Revisiting educational policies and priorities in Commonwealth small states

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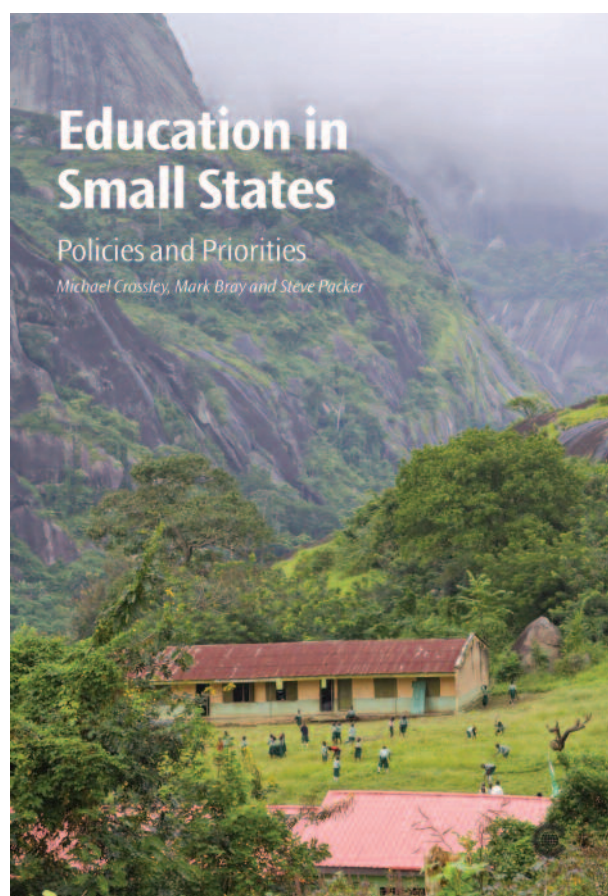
Introduction

The Commonwealth classes 33 of its member countries as small states, adopting a broad definition which includes, alongside countries with a population of less than 1.5 million, those larger states that share many similar characteristics – Botswana, The Gambia, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia and Papua New Guinea. Small states thus comprise over half of the total membership, and the Commonwealth has a strong mandate to give special attention to them.

The 2009/2010 volume of *Commonwealth Education Partnerships* reported upon the start of a programme of research on education in small states commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Crossley and Bray, 2010). This study was designed to inform, and take further shape from, discussions held with Ministers of Education and senior officials from small states at the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) held during 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This paper reflects upon what has been achieved since the 17th CCEM, and provides an overview of the key research findings and issues that are reported in a new Commonwealth Secretariat publication, *Education in Small States: Policies and Priorities* (Crossley, Bray and Packer, 2011).

The research process

Research began with a critical analysis of global trends and developments at the broadest environmental, economic and societal levels. This included an examination of the nature and impact of international education and development goals and agendas from the perspective of small states. This was directly linked to the 'Towards and Beyond Global Goals and Targets' theme that was established for the 17th CCEM. Comparisons were then drawn with educational and development targets, and aspirations being articulated and advanced within Commonwealth small states. In doing so, the research team was able to draw upon earlier studies (Bray, 1992; Bray and Packer, 1993), on an extensive network of policy-makers, administrators, academics and practitioners working within small states (see www.smallstates.net), and on the findings of doctoral researchers from small states studying at the University of Bristol, UK. In addition, consultation was possible with small states educational planners participating in the Advanced Training Programme (ATP) at UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Paris.

Initial findings were presented directly to a specially convened meeting of Ministers of Education and senior officials at the 17th CCEM. The ensuing discussions made a central contribution to the nature, content and focus of the ongoing research. Statistical data relating to education and human development in small states were drawn from a parallel study of the performance of Commonwealth countries in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) targets (Packer and Aggio, 2010). Further detailed research – including field visits to Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea – was then possible, within this contextually grounded framework. At the theoretical level, the study adopted a socio-cultural approach to comparative educational research that is sensitive to contexts (Crossley and Watson, 2003), and consistent with Amartya Sen's influential work on Commonwealth values and respect for and understanding of difference (Sen, 2007).

