

1 ORIGINS AND MANDATE

1 We were invited by the Commonwealth Secretary-General to serve as a working group with the following terms of reference:

(a) To consider and make recommendations about appropriate arrangements for the creation of a Commonwealth institution to promote co-operation in distance education, in accordance with the decisions of Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Vancouver in October 1987.

(b) To report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General by 30 June 1988.

2 These terms of reference in turn reflect the decisions made by Heads of Government, meeting in Vancouver in 1987. They commended the Briggs report Towards a Commonwealth of Learning and in its light 'agreed to create a Commonwealth institution to promote co-operation in distance education, which may become the University of the Commonwealth for co-operation in distance education'; they also endorsed in principle a Canadian proposal for a university and college network for distance education, with a headquarters in Vancouver and units in other parts of the Commonwealth. Heads of Government requested the establishment of a Working Group 'to develop the financial and organisational framework, establish appropriate guidelines and set priorities for the institution with a view to ensuring the relevance of programmes and the appropriateness of educational technologies to countries' particular situations and needs'. In the light of this our report recommends priorities and an organisational structure in the context of the purposes and functions set out in Section 2 below. We consider organisation both in Section 3 on structure and in Section 4 on governance, and we look at its implications for staffing in Section 5 and for accommodation and services in Section 6. We examine priorities in relation to programme activities in Section 7 and examine appropriate technologies both in that section and in Section 8 on implementation. The financial framework appears in Section 9.

3 In response to our mandate we have met twice in London and established a planning sub-committee which met in Vancouver and Milton Keynes in order to expedite work between our meetings.

2 PURPOSE AND FUNCTIONS

4 Our recommendations are directed towards the establishment of a Commonwealth institution to promote co-operation in distance education as called for by Heads of Government. The institution will help Commonwealth countries to develop in a cost-effective way their facilities for distance learning in order to enhance educational opportunity as a means of assisting their social and economic development, particularly human resource development, and will strengthen their key institutions. The arrangements will depend for their success on tapping the experience and expertise of educational bodies throughout the Commonwealth but will in turn contribute to their institutional development. Our concern is with the widest range of post-school-age learners and our recommendations are to select from the widest range of communication technologies, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, taking account of cost, of convenience for learners, and of the

state of development of communication infrastructure in member countries. The institution should set priorities with a view to ensuring the relevance of programmes and the appropriateness of education technologies to member countries' particular situations and needs.

5 International co-operative activity in this area has been made possible by the dramatic expansion of distance education and the new communication technologies put at its disposal over the last quarter century. Within many Commonwealth countries distance education has been used to widen access to education and to meet shortages of trained manpower. It has often proved an economic and effective way of doing so. As a result the Commonwealth can look forward to obtaining benefits that are made possible by using a range of appropriate communication technologies in education but can most effectively be achieved only through international co-operation.

6 Co-operation has to be worked for. The Briggs group examined the educational and development needs that could be addressed through co-operation in distance education and recommended the establishment of a university institution to promote Commonwealth co-operation. Subsequently Heads of Government expressed their intention to work towards the longer term end that, 'any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance-teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth'. In our recommendations we have sought both to keep in view the longer term potential which a new co-operative venture brings for the Commonwealth and for the advancement of education within it, and to make realistic recommendations for activities that can be launched in the early stages, with the funds likely to be available.

7 Our proposals are for what we have called the Commonwealth of Learning, using this term to embrace the whole range of co-operative distance-education activities undertaken within a network of colleges and universities and other educational and training institutions. For convenience we have used the term Agency for the institutional structure that facilitates co-operation, comprising both a headquarters to be set up in Vancouver and units in other parts of the Commonwealth. It will work as a multilateral venture whose main concern is with the priorities of Commonwealth member countries in human resource development. Some activities will be undertaken by the headquarters, some by regional bodies under its direction and some by institutions working together for a particular purpose.

8 The possible functions for the new enterprise, which were identified and examined in detail by the Briggs group, will include development of institutions (para 9), of materials and techniques (para 10) and of institutional support services for students (para 11).

9 To support institutional development, there are demands for co-operative work in four domains. In each domain such collaboration could strengthen national capacity in distance education and open learning.

9.1 Institutions require information both on the processes of distance education and on the content and availability of distance-teaching materials particularly where there are proposals for their exchange and shared use.

9.2 Many educational institutions seek training for their staff in distance education and there is scope for co-operative activity.

9.3 Colleges and universities can benefit from inter-institutional links through new forms of communication technology both to develop their on-campus teaching and to support their programmes for off-campus students. Such electronic links allow for shared teaching and joint seminars, for cooperative research and access to a wider range of data bases and for administrative co-operation.

9.4 Commonwealth co-operation in evaluation and applied research in the methods of distance education can yield benefits both for individual institutions and for co-operative ventures.

10 Commonwealth colleges and universities can benefit in at least three ways by sharing teaching materials and techniques.

10.1 In some cases educational needs can be met from material that already exists within the Commonwealth and can be used as it stands or in an adapted form. This is only possible as long as arrangements can be made for material, or rights to it, to become available to institutions other than those which developed it. The Commonwealth of Learning will have a crucial role in helping to negotiate such satisfactory arrangements.

10.2 In other cases, where educational needs cannot be met from already existing material or where common courses can best be developed on a co-operative basis, there is scope for commissioning the development of new materials.

10.3 In yet others the sharing of teaching techniques will enhance the distance education process.

11 The Commonwealth of Learning should not teach learners directly but two of its functions will bear directly on learners' needs; mutual accreditation procedures and the development of tutorial and support services.

11.1 Students following a course developed at an institution other than their own seek the assurance that they can gain appropriate credit for their work. As the sharing of distance-teaching resources between Commonwealth countries grows so there will be an increasing need for co-operation on the recognition of credit. Work on these issues should be related to the exchange of information on teaching materials.

11.2 Distance education is made more effective by good local support services to students. There will be scope for co-operative activity to assist in the development of such services and in this the Commonwealth of Learning can assist greatly. The development itself, in our view, should take place at the individual distance-teaching institutions which must also have the prime responsibility for running these services as an essential element of their provision for students.