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INTRODUCTION



Staying Relevant: Commonwealth Education at 60

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Education, once a mainly domestic concern, has been affected as much as any sector by the forces of globalisation and international connectivity. A country's global standing now depends, in part, on its education provision. Schools, pupil performance and curricula are subject to external scrutiny and international rankings. School and college places have become a commodity, forming part of a country's export trade. Online educational provision means courses are offered across national boundaries. Employability and relevance of qualifications to the international job market are an increasing concern.

Partly for reasons of history and shared language, Commonwealth countries are heavily engaged in international education exchange. This volume is published to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the first Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford in 1959. It aims to reflect on some of the principal dimensions of education development in member states and on the challenges they face; to examine the case for education being a priority area for Commonwealth collective engagement; and to consider where and how the Commonwealth might direct its efforts in education at a time of constrained resources.

A Special Issue: Approaching Commonwealth Education

A Special Issue on education in a Commonwealth-focused professional journal might consider the Commonwealth and education from three differing standpoints.

- (1) A survey of Commonwealth countries' education provision and performance, comparing both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries individually and collectively and analysing progress over time in relation to both the global development goals and emerging needs.
- (2) Considering education as a characteristic defining the Commonwealth and a contributor to its cohesion and sense of identity.
- (3) Assessing education as an area of collective Commonwealth activity where countries co-operate both in pursuing education development in individual member countries and in helping to shape the international framework for education relations and exchange.

This Special Issue touches on all three, but is overtly concerned with the third, in recognition of the 60 years of Commonwealth educational co-operation instigated by

the 1959 Oxford conference. That conference erected three prominent pillars upon which much of subsequent Commonwealth co-operation in education has rested: it inaugurated the series of triennial Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEMs), of which there have now been 20; it established for the first time a central secretariat for education (the Commonwealth Education Liaison Unit, later incorporated into the Commonwealth Secretariat as its education team); and it launched the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). It is noteworthy that mechanisms for co-operation in education pre-date the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat and Foundation in 1965, underlining the primacy of education on member-state agendas and as a facet of Commonwealth collective activity and, arguably, identity.

From 50 Years On to 60 Years On

The Round Table published a precursor to this volume to mark the 50th anniversary in 2009 (Williams and Lee, 2009). That Issue highlighted the challenges to education posed by globalisation and the inequalities created by a global market. Commonwealth education systems and educational co-operation have been shaped by many changes in the intervening 10 years, a decade that has taken us forward from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015. These changes include shifts in the balance of world power and in attitudes to multilateralism; continuing demographic growth and displacement due to conflict; environmental concerns and more frequent natural catastrophes; life-changing advances in information and communication technology (ICT)-supported interconnectivity; challenges of urbanisation; as well as ongoing threats posed by extremism and terrorism. These trends will no doubt continue to exert their influence in the 2020s and 2030s.

Adding in the tasks assigned to education (promoting democracy and good citizenship, gender awareness, responsible stewardship of the environment, countering drug-use, gun and knife crime), there seems no end to the number of societal challenges to which education systems are expected to provide at least part of the answer. How then are these contextual changes reflected across the three dimensions of Commonwealth education that this collection of essays seeks to address?

Commonwealth Education Provision and Performance

Here, two contradictory messages emerge. One is a note of optimism, indeed a cause for congratulation, that despite strong population growth, there have been equally strong rises in school and college enrolment rates, and young people are on average staying longer in formal education. Keith Lewin notes that at primary level Commonwealth countries now have average gross enrolment rates well in excess of 100% (under- and over-age children explaining the excess). While corresponding secondary-level enrolment rates are only 36% in Commonwealth low-income countries and 69% in lower-middle-income countries, this represents a considerable advance over the past 10 years. Rebecca Gordon et al. report substantial progress on gender parity, with 31 out of 44 countries having the data, achieving gender parity in primary enrolment and, encouragingly, the greatest improvements coming in African and Asian countries that were furthest behind.

The converse message is that much of the global shortfall on SDG targets is in Commonwealth countries – largely because of high numbers of unenrolled children in Nigeria and Pakistan – and that almost everywhere in the Commonwealth, school attendance does not equate with actual learning. Indeed, in Nigeria and Pakistan amongst other countries, Gordon et al. note that ‘girls only achieve four years of learning’, despite spending seven or eight years in primary school. Even in well-performing Commonwealth countries, there are serious inequities between different socio-economic groups in the quality of schooling received, and of learning achieved, and many classrooms remain both overcrowded and under-equipped.

