



COMMONWEALTH POLICY STUDIES UNIT: 12

**2003 Commonwealth Education Ministers' Meeting:
Policy Brief**

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Policy brief for the Commonwealth Education Ministers' Meeting, 27-30 October, 2003, Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom

Executive summary

The aim this year is to produce an Edinburgh Action Plan in six areas: the achievement of universal primary education; the elimination of gender disparities in education; improving quality in education; using distance learning to overcome barriers; supporting education in difficult circumstances; and mitigating the effects of HIV/AIDS on education systems. Some are easier to achieve than others – the Commonwealth of Learning is launching a Virtual University for Small States for instance. The Commonwealth has, sadly, unique experience of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the knowledge to produce an action plan of interest to non-Commonwealth states also. But improving quality in education has eluded educators for centuries. Commonwealth action plans have a mixed record. The conference may see sharp exchanges over the recruitment of teachers by richer states from poorer. But exceptional preparatory work for the first Commonwealth Education conference in the UK since 1959 augurs well for success.

Executive summary

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1 Status, representation, recent meetings

Participation levels at the Education Ministers' meetings, which should take place every three years but which missed a year in 1993, compare favourably with many other specialist meetings of Commonwealth Ministers. In 1990 in Barbados there were 40 countries represented, with 31 Ministers leading delegations; in 1994 in Islamabad, Pakistan, there were 44 countries represented, with 35 Ministers; and in 1997 in Gaborone, Botswana, there were 42 delegations, 30 headed by Ministers. In Halifax, Nova Scotia there were 45 delegations, 37 led by Ministers, in 2000. Edinburgh is expected to do better still, not least because Australia and New Zealand are likely to send Ministers for the first time for years. The United Kingdom (UK) had a rather erratic participation in the 1990s: a junior Minister, Tim Eggar, never got in from Barbados airport in 1990 as he was recalled to vote on dog licences at Westminster, and in 1994 the delegation was led by a peer who was not even a Minister. This time, however, Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for the Department for Education and Skills, and educational politicians from the devolved institutions in the United Kingdom, will share the chairing, and Ministers from UK dependent territories are also expected.

The Edinburgh conference takes place thanks to an initiative by Jack McConnell, then Education Minister and now First Minister of Scotland. He led the UK delegation to Nova Scotia in 2000 and offered to host the next conference. It is a sign of the change in the UK constitution that Scotland has been able to take this lead. Education Ministers would have come to Scotland in 1993, in pre-devolution days, but a quarrel over the budget between the Scottish Office and Whitehall departments stymied the proposal. The Commonwealth Secretariat team this year will be led by the Secretary-General, Don McKinnon.

Education Ministers have had a theme for each of their conferences for the last 30 years, often stressing resource or vocational issues. This time it is "Closing the Gap: Access, Inclusion and Achievement." Ministers are seeking to generate tangible results in six action areas: universal completion of primary education; eliminating gender disparities in education; improving quality in education; using distance learning to overcome barriers; supporting education in difficult circumstances; and mitigating the effect of HIV/AIDS on education systems.

2 Record for policy

Compared with the Commonwealth Finance Ministers, who meet annually and have been a knowledgeable, persistent lobby for debt write-off and international financial reform, Commonwealth Education Ministers suffer handicaps. It is unusual for the same Minister or senior civil servant to attend more than two such meetings, and decentralised systems in many countries -- from India to Canada -- mean that Education Ministers themselves share their power with others. The Education Programme within the Commonwealth Secretariat is relatively small. Much significant activity, such as the work of the distance teaching service, the Commonwealth of Learning, or the work of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, is managed by others.

Nonetheless Education Ministers in the past have done more than exchange views, useful as that is within the perpetual debate which is the Commonwealth. In the late 1980s they assisted in the growth of the Commonwealth of Learning, which now reports regularly to their meetings, from which it has to win budgetary approval. They take a triennial interest in the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, under which postgraduate students are enabled to study in other countries; delegations make public pledges of awards. Ministers have also promoted initiatives such as the Commonwealth Universities' Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC), which was started by the Commonwealth Secretariat and is now managed by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the Commonwealth Electronic Network for Schools and Education (CENSE) which is managed by the Commonwealth of Learning.

