



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

An Education Forum at Future CHOGMs?

**Outcomes from the
Consultation Process**

The Commonwealth of Learning is very grateful to Mr Alex Wright for taking full responsibility for consulting a range of stakeholders and writing the report.

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4710 Kingsway, Suite 2500
Burnaby, BC V5H 4M2
Canada
Tel: +1.604.775.8200
Fax: +1.604.775.8210
E-mail: info@col.org
Web: www.col.org

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Executive Summary

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has undertaken a consultation process to study the possibility of organising an Education Forum at future Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs), in keeping with the request received from Heads of Government in the Malta CHOGM communique. Taking into account the balance of opinion expressed during consultations, COL proposes that the Commonwealth Secretariat and Government of the United Kingdom actively consider the establishment of an Education Forum as part of the CHOGM to be held in the United Kingdom in 2018. COL notes that for an Education Forum to be viable financial contributions would need to be secured from the host government and/or other partners, and steps taken to ensure that an Education Forum complements rather than competes with the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CEEM).

1. Background and consultation process

Commonwealth Heads of Government asked that COL explore the possibility of organising Education Fora at future CHOGMs in Paragraph 42 of the Malta CHOGM Communiqué in 2015: *“In view of the importance of education, Heads requested COL and the other related intergovernmental organisations, as well as Commonwealth Associated Organisations, to study the possibility of organising education fora at future CHOGMs”*.

COL therefore commissioned a feasibility study to explore the possibility of an Education Forum at CHOGM. More than 20 organisations were consulted including governments, intergovernmental organisations, Commonwealth Associations and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). With the assistance of the Commonwealth Secretariat, a further consultation meeting was held on 20 October 2016 with members of the Commonwealth Accelerated Development Mechanism for Education (CADME) Technical Working Group, representatives from Commonwealth High Commissions in the United Kingdom and invited stakeholders. This paper reflects the balance of opinion expressed by the variety of stakeholders consulted through this process.

2. Support for an Education Forum

Consultations indicate that the balance of opinion is fairly evenly divided between those in favour of an Education Forum and those opposed to the idea or holding reservations.

There is a particularly strong demand from the Commonwealth education community (i.e. Commonwealth Associations and accredited organisations). Strong support was also voiced by the Commonwealth Teachers Group and Education International, together with other international NGOs, international organisations and some Commonwealth governments (including India, Mauritius and the Seychelles). Furthermore, it is clear that an Education Forum, if approved, would be supported by a range of stakeholders from across the different sectors consulted. This support is, however, conditional on the Education Forum assuming an appropriate aim and structure, and securing the necessary conditions for success.

An Education Forum is perceived as a potentially effective means to raise education issues of global and Commonwealth concern to Heads’ of Government attention. Consultations indicated that there is a concern that education seldom receives substantive attention at CHOGM or its associated fora despite being a top development priority for member countries, with a key role in relation to wider development goals. Many of those consulted also noted that the Commonwealth is a potentially valuable forum for international exchange and collaboration in education and that education enjoys one of the largest active constituencies in any area of Commonwealth cooperation.

3. Reservations

Some Commonwealth governments, including Australia, did express reservations regarding the establishment of a new CHOGM forum. The two principal reservations were a concern over expanding the number of CHOGM-associated fora, and a risk of confusion or competition with the existing triennial CCEM.

The concern with adding an Education Forum to the existing Commonwealth People's Forum, Business Forum, Women's Forum and Youth Forum, is that it would increase the size and complexity of CHOGM to a point which might deter smaller Commonwealth governments from hosting.

It was also noted that CCEMs, which take place every three years, are the largest of the Commonwealth's ministerial meetings and feature fora for stakeholders, teachers and youth. There is a concern that, without due care, an Education Forum might dilute, diminish or compete with CCEMs.

Some governments and Commonwealth Associations suggested that demand for an Education Forum is, at least in part, evidence of the structural limitations of CCEMs. There was a suggestion that the structure and organisations of CCEMs might be reviewed to make them more inclusive and innovative. The ministerial chair of the CCEM might then be given a slot at CHOGM through which to advance the case for education, rather than seeking influence through an Education Forum.

Counter views were also expressed, noting that Commonwealth Small States have successfully hosted large-scale international meetings such as Samoa with the 2015 UN Small Island Developing States meeting. It was also noted that both Women and Youth currently successfully manage both Commonwealth ministerial meetings and CHOGM-associated fora and therefore there is little reason to think that education could not do the same.

4. Conditions for supporting an Education Forum

Consultations revealed that these reservations were widely acknowledged as valid concerns, but many argued that they might be overcome through appropriate planning and consideration. The broad consensus, clearly expressed at the consultation meeting, was that any proposed Education Forum would need to adopt the following characteristics in order to merit support. It should concentrate on advocacy around high-level policy messages appropriate to the audience of Heads of Government. Its design and integration with the wider CHOGM should allow for a reasonable opportunity for successful advocacy activity. It should be clearly differentiated from the CCEM and seek to support and strengthen the CCEM's outcomes. Finally, any inaugural Education Forum should be subject to proper review and evaluation before any decision is made in relation to future events.

a. Advocacy Focus

There was a clear consensus that the purpose of an Education Forum ought to be advocacy around education and related "macro" policy issues of relevance to Heads of Government. This was felt to be the best use of the opportunity presented by a meeting in the wings of CHOGM, and would leave technical discussions of education policy and practice as the remit of CCEMs.