Findings and priority issues

Contemporary global challenges, limited natural resources and small populations underpin the robust commitment of many small states to the development of high-level skills for the knowledge

REPUBLIC OF VANUATU
Ministry of Education

An educated, healthy and wealthy nation

Vanuatu has a large number of schools spread across some very remote islands. There are 84 secondary schools, 426 primary schools and 523 early childhood kindergartens.

Function

The function of the Ministry is to deliver the education aspects of the Millennium Development Goals and the international agreements such as Education for All and respect for the rights of children.

Vision

Vanuatu Education Road Map (VERM) incorporates the strategic vision for education in Vanuatu set out in the Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy 2007-2016 (VESS).

'Our vision is for a caring education system which provides every young person with the lifelong skills, values and confidence to be self-reliant and to contribute to the development of Vanuatu, and which works in partnership with all stakeholders to provide well-managed schools.'

The VESS remains the guiding document for the development of the Vanuatu education system over the period 2007-2016, and is the umbrella document that sets the policy framework for the Vanuatu education sector.

The VERM supports the Vanuatu education system through focusing on three key strategic goals: improved access, better quality and strengthened management.

Policy and Strategy

The Government of Vanuatu's strategic directions for the country are published in *Priorities & Action Agenda: 2005-2015*. It sets out the Government's strategic directions for education and human resource development. Four policy objectives are adopted:
- To improve access to education and ensure gender and rural/urban balance
- To raise the quality and relevance of education
- To improve planning, fiscal and financial management in the sector
- To develop a distinctively Vanuatu education system

Vanuatu Education Road Map

Key targets to be achieved through the VERM include:
- Increase the net primary enrolment rate to 100 per cent by 2015
- Improve literacy and numeracy skills of school age children
- Strengthen financial management and accountability
- Increase the proportion of certified primary school teachers
- Enrol higher numbers of technical and vocational trainees

Joint Partnership and Tripartite Grant-Funding

To implement the VERM, Vanuatu is seeking Development Partners to enter into a Joint Partnership Arrangement. The signatories will be categorised in two groups: 'Pool Partners', who will make a financial contribution (initially the Government of Vanuatu, Australia (AusAID) and New Zealand (NZAID); and 'Non-Pool Partners' who will contribute through separate mechanisms (including the use of General Budget Support).

Main Activities

The Government implemented the Universal Primary Education policy at the beginning of 2010. There are four policy papers that the Ministry of Education has been working on this year.

- **Early Childhood Education (ECE)** aims to ensure that the quality of services is improved.
- **Education in Emergency (EiE)** aims to increase equitable access to education for all people at all levels of education in Vanuatu before, during and after an emergency.
- **Inclusive Education (IE)** policy and Strategic Plan 2010-2020 were developed for an education system that is inclusive of all children.
- **Education Language Policy (ELP)** seeks to develop a national language policy statement that would clearly reflect the languages of Vanuatu.

The completion and publication of the policies will occur in 2011.

Statutory Authorities

The Ministry of Education portfolio includes the following statutory bodies:
- Teaching Service Commission
- Vanuatu Institute of Technology
- Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education

Ministry Structure

Minister of Education:
Honourable Charlot Salwai
Director General: Mr Daniel Lamoureux
Director Corporate Services:
Mr Jag Beerbul
Director of Education Services:
Mr Roy Obed

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economy through the rapid expansion of secondary, technical, vocational and tertiary education opportunities. The growth of tertiary education thus features strongly in the policy priorities of many small states, along with strategies for improved quality assurance, partnerships with overseas providers, and co-ordination and regulation (Martin and Bray, 2011). The harnessing of information and communications technology (ICT) is seen to hold considerable potential for generating accessible opportunities in this respect, with the work of the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) being a notable and innovative example (West and Daniel, 2009).

Key findings and priority issues presented in *Education in Small States: Policies and Priorities* examine the impact of rapidly changing global forces and circumstances. Climate change, for example, is particularly challenging for small island developing states (SIDS) that are uniquely vulnerable to rises in sea levels and associated threats to vital infrastructure, food production, economic development and settlement itself. Yet education is generally on the margins of vulnerability analyses. Implications for education in such contexts include how education can help communities to reduce their vulnerability to major environmental challenges, and how disaster preparedness can be incorporated into educational planning and cross-sectoral skills training for personnel working in all sectors of society.