Other activities have not always been so successful. In 1990, "Ministers looked forward to the outcome of the High Level Appraisal Group on the Commonwealth in the 1990s and Beyond and placed on record their hope that the centrality of cooperation in education to Commonwealth relationships, and the scope for broadening and deepening Commonwealth educational links, would be recognised in the Group's findings." In fact the work of this Group, chaired by Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia, led to the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, 1991, which did not mention the word education once. Something similar happened after Halifax in 2000-2002, when Education Ministers failed to influence Commonwealth priorities set by the High Level Review Group chaired by South Africa. Education has lost ground in the Commonwealth agenda.

Against a background of secular decline in the staffing of the Commonwealth Secretariat -- from around 420 in 1990 to around 270 in 2003 -- the small Education unit of six professionals has been the object of successive mergers. Combined with Health in the former Human Resources Development Division this division itself has, since Halifax, merged with Gender to form the Social Transformation Programmes Division (unkindly nicknamed the StuPiDs). The two Millennium Education Goals for education -- completion of primary schooling for all, and an end to gender disparity in primary and secondary education -- emerged as key Commonwealth Secretariat priorities.

This has meant that the eight priorities set in Halifax have, although there have been detailed achievements for each, been somewhat overtaken, although two have resurfaced at Edinburgh. The Halifax priorities were: improved resources for learning; work on qualifications, standards and equivalencies which could increase mobility and prevent malpractice; school improvement in small states; education to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS; education in difficult circumstances; citizenship education; teacher training and professional development; and partnerships and networking. A key idea at Halifax was to bring together consortia of the willing -- of countries, NGOs and the private sector -- to take each topic forward. This has not worked too well. Even before Edinburgh the Commonwealth Secretariat has been trying to set up a more effective system to catalyse wider resources behind the Edinburgh objectives.

The agenda for Ministers is the result of consultation between the Secretariat, the host government and other Education Ministries.

3 Agenda for 2003

The provisional draft agenda, which may be confirmed or amended on the eve of the conference, is:

Pre-meetings (Monday, 27 October)

For Ministers and Senior Officials with the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth of Learning, Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, Commonwealth Centre for Education (at Cambridge University, the latest incarnation of the Commonwealth Institute), the Commonwealth Education Fund

Opening ceremony (19.00 to 20.00) at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre

With Ministers, delegates and participants in the Parallel Symposium and Youth Summit

1 Joint Opening Session with Parallel Symposium and Youth Summit delegates (Tuesday, 28 October):

- Keynote speech by Prof Amartya Sen on issues of conference
- Contribution by representative of Parallel Symposium
- Contribution by representative of Youth Summit
- Feedback from informal discussions
- Concluding statement by a Commonwealth Education Minister

2 Plenary session on themes of conference

3 Presentations of specific initiatives

To include the launch of the Global Gateway by the UK, a Virtual University by the Commonwealth of Learning etc

4 Ministerial committees

Ministers and officials will break into three groups, one each on Access, on Inclusion, and on Achievement. The purpose will be to sharpen the analysis, and to identify the priority for the Commonwealth in each area. Two Ministers will introduce each committee session.

5 Plenary session with the Commonwealth of Learning (Wednesday, 29 October)

This will develop the concept of a Virtual University for Small States

6 Joint session of Ministers with Parallel Symposium delegates

There will be six roundtables focused on each of the six action areas:

- universal primary education
- gender disparities in education
- improving quality in education
- using distance learning to overcome barriers
- supporting education in difficult circumstances
- mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on education systems

7 Plenary on Commonwealth Teacher and Learners Issues

8 Report back from breakout sessions on Access, Inclusion and Achievement the previous day, the sessions with the Parallel Symposium and lunch with the Youth Summit

