

PART TWO

ACADEMIC INTERCHANGE AND INSTITUTION BUILDING IN THE COMMONWEALTH

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Trends, Problems and a Commonwealth Project

Jasbir Singh

Introduction

Commonwealth student mobility is a long standing phenomenon and remains one of the cornerstones of Commonwealth relationships. Educational interchanges form an important part of the enduring links and ties. Many Commonwealth leaders have received part or all of their higher education in another Commonwealth country. Close personal, professional, political and business ties have been formed and sustained through student interchange. Study abroad has formed an important component of human resource development programmes for developing countries, and small states (which are the majority of our members) have inevitably depended on other countries for the provision of high level and specialised study and training.

The movement of students among Commonwealth countries is the most valued element of higher education co-operation and has been on the agenda of higher education consultation since the first conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education, which was held in Oxford in 1959. It forms the basis for the best known of the awards schemes – the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. The relevance of exchange for Commonwealth connections, as well as concern at the weakening of these links from reduced exchange, has frequently been expressed.

Documents portray with urgency the need to keep a high degree of Commonwealth student mobility. The extent to which the Commonwealth attaches importance to student mobility may be demonstrated from the fact that in 1982 the Secretary-General

appointed a Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility pointing out that:

...student mobility and education interchange within the Commonwealth were important to the national development efforts of Commonwealth countries and to maintaining Commonwealth links...

The Secretary-General affirmed that unless educational interchange between countries is assured a special place in our educational systems, the Commonwealth connection itself would be in danger of impairment.

Trends in student flows

Changes in student mobility have surfaced largely since Britain introduced full-cost fees in 1980, followed by Australia, New Zealand and Canada (partially). In 1989 Heads of Government expressed great concern at the evidence adduced by the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility and Higher Education Co-operation in its Sixth Report, *Progress through Co-operation*. The Committee's evidence showed that:

- Intra-Commonwealth student mobility to the four industrialised Commonwealth countries had declined by over 10 per cent in the decade between 1977 and 1987.
- In the principal Commonwealth host countries, the most recent trends had been for Commonwealth student numbers to continue to decline whilst the student intake from non-Commonwealth countries was increasing; Unesco statistics suggested that mobility of students involving exchanges with and between non-Commonwealth countries appeared to have grown by a quarter, while intra-Commonwealth student mobility stagnated.
- In consequence, the proportion of all students from abroad accounted for by Commonwealth countries had declined from 57 per cent to 50 per cent between 1984-85 and 1987-88, and 47 per cent in 1988-89.
- When these trends were compared with those for other major host countries outside the Commonwealth, it was found that their intake of students from abroad was in some cases growing appreciably, including their intake of Commonwealth students.
- Patterns of intra-Commonwealth student mobility revealed a

heavy concentration on a few main host and a few main sending countries, with Malaysia and Hong Kong accounting for just over half the total number of Commonwealth students hosted by the four Commonwealth industrialised countries.

Trends have changed slightly since 1989. There has been a promising reversal to the decline in intake of Commonwealth students by the industrialised countries. In 1989–90 the figure had climbed back to 65,000, the same level as in 1984–85 and preliminary estimates for the early '90s indicate that the increase continues (see Appendix I for recent statistics). However, there are a number of issues related to the phenomenon which are of great concern to the Commonwealth Secretariat.

- Mobility is still largely into those three 'developed' Commonwealth countries (Australia, Britain and Canada).
- The concentration remains of a few main sending countries: the richer NICs, such as Malaysia and Hong Kong. The numbers from the poorer African countries and the Asian subcontinent have greatly diminished.
- Mobility among the developing countries is extremely limited. Countries like India (which is the largest host developing country) are drawing students from a limited range of countries and in a few disciplines only.

