

Commonwealth Consortium for Education
C/o LECT, 7 Lion Yard, Tremadoc Road London SW4 7NQ
Office telephone: 020 7498 1101 Fax: 020 7720 5403

Chair: Professor Colin Power c.power@eidos.org.au
Hon. Sec: Peter Williams peterrwilliams@onetel.com

MEMORANDUM TO COMMONWEALTH MINISTERS OF EDUCATION AT 16CCEM

Commonwealth Partnerships to Strengthen Education for the Good of All

The Consortium is a group of 24 Commonwealth associations committed to working together, and with others, for Commonwealth education development. Our member organisations have been collaborating through the Consortium since 2001. Many of them will be represented at 16CCEM in their own right and the Consortium will have a small delegation. You will receive copies of the twelve *Commonwealth Education Briefing Notes* that the Consortium has compiled and a copy of the *Commonwealth Education Directory* that it has recently completed. Your observations on how these could be improved for future use would be very welcome.

You will also receive copies of a report entitled *Implementing the Commonwealth Edinburgh Action Plan for Education: the way Forward*. This was commissioned from the Consortium by the Commonwealth Secretariat following 15CCEM.

Nurturing and developing Commonwealth education infrastructure

Our report identifies the comparative advantage that the Commonwealth has in tackling the key education challenges facing member countries in the six Action Areas you identified in Edinburgh. We draw attention to the Commonwealth's well-developed education infrastructure, more extensive than in any other sector. Policy makers have sometimes found it inaccessible, because of its apparent complexity: and we hope our own 'mapping' efforts, referred to above, prove helpful in that context. What seems clear is that there is a good foundation for development programmes in education, but it is under-resourced (because of the excessively constrained budgets of the Secretariat/CFTC, the Foundation and COL). Moreover, there is a danger of the strengths of the Commonwealth being dissipated through fragmentation of effort.

Partners in development

There is great potential for official and unofficial organisations to work closely together for education development.

At national level partnerships between government and civil society – with the business sector as an important third player – are essential for progress in education. Governments with their democratic mandate and control of substantial resources must take the lead in education policy and development. But the voluntary and professional groups that make up civil society can mobilise energy, independent thinking, innovation and local knowledge to support government effort.

The same is true of the Commonwealth. Official Commonwealth programmes will often achieve greater effectiveness by working with and through independent professional and institutional associations. The Consortium and its members co-operate closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth of Learning.

There is scope for effective mobilisation of institutional efforts around common themes and goals. It would be helpful to civil society if Ministers at their triennial Conferences were to set broad priorities and directions for concerted Commonwealth action in the subsequent triennium. Implementation agencies – whether they be inter-governmental bodies or civil society organisations – could afterwards confer on turning these priorities into a common plan of action. Each organisation - along with governments and bilateral aid agencies - would thus be helped to identify a constructive role for itself, reflecting its special expertise and level of resources. ***We would welcome guidance from CCEM on where our input would be most valuable and how it could fit into a wider Commonwealth programme for education improvement.***

School and college linking

International linking of schools and colleges opens up the prospects of an exciting new form of partnership in Commonwealth education. In our generation developments in communication, both physical and electronic make it more possible, though still expensive, for schools and colleges to make direct contact with each other and to forge partnerships that enhance the quality of education. The Consortium, in partnership with Link Community Development and others, will be holding a Conference on school and college linking in Cape Town on December 8 and 9 and will share its findings with Ministers and the civil-society Forums. At this relatively early stage in the development of twinning arrangements, ***we believe it would be beneficial for Ministers to consider their potential, to suggest ways in which the networks can be expanded to include less affluent schools and countries, and to set out principles to serve as a framework for good practice in the conduct of links.***

Education about the Commonwealth and Commonwealth values

A primary aim and beneficial effect of school and college partnerships in the Commonwealth is the promotion of friendship among individuals and communities in different member countries. They create awareness of what is shared and what is distinctive about the different societies making up the Commonwealth association. It has never been more important than now to inculcate in the young the common values of tolerance, mutual respect, and active compassion for others. Heads of Government have handed down a mandate to the Secretariat addressing issues of Understanding and Respect, and we urge Education Ministers to devote time at CCEM to considering how education systems can respond. ***We believe it would be timely for Ministers to establish a stakeholder group on education about the Commonwealth and its values, to report to 17CCEM.*** Our members would be glad to give all possible assistance.

The holistic approach

We urge Ministers to address education development in holistic terms, to explore ways of strengthening the links between different levels and types of education and – where comparative advantage for Commonwealth initiatives seems evident - to extend the range of Commonwealth co-operative efforts to embrace all forms of education from cradle to the grave.

The need to address Education for All is evident. The Dakar Goals set in 2000 interpret this in a comprehensive way, emphasising not just the primary school, but its place within a lifelong learning process. Successful learning in primary school is more likely if children have had positive social and educational experiences from an early age. Parental literacy reinforces the efforts the school makes. The targets within the Millennium Development Goals framework are valid objectives, but Ministers and Commonwealth agencies should also address other concerns both in basic education and at other levels.

Secondary and tertiary education must be developed in step with primary education. There are obvious linkages between the different levels through incentives to study, the provision of teachers, research and development work leading to an improved curriculum. Commonwealth co-operation in higher education and research can usefully underpin efforts to extend primary-school provision to the poorest in society. At all levels gender parity is a priority objective.

Next steps

In 2009 at 17CCEM the Commonwealth will be celebrating 50 years of Commonwealth Education Ministers' Conferences. In anticipation of this milestone, and to lay solid foundations for active collaboration in the next half-century, we suggest that it would be timely for 16CCEM to address the issue of continuity and oversight of education co-operation between Ministerial Conferences.

The Commonwealth lacks adequate machinery for monitoring progress and guiding and supporting the Secretariat in the fulfilment of its education mandates. ***We suggest Ministers might consider the creation of a small Ministerial committee, composed of representatives from each main region and with appropriate civil society participation, to meet at intervals during the triennium between CCEMs to ensure that the implementation of CCEM mandates is on track and to ensure that the Commonwealth responds flexibly to new opportunities and challenges.***