Given that education is relevant to so many other sectors of development, there was wide interest in an Education Forum focussing on areas where education intersects with other development issues. In keeping with this cross-sectoral interest, there was also a suggestion that an Education Forum might explore discussions and advocacy with the constituencies represented at the other CHOGM-associated

fora (i.e. wider civil society, business, women and youth), many of whom are not represented at CCEMs.

b. Relationship with the wider CHOGM

There was recognition that an Education Forum with aims as outlined above would need to have access to conditions for successful advocacy to be worthwhile. An Education Forum would therefore need to be assured of the prospect of an appropriate level of access to the wider CHOGM proceedings in keeping to those available to the existing fora. The opportunity to explore interaction with the other fora would also be welcomed. Discussions during the consultation meeting indicated that stakeholders were realistic about the scope of opportunity for interaction that is likely to be available, and the need for advanced planning in relation to advocacy objectives in order to achieve impact.

c. Differentiation and coordination with the CCEM

It was unanimously agreed that an Education Forum would need to be clearly differentiated from CCEMs in terms of its aims and outputs in order to avoid the danger of dilution or competition. Furthermore, there was support for active coordination with CCEMs to ensure that the two meetings are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

CCEMs are official ministerial meetings, providing a platform for discussions as ministers of education, and serve to help direct and shape the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat and to agree common positions or priorities. The communiqué and pronouncements from CCEMs therefore enjoy the imprimatur of ministers. The agenda for CCEMs primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) tend to focus on the workings of the education sector. The CCEM-associated fora for teachers, youth and stakeholders (civil society, private sector and academia) are intended to serve the ministerial discussions as well as their own constituencies, and their advocacy efforts are directed towards ministers of education.

The suggested focus of an Education Forum on advocacy implies an element of differentiation in terms of both purpose and content. Consensus at the consultation meeting was that technical discussion of education policy should be left for CCEMs. Rather, any outcomes or priorities for Commonwealth advocacy emerging from CCEMs could and should be picked up by an Education Forum. Furthermore there was a suggestion that an Education Forum should not be a ministerial meeting, but rather a non-governmental forum as with the other CHOGM-associated fora. The core audience could therefore be different from that of CCEMs and any outcomes of the Forum would have a very different status.

It was noted that CCEMs run on a three-year cycle, and CHOGMs on a two-year cycle. In most instances this presents a comfortable spacing between a CCEM and an Education Forum, though it does also throw up some years of coincidence between the two meetings, as in 2018 (a calendar of meetings can be found in the feasibility study). These years might offer an increased risk of competition or confusion, but also opportunities for sharper and timelier advocacy in support of the CCEM outcomes. In practical terms it was suggested that coordination with CCEMs might be secured through some continuity or representation of the CCEM Steering Committee in planning for an Education Forum. Further elaboration may be required of how the tension between clear differentiation and complementarity between CCEMs and an Education Forum would be managed to avoid dilution or competition.

d. Review and Evaluation

There was consensus that an inaugural edition of an Education Forum should be subject to review and evaluation. Acknowledging concerns over the expansion of CHOGM, it was widely suggested that no commitment should be made for future CHOGMs before a review of the efficacy and value for money of an inaugural forum is conducted. It was further suggested that any review should control for factors primarily related to the country in which the inaugural Forum was held.

5. Structure, Audience and Organisation

In addition to the primary purpose outlined above, consultations arrived at a general agreement as to an appropriate broad structure, audience and organisation of an Education Forum.

e. Structure and Audience

In practical terms it was felt that an Education Forum should not exceed two days in duration and 150-200 participants. There was agreement that, in keeping with the proposed focus of the Forum, these participants would be thought leaders and experts from education and possibly other sectors. There was recognition that these would be primarily non-governmental delegates, but there was also support for the idea of securing some involvement of relevant government officials and/or ministers. Where government representatives attend, it was proposed that this be on an unsegregated basis. It was anticipated that an Education Forum would be allocated the same time window as the existing CHOGM-associated fora.

f. Organisation

There was wide support for COL to assume the convening role for an Education Forum. Commonwealth Associations (such as the Commonwealth Teachers Group) asserted that they would also want a clear role. The Health and Education Unit, Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Foundation indicated that they would engage constructively with a forum should it proceed, though noted that they would not be in a position to commit human or financial resource towards a forum. As previously discussed, a formal linkage with the CCEM planning structures was suggested. It was also suggested that COL engage appropriate host country institutions, NGOs and international organisations in the planning process. Finally, there was a proposal that appropriate regional and/or sub-regional consultations form part of the planning process in order that concerns from across the Commonwealth are reflected in the planning and agenda of a forum.

