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## 7. Conclusions

The Commonwealth has a special interest in small states because over half of its members are in this category. Commonwealth work has naturally focused on Commonwealth countries, but it has also contributed to wider agendas which include those of UNESCO as a universal organisation with 193 member states. Some of the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat has therefore been carried out in partnership with UNESCO, and with its International Institute for Educational Planning. The ministers of education who participate or are represented in the CCEM also participate or are represented in wider global forums. In addition, many small states, particularly in the Caribbean and south Pacific, operate effectively together in regional bodies.

This concluding chapter advances the case for new and strengthened educational initiatives in and for small states, to be supported by Commonwealth organisations and in partnership with other strategically placed agencies and personnel. The preceding chapters have demonstrated that small states face distinctive challenges arising from their scale, and that they also have distinctive benefits – including the fact that they are states and therefore have a voice in international arenas that is unavailable to comparable population groups within larger states. Much of the conceptual and theoretical work on education on small states sponsored by the Secretariat from the 1980s to the early 2000s, along with work on management, leadership and planning, is still useful for a new generation of policymakers and planners who may be unfamiliar with what has been done in these areas. The review of this work carried out by Crossley and Holmes (1999) serves as a useful summary of previous debates, issues and achievements – and as a foundation upon which this current study builds.

What most distinguishes contemporary challenges and priorities from those of previous decades is the fact that today's priorities are more concerned with how small states can respond to major external shocks and challenges within the economic, environmental, cultural and political domains. A key priority for

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future work thus focuses upon understanding how these global issues impact on education and how education systems in small states themselves should respond. This requires thinking beyond education alone and demands greater cross-sectoral development planning and interdisciplinary research.

The research reported here demonstrates that Commonwealth small states have made good progress towards the achievement of global goals and targets. The EFA targets and MDGs remain relevant for Commonwealth small states; but many of their most pressing priorities lie beyond those that command the attention of larger states and the agendas and resources of influential international development agencies.

Commonwealth small states have achieved much in terms of providing access to basic education – though for some, such as Solomon Islands, The Gambia and Nauru, access remains a challenge. Factors influencing retention, equity, inclusion and improved quality have therefore long been prioritised and will continue to demand concerted attention. This has, however, already generated much valuable experience in developing strategies to deal with such issues and dilemmas.

In terms of gender, many small states have either achieved or are close to parity in primary and secondary schooling, or the attendance disparity, especially at secondary level, favours girls. This is particularly evident in the Caribbean, where the enhancement of boys' achievement remains a distinctive priority. Some small states remain the exception, however, and regional differences are evident, with the greatest gender challenges remaining in small states located within, or close to the shores of, sub-Saharan Africa.

A further set of priorities revealed here relates to the fact that small states have been among the first to extend the concept and boundaries of basic education to prioritise secondary and higher education and, in tune with early EFA agendas, to reprioritise adult and lifelong learning. They have done much to pioneer efforts to move beyond what have long been the dominant global goals and targets, and to prioritise skills training for the modern economy, strategies to deal with the migration of teachers and other professionals, the expansion and strengthening of higher education, and the use of ICT. The achievements of the VUSSC are notable, as are related strategies to strengthen the quality, co-ordination, integration and regulation of higher education within and across small states. Each of these distinctive issues demonstrate substantial achievements, at the same time as they call for ongoing support for clear, focused and collective attention across Commonwealth small states in the immediate future.

Other related issues for future work and ongoing development include

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further theoretical research on the conceptual premises and distinctive rationale for focused attention on small states; increased awareness of the potential and limitations of education policy transfer from the perspective of small states; studies of the implications of higher unit costs in education when compared to larger states – and of strategies to deal with this; more research on the volume, predictability, forms and impact of aid to education in small states; and attention to the factors that underpin the sustainability of educational achievements in a global context, where challenging economic prospects intensify international concerns about increasing incidences of fragility, insecurity, conflict and poverty.

As a follow-up to the 17th CCEM, the Commonwealth Secretariat's *Education Strategic Plan 2010–2012* identified four broad priority areas – with priority 2 reflecting the trajectory of our own research and focusing directly upon small states. The remaining three priority areas, consisting of inclusive education for sustainable development, quality education and research also resonate closely with many of the issues raised here, making recent Commonwealth initiatives important benchmarks for education in small states. While the new *Strategic Plan* provides a coherent and supportive framework for ongoing work, it also highlights the importance of maintaining and strengthening international and regional partnerships to secure the resources and specialist expertise required to achieve significant impact with and within small states. In doing so, priority must also be given to establishing or revitalising strong professional networks and partnerships between small states, to focusing upon a programme of core and deliverable activities, and to generating appropriate external and internal sources of funding. To assist with such work, and consistent with its profile as a listening and responsive organisation, the Commonwealth Secretariat may find it helpful to establish an Education in Small States Advisory Panel, with input from a variety of different stakeholder groups, including those involved in relevant research. Given the magnitude and unpredictability of the global environmental, economic and political challenges faced by small states in today's rapidly changing world, the importance of well-grounded, cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary initiatives is also highlighted by our own findings, if contextually appropriate and sustainable development is to be achieved.

Much can be learned from the collective experience of small states, but while collaborative work is vital, contextual differences caution against the search for simplistic blueprints for replication. Efforts to support locally grounded research and to strengthen evaluation capacity within small states, in collaboration with external agencies, therefore emerge as a further cross-cutting priority for attention. Such developments could do much to promote the sharing of insights

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derived from the creative and distinctive experience of small states in ways that will help them to learn more from each other, engage in more balanced and equal global partnerships, and contribute to the shaping of sustainable international agendas for the future.

In conclusion, it is hoped that this study will prove to be informative and helpful for all engaged in educational development within small states worldwide. We also hope that it will support the ongoing work of the Secretariat itself, as it strives to build upon its deservedly strong international profile and comparative advantage in work designed to support the educational and development goals of small states throughout the Commonwealth and beyond.