Education as an Expression and Driver of Commonwealth Identity

Our authors rightly distinguish between evidence of extensive education interchange in the Commonwealth on the one hand and any sense of Commonwealth identity to which that might give rise on the other. The extensive exchange of education services, teachers and students between Commonwealth countries does not necessarily equate to any awareness of a Commonwealth aspect to such activity. As Kenneth and Pravina King point out in relation to Africans studying in India, students from one Commonwealth country studying in another may be totally oblivious to any Commonwealth connection.

But the articles do find areas where it can be claimed that Commonwealth educational activity and co-operation contribute to greater Commonwealth awareness and constitute a facet of what the Commonwealth is understood to be and embody. Many refer to the common use of English as a source of cohesiveness and note the central role Commonwealth education systems play in the teaching and spread of English. The inclusion of focused curriculum content as a means of promoting Commonwealth awareness is not covered in this issue but is worth noting here as an aspect that has had limited attention since the Symons Report (Symons Commission, 1996) advocating investment in Commonwealth studies was released. The primary area identified by almost all authors as contributing to Commonwealth awareness and cohesion is student interchange.

Hilary Perraton’s review of student exchange gives us a nuanced view of the changing context of student flows. While intra-Commonwealth student mobility has grown markedly, the flow of Commonwealth students to certain non-Commonwealth destinations (US, China, Europe (ex-UK), Middle East) has probably increased faster, making it hard to claim that Commonwealth cohesion has been decisively affected by student mobility in recent years. Nevertheless, after a drastic fall in the decades up to 2005, Perraton notes that the Commonwealth share of international students hosted by Australia, Canada and the UK has remained steady and in New Zealand has even risen. In addition, the CSFP does consciously try to develop Commonwealth awareness in member-country students studying in another Commonwealth country. Explicit efforts are made, particularly in the UK, to familiarise Scholars with Commonwealth institutions and co-operation.

There have been interesting shifts in patterns of Commonwealth student mobility: first, as Perraton’s data show, in the latest period (2005-2016) Australia overtook the UK as the principal Commonwealth host to Commonwealth students; second, Malaysian (and incidentally Hong Kong) students still prefer the UK and Australia to the US as a study destination; and third, the top destination in 2017 for Nigerian

students after the UK was Malaysia according to Perraton, followed in fact by Ghana. Perraton's observations and the article by the Kings throw into relief an important harbinger of future developments – the emergence of a multi-polar Commonwealth where new players (e.g. India, Malaysia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa) themselves become hubs of attraction for students from the Commonwealth and elsewhere.

Educational Co-operation: A Collective Commonwealth Activity

The period from 17CCEM in Malaysia in 2009 to 20CCEM in Fiji in 2018 has seen continuing evolution in patterns of international collaboration in education, quite apart from the global community's adoption of the SDGs in succession to the MDGs. Developments include a larger role assigned to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the emergence of new players – regional development banks, Arab-world institutions, bilateral donors like China and India – in education aid. There are signs of some retreat from multilateralism among traditional donors and a greater propensity to apply aid programmes to further donors' commercial and political interests. The extended use of indicators to measure educational achievement and construct international league tables has created a huge demand for more, and increasingly refined, data.

The Commonwealth's own institutional capacity to respond to these developments in the education sector has not kept pace. This partly reflects 'the big picture' regarding the position of the Commonwealth in the world and is in part the product of the Commonwealth's collective decisions on its priorities for joint endeavour.

Advocates for the Commonwealth are wont to repeat that it accounts for a third of the global population and a quarter of UN membership and that individual Commonwealth member states display some of the best records of economic and educational advance. Yet in development co-operation, Commonwealth countries have not emerged as major new sources of additional finance, nor have the international agencies with expanded mandates and resources at their disposal been the Commonwealth's own collective institutions. Indeed, the funding available to the Commonwealth Secretariat (ComSec) and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) has declined from the already miniscule (in global terms) £52m p.a. in 2012/2013 to just £32m now (Landale, 2019). Reflecting this, Commonwealth Secretariat staff numbers have been reduced by a quarter from 295 in 2016 to only 223 in 2019.

Strategic priorities for dispensing this diminished Commonwealth resource are promulgated in Communiqués from Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs), while programmatic priorities for Secretariat action are laid out in four-year Strategic Plans. Education – described by Shridath Ramphal in 2009 as 'the jewel in the Commonwealth's crown' (Ramphal, 2009) – and health have been the big losers in the last decade with Secretariat professional education staff reduced from six in 2009 to just two in 2019, now without an education professional as section head. Resource constraints compelled cuts, and downsizing of social development activity was where the axe fell, but only after anguished and reportedly angry debates in ComSec's Board of Governors and frequent referrals back in response to suggestions that education should be discontinued completely as a Secretariat activity.