9 Report back to Ministers from Parallel Symposium and Youth Summit

10 Plenary on Edinburgh Communique and Action Plan, message to Commonwealth Heads Meeting, and press release (Thursday, 30 October)

11 Presentations of their workplans by the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, the Commonwealth Secretariat education work programme, and the Commonwealth Centre for Education

12 Approval of statements, press conference and conclusion

4 Comments on numbered agenda items

1 The opening session, with an address by Professor Amartya Sen, the Nobel economist, is likely to focus on the critical role of education in development and for its own sake. It is estimated that as many as 110M children in Commonwealth countries are not in school and there are huge disparities in member states. As the concept paper for the conference states, "Some countries have been able to provide education for all their children and young people up to the age of 16, while others are struggling to enrol half of the 12-and 13-year olds. Some countries can enrol 30-50 per cent of their young people in tertiary education while the equivalent figure elsewhere in the Commonwealth is one or two per cent." While some of the larger numbers out of school are in south Asia, with a particular bias against girls, recent work by the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit has pinpointed the particular problems faced by Indigenous peoples also.

The conjunction with the Youth Summit and the Parallel Symposium takes forward two different concepts. Since Gaborone in 1997 there has been a Parallel Symposium, strongly supported by the British Council and other interests. Its object is to bring together professional educators and non-governmental people to talk about issues of concern; in the past these have roamed wider than the agenda of the Ministers, but at Edinburgh, although the Parallel Symposium has had a separate international advisory group chaired by Geoff Whitty, Director of the London Institute of Education, it will look at exactly the same issues and there will be much more interaction with Ministers and officials.

The Youth Summit, supported by several youth bodies, is in part a consequence of a call by Commonwealth leaders at their Australian meeting last year. Essentially the Commonwealth of 54 states, where over half the population is under 30, is almost unknown to this age group. What is now defined as an association of peoples as well as states will actually die if it is the preserve of an ageing coterie of officials and enthusiasts.

Although it is causing difficulties of adjustment, to both governments and NGOs, there is a growing recognition that if younger citizens are to acquire any sense of ownership of the Commonwealth idea, their input must be recognised and encouraged. Two youngsters from each of the Commonwealth countries are coming to Edinburgh to take part in the Youth Summit.

2 The first plenary on the issues before the conference will allow Ministers to set out their own priorities. The six chosen were designed to enable every government to participate in its own way and, although a handful of developed and developing countries have achieved universal completion of primary education, each of the others has a relevance in every country. But the order of importance will vary. For Trinidad and Tobago, for example, quality issues are seen as the most critical, HIV/AIDS next, then teacher issues (see below for a discussion of the controversy over teacher mobility), and then gender issues. In the Caribbean, as in the UK, the gender issue of most concern now is not the under-performance of females (though that is still a worry in south Asia) but the under-performance of males. The Trinidadian media has been publicising the links between under-performing teenage males in school, and unemployment, violence and indiscipline.

3,5 Organisers are not yet sure which new initiatives will surface at this stage. However the UK Government will bring forward its proposal for a Global Pathway, designed to link schools around the world by email and internet. It is not clear in advance how far this is really a Commonwealth initiative, as against a UK global project in which Commonwealth countries are invited to join. One of the organisational deaths since Halifax has been that of the Commonwealth Linking Trust, a modest NGO which encouraged schools to link by correspondence. There is scope for new Commonwealth links using IT, perhaps tied to work on citizenship and Commonwealth values, but it would require investment in publicity, facilitation and the raising of teacher awareness. Nigeria has taken a bold step, which deserves reciprocation elsewhere and is ideally suited to email and internet links, by establishing Commonwealth Clubs in secondary schools.

Ministers will undoubtedly want to hear more from the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL), the distance learning service based in Vancouver, about its new Virtual University for Small States. Over half of Commonwealth countries have populations under 1.5M – St Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean has 28,000, for example – and many of these cannot afford tertiary institutions of their own. The Virtual University will in some ways see a return to the ideals of the original Asa Briggs report which led to CoL's establishment in the late 1980s. The vision then was to enable students anywhere in the Commonwealth to access the best courses they could. Commercialisation of higher education, changes in technology and the actual experience of CoL in assisting islands and dispersed populations, altered that vision and will influence the new development.

