

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR CURRICULUM REFORM

Control, Organization and Planning at the National Level

In the vast majority of Commonwealth countries, overall control of the curriculum of the schools is centralized within the Ministry or Department of Education. In the federal states of Australia and Nigeria responsibility is shared between federal and state ministries. In Canada each province within the federation controls its own schools. England, Wales and Northern Ireland are exceptions to the general pattern in that control is very largely delegated to local education authorities by the Department of Education and Science.

However, beyond the general picture of centralized control there has been, throughout the last decade or so, much change and diversification. Many countries have undertaken reviews of the institutions involved in curriculum control and development. In the Seychelles, the Ministry of Education and Information is currently undergoing wholesale re-structuring in order, in part:

To co-ordinate the activities and general direction of schools (primary and secondary) and further education institutions, and the development of integrated and inter-related curriculum appropriate to the country's needs and the administrative efficiency of the system. Of particular relevance is the establishment of a Division of Research and Pedagogy, headed by a Senior Education Officer, and containing staff dealing with the subjects, examinations, evaluation of programmes, careers counselling, Teachers' Centres, schools broadcasting and teacher training.

In other countries re-organization though usually less radical has reflected the same sensitivity to the importance of curriculum development.

Specialist Units for Curriculum

Throughout the New Commonwealth the late 1960's and 1970's have seen the establishment of specialist units, divisions, committees and panels within Ministries of Education. Such a departure has often followed fast on the localization of control of public examinations for this has given countries much greater freedom than formerly to determine curricular aims and content.

In Barbados, the National Curriculum Development Council was set up in 1974. (See also Appendix I). Its duties focused on the development of subjects within the curriculum of the primary and secondary schools. It was to:

1. Review the existing curricula in the various schools.
2. Advise the Minister on the subjects to be taught at each level in the primary and secondary schools and the time to be allotted to the various subjects.

