

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. 8. EDUCATION ABOUT THE COMMONWEALTH

Introduction

The Commonwealth Education Briefing Notes in this series mainly address education development in the Commonwealth and its member states, and co-operative programmes to that end. This Note has a different orientation, focusing on the theme of education for Commonwealth citizenship – learning about the Commonwealth and its member countries, imbibing Commonwealth values and particularly respect for other cultures and societies, and learning to live together harmoniously in a diverse international community.

Education about the Commonwealth, broadly understood, is important for the future of the Commonwealth, for the causes of international peace and development and for the development of democratic societies across the globe. It also helps learners of all ages to find their compass in a rapidly changing and increasingly interdependent world.

A very wide spectrum of activities, programmes and organisations play a part in projecting knowledge about the Commonwealth and its place in the modern world. Commonwealth awareness is nurtured by, for example

- major public events such as the annual Christmas Day broadcast by the Queen, and Commonwealth Day observed on the second Monday in March;
- biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (the CHOGMs) and associated events such as the Commonwealth People's Forum and Commonwealth Youth Forum, and the quadrennial Commonwealth Games;
- visible expressions of Commonwealth co-operation in the shape of Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation projects, programmes of the Commonwealth of Learning, or the presence in a local university of Commonwealth Scholars;
- press releases and information materials published by the Commonwealth Secretariat and Foundation;
- education and information activities of the Royal Commonwealth Society and other civil-society Commonwealth voluntary and professional bodies;
- cultural activities, such as the annual Commonwealth Writers' Prize presentation;
- libraries and museums specialising in Commonwealth materials;
- explicit learning, teaching and research that focuses on the Commonwealth in the schools and colleges of member states.

All this adds up to a substantial volume of activity, but the many pieces of the jigsaw have yet to be assembled so as to form an intelligible picture. For although Commonwealth Heads of Government and Ministers of

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)

Education have frequently identified Education about the Commonwealth as a major concern, they have yet to devise collective overall strategies and to assign responsibilities and resources for carrying them out.

Education about the Commonwealth thus currently represents a hole in the association's education infrastructure that a number of other organisations strive with only partial success to fill. At one time it might have been thought that the Commonwealth Institute in London might, if properly resourced, assume this mantle. Until 2002 UK Government funding supported the Institute's activities, which focused on teaching about the Commonwealth, mainly however in the UK. After UK financial support and oversight came to an end, the Trustees of the property decided to realise their capital assets and to use the proceeds to support a Centre for Commonwealth Education at the University of Cambridge focusing on primary and secondary education and the training of teachers within the Trust's remit to advance education in the Commonwealth.

In the mid-1990s useful exercises were conducted, attempting to draw together the strands of Commonwealth information and education activity in two

limited areas. In 1997, Derek Ingram's *Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Information Programme* was published. It followed the 1996 Report of the Commission on Commonwealth Studies chaired by Professor Tom Symons. The 'Symons Report' *Learning from Each Other: Commonwealth studies for the 21st Century* had a focus on research and teaching about the Commonwealth at the tertiary-education level.

Commonwealth awareness

Knowledge of the Commonwealth seems to be diminishing. It may well be that only a small minority could name more than a handful of Commonwealth countries other than their own, know what values the Commonwealth stands for, or are familiar with the practical development activities that Commonwealth agencies undertake. For many of its citizens, the Commonwealth connection that has shaped their present situation and status seems to be a matter of history. They are conscious of it as a contemporary phenomenon only when a CHOGM or Commonwealth Ministers meet in their country, the Commonwealth Games are on TV, or a Commonwealth programme benefits them individually.

Insofar as the modern Commonwealth is equated in the popular mind with the former British Empire, it is understandable that in newly independent countries people want to move on. It has to be recognised, too, that unlike the UN, the Commonwealth does not have visible offices in Commonwealth capitals, and the resources it commands for collective development programmes are comparatively modest in scale.

