

COMMONWEALTH POLICY STUDIES UNIT: 5

2000 Commonwealth Education Ministers' Meeting: Policy Brief

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Policy brief for the Commonwealth Education Ministers' Meeting, 26-30 November, 2000, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

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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. Again 40-45 countries are expected for the upcoming conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The United Kingdom 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, there are likely to be senior Ministers from the Department for Education and Employment, the Department for International Development and from the devolved Scottish Executive; Ministers from UK dependent territories are also expected. Australia, whose delegation has rarely been headed by a Minister in recent years, is likely to be represented by civil servants again, even though it will be hosting next year's Commonwealth summit in Brisbane.

The Halifax conference coincides with a federal election in Canada, and it is therefore likely to be opened by the Speaker in the outgoing federal parliament. Dr Speciosa Kazibwe, Vice-President of Uganda, will deliver the keynote address. Sessions will be chaired by Glen Hagel, Minister of Education in Saskatchewan and chair of the provincial council of Education Ministers; education is a provincial not a federal matter in Canada. The Commonwealth Secretariat team 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. The theme for Halifax is "Education in a global era: challenges to equity, opportunities for diversity." It is designed to highlight not only issues of equity and diversity, but also the Commonwealth effort for Education for All, recently reaffirmed on a global basis in Dakar. The conference will result in a Halifax Statement on education in the Commonwealth, on which there has already been widespread consultation.

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 itself -- 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, led to the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, 1991, which did not mention the word education once. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s education was indeed central to much Commonwealth activity, this was not true in the 1980s and 1990s.

At Gaborone in 1997 the Ministers devoted a chunk of their communiqué to the promotion of Commonwealth studies in universities and schools, commending a report by a team chaired by the Canadian, Professor Tom Symons. But efforts to get an Association of Commonwealth Studies off the ground have not yet been successful and, while the Commonwealth will enter the school curriculum in England and Wales from 2002, this is not the direct result of Commonwealth Education Ministers. Their proposal for a "Ministerial Action Committee to promote and monitor action on Commonwealth Studies arising from this conference," backed by an expert group, has not been followed up. Part of the problem is that the Commonwealth Secretariat's Education Programme, which tries to carry out ministerial recommendations, has lost funding over the past three years.

The agenda for Ministers is the result of consultation between the Secretariat, the host government and other Education Ministries. Because of the triennial timing of meetings, some issues, which are important to ministries, may not get the Commonwealth attention they deserve. For instance the Barbados conference in 1990 took place after the Jomtien conference which led the world-wide push for basic education. The Gaborone conference in 1997 was almost three years before the Dakar conference which reaffirmed the Jomtien commitments; its theme was "Education and Technology in the Commonwealth: making the transition" and did not consider basic education. Yet it is generally believed that the majority of children who are not in school are in Commonwealth countries.

3 Agenda for 2000

Following the two opening sessions, the provisional draft agenda, which will be confirmed or amended on the eve of the conference, is:

1 Open discussion of theme in terms of:

- Review of 40 years' cooperation
- Education in a global era
- Challenges to equity
- Opportunities for diversity
- The Halifax Statement

(Second Ministerial plenary session)

2 Matters to discuss/note/endorse:

- Commonwealth Secretariat report
- Commonwealth of Learning strategic plan
- Commonwealth Games
- Referrals from other Meetings
- Written submissions to Ministers

(Third Ministerial plenary session)

3 Theme discussion on:

- Education in a global era
- Challenges to equity
- Opportunities for diversity

(Fourth Ministerial plenary session)

4 Discussion of sub-themes:

- Social and economic development
- Enhancing cultural identity
- New directions in financing and management of education
- Strengthening quality and promoting mobility

(Ministerial committee sessions on these sub-themes all will be asked to consider accessibility, educational alternatives and empowerment)

5 Discussion of theme issues:

- Access, equity, mobility
- Quality and sustainability
- Capacity building and capacity utilisation
- HIV/AIDS, health and education

(Ministerial committee sessions will be asked to define the comparative advantage for Commonwealth cooperation in these areas)

6 Matters to discuss/note/endorse

- Commonwealth Secretariat strategic plan
- The report of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan
- Citizenship education

(Sixth Ministerial plenary session)

7 Halifax Statement: action areas:

- Qualifications, standards and equivalences; scholarships, fellowships and exchanges
- Small states' priorities; resources for learning
- Values education and citizenship; early childhood education
- Coping with HIV/AIDS in education; education in difficult areas

(Ministerial committee session)

8 Adoption of Halifax Statement

This concluding session on Thursday, 30 November, will include a message to the group of political leaders reviewing the future of the Commonwealth, which is being chaired by President Mbeki, and a message to the next Commonwealth summit in Brisbane in October, 2001. It will be followed by a press conference.

