

Introduction

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This book is one of the products of a Commonwealth Secretariat project which was initiated within the framework of the Secretariat's longstanding concern with education in small states. The project was conceived in 1994, and included among its highlights a pan-Commonwealth workshop in Barbados two years later. The workshop was attended by over 50 people concerned with examinations systems in Commonwealth countries, and included officers responsible for examinations in small states in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the South Pacific. This book is partly based on papers presented at that workshop, but includes additional material that was commissioned to cover dimensions not otherwise addressed.

The Secretariat has a particular mandate to address the concerns of small states because they comprise a large group within the Commonwealth. Among the Commonwealth's 54 member states, 30 have populations below two million and 28 have populations below 1.5 million. These states are listed in Table 0.1, together with 17 non-sovereign associated states and dependencies which have populations below 1.5 million. Recognising the importance of these members, the Commonwealth has addressed the concerns of small states in all its major sectors of activity. Education stands out as a sector in which the Secretariat's conceptual and practical work has been especially noteworthy.

Focus and Conceptual Contributions

The Commonwealth Secretariat's focus on issues which are specific to the education systems of small states has dated from the early 1980s. In 1983 the Secretariat commissioned Colin Brock, then of the University of Hull in the United Kingdom, to undertake a survey of education in the small member states of the Commonwealth (Brock 1984). This was followed by a 1985 pan-Commonwealth meeting in Mauritius which, in the words of one participant, was "the watershed event which developed a coherent, common vocabulary to speak of the problem, outlined a nascent theory, and [helped establish] a professional network of colleagues" to analyse and improve education in small states (Higginson 1991, p.537; see also Bacchus & Brock

*Table 0.1: Commonwealth Independent States, Associated States and Dependencies with Populations below Two Million**

Country/Region	Population	Country/Region	Population
<i>Africa</i>		<i>Caribbean (Contd.)</i>	
Botswana	1,402,000	St. Vincent & Grenadines	110,000
The Gambia	1,019,000	Trinidad & Tobago	1,282,000
Lesotho	1,899,000	Turks & Caicos Islands†	13,000
Mauritius	1,111,000		
Namibia	1,565,000	<i>Europe</i>	
Seychelles	70,000	Cyprus	718,000
St. Helena†	6,000	Guernsey†	55,000
Swaziland	888,000	Jersey†	82,000
		Gibraltar†	32,000
<i>Asia</i>		Isle of Man†	64,000
Brunei Darussalam	281,000	Malta	371,000
Maldives	236,000		
		<i>South America</i>	
<i>Caribbean</i>		Falkland Islands†	2,000
Anguilla†	7,000		
Antigua & Barbuda	67,000	<i>South Pacific</i>	
Bahamas	266,000	Christmas Island†	1,000
Barbados	260,000	Cook Islands†	20,000
Belize	205,000	Fiji	796,000
Bermuda†	62,000	Kiribati	76,000
British Virgin Is.†	13,000	Nauru	10,000
Cayman Islands†	27,000	Niue†	2,000
Dominica	72,000	Norfolk Island†	2,000
Grenada	91,000	Samoa	163,000
Guyana	812,000	Solomon Islands	346,000
Montserrat†	10,000	Tokelau†	2,000
St. Kitts & Nevis	41,000	Tonga	93,000
St. Lucia	158,000	Tuvalu	9,000
		Vanuatu	161,000

* Most figures refer to the early or mid-1990s.

† Associated State or Dependency.

Sources: Commonwealth Secretariat (1995); various national sources.

1987). The Mauritius meeting clearly showed that, despite wide diversity in the countries' societies, economies and geographies, smallness was one determinant of common features in their education systems. The statement prepared by participants (Commonwealth Secretariat 1986, pp.5-6) pointed out that:

The style of educational development ... is too frequently modelled on what is appropriate and fashionable in large states. Small countries are not simply a scaled-down version of large countries. They have an ecology of their own. We believe there is a cluster of factors which suggest particular strategies in the smaller states of the world.

Since the 1985 Mauritius meeting, the Secretariat's projects on education in small states have been more specialised. The main ones have focused on:

- the supply, training and professional support of educational personnel in multi-island countries (Commonwealth Secretariat 1987);
- the organisation of post-secondary colleges in small states (Commonwealth Secretariat 1988);
- the training of multifunctional administrators (Farrugia & Attard 1989);
- the organisation and management of ministries of education in small states (Bray et al. 1991; Bray 1991b);
- educational consultancy in small states (Lloyd & Packer 1994);
- examination systems in small states (Commonwealth Secretariat 1996);
- and
- management of tertiary institutions in small states (Commonwealth Secretariat 1997).

This book may therefore be seen in the context of a series of projects, and also within a broader literature focusing on the implications of size for various facets of educational development in small states.

On another dimension, the book extends the comparative literature on examinations. Noah & Eckstein (1992, p.3) have noted the general paucity of comparative studies in this field. Although a vast literature deals with examinations in particular countries, they observe, relatively little systematic cross-national comparative work has been conducted. The book of course only addresses one segment of the vast array of potential themes in the comparative study of examinations; but it addresses a topic which has previously been almost totally neglected.

