

Foreword

The Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers which convened in Nicosia, Cyprus from 23-26 July 1984, was the ninth in the series which was inaugurated in Oxford in July 1959. It took place almost exactly 25 years after the first Commonwealth Education Conference was held, and on this notable occasion Ministers reaffirmed the particular value that their governments place on continuing educational co-operation, consultation and interchange within the Commonwealth at both governmental and professional levels, and made important commitments to sustain them.

Co-operation in education lies close to the heart of our Commonwealth association. Education is the vehicle through which many of our shared values, perceptions and ideals are shaped and communicated. The awareness of the historical links between our countries, a respect for our diversity, and an understanding of the various cultures in the Commonwealth are fostered through the education system. The opportunity to study alongside Commonwealth students coming to our schools, colleges and universities, or to travel abroad for study and research, provides enduring ties of friendship which may last a lifetime. The smooth conduct of Commonwealth meetings, and the easy rapport between the leaders of Commonwealth nations, bear witness to the incalculable role of education in forging and maintaining Commonwealth bonds.

Nowhere was all of this more evident than in Nicosia, where Ministers engaged in a frank and informative dialogue on issues of key concern and formulated constructive proposals for working together more closely in future. During the first two days of the Conference we had a useful exchange of experiences and ideas for practical co-operation between Ministers on the important topics of Resources for Education and their Cost-Effective Use, and Education and Youth Unemployment. All countries represented in Nicosia are afflicted by these problems, and the opportunity to share perspectives and become acquainted with innovations and developments in Commonwealth partner countries was helpful to all.

Naturally enough some of the most spirited exchanges took place on the subject of Commonwealth Student Mobility, a problem that has been of deep concern to Ministers for several years and which figured largely on their agenda at the Eighth Conference in Colombo in 1980. In Nicosia, Ministers had before them the Third Report of the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility which identified disturbing trends in the volume of Commonwealth student flows with distinct signs that the pattern of growth in the 1970s had petered out. One of the most important reasons for this appeared to be the increasingly protectionist stance of some of the main traditional Commonwealth receivers of students. High fees, quotas and more stringent immigration and work regulations had contributed to restriction of access for Commonwealth students wishing to study abroad. This imperilled not only the socio-economic development plans of less developed Commonwealth countries, especially small states with no higher education facilities of their own, but also the very bases of the Commonwealth association.

Ministers responded in a positive manner to these dangers. Despite natural differences of view about the way in which obstacles to Commonwealth student mobility should best be resolved, Ministers collectively approached the problem in a constructive spirit and unanimously agreed the terms of a Statement on Commonwealth Student Mobility. In this they affirmed their belief in its value and committed themselves to strive to work and consult together to sustain Commonwealth student flows. This recognition of a common interest and determination to co-operate in pursuing Commonwealth student interchange is a heartening sign for the future. It is to be hoped that when Ministers meet again in the latter months of 1985 there will be solid progress to report.

The determination of Commonwealth Ministers to strengthen collaboration was underlined by their commitment to expand the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. This was also the 25th anniversary of the inauguration of the Plan at Oxford, and Ministers took the opportunity to pledge additional resources to the Plan. The target of 1,500 awards which had been set at previous Ministers conferences was now for the first time attained. In fact, it was comfortably exceeded. Before the Nicosia meeting ended the total reached a new level of 1,650 awards; and pledges have since been confirmed which bring the total to over 1,700. Many countries were responsible for this splendid achievement including five developing countries which were pledging for the first time. Outstanding among the pledges was one by Canada of 200 additional awards which together with the increase of over 100 additional awards previously announced by Britain carried the Plan a long way forward. Australia and India have also promised substantial increases in their programmes.

We experimented with a new style of Conference at Nicosia in response to proposals made by Ministers at the Eighth Conference in Colombo. In particular, the Conference was shorter than earlier ones and the previous arrangement by which the meeting of Ministers was preceded by a meeting of Officials was abandoned in favour of a unified structure. The result was very successful. Ministers welcomed the changes and the opportunity thereby given them to address themselves more directly to matters of substance.

Our meeting in Nicosia was splendidly hosted by the Government of Cyprus and we were privileged that His Excellency, the President of Cyprus, Mr. Spyros Kyprianou, graciously agreed to open the proceedings. The organisational arrangements were excellent and we were afforded the most generous hospitality. It was with a feeling of great appreciation to our hosts, and of satisfaction at what had been collectively achieved that we left Nicosia and now look forward with keen anticipation to the Tenth Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education. The Government of Kenya has kindly offered to host this in 1987.

