

3 STRUCTURE

12 To perform these functions the Commonwealth of Learning will require a structure which provides for that measure of central direction of policy and of its decentralised activities necessary for coherence and efficiency. At the same time, that same structure needs to be capable of creating and maintaining effective and harmonious relationships between the Agency itself and the institutions at grass-roots level that will form the network of participating organisations. In addition to the links with universities and colleges the Commonwealth of Learning will need to develop relationships for specific projects or activities with organisations of a different kind including multinational corporations, other multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, World Health Organisation, Food and Agriculture Organisation and United Nations Development Programme, and also trusts and foundations.

13 Taking these factors into account, our proposal is for a structure that will support activities of four kinds. First, we propose that there should be a headquarters for the Agency with the responsibilities set out in para 14. Second, it will be appropriate for some activities that are of benefit to the Commonwealth as a whole to be decentralised (see para 15-16). Third, at least in some parts of the Commonwealth, co-operative activities can be decentralised to meet regional needs through regional co-operation (paras 17-24). Fourth, and most important, the Agency will need links with colleges, universities and distance-teaching institutions throughout the Commonwealth; these are the institutions which, together with the Agency, will form a network of co-operating partners (para 25).

14 In order to run coherent programmes the headquarters will thus require powers of initiative, co-ordination and direction as well as adequate funding and efficient means of communication with those undertaking decentralised activities. The central core of activities at the headquarters will include:

central management and direction of common services and co-operative activities;

policy oversight of all decentralised activities;

identification, in association with regional and national institutions and with governments, of educational needs to which Commonwealth-wide programmes should respond;

co-ordination of training and support for it;

applied research and evaluation; monitoring of the activities of the Commonwealth of Learning itself;

arranging for the acquisition of materials or rights to them and facilitating their delivery to and use by collaborating institutions;

arranging for the development of materials, generally through subcontracts but on occasion at the headquarters.

15 While these powers of co-ordination are necessary, the Commonwealth of Learning will benefit from an ability to decentralise and to work with and through partners in any part of the Commonwealth. In some cases there will be advantages in arranging for services to be provided on a pan-Commonwealth basis, from an appropriate institution away from the Agency headquarters. The

two guiding principles for such agreements are that decisions on policy should rest with the governing board of the Commonwealth of Learning and that general Commonwealth-wide facilities and services should be made available on comparable terms to institutions throughout the Commonwealth. Specific projects mainly benefiting industrialised countries would be carried out on a basis of cost recovery. There is an existing international information service on distance education (the International Centre for Distance Learning) at the British Open University, and considerable experience there of working on the related questions of credit transfer. It is proposed to develop these services for the Commonwealth mainly at that institution with assistance offered by the British Government for those purposes. Efforts will be made to ensure that advantage is also taken of experience in other parts of the Commonwealth.

16 There is a possibility of establishing a centre of a rather different kind in Malta where the Commonwealth of Learning could avail itself of a generous offer by the Government to make facilities available. The work of a centre in Malta might build on existing interests and strengths in Malta in sea-related studies and educational management in small states and concentrate on the application of distance education to the problems of small states. These would include marine issues in particular, bearing in mind that Malta is already the locus of the International Ocean Institute. It would address common educational needs which are particular to small states and especially to island countries, issues that are already defined as a Commonwealth priority. There could be useful linkages with the South Pacific and the Caribbean. Malta's location would also enable it to serve as a bridge between co-operative activities in distance education in the Commonwealth and within Europe. Initially it is proposed that any services to be developed in Malta should be made available by means of a contract between the Agency and the University of Malta which is already developing a centre for distance learning. In the longer term, however, a closer constitutional relationship might develop. The Secretariat is exploring with the Malta Government more detailed arrangements for such a centre. Subject to the acceptability of these to the Agency and consultation with those who would be most fully served by the development of such a centre, we hope that it will in this way be able to take advantage of the Malta Government's offer.

17 For some activities the Commonwealth of Learning will work most effectively on a regional basis. This will facilitate the articulation of local needs and proposals, and will provide institutions and governments in each region with a greater sense of participation in and ownership of the Commonwealth of Learning network. A regional basis for co-operation has particular advantages in terms of similar cultural and socio-economic conditions where neighbouring countries share common characteristics; in terms of physical convenience of access where distance educators need to travel for training, consultancies, planning meetings and conferences; in terms of co-ordination where joint distance-education projects on a regional basis are proposed; and in terms of viability where individual countries' small size makes common services or jointly owned facilities desirable.