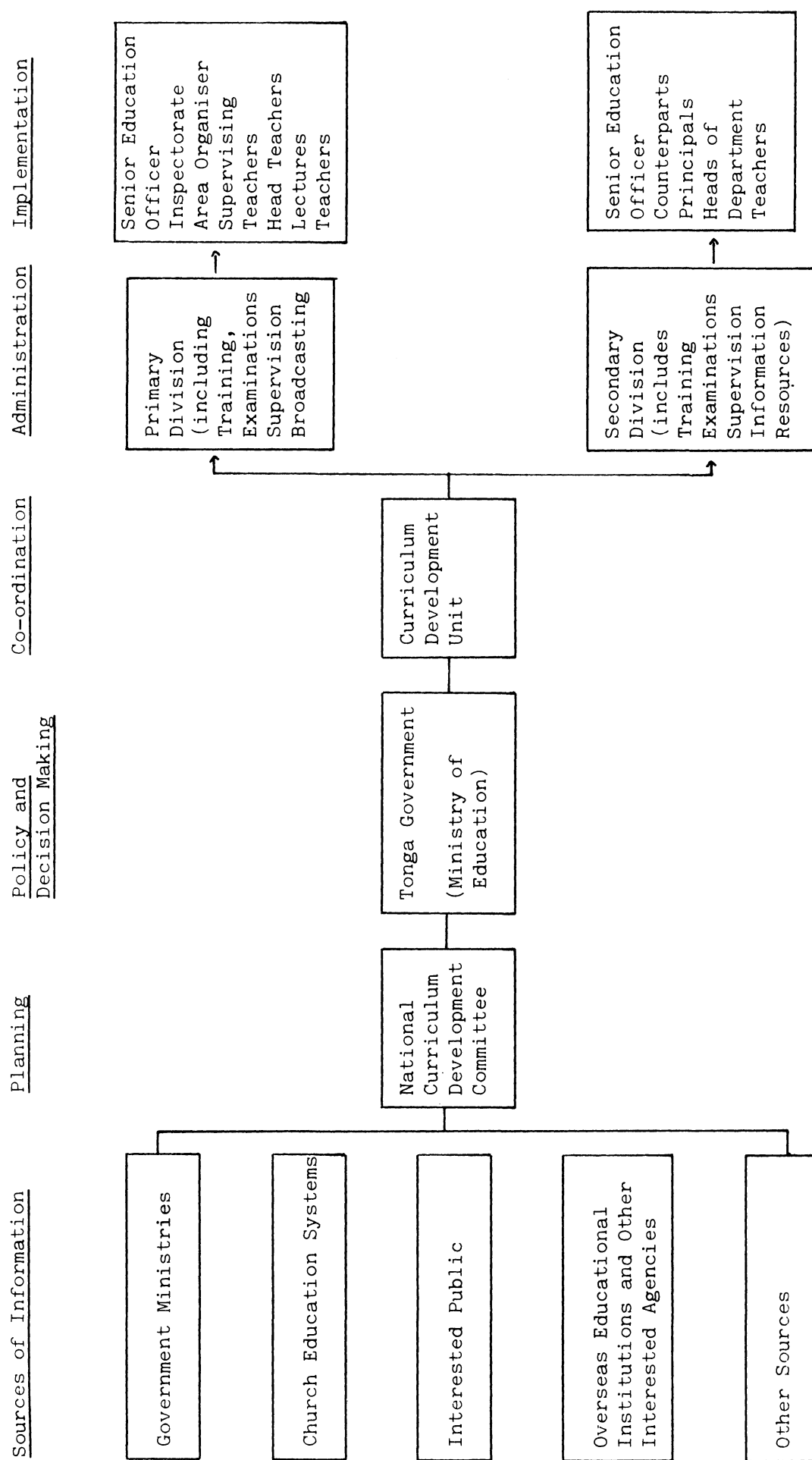


FIGURE 1 : THE PROCESS OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN TONGA

3. Set up committees for the production of syllabuses, guidelines, lists of appropriate textbooks and teaching material and to make recommendations thereon to the Minister.

The overall aim was to improve the quality of curricular offerings in the schools

In Papua New Guinea and Botswana the co-ordination of the curriculum between primary and secondary schools was a major priority in the setting up of curriculum units. In Papua New Guinea the Curriculum Unit was set up in 1975 within the Provincial Standards Division of the Ministry of Education in order to:

1. Co-ordinate development of primary and secondary curricula, previously controlled by separate divisions.
2. Have HQ officers working full-time to develop curricula specifically for this country.
3. Provide teachers with support materials in addition to the bare outline syllabus.

In Botswana the creation, in 1977, of the Department of Curriculum Development and Evaluation looked towards the day when Botswana is able to offer all children a basic education from primary through secondary school. The long term aims of the secondary curriculum unit in Swaziland, exemplify the great responsibility for developmental change with which many Ministries of Education are charged. The Swaziland unit is responsible for the establishment of:

1. Procedures through which the educational system can serve the changing socio-economic needs of the country.
2. Consultative and approval systems for curriculum development.
3. Evaluation techniques.
4. Methods of providing linked teacher education and curriculum development.
5. Procedures for the staged implementation of changed curricula.

Tonga has recently re-organized its controlling structures in order to run the process of curriculum development more efficiently. (Figure I p 6)

The machinery is still in the experimental stage. The changes came about as a result of a desire to re-orientate (the) education system to reflect more truly the needs of the country at the same time there is concern too that school programmes are commensurate with world trends in education.

The National Curriculum Committee is composed of permanent members (Minister of Education, principals of schools and directors of non-government institutions) and co-opted members (other ministries) and interested members of the public. It is responsible for elaborating national educational aims and specifies the content of the curriculum in co-operation with subject curricula committees, composed of Curriculum Development Unit personnel, a consultant and co-opted members of the teacher training colleges and

practising subject teachers. The Curriculum Development Unit produces and distributes curricula material.

Curriculum Units and Shared Responsibility

Variations are many but the theme is constant, a trend towards specialist units within ministries, of greater or lesser degrees of organizational complexity. In some countries a curriculum development unit is responsible for the whole range of curricula concerns as is Singapore's Curriculum Development Committee. In others responsibility is shared. In Guyana, for instance, the Curriculum Development Centre specifies national educational aims but shares the responsibility for drawing up curriculum plans with specialist education officers, the Faculty of Education of the University of Guyana and the Caribbean Examinations Council. For the distribution of instructional materials the Centre works with the Broadcasts to Schools Unit and the Book Distribution Unit. In Tanzania, the Institute of Education founded in 1975 has power to make and develop the curriculum under the advisory and co-ordinating umbrella of the Ministry of National Education. In Nigeria shared responsibility is far-ranging. The Federal and State Ministries of Education share responsibility for the content, production and distribution of instructional materials with the Nigerian Technology Centre and the Schools Unit of the Nigerian Television and Broadcasting Authorities. Curriculum plans are worked out between Ministries, the autonomous Nigerian Education Research Council (1972), the Comparative Education Study and Adaption Centre of the University of Lagos (1968) and the West African Examinations Council.

