

# COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION BRIEFING NOTES

Prepared by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education

A grouping of voluntary and professional bodies committed to education development in the Commonwealth

## No. 2. CONFERENCES OF COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS

The Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Cape Town, December 11-14 2006 is the sixteenth in a series that began in Oxford in 1959.

This Briefing Note sets out to explain the function and format of the Conferences, and of the Secretariat that serves them, and raises issues that Ministers will need to address in making Commonwealth education co-operation more effective. Companion Papers in the series explore other aspects of Commonwealth co-operation in education.

### Commonwealth co-operation in education

The Commonwealth family has grown to 53 members and spans every continent. The very growth of the association is one of the factors responsible for modifying the functioning of the Education Ministers' Conferences: 53 delegations are bound to interact in a different manner from what was possible when there were just 15 or 20 member states 40 years ago. The modern Commonwealth includes states that vary widely in physical and population size, and which are diverse in ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic make-up. Almost all (Mozambique is an exception) have had a historic connection with Britain as former dependencies or protectorates. Box 1 shows the present members by date of joining the Commonwealth and geographic region and as independent states.

Commonwealth Heads of Government themselves meet every two years, most recently in Valletta, Malta (2005) and Abuja in Nigeria (2003). Their next meeting is due to take place in Kampala Uganda in 2007. Below the level of the Heads, inter-governmental consultation and co-operation span many different areas of endeavour. It is orchestrated through the Commonwealth Secretariat and ranges across the political and economic fields to law, health, science, youth, gender and education. In many sectors there are annual or triennial ministerial meetings: in education the tradition has been to hold Ministerial Conferences every three years.

Education has always been at the centre of Commonwealth co-operation and interchange. This reflects the high priority that most members, with their young and rapidly growing populations, give to human development and welfare. Sharing of a common language in English, and similar institutional patterns in organisation of educational provision, have fostered links between member states and have led to the creation of common institutions both in the official inter-governmental sector and in the voluntary non-government sector.

### Box 1: 53 Member States of the Commonwealth

Antigua/Barbuda	Ca	1981	Mozambique	Af	1995
Australia	Pa	1931	Namibia	Af	1990
Bahamas	Ca	1973	Nauru	Pa	1968
Bangladesh	As	1972	New Zealand	Pa	1931
Barbados	Ca	1966	Nigeria	Af	1960
Belize	Ca	1981	Pakistan	As	1947
Botswana	Af	1966	Papua New Guinea	Pa	1975
Brunei Darussalam	As	1984	St. Kitts Nevis	Ca	1983
Cameroon	Af	1995	St Lucia	Ca	1979
Canada	Ca	1931	St Vincent	Ca	1979
Cyprus	Eu	1961	Samoa	Pa	1970
Dominica	Ca	1978	Seychelles	Af	1976
Fiji	Pa	1970	Sierra Leone	Af	1961
Gambia	Af	1965	Singapore	As	1965
Ghana	Af	1957	Solomon Is	Pa	1978
Grenada	Ca	1974	South Africa	Af	1931
Guyana	Ca	1966	Sri Lanka	As	1948
India	As	1947	Swaziland	Af	1968
Jamaica	Ca	1962	Tanzania	Af	1961
Kenya	Af	1963	Tonga	Pa	1970
Kiribati	Pa	1979	Trinidad/Tobago	Ca	1962
Lesotho	Af	1966	Tuvalu	Pa	1978
Malawi	Af	1964	Uganda	Af	1962
Maldives	As	1982	United Kingdom	Eu	-
Malaysia	As	1957	Vanuatu	Pa	1980
Malta	Eu	1964	Zambia	Af	1964
Mauritius	Af	1968			

**Af** – Africa (18)      **As** – Asia (8)      **Eu** – Europe (3)  
**Pa** – Pacific (11)      **Ca** – Canada/Caribbean (13)

Today this infrastructure includes the CCEMs (Ministerial Conferences), the education activity of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), and civil society organisations - including the Association of Commonwealth Universities and Commonwealth Institute among the best known (see also Briefing Notes 1 and 7 in this series).

