

Foreword

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Professor Michael Crossley FRSA, FAcSS has kindly agreed to write a foreword for this collection of papers. Here he gives the context to the importance of research about education in small island states. He is Professor of Comparative and International Education and Director: Education in Small States Research Group at the University of Bristol (www.smallstates.net) and is also Adjunct Professor of Education, The University of the South Pacific.

Research specifically focussed upon education in small states dates back to the 1980s and the seminal work of Bacchus and Brock (1987; Brock 1984) for the Commonwealth Secretariat. With a majority of its member states being classified as small (those with less than 1.5 million people) the Commonwealth became a key supporter and advocate for focussed attention on their distinctive needs and aspirations. This generated collective action and provided tangible support in the form of regional, pan-Commonwealth and international meetings and workshops for small states, the production of dedicated materials and resources, and funds for research and development initiatives (Crossley and Holmes, 1999).

Much has been achieved since then, with the Commonwealth continuing to play a leading role, and UNESCO also pioneering work with a more focused grouping classified as small island developing states (SIDS). This consists of 52 SIDS that were initially recognised at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in June 1992 (UNDESA, 2007). In more recent times such work has become increasingly important given the special vulnerability of SIDS to the emergent challenges of environmental uncertainty created by the impact of climate change on rises in sea level, fresh water supplies and food security. Tuvalu in the Pacific and Maldives in the Indian Ocean, are, for example, both threatened by total inundation by a relatively small rise in sea levels.

The impact of such global challenges for education in small states was examined in work carried out for the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2009 (Crossley, Bray and Packer, 2011), and at a multidisciplinary conference held in 2014 at the University of Bristol on the theme of Environmental Uncertainty in Small Island States. At this meeting, convened by the Cabot Institute and Graduate School of Education, HE Dame Pearlette Louisy, Governor General of St Lucia in the Caribbean, delivered an influential Keynote Address titled 'Living at the Sharp End of Environmental Uncertainty in a Small Island Developing State'. In doing so, she called for greater efforts by the international community to engage in sustained partnerships with local agencies and personnel in dealing with the dramatic impact of global environmental challenges on small states (Louisy, 2014). More specifically, a strong case was made for education to do more to help address the economic and societal implications of such challenges, and for concerted efforts to be directed at the strengthening of indigenous research capacity in education and other strategic fields. Further details of these discussions, videos of the key presentations, and information on the follow on progress of a UN accredited 'Sharp End: SIDS Research Partnership and Capacity Building Network' that was launched at the Third International UN Conference on Small Island Developing States held in Samoa during September 2014, can be

found on the Cabot Institute website and at www.smallstates.net. In many respects, initiatives such as this are advancing the momentum of work on education in small states, and inspiring a new generation of researchers from and within such contexts worldwide.

This Special Issue of the *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* takes the field forward and adds to this momentum, and for these reasons I am especially pleased to support the work of the Special Issue Editor and the diverse contributors who are carrying out original research in small state contexts that range from the Pacific Islands of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, to Bhutan, Timor-Leste and Maldives. This is an important initiative, and one that I hope will further inspire others from small states to lead and shape the direction of future research, including innovative, but more equal, partnerships with colleagues elsewhere (see also related arguments by Coxon and Cassity, 2011, in this journal). This is especially important in current times when pressures on government budgets are generating significant cuts to education and research, and even threatening to constrain the future role of the Commonwealth in maintaining its own direct engagement in education, and thus, in education in and with small states.

My own work, and that of the Education in Small States Research Group at Bristol, has long argued that if the distinctive educational needs and priorities of small states are to be addressed, the dominance of the ‘one size fits all’ thinking that characterises many international development agencies must be systematically challenged. So too must the hegemony of larger, richer nations, with different contextual and cultural realities, that are often wedded to Western values and neo-liberal ideological trajectories. Trajectories that may not be appropriate for the challenges faced by SIDS. This is not to say that education systems cannot learn from each other, but it is to highlight the limitations of a simplistic search for so called ‘best practice’; to do more to challenge uncritical education policy transfer; and to recognise the importance of greater context sensitivity in educational research and development worldwide (Crossley, 2010).

More positively, it is argued that research on education in small states has much to offer the international community, as demonstrated by investigations long carried out on the problems faced by boys in schooling in the Caribbean (Miller, 1991), as we have already shown by contributions made to the climate change debate, by innovative approaches to education for sustainable development in the Pacific (see Koya Vaka’uta, Nabobo-Baba and Teadero, 2011) and given the increasingly acknowledged potential of small states to actively engage with the new global international development architecture and influence both the nature and implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This Special Issue makes a further and most welcome small state contribution to the international literature.

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