Control of Distance Teaching

So far the focus has been on the control of the general secondary school curriculum. Some countries also have provision for secondary education by means of distance teaching. Normally control is in the hands of the Ministry of Education as, for example, in Botswana. Tanzania has its Institute of Adult Education under the Ministry with special responsibility for distance education. In a few cases like this a specialist institution shares responsibility with the Ministry, for example, the Mauritius College of the Air. Papua New Guinea's College of External Studies is another example; this operates through the Secretary for Education and on the advice of the College's Board of Studies, the Chairman of which is the Principal Curriculum Officer of the Ministry of Education.

Control of Teacher Education

The control of teacher education at the lower secondary level is the responsibility of Ministries of Education through the teachers' colleges. Sri Lanka is one of a very few countries which records specific co-ordinating machinery for schools and teacher education through its Curriculum Development and Teacher Education Division. An interesting innovation is the setting up of the Board of Higher Education in Swaziland. This controls teacher education through Ministry representatives, the University, the teacher training colleges and the Swaziland National Association of Teachers.

The control of teacher education at the upper secondary level tends to be with the universities. Some smaller countries rely wholly on regional facilities and overseas training.

Co-Ordination of the Curriculum

There is a general consensus that co-ordination of the curriculum of the secondary schools of different types is desirable. But again, most countries do not have elaborate machinery for bringing this about. In general ministries accept overall responsibility but actual co-ordination is achieved informally and as the need arises. The Solomon Islands is unusual in boasting a curriculum co-ordinating committee for general, and technical and vocational education at the upper secondary level.

Primary Education

In most countries machinery for the co-ordination of primary with secondary education is fairly well established. Here again, ministries take overall responsibility. In many there are separate primary and secondary curriculum units or committees. The Solomon Islands institutionalizes co-ordination through its Curriculum Co-ordinating Committees. In the Seychelles the Ministry of Education and Information, Division of Research and Pedagogy, charges its subject advisers with responsibility for primary and lower secondary co-ordination. In some countries the same machinery deals with primary and secondary levels. There is a tendency, reflected in the machinery of co-ordination, for the years of basic or compulsory schooling to be regarded and treated as a single unit. An interesting and important feature of a carefully designed co-ordinating scheme in Fiji is the participation of primary teacher college staff in secondary level work-groups. Nowhere, however, is the participation of secondary level teacher educators in primary level curriculum work explicitly recorded.

Higher Education

Co-ordination between the curriculum of upper secondary and higher education is important for the minority of students who continue into higher education. But, because of the relatively greater cost of schooling at the tertiary level, it is all the more important that adequate steps are taken to ensure that there is smooth and coherent progression of the curriculum between upper secondary and tertiary institutions. Good quality higher level manpower is dependent upon the quality of education at the tertiary level. Most countries rely to a large extent on the filter-down effect of the examinations for entry to higher education on the curriculum of the upper secondary schools. Another informal but considerable influence is the work of teachers in higher education on subject panels for secondary school syllabuses in the setting and marking of examinations and in the writing of curricular materials. A few countries, however, are developing special machinery in addition. In Papua New Guinea, for instance, co-operation between the Ministry of Education and the Universities is the specific formal responsibility of the Curriculum Unit.

Non-Formal Education

A few countries are attempting to provide machinery to co-ordinate formal secondary and non-formal provision at the secondary level. Where any type of machinery exists at present it is normally under the umbrella of the ministry of education. In Swaziland it is the special responsibility of the Curriculum Co-ordinating Committee. In Sri Lanka the Ministry has a special non-formal education division. In Malaysia, Fiji and Nigeria the Ministry of Education shares responsibility with other ministries. The Nigerian Youth Council also plays a part.

Participation at the Local Level

The major priority over the last ten years in the majority of countries of the New Commonwealth has been to devise and set up machinery for the control, unification and development of the curriculum at the national level. Consequently, although a number of countries refer to the importance which they attach to the need for machinery for curriculum development at the local level, there are few examples reported of thorough-going attempts to establish mechanisms for this. One noteworthy example is the establishment of District Curriculum Centres in St Lucia. Another are the local Resource Centres responsible for the production of teaching materials in the Seychelles. Where machinery exists it is usually intended to aid implementation of curricular plans devised at a national level rather than to delegate control of the curriculum to the local level.

Significantly, few countries highlight the participation of professional and administrative staff outside central ministries at the local level. Only one or two countries comment on the valuable work of their subject advisers and curriculum development officers at the local level. But, in general, the impression is of activity and development at the centre and little local involvement of centrally-placed staff or of little attention given to locally-based professional curriculum developers or administrative and supervisory personnel. It may be that the extent of local involvement by central staff is under-emphasized because curriculum development is perceived as a minor task for them. Or again, it may be that activity in curriculum development at the local level is not fully recorded at the national level. However, it is evident that one way or another the tremendous growth of machinery for curriculum development at the centre in so many countries over the last few years has not been mirrored fully by a growth in formal machinery at the local level.

