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## 6. International Consultation, Collaboration and Partnerships

Small states are inherently international. Simply because of their small size, they have to be outward looking. As a result, an international outlook is for small states a much more natural way of life than in larger states. To the many remarks that have already been made on the value of international collaboration and partnerships, this chapter commences with an elaboration of the potential of different forms and levels of partnership, and of the role and potential of educational research for Commonwealth small states.

### Forms and levels of partnership

Partnership is a much-used term in both educational and development discourse, but it is characterised by considerable distance between rhetoric and reality. Translating intentions into successful practice is often more difficult than many partners realise. Within the Commonwealth, however, there is a strong tradition of effective partnerships, consultation and co-operation – not least among Commonwealth small states. In a special issue of *The Round Table*, Lee (2009) draws attention to the 50 years of Commonwealth education co-operation between the first Oxford conference on Commonwealth education, held in 1959, and the 17th CCEM, held in Kuala Lumpur in 2009. The annual publication of the book *Commonwealth Education Partnerships* also testifies to the enduring centrality of partnerships in Commonwealth plans and activities (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009d).

International consultation, collaboration and partnerships continue to hold considerable potential for the realisation of the Commonwealth mission for small states. Examples of specific collaboration are visible throughout the previous chapters, but here attention is paid to the different forms and levels that

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such partnerships do and might take, and to the potential that may be gained from continuing to prioritise partnerships between and with small states in particular.

Regular pan-Commonwealth meetings in the political and economic spheres often focus upon the broad concerns of small states – through, for example, Foreign Ministers Meetings, Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meetings and the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. In addition to supporting such events, the Commonwealth Secretariat supports small states in areas such as trade and through the provision of a joint office for Commonwealth permanent missions to the United Nations.

Beyond this, much is done to facilitate regional meetings and collaboration between small states. Thus, in the 12 months following the 17th CCEM, regional consultations were arranged in the Caribbean, south Pacific, southern Africa and south-east Asia, with Secretariat support to build upon and advance the agenda identified in Kuala Lumpur for education in small states (Appendix 5). Such consultative dialogue can do much to help identify country, regional and international priorities that will shape and drive future Commonwealth work in this arena.

Further developments along these lines could do much to stimulate innovative collaboration between, for example:

- richer and poorer Commonwealth small states;
- those in the North and those in the South;
- large and small Commonwealth states;
- small states and the often neglected smaller Overseas Territories (Fisher, 2005);
- public and private sectors; and
- Commonwealth and other groups and agencies.

The other agencies include UNESCO/IIEP, whose own interest, involvement and engagement is reflected in the convening of the 2009 Policy Forum on Tertiary Education in Small States (Martin and Bray, 2009) and the IIEP Online Forum on Tertiary Education in Small States (UNESCO/IIEP, 2010). Such cross-agency collaboration was reinforced in October 2009 with a co-operation agreement between the Commonwealth Secretariat and UNESCO (UNESCO, 2009d). While a broad memorandum of understanding has existed between the two organisations since 1980, this agreement further solidifies the organisational partnership and focuses attention upon resource management towards the mobilisation of competencies for development and equality. The

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potential of strengthened partnerships and collaboration is also visible in the efforts of agencies, including the Secretariat itself, to conduct education and development debates within broader cross-sectoral collaboration initiatives designed to be part of much wider policy dialogue and action. In such ways the Commonwealth can build upon its own strengths in education through ongoing regional and global partnerships in which it has an established comparative advantage.

At the same time, membership of international bodies has a demanding side. By definition, small states have limited numbers of personnel, so when a single person from the ministry of education or a similar body in a small state has to go abroad for an international meeting, the absence from domestic duties creates a much greater proportional impact. By corollary, maintaining permanent representation at the headquarters of international organisations such as UNESCO places a much larger burden on small states than on large ones. Small states may also find that they lack personnel with the technical expertise available to larger states for analysis of and negotiation on specific issues.