4 Comments on numbered agenda items

1 The review of 40 years of educational cooperation in the Commonwealth is an ambitious undertaking, which could promote much soul-searching. The current issue of The Round Table, the Commonwealth journal of international affairs (issue 356, available on the internet at <http://www.tandf.co.uk>) is entirely devoted to education in the Commonwealth. Its editorial warns against airy rhetoric, and suggests that the current political review of the future of the Commonwealth chaired by President Mbeki "may question the very involvement of the Commonwealth in education." The editorial writer implies that although Commonwealth cooperation may continue, there are those within the Commonwealth Secretariat who would like to terminate its small, dedicated education unit.

It is in this context that the planned Halifax Statement could be important. Entitled "Education for our Common Future" this was originally billed as a Declaration, until it was pointed out that Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings in the early nineties resolved that only they could make Commonwealth Declarations. An earlier draft had listed a large number of potential collaborations, but the draft Action Plan now lists only six items, some of which are not closely defined: strategic initiatives in information and

communication technology (ICT); affordable resources for learning (including textbooks, CD-ROMS and online materials); work to improve standards in qualifications, and create equivalences between countries and regions; school improvement programmes in small states; coping with HIV/AIDS in education; and expanding and diversifying the Commonwealth scholarships, fellowships and exchange schemes which exist.

In putting forward this list the Secretariat has opted for areas where it believes there is strong country interest and potential finance. For example, in the area of ICT, it knows that the UK government is working with African partners and the Cisco company on a scheme to provide support for Commonwealth African schools. Further, at their New York meeting in September, President Mbeki's group set up an advisory panel to help speed up the information revolution in Commonwealth states, and overcome the digital divide between rich and poor.

One key idea in the proposed Action Plan is that not every project should involve all 54 member states; there could instead be consortia, involving small numbers of states but also donor agencies, NGOs and even the private sector. This approach also dovetails with much enhanced interaction between Ministers and their officials with the parallel symposium and educational trade fair which will be running simultaneously in Halifax (see below). It is almost certain that there will be further projects added to the six listed in the latest draft. For example, there is a well-developed proposal for professional networking for basic education, which would involve officials, NGOs and persons from educational think-tanks in South Africa, Mozambique, India and Bangladesh. This network would work by ICT. The proposal follows field research by the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, London, but ownership would lie with persons and organisations in the four countries facing similar challenges.

2 This session is likely to focus particularly on the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth of Learning. Among many activities of the Secretariat since the Gaborone meeting, different Ministers will comment particularly on those affecting their own countries: for instance African Ministers will be aware of efforts to help the teaching profession (the Secretariat has sponsored a teacher and head teacher training programme); those in small states will, following a recent meeting in the Seychelles, comment on efforts to exchange people and practices. More generally it will be seen that the small Education Programme at the Secretariat is perhaps at its most useful in acting as a catalyst for projects which are then run by others -- like the Commonwealth Electronic Network for Schools and Education (CENSE), now largely run by the Commonwealth of Learning, or the Commonwealth Universities' Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC), now managed and expanded by the Association of Commonwealth Universities.

The disappointing progress of Commonwealth studies since Gaborone has been mentioned above, although a London University review of the only research institute in this field -- the Institute of Commonwealth Studies -- has just been completed and is likely to give a boost to contemporary Commonwealth work. In fairness to the

Secretariat, the proposed Association for Commonwealth Studies was always going to be non-governmental, and it has suffered from the lack of starter funds. But it would be surprising if Education Ministers do not come back to this issue, given that President Mbeki's review group is concerned about awareness of the Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth Secretary-General has made several speeches about the needs of the younger generation. The Commonwealth Institute, Kensington, is preparing materials for the Commonwealth component in the national curriculum for England and Wales which will be of interest elsewhere also.

Some of the issues discussed in Gaborone will be followed up in the national reports prepared before each Education Ministers' meeting. This was the case, for instance, with the review of countries' teaching about human rights in the context of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration (paragraph 46 of the Gaborone communique, related to Commonwealth Values in Education). Although the Secretariat or another agency was asked to collate this information, which has become of increasing interest with the growth of citizenship and human rights curricula, Ministries themselves were asked to report progress. However, the full report of the Gaborone conference, which is usually published within a year of an Education Ministers' conference, has yet to appear.

The Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) is likely to get warm approval and encouragement in Halifax. In a sense it is on home turf, because this distance teaching service is run from Vancouver and is strongly supported by the both the Canadian federal government and the British Columbia provincial government. After a difficult time in the early nineties, when funding declined and it lost the confidence of certain donor governments, it has recovered markedly under the leadership of Professor Raj Dhanarajan. The world-wide demand for ICT, and the continuing problems in providing traditional support for the poorest developing countries, have given CoL a cutting-edge status which is still not appreciated in countries like the UK and Australia. CoL, which raises funds from other sources also, is hoping for a substantial rise in intergovernmental funding over its next three year budget. Its chances look good.