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HIGHER EDUCATION IN SMALL STATES: EVOLVING PATTERNS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

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● Abstract

Since the 1980s, a literature has emerged on the distinctive features of small states. These states, the literature observes, are not just small versions of large states. Rather, they have distinctive features that demand particular strategies for development. This fact has implications for the nature of education as well as for other domains.

This paper begins by summarising the early literature on education in small states, revisiting it with lenses from the present decade. It notes that many of the early propositions remain valid, but that some dimensions of contextual environment have changed. The forces of globalisation are among these dimensions, and in some respect have facilitated educational development in small states. The paper focuses particularly on higher education, and includes examples from the University of Seychelles.

Parts of the literature in the 1980s and 1990s declared a relatively high population threshold for small states wishing to offer domestic higher education (e.g. Bacchus 1989; Bray 1990, 1992; Packer 1990). The literature highlighted challenges of filling classrooms and recruiting qualified teachers from small pools, and pointed to the lack of economies of scale. It also stressed issues of international recognition of qualifications. For some small states, it was argued, the solution lay in regional cooperation. And for small states without regional partners, the best approach was perhaps simply to send students abroad.

In the 2010s, some dimensions look different. The threshold for establishing national institutions has been lowered, illustrated by the opening of the University of Seychelles (UniSey) in 2009 to serve a country with just 90,000 people. Yet other dimensions remain similar; and small states still have to find innovative strategies to meet their higher education needs.

Early Perspectives and Continued Pertinence

Much of the early literature was led by the Commonwealth Secretariat, which in 1985 convened a seminal meeting in Mauritius that noted (Commonwealth Secretariat 1986, p. 5) "a cluster of factors which suggest particular strategies in the smaller states of the world." Three years later, a meeting followed up in St. Lucia to focus on post-secondary education (Commonwealth Secretariat 1988); and the conclusions of this meeting were an input to a paper by the present author (Bray 1990).

The 1990 paper identified five basic strategies for providing higher education in small states: These were:

Multilevel institutions. Institutions with restricted focus on degree programmes were likely to be smaller than the ones that also provided sub-degree courses; and institutions with a three-year basic duration for degree courses were likely to be smaller than the ones with a four-year basic duration. Thus, one strategy for enlarging the size of institutions could be the offer of courses with a range of levels and fairly long durations. The University of Mauritius and the Universiti Brunei Darussalam exemplified this approach.

Multifaceted institutions. Economies of scale could be secured by merging specialist institutions such as teachers' colleges, nursing colleges and technical colleges. This strategy was employed to form community colleges in a number of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

International recruitment. Institutions can be enlarged by recruiting students (and staff) from outside the country. The paper noted the examples of the Universiti Brunei Darussalam and the University of Guam, with the former offering government-subsidised scholarships.

Regional cooperation. The best-known examples of regional cooperation were the University of the West Indies (UWI), established as a University College in 1948 and at the time of the paper serving 14 countries, and the University of the South Pacific (USP), established in 1968 and serving 11 countries. However, small states without close regional neighbours could not easily imitate this model.

Distance education. Even in 1990 a significant number of small states were meeting part of their needs through distance links with institutions in larger states and/or with other small states.

Also pertinent in small states is the notion that national planning is micro-planning. An example may be taken from the projected manpower requirements of Bhutan, in which small numbers gave a strong danger of either a severe shortage or a serious over-supply (Bray 1992, p. 33):

For example, estimated demand is for only two remote sensing surveyors. If two individuals are trained but one fails the course, changes occupation or for some other reason is unavailable, then there is a 50 per cent shortfall. On the other hand, if the authorities train three individuals on the assumption that one will drop out, but then find that actually all three do graduate and are available, then there is a 50 per cent over-supply.

Institutions of higher education must consider such matters because training of personnel is usually among their principal mandates. Remote sensing survey is a specialist occupation which is unlikely to be offered domestically and therefore the task is to identify foreign institutions for training, and individuals to take the foreign university places identified. However, the overall principle also applies to courses run domestically by local institutions. Part of the answer to the threat of over-supply of personnel lies in flexibility of training so that

the individuals can also take up other roles. In turn, this has implications for curriculum design. In any case, flexible training cannot accomplish everything; and while waste of human and other resources is serious in all contexts, it is especially problematic in small states because they have limited resources to begin with.

The Impact of Globalisation

In some respects, the forces of globalisation, which have been facilitated by technological developments and by closer international integration, have assisted higher education in small states. General enrolment rates have greatly expanded worldwide in part through international collaboration and the impact of global organisations. The Education for All movement, led by UNESCO and partners and launched in Thailand in 1990 (World Conference on Education for All 1990), focused mainly on primary education; but in due course the expanded primary enrolments increased demand for secondary education. Trajectories were reinforced by the sequel event held in Senegal in 2000 (World Education Forum 2000); and by the time of the 2015 event that took stock and looked ahead to 2030 (UNESCO 2015), the increased numbers of students in secondary education had fostered demand for higher education. Countries across the world had expanded their higher education provision, and anticipated further expansion. One implication for small states was that greater proportions of their populations sought tertiary education, which in turn made institutions larger and improved their viability.