Teacher Participation

By far the greatest amount of curriculum development work at the local level is undertaken by teachers and teacher trainers. In most New Commonwealth countries represented in the survey teachers at the lower secondary level are non-graduates. Increasingly, the trend is for the numbers of untrained teachers to diminish except where there are extreme shortages in certain specialist subject areas. At the upper secondary level there is a rough balance between countries whose teachers are graduate and those whose teachers are not. In the Old Commonwealth there is a trend towards an all-graduate and trained teaching force. A number of countries are moving towards a unified training for primary and lower secondary level teachers.

It is widely recognized throughout the Commonwealth that teacher involvement in curriculum development is important. If indeed, as it appears, there is a steady improvement in the levels of education and training of teachers, they should be able to make a significant contribution to curriculum development through every phase, from planning and implementation to evaluation. While many countries, if not most, make provision for consultation with teachers in the planning stages of curriculum development, it is in the devising of syllabus content and instructional aids that teachers play a more dominant role. Only a few countries emphasize the role of teachers in curriculum evaluation.

Good quality teachers are likely to produce good quality curricula. The main ways in which teachers become involved in curriculum development at present is through subject panels and subject associations. St Lucia records the positive effects on curriculum development in English, mathematics, integrated science and social science following the regionalization of

examinations through the Caribbean Examinations Council. Teachers at secondary level appear to participate most readily in institutions for curriculum development which are subject-based. A number of countries, it is true, have developed or are in the process of setting up, teachers centres and local curriculum resource units, some of which aim to involve teachers with general pedagogical and curriculum issues, but these do not yet appear to be a vital force.

Teacher training institutions are the other major source of teacher participation. Teacher trainers contribute directly to the development of school subjects as, for example, the Goroka Teachers College, University of Papua New Guinea. Tanzania, Swaziland, Singapore and Barbados also emphasize this valuable contribution. Guyana, Grenada and Tonga teacher college staff are examples of teacher trainers active in curriculum evaluation. In Tonga, college staff are members of the Curriculum Development Unit on a part-time basis. In Guyana, Malaysia and Fiji particular efforts are being made to involve teachers in training in the development of curriculum materials at the pre-service or in-service levels. Awareness of the need to keep training institutions and their products abreast of new features in the school curriculum is high but means to do this are somewhat lacking. India's National Council for Teacher Education, charged in 1978 with devising a new framework for teacher education, is in a very good position for taking a bird's eye view of how teacher training and curriculum development might proceed hand in hand.

Community Participation

Significantly, most countries understand locally-based curriculum development to imply teacher-based development. And indeed, professional educators take the major responsibility for the curriculum process at school level. The extent of lay participation is rather limited. Despite current discussion about community involvement in education, there is a lack of information on ways in which members of the community participate in schools. Parent-teacher associations are the most commonly reported modes of involvement and, of course, their vitality varies from place to place. In a very few instances members of the community with special skills are involved in teaching. But the general picture is of rather low-key involvement. This may be for a variety of reasons. It may be that the idea of lay participation in curricular matters is not universally endorsed as a good thing by the professionals. It may be that members of the community themselves prefer to stand aside. The prevailing culture and history of participation in any context is an important factor here. Additionally, it may be that national level personnel lack detailed knowledge of community involvement and, therefore, underestimate it or under-play its significance.

Old Commonwealth

Machinery for the control and co-ordination of the curriculum in the Old Commonwealth has been singled out for comment because it has been in operation for a longer time in these countries. The general pattern is not of major structural change and innovation but of specific modifications and adjustments. This does not mean, however, that innovations are non-existent. As recently as 1976 Alberta, Canada, established its Curriculum Policies Board in order to deal with broad policies relating to the whole curriculum from Grades 1 to 12. Manitoba, Canada, has also experimented with curriculum development machinery, setting up its Programme Review Structure in 1976 and revising it two years later.

Central Control

In all these countries, except for England and Wales, the tradition has been for a large measure of central control of the curriculum (See Appendix I). Interestingly, however, it is the issue of whether and how far to devolve more responsibility to local levels which is under review. No clear trend towards devolution or further centralization is apparent. Indeed, a number of different approaches and experiments are underway. Within Canada there are some signs of a trend towards tighter provincial (central) control. Nova Scotia, for example, is attempting to control the number and types of innovations in the curriculum at local school levels by sponsoring pilot projects which must be evaluated before becoming institutionalized. Saskatchewan has been developing a core programme for all students, the guidelines for which are more detailed and prescriptive than formerly.

