

# Commonwealth Education Policy Framework

Second Edition

November 2022

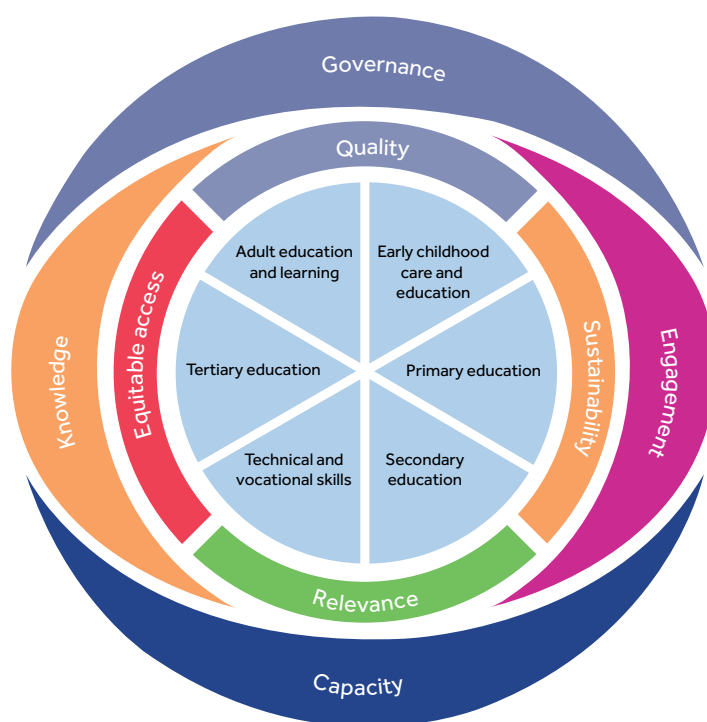


The Commonwealth

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# Foreword

The 19<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (19CCEM) highlighted the Commonwealth values of equity, access and the key role of Education for sustainable development through signing the Nassau Declaration in June 2015. In this regard, Ministers welcomed the significant contributions within the national context of each country through the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group to the education component of SDGs that were launched in December 2015.

From the outset, it was recognised that the advancement of the SDGs would require coordinated action at the national and international levels. At its core is the need for a sustained investment in education since education has a central role in the realisation of all 17 SDGs.

The Nassau Declaration asked the Commonwealth Secretariat to assist member countries through the development of effective policy frameworks. This laid the foundation for the Commonwealth Education Policy Framework (CEPF). The CEPF enables member countries to align their national education policies within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the 2030 Agenda). It intends to provide a comprehensive policy toolkit to update and strengthen education governance and delivery systems in order to attain the SDGs according to national contexts.

At the 20CCEM (Fiji, 2018), Ministers reaffirmed that education is indispensable for sustainable development. The Nadi Declaration recognised the importance of the CEPF and the complementary toolkits that had been developed. They requested the development of further toolkits which has occurred and remains a focus.

The sixth anniversaries of the SDGs and the Nassau Declaration came to pass in the midst of a pandemic and in the context of a rapidly changing world of learning and work. Today, facilitating conditions that 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (SDG 4) in all Commonwealth countries is of critical importance. So too is the need, recognised by Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2015 and again in 2018, to build resilience and prepare the next generation of Commonwealth citizens to contribute positively to their communities.

COVID-19 is a reminder of both the importance of resilience and the need to have an agile future focus. As we are all aware, the pandemic has deepened the education crisis and widened existing inequalities. A joint report<sup>1</sup> issued by the World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF notes that an estimated 24 million students from pre-primary to tertiary were deemed at risk of permanently dropping out of school in 2020. Due to prolonged school closures and poor learning outcomes, there is an unprecedented increase in Learning Poverty in low- and middle-income countries, with the most vulnerable students being the most adversely affected. Moreover, UNICEF has estimated that since the onset of the pandemic until September 2021, schoolchildren around the world lost 1.8 trillion hours of in-person learning<sup>2</sup>, not to mention the tremendous social and psychological benefits schools provide.

COVID-19 has tested the ability of education systems in Commonwealth countries to withstand and recover from a global pandemic. There will be other health crises and environmental disasters in the future that may threaten to once again disrupt learning across the globe. This is why the post-COVID era must be marked by member countries' paramount efforts to build back better at all levels of their education systems. Unless member countries act with foresight and steps are taken now to ensure resilience, the learning of millions of

Commonwealth citizens will remain at risk or in some cases, non-existent. The second edition of the CEPF intends to play a vital role in building this resilience and strengthening education systems in the Commonwealth.

Furthermore, as expanded upon at various points throughout the body of this document, there are at least five interlinked reasons for revising and updating the CEPF in 2021, namely because:

- Priorities in the education sector have evolved since the first edition published in 2017, particularly following the unprecedented impact of COVID-19;
- Progress towards SDG 4 is not materialising fast enough at all levels, therefore, revisiting and updating national policies and implementation plans are of utmost importance;
- For further progress to be made and sustained, it is essential that education systems at all levels are resilient to disruption, whatever the source;
- Differences among Commonwealth countries matter, making it important to ensure that the CEPF supports solutions tailored to local or regional contexts; and
- Rolling out the CEPF in three Pacific and ten SADC countries has provided practical insights on the Framework and its utility.

My hope is that Commonwealth countries find this second edition of the CEPF of enhanced relevance and utility. That it plays a vital role in contributing to necessary change, ensuring education outcomes that are equitable, high quality, relevant and sustainable - the cornerstones of the CEPF. I am immensely grateful to all those who have been so generous with their time and insights when contributing to its revision.

The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC  
Secretary-General of the Commonwealth

## Notes

- 1 The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF (2021). The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery. Washington D.C., Paris, New York: The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF.
- 2 UNICEF (2021) Education Disrupted: The Second Year of the Covid-19 Pandemic and School Closures. Available at: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/education-disrupted/>

# Acknowledgements

The revision and update of the CEPF to produce this second edition were led by Nasir Kazmi, Education Adviser and supported by Anahita Alexander-Sefre, Education Programme Assistant. Further work on the refinement of the document was undertaken by Mary Clarke, an independent education policy specialist.

In addition to thanking again those who were involved in the CEPF's development back in 2016 (notably attendees of the Pan-Commonwealth Consultation discussions and the Commonwealth Accelerated Development Mechanism for Education – Technical Working Group), we wish to recognise and extend our gratitude to all who gave generously of their time and insights on how the CEPF has performed and could be improved. This includes officials from education ministries in selected Commonwealth member countries, education experts and representatives from Commonwealth and global education organisations.

Specifically, we wish to thank: Martha Sereetsi (Botswana), Carol Nuga-Deliwe, Bheki Mpanza and Phozise Nqadolo (South Africa), Marcellus Taylor (The Bahamas), Ann Gachoya (Kenya), Raymond Camiller, Erika Scerri and Grazio Grixti (Malta), Simon Moore (Australia), Chang Gwang-Chol (UNESCO), Fiona Khandoker and George Lakey (Association of Commonwealth Universities), Meera Sabaratnam (academic, University of London) and Anna Molosiwa (SADC consultant). Special thanks go to Simon McGrath (academic, University of Nottingham) who assisted in the development of the first edition of the CEPF and willingly gave of his wisdom for the second.

Finally, we extend our appreciation to the Secretariat's publications, design and production team for their time and effort in bringing the second edition of this document to fruition.

# Executive Summary

Since 2015, when world leaders first committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and Commonwealth Education Ministers recognized the importance of the quality and equity for their attainment, education and SDG 4 have lain at the heart of realising the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Coordinated action on education policy remains necessary at national and international levels. Therefore, the Commonwealth Secretariat released the first Commonwealth Education Policy Framework (CEPF) in 2017. This second CEPF is designed to inform and enable the development and update of national policies to help Commonwealth countries achieve their targets under SDG 4.

The second edition of the CEPF highlights the lessons learned over the past four years, especially those generously shared by stakeholders in Commonwealth countries. It responds to challenges caused by COVID-19 and recognises the need for resilient, accessible and quality education services and systems. This edition is intended to complement, and not compete with, the strategies of other global education partners and is flexible in its application given the diverse contexts and progress of Commonwealth countries. Rarely has the imperative to prioritise education in the strategies and budgets of Commonwealth governments been greater.

## Progress towards targets

Many Commonwealth countries are not on track to meet their 2030 education targets. Prior to COVID-19, while progress was being made in some areas, it was not happening fast enough. The pandemic is deepening the education crisis and widening existing inequalities.

At 70 per cent, the proportion of young children who have accessed quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education falls short of the aspiration of universal access by 2030. This rate is skewed by a lack of Commonwealth country progress in Africa, where the average rate is around 50 per cent. There is a need for continued efforts to raise participation levels.

The primary school completion rate of 83 percent shows improvement for Commonwealth countries. Although positive progress, this is still short of meeting the target of 100 per cent by 2030. There is wide variation across Commonwealth countries, with some Eastern African nations at around half this rate versus Caribbean countries nearing 100 per cent.

Completion rates for lower and upper secondary school are 71 per cent and 41 per cent respectively. Again, the lagged situation in Eastern African Commonwealth countries is evident in the overall average being lower. That said, completion rates at higher secondary levels of education fall in nearly all regions of the Commonwealth, suggesting the urgent need for action everywhere.

Indicators of gender parity reveal that while primary school completion rates have improved for girls, they continue to remain low at upper secondary level. Therefore, more needs to be done to keep girls in school.