Reasons for declining mobility

Two principal factors have influenced present trends in student mobility:

1 The impact of high fee regimes

Reasons for the decline and imbalance in Commonwealth student mobility have been documented by the Standing Committee, especially the close link between levels of fees and flows of students. The effects of high fees have been magnified by rapid rises in living costs in many developed countries and the depreciation of some countries' currencies against, for example, the Canadian dollar or the British pound. To illustrate this last point, whereas fees in Britain for an overseas undergraduate taking a science course increased roughly six and a half times between 1979 and 1990, the cost in Guyanese dollars of these tuition fees was *60 times*

higher in 1990 than in 1979 because of the change in value of the Guyanese dollar relative to the pound.

High cost fees and poor exchange rates make it impossible for students from many developing countries to pursue higher education in the traditional centres of learning.

2 New regional affiliations

There have arisen special relationships between the major Commonwealth host governments and some of their non-Commonwealth neighbours and trading partners which have placed Commonwealth students at greater relative disadvantage. In Britain, the question of equitable fees for Commonwealth students is further complicated by the differing relationships in place in the European partners who had a colonial past. France, in particular, has overseas departments like Martinique and Guadeloupe, which are treated as part of Metropolitan France, so that students from these Caribbean islands have access to all the European Community arrangements and programmes like ERASMUS that favour European student mobility. This led (perhaps unjustifiably) to invidious comparisons being made by Commonwealth Education Ministers at their Eleventh Conference in Barbados.

From their point of view, Commonwealth scholars are likely to be further disadvantaged as Europe moves ahead with re-arranging its foreign policy in the new context of Central and Eastern Europe and the break up of the Soviet Union. The results include schemes such as TEMPUS, which permit East European students easier access into the higher education institutions of Western Europe. The logic of Commonwealth concern seems clear enough: European students are going to have their movement into Britain (which is the pole of attraction for large numbers) facilitated; by comparison, in the absence of special sponsorship, Commonwealth student mobility into Britain may further decline both absolutely and relatively.

Of the other main receiving countries, Canada follows a fairly even-handed policy as between Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries and particularly leans favourably towards some of the Francophone countries in Africa. Australia has always shown keenness to play a leading role in the Asia-Pacific Rim and has recently extended its aid priority (including educational aid) from South-East Asia to include Taiwan and Korea.

Boosting mobility

To combat declining Commonwealth mobility and to achieve a more balanced pattern of mobility, the Secretariat has from time to time proposed a number of schemes. These have included: the institution of new award schemes/programmes; more scholarships for women; awards for students enrolled at a distance; flexibility in credit transfer; exploration of link and split-site arrangements; better student support services, as well as opportunities for employment; and expansion of fee-free exchanges. While many of these ideas, such as split-site courses, have taken off significantly, for some of the countries there is still concern that the direction of flow remains from the developing to the developed countries, and that in many instances such schemes have actually impeded the development of proper exchange schemes and two-way flows of students. They are often seen as hampering the strengthening of institutions in developing Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General recently proposed a number of strategies to counter the high fees and enable greater student mobility. These were discussed between the Secretariat and interested governments at the meeting in June 1992 of the Standing Committee on Student Mobility and Higher Education Co-operation. The Secretary-General proposed a five-point plan:

1 An acceptable basis for computation of fees

This requests that only those items which properly and directly relate to the study programmes undertaken by the overseas student should form the basis for charging.

2 Fee reduction for postgraduate students

Many postgraduates contribute to research projects undertaken for the benefit of the host country and constitute a resource for the host country.

3 Expanded scholarship provision

Despite the expanded programmes in Australia, Britain and Canada a need for more awards is recognised. Cost-effectiveness considerations will often be best served by putting awards on an in-country or third-country training basis, which would also have the merit of diversifying the pattern of intra-Commonwealth student flows.

4 Tuition-fee scholarships

As overseas students can sometimes economise on living costs, a higher proportion of available scholarship monies should be

concentrated on financing tuition fees, which often have to be paid 'en bloc' and are a fixed sum.