In contrast, there are indications in some Australian states of devolution of responsibility from state to local school level. In Western Australia, school-based curriculum development is actively encouraged and regional directors are now responsible for the selection, co-ordination and direction of advisory and specialist personnel. The head office continues to co-ordinate curricular services and materials. In Victoria also, a curriculum support team has been established for schools which need help in developing their curriculum with respect to technical education.

England and Wales have long represented an exceptional tradition in which curriculum control is localized. In England:

Responsibility for the school curriculum rests with local education authorities and school governing bodies. In practice day to day responsibility for curricular work in the schools rests with the head teachers and their staffs. Advice and guidance is available from external sources such as the Schools Council and HM Inspectorate.

Currently, after considerable public debate and professional review, the government has announced its intention to establish a nationally agreed framework for the curriculum. This is a major departure from long established tradition although it would bring England and Wales more in line with the pattern of control in most other Commonwealth countries. Some would argue that it is merely a logical extension of a trend towards greater central control beginning in 1964 with the establishment of the Schools Council for Curriculum and Examinations. This body undertakes research and development and advises the Secretary of State on examinations policy. More recently, since 1976, the country has engaged itself in a national debate on education which has highlighted public and professional concern about the maintenance of good standards and with the accountability of schools for spending public money to good effect. At the time of writing, the form of national framework for the curriculum might take is still uncertain and the subject of much controversy. The issues under review are the subjects which should be taught as a minimum core, their range and depth and the age-groups to which they are appropriate and the number of subjects which should be offered as options at the secondary level.

Co-ordination

As in the New Commonwealth, co-ordination on control between types and levels of schooling tends to be informal or achieved on an ad hoc basis. Co-ordination is formally established most frequently for the curriculum of primary and secondary schools and least frequently between formal schooling

and non-formal agencies. Co-ordinating committees are the device most used. There is some formal machinery also at the secondary/tertiary level. In Manitoba, Canada, post-secondary institutions make inputs into the secondary curriculum committees dealing with senior high school subjects, and through liaison between members of the Articulation Council of Secondary and Post-secondary Education. But this is an exceptionally formalized example. New Zealand probably expresses the anxieties of many a country by suggesting:

Universities Entrance Board prescriptions for subjects in the final two years of secondary school should provide for co-ordination but, in fact, such co-ordination is not as widely carried out as it might be.

Where co-ordination exists it tends to be with authority from top-down, not bottom-up.

Local Control and Participation

Apart from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the countries of the Old Commonwealth work with state level curricula guidelines which all schools follow. Most emphasize, however, that local teacher participation in curriculum is important and ways are found to allow for, even encourage, local initiatives. In Saskatchewan, provincial curriculum guides, though in the process of being tightened up, are expected to be sufficiently flexible to allow for local modification and adaption. Provision is made by the central authorities for locally developed courses. Innovative programmes are eligible for financial grants. In Manitoba, though the curriculum is mainly prescribed centrally, it is possible for a teacher group in a local school district to develop a complete curriculum for an optional course to be offered in the local school. This is most popular for Canadian Studies or Sociology where local student interest is high and teachers have special knowledge. In England, where the school in theory has autonomy to develop its own curriculum, in practice it is limited by the demands of examination boards and by recommendations of HM Inspectors, local authority advisers and the considered proposals of the Schools Council. Nevertheless, the work of teachers, often co-operating in Teachers Centres, has made a significant contribution to inter-disciplinary studies such as environmental education, development studies, political education and education for international understanding. While teachers centres are a useful means of relating teachers across subject boundaries, subject associations are possibly the more frequent mode of association in curriculum development as much in the Old as in the New Commonwealth.

There is no consensus about the proper participation of lay persons in curriculum development. Parents can have a say in school affairs but there is wide variation in the extent to which this is thought valuable. In England the recent democratization of governing bodies of schools has paved the way for parents to exert more control at the school level. In Western Australia, on the other hand, "very few schools invite parents to join in school curriculum development". However, contributions from extension and welfare agencies is welcomed; a parenthood course was devised and implemented with assistance from the Community and Child Health Services.

Discussion of the Old Commonwealth with respect to control and co-ordination of the curriculum has been singled out by virtue of the fact that machinery for control has been established much longer. The striking fact emerges, however, that apart from the longer tradition, the issues which are currently under review or proving problematic are very similar to those being experienced in the countries of the New Commonwealth which have more recently established institutions for curriculum development.