On average, a quarter of school leavers across the Commonwealth go on to enroll in tertiary studies within five years. However, the range is large across all regions. At the upper end are advanced economies, while, in developing countries, typically less than half of students go on to post-secondary education. While gender disparities in access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education are expressed in both directions depending on the country, there has been a progressive change favouring the representation of women in tertiary education.

Despite these gains, the literacy levels among women continue to be lower than that among men in Commonwealth countries. Therefore, more needs to be done to redress this.

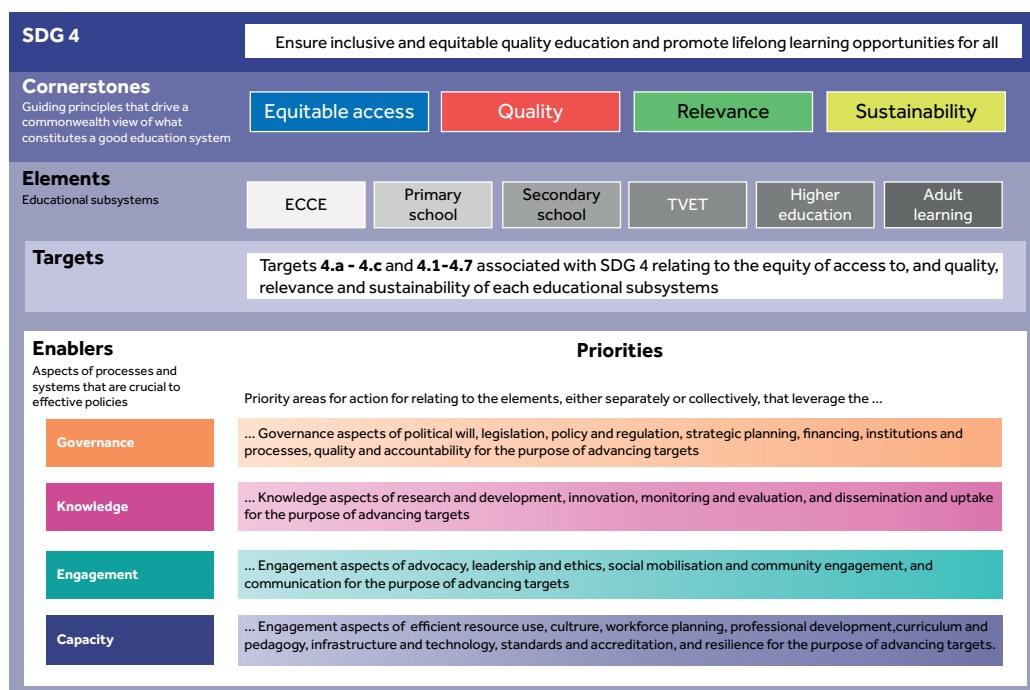


## The Commonwealth Education Policy Framework

The CEPF has:

- *At its pinnacle, the global community’s vision for education, expressed by **SDG 4**, to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’.*
- *Four **Cornerstones** that serve as guiding principles that drive a Commonwealth view of what constitutes a good education system. They are: **Equitable Access** for all individuals to educational opportunities; Quality skills, values and attitudes of all and the processes necessary to advance the same; the **Relevance** of learning experiences to the situations, contexts and aspirations of students and the issues they face; and **Sustainability**, both broadly defined to encompass triple bottom line outcomes, and narrowly defined to care about the endurance of education and its resilience to disruptive change.*
- *Six **Elements**, one each for the educational subsystems of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Primary education, Secondary education, Technical and Vocational Skills and Training (TVET), Higher Education, and Adult education and Learning.*
- ***Targets** 4.a – 4.c and 4.1 – 4.7 associated with SDG 4 relating to the equity and quality of each educational subsystem.*
- *Four **Enablers** or aspects of processes and systems that are crucial to effective policies that advance the Targets. These fall under the headers of: **Governance** covering political will, legislation, policy and regulation, strategic planning, financing, institutions and processes, quality and accountability; **Knowledge** covering research and development, innovation, monitoring and evaluation, and dissemination and uptake; **Engagement** covering advocacy, leadership and ethics, social mobilisation and community engagement, and communication; and **Capacity** covering efficient resource use, culture, workforce planning, professional development, curriculum and pedagogy, infrastructure and technology, standards and accreditation, and resilience.*

This schematic captures these components which are the foundation of the CEPF.



Situating current policies within this Framework enables policy gaps and challenges to be identified. The CEPF provides guidance for the ideation and development of national education policies and legislation. It supports an intervention logic that ensures approaches advance quality and equity in education and deliver on the critical aspects of SDG 4. It facilitates a consistent approach to comparing and reviewing policies and supports benchmarking implementation.

## Priorities

The CEPF proposes priority actions at each level of education for inclusion in national education plans and policies. Countries may choose to adopt and tailor the CEPF priorities to their context and supplement them with their own.

**ECCE** supports critical holistic childhood development. The aspiration is to provide all young children with access to quality ECCE through a multi-sectoral approach that supports and promotes early learning and development. Priorities include:

Governance	Knowledge	Engagement	Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investing in young children through early childhood development programmes</li> <li>Maintaining a strong focus on the goal of building effective early socialisation of children</li> <li>Developing appropriate interministerial strategies for meeting the particular challenges of the distinctive early years (0–3), pre-school and reception phases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving approaches to measuring, monitoring and evaluation of ECCE learning that take account of its particular objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Building effective coalitions of actors to bring about improvements in the quality and quantity of provision, mindful of the particular challenges in the ECCE phase of matters of educator development, curriculum, pedagogy and quality assurance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring the readiness of learners for primary schooling</li> </ul>

Six per cent of **Primary School** aged children across Commonwealth countries are out of school, and many of those in school do not see it through to completion. A concerning number of children are not meeting minimum learning outcomes. Priorities include:

Governance	Engagement	Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Renewing commitment to reaching the hardest to reach and building strategies for getting them into school and helping them to complete and achieve</li> <li>Introducing early assessment of learning, and health and development checks in order to identify any issues quickly and to develop intervention strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addressing the complex issue of language policy so as to balance a respect for parental preferences with an awareness of how language of instruction choices impact upon learning outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring a strong focus on building literacy, numeracy and socialisation in the first phase of primary education to serve as a foundation for later learning</li> <li>Building upon this with a broader curriculum in the upper primary phase aimed at providing the foundations for secondary schooling</li> <li>Implementing strategies to ensure that all primary learners have access to appropriate gender role models among staff</li> </ul>

Access to a **Secondary School** education has improved more in the lower year levels compared to the upper year levels. However, access is unevenly distributed based on indicators such as gender, class, rural/urban or (dis)abilities, and there are quality concerns at both levels. Priorities include:

Governance	Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differentiated policies for lower and upper secondary education that make clear the distinctive purposes of each</li> <li>• Ensuring that all secondary schools are safe and accessible and tackling specific threats to this such as cultures of violence</li> <li>• Addressing the specific gender-based factors that lead to non-attendance of many boys and girls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategies for building the subject knowledge of secondary teachers and resolving the unequal distribution of teachers in key subject specialisms</li> </ul>

**TVET** connects education and the world of work . Of concern are high rates of youth unemployment in rapidly changing job markets, and the increasing numbers of young entering the market with little or no employability skills. Priorities include:

Governance	Knowledge	Engagement	Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognising that TVET is accessed over the life course and facilitating access requires smooth transitioning between academic and vocational pathways, and between TVET and work</li> <li>• Developing national approaches to the place of vocational education in the school system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the particular complexities of certification in the TVET sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing the widespread negative image of TVET</li> <li>• Clarifying the multiple purposes of TVET in national contexts</li> <li>• Building stronger links between public provision and industry</li> <li>• Strengthening mechanisms for successful and timely transition to decent work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring that vocational learners receive a wider set of skills, including literacy, numeracy, business and entrepreneurial skills, that can equip them for sustainable livelihoods</li> <li>• Acknowledging and addressing the particular challenges of educator/ trainer professional development and the need to combine the pedagogic and occupational domains</li> </ul>

Rapid enrolment growth plus an explosion of private providers is fueling quality concerns in **Higher Education** and associated issues of qualification comparability and graduate employability. Priorities include:

Governance	Knowledge	Engagement	Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequately resourcing tertiary education</li> <li>• Limiting overspecialisation and rationalising the supply of graduates across disciplines in line with broad high-level workforce needs</li> <li>• Building national strategies for meeting the challenges of offshore provision and graduate mobility</li> <li>• Increasing the numbers of scholarships and exchange programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing concerns about the non-comparability of qualifications</li> <li>• Finding innovative new ways to fund tertiary education to improve institutional financial sustainability and reduce learner poverty and drop-out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating stronger university-industry partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting student learning and building employability and entrepreneurship skills</li> <li>• Strengthening research capacity, particularly for applied research that can support SDG achievement</li> </ul>

**Adult Learning** is an important counter to poor literacy and numeracy skills and a multitude of consequential disadvantages. Quality and inclusive lifelong learning opportunities exist in formal systems, non-formal offerings, such as micro-credentials, and via informal mediums, including through experience. Priorities include:

Knowledge	Engagement	Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding ways to tackle reasons for poor take-up of adult education programmes, particularly among men</li> <li>• Designing flexible programmes that minimise barriers to access</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing the availability of programmes that reintegrate adults into work and society, and meet the particular circumstances of migrants and refugees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building into programme design an understanding of the multiple motivations individuals have for adult learning</li> <li>• Constructing new basic adult education programmes that address the set of skills, knowledges and attitudes adults need to live enriched lives</li> <li>• Addressing the particular challenges of educator development and certification that are found in the adult learning sector</li> </ul>