### Education Ministers' Conferences 1959-2006

The first Commonwealth Education Conference was held in Oxford in 1959. Subsequent conferences have moved round the Commonwealth: five in Africa, three in Asia, two in Canada, two in the Caribbean, three in Europe, one in Australia (Box 2). Britain and Canada have each hosted two in the series.

**Box 2: Venues and dates of the CECs/CCEMs**

1	CEC	Oxford, United Kingdom	15 - 28/07/1959
2	CEC	New Delhi, India	11 - 25/01/1962
3	CEC	Ottawa, Canada	21/08 - 04/09/1964
4	CEC	Lagos, Nigeria	26/02 - 09/03/2006
5	CEC	Canberra, Australia	3 - 17/02/1971
6	CEC	Kingston, Jamaica	10 - 22/06/1974
7	CEC	Accra, Ghana	9 - 18/03/1977
8	CEC	Colombo, Sri Lanka	5 - 13/08/1980
9	CCEM	Nicosia, Cyprus	23 - 26/07/1984
10	CCEM	Nairobi, Kenya	20 - 24/07/1987
11	CCEM	Bridgetown, Barbados	29/10 - 02/11/1990
12	CCEM	Islamabad, Pakistan	27/11 - 01/12/1994
13	CCEM	Gaborone, Botswana	28/07 - 01/08/1997
14	CCEM	Halifax, Canada	26 - 30/11/2000
15	CCEM	Edinburgh, United Kingdom	27 - 30/10/2003
16	CCEM	Cape Town, South Africa	11 - 14/12/2006

Until 1980 conferences were styled 'Commonwealth Education Conferences' but later, starting with Nicosia in 1984, 'Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers'. The change in name betokened a change in format to a shorter, more streamlined, event lasting only three or four days, whereas the first eight CECs normally lasted a full week, and were preceded by as much as a week of preparatory work by education officials. CCEMs have also tended to focus more on policy and rather less on professional concerns than the earlier CECs. They have also included fewer participants from outside government ranks, although there has been compensation for this recently by the institution of civil society 'forums' (see below).

The principal thrust at the first, Oxford, Commonwealth Education Conference in 1959 was the launch of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) and the creation of a small secretariat, the Commonwealth Education Liaison Unit, to implement the decisions of the Conference, based in Marlborough House. The second (New Delhi) and third (Ottawa)

**Box 3: Themes of Education Ministers' Conferences 1974 to 2003**

1974	6CEC	Management of education
1977	7CEC	Economics of education
1980	8CEC	Human resource development
1984	9CCEM	Resources for education and their cost-effective use
		Education & youth unemployment
1987	10CCEM	Vocational orientation of education
1990	11CCEM	Improving the quality of basic education
1994	12CCEM	Changing role of state in education
1997	13CCEM	Education and technology
2000	14CCEM	Education in a global era: challenges of equity, opportunities for diversity
2003	15CCEM	Access inclusion and achievement: closing the gap
2006	16 CCEM	Access to quality education: for the good of all

Conferences were organised by the CELU, but by the time the fourth was held in Lagos the Commonwealth Secretariat had been created. The first decade of Commonwealth education co-operation saw strong enthusiasm to develop new schemes and programmes of collaboration, some multilateral and others bilaterally-based. They included, for example a series of Commonwealth Specialist Education Conferences, and a major Commonwealth Bursaries Scheme to strengthen teacher education.

From 1974 onwards the Conferences adopted a principal theme for exploration and exchange of experience, the discussion often being introduced by invited keynote speakers. The theme was additional to the ongoing business of reviewing and improving the mechanisms of co-operation, or identifying new opportunities for working together. The principal themes of

the eleven Conferences since 1974 are shown in Box 3. Conference themes tended to reflect the main global issues and debates in educational development – e.g. better resource management, economics and financing of education, the linkage between education the curriculum and the job market, quality and access, the role of the state.

Some of the sharpest exchanges of the 1980s did not concern these issues, but rather the mobility of students in the Commonwealth. The decision of some of the industrialised countries to withdraw subsidies at tertiary level from students from abroad, while retaining them for home students, meant that tuition fees for international students rose sharply. The seven successive reports of the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility were vigorously, and at times acrimoniously, debated by Ministers.