Although not applying to these proposals, old hands at Commonwealth education conferences have to take some announcements with a pinch of salt. They remember, for example, the announcement by Malaysia in 1997 that it was setting up a "Commonwealth University" – an institution which has yet to be seen. Roles ascribed by Ministers to the

Commonwealth Institute, until 2000 a British statutory institution in Kensington, have been rather overtaken by a sharp change of direction by its trustees in 2002 (see below).

4,6 This is the meat in the conference, and a real opportunity also for Ministers and Parallel Symposium delegates (who are expected to number 200, although fees have ranged from £495-£595) to put their heads together. The challenge to produce tangible outcomes, for which the UK Government is particularly keen, is not easy when the nature of the task and the resources available differ so markedly in each country. Yet there is a strong drive, across all types of Commonwealth activity, to pull together in order that the Commonwealth may make a difference. The Secretariat was encouraged by a large turnout at a preparatory meeting at the end of last month, involving professionals and NGOs, and one staffer will be allocated after Edinburgh to maintain momentum for groups cooperating behind each goal.

One new dimension, thanks to the establishment of a Commonwealth Teachers' Grouping of Education International, is that teacher perspectives may be heard more loudly this year in the interaction between the Parallel Symposium and the Ministers. This is thanks to an active cooperation, developed over the last seven years, between Caribbean, Australian and Canadian teacher bodies, the South African Democratic Teachers Union, the All-India Federation of Teachers' Organisations, the National Union of Teachers and the Educational Institute of Scotland.

Conference planners have bundled rather disparate topics together under some headlines. For example studies of the Commonwealth, a major topic at the Gaborone conference six years ago, now appear as an oddity in "supporting education in difficult circumstances" – an area which might have been expected to focus on post-conflict reconstruction, or the problems facing remote communities. In fact there has been significant progress in education about the Commonwealth. A number of countries, including England, have now put the Commonwealth into the school curriculum; a Commonwealth Virtual Network on Citizenship Education was established last year; an Emeka Anyaoku Professor of Commonwealth Studies took up his new chair at London University last month; an Association of Commonwealth Studies has held two international conferences, the latest in Canada in May; the Commonwealth Youth Programme Diploma has a module on Commonwealth Values; and Nigeria has published "The Nigerian Handbook for Commonwealth Activities in Schools", with a special emphasis on Commonwealth values.

Sadly, Commonwealth countries are among the most expert in the problems raised for education by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, whether in creating orphans, or ravaging the teaching force. Three excellent articles in the 2003 issue of "Commonwealth Education Partnerships" (edited by Stephen Matlin, published by the Stationery Office) – by Henry Kaluba, David Clarke and Carol Coombe – illustrate what is known, and what can be done. Here, pre-eminently, there is scope for a Commonwealth education task force.

7 This could be the most contentious session in the conference. Following an initiative by Caribbean Education Ministers a protocol was drawn up by them, and revised by staff in

the Commonwealth Secretariat in June, designed to see fair play in the recruitment of teachers from poorer to richer Commonwealth countries. It had several aspects, including clauses designed to protect teachers from exploitation, but the most bothersome for richer countries was that they would be required to provide compensatory aid or other forms of support for exporting countries. Under heavy pressure from the UK government in particular the Secretariat has “withdrawn” its draft, which will now be considered by an intergovernmental working party. Developing countries have been encouraged by the success of the South African government, in its efforts to get compensation for scarce health workers, recruited overseas. The situation is complex, because reverse flows and remittances also need to be considered, and globalisation has thrown earnings disparities into higher relief. Nor are the wealthier Commonwealth countries always the most important destinations. In 2001, for instance, while over 100 Jamaican teachers migrated to the UK, 350 went to New York; a Trinidad teacher is reported as earning US \$6,000 a month in Hong Kong (China). The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit is collaborating in work at Nottingham University, funded by the Department for International Development, on broader issues of teacher mobility.