There are **Overarching Issues** that cut across more than one and sometimes all of the six stages of learning that comprise the elements. Priorities include:

Governance	Knowledge	Engagement	Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognising in legislation and regulations and by standard setting and quality assurance bodies courses taught online or via a blend of online and on campus experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitating access to advice on learning and career pathways</li> <li>Developing appropriate and cost-effective approaches to the recognition of prior learning and transparency and portability of qualifications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening the education department-led coordination mechanisms between education institutions, in-country stakeholders, including public and private sectors, and all government departments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development</li> <li>Increasing the supply of qualified teachers</li> <li>Monitoring and analysing big data to provide early alerts that disruptive change is coming</li> <li>Planning for contingencies so that learning continues should changes occur and could otherwise compromise learning</li> <li>Providing guidance and training to teachers and students in online and blended pedagogies and the use of VLE / LMS</li> <li>Extend the reach of internet and access to digital devices</li> </ul>

## Implementation

While many countries have developed comprehensive policies, the challenges for implementation remain. Therefore, this study has explored systems to enable effective implementation. The following are some essential steps in education policy implementation identified in this study:

- **Agree national education priorities**, employing the CEPF as a tool to aid identification in the various ways described above;
- **Identify actions and initiatives** causally linked to national education priorities, using the CEPF to aid ideation and assist in testing the intervention logic;
- **Consult and test** through trials and pilots in order to gain and integrate practical insights early prior to wider implementation
- **Plan** by: taking on board the lessons from the step above, keeping desired outcomes in clear and constant sight, breaking down work into manageable sequenced tasks, putting in place effective governance arrangements to support implementation; and anticipating and assessing risks and designing appropriate responses to those assessed to be high;
- **Execute** plans, ensuring sufficient resources are mobilised and targeted to planned ends, meetings and systems are put in place to coordinate progress, and education management systems are strengthened to support the collection and use data for evaluation;
- **Monitor and evaluate** targets and indicators of initiatives, actions and outcomes;
- **Capture learnings** from the step above and nurture a constructive culture of continuous improvement; and
- **Communicate and manage stakeholders** at each stage of the education policy implementation cycle.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>CEM</b>	Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers
<b>CEPF</b>	Commonwealth Education Policy Framework
<b>CTEF</b>	Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility
<b>ECCE</b>	Early Childhood Care and Education
<b>EFA</b>	Education For All
<b>EMES</b>	Effective Management of Education Systems
<b>GMR</b>	Global Monitoring Report
<b>GPIA</b>	Adjusted Gender Parity Index
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technology
<b>IIEP</b>	International Institute for Education Planning
<b>LMS</b>	Learning Management Systems
<b>SADC</b>	South African Development Community
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>TVET</b>	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
<b>UIS</b>	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
<b>VLE</b>	Virtual Learning Environments

# 1. Background

"Education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights" (UNESCO, 2016). Its nature as a fundamental right means that it requires no other justification. Yet, as the above quotation notes, it is also the basis for the achievement of other rights. In pursuit of their obligations under various international human rights conventions, Commonwealth member countries have already committed to ensuring that quality education must be available and appropriate to the needs of all.

There is also robust evidence about the economic benefits that flow from education (Thomas and Burnett, 2015) as well as a range of other benefits, including gender equality, democracy, peace and personal development (World Bank, 2016). Recognition of this multifaceted case for education's developmental importance has been given in the SDGs.

The global community's vision for education is expressed via Goal 4, that is, to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). SDG 4 is ambitious and covers the full spectrum of education: early childhood care and education, primary, secondary, technical and vocational education and training, tertiary, and adult education and learning. The SDGs apply to all nations.

Education is one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and achieving other development goals. In this regard, SDG 4 has significant implications for the other 16 SDGs, whether that be, for instance, as the producer of necessary human resources for health and other sectors (Lancet, 2016) or in its work of educating citizens to adopt more sustainable practices. Building on the outcomes of the 19CCEM, in the Nadi Declaration from the 20CCEM Commonwealth Education Ministers "reaffirmed that education is a fundamental human right and is indispensable for the achievement of sustainable development. Ministers committed to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018).

The focus on these goals as global-oriented is of particular significance to the Commonwealth, given its core identity as a community of states

from across all levels of economic and human development, representing varied geographic locations.

At the same time, education policy in the Commonwealth needs to be aligned to espouse Commonwealth values, as contained in the Commonwealth Charter (the Charter) (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013). While there is much resonance between the Charter and the SDGs, the CEPF extends to matters of particular emphasis in the Charter. Relevant is how education contributes to freedom of expression; tolerance, respect and understanding; the rule of law; peace and justice; improved gender relations, including less gender-based violence; and managing climate change.

The Charter also embraces the notion of a "young Commonwealth". With more than 60 per cent of the combined populations of Commonwealth countries aged 29 or under (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020), this makes a young Commonwealth a demographic reality that is both a challenge and an opportunity. The Nadi Declaration noted Ministers' deep concern that youth in many Commonwealth countries are vulnerable to drugs, gang violence and street crime and, in certain societies, extremism. They called for concerted efforts to impart global citizenship by inculcating universal and humanistic values through peace education, both formal and informal (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). They were, in effect, emphasising the importance of SDG 4.7 in the Commonwealth context. Ministers also noted the high rates of youth unemployment in rapidly changing job markets, and the increased number of young people entering the labour markets with little or no skills for employability or entrepreneurship (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018).

The Charter is stronger on the issue of research partnerships than the SDGs. In the Nadi Declaration, Commonwealth Education Ministers encouraged that appropriate resources be made available to further strengthen joint research (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018).

The Commonwealth also has a tradition of emphasising the role of education in producing skilled workers and professionals for other sectors



such as health, governance and trade. These are areas where the Commonwealth might take a leading role in the SDG delivery process.

The CEPF is not expected to compete with any existing frameworks, but rather is intended to complement the work that is being done by global partners. Key amongst these are the strategies and initiatives of UNESCO and the World Bank.

UNESCO's Education Strategy 2014–21 (UNESCO, 2014) is a universal strategy to lead and coordinate the advancement of SDG 4 and its associated targets through partnerships, monitoring and research.

The World Bank's Education Strategy 2020 is targeted to developing nations and is focused on achieving learning for all people of all ages, capabilities and means, by investing early, smartly and for all. It operationalises this by working at the country level to support the reforms of education systems to make effective use of resources to accelerate learning. It also focuses the Bank's energies on building the knowledge base on education reforms, country-level intelligence and providing guidance.

In other words, the CEPF, the UNESCO and the World Bank strategies have the shared objective of advancing SDG 4, differing but overlapping country focuses, and differing but complementary means to advance ends that all drive in the same direction.

Education needs to be more relevant and enable Commonwealth member countries to address the triple bottom line challenges of sustainable development (see Figure 1.1). In doing so, it will be necessary to deal with a world that is far more complex, where education systems are open to international movements of people and ideas, and where new technologies bring opportunities as well as challenges. While ministries of education must continue to play a leading role in the delivery of education and must be developed in partnership with other ministries, state agencies and local education authorities, with international players, the private sector, civil society and non-governmental organisations, and with parents, learners and educators. Governance of education is undergoing a profound democratisation across the Commonwealth, and policy processes must respect and reinforce this, eliminating corruption and promoting accountability.

Figure 1.1 Overarching elements of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030).





Another major challenge is the different levels of commitment and national priority given to education, evident from the range of education spending in Commonwealth member countries, which starts at 9 per cent and stops at 34 per cent of total public expenditure (refer [Figure 1.2](#)). The population-weighted average of 14 per cent for Commonwealth countries is less than the aspiration adopted at the 2015 World Education Forum that a minimum of 15–20 per cent of government expenditure is on education (UNESCO, 2015). Commonwealth Education Ministers have recalled this commitment, most recently under the Nadi Declaration (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018).

In addition to mobilising national budgets for education, other domestic sources will be vital. The SDGs' achievement requires the mobilisation of large-scale international financial support, whether this be through traditional official development assistance routes; new initiatives; or philanthropic and equity fund interest in supporting educational development. Alongside necessary funding increases, education institutions and systems must strive for greater efficiencies.

## 1.1 Reasons to revise and update the CEPF

In the Foreword, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat identifies that there are

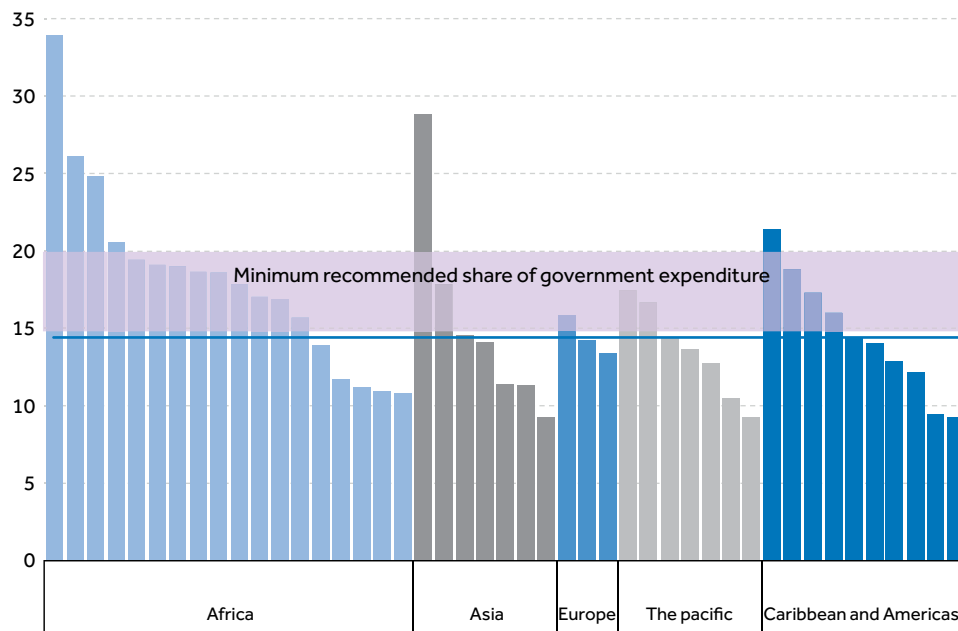
at least five good reasons for revising and updating the CEPF.