A more substantial spin-off from the Standing Committee's deliberations was in the field of distance education. There was growing awareness of the potential of distance learning to contribute to education development. The Secretary-General in consultation with Governments was prompted to establish a Committee under Lord Briggs to examine the scope for co-operation in distance education. The Briggs Report led to the creation of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 1988, following endorsement at 10CCEM and CHOGM.

**Planning and organisation of the Conferences**

The venue of the next CCEM is often agreed at the preceding Conference in response to an invitation by one of the participating Ministers. Precise dates are then fixed by consultation, normally falling in a period 32 to 40 months (roughly three years) after the Conference before. Customarily the mechanism for securing approval of dates, agenda etc for CCEMs, and the list of invited observers has been the Commonwealth Education Liaison Committee (composed of representatives of every High Commission in London meeting with the Secretariat).

Recently CELC has been used more sparingly and has had less influence.

Once a theme has been agreed by member countries through consultation, the Secretariat has normally taken main executive responsibility for the agenda and documentation, the degree of engagement by the host country depending on its wishes and capacity to be extensively involved. In the past member countries have been asked to submit a paper outlining their perspective on the main theme, and the Secretariat has then commissioned a pan-Commonwealth overview of these reports for Conference use; but for 16CCEM the expectation that every country will submit a paper has been waived.

The role of the host is to plan the Conference in conjunction with the Secretariat, to chair the Conference sessions, and to provide the venue and much of the logistical support. Heads of Delegation (usually a Minister) normally stay as the guest of the host country, which also provides other hospitality to delegates – lunches, dinners, receptions – from its own resources. Delegations' own financial responsibility includes travel to the Conference, and living costs for delegation members.

### **The Conference in session**

Typically 40 or more delegations attend, most led by Ministers. Some contain more than one member of ministerial rank, especially in countries with multi-jurisdictional responsibility for education, as in federal systems. UK dependencies are invited to be present as part of the British delegation. Delegations vary in size from one or two to a dozen, but the host-country delegation has often numbered 20 or 30. Commonly there will be 150-180 country delegates present, and a further 20 or 30 members of invited observer delegations, including international agencies and Commonwealth voluntary/ professional bodies with education functions (Box 4).

Prior to the Conference opening, senior officials meet to review the agenda and make recommendations to Ministers on selected items of business. The ceremonial Conference opening is followed by three days of business sessions in plenary, with occasional break-out into committees. The Commonwealth's compact size means that ministers can sit round one table, enabling an informal exchanges of a kind denied to UN bodies with 150 or more members.

Proceedings are presided over by the host Minister, formally elected to the Chair. Long prepared speeches are strongly discouraged. A record is taken by Commonwealth and host-country officials, jointly acting as the secretariat for the Conference.

The business of the conferences has traditionally been of three main kinds. First, a day or more early in the Conference is devoted to the main theme in plenary and working group sessions, with invited plenary speakers introducing the subject. The character of this part of proceedings is exchange of experience by countries, and identification of common issues and interesting innovations. Conclusions and recommendations are

distilled from discussion for report and follow-up action.

A second major segment of business is concerned with Commonwealth co-operation in education and the common institutional infrastructure. The activities of the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth and Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, and of the Education Section of the Secretariat are all reviewed, sometimes with the help of Conference working parties. Progress is noted, mandates and new directions are agreed and new pledges may be invited or made for COL and CSFP. Accounts may be given of progress on new initiatives in train e.g. the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol or the Virtual University for Small States.

Third, close attention is given to the Conference Communique, incorporating the conclusions of the Conference and Ministers' decisions concerning future action. At 14CCEM in Halifax Ministers had the additional challenge of agreeing a Halifax Statement *Education: our Common Future*. Every Conference up to and including the Twelfth was followed by a Report prepared by the Secretariat. For 13CCEM and 14CCEM this useful practice, which helps to ensure proper accountability and follow-up, fell victim to Secretariat economies; but an attractive Conference Report was produced from 15CCEM in Edinburgh.

### **Box 4: Observer Delegations**

Bodies typically invited to observe at the Conferences (40 at 14CCEM, and 46 at 15CCEM) fall into four main groups:

- i) Commonwealth civil society organisations/ associations
- ii) Intergovernmental organisations
- iii) Bilateral and other development agencies
- iv) Other relevant organisations, including host country ones

Quite commonly only half this number take up the invitation.