10 In view of the poor record of Education Ministers in recent years in influencing meetings of Commonwealth Heads of Government – the next is in Abuja in December – Ministers will want to satisfy themselves that what they say will count. This time it may help first, that Charles Clarke, the UK Secretary of State, is a strong political figure and will make sure that Tony Blair and Jack Straw pass on the message and second, that the Nigerian government is wholly committed to raising Commonwealth awareness.

11 By this stage the presentation of workplans has a formal quality, for much of the discussion will have taken informally already, and outside the conference chamber. The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, whose UK quota is managed by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, is continuing its steady process of modernisation, though it would undoubtedly welcome more support from more governments. Since 1999 the number of governments making awards has risen from seven to 13, and the average number of awards has gone up from 421 to 460 a year. Malaysia, Trinidad & Tobago, South Africa, Mauritius, Ghana and Cameroon have all joined the scheme, and a directory of alumni is being published with 20,000 names of the past holders of awards.

The Commonwealth Education Fund, the British-backed programme for dynamising civil society behind Education for All (EFA), will have had bilateral and multilateral discussions already. The Fund can perhaps take partial credit for assisting the public pressure which caused Kenya and Tanzania to abolish school fees. But the challenge remains daunting. Fourteen Commonwealth countries actually moved away from the EFA goals between 1990 and 2000, and Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Pakistan account for about two thirds of the world’s out-of-school children.

Interest may yet be aroused by the scheme for a Commonwealth Centre for Education in Cambridge, promoted by the Commonwealth Institute trustees. The trustees are selling their much-loved 1962 building with its Holland Park site in Kensington, in a drastic

change of direction, and may be able to announce the name of the first Director of the Centre. The Centre itself is to be a resource for primary and secondary education in the Commonwealth, especially for developing countries, and is being run in conjunction with Cambridge University.

The fate of the Institute, which dates from the nineteenth century, has evoked criticism in Commonwealth circles in London. Shortly after becoming independent of the UK government, which had provided most of the funding since the early years of the twentieth century until the end of 1999, the Institute's management lost a large part of their untied endowment in an ill-timed dotcom venture, the e-Commonwealth portal. A business plan based on conference lettings was insufficiently viable. A new chair of the trustees resolved to cut the Gordian knot by a hasty deal with Cambridge University, new purposes, and the realisation of the asset in Kensington.

Critics have argued that the historic and charitable role of the Institute, to educate about the Commonwealth, will disappear at a time when such resources are badly needed. They are appealing to Ministers to intervene, either by persuading the trustees to set aside some of the fruits of the sale for the Institute's traditional object, or to ensure that education about the Commonwealth becomes a priority for the new centre. Since the trustees have argued publicly that they are now responsible to Education Ministers, the Ministers have real influence.

5 Interactions with other bodies

Traditionally the Education Ministers have observers and guests from bodies such as the World Bank, Unicef and UNESCO. But this year, in addition to the Parallel Symposium and the Youth Summit, there will be two other interactions of importance. The first will be the Showcase of Good Practice, which replaces the exhibitions which took place at Gaborone and Halifax. The aim is to put educational innovations before the Ministers, officials and professionals who will be visiting Edinburgh. Hopes that a commercial exhibition could be a moneyspinner for the conference organisers were disappointed in the past, and it may be that the Showcase is better attuned to the interests of educators.

A second interaction will be with those who stay on from the first conference of the new, non-governmental, Commonwealth Consortium for Education (CCfE). This will be a two day event on Friday 24 and Saturday 25 October, just as the Ministerial delegations are arriving. The title for the conference is "Recruitment, retention and mobility of teachers" – one of the most controversial of the issues the Ministers will discuss. The consortium has been put together by a number of UK-based Commonwealth bodies, and it is dedicated to upholding the visibility and the significance of Commonwealth-wide cooperation for education. It is bringing in some extra participants from outside the UK, who will stay on for the Parallel Symposium. It is ensuring that some of the participants are young, though the fact that it is starting on a Friday will make it hard for serving teachers to attend.