The first is because the world has not stood still and priorities change. COVID-19 has rattled economies across the globe, disrupted supply chains and rendered many unemployed or underemployed. It has exposed fractures in the social fabric and tested the resilience of nations. The urgency for education systems to function as an agent for growth and social cohesion and as an equaliser has rarely been greater.

COVID-19 has also turbo-charged changes already impacting the futures of work, learning and credentialing. It has accelerated the adoption of new technologies into workplaces and homes, leading employers to value digital dexterity *and* human skills (World Economic Forum, 2020). It is essential that both be developed at all stages of learning – from early childhood through to adult learning.

Rising levels of unemployment and underemployment have stimulated adult learners' already growing appetites for bite-sized learning that can be consumed at the time, pace and physical or virtual place of their convenience. Increasingly, the skills gained through formal learning and/or experiences are being signalled by micro- or alternative credentials awarded by traditional and non-traditional providers, including industry bodies and employers. These are futures

**Figure 1.2 Government expenditure on education. Commonwealth countries, share (%) of total government expenditure and most recent value.**



**Source:** UIS (2020).

**Note:** Data on the indicators for the SDG 4 targets is not available for all 54 Commonwealth countries. Nor is it provided each year by the countries where data has been made available over time. The graph captures the latest information shared in the September 2020 update.

only partially anticipated by the first edition of the CEPF. Revision is therefore necessary to future-proof it.

The second reason is that, while progress has been made in some areas, it has not been happening fast enough. This edition of the CEPF includes a new section that shares the progress of Commonwealth countries towards the SDG 4 targets. The indicators shared in this section pre-date COVID and demonstrate that many Commonwealth countries were already a long way short of the targets.

The third motivation for revising and updating the CEPF is that education systems need to be resilient to all forms of adversities that may arise. COVID-19 has tested the ability of the education systems of Commonwealth countries to withstand and recover from a global pandemic. There will be other diseases of endemic or pandemic proportions that may threaten to disrupt learning. There will be natural and man-made disasters that threaten to do the same. Climate change has been tied to the increased frequency of severe weather events impacting Commonwealth nations, including hurricanes, droughts, wildfires and flooding. Unless

countries act with foresight and steps are taken now to build resilience, the education systems of many will remain vulnerable.

Many, but not all, will be vulnerable, and not to the same extent. The differential impact of COVID-19 on the health of nations, their economies and education systems has made apparent what we already know: differences matter. Commonwealth countries are diverse. They are found in every region of the world and are amongst the world's biggest, smallest, richest and poorest countries. When the gates of ECCE centres, schools, TVET and higher education providers around the world closed, learning did not move seamlessly online for all. Closures impacted the poorest countries hardest: those less likely to have access to three meals a day, an internet-enabled computer, educated parents, an available teacher and a safe quiet space to study (The Economist, 2020). Ensuring that the CEPF supports solutions tailored to local conditions and priorities is an important testbed of its utility. The principle of subsidiarity is the fourth reason why revision is important.

The fifth and final reason suggested here is that the CEPF pilots have yielded practical insights on the

Framework and its utility. Pilots have been rolled out in select Pacific nations and Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. A forthcoming pilot will take place in the Caribbean. From the first two pilots we know how participants engaged with the CEPF, the outcome of their engagements, participant perspectives on whether they found that the CEPF had utility and was a value added to their education strategy, and review processes. These exercises have shone particular lights on the governance and capacity enablers and touched on the advocacy and knowledge enablers. They also singled out monitoring and evaluation as a self-identified area for improvement in many countries. These experiences provide an important stimulus for thinking about Framework enhancements.

## 1.2 Application of the CEPF

Drawing on the vision for education articulated by SDG 4, the global challenges for education and the commitment made by the Commonwealth Ministers of Education at their 19th and 20th Conferences (19CCEM and 20CCEM), and both on Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (United Nations, 2015) and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2015), the CEPF aims to provide member countries with a comprehensive approach to:

- i. identifying key policy gaps and challenges;
- ii. assisting renewal and development of national education policies and legislation that enables the delivery of the SDGs in line with Commonwealth needs, priorities and values;

- iii. ensuring delivery on the critical aspects of Goal 4 of the SDGs;
- iv. enabling policy development that simultaneously addresses the challenges of equity and quality in a sustainable way and enhances the relevance of education across all SDGs;
- v. providing a mechanism for member countries to compare, review and formulate their respective national education policies; and
- vi. supporting the benchmarking of policy implementation with similar member countries and the monitoring of national progress on implementation.

These purposes were reaffirmed during consultation with officials from Commonwealth countries and experts from Commonwealth and global organisations. Benchmarking and, for those countries that had engaged in workshops as the CEPF was piloted, learning about the actions and initiatives of similar countries were identified by some as one of the more useful purposes served by the CEPF. The important qualifier on their comments was the word “similar”. Approaches need to be appropriate to context and innovation needs to be encouraged when designing solutions suited to the particular challenges and priorities of each Commonwealth country. The CEPF is deliberately agile in its application across all Commonwealth countries, regardless of their stage of development or size.

## 2. Progress towards targets

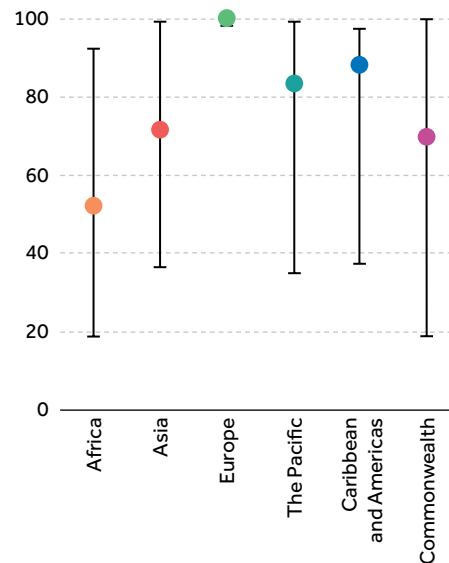
Many Commonwealth countries are not on track to meet 2030 education targets. Prior to COVID-19, while progress was being made in some areas, it was not happening fast enough. Education systems across the Commonwealth have been hit hard and abruptly by the pandemic. Disrupted education is adversely affecting learning outcomes and the social and behavioural development of children and youth. Children and youth in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities are particularly at risk of educational exclusion. The pandemic is deepening the education crisis and widening existing educational inequalities (UN, 2020). This section provides an overview of progress against the SDG 4 targets.

It draws on the latest available data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database on the indicators for the SDG 4 targets. It should, however, be noted that the data are patchy over time and place. It is not available for all 54 Commonwealth countries. Nor is it provided each year by the countries where data have been made available. Furthermore, country coverage differs from indicator to indicator. The graphs shared below capture the latest information shared in the September 2020 update. Only the indicators with relatively greater rates of reporting are drawn upon here. Even so, the data remain thin in parts. For instance, data are available for only a handful of Commonwealth countries in Asia and the Pacific. Readers should be careful not to place undue reliance on the derived population-weighted averages and ranges reported below for these regions. Looking ahead, more diligent reporting would assist in providing an accurate description. This is essential for evidence-based education policy development. The categories of education in this section have been grouped distinctly from those the CEPF covers as a mechanism to overcome challenges due to data limitations for each category.

### 2.1 Participation in pre-primary education

Target 4.2 is that by 2030 all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they

**Figure 2.1** Participation rate in organised early learning. Commonwealth countries, 1 year before the official primary entry age, rate (%) and most recent value.



**Source:** UIS (2020).

**Note:** Refer discussion at the beginning of this section on data coverage, timeliness and quality.

are ready for primary education. As can be seen in [Figure 2.1](#), the population-weighted average for Commonwealth countries, at 70 per cent, falls well short of this aspiration. This rate is pulled down by Commonwealth countries in Africa, where the average rate is around a half. In a couple of Southern African countries, only around a fifth of children participated in pre-primary education. There is a need for continued efforts to raise participation levels in these countries. On a more positive note, the average is pulled up by countries across all remaining regions, with participation rates approaching 100 per cent.