Other aspects of globalisation were related to technology. One specific domain with dramatic advance concerned university libraries. During the 1980s and 1990s, commentators pointed out that few small states could afford the sorts of specialist libraries needed by universities. By the 2010s a huge amount of library material was available on the worldwide web, and an individual with internet access in a small state could read the same content as a counterpart in a large state.

Technology has also facilitated international travel, which means that small states can more easily collaborate with partners in larger states. And since internationalisation is now on the agenda of all states, many institutions in larger states are keener to collaborate than previously.

In addition, technology has facilitated distance teaching and learning. Such work was already strong in some states during the 1980s and 1990s using satellites, but it has been made much easier by the further advances of the 2000s and 2010s. One specific initiative is the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) created by the Commonwealth of Learning to support small states in curriculum, staff development and quality assurance (West & Daniel, 2010; Kanwar, 2015).

The UniSey Example

The history and strategic plans of UniSey illustrate some of these observations. The University was established by building on existing institutions with a vision for domestic provision of higher education that provides an apex to the school system. In 2015 UniSey had 1,330 students (UniSey 2015a, p. 3), all of whom had been recruited locally. The authorities decided to add international students to the local student body "to add considerably to the dynamism of classes, with the contribution of ideas from different cultures" *(www.unisey.ac.sc)*. The strategy was also expected to expand classes, which in turn would help to achieve economies of scale (Hardy, 2014, p. 9). The University recognised that Seychelles has valuable assets, including its natural beauty. With this in mind, the Prospectus (UniSey 2015b, p. 2) opened with the question "Why choose us?" and placed at the top of the list: "You benefit from living in one of the most beautiful places on earth".

Second on the list of reasons proposed for both local and international applicants to choose UniSey was: "In addition to our developed programmes you can also study University of London programmes and gain a prestigious University of London degree." This mechanism secured international currency within the local base, and reassured persons who might have been sceptical about standards. In some respects this was an asymmetrical need for the small state: the University of London did not itself need to advertise its connections with Seychelles. Further, a question not addressed in the Prospectus might concern the curriculum: whether (and with what implications) the University of London was

● **Résumé**

La documentation scientifique portant sur les traits caractéristiques des petits Etats, qui a commencé à émerger à partir des années 80, note que ces pays ne sont pas que des versions réduites des grands Etats. A l'inverse, ils ont des traits distinctifs qui nécessitent des stratégies de développement particulières, tant dans le domaine de l'éducation que dans les autres secteurs.

Cette communication propose, pour commencer, un résumé de la documentation scientifique initiale sur l'éducation dans les petits Etats, tout en revisitant certains concepts par le biais d'outils développés au cours de la dernière décennie. Un tel exercice révèle que de nombreuses propositions préalablement formulées sont toujours valables, mais que certains éléments du contexte environnemental ont évolué. La mondialisation, qui figure parmi ces éléments, a d'une certaine façon aidé au développement de l'éducation dans les petits Etats. La communication est particulièrement axée sur l'enseignement supérieur, en se référant par exemple au cas de l'Université des Seychelles.

La documentation issue des années 80 et 90 fait état d'un seuil de population relativement élevé pour les petits Etats souhaitant assurer la formation tertiaire à domicile (cf. Bacchus 1989; Bray 1990, 1992; Packer 1990). Elle souligne également les défis liés et au taux d'occupation des salles de classe et au recrutement d'un personnel qualifié à partir d'un masse de professionnels relativement restreinte, des défis qui conduisent souvent à une absence d'économies d'échelle. La documentation existante évoquait également la question de reconnaissance internationale des diplômes délivrés, soulignant que la solution pour certains petits Etats résidait dans la coopération régionale. Quant aux petits Etats dépourvus de partenaires régionaux, la meilleure approche consistait simplement à envoyer leurs étudiants à l'étranger.

Dans les années 2010, les paramètres devaient une nouvelle fois évoluer, avec une baisse dans le seuil de population pour la mise sur pied d'institutions nationales dans les petits Etats, comme en témoigne l'ouverture de l'Université des Seychelles (UniSey) en 2009 au service d'une population de seulement 90,000 habitants. Toutefois, certaines réalités demeurent inchangées et les petits Etats se doivent de trouver des stratégies innovantes pour répondre à leurs besoins en matière d'enseignement supérieur.

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or was not willing to tailor provision for Seychelles students. As in so many domains, balances were needed.

The Strategic Plan for 2014-16 (UniSey 2014a) may also be viewed through a small-states lens. The document identified four pillars for action, namely:

    teaching and learning,
    institutional capacity,
    university culture, and
    research.

For each pillar, the Strategic Plan identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

By way of preamble, the Strategic Plan noted (UniSey, 2014a, p. 9) that "the general public have good knowledge of UniSey". The document identified local media and the internet as the main sources of that knowledge, but it seems likely in a small society that word of mouth would also have played a major role. Small states, especially ones that are compact (or have concentrations of population, which is the case in Mahé), have an advantage in this respect compared to larger states.