Most Commonwealth small states have achieved almost universal access to basic education and many have either attained or are close to attaining gender parity in primary and secondary schooling. On the other hand, some small states, notably in the Caribbean region, have for some time experienced gender disparities that favour girls (Miller 1991). In the Caribbean, one reason for the disparity at secondary level is a high boys' drop-out rate. According to government figures in Trinidad and Tobago (2009), for example, the 2006 and 2008 drop-out rates were 14 per cent higher for boys than for girls in all but two school districts. According to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)'s Commission on Youth Development (2010), a much higher percentage of Jamaican boys drop out of the school system than girls, with 'drop-out' young people (aged 15–24) – mainly boys – making up 30 per cent of the total youth population (Government of Jamaica, 2009). Educational policies and priorities in small states thus often differ from those aspects of global goals and targets that currently dominate international discourse, attention and priorities.

The research study therefore argues that small states have been some of the first countries to prioritise and address more complex analyses of gender imbalances and equity in education, and to focus upon issues of retention, quality, inclusion and skills training. In doing so, they have often pioneered the extension of policy discourse boundaries beyond conventional notions of access and basic education, aiming to concentrate increased attention upon what they perceive as their own distinctive and urgent needs. Moreover, there is much that other small and larger states (in both the North and the South) can learn from the Caribbean experience (Crossley, 2010).

At the same time, international support for education in small states remains strategically important if existing achievements are to be consolidated and sustained. Very little direct aid funding goes to education in the Caribbean. Assistance in the south Pacific is much greater, though it varies from year to year. For example,

Papua New Guinea received well over US$100 million per annum at the beginning of the decade, but only $40 million in 2007. Samoa received $4 million in 2007 compared with $24 million in 2006. Aid to Vanuatu fell from $14 million in 2000 to $9 million in 2007.

Recent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) research indicates that the number of those living below national poverty lines in the Pacific region jumped from 4 million to 4.5 million in the two years prior to mid-2009. Already, the proportion of employed people living on less than $1.25 a day in the subregion has increased from 35 per cent in 2007 to 38 per cent in 2008. So even though most Pacific countries had appeared to be on track to achieve universal primary education (MDG2), the economic crisis may mean that more children are unable to enrol in school, drop out or are suspended (due to unpaid fees), or experience declines in education quality.

Other factors that determine school retention in small states worldwide include participation in early childhood education, health, and respect for indigenous knowledge and local languages. Recognising the former, Commonwealth small states' provision of access to early childhood education and care are charted in the report.

Research implications and ongoing Commonwealth priorities

Throughout much of the above discussion, and the study itself, the importance of locally grounded research in informing policy developments and subsequent practice emerges as a further priority issue. As Dame Pearlette Louisy, Governor General of St Lucia, argues in the study's Foreword, 'Small states have challenged global agendas, based on their own tried-and-tested experiences, and on their own knowledge derived from locally grounded contextually relevant experience and research' (Louisy, 2011: xv). Our work in small states thus draws attention to the dangers of the uncritical international transfer of policy and practice, and of the simplistic replication of 'best practice' as observed or experienced elsewhere. The research does, however, generate much support for comparative studies and for efforts to learn from elsewhere, but in ways that facilitate evidence-based adaptations, or challenges, to international trends.

Policy-makers and planners need strategies to benefit from the fact that small states are sovereign entities, while handling the demands that this may bring. Professionals in small states may also need to be more multifunctional than their counterparts in larger states, who are more easily able to specialise – for example, in aspects of the curriculum, financing and aid negotiation. Small states may be more responsive to reform, since a single actor can have a greater proportionate influence than would be the case in a larger state; but this may bring challenges of volatility. Planners in small states are also more likely to face issues of dependency than their counterparts in larger states.

The strengthening of Commonwealth partnerships can facilitate development that is sustainable and appropriate to context; the Secretariat and other Commonwealth agencies have important and strategic roles to play. Indeed, following the 17th CCEM, the Kuala Lumpur Communiqué reinforced Commonwealth commitment to

the support of education in small states (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009), as does the subsequent Education Strategic Plan 2010–2012 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2010). Our own research has already made a contribution to ongoing regional consultations on education in small states, and we hope that the work will continue to facilitate further productive partnerships, planning and developments across Commonwealth small states in future years.

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Acknowledgement

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