Such perceptions, understandable as they may be, do scant justice to the reality of the Commonwealth in terms either of its significant role in shaping the societies in which Commonwealth citizens live, or of its potential relevance to building a better and safer world.

The Commonwealth was born from the movement of peoples. Originally the drivers of this mobility were conquest, settlement and labour migration - including the slave trade - during the period of the British Empire. But since 1945 and the era of Independence, migration has continued on an even greater scale as people have sought better livelihoods and education in other Commonwealth countries; or have taken up residence either temporarily under contract with an international employer, or more permanently through marriage or refugee status. Consequently many Commonwealth countries have large minorities, born in another Commonwealth country and whose presence in their midst owes much to historical ties, and is facilitated by shared language, professional practice and institutions. Many Commonwealth countries have become vibrant multi-cultural societies, microcosms of an increasingly globalised world. Some insight into the Commonwealth's past and present is necessary for a person's understanding of his/her own place in the world.

The Commonwealth is highly relevant to the building of a better international community. Composed as it is of societies from every continent that embody diverse races, cultures and faiths, and at very different levels of economic development, the Commonwealth is representative of the wider world to which it belongs. The readiness for compromise and to seek

accommodation of differences that has characterised Commonwealth relations is a useful asset on the global stage. The Commonwealth's own make-up of rich and poor countries enables it to identify solutions to difficult issues that respect the common interest and serve the common good. It has been a pathfinder in pursuit of agendas of democracy, good governance, tolerance and mutual respect that reflect the principles set out in its 1991 Harare Statement and subsequent documents.

The Commonwealth could pursue a number of strategies to keep its profile before the public and to ensure that the rising generations grow up to be well informed about the Commonwealth association, and the benefits and obligations involved in membership.

- Striving to ensure that Commonwealth institutions and activities are more broadly shared than at present throughout member countries. Strenuous efforts should be made to reduce the over-concentration of activity in the UK.
- Full attention to public relations and to media-related work of all kinds, and better co-ordination of the media work and messages put out by the Secretariat, Foundation and civil society organisations. To address this, plans are currently afoot for a Commonwealth Communications Forum to be established.
- Using Commonwealth programmes and resources to spread the Commonwealth message. Outreach activity aimed at the general public, and at young people in particular, should be part of every Commonwealth conference and workshop. Commonwealth experts under CFTC, and Commonwealth Scholars and Bursars, might be encouraged and assisted to become informants about, and ambassadors for, the Commonwealth.
- Support through the Commonwealth Foundation and other bodies, including the private sector, for civil-society bodies that engage in Commonwealth outreach-education work, arranging conferences, Youth CHOGMs, prize competitions, displays and exhibitions. A few of these organisations and their activities are described later in this Note (p4).
- Young people form a key constituency within the audience for messages and information about the Commonwealth. In recent years a more conscious effort has been made to include youth activities in Commonwealth Foundation programmes; Youth Forums have been held to coincide with CHOGM, and in conjunction with 15CCEM and 16CCEM.
- Promoting education about the Commonwealth and Commonwealth studies in schools, colleges and universities throughout the Commonwealth. This is addressed more fully below.

Commonwealth Day, held on the second Monday of March each year, provides a special opportunity for engaging the interest of the public in the Commonwealth. Each year a theme (education in 2005, health in 2006, 'respecting difference, promoting understanding' in 2007) is chosen and this provides the focus for activities, for the Queen's Commonwealth Day message, and for a display poster that is sent to schools in every Commonwealth country. In many countries there is a special Commonwealth Day observance ceremony: in the UK

this takes the form of a multi-faith religious service in Westminster Abbey in the presence of the Queen, the Commonwealth Secretary-General and the British Prime Minister. Many schools and colleges in Commonwealth countries also mark the Day with a parade or other ceremony, and children are encouraged to undertake projects on Commonwealth topics. Commonwealth West African countries have been prominent in marking the Day by special events.