### 2.2 School completion rates

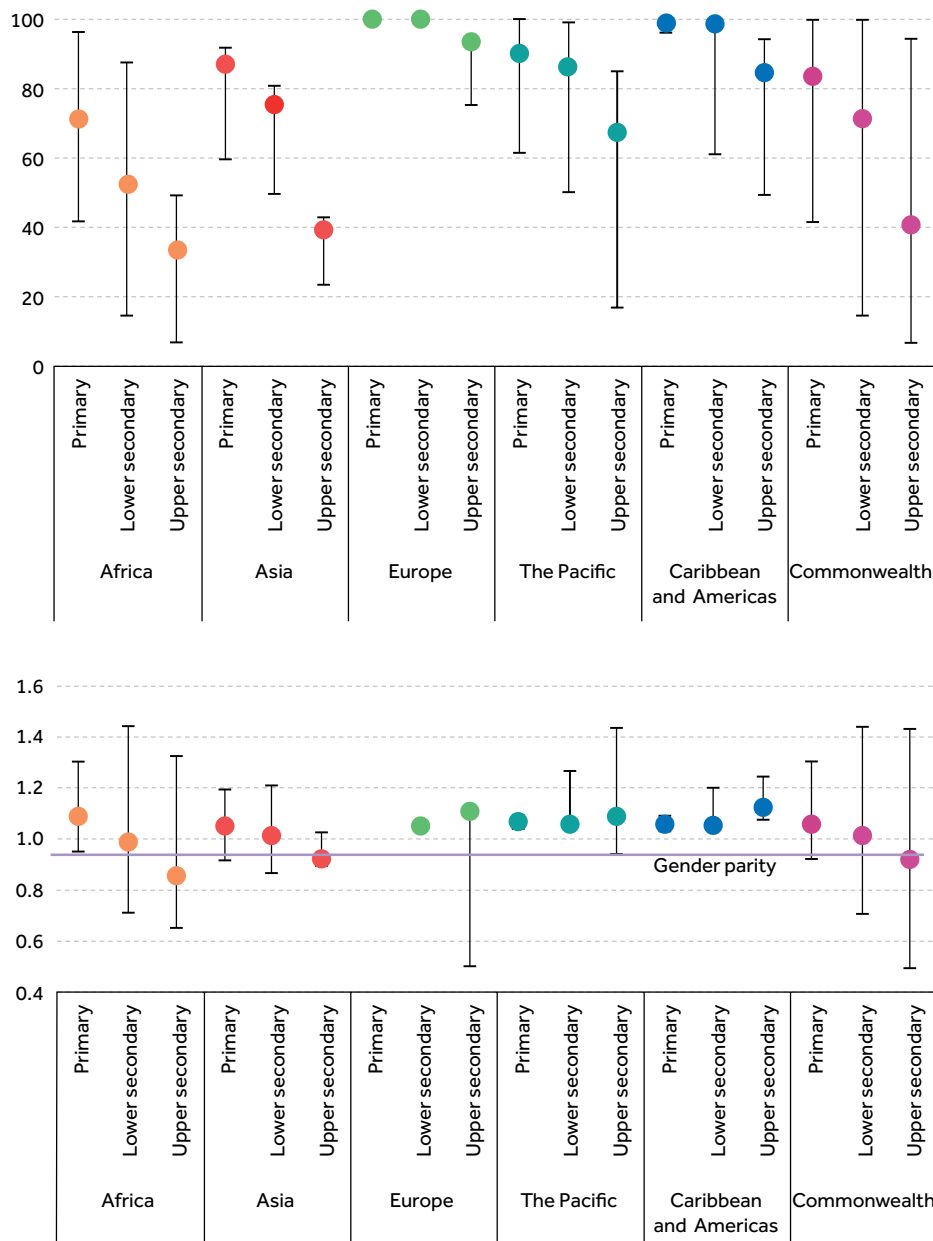
Based on the most recently available data, the population-weighted average primary school completion rate for Commonwealth countries has reached 83 per cent. This compares favourably against 70 per cent for all countries in 2000 (UNESCO, 2020) – a positive progress. However,

under current trends, by 2030, UNESCO estimates that it is expected to fall well short of 100 per cent. The 83 per cent average masks a wide distribution. At one end of the spectrum are completion rates in the forties and fifties in some Eastern African nations. At the other end are Caribbean countries nearing 100 per cent.

Secondary school completion rates are lower than for primary. The Commonwealth population-weighted averages for lower and upper secondary

school are 71 and 41 per cent, respectively. Again, it is largely Eastern African Commonwealth countries that are pulling down the averages. For all Commonwealth countries combined, not only do completion rates decrease with higher stages of schooling, so too does the lower boundary on the range of outcomes. The top chart shown in Figure 2.2 shares the ranges and population-weighted averages by region for each stage of school learning.

**Figure 2.2 School completion rates. Top: Commonwealth countries, rate (%) and most recent value. Bottom: Commonwealth countries, GPA and most recent value.**



**Source:** UIS (2020).

**Note:** Refer discussion at the beginning of this section on data coverage, timeliness and quality.

That was before a global pandemic saw school gates shut around the world. At its peaks, plural, in April then May 2020, 45 out of 54 Commonwealth countries had either partially or fully closed their schools.

The sheer magnitude of school closures due to COVID-19 is likely to set back progress on not just this but also other targets. It may have knock-on consequences for further education and adult literacy. And it may see the undoing of some of the gains made towards eliminating gender disparities in education.

The bottom chart shown in Figure 2.2 shares the adjusted gender parity indices (GPIA) for school completion rates. The good news is that the population-weighted averages all cluster around 1, which indicates parity. Rates above 1 indicate relatively higher rates of completion for girls than boys. Rates below 1 indicate the reverse. The trend across all Commonwealth countries combined is that while primary school completion rates slightly favour girls, by upper secondary they have tipped in favour of the boys. This is seen more starkly in Western and Eastern African Commonwealth countries which sit towards the bottom end of the range shown. The situation is an improvement on what it was in the past. A status update presented at the 20CCEM found that while there is improving access to secondary education, girls continue to struggle more

than boys, despite their better performance. More needs to be done to keep girls in school.

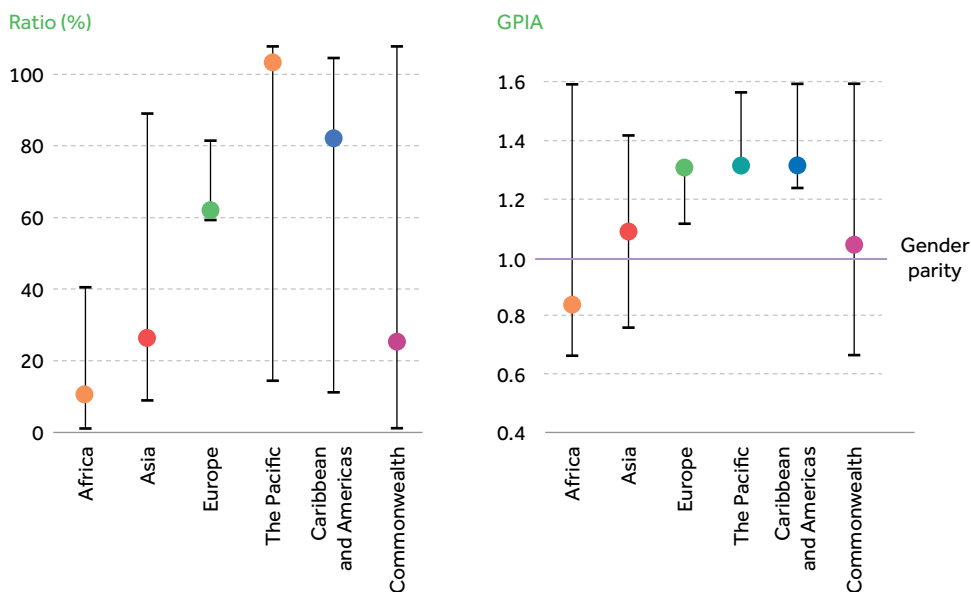
### 2.3 Tertiary education

On average, a quarter of school leavers across the Commonwealth go on to enrol in tertiary studies in their first 5 years out. However, as can be seen in the chart to the left of Figure 2.3, the ranges are large across all regions. At the upper end are advanced economies. While, in developing Commonwealth countries, the shares are typically less than half, with single figured shares being recorded in many African member countries and elsewhere. In other words, well short of Target 4.3 of equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.

Interestingly, while on average the outcomes for young men and women in all Commonwealth countries are on par, the regional breakdown shared in the chart on the right in Figure 2.3 suggests that the discrepancies lie in both directions. The balance lies in favour of men in African countries, reflecting the situations in Western and Eastern African countries.

In Southern African countries, the gender balance typically favours women, as is the case in most non-

**Figure 2.3** Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education. Commonwealth countries and most recent value.



**Source:** UIS (2020).

**Note:** Refer discussion at the beginning of this section on data coverage, timeliness and quality.

African Commonwealth countries. This reflects a global phenomenon which over the course of a decade has witnessed a progressive change from the under- to the over-representation of women in tertiary education (UNESCO, 2021).

