

Introduction

Education, we are reminded in this book, was the focus of collaborative Commonwealth endeavour even before the Commonwealth structures for co-operation (which we now take for granted) came into being. Shared educational values, we are also reminded in this book, form 'the glue which binds the Commonwealth together'. Yet, in recent years, pressing economic and political challenges have led member states rather to downplay their bonds of educational interest. That could be unfortunate, since the Commonwealth has racked up useful successes in this arena, in spite of limited resources, because of goodwill, joint understanding and professional enthusiasm across boundaries.

This book is, in part, a record of those successes and achievements. The idea for it grew in the run-up to the Halifax Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM), since the year before it, 1999, was the 40th anniversary of the first ever Commonwealth gathering to exchange ideas and develop programmes in education. Dr Cream Wright and colleagues in the Secretariat proposed a history of the first 40 years of Commonwealth education. The original plan was to have covered a great many topics and to have included a volume of case studies, but the project was temporarily aborted for budgetary reasons. It is to the credit of the Commonwealth Secretariat that it is backing this, slightly more modest, study.

Five of the chapters here were written under the auspices of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC), which has played a key role in keeping the plan on track. Four authors wrote their chapters in close consultation with each other and with an advisory group brought together by the CEC. A fifth chapter reproduces a lecture given in the UK House of Lords for the CEC. The other two chapters were contributed by a member of the Secretariat and the President of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

The table of contents shows the scope of this book. The first part is a magisterial survey by Dr Peter Williams of Commonwealth policies, activities and initiatives since 1959, including a detailed description of official structures and arrangements. It is authoritative, coming from someone who was Director of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Education Programme for a quarter of the period surveyed here, and combines a broad sweep with much useful detail. The second

part sets the Commonwealth's education work in the world context of currents of thought about Education for All (EFA) and about gender in education. Sir John Daniel relates interest in EFA in the Commonwealth to the work of the UN in this field and particularly UNESCO as the leaders. Dr Jasbir Singh, who also worked for many years in the Commonwealth Secretariat, has shown how the Secretariat and education ministers gradually became sensitised to the needs for gender balance at all levels and across the education board.

Part Three moves to a particular set of issues relating to science, mathematics and technology in education. The topic has been prominent in most deliberations from 1959 onwards, in Commonwealth Education Conferences (CECs), CCEMs and specialist conferences. Dr Ved Goel clearly shows the importance of the latter in improving educational quality in the field and also the value of professional associations set up under the Commonwealth aegis in raising standards and morale. Dr Bonney Rust relates developments in Commonwealth policy-making to economic and demographic profiles in the various member countries in a way which gives full sense and life to his description of the different reports and meetings.

Part Four deals with higher education, which, as Peter Williams says in Chapter 1, especially lends itself to international activity and interchange. Dr Dhanarajan highlights one of the greatest innovations in the whole 40 years, which has dominated the fourth decade and beyond – the Commonwealth of Learning. Not surprisingly, other authors in this book refer to COL (in Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5), since it is such an imaginative venture and points to a hopeful future, abreast of new methods and technology. The final chapter, by the editor, illustrates the strengths of Commonwealth links – in language and common scholarly patterns – but also the severe tensions which can be experienced in an international organism of such a diverse character as the Commonwealths. It concludes, however, that: 'It remains true that all members have something to learn from others and all have something to give'.

The aim overall has been to take stock of what has been done over 40 years in the name of Commonwealth education co-operation officially – that is through the mandates of successive conferences and through the initiative of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The book is written in the knowledge that there are very many less formal activities in education arising from the Commonwealth relationships – and that would be the subject for a different study. Here, we have tried to give a reasonably comprehensive picture of the successes of and setbacks to education work engendered by Commonwealth agencies. We have covered the 40 years between 1959 and 1999 in detail, but as the book finally goes to press in 2003, a number of the chapters take account of more recent events, such as the Halifax Conference in 2000, and of trends as they appear in 2003.

There has been close collaboration between some of the authors, through the initiative of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, but each author's opinions are their own. This is a history of officially-sanctioned activity, but it is not

an 'official history'; it has not in any way been vetted or limited by the Commonwealth Secretariat. This again is to their credit and lends strength to the underlying tone, in most of what is in this book, of admiration for the professionalism and motivation of Commonwealth education officials over the years.

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