

Taking a stand: Commonwealth educators demand protection for education

Government ministers, education professionals and students from 27 Commonwealth countries celebrated 50 years of educational co-operation in a conference at the University of Oxford last week.

Progress in all forms and levels of education in the 53 countries has been impressive, even if still insufficient in terms of gender and other dimensions of equity, or of quality. The Conference resolved that the current global economic downturn must not be allowed to slow progress, still less halt or reverse it. No country, it asserted, has succeeded in its development aims without investing in the professionalism, skills, literacy and numeracy of its peoples.

However, as the Prime Minister of Namibia, Hon. Nahas Angula observed, maintaining momentum in educational progress will need more than technical co-operation: it will require the richer countries of the Commonwealth to provide financial support to those hard hit by the downturn.

The Commonwealth comprises a quarter of the countries of the globe and a third of the world's population. Of its two billion people, half are under 25 – truly a young Commonwealth – and all in need of access to early childhood development, primary and secondary schooling, universities, professional training and lifelong education opportunities. The conference affirmed the holistic nature of education and that the vital Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education was unattainable without support from other levels and forms of education.

Commonwealth countries, working together, have succeeded in reducing the number of out-of-school primary children considerably, from about 45m at the start of the decade to around 28m now: an achievement all the more impressive for having taken place in the face of continuing population growth.

With regard to university education, at the dinner hosted by the University to celebrate five decades of Commonwealth scholarships the University, David Lammy, the UK's Minister of State for Higher Education, stressed the tremendous impact of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP): in its 50 years, more than 26,000 young women and men have been supported to study and research in other countries. From there they have gone on to become leaders in politics, science, technology, medicine, business, law and education.

The Commonwealth has extensive experience of using modern information and communication technologies to expand educational access and quality. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which promotes innovative applications of the internet, radio, television and other media formats, has nurtured the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). COL President, Sir John Daniel, outlined how ministries of education from the Pacific to the Caribbean contribute to, and benefit from, 'boot-camps' in ICT, curriculum and materials development in a range of practical development-related studies.

In her keynote address Hon. Naledi Pandor, South Africa's Minister of Education, praised these Commonwealth initiatives, particularly programmes for the exchange of professional experience in such areas as teacher management and support, and education in small states. Reporting her own country's effort to develop leaders, she offered places in their programmes to head-teachers from Ghana and other Commonwealth countries.

At the heart of education was what young people actually learn, not just subject content but also values and behaviour. Building on this John Alderdice, the Northern Ireland peer, stressed the relevance of the Commonwealth: he said that it operated through relationships of shared culture and diversity with differences not leading to division, but to enrichment. He suggested that Commonwealth should urgently address the challenge put to it by Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, and propose means through which education would promote values to ensure that future generations will live together in harmony.

While celebrating past achievements, the theme of the Conference was 'looking ahead'. Conference participants noted that when Ministers of Education meet in Malaysia in June for their 17th Conference they will debate proposals for new forms of co-operation including a Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility, elaboration of the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol which limits the scope for poaching of teachers from developing countries, and for a new CSFP Endowment Fund. There was every reason to be optimistic about the Commonwealth's continuing role as a catalyst for constructive educational innovation.

**A conference 31 March and 1 April in Oxford, sponsored by the University of Oxford, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Commonwealth educational cooperation. The first Commonwealth Education Conference in 1959 was hosted in Oxford by the University. It inaugurated the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, established a central secretariat to coordinate cooperation in education, and prompted the creation of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth later the same year.*

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