Boundaries in Focus

Within the focus on examinations, the main concern of this book is on external assessments at the secondary level. This concentration was chosen because it is at this level that tensions between national, regional and international forces, which are a major theme of this book, are most clear. Although decision-makers in all countries must balance demands for local relevance with desires for international recognition of qualifications, this tension is particularly severe in small states. While giving particular attention to the secondary level, however, the book does also comment on examinations at the primary level. The differences in emphasis are another instructive domain of comparison.

Also demanding emphasis at the outset is that the principal concern in the book is with broad policy choices rather than with technical matters such as the mechanics of item-banking, moderation, criterion-referenced assessment, and group testing. Some technical issues are noted in so far as they are affected by the size of the system concerned. However, much of the technical literature that exists elsewhere (e.g. Bude & Lewin 1997; Green 1991; Luijten 1991; Keeves 1994; Walberg & Haertel 1990) is relevant to examination systems in countries of all sizes. Universally applicable material is in general outside the focus of this book, and is only noted when it is directly related to the issues particularly facing small states.

Further, the book focuses almost exclusively on Commonwealth countries. The chief exception is the chapter on Bhutan, which is not a member of the Commonwealth. The fact that most the countries which are the focus of detailed discussion have education and examination systems derived from British models provides a common basis for comparison. The fact that the book omits detailed study of countries which operate in francophone, lusophone or other traditions does mean that the picture covers only one group of small states (albeit the majority, since anglophone small states happen to be the most numerous). Inclusion of the chapter on Bhutan does not provide a strong contrast with the Commonwealth countries, first because Bhutan's education system gives a high priority to English even at the primary level, and second because pupils in the highest grades in Bhutan's secondary schools sit examinations set in India (which is a Commonwealth state). As a result, Bhutanese models resemble ones found in some Commonwealth states more closely than would be the case for models in, for example, in Liechtenstein, Sao Tomé & Príncipe, or Gabon. Having recognised this point, however, the fact remains that the book does provide detailed material for comparison of a wide-ranging group of small states in very different parts of the world.

Structure and Authors

This book is divided into five main parts, each of which deserves some commentary. The first part elaborates points sketched in this Introduction. It presents a conceptual framework, drawing on the existing literatures on education in small states and on examination systems. The conceptual framework provides a set of lenses through which to view the material in subsequent chapters.

Part II of the book, which is the longest, contains 10 case-study chapters of examination systems in particular countries. The countries have been grouped alphabetically within world regions. This grouping is chiefly a matter of convenience rather than because countries in particular geographic groups necessarily have more in common with each other than with countries in other geographic groups. However, the grouping does highlight the fact that the case studies are drawn from four very different regions of the world. With such a broad canvas it is possible to identify common features which affect all small states despite the diversity in the cultures, economies and political frameworks within which those small states operate.

An alternative way to have grouped the countries would have been in ascending order of population size. At one end of the scale would have been Samoa, with a population of just 163,000, and at the other end would have been Namibia with a population of 1,565,000. The issues faced by policy-makers in the smallest-of-the-small countries may be rather different from those in the larger ones, and to some extent it is necessary to identify a continuum in the ways that size affects examination systems. This is especially the case when considering economies of scale and the manpower demands of examination systems.

Part III of the book focuses on three important regional examining bodies. An extensive literature addresses attempts to meet the needs of small states through regional bodies (e.g. Atchoarena 1993; Bray & Packer 1993; Crocombe & Meleisea 1994; Crossley & Louisy 1994). The three chapters in this part of the book add to that literature, showing that regional bodies can certainly meet the collective needs of their members but also noting that regional bodies suffer major tensions and are sometimes imperfect solutions to the problems they confront. The chapters also show a range of alternative structures, for although all three regional bodies endeavour to meet the examining needs of small (and not so small) states through common frameworks, the compositions and modes of operation of the three bodies differ markedly from each other.

A further dimension to what is already a complex picture is introduced by the two chapters in Part IV of the book. These chapters focus on a pair of metropolitan examinations boards which operate in many countries.

Although the metropolitan boards presented here exist primarily to serve candidates in the countries in which the boards are based, each also plays a major international role. The international work of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is almost entirely within the South Pacific; but that of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate is worldwide. The ways in which the roles of these bodies have evolved over time, and in particular the ways in which the roles dovetail and/or overlap with those of regional and national examining boards, is of major importance.

The last part of the book contains a pair of chapters which summarise and conclude. The first of these chapters elaborates the conceptual contributions of the book; and the second draws out the more practical implications for policy at national, regional and international levels. It is impossible to resolve all tensions and create a perfect system; but this book does help highlight some successes, some problems, and some potential ways forward in the improvement of examination systems in small states.

Finally, a note should be presented about the authors of the chapters in this book. All are professionally involved in the examination systems about which they have written, and in most cases they are actually responsible for the administration of those systems. Moreover, all the authors of the country-chapters are nationals of the countries concerned. As such, they have been able to write with authenticity about the systems they describe.