Each year the Royal Commonwealth Society on behalf of the Council of Commonwealth Societies (CCS) prepares a comprehensive Commonwealth Day Information Pack, which receives wide distribution. The Commonwealth Secretariat used to publish an attractive Commonwealth Day Handbook for Schools to serve as a resource book with suggestions and guidance for schools, and sharing ideas and experiences. This last appeared in 1992.

Education about the Commonwealth: what is involved?

The evolution of the Commonwealth and its contemporary membership, structures and organisation are a worthy subject of study in their own right. They may form a discrete topic within a syllabus addressing international organisations or contemporary international current affairs. In what tends to be a very crowded curriculum, however, the Commonwealth will often be studied obliquely rather than directly: via, for example, history, geography, literature, politics or citizenship.

The study of citizenship provides a natural bridge to consideration of the Commonwealth with its emphasis on inter-cultural appreciation and tolerance, and mutual respect among people of diverse faiths and cultures. Education about the Commonwealth naturally overlaps with education for international understanding and global citizenship, with development education, and at tertiary level with area studies, development studies and comparative studies more generally.

Learning about the Commonwealth at school

As indicated above, there is a place for specific attention to the Commonwealth and its institutions in the school curriculum. In 1997 in conjunction with 13CCEM in Botswana the Commonwealth Secretariat conducted a survey on education about the Commonwealth in member countries. As was to be expected, in the countries that responded more work was reported in the area of citizenship and values education than in the explicit study of Commonwealth membership and institutional arrangements. Nevertheless some countries did (and do) make specific reference to the Commonwealth in their school syllabus.

Whether the focus is on formal Commonwealth organisation and membership or more loosely on values and citizenship, specialised resources and appropriate in-service training are clearly needed to enable teachers and students to cope well with this part of the curriculum.

Formal classroom study of curriculum content is only one way in which student awareness of the Commonwealth can be inculcated at school. Student clubs and societies

and school international partnerships can significantly influence student perceptions and experience.

One major development under way is the growth of voluntary Commonwealth clubs, democratically run by students in schools. Inspired by Nigeria, where more than 120 have been established, the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit obtained a grant for over two years to stimulate clubs in secondary schools in England; and the Royal Commonwealth Society hopes to be able to raise further funds for continuation of this work after March 2007. There are now 40 clubs in Cameroon, 20 being set up by the Commonwealth Society of Ghana, and others in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya. As more countries start them up, interest in Commonwealth clubs is growing.

The Commonwealth clubs programme works closely with those promoting international partnerships and linking for schools. In the UK particularly there are many school-linking organisations and initiatives, and the Government has recently set a target for every school to enter into an international partnership by the year 2010. The various Commonwealth gatherings in Cape Town in December 2006 provide an opportunity to undertake a stocktaking of school and college linking in the Commonwealth and to review its potential for creating solidarity among young people in member countries, for instilling an awareness of the rights and responsibilities of global citizenship, and finding new ways of working together for education development. The Commonwealth Consortium for Education is devoting its own Conference to the theme in partnership with Link Community Development, a South Africa-based NGO, and others.

In looking to engage with people from different cultures across the world, schools are often oblivious of the make-up of their own local communities. Migrant professionals and other workers, international students, and refugees may be present in considerable numbers. In many locations learning about the Commonwealth can thus start at home through contact with individuals and 'diaspora' communities. The student and teacher population of the school, and the community in its immediate neighbourhood, provide a rich resource for learning about the peoples, societies and cultures that make up the modern Commonwealth.

Commonwealth studies at tertiary level

There is a wide range of relevant teaching and research in universities and other institutions of post-secondary education and this was partially mapped by the Commission on Commonwealth Studies in its 1996 report. The Commission found there were no complete undergraduate degree courses in Commonwealth Studies but at postgraduate level there were a small number of programmes leading to higher degrees in Commonwealth Studies, Commonwealth History and Commonwealth Literature. In addition a number of programmes carry the designation 'post-colonial' rather than 'Commonwealth'.