5 Reciprocal arrangements for fee remission

Such arrangements should build on examples that already exist for waiving of overseas fees on a reciprocal basis, for example, the home-fee status accorded to each other by Australia and New Zealand.

This plan was considered by the Standing Committee in June 1992 and the proposals were supported by the great majority of participants. As a statement after the meeting declared, however:

... there was acute disappointment that the industrialised host countries were neither able to change their position in any respect in relation to these points, nor to advance alternative proposals. In the absence of a willingness by the industrialised countries to commit additional resources which would enable fee levels to be reduced or scholarships to be expanded, no progress was possible ...

The Commonwealth government representatives deplored a lack of political will and repeated the fear that Commonwealth relationships might be put in jeopardy.

At the same time, they acknowledged that among major host countries, India and some provinces of Canada had met and on occasion went beyond the Secretary-General's proposed criteria. The meeting did discuss other measures, particularly to diversify patterns of Commonwealth student mobility, and commended the initiative of the Commonwealth of Learning.

A Commonwealth project: Academic Interchange and Institution Building

The Commonwealth Secretariat continues to look for ways of ameliorating high fee structures. At the same time, on other fronts, the Secretariat is keen to explore other arrangements and initiatives which will favour the expansion of student mobility. It is anxious to achieve this within a framework of growth and sustainable development of developing country institutions. Mindful of the need to build institutions and capacity in developing countries, its project, Academic Interchange and Institution Building, has been designed on the premise that both student mobility and institution building are closely inter-

twined and dependent upon each other. Student mobility adds dimensions to developing country institutions that help them grow while strong centres of learning attract students to these institutions and countries.

The problem is complex and, as in the case of the proverbial chicken and egg, we tend to ask which should come first? I think we need not be concerned with trying to determine which should be the starting point, student mobility or institution building, but rather to think of schemes which attempt to achieve the two in tandem, that is, promote the interface between student mobility and institution building. We need to think of arrangements that may be put in place to channel students from one institution and/or country to another. At the same time, we need to think of the arrangements and initiatives needed at the national and institutional level to improve recipient capacity. They may include better information, recognition of qualifications, improved accommodation and welfare and opportunities for students to work, as well as aspects of the quality of teaching and research.

The task now is to think out and recommend co-ordinated programmes of exchange and student flow among developing country institutions and from the developed to the developing country institutions. The vision is a framework within which Commonwealth link and exchange programmes can be planned, to enable selected institutions in Commonwealth developing countries successfully to host academics and researchers from other developing country institutions.

Any realistic planning must be done bearing in mind the make-up of the Commonwealth – a group of fifty countries, with limited resources. In the group are: four industrialised countries – Australia, Britain, Canada and possibly New Zealand; a number of newly industrialising countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia; and a large number of very poor or poor countries. Many of these countries are far too small even to support a higher education institution; thirty of them have populations of under two million.

Large pools of money are not likely to be available. While committed to the ideals of mobility and association, Commonwealth governments often cannot match these with hard currency. Thus the focus has to be on creative ways of maximising resources. We need to see what resources, however little, are available from all partners in the enterprise; and we should not underestimate the input of developing countries, who may be able to make small concessions of fee waivers and the like. Reflection is needed on the ways we can best take advantage of these resources inside developing countries and combine them for best

effect, with any external resourcing we may be able to identify. Thus while schemes like ERASMUS spring to mind, we have to take the lessons from these schemes and work out ways of implementing them with none of the financial backing that the European Community can provide.

The Workshop in Singapore in April 1992 was designed to take the project forward, with some small-scale, implementable recommendations, within a coherent programme of activities and initiatives, for which the resources would be attainable, and working where possible in partnership with other Commonwealth agencies. The Workshop was seen as a landmark meeting, from which a new approach to Commonwealth student mobility crystallised – an approach based on greater diversification of student destinations, the encouragement of more South-South co-operation in higher education, and the development of a consortium of universities of North and South to engender pivotal study abroad schemes. The Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium or CUSAC is the first fruit of the new approach.