However, deprioritisation of education in ComSec does not denote terminal decline across the board. Of the two other pillars established in Oxford in 1959 – Ministerial Conferences and the CSFP – CCEMs with their associated forums have continued and

seem likely to survive beyond the already-scheduled 21CCEM in Kenya in 2021, particularly if suggestions for making them more vibrant and productive (Kirkland, 2018; Wright, 2015) are taken up. The CSFP too continues, with annual investment in the plan by awarding countries roughly equal to ComSec's resource envelope of £32m. The loss of Canada, the Plan's originator, as a contributor has dealt a blow to its multilateral character (working on the principle of bilateral contributions in a multilateral framework) and left the UK awkwardly placed as a contributor of around 90% of the awards. But this is somewhat offset by the expansion of the CSFP Endowment Fund launched at 17CCEM which has £14m at its disposal and out of its income funds awards, now known as Queen Elizabeth Commonwealth Scholarships, tenable at institutions in low-income and lower-middle-income Commonwealth countries.

The three pillars established at the 1959 Conference represent only a fraction of the totality of Commonwealth education infrastructure (Williams and Lockwood, 2015). The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the third of the Commonwealth's trio of inter-governmental organisations (alongside ComSec and the Commonwealth Foundation), has continued in good health since its inception in 1988. Tim Unwin notes its important role in sharing good practices and in creating the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth. COL clearly represents a major Commonwealth resource, not just for education but for every sector where communication technologies can assist in capacity building and human resource development. However, translating its Commonwealth reputation for success into global recognition remains a challenge.

Of the extended family of Commonwealth civil society organisations, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) is the largest, with over 500 members and now responsibility for the coordination of CSFP and management of the Queen Elizabeth Commonwealth Scholarships. Of the other organisations, many, like the Commonwealth Education Trust, are now operating on a reduced scale, with some struggling to survive following the withdrawal of Commonwealth Foundation support grants.

From this brief stocktaking, we can only conclude that, in line with overall Commonwealth fortunes, education co-operation has lost momentum in the past decade, but that basic infrastructures capable of providing platforms for new collaborative initiatives remain in place.

Education: Still a Commonwealth Priority?

So, where does this review of Commonwealth educational activity leave us? There is little doubt that the future lies with knowledge societies and that most Commonwealth countries, given their population profiles (60% aged 30 and under and with many more children than working adults according to Lewin), have education and health as their top priorities and will likely continue to do so. But internally the Commonwealth remains divided on education's place as a necessary facet of Commonwealth joint endeavour, with many questioning the Commonwealth's ability to contribute usefully and distinctively in a crowded field containing so many substantially better resourced international players. Mirroring broader debates on Commonwealth purpose and potential across all its areas of operation, member states have tended to align themselves into two camps, with the more developed Commonwealth 'paymasters' (Australia,

Canada, New Zealand and the UK) advocating a prime focus on values and democracy, while low- and middle-income member states favour a continued Commonwealth role in socio-economic development including education and health. The ‘paymasters’ have tended to win, with democracy pushing out development and limited Commonwealth resources focused on human rights, governance, peace and trade, at the expense of human development programmes.

Emotive as this polarised debate easily becomes, when considered dispassionately is there a real case for continued Commonwealth involvement in education? What would be lost if Commonwealth educational co-operation did disappear as an area of collective inter-governmental activity? And if a valid case can be made for continuing engagement, what shape should that take?

Limited Resources, Limited Impact?

A number of the articles in the issue address the value of continued Commonwealth activity in education. Our brief snapshot of recent history highlights weaknesses and identifies challenges requiring attention. Many commentators consider education best left to other, better-resourced, multilateral agencies (Cream Wright reminds us how these have multiplied), or to the regional level (discussed by Tavis Jules). Another model involves borrowing the Commonwealth name for essentially bilateral programmes designed *for* groups of Commonwealth recipients but not governed *by* collective Commonwealth institutions. The Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Platform for Girls’ Education and the Girls’ Education Challenge announced at CHOGM (which provide the background to Gordon et al.’s article) might be so categorised.