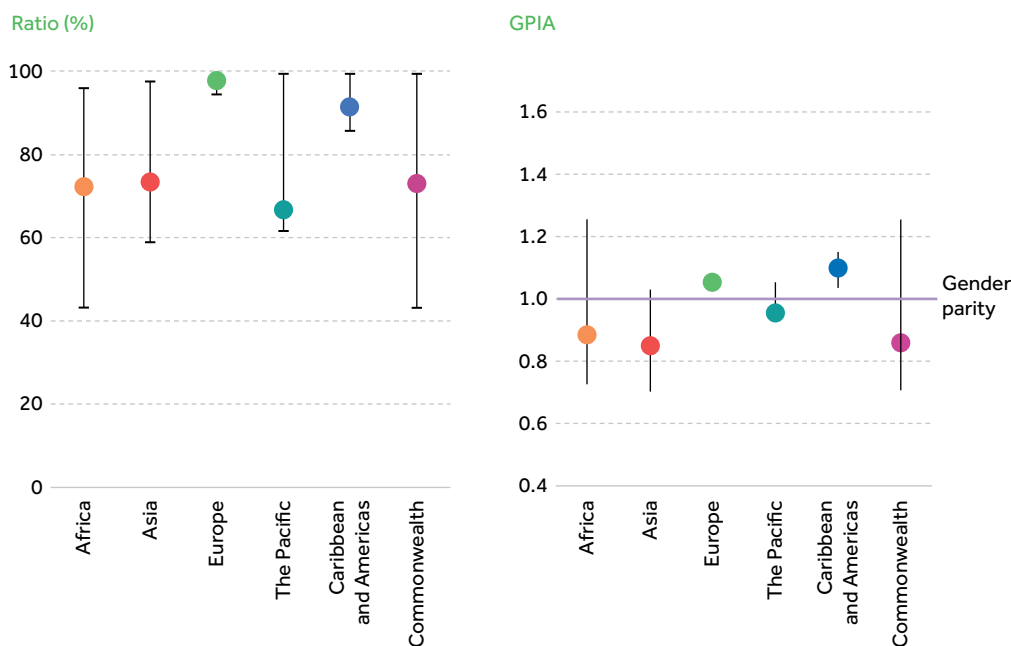
In Caribbean countries, the relatively fewer men than women participating in higher learning, their higher rates of drop-out and under-performance have long been an issue. The reasons are complex. They reflect deep systemic societal issues best understood through the lens of gendered role expectations and its intersection with other factors, such as socio-economic status and ethnicity (Bailey and Charles, 2010). They continue to challenge educationalists and policy makers.

## 2.4 Adult literacy

Despite the gains just outlined, there continues to be a greater prevalence of illiteracy in women than men in Commonwealth countries. More needs to be done to redress this.

Many Commonwealth countries fall short of the aspiration in Target 4.6 that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy. The population-weighted average is that less than three quarters of youth and adults in Commonwealth countries are literate. Illiteracy is most prevalent in the least developed of Commonwealth countries (Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4 Adult literacy rate. Commonwealth countries, population 15+ years and most recent value.**



**Source:** UIS (2020).

**Note:** Refer discussion at the beginning of this section on data coverage, timeliness and quality.



# 3. The Commonwealth Education Policy Framework

## 3.1 Summary

The CEPF incorporates the following:

- *four cornerstones*: these are the guiding principles that drive a Commonwealth view of

what constitutes a good education system: quality, equitable access, relevance and sustainability;

Cornerstones	
<b>Equitable access</b>	Education is a human right. As such, all individuals should have access to educational opportunities. Access must be irrespective of any form of disadvantage or discrimination due to age, gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, disability, ethnicity as well as minority and marginalised groups. Access is a starting point only. Equity necessitates participation and inclusion.
<b>Quality</b>	Access and retention without quality are of little value. Quality is broadly defined and reflects a humanistic inclusive vision of SDG 4. It cares about the learning outcomes of all. It includes and extends beyond foundational skills to high-level cognitive skills, values and attitudes. And it concerns itself with the inputs and processes necessary to advance them. It is important that standards are set to uphold quality.
<b>Relevance</b>	Learning experiences should be directly connected to the personal situations, contexts and aspirations of students, and the real-life issues they are likely to face. Education should meet societal needs, including but not limited to employment and productivity in the rapidly changing world of work. Education should support the delivery of all 17 SDGs.
<b>Sustainability</b>	The SDGs mean that sustainability is at the core of the global education agenda. This vision is broad, encompassing the social, economic and environmental areas. It is also narrow: the sustainability of education is dependent on adequate resourcing and resilience to disruptive change so that learning continues into the future. It requires careful attention to be given to building and maintaining the support of other stakeholders.

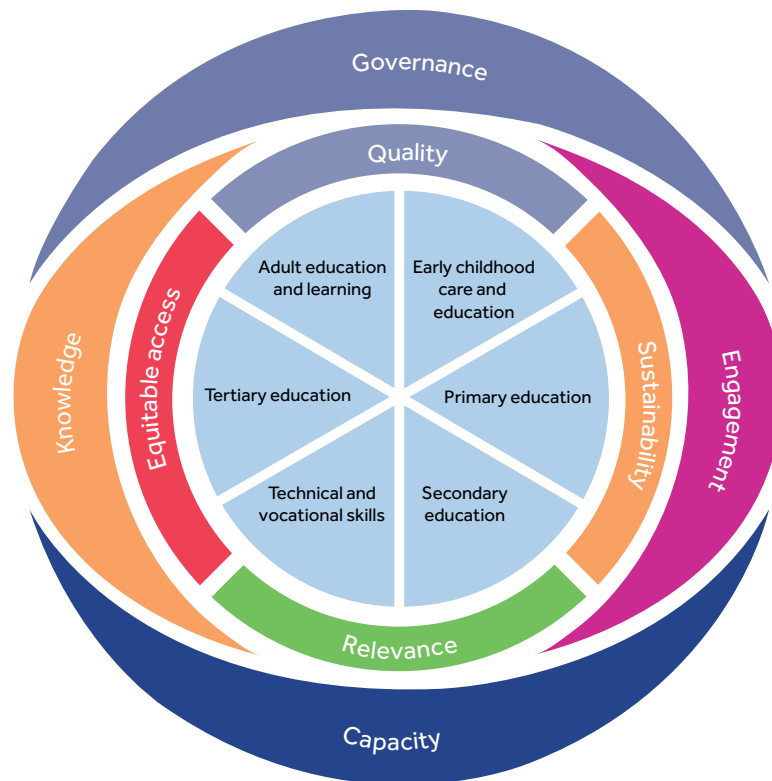
- *four enablers*: these are aspects of processes and systems that are crucial to effective policies: governance, knowledge, engagement and capacity; and
- *six elements*: these are educational subsystems: early childhood care and education, primary education, secondary education, technical and vocational skills, tertiary education, and adult education and learning.

components under each theme are intended to provide a high-level overview of the main policy prescriptions required for supporting the SDGs and improving educational outcomes. The figure shows the interplay between the cornerstones, enablers and elements.

The large schematic shown in [Figure 3.2](#) populates the Framework with priority areas for actions identified through consultation and research conducted ahead of both the first and second editions of the CEPF. Priority areas for action identified ahead of the first edition were reaffirmed for the second, and new priorities, reflective of significant changes impacting across the life course

[Figure 3.1](#) shows a diagrammatic representation of the CEPF. It highlights the key tenets that comprise each overarching theme: the cornerstones, enablers and elements. The respective

Figure 3.1 Graphical depiction of the Commonwealth Education Policy Framework: Cornerstones, Enablers and Elements.



of learning, have been identified. The new additions are designed to enhance the flexibility and resilience of learning.

## 3.2 Cornerstones

There is a commitment in SDG 4 to address access to education by all learners and to extend the period of participation. Increased emphasis is placed on the development of a quality education system that is equitable and inclusive and is relevant to the needs of all learners so that they are able to improve their livelihoods and human flourishing and contribute to sustainable development. It is in this regard that access and equity, quality, relevance and sustainability form the basic foundation of the CEPF. Each of the four cornerstones reinforces the others and must be understood collectively rather than in isolation. A framework that is built upon them will ensure that education policies of member countries give due diligence to these important anchors as a means to improving education outcomes.

### 3.2.1 Equitable access

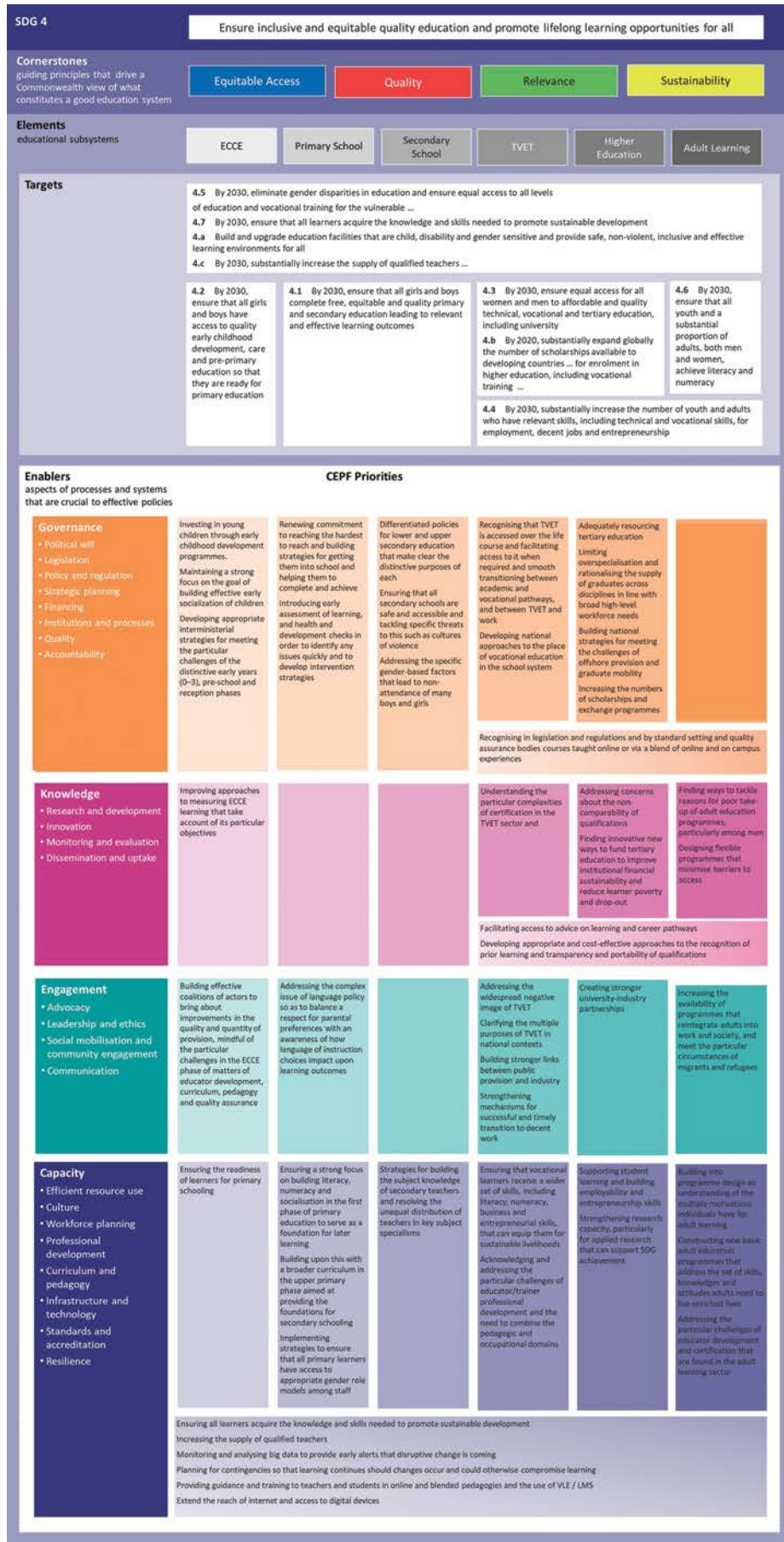
While COVID-19 has deepened learning inequities and frustrated access for many, it has also made them more difficult to ignore. Many Commonwealth