Official observers can participate in working groups and break-out sessions but not in Ministerial plenaries, and they are included in social events.

Conference business has undergone elaboration through introduction of recent innovations. The press was admitted to the proceedings for the first time at 14CCEM, and from 13CCEM onwards the programme has included 'parallel events'. At Gaborone in 1997 a 'Parallel Symposium', providing for civil society involvement and discussion of the issues before Ministers, was introduced, a feature repeated in 2000 and 2003: and again in Cape Town in 2006 but this time under the rubric 'Stakeholder Forum'. At 15CCEM a 'Youth Summit' was added, and in Cape Town both a Youth Forum and a Teacher Forum. Conference agendas take account of these parallel events, enabling Ministers to interact with the Forums and to hear their conclusions, before framing their own. In Gaborone and Halifax there were exhibitions: in Edinburgh a

'Showcase of Best Practice'. Dovetailing these various events, to allow interfacing of civil-society participants with Ministers and delegations, extends the range of interactions in a welcome way but also adds considerable complexity to Conference schedules.

### **The Secretariat**

From 1959 onwards the Commonwealth has had a small internationally-recruited group of professional officers to service the Education Ministers' Conferences and carry forward its decisions in co-operation with member countries. Initially this 'Commonwealth Education Liaison Unit' was self-standing. It was absorbed in the Commonwealth Secretariat, after that was formed in 1965. Designated successively as Education 'Division', 'Department', 'Programme', this part of the Secretariat is now a 'Section' of the Social Transformation Programmes Division, where it works with sister sections for health and gender. The Section has 5-6 professional staff and is headed by a Deputy Director (Education).

### **Charting the future of CCEMs: some challenges**

The efficacy of the Commonwealth as a forum to address issues affecting the global common interest is well recognised. Commonwealth Conferences have particular attractions for participants for their informality, mutual respect and equality of members, a sense of common purpose, and direct exchange of views (contrast with the formality, set speeches, and the effect

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of listening to simultaneous translation at many world gatherings). Moreover the extensive intergovernmental infrastructure of institutions and activities in education requires guidance from political leaders representing their countries and peoples, the beneficiaries of co-operative activity. It is also recognised that education represents one of the pillars on which the Commonwealth association rests, and that the Commonwealth's future depends on allegiance to its values by the young.

The Conferences therefore seem here to stay, but if they are to justify fully the expense of time and money needed to bring together up to 200 political leaders and professionals in education for a week, and the months of preparation required, they must ever adjust to new challenges so that they can operate more effectively.

Among suggestions made for reform, one is for somewhat less frequent CCEMs, perhaps on a four-year

cycle. However, a four-year cycle of CCEMs would require careful dovetailing with the cycle of CHOGMs and UNESCO General Conferences. Its workability would also depend on ensuring greater continuity between CCEMs: already, with the current three-year interval, the democratic political process results in a comparatively small proportion of ministers surviving from one Conference to the next. The Commonwealth Consortium for Education suggested to 15CCEM that greater continuity might be provided by establishing a small representative group of four to six ministers to monitor implementation between conferences and to assist the Secretariat's Education Section in carrying out ministerial mandates. An informed, committed, group of Ministers could provide leadership and impart greater substance to CCEM deliberations. This would certainly seem to be a more effective and less expensive approach than the holding of mid-term Regional Conferences in different parts of the Commonwealth, as was done in 2005 between 15CCEM and 16CCEM.

The Consortium's proposal would be one way to help ensure that Conferences confined their decisions and recommendations to what can be realistically be implemented. There has been a temptation at past CCEMs to go in for vague 'wish lists' without specifying the scale and provenance of resources and the locus of responsibility for implementation. The Consortium proposed in its Memorandum to Ministers before 15CCEM that there could be an agreed framework of Commonwealth co-operative activity in education, centrally co-ordinated but mobilising the efforts of both official and non-official agencies behind priorities established by Ministers. The scope for developing an agreed Commonwealth Plan of Action in Education was further explored in the Consortium's 2005 Report to the Secretariat on the way ahead for the Commonwealth in relation to the six Action Areas identified in Edinburgh..

#### **More information**

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