Halifax provided a breakthrough, in that all Ministerial sessions were for the first time open to press and TV crews. Unfortunately the fact that the Halifax meeting coincided

with the final stage of a Canadian federal election meant that the publicity was less than had been hoped. In 1971 an Australian journalist described the fifth Commonwealth Education Conference, which had brought 31 Ministers to his country for a fortnight, as "the case of the conference nobody noticed." In reality the series has been dogged by the inattention of the media, and it is vital that this trend is reversed. Hopefully UK and Scottish information officers will throw their weight behind the event, and Professor Sen, Education Ministers and delegates at the Parallel Symposium will have newsworthy things to say.

6 Other issues

One of the other matters, which publicity and the results of Edinburgh may influence, is the frequency with which Education Ministers will meet in future. Hitherto, like Law Ministers and other Commonwealth groupings, they have met at three yearly intervals. However there is strong pressure to bring them into a four yearly or, less likely, a biennial cycle. A drive for "focus" by donor governments in the Commonwealth emerged at last year's Australian summit of Heads of Government. The object was to reduce the number of Commonwealth ministerial meetings, to bring them into the Commonwealth Secretariat planning cycle (of two or four years) and, where possible, to house them in the wings of UN or other global gatherings. Obviously this was in part a money-saving exercise but it had other likely effects as well. It would tend to tie Commonwealth activity more tightly into overall UN and international policies – such as the Millennium Development Goals for education – and make Commonwealth Ministers into a lobbying fraction at the UN rather than an autonomous group looking at their own issues afresh. It could reduce the risk of divided loyalties in Secretariat staff, presented with competing priorities by Ministers and the biennial meetings of Heads. Discontinuities between education conferences, already considerable with a three year gap, would be greater after four years. The UNESCO General Assembly would not provide a natural home for Commonwealth Education Ministers as many UNESCO delegations are led by Science, Culture or Information Ministers. Ministers in Edinburgh will debate all this. It is expected that their next conference may be held in Asia or the Pacific.

Not all of the education initiatives will be ready in time for Edinburgh. This is the case, for instance, with an innovative proposal for a school-based Commonwealth Record of Achievement in Human Rights Education for secondary students. A substantial amount of work has been done on this, coordinated by the National Union of Teachers, and arising from the Secretariat's only celebration of the jubilee of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in Accra in 1998. It has won support from many teacher bodies, and should be available in the course of next year.

Charles Clarke, and the host governments in the UK, have made it plain that they want to see results from the Education Ministers' conference, and not just a talk-shop. Experience after Halifax suggests that the Edinburgh Action Plan will only result in significant action if there is strong follow-up and each topic area has a group driving it, which contains at least three governments and three significant NGOs. The Commonwealth Secretariat is far too weak to provide this drive, and in any case has indicated that it would be wrong for it to do so in the new collaborative era. Hence the real chance of action depends on

the deals that are struck in Edinburgh: every Minister attending has a chance to contribute. But afterwards will be too late. If Clarke and others seriously believe in the Action Plan, they would be wise to arrange a formal progress review – if only by electronic means – in early 2005.

Author, Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, acknowledgments

Richard Bourne is Head of the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU), which is celebrating its fifth year of work as a think-tank for the contemporary Commonwealth, attached to the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London University. His report “Invisible lives” (June 2003) pinpointed the educational disadvantage and general marginalisation suffered by Indigenous peoples in the Commonwealth. He is editor of “Universities and Development” (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2000) and author of “Professional networking for basic education: proposal for a four country project” (CPSU, 2000). He has written widely about education and Commonwealth matters and has formerly been Education Correspondent for The Guardian (London), Director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (NGO), and coordinator of the Commonwealth Values in Education project at the London Institute of Education. CPSU output is publicly available on the website: www.cpsu.org.uk The author would like to thank all those who helped him in preparing this document.