Mechanisms through which small states handle such challenges include collaboration to present a collective voice. For example, New Zealand has at times represented other south Pacific states in UNESCO meetings. Comparable arrangements can be made for other organisations.

Moreover, technological advances have greatly assisted in this area, as in many others. With the internet, video-conferencing facilities and other mechanisms, it is easier for personnel in small states to participate in discussions without ever leaving home. And similarly, when officers do leave home to attend international meetings, they are able to remain in touch through e-mails and other forms of communication in a way that was previously impossible. Maintenance of such contacts can reduce the gap which arises in a small state when an individual is not physically available in the office.

It is important, nevertheless, for international organisations themselves to be sensitive to these issues. Bodies such as the Commonwealth Secretariat and UNESCO have a responsibility to be aware of the demands that their meetings can impose on small states. This underlines the need to be realistic and ensure that increased co-ordination among international agencies reduces overlap and parallel demands.

## **The place of research and research capacity building**

In much of the above analysis the importance of locally-grounded research in helping to shape policy development and implementation is clearly evident and research, particularly in higher education, features as a priority activity for

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small states in the Commonwealth's *Education Strategic Plan 2010–2012* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2010). The 1985 workshop in Mauritius, which launched the Secretariat's work on education in small states, stressed that they should not be seen simply as scaled-down versions of larger states: they have an ecology of their own, which requires local research to supplement and perhaps modify the insights that can be obtained from larger countries (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986: 5–6). In all domains, globally informed but locally relevant innovation is required of future generations of leaders, and the recent Kuala Lumpur Communiqué underpins this by prioritising the advancement of education in small states through 'a variety of capacity-building and research initiatives' (Appendix 5).

Strengthened local research capacity is also vital if small states are to develop more genuine partnerships and engage more effectively and critically in mediating, adapting or, where appropriate, challenging global agendas (Holmes and Crossley, 2004; Crossley, 2008). As Dame Pearlette Louisy (2001: 435–436), Governor-General of St Lucia, has pointed out:

It is not easy to avoid the dangers of 'uncritical international transfer' if one lacks the national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research or investigative enquiry necessary to 'customise' the experiences of others ... The region's continued dependence on external financing for its development projects further strengthens the control of the development agencies (many of whom find it easier to adopt a 'one size fits all' policy), making it extremely difficult to bring its own perspective to policy decisions taken on its behalf.

Small states may always be constrained in this area, but, once again, one way of resolving such problems lies in greater collaboration among small states (rich and poor) across the Commonwealth and their counterparts in larger states (Mayo, 2008). In the Caribbean, the Association of Universities and Research Institutions of the Caribbean (UNICA) was founded in 1967 to foster co-operation among higher education centres in the region (UNICA, 2010). The Mediterranean Society for Comparative Education (MESCE) serves the countries of that region, including Cyprus and Malta, and the Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) serves the small and larger Arabic-speaking states of the Gulf.<sup>16</sup> Even in times of economic stringency, such collaborative strategies can do much to focus more effective and relevant research upon the distinctive environmental, financial and educational concerns of small states.

As indicated in this study, comparative experience also suggests that while small states can learn much from global research partnerships and trajectories, their concerns have much in common with socio-cultural comparative perspec-

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tives that caution against the uncritical international transfer of educational policy and practice (Crossley and Watson, 2003). While this orientation recognises the benefits to be gained from experience elsewhere, it is equally sensitive to Commonwealth values as embedded in the *Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding* (Sen, 2007), and acknowledges how contextual differences often deserve greater consideration in educational policy development and implementation. This is not to say that small states cannot learn from elsewhere or from each other, but this is a more complex and subtle process than is often acknowledged. As Stenhouse (1979: 5–6) argues: comparative studies of education should ‘deal in insight rather than law as a basis for understanding,’ and insights derived in this way can then help to ‘tutor judgement’ with regard to the potential of experience for adaptation or guidance elsewhere. This, we suggest, also applies to the methodologies and processes of research and to the international transfer of new modalities for research capacity building (Crossley, 2011).

