

A Common Future for Education

A Statement from the Commonwealth Consortium for Education to Commonwealth Education Ministers on the occasion of their 20th Conference in Fiji February 19-23 2018

1. At this April's meeting Commonwealth Heads of Government will be deliberating on the theme 'Towards a Common Future'. The Commonwealth Consortium for Education (CCfE), representing Commonwealth-accredited voluntary and professional organisations in the education sector, believes a common approach to education in the Commonwealth brings benefits both within the educational sphere and beyond to member countries. To build a common future for education we believe that an urgent recommitment of interest and support from member states and from the wider Commonwealth community is needed. **Consortium members therefore call on Commonwealth governments to use the 60th anniversary of Commonwealth educational co-operation in 2019 to commission a thorough review of the scope for partnership in education under the leadership of a strengthened Secretariat.**

Importance of Commonwealth co-operation in education

2. Education is one of the binding forces that has helped to shape the modern Commonwealth. It sustains the Commonwealth association through the movement of students, teachers and researchers, through partnerships between colleges and schools, and through the exchange of experience and good practice between education systems built on common systems and ideas. Education also has an important part to play in creating a sense of shared identity among Commonwealth peoples.

3. Commonwealth collective efforts through shared institutions and programmes such as those operating through the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth of Learning, Association of Commonwealth Universities, and Commonwealth Education Trust, constitute a modest but significant part of a far larger picture of extensive education interchange between our countries.

Challenges in a changing environment

4. Next year, 2019, marks a significant milestone in Commonwealth education, the 60th anniversary of the first Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford and the launch of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. A year later, in 1960, the Commonwealth Education Liaison Unit began operations at Marlborough House pre-dating the Secretariat and Foundation themselves.

5. Significant changes in the intervening 60 years have produced a very different environment for Commonwealth educational co-operation today. Expanded Commonwealth populations seek new skills as countries move into the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Diversified education systems must respond to changing needs, internationalisation and 'marketisation' through private sector involvement. The global community has adopted the Millennium Development Goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with their ambitious education targets. International agencies and programmes promoting international educational co-operation have multiplied.

7. However, budget constraints across the development sector and within the Commonwealth in particular have affected organisational capacity to contribute to the development of education systems and to enable education to play its proper role at the forefront of wider concerns like promoting the 'blue economy', countering extremism and preventing violence against women.

8. Drastic reductions in the Commonwealth's income have triggered across-the-board reductions in staffing and resources for much of the Secretariat's core work. Provision for Education is now at a level where even the basic function of preparing and mounting a ministerial conference such as 20CCEM necessitates drafting in extra staff on a temporary basis.

Revitalising Commonwealth mechanisms and building partnerships

9. We see maintenance of an effective educational presence in the Commonwealth Secretariat as crucial. Commonwealth countries' ability to exert collective influence on international education agendas at the UN and UNESCO or in other fora is necessarily mediated through the Secretariat as their authorised agent and no other body has the same authority and the same access to member governments. Moreover the vitality of the rest of the Commonwealth education infrastructure depends largely on co-ordination and leadership from Marlborough House. We believe that an effective partnership model will depend on a Secretariat able to perform the necessary leadership and co-ordination functions even while drawing on the capacity and professional expertise elsewhere in the Commonwealth family.

10. Reflecting these concerns, the Consortium commissioned a short independent study of pan-Commonwealth co-operation in the education sector to kick start a conversation about possible ways forward. Consortium members are anxious that discussions should be under way to feed into the 2018 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Fiji (20CCEM), the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to follow in London in April 2018 and the Secretary-General's consultations for establishing a High-Level Group to address governance and other matters of Commonwealth concern.

Consortium-commissioned report: *Towards a Common Future for Education*

11. The study, *Towards a Common Future for Education* (echoing the theme of the forthcoming CHOGM), was completed in February 2018 and was conducted by Dr John Kirkland, until recently Deputy Secretary General at the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK. Dr Kirkland was asked to examine the place of education in the Commonwealth's collective existence and activity and the nature and extent of existing co-operation in education taking place under a Commonwealth banner. He was invited to explore options for strengthening and improving Commonwealth consultative mechanisms in education and bringing about more effective collaboration.

12. Key messages that emerge from the report include: i) the wide range and variety of educational institutions and programmes bearing the Commonwealth name, representing significant potential; ii) the appetite for greater partnership working amongst Commonwealth non-governmental organisations provided there is a strong Secretariat function to guide this; and iii) recognition of the symbiotic relationship between the functions and capacities of the inter-governmental, governmental and non-governmental actors and the increased impact they can achieve through co-operative activities compared to somewhat fragmented past efforts.

13. The report also sketches out new ways for the education community to collaborate, for example: the suggestion for joint programmes of work on priority issues, the idea of creating a forum through which the main Commonwealth education players could co-ordinate their efforts more closely, and wider resort to mobilising distinguished thought-leaders and experienced practitioners as 'Commonwealth ambassadors', 'Commonwealth chair-holders' and Commonwealth champions.

60th anniversary review of Commonwealth co-operation in education.

14. The report by Dr Kirkland is intended as a catalyst for debate rather than a final word or the more substantial review of the sector that we believe is necessary and hope will ensue from the discussions that study stimulates.

15. *The Consortium believes the 60th anniversary represents an opportune time for this more substantial examination, and it requests that member governments seize the moment at 20CCEM to commission a forward looking, practical review of educational co-operation in the Commonwealth.*