countries are more motivated to pursue initiatives designed to address and redress inequities.

As education is a human right, it is non-negotiable that all individuals should have access to educational opportunities. Access must be irrespective of any form of disadvantage or discrimination. The extent of these opportunities must extend beyond basic education to give equal access to the full range of lifelong learning elements. Access should be understood in terms of the "4As" if it is to conform to rights obligations (Tomasevski, 2001):

- *availability* – that education is free and government-funded and that there is adequate infrastructure and trained teachers able to support education delivery;
- *accessibility* – that the system is non-discriminatory and accessible to all, and that positive steps are taken to include the most marginalised;
- *acceptability* – that the content of education is relevant, non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate, and of quality; that the school itself is safe and teachers are professional; and

Figure 3.2 CEPF on a page.



- *adaptability* – that education can evolve with the changing needs of society and contribute to challenging inequalities, such as gender discrimination, and that it can be adapted locally to suit specific contexts.

There is now a stronger understanding that access is a starting point only. It must be complemented by participation, inclusion, retention and achievement. In all these dimensions, the discussion and analysis in the previous section contribute to a broader evidence base that progress towards equity has been inadequate. Variations on the slogan “no child left behind” point to a policy-level acceptance that equity must mean a focus on the individual needs and aspirations of all. However, operationalisation and achievement of this commitment are far weaker.

The achievement of access, equity and inclusion requires the obstacles to these goals to be identified and addressed at the individual, institutional and system levels. A practical reality raised during consultation on this document is that when funds are scarce, the return on equity-enhancing initiatives, such as extending the reach of the Internet to low population density remote communities, is insufficient to justify the investment. The CEPF encourages that, where necessary, differentiated funding should be made available to ensure equitable access. At all levels, targets for improved equity and commitments to expand policy and legislative commitments to promote equity should be set, monitored and reviewed.

Addressing cultural and societal norms and attitudes that constrain equity in education must also be a priority, albeit one that requires great sensitivity.

### 3.2.2 Quality

A quality education system can take on many meanings. As the SDGs were being developed, meanings both broad and narrow were advocated at differing points in time by different parties (Unterhalter, 2019). A narrow definition, which confined quality to a limited range of literacy and numeracy learning outcomes measurable at lower secondary school, was advocated when work first began on SDG 4 back in 2012. The prevailing view in 2015 reflected a humanistic inclusive vision of SDG 4 and a much broadened perspective on learning

outcomes. SDG 4 speaks of “inclusive and equitable quality education”. The Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015) stressed the need to address exclusion and work on gender equality. It referred to learning outcomes as not just the acquisition of the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy, but as incorporating analytical, problem-solving and other high-level cognitive skills. And it did not stop there. It covered the values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges through education for sustainable development and global citizenship. It also recognised that to improve outcomes requires strengthened inputs and processes, notably investment in teacher quality and systems. The CEPF reflects this broader thinking, which was tested and affirmed during consultation on this second edition.

Thus, understandings of educational quality will require readjustment in the light of the broader SDG vision. Notions of quality schooling must encompass a stronger equity dimension and must also take account of the clear SDG emphasis on “the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (SDG 4.7). Notions of quality will also need to take consideration of how learners are prepared for decent work and life, and for lifelong learning. At the same time, quality should be thought of in terms of how empowering education is. This would require consideration of the extent to which education enables all learners to imagine and achieve their human flourishing.

Remembering that SDG 4 is not just about schooling, quality education must have different meanings in different settings. All learning spaces must be safe and inclusive if quality learning is to take place. Multiple understandings of what constitutes successful education need to be drawn upon, including how it promotes individual, community and national resilience.

Existing notions of quality should be further developed to include the importance of well-trained educators, support staff and managers, as well as appropriate resources, equipment, learning spaces and learning materials. The possibilities of



improving learning through the use of information and communications technologies will be an important aspect of all of these. Existing processes of quality assessment and improvement will need to be further developed and implemented more widely.

These will include processes of external inspection and reporting systems as well as internal processes of provider improvement and educators' own commitment to professional development. Given that quality is related to resourcing in important ways, it is vital that cost effectiveness be considered as one aspect of quality. Moreover, an aspect of educational sustainability is that investments in education can be sustained financially and politically, including through the contributions of communities and individuals.

### 3.2.3 Relevance

Quality has little meaning without relevance. It is essential that education contributes to individuals', communities' and nations' ability to respond to the complex challenges of life today and in the future. Learning experiences should be directly connected to the personal aspirations, situations and contexts of all students and the real-life issues they are likely to face. It should support them to become local and global citizens. Education must support the value base of communities and society.

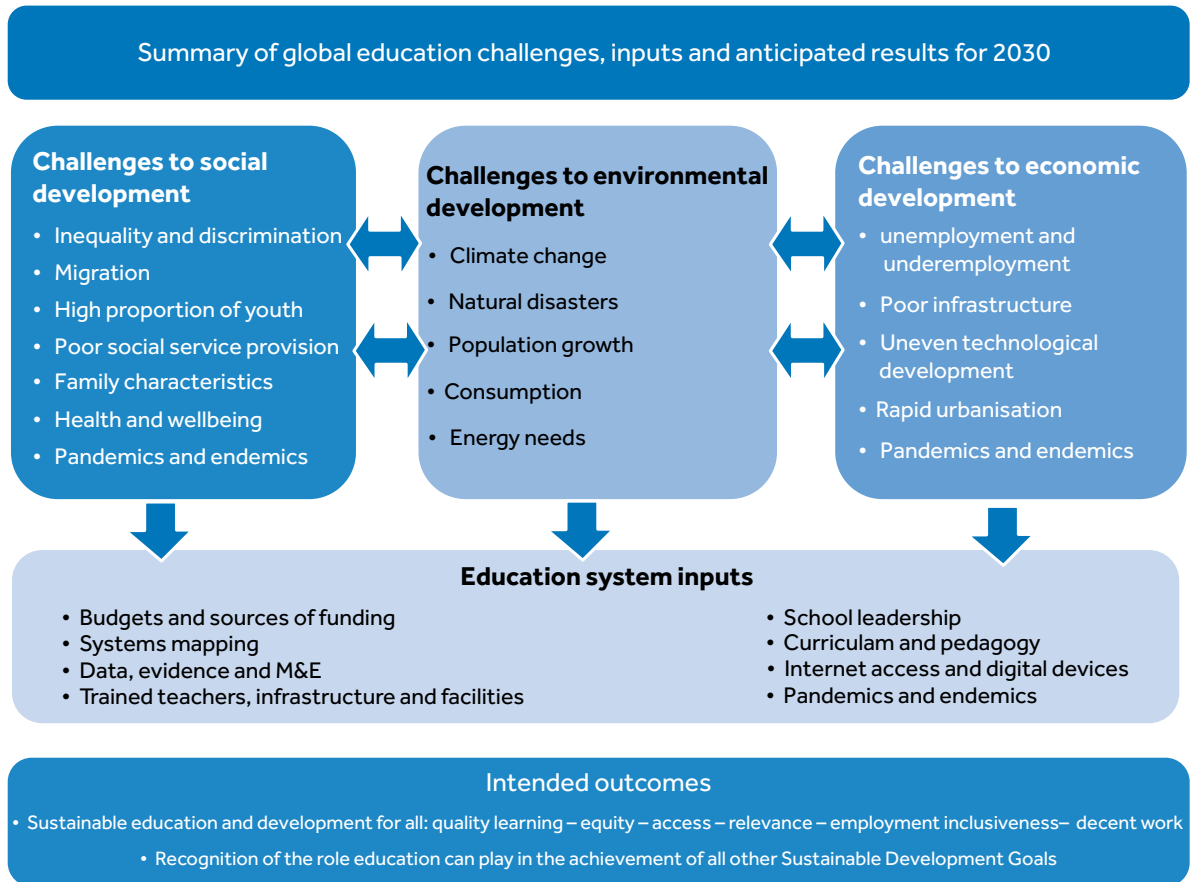
It must support the ability of firms and countries to pursue economic activities in ways that build prosperity and ensure sustainable development.