As a corollary, universities in small states may have responsibilities which are less obvious in larger states. The Vice-Chancellor's foreword to the Strategic Plan referred to the role of the university in seeking "to contribute directly to the growth and development of the nation, empowering its citizens to play a full and productive part in its future".

Again, it is doubtful if the University of London would express its role in quite the same way. The UniSey mandate includes "endorse the official languages of the state with special regard to preservation, promotion and use of the Creole language and the preservation and promotion of the distinctive culture of Seychelles" (UniSey, 2014a, p.2).

The weaknesses and threats recorded in the Strategic Plan included that many people in the general public saw the institution more as a post-secondary school than as a university. One way to strengthen the university image was to conduct more research, and the Strategic Plan identified domains which indeed seemed pertinent to national development and wider leadership, namely:

    Environment,
    Blue Economy,
    Tourism, and
    Small Island States Issues.

These themes indeed seem pertinent to national development in Seychelles (see also Simeon, 2014, p. 16). The institution was nevertheless aware of the need to balance identification of these themes with traditions of academic freedom. Such balances also have to be found in larger states, but in those settings individuals who research on themes outside the core areas are likely to be proportionately few in a large pool. In contrast, in a country as small as Seychelles each individual counts in a much more visible

way. UniSey has explicitly addressed matters of academic freedom (Unisey, 2014b, p. 5), recognising that "Research flourishes best where academics feel free to pursue their interests", but also that "freedom can rarely be unbounded" and that universities "will always need to take account of their context". The document placed at the fore the institution's responsibilities to stakeholders and its vision, mission and values.

Related remarks may apply to the programmes offered by the University. As of 2015/16, UniSey operated 14 programmes in two Faculties, namely the Faculty of Business and Law and the Faculty of Science and Humanities (UniSey, 2015b, p. 6). Eight of these programmes were under the direction of the University of London, one was under the direction of the Université de la Réunion, and the remaining two were under UniSey's direction. Seychelles has an enviable situation of "full employment across the nation" (Hardy, 2014, p. 7); but, as noted above, planning in small states has knife-edge demands when small numbers of people are required for specialist occupations. The questions then are not only what courses should be offered but also what courses should *not* be offered because it is preferable for the training to be sought overseas to satisfy small numbers and fluctuations in demand. No higher education institution in a small state should be expected to do everything.

● Conclusions

In a volume entitled *Tertiary Education in Small States,* Tewarie (2011, p. 243) observed that:

A reality for small states is that they have to ask new questions, find new answers to old questions, and find solutions that have not been thought of before.

This has arguably always been the case, exemplified for example by the regional universities of the West Indies and the South Pacific and also by many national universities. The fact that small states are still asking new questions, finding new answers to old questions, and finding solutions that had not been thought of before, is behind the lowered thresholds for establishing universities as exemplified by UniSey.

At the same time, Tewarie rightly added (2011, p. 243) that: "Even more than larger states, small states have to look for strategies which share responsibility across national borders." Almost by definition, small states must have international orientations to an extent that is less necessary for larger states. These international orientations commonly take the form of partnerships in the offer of degrees, recruitment

of students and staff, and collaboration in research.

At first sight, Seychelles may be very different from small states in the Caribbean and South Pacific insofar as the Seychelles does not have close geographic neighbours. However, improved travel and closer integration through the forces of globalisation now permit regional collaboration to be envisaged even for Seychelles. Thus, one of the strategies considered by UniSey is collaboration with counterpart universities in Mauritius and La Réunion, which can be linked by air travel of much shorter durations and at much lower cost than used to be the case. In any case, travel might not actually be necessary. As explained by the UniSey Vice-Chancellor (Hardy 2014, p. 10):

With the help of online access, a student in … Seychelles could select a course unit offered in La Réunion without actually having to travel there. This kind of situation would be especially advantageous, given that universities in the region are generally of a modest size. It would enable the kind of subject choice that is normally only possible in a university with a large student population.

In summary, much of the literature of the 1980s and 1990s

about goals and strategies for higher education in small states remains pertinent in the 2010s. Small states have distinctive features and "a cluster of factors which suggest particular strategies" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986, p. 5). These strategies build on the advantages of small states as personalised societies with distinct identities, and confront the challenges of operating small institutions in contexts of scarce human resources.

At the same time, some of the constraints identified in the 1980s and 1990s have eased in the contemporary era. The internet has brought library and other resources to states of all sizes at the click of a computer mouse; cheaper air travel has facilitated physical movement of people; and improved infrastructure for distance education has avoided some of the needs for travel. In addition, expanded enrolment rates in primary and then secondary education have enlarged the pool of applicants for higher education, which in turn means that thresholds for operating universities in small states can be lowered.

Looking ahead, institutions of higher education in small states will continue to occupy a distinctive space that on the one hand is locally grounded but on the other hand is internationally networked. Each institution has to find its own balances, which necessarily change over time. Yet contemporary patterns show possibilities that were not previously evident; and no doubt future strategies will show further avenues of innovation and conceptual leadership for which many small states have already demonstrated strong capacity.

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