### **Box 13. The University Consortium of Small Island States**

The University Consortium of Small Island States (UCSIS) brings together the Universities of Malta, Mauritius, South Pacific, Virgin Islands and West Indies. Its principal objective is to promote research, training and dissemination of information on the common challenges. Participating institutions co-operate to: (a) develop and implement a graduate programme focusing on development issues in small island developing states; (b) develop visions, values and skills for effective advocacy; and (c) elaborate methods for research programmes. Since the inception of UCSIS, UNESCO has supported the Consortium through its status as a UNITWIN network.

Source: UNESCO (2009c)

Innovative international partnerships and collaborations can help small states to strengthen their own local research capacity, but influential global trends currently promote ‘big science’ approaches that prioritise, ‘... growing international interest in systematic review methodology and its associated privileging of quantitative research strategies such as randomised controlled trials, in evidence-based policy’, (Vulliamy, 2004: 261). Such forms of research capacity have their place, and can play an important role, but for small states, much contemporary experience suggests that priority should also be given to research strategies and modalities that are grounded in their own distinctive contexts and cultures. This points to the benefits to be gained from varied and mixed methodological strategies – including qualitative fieldwork, case study, action

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research, discourse analysis and the application of post-colonial perspectives (Crossley and Tikly, 2004).

Throughout this book many of the research priorities that emerge from the discussion highlight the need for more locally grounded studies, carried out by researchers from small states who are familiar with the distinctive local challenges raised by, for example, climate change, international financial trends, migration patterns or the cultural and linguistic dilemmas facing education.

Ways in which practising teachers in Mauritius are working in partnership with ministry officials to carry out locally-led action-research as a way of inspiring qualitative improvements in their own pedagogy illustrate many of the above issues and principles (Box 14).

In the final chapter we revisit the main issues raised throughout the book, identify the key priorities that emerge from the text, and consider major challenges and possible ways forward for the future.

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## **Box 14. The Learning Enhancement Programme in Mauritius**

### **What is it?**

The Learning Enhancement Programme is an after-school programme for Standard IV (9-year-old) students and teachers. It directly addresses three culturally sensitive issues relating to education quality: (a) unequal opportunities for all Standard IV pupils to participate in high quality after-school activities that prepare them for the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) exam; (b) training teachers to use child-centred pedagogy in an integrated curriculum; and (c) eventually obtaining parent and teacher approval for the future dissolution of the CPE. Developed in 2009 by the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE), at the request of the Mauritius Ministry of Education and Human Resources, the programme began in February 2010.

### **Why was it created?**

The 2007 National Primary School Curriculum Framework stresses an integrated and inclusive pedagogy that will prepare children to be successful citizens in a knowledge economy. The MIE has been training teachers to use child-centred approaches in their classrooms so that the pupils will develop the critical and creative thinking skills required for a knowledge economy. However, many teachers find it difficult to implement them due an overemphasis on teaching to the test, (as a shortcut to ensuring CPE examination success) as well as societal pressures for good grades in the CPE.

### **How does it work?**

The MIE created enhancement programme booklets which outline how to conduct child-centred activities that integrate Standard IV subject matter, using group work, technology, creative arts and outdoor activities. MIE academics model these activities in webcasts filmed at the Mauritius College of the Air, which enhancement teachers watch live or in an archived format from computer labs at their school. The teachers are encouraged to try the strategies and share what they learn with their colleagues, using basic action research. The MIE also conducts face-to-face training sessions with teachers.

### **What will happen next?**

The MIE will evaluate the programme and incorporate what it learns into similar programmes for Standards III–VI. Over time, and in conjunction with many other programmes, the MIE and the Ministry hope to improve education quality by making schooling curriculum based instead of examination based.

Mauritius Ministry of Education (2007). *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Available at: <http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/educationsite/file/primary-curr-framework.pdf>