18 There is varied experience of regional co-operation in different parts of the Commonwealth and there are advantages in experimenting with a range of different structures for this purpose. In some parts of the Commonwealth existing structures to support co-operation among Commonwealth countries in human resource development may provide a base for co-operation in distance education. In both the Caribbean and the South Pacific there are regional universities which already make considerable use of distance education. In Southern Africa there is a co-ordinating council for educational co-operation between Commonwealth countries comprising the permanent secretaries of all

seven ministries of education. The Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) is considering a plan, drawn up with the support of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, to create an institutional base for co-operation in distance education and there is already experience of co-operation between distance-teaching institutions in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland through a regional Distance Learning Association. In West Africa and Asia, major regional organisations exist which embrace both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries.

19 It cannot however be assumed that a regional framework would prove suitable everywhere or for every form of co-operation. Some countries, such as those in the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean, have few potential Commonwealth partners in their region. Geographical proximity does not necessarily entail homogeneity in culture or level of economic development among neighbouring countries. Some existing regional organisations may be found less acceptable to those in the region or less appropriate than others as a base for Commonwealth co-operative activity in distance education. To some extent too the logic of the development of communication technologies means that a local physical base for information storage is becoming less necessary. Where information can be accessed or exchanged electronically distance may not be the most important barrier to co-operation.

20 For this reason we recommend an exploratory approach to the build-up of regional arrangements, recognising that there can be no uniform pattern, that the Commonwealth of Learning will have to learn from experience how best to organise regional activities, and that any structures established should be flexible and capable of modification. As a general guide we envisage regional co-operation taking place through networks of participating institutions and agencies. Some of their collaborative activities might be orchestrated by regional units serving in a co-ordinating capacity. Their visibility would be more in terms of their activities and functions than of physical facilities.

21 The various regional arrangements should be based on certain guiding principles. First, arrangements to promote regional co-operation should be there to support and serve institutions and programmes in their regions and should not control or direct them. Second, such arrangements should in no way act as a bureaucratic barrier standing between participating educational institutions or between them and the pan-Commonwealth institutions of the Commonwealth of Learning. In other words every participant in the Commonwealth of Learning should have a right of direct access to other parts of the network. Third, modes of operation at regional level should be subject to broad policy guidelines laid down by the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning. Fourth, any common services developed in the region should be provided on comparable terms to all Commonwealth institutions in the region. Fifth, any regional unit while receiving some finance for regional activities from the headquarters of the Agency should, after consultation with its host institution and the Agency headquarters, be able to raise additional programme funding. Sixth, there should be appropriate consultation with governments and other relevant bodies in each region both at the stage of establishment of regional units and also for monitoring their progress.

22 The functions to be performed through mechanisms for regional co-operation might include:

collecting and disseminating information within the region, assisting institutions in gaining access to information, and passing information on to other regions;

co-ordinating activities in staff training, consultancy, research and course development in response to demand;

planning and executing collaborative projects and programmes in areas of common concern;

promoting the development of a regional framework for credit transfer for distance-teaching programmes;

developing expertise in particular subject areas;

generally facilitating the development of distance education in the region and assisting institutions in locating resources for institutional development.

23 In accordance with the approach we have outlined, we see merit in experimenting with the creation of a variety of different structures to promote regional co-operation. In some cases it may be appropriate to invite an existing institution to set up a unit to promote regional co-operation. A unit of this kind would be constituted on a modest scale. A flexible and fairly short-term agreement, running initially for not more than three years so as to ensure that the maximum flexibility is retained, should be negotiated between the host institution and the Commonwealth of Learning. The agreement would provide for monitoring of the work of the unit so as to provide information for the developing policy and practice of the Agency.

24 In examining the potential for regional co-operation we have taken into account expressions of interest by a number of Commonwealth governments and also existing structures for regional co-operation with the aim of ensuring that regional activities for co-operation in distance education could be mounted quickly and effectively. We assume that the Agency will, as a priority, take advantage of the existence of the two regional universities of the South Pacific and the West Indies and seek to develop appropriate structures for co-operation in association with them. Subject to regional discussion we would also favour the development of regional co-operation through units housed at the Indira Gandhi National Open University and at a Nigerian institution to be identified. If an institution is established to promote co-operation in distance education within SADCC (para 18) then this would provide a suitable location and structure for regional activities supported by the Agency in this region.

25 A range of post-secondary institutions, not restricted to those currently engaged in distance teaching, would be partners in the Commonwealth of Learning. Central co-ordination for the network would be provided by the Agency in its role as broker and catalyst, and as promoter of new initiatives. So far as possible the Agency's programmes would involve participating institutions as contractors and as the locus of activities. It is envisaged that participation in the network would generally be open to public and nonprofit institutions throughout the Commonwealth involved in the education of adults at a distance. Naturally some institutions and colleges would wish to have more frequent and regular contact than others with the Agency. Within the overall network one could also envisage the emergence of certain subsidiary specialist networks of institutions engaging for example in training or in sharing courses in certain subject areas, sometimes by means of direct communication links. Institutions in particular regions might also develop particularly close working relationships, sometimes through their own regional or sub-regional distance-education associations.