g. Financing

As the convening agency, COL would need a commitment of financial contributions from the host government (or related agencies) and other partners. This might include financial support or sponsorship (perhaps from the United Kingdom Department for International Development or British Council etc.), and/or “in-kind” support from Commonwealth Associations or host-country institutions (e.g. the provision of a venue). Some Commonwealth governments (including Australia) requested further work be done to clarify the financing required for the Forum, the process for securing financing and by what timeframe a financing commitment is needed to make the Forum viable.

h. An Education Forum at the United Kingdom CHOGM, 2018

It was acknowledged throughout consultations that the next CHOGM, scheduled for 2018 in the United Kingdom, presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges. The proximity in time of CHOGM (spring 2018) to 20CCEM (likely in February 2018) was recognised as a challenge, however many consulted argued that the accessibility of a CHOGM held in the United Kingdom would provide

an ideal opportunity for an inaugural Education Forum. Potential benefits cited include ease of access for Commonwealth Associations and many international partners, and the range of high quality United Kingdom-based potential partners. It was also suggested that the proximity with the CCEM might allow for the “fresh” outcomes of the CCEM to be projected to Heads of Government more effectively.

It was also noted that many organisations, both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth, are highly likely to undertake advocacy activity around the United Kingdom CHOGM regardless of the decision in relation to an Education Forum. Commonwealth Associations expressed a strong preference that this activity be organised and brought under the umbrella of CHOGM through an Education Forum.

6. Proposal

Following consideration of the balance of opinion expressed by those constituencies consulted, COL proposes that the Secretary-General, the Commonwealth Secretariat and host government actively consider the inclusion of an Education Forum as part of the 2018 CHOGM.

COL would act as the convening agency, engaging with Commonwealth Associations, the Commonwealth Secretariat, host country institutions and other appropriate partners to plan and deliver a forum, paying particular attention to coordination with the CCEM. The proposal is for a two-day Education Forum of 150-200 experts and thought leaders from the education sector and related fields. The aim of the Forum would be to advocate for education-related, high-level policy issues of relevance to Heads’ of Government discussions. This would include promoting the relevant outcomes from 20CCEM. Should an Education Forum be approved for the 2018 CHOGM, with the required financial commitments from partners, COL could undertake to organise the Forum and carry out a review and evaluation of the Forum and its impact, before a decision is made in relation to future CHOGMs.

COL recognises the reservations raised during the consultation process and proposes that, should initial approval be granted, further work is undertaken to elaborate the projected financial costs (and required external funding) for an Education Forum, and the mechanisms through which to manage the risk of competition with CCEMs drawing on the experience of the Women’s and Youth Fora.

Appendix A: List of Organisations Consulted

Consultations on the feasibility of an Education Forum at future CHOGMs included the following organisations:

Commonwealth Intergovernmental Organisations

- Dr Joanna Nurse, Head, Health and Education Unit, Commonwealth Secretariat
- Vijay Krishnarayanan, Director, Commonwealth Foundation
- Prof Asha Kanwar, President and CEO, Commonwealth of Learning

International Organisations

- Jordan Naidoo, Director, Education 2030 & Dr Indrajit Banerjee, Director, Knowledge Societies Division, UNESCO
- Ian MacPherson, Education Specialist & Sarah Beardmore, Senior Strategy and Policy Specialist, Global Partnership for Education

Commonwealth Associations

- Samidha Garg, Commonwealth Teachers Group
- Sonny Leong CBE, Chair, Council for Education in the Commonwealth
- Dr John Kirkland, Deputy Secretary General, Association of Commonwealth Universities
- Beth Kreling, Secretary Commonwealth Consortium for Education
- Helen Jones, Director of Youth Affairs and Education Programmes, Royal Commonwealth Society

UK organisations

- Prof. Simon McGrath, Chair, UK Forum for International Education and Training
- Dr Moya Wilkie, Interim Director, International, Institute of Education

International NGOs and Foundations

- Anjela Taneja, Head of Policy, Global Campaign for Education
- David Edwards, Deputy General Secretary, Education International
- Leila Asrari, Policy Officer, Plan International
- Hugh McLean, Director, Education Support Programme, Open Society Foundations

Commonwealth Governments

- Rob Whitby, Deputy Head, Education Policy Team, Department for International Development (UK)
- Lorna Bertrand, Head of International Evidence & Partnerships, Department for Education (UK)
- Rebecca Hughes, Head of Education, British Council
- H.E. Mrs Marie Pierre Lloyd, High Commissioner, Republic of the Seychelles.
- Duncan Howitt, Political Officer, Australian High Commission
- Ambassador Dinesh Patnaik, Deputy High Commissioner, Indian High Commission*
- Elizabeth Stephenson, Canadian High Commission*

Stakeholder Consultations

More than 60 IGO, NGO and High Commission staff and stakeholders contributed to finalising the draft proposal.

* Representatives from the Indian High Commission and Canadian High Commission were consulted following the feasibility study but prior to the consultation meeting.