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This book is one of the products of a Commonwealth Secretariat project concerned with education in small states. It is based on papers from a pan-Commonwealth workshop held in 1994, but also contains material which analyses and draws together the key issues.

Small countries are so frequently overlooked in global studies that it is a relief to read a book that shows an understanding of the issues that we face, for example: “Small countries are not simply a scaled-down version of large countries. They have an ecology of their own.”

The book is in five sections. The first, by Mark Bray, offers a conceptual framework that defines the terms used in the book. For the purposes of this study, small means a population of less than 2 million. The term state is used loosely, as the countries referred to in the book have various forms of governance. Issues surrounding the economies of small states are discussed and it is interesting that the authors look not only at the disadvantages such as dependency on foreign trade and inability to influence prices, but advantages as well.

Many small states have well developed education systems and one of the outcomes of this is high levels of emigration, which in itself has pros and cons – on the one hand it deprives the country of skills, but foreign remittances are important to many small economies.

Bray draws on some fascinating material on the sociology of small societies especially in relation to education systems, which are all too

[1] All quotes are from the book under review: Bray and Steward (Eds.), 1998, p.3
familiar in the Pacific, such as the highly personal nature of relationships between people and the avoidance of conflict and disagreement in the interests of stability and compromise. In small societies, education systems can run very efficiently because everyone knows everyone and can go straight to the right person for answers. The downside of this is that such intimacy can be abused, when individuals or communities put officials under pressure to take actions in their favour. There can be difficulties with personnel in small states – professionals often have to be multi-skilled and very flexible because of the limited number of staff in ministries, and some specialist skills may be lacking altogether. Individuals can have a major impact on small systems, which again can be positive or negative. This is partly because individuals in small systems have a larger say compared to large systems. Conversely, when someone stays in a senior position for many years, it can block promotion opportunities for others.

One of the recommended ways of countering the constraints of small education systems and limited personnel is to utilise established paths of international co-operation, such as the Commonwealth, UN agencies etc. Regional forms of co-operation are also explored.

Examinations play a central role in education systems, as they dictate curricula and teaching. Changes in examinations usually spell changes in whole systems. Examinations are also important as they allocate life chances. They are thus a very political issue.

Section II covers case studies of examination systems in ten small states in four different areas of the world. Samoa is the example from the Pacific. The country studies are generally thought provoking and illustrate many different ways of meeting the challenges in examination systems, particularly in finding a balance between local relevance and international recognition and credibility. Most small countries have relied heavily on examinations and examining boards in either former colonial countries, or in neighbouring metropolitan countries. However there are many permutations and combinations
of systems: some countries rely totally on their own systems, while others have continued to use foreign systems alongside local ones. Regionally created examinations provide another option in some parts of the world.

One of the universal features is that most small states have small teams of professional staff, and examination systems stretch both human and material resources to the limit.

Some of the issues described will be familiar to education officials in Pacific countries, for example, from Bhutan:

The small size and closeness of Bhutanese society poses a special problem in terms of maintaining social relationships but also confidentiality in examinations. Frequent visits and telephone calls by relatives and friends anxious for inside information during and after examinations are a continuing nightmare for BBE staff.²

The case of Malta (by Ronald Sultana) is particularly interesting, as it illustrates how a small country has attempted to change its examination system to be more in line with the western trend of school-based assessment. This change meant that the whole philosophy and ideology of the education system needed to be rethought, and there were major pedagogical implications. Examinations were changed from merely a selection device to a test of skills – what students can do, rather than what they cannot do. When the changes were made, there were problems with the lack of skilled and trained personnel for monitoring and teachers needed re-training in order to cope with the coursework component of the assessment procedures. The Maltese case shows very clearly that while it is easy to recommend that assessments include increased levels of coursework, there are major implications in putting this into practice.

² Bray and Steward, op cit, p76
Section III of the book looks at three regional examination bodies, the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) and the West African Examinations Council. All of these bodies operate regional examinations, but only a minority of students in their respective regions sit them. National and international examinations operate alongside regional ones in many countries. All of the regional organisations offer professional support and training to members, which is more cost-effective than if each national system was to have a full range of skilled personnel. There are costs and benefits to all parties in regional bodies: there can be tensions among members and different perspectives on issues. The benefits are shared personnel and professional advice that could not be afforded by each small state.

Many small states still use examinations from international boards and Section IV of the book covers two such bodies. Examinations set by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). UCLES examinations are widely used, and since 1902 have incorporated local options such as components relating to history, geography and science, as well as minority languages. For example, in Namibia, students take the International General Certificate of Secondary Education and, of the 41 syllabuses offered, 17 are either localised or Namibia specific. These local variants include seven languages spoken in Namibia.

In some cases, bilateral aid funds assistance through bodies such as UCLES, which has provided training to many countries in their transfer to local examination systems. UCLES has devised a Small Examinations Processing System which is capable of administering examinations with up to 10,000 candidates. This may be of interest to Pacific countries.

The chapter on New Zealand’s role in the examination systems of Pacific Island Countries explains the evolution from total dependence to the inclusion of local options, to phasing out the
use of New Zealand examinations. This is largely due to internal changes within New Zealand that saw assessment moving away from traditional examinations.

The concluding section of the book, by editor Mark Bray, draws together lessons for conceptual understanding and lessons for policy and practice. Bray poses key questions drawing from the experiences of different countries and regions discussed in the book. Of particular interest is the analysis of localisation, self-determination and international links.

Bray points out the apparent contradiction, whereby independent countries are often enthusiastic about localising curricula, but reluctant to localise examinations. There are advantages and disadvantages to using international examination systems. The major perceived advantages are the benefits gained from economies of scale in a larger system that can offer a wide range of subjects, plus the recognition that goes with international certification. There are savings on the one hand in not having to train and employ technical expertise locally, but significant expense in foreign exchange on the other. The use of international systems also means that countries have less control over the system. The case of Singapore is noteworthy in that it is a country that could well afford its own examination system, but it has maintained the UCLES system for its apparent respectability and neutrality.

Regional examination bodies are considered useful for small states, despite the inherent tensions and difficulties, as these can provide some economies of scale for small states.

Bray returns to the sociological dimensions of operating examination systems in small states and looks at positive and negative aspects. This is quite fascinating as it identifies areas that are very familiar to those working in education in the Pacific. Rather than repeating the contents of previous chapters, the editors might have been better to have developed this analysis more.
Bray looks at alternatives in policy and practice, focussing on managing local examination units. This is such a crucial area that again more in-depth discussion of strategies would have been preferable to reiterating examples from the case studies in the book. Some key issues that could have been developed here were not, such as strategies for including and increasing the coursework components of assessment.

The concluding chapters are more of a summary of the previous chapters, rather than an in-depth analysis of the issues. As many educational administrators in small states tend to find themselves bogged down in bureaucratic matters, not having the time for extensive reading and research, this would have been an ideal place for a discussion of issues such as how to use examinations to reform education systems and improve the quality of education.

Overall, the Commonwealth Secretariat must be commended for this series. Issues that are peculiar to small states are frequently forgotten or ignored, and it is very valuable to have them focused upon. This addition to the series provides some excellent insights into the organisation of examination systems. It bears relevance to issues facing Pacific Island states and thus deserves to be widely read. It should be of particular use to students and teachers of education as well as personnel in ministries and departments of education.