

Education Conference

61
130

A Communique issued on Friday at the end of the tenth Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, calls for greater cooperation among member countries. Both for the sake of education and for cementing the sense of belonging that Commonwealth countries feel for one another this is the usual, but nonetheless necessary, reiteration. In the field of educational and other assistance some of the best minds of member countries stand to gain from the high standards set by the Commonwealth executive body. It is therefore with good reasons that Education Ministers attending the Conference have come out with an unanimous decision emphasising the need for more give-and-take among those within the fold.

The communique calls for an overall increase in educational awards, opportunities for the training of teachers and the mobility of students and for a vocational bias to education in general. Bangladesh has specially proposed that an open university be set up for distance education, a concept originally developed in Britain in the mid 19th century and followed soon after by the United States and other English speaking countries. The proposal for the open university has hopefully been accepted in principle, with a heartening promise to broach the subject in the forth-forming summit of the Commonwealth Heads of State and Government in Vancouver later this year.

When the concept of university extension courses was first developed it was basically for people who wanted to grow mentally at leisure. Among the methods used for instruction were correspondence, formal lectures, seminars and workshops. The students enrolled themselves into these courses for vocational, technical and professional competence as well as learning for learning's sake. Needless to say, modern technology today can literally bring the open university into the home through audio-visual facilities, provided the beneficiaries have access to them.

The Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) which uses the national radio and television network to advantage, was encouraged by its success to ask the government last month for an open university in the country. Such an institution presumably would be extra-mural, not in the sense that instruction would occur under the open sky, but rather from modest centres manned by competent personnel. It would understandably not entail the construction of expensive infrastructure like the traditional universities. The idea therefore excludes at the very beginning every possibility of campus-chaos which robs the students, teachers and the country of so many man-hours and money. As the open university system is meant to offer university extension curricula for earnest adults, there would be a certain commitment in the students who would obviously be more resolute about their goal. Under the system therefore both political trouble-makers as well as mere certificate-seekers would automatically be ruled out, leaving the open university a near-ideal academy for the pursuit of knowledge, provided its offers of education are priced within the capacity of the aspirants.

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