

Potential for Higher Education, International Collaboration and Research in Small States

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Beyond Basic Education in Small States

- As we have seen, the educational priorities of many Commonwealth small states have, for some time, extended beyond those identified for basic education that have dominated international policy agendas in recent years.
- Our own presentations and discussions with Ministers of Education at the 17th CCEM in Malaysia demonstrated how many Commonwealth small states remain committed to EFA and MDG agendas.
- But, at the same time, they are also pressing well “beyond global goals and targets” and they are looking for international support in such ventures.

The Case for Higher Education

- We cannot cover every dimension of education or every emergent issue that is explored in our research in our presentation today – even with regard to basic education.
- For that, we hope you will find our full report helpful – to be published by the Commonwealth Secretariat later in the year.
- In this section of the presentation, I will, therefore, focus on three related areas:
 - Higher Education
 - International Collaboration
 - Research

Planning for Higher Education in Small States

- Often in the face of external criticism, small states are increasingly prioritising the development of their own higher education sectors.
- This can be seen in the Caribbean, where, for example, Saint Lucia is currently planning to turn the SALCC into a university college – and in the South Pacific, where 2004 saw the launching of the University of Fiji, and the new Fiji National University began operation in early 2010.
- In the South Pacific, local pressures for such national developments go back to the 1980s, when the received wisdom maintained that regional provision (in the form of USP), combined with international study opportunities were the most appropriate and cost effective options.

Pressures for Locally Based Higher Education

- These include:
 - The successful expansion of primary and secondary provision, leading to increased social demand for HE
 - Efforts to prepare all citizens for participation in the knowledge economy
 - Calls for tertiary provision that caters directly to local needs and priorities
 - Concern to increase advanced level opportunities within home contexts where many skilled people seek outward migration
 - Other.....for discussion later today?

New Challenges for Policy and Practice

- Priorities do encompass more than basic education across many Commonwealth small states.
- Beyond basic education a diversity of provision is also in demand – with TVET and teacher education being especially prominent.
- This requires innovative planning to deal with the issues and dilemmas raised by the combination of internal and external challenges as identified earlier – climate change, global economics, poverty, migrations.....

Emergent Priorities in Higher Education

- From the research include:
 - Planning for balanced, cost effective growth focussed upon national development challenges and goals
 - Coordinating national and regional initiatives
 - Ensuring quality assurance
 - Leadership training, staff development and retention
 - Strengthening international collaboration and regulation – including concern with the impact of external competition and ‘degree mills’
 - Harnessing the potential of technology and of Distance and Flexible Learning (DFL)
 - Encouraging partnerships between small states
- Familiar issues, but all have distinctive challenges within and for small states
- We will look at the three highlighted examples in more detail.

Three Illustrative Examples

- Coordinating National and Regional Initiatives
 - Both Saint Lucia and Fiji Islands must now prioritise increased collaboration with established regional universities (UWI and USP) to negotiate cost effective and mutually supportive ways forward – perhaps with complimentary programmes and specialities.
- Ensuring Quality Assurance
 - Larger small states such as PNG, Malta, Mauritius, Botswana have established 'buffer organisations' – higher education commissions – for the development of higher education policy and strategic planning – in some cases this includes the creation of HE Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance systems with national, regional and international scope. – For example, the Pacific Qualifications Framework (2009+) for international benchmarking and qualifications portability.
- But different models are necessary to meet different needs.

Illustrative Examples (continued)

- Harnessing the Potential of Technology
 - This is seen to have much potential for Commonwealth small states – reducing isolation via ICT
 - The Internet and ICT are transforming DFL: USP is now prioritising virtual learning platforms (Moodle)
 - Increased numbers of online enrolments (USP/UWI and national organisations)
 - Growing impact of VUSSC – a global sharing network, facilitated by COL – programmes in eg. teacher education, tourism, fisheries, disaster recovery, etc.
 - But technology is not a panacea. Many providers are facing new technological challenges and the benefits of ‘blended learning’ are widely recognised if quality is to be maintained.
 - This needs realistic understanding and informed planning if it is to be successful.

Potential for International Collaboration and Partnerships

- These are much used terms, but central to a long tradition within the Commonwealth.
- Central also for the success of many developments identified within our research.
- Priority to building on the Commonwealth's 'comparative advantage' with strengthened partnerships between:
 - Richer and poorer small states
 - North and south
 - Large and small
 - Small states and Overseas Territories
 - Public and private sectors
 - Commonwealth and other international agencies – IIEP, 2009 Policy Forum on Tertiary Education in Small States
- Support for the ongoing work of Comsec on small states in collaboration with national and regional organisations.

The Place of Research and Research Capacity Building

- Throughout all of our work the importance of locally grounded educational research is clear for sustainable policy development and implementation.
- Much can be learned from elsewhere and from international agendas and partnerships.
- But, small states do have an 'ecology of their own' which requires local knowledge and understanding – Kuala Lumpur Communiqué prioritised 'a variety of capacity-building and research initiatives'.
- This emphasises the importance of increased context sensitivity in educational research and research capacity building in small states – more studies carried out by local researchers in collaboration with international partners and agencies such as the Commonwealth Secretariat.

A Last Word from Saint Lucia

"It is not easy to avoid the dangers of 'uncritical international transfer' if one lacks the national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research or investigative inquiry necessary to 'customise' the experiences of others...the region's continued dependence on external financing for its development projects further strengthens the control of the development agencies (many of whom find it easier to adopt a 'one size fits all' policy), making it extremely difficult to bring its own perspective to policy decisions taken on its behalf."



Dame Pearlette Louisy

(Comparative Education, 2001: 435-436)

Governor General

Saint Lucia