This requires curricula that meet the needs of the present and can be quickly adapted to changing needs. It highlights the importance of flexible learning pathways and delivery mechanisms that support lifelong learning, and equip learners with skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that can be applied in various contexts throughout their life. This may include a strong focus on generic and transferable competencies; a better means of certifying learning, including the recognition of prior learning; and funding approaches that help learners to access formal, non-formal and informal learning when needed across their life course.

New technologies not only offer possibilities for novel approaches to learning that are more relevant to the lived experiences of many learners, but also challenge education to become more relevant to the technological worlds into which learners will graduate. The pace of technology adoption, in tandem with the COVID-19 recession, is creating a "double-disruption" scenario for learners and workers (World Economic Forum, 2020). The disruptive effect of the pandemic saw learning and work transfer into people's homes, accelerating technological adoption by education providers and workplaces alike. It has transformed tasks, jobs and skills.

In constructing new curricula and pedagogies, and identifying revised learning outcomes, it is also important to address relevance through genuine engagement with other stakeholders throughout planning and delivery. The voices of employers (large and small, public and private) must be strong,

Figure 3.3 Summary of global education challenges and intended outcomes for 2030.



but so must those representing cultural and religious traditions, as well as those of learners, parents and educators.

As with quality, relevance must encompass equity. As the right-to-education movement has stressed, educational provision must be relevant both to the individual circumstances of all learners and to their aspirations, particularly marginalised groups.

Apart from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the global community's focus on education has been transformed by emerging new challenges such as pandemics, climate change, migration and radicalisation, while existing challenges, such as gender-based violence, crime and poor governance have not receded. In this light, education for citizenship as well as transitioning young people into decent work have become more critical than ever before. Figure 3.3 summarises the main education challenges for 2030, the inputs that are required to revitalise the education system, and the intended outcomes.

### 3.2.4 Sustainability

The advent of the SDGs means that sustainability is at the core of the global education agenda. UNESCO's framework for Education for Sustainable Development advocates for the sustainability principle to be reflected in education policy, curricula, training and practice as a means to empower individuals to take informed decisions (UNESCO, 2019). It also forms a cornerstone of the Commonwealth's approach. In this view, education's relevance must be judged largely in terms of its contribution to sustainability. This moves educational thinking beyond earlier notions of education for sustainable development, which tended to be relegated to the margins and seen as little more than environmental education, important though that is. Rather, sustainability is to be understood as a broader issue cutting across the environmental, economic and social domains. Throughout the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and particularly in SDG 4.7, education is understood as a crucial means to address global



challenges and create more sustainable and resilient individuals and societies constructively and creatively (UNESCO-GMR, 2014).

Education is also neither a static nor contextless concept. It needs to be customised to reflect the situations in different Commonwealth countries, which may also change over time.

At the same time, education itself operates as a subsystem within the much wider education complex just described. The challenge is, therefore, not only how to engage and educate learners on sustainable development, but how to work effectively to change education policy and practice. In this way, it can be an agentive part of the sustainability transition rather than a barrier to its realisation (Sterling et al., 2017). Education needs to be sustainable at the institutional and system levels. To achieve SDG 4.7 will require new curricula, pedagogies and materials, as will other aspects of an educational contribution to sustainable development.

The sustainability of education is dependent on adequate resourcing and building resilience to disruptive change so that learning continues into the future. While COVID-19 has underscored

the importance of resilience, it always has and will continue to be important. It is essential that learning continues when disaster strikes, regardless of whether that be a naturally occurring environmental phenomenon, man-made, endemic or pandemic, big or small.

There is also a need to pay careful attention to building and maintaining the support of other stakeholders. Without the support of learners and their families in particular, educational initiatives will not be sustained. Innovation in delivery, management, stakeholder engagement and funding needs to be nurtured as a means of promoting sustainability.

### 3.3 Enablers

The educational agenda is marked by an increased focus on learning outcomes broadly defined (refer above discussion on Quality). Indeed, SDG 4 outlines a number of ambitious targets to be met by 2030. The achievement of these targets requires that national education policies are not only aligned to the SDGs but also that key pillars are in place to support the development and subsequent implementation of policy prescriptions designed

to meet these targets. In this regard, the CEPF highlights four critical enablers that must be in place. These are:

1. governance;
2. knowledge;
3. engagement; and
4. capacity.

### 3.3.1 Governance

Having the right knowledge and capacity in place can still be ineffective if there is an inadequate system of educational governance. The complex challenges of the current era and the greater diversity of educational providers and stakeholders implied by SDG 4 bring new dimensions to the area of educational governance. Aspects of educational governance include political will; legislation; policy and regulation; strategic planning; financing; institutions and processes; quality; and accountability (see Figure 3.4).

While the technical elements of good governance are vital, it is equally important to stress that educational progress against national and international development goals will only happen if there is a degree of consensus on shared goals and vision.

#### 3.3.1.1 Political will

Educational reform processes cannot simply be evidence-based. Rather, they require active support from important actors. Thus, there is a need for:

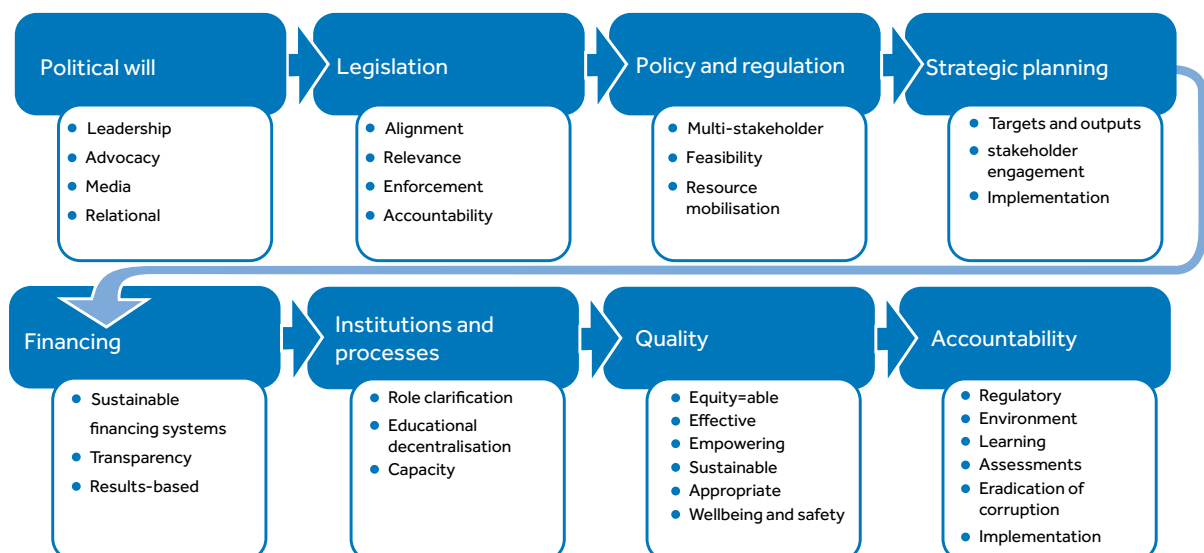
- active championing of SDG-enabling educational reforms by important leaders, particularly Ministers and heads of state;
- consistent support of governments to the achievement of SDG 4 regardless of which political party is in power;
- generating and maintaining widespread popular support for reforms through advocacy and sensitisation activities; and
- investment of effort in building relationships with key stakeholders in the authorising environment and in understanding the policymaking process sufficiently to take best advantage of policy windows when they arise.

#### 3.3.1.2 Legislation

Legislation is a key element of sustainable policy reform. It provides clarity about mandates, promotes enforceability, facilitates democratic scrutiny and may be necessary to mobilise resources and establish new structures and entities necessary for policy delivery. It is important to:

- map the fit of current legislation against relevant international agreements and norms, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26: Right to education); UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); UNESCO recommendations and the like, as well as take

Figure 3.4 Education governance for SDG alignment.





steps to fill gaps and to localise the provisions of such agreements;

- review education acts, and other relevant legislation, to ensure their relevance to Commonwealth values and educational delivery against the SDGs;
- enact new legislation, where necessary, in a timely fashion to respond to identified gaps in the current educational response to the SDGs and their obligations in education under international human rights law;
- audit the status of enforcement of educational legislation and take action where necessary; and
- build a robust approach to public accountability and the enforcement of legislation with appropriate and functional reporting systems.

### 3.3.1.3 Policy and regulation

Legislation is often only the starting point. It is also necessary to ensure that the appropriate policies and regulations are in place to build a practice of education for sustainable development. This requires:

- review of existing national education policies and regulations and the development of new policies and regulations where necessary;
- consultations on new policy formulation and implementation that include all relevant stakeholders;
- campaigns to ensure that stakeholders have the necessary information on which to engage with policy consultations;
- inter-ministerial and inter-sectoral committees/working groups to embed education across wider policies;
- careful attention to the feasibility of policy implementation in the process of policy development;
- articulation of theories of change that anticipate the likely obstacles to policy implementation and the necessary sequencing of implementation; and
- education diplomacy and foreign policy that encompass the importance of education to

fostering respect, intercultural understanding and economic development.

### 3.3.1.4 Strategic planning

Planning is an integral part of the process of turning educational visions into realities. It is widely accepted that planning must be strategic and reflect the complex nature of education systems. It implies:

- transforming wider education policies into actionable strategies, targets