

BACKGROUND

1. In many Commonwealth African countries, polytechnics and other technical institutions began to teach at the technician level only during the sixties and early seventies. It soon became apparent that middle-level education - especially in engineering and technology - was very expensive, that relatively small numbers of technicians in particular categories were required by most of the countries, and that many new problems arose at this level of technician education. All this began to suggest that much closer co-operation between countries and between educational institutions was now needed. Moreover, the possibility of more general educational benefits accruing to them if they shared their experiences and to some extent their resources began to be seen by the polytechnics and comparable post-secondary colleges.

2. The need for co-operation in this area has in consequence been emphasized at Commonwealth Education Conferences and in recent activities of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Publications and surveys of the Education Division have drawn attention to it, as did a Commonwealth regional seminar on "Technical Education and Industry" held in Hong Kong in October 1976. In 1974 the CFTC had convened a regional seminar for Commonwealth African countries, in Nairobi, concerning its education and training programme. This seminar considered a suggestion (among many others) that the feasibility of setting up an association of African technical institutions, analogous to the Association of African Universities, might be explored. It went on to note the Inter-Af Scholarship Programme operated by the AAU and suggested that "a parallel scheme, covering technical and professional training, might contribute significantly to the acceleration of manpower training programmes. If this proposal found favour, the CFTC would be prepared to consider playing a part in the setting up of a small secretariat for the association for an initial period, and providing education and training awards in support of the Association's scholarship programme."

3. During consideration of its report, some of the issues raised at the seminar were clarified. It was not felt that the degree of autonomy of polytechnics and colleges was a critical consideration; several that might be considered eligible for membership of an association had only a small degree of autonomy or none at all, while others had a degree of autonomy comparable with that of typical universities. It was considered that the former could, without prejudice to the association (which would be completely voluntary), join with the concurrence of their governmental authorities; and that most governments would welcome the opportunities provided by such an association for exchanges of information, experience and ideas, and for joint activities.

4. Consideration was also given to a suggestion that the Commonwealth Secretariat through the CFTC already provided adequately for access to other developing countries' technical institutions, and it was concluded that the Secretariat, which places a few students in polytechnics and comparable institutions in developing countries other than their own, could only benefit from the existence of an association which could provide support for this particular function. But the objectives that began to be envisaged for an association, and the common interests of the polytechnics, were seen to range over a far wider set of functions than simply the placement function. (The

AAU was not in the foreseeable future likely to be extending its activities, as had been suggested, to embrace certain technical institutions; and it was recognized that the objectives, interests and priorities of technical institutions were different from, though complementary to, those of universities).

5. The time therefore seemed ripe, in 1976, to place proposals for a regional association before the Seventh Commonwealth Education Conference due to meet in Accra in March 1977. Africa was chosen as the first region for which to propose such an association because of the relatively homogeneous nature and development of the polytechnics and polytechnic-type institutions in Commonwealth African countries. During the 1960s and early 1970s a dozen polytechnics in these countries had either been founded under that title or been renamed polytechnics after being developed out of technical institutes or colleges; and a dozen other institutions operating under other titles had the same role and character as polytechnics. The general pattern is that the smaller countries have only one institution each of polytechnic status, the medium-sized countries two or three, and Nigeria at least a dozen; these are essentially post-secondary institutions, for the education and training of technicians and other middle-level personnel; some of them have a "tail" of craft courses and one or two a "top" of degree courses. The two main considerations that pointed to the need for co-operative action were, first, that few kinds of higher technician are required by any one country in sufficient numbers to make certain educational courses economically viable for that country alone, therefore it would make sense to develop these courses in co-operation with other countries and send a few technicians in specialized areas to those countries; and second, that technician education and training is still in its infancy, and no substantial corpus of knowledge or experience of it exists in ministries or institutions. Polytechnics therefore need outside influences and exchanges among themselves to help them work out the best educational, organizational and administrative arrangements needed to attain their objectives successfully.

6. The Accra Conference had no hesitation in endorsing the proposition that an association of polytechnics in Commonwealth African countries could make a valuable contribution to co-operation in this area; and the Conference report (see paper CAP/77/WP1) set out the relevant recommendations of the Conference and the argument leading up to it. African countries were of course represented on the working committee on technical education which placed its recommendations before the Conference for endorsement; and all Commonwealth African countries subscribed to this endorsement. The recommendation that appeared in the Conference's Summary of Recommendations (page 6 of the Report) reads as follows:

6 (c) A meeting be convened to consider the establishment of an association of polytechnics in Commonwealth African countries.

7. After the Conference, interest in an association for Commonwealth African countries was expressed by or on behalf of a wider range of colleges than had been expected. Also, a suggestion that a pan-Commonwealth association of colleges might be formed at some time in the future was put forward by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, informally, to the Commonwealth Foundation. The Secretariat felt that this longer-term possibility should be brought to the attention of the proposed meeting, and that the ACCC would have interesting experience of its own to offer. The Secretariat also took note of the interest in this project expressed to the Conference by l'Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique and the Economic Commission for Africa, and of the Conference's wish that the possibility be considered of inviting francophone and other non-

Commonwealth institutions to consider involvement in one way or another.

8. The Conference having recommended that the proposed meeting should be convened in Kenya or Nigeria and should consist of the directors or principals of the polytechnics and comparable institutions that might suitably become founder members, the Secretariat approached the Government of Kenya to enquire whether it would be willing to host the meeting, perhaps in association with the Kenya Polytechnic; and both the Government and the Polytechnic readily agreed. The Secretariat felt that, in addition to the directors or principals, governments might well wish to be represented by senior officials, recognizing that polytechnics and colleges are in some cases under direct government control and that governments might later be asked to assist with the funding of the proposed association; and invitations were issued accordingly.

9. All governments of Commonwealth African countries including the governments of Mauritius and the Seychelles were invited to nominate delegates. The institutions which might be represented by their principals or directors were not closely defined; but they had to be essentially post-secondary institutions. The meeting was arranged to take place between 6 and 9 December 1977, at the Kenya Polytechnic, the delegates being accommodated at the Panafric Hotel. Acceptances were received from nine countries - Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Lesotho, Swaziland and the Seychelles. In the event the Zambian delegation was unable to attend, as were delegates from Ghana and Mauritius, whose governments had indicated just before the meeting that they would like to be represented; but Uganda, also a late acceptor, was represented by two delegates.

10. Four organizations - UNESCO, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique, and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges - accepted invitations to send observers. The nominee of the last named was unfortunately unable to attend. By virtue of his wide knowledge and experience in this area, the Rev. Dr. George Tolley, Principal of the Sheffield City Polytechnic and Honorary Secretary of the Association of Colleges for Further and Higher Education (UK), was invited to assist the meeting as a resource person. A list of participants appears on page 25.