Not all of the programmes bearing the Commonwealth or post-colonial label take place in Commonwealth countries for there is wide interest in Commonwealth literature and history elsewhere. Within the Commonwealth the Institute of Commonwealth Studies of the University of London, with its concentration of research and teaching

and a fine library collection has always held a pre-eminent place. Although the Institute tended to focus on Commonwealth history in the past, its present offerings are much more contemporary dealing with human rights and social and economic development. It houses the independent Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit whose main concern is with current issues facing Commonwealth decision-makers.

The Commission on Commonwealth Studies took a wide view of the nature of 'Commonwealth Studies' and stressed that comparative study of national experience in a Commonwealth context was an important component. It emphasised the value of 'Learning from Each Other'. The Commission made a number of important recommendations but although these were welcomed by CHOGM in 1997 there has been no orchestrated follow up.

Main actors and sources of support

Many different bodies play some role in promoting teaching and learning about the Commonwealth. Until six years ago there was an information centre and exhibitions at the *Commonwealth Institute's* Kensington premises where programmes were organised for school pupils and teachers. While the main thrust of these education activities was located in and directed to the United Kingdom, there was also some pan-Commonwealth activity including exhibitions and performances in the Arts.

The *Association for Commonwealth Studies* was formed in the aftermath of the Symons Report, and has held conferences on different aspects of Commonwealth development and culture including health, architecture, governance, and literature. The 2007 theme will be Educating the Commonwealth about the Commonwealth.

The *British Empire and Commonwealth Museum* in Bristol is a privately funded charitable body that maintains permanent displays and temporary exhibitions about Empire and its transition to Commonwealth. It describes its mission as being "to provide a national forum for preserving, exploring and studying the UK's cultural heritage associated with its former empire and with the Commonwealth, to promote an understanding of their integral role in Britain's cultural, historical and social heritage." The Museum is increasing its outreach work with schools and teachers.

The *Royal Commonwealth Society* has promoted learning about the Commonwealth for young people in a variety of ways. It has been active in advocacy, arranging conferences and meetings to examine how the Commonwealth should address the challenge. It runs an annual Commonwealth Essay competition for school students throughout the Commonwealth, and for secondary-school pupils organises a programme of Youth CHOGMs involving young people in assuming the role of different member states in international gatherings.

The *Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit*, an independent think-tank based at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, has maintained a close interest in education about the Commonwealth. It has funding from the Department for Education and Skills in the UK to promote

Commonwealth clubs and to engage young people with the Commonwealth and its values.

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Looking Ahead

The current concern by Commonwealth Heads of Government with promoting Understanding and Respect, the subject of a special mandate in 2005 from the Malta CHOGM to the Secretariat, seems likely to push Education about the Commonwealth and its values higher up the association's collective agendas. The readiness of Professor Amartya Sen to chair a group of distinguished Commonwealth citizens to deliberate on these issues underlines their salience in international concerns. The group's work will be informed by the Commonwealth Foundation's linked project on promoting inter-faith co-operation, focusing on work that builds on and enhances shared values and with a strong youth dimension.

Commonwealth leaders will surely look to their countries' education systems to play a major role in efforts to address the Understanding and Respect agenda. Programmes that promote friendship and co-operation across the boundaries of nation, race, culture and faith can help to move that agenda forward and to ensure a more stable and peaceful world future. This will require a stocktaking and analysis of what current programmes are in place to promote the Commonwealth values of mutual understanding, respect for human rights, and democratic accountability and to strengthen the bonds of Commonwealth identity.

It would seem to be an appropriate moment for Commonwealth Education Ministers to commission, through the Secretariat and interested civil-society organisations, their own review of what the education systems of the Commonwealth are doing to promote core Commonwealth values and how they could best assist with future Commonwealth action programmes to reduce conflict and tension in the world.

More information

Secretary, Commonwealth Consortium for Education
7 Lion Yard, Tremadoc Road, London SW4 7NQ

Consortium website: www.commonwealtheducation.org or
CCEM website: www.16CCEM.com

British Empire & C'wealth Museum: www.empiremuseum.org

Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit: www.cpsu.org.uk

Royal Commonwealth Society: www.rcsint.org

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