

Partnering for democracy and good governance in the Commonwealth

Balasubramanyam Chandramohan describes the proceedings of the first ever Commonwealth Summer School, which brought together youth, students, and young researchers

The inaugural Commonwealth Summer School was held at the University of Buea, Cameroon, from 26-30 July 2011, and was a unique event. It focused on a continuum of experience that youth, students, and early/mid-career academic researchers face. The institutional backing for this combined event came from the ACU, which took the lead, the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), which organised a consultation with students, and the RIMI4AC project, funded by the EU-ACP science and technology programme, which supported a research capacity building school, aimed at improving research and innovation management capacity in Africa and the Caribbean.

The ACU's planning for the Summer School began in January 2011, and it grew from a single event with a modest budget to an expanded event that brought students from universities as far apart geographically as the University of the South Pacific and the University of the West Indies. The Summer School also provided a broad spectrum of activities and discussions that catered to the different but interlinked audiences of youth, students, and researchers.

In supporting the Summer School, the ACU aimed to provide a unique opportunity for students from throughout the Commonwealth to engage with each other, and a team of international academics, in an informal atmosphere. The Summer School, thus, stressed three elements: inclusivity, interaction and informality.

The Summer School received enthusiastic support from the host and other universities in Cameroon, Cameroon government ministries, the British Council, the British High Commission in Cameroon, the Bristol Commonwealth Society, and Routledge publishers. The overall result of such enthusiasm, planning, and effort from a range of stakeholders was an event that was successful in many ways: participation (from several Commonwealth countries as well as Central/West African countries not in the Commonwealth), process (integrated and overlapping events of the three

main sponsors), and outcomes (student statements addressed to Commonwealth governments, and the launch of a peer-reviewed academic journal, *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth*).

Commonwealth youth consultation

The CYP was interested in conducting a youth consultation, in the build-up to the forthcoming Commonwealth events in 2011 and 2012, such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) and the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting. Under the overall guidance of the pan-Commonwealth office based in London, the Africa Centre in Lusaka, Zambia, took the lead and sponsored the attendance of student leaders, in particular the All-Africa Students Union. The first two days of the Summer School were devoted to the consultation, which, through heated discussion and debate among students, led to the preparation, adoption, and presentation of the 'Mount Cameroon Statement on the Formation of the Pan-Commonwealth Students Union'.

The 5-page Mount Cameroon Statement includes key messages for Commonwealth universities. The statement covered a wide

range of student issues under themes such as 'Role of Student Leaders in the Commonwealth', and 'Status of student advocacy in Africa and the issues involved'. The proposed Pan-Commonwealth Students Union seeks to strengthen Commonwealth identity among students and provide an organisational rationale and structure for trans/international activities. The statement also covers non-state (private) universities: 'We recognize the non-state Universities and enjoy cooperative and collaborative relations... We propose that they are all looked upon and treated equally as long as they are recognized by the state at the level of the certificates and other activities or issues'.

Commonwealth Summer School

Delegates for the main Summer School came from across the Commonwealth; from across Cameroon – both Anglophone and Francophone regions; and from several different universities, civil society organisations, and intergovernmental Commonwealth institutions. The ACU awarded bursaries to enable students to attend the Summer School. Other representatives made their contributions via video recordings – as in the case of Jacki Hill-Murphy, an independent filmmaker whose film *Mary Kingsley's Mountain* received critical

The entrance to the University of Buea





A panel session at the research capacity building school

attention and appreciation. Former Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows in Cameroon also played a key role in both organising and presenting papers.

The Summer School was residential, which facilitated good interaction between students and academics attending the event, both in their own and between peer groups. This arrangement was also helpful in enriching the extent, nature, and quality of the 'community of learning' at the Summer School. Excursions to sights in the area such as the Limbe Botanic Garden and the site of a volcanic eruption gave a local flavour and feel to the event; this atmosphere of informality actually helped to make the formal elements more effective.

The Summer School began with a speech by Tim Fisher, British Deputy High Commissioner to Cameroon, in which he encouraged delegates 'to continue with...[a] strong tradition of challenging injustice and yet seeking a consensual way forward...[which is] one of the strengths of the Commonwealth'. The ensuing sessions covered a broad range of themes, including, but not limited to, shaping strategic partnerships for good governance, making the most of civil society, and literature, education and democracy in the Commonwealth.

Towards the end of the Summer School, students participated in a consultation to produce a 'Students' Communiqué to the Commonwealth', in which they focused on education, technology, and innovation, and highlighted their concerns, 'asks', and hopes under the following headings, among others: training and infrastructure, brain drain, opportunities for learning, and gender and education.

Research capacity building school

The research capacity building school, which followed the main Summer School and overlapped for one day, introduced the student delegates to a new experience. Attendees came from both Commonwealth countries and Francophone countries in Central and West Africa and, therefore, facilities for simultaneous translation were provided. Delegates could be seen taking their headsets on and off as Cameroonian and other speakers switched between English and French. Even Commonwealth events now have to be bi- or multi-lingual to have enhanced impact!

The theme of the research capacity building school was 'The Research Office: its place within the University', and sessions focused on matters such as research culture, identifying and responding to young research staff, career development and post-qualification mobility of researchers, and getting research published in journals. Discussions were led by senior academics and research facilitators from a range of countries, including Cameroon, France, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and the UK. Representatives from Research Africa, Routledge, and the British Academy also contributed to the success of the event by staffing dedicated exhibition stands and/or making presentations.

Among the joint activities of the Summer School and the research capacity building school was the launch of an interdisciplinary journal, the *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth*, edited jointly by Dr Kizitus Mpoche (of the University of Douala, Cameroon) and Dr Balasubramanyam Chandramohan (of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University

of London, UK). The printing of the first issue has been made possible by the support and funding of the Cameroon Ministry of Higher Education. The journal was launched by Professor Vincent Titanji, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buea, who also stressed the benefits of publishing an online version of the journal.

Post-Summer School developments

- The Commonwealth Summer School was widely regarded as a success, and the ACU is coordinating plans to conduct Summer Schools at other universities next year.
- Students at different universities in Cameroon have established a country-level Commonwealth Society and are looking forward to contributing to the formation of a Commonwealth-wide organisation.
- Dr Kizitus Mpoche will report on the Summer School to the Education Assembly of the Commonwealth People's Forum at CHOGM, in Perth, Australia, in October 2011. Copies of the *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth* will be available at the event. ■

Dr Balasubramanyam Chandramohan is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, School of Advanced Studies, University of London, UK.

www.acu.ac.uk/conferences/commonwealth_summer_school_2011