managed mainly by the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ), which is the national accreditation agency under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, demonstrating the government's commitment to QA. The UCJ, through collaboration with the higher education institutions (HEIs) and its work with international bodies, has developed standards that all HEIs have come to agree with and implement. There are, for example, institutional and programme standards.

In addition to the UCJ, there are other bodies which help to manage QA in the sector. The Joint Board of Teacher Education (JBTE) oversees teacher education programmes, the Council of Community Colleges of Jamaica (CCCJ) oversees Community Colleges, and the Ministry of Education manages various aspects through its tertiary unit. It is important to note that notwithstanding the various agencies and groups, the UCJ is the body that accredits programmes. Bodies such as the CCCJ, however, work directly with institutions under their charge to help them develop, implement and maintain established standards.

Institutions also employ staff whose main responsibility is to lead the QA process, leading to continuous improvements in the system. Furthermore, the presence of the QA systems in Jamaica has provided for an almost all-inclusive tertiary sector. Qualifications are recognised, leading to transferability of credits.

Source: Adapted from a contribution by Adamson Cebert to the IIEP *Online Forum on Tertiary Education in Small States*, 18 October–26 November 2010.

Small states may face challenges in the specialist training of teachers, especially for subjects which require training of only a few teachers each year, such as upper secondary music, advanced mathematics and foreign languages. One solution is to send teachers abroad for training. For example, Solomon Islands has long benefited from the teacher education facilities of neighbouring Papua New Guinea; teachers from Montserrat have been trained in Antigua; and specialist Maldivian teachers have been trained in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

The Caribbean has achieved much in this regard, with the ironic result that their teachers are actively recruited to work in the USA, UK and Canada. This has led to a debilitating effect in some Caribbean countries, so many of whose well-trained teachers have emigrated that it has left large gaps in their capacity to provide quality schooling (Fulford, 2008). The Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol adopted by Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2004 has thus become a regional planning priority because to date it has had

only a limited impact on the haemorrhaging of Caribbean teachers (Jules, 2009).

Both qualifications frameworks and quality assurance schemes are connected to the mobility agendas of students and professionals. There are thus numerous regional and multi-state solutions in this area, such as the Pacific Qualifications Framework, an initiative launched in 2009 as an umbrella structure for the national qualifications frameworks in the south Pacific. In the Caribbean, a regional network of quality assurance agencies, CANQATE, was created in 2002 to facilitate the sharing of information about quality assurance systems in the Caribbean and disseminate good practices. CARICOM has also been active in the co-ordination of quality assurance at regional level, as the organisation in charge of implementing the Caribbean single market and economy.

Box 11. Regional quality assurance under CARICOM

The Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM) was launched under the aegis of CARICOM in 2004. CAAM was created as a regional accreditation body after the General Medical Council (GMC) of England advised it that it would no longer be responsible for accreditation of medical schools outside the European Union.

CAAM is the legally constituted body which accredits medical, dental, veterinary and other health programmes leading to professional degrees required for practice in CARICOM member states. By judging the compliance of programmes with nationally and internationally accepted standards of educational quality, CAAM serves the interests of both the students and the general public.

CARICOM also has plans to create a broader accreditation agency in order to:

- establish an internationally recognised system of post-secondary education for the Caribbean;
- promote the mobility of skilled individuals;
- contribute to economic and social development; and
- ensure international recognition and agreements with state entities for reciprocal recognition.

Source: CARICOM Secretariat website; CAAM website; Parkins (2008)

Small states nevertheless continue to face tensions in developing policy solutions that fit their particular needs and contexts, while regional or multi-state

initiatives, which comply with broader policy agendas of economic development, continue to affect their choices. This naturally limits room to manoeuvre, but it provides increased opportunities to bring national higher systems into line with policy development at regional and international levels. Thus, policy-makers and planners may ask what sorts of partnerships are desirable and can be tailored for what sorts of circumstances for quality assurance in the context of broader goals. One model which deserves wider attention is highlighted in Box 11 above.

Harnessing the power of technology

Information and communications technologies have revolutionised the processes of teaching and learning throughout the world (McIntosh and Varoglu, 2005; Law *et al.*, 2008). Small states, as well as large states, are benefiting, partly because they are no longer so isolated. In the past, populations in small states were disadvantaged in access to specialist libraries that could only be justified for populations of sufficient size. Now a great deal of information is available on the internet; people who can access the internet in small states are able to gain the same information as their counterparts in large states. In addition to its direct benefits, the ICT revolution is a response to the need for a technologically adept population that can learn independently and cope in the global marketplace. Evidence of shifts in the modes of operation can be found in the massive enrolment of online students in the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL, 2007), the University of the South Pacific (Whelan, 2008; Chandra *et al.*, 2010), and the University of the West Indies (Marshall *et al.*, 2008; Thomas and Soares, 2009). The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is also using technology to accomplish goals that would previously have been very difficult, if not impossible (Box 12).

Other developments in the Caribbean and south Pacific provide further examples of ways in which small states have been able to grasp the opportunities offered by ICT. In 1999, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) launched a project to support ICT policies in its region. The strategic framework covered many dimensions, including access, learner-centred pedagogies, teacher professional development, lifelong learning and information management (OECS Education Reform Unit, 2001). The recommended model was adopted in Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Gaible's (2009) evaluation showed significant progress in learning. Parallel initiatives in the south Pacific were launched in 2008. They are made possible through a satellite-based Pacific

Box 12. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

The establishment and growth of the VUSSC as a global network for higher education is based on principles of working together for the common good with few external resources. The structure complements regional education networks such as the Caribbean Knowledge and Learning Network, through which countries co-operate to develop their human resources within a traditional political framework with support from international donor/lending agencies.

Facilitated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the VUSSC relies on the work of individuals in small universities and colleges around the world who share their knowledge and learning materials about common issues such as teacher professional development, fisheries, construction and disaster recovery. The internet is an essential tool (West and Daniel, 2009).

Rural Internet Connectivity System (RICS), consisting of low-cost satellite broadband internet. Nevertheless, policy-makers and planners need to exercise caution with such schemes. Major investments are required not only in hardware, but also in training and socialisation of teachers, learners and families. Rapid changes in technology can bring social disruptions that have not been anticipated; in some respects small states can become more, rather than less, dependent on large states because the innovations demand machines, technical support and foreign exchange.

Many of the issues raised in this section, and in the book as a whole, point to the significance of contextually grounded research – in higher education and elsewhere – in informing educational policies and priorities in small states. This potential is considered in more detail in the following chapter, which focuses on international consultation, collaboration and partnerships.