Whether bilateralism is in the ascendancy, or multilateralism and networks of networks are the new norm, all authors stress the need for the Commonwealth to adapt to fast-changing international landscapes: ‘re-inventing itself for the 21st century’ as Cream Wright puts it. In exploring how to adapt, some common ideas emerge from the articles of what constitutes Commonwealth comparative advantage in education. These echo more general, frequently cited Commonwealth strengths:

- Commonwealth advantages in terms of convening power and above all its empowerment of members’ voices.
- ‘Monolingualism’ (English) has advantages for international discourse and communication and, as Unwin notes, has ‘considerable value in developing educational and training solutions at scale’.
- Reach of membership across diverse cultures, faiths and income levels, encompassing both donors and recipients.
- Relative informality and agility compared to other fora. As Unwin observes: ‘it is often much easier to reach such agreements within [the Commonwealth] than it is at the larger scale of the UN’
- The profile of Commonwealth membership, e.g. so many small states in membership (explored by Michael Crossley and Pearlette Louisy) and a heavy presence in some regional groupings (Jules) provide a comparative advantage in specific contexts.

- Capacity to leverage Commonwealth breadth and depth to break down silos within and beyond education. It is salient that the authors of this education-focused special issue are drawn from disciplines as diverse as International Development, Geography, Regional Studies, and Population Studies, as well as Schools of Education.
- A fund of acquired expertise in certain specialised areas. Examples include ACU and university co-operation; COL and distance education; education in small states; development of the teaching profession and teacher management and support (instanced by Unwin); or the ongoing commitment to gender parity and equality which has led it to focus even-handedly on the inclusion of disadvantaged girls and underachieving boys.
- Extensive experience and successes with particular modes of intervention, including technical co-operation, scholarship programmes, south–south knowledge transfer, etc.
- An existing, although much weakened, collaborative network of civil society organisations connecting up areas of expertise.

Some would argue that the existence of these strengths alone makes the case for continued Commonwealth educational activity and demonstrates the capacity to adapt to new contexts. Others would say that whilst they represent the potential to perform, they do not provide an imperative. Perhaps that imperative stems from the bigger picture. If the challenges facing education and its failure to rise to them are a microcosm of the difficulties the Commonwealth finds itself in more generally, then success or failure in the education context has wider implications. For if education, with its role in forging Commonwealth connections, its longstanding Commonwealth infrastructure of institutions and programmes and its strong support from LMIC countries, cannot make the case to remain a core area of Commonwealth focus and endeavour, then is, by extension, the whole Commonwealth project also doomed? Those who understandably point to issues of environment and climate change, security and democracy, empowerment of women and youth as having equally strong claims for Commonwealth attention might bear in mind education's vital supportive role in creating the knowledge and understanding, and shaping the attitudes, prerequisite to achieving key Commonwealth objectives in parallel sectors.

Where Next Then? A Refocused Commonwealth Education Agenda

If there is an argument for the Commonwealth to stay engaged with education, what should be the focus? Recent years have seen it unimaginatively following global trends with the last seven CCEMs focussed effectively on EFA, the MDGs or the SDGs with limited effort made to define a distinct Commonwealth agenda or contribution within these. As Cream Wright puts it 'the world does not need yet another grouping of countries that simply tags along with support for the education SDGs'. A contributory factor has been the lack of continuity between CCEMs (Wright, A. 2015) and the consequent absence of a defined set of priorities around which to coalesce.

The articles in this special issue point to a number of potential areas of focus:

Building a Commonwealth Education Agenda

Gordon et al. highlight the Commonwealth's potential to provide political leadership and the need for simultaneous, coordinated interventions only achievable with visible political commitment. The current international focus on climate change, migration, education for peace and global security provides a menu of issues which play to Commonwealth values and experience and could frame a 'Commonwealth' agenda aligned with global priorities.

Shaping Fairer Global Agendas

The imbalance between rich and poor countries in ownership of global goal setting has long been noted. The Commonwealth's strengths as a convenor and as a representative of those without a voice in other multilateral fora leave it well placed to help disadvantaged states to share ownership of development agendas. Lewin evidences the value of the Commonwealth's input to the SDG development process citing a number of ways in which the Commonwealth Goals and Targets for 2030 informed the format of the adopted SDGs. He suggests this type of intervention as a possible focus area or 'new agenda' for the Commonwealth. He argues that the Commonwealth should seek to 'take control of the global development framework in ways that match Commonwealth conditions and national priorities'. In other words, the Commonwealth should use the essence of its identity as a platform giving equal voice to all, to advocate for a fairer global development agenda.

Bridging the Donor–Recipient Divide

Almost all of our authors refer explicitly to the changing development landscape and the increasing importance of bridging the divide between the recipient and donor (Wright, Jules), target setter and target getter (Lewin) and working 'with' not 'for' development beneficiaries (Unwin). With a membership comprising both donors and recipients and those emerging players who are moving between the two, the Commonwealth could make this rebalancing a focus of its educational activity. Efforts to address this in the education sphere would have applicability in other areas of Commonwealth development work providing opportunities for cross-sectoral work. Commonwealth strengths in supporting knowledge exchange and south–south technical co-operation also suggest it could play a valuable role in enabling 'target getters' to take greater ownership of monitoring and reporting on global goals.

Convening Power and CCEMs

Convening power, capacity to marshal political leadership and to build political consensus behind issues, comes up again and again as an area of Commonwealth comparative advantage. As the second largest Commonwealth ministerial after CHOGM, CCEMs represent a significant opportunity and tool within the Commonwealth's education armoury. In recent years, however, they appear to have lost some of their dynamism, and their potential has been underused. Significant rethinking is needed to

position them as a relevant event in the government and civil society global education calendars. Desirable changes include better defined themes and preparatory briefings; greater continuity between CCEMs; clearer remits for communiqués and monitoring of performance against commitments; and revamped parallel fora better embedded in ministerial programmes.

A Revitalised Secretariat

The wider Commonwealth infrastructure in education relies on ComSec and CCEMs for leadership in identifying priorities, launching initiatives and convening interested parties for co-operative action. The strength of those original pillars is, therefore, crucial. It is clear that a professional education staff team at ComSec of only two is insufficient simultaneously to execute a programme of new work while also preparing and servicing the next triennial CCEM and the follow through, as well as managing relations with COL, ACU and the wider infrastructure. Secondments from member countries and education-specific internship schemes for young professionals could provide valuable additional support. The UK has reported its recent initiative to deploy two human rights advisors to the Commonwealth Small States team in Geneva, suggesting a precedent to follow.

Partnership Working

The Secretariat is already making moves towards remapping its approaches to partnership with both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth players. At 20CCEM in Fiji ACU, the Commonwealth Secretariat and COL entered into a semi-formal Commonwealth Education Partnership to ensure closer coordination of effort in education to advance Commonwealth priority concerns. Additional use of similar partnerships to co-opt Commonwealth agencies and others to work on key aspects of a Commonwealth programme in education could help bridge resource gaps. Active management by education professionals is still needed to make any form of outsourcing or hub-based approach effective – it should not be seen as a replacement for in-house teams but rather a complement to them.

Education Champions

The welcome spread of democratic government and more frequent replacement of one government by another results in rapid turnover of education ministers with few surviving from one CCEM to the next. This erodes feelings of responsibility and ownership of conclusions and commitments entered into. The UK government announced in 2019 that it was appointing an ‘International Education Champion’ tasked with ‘opening up international opportunities for the UK sector, connecting the education sector to overseas opportunities, and overcoming any challenges and barriers to growth’ (International Education Strategy, 2019). Similarly, in the wake of CHOGM, the UK government has set up ‘The Platform for Girls Education’ which ‘comprises 12 influential global figures who are championing the girls’ education agenda during UK’s term as Commonwealth Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth’ (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019). The

Commonwealth might do well to consider adopting a similar strategy. From Julia Gillard at the GPE to Gordon Brown as UN Education Envoy, there are precedents to follow. This type of approach could support efforts to build momentum behind particular issues or causes, helping to simultaneously focus Commonwealth efforts on to particular agendas and to raise the profile of activities.

Expert and Advisory Groups

ComSec has considerable ‘convening power’ and can use the prestige and sense of public service that a Commonwealth assignment confers to attract the best talent to Commonwealth service, normally free of charge. Some of the most significant past work in education leading to the creation of COL, establishment of the Commonwealth Higher Education Support Scheme and Higher Education Management Service or the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol have been produced in this way. The creative and effective work post-18CCEM on the SDGs (as described by Lewin) also involved a high-level working group of a different kind. ComSec should look to leverage expertise to be found among the civil services, research institutions, think tanks, universities and business corporations of member countries, and imagination should be used in recruiting them to Commonwealth service.

Conclusion: Adapting to Survive

In recent years, articles on the Commonwealth that do not mention a ‘crisis’ or the need for ‘reform’ or ‘revitalisation’ are rare. This special issue is no exception, and it is depressing that since the last stocktaking on education in this journal in 2009, little progress has been made. The same challenges exist and have multiplied, and similar suggestions for how to catalyse change have been made and gone unheeded. Without that change, it is doubtful whether anyone will notice the 70th anniversary of the Oxford Conference in 2029.

We hope the contents of this special issue will stimulate reflection and debate and prompt further high-level enquiry into the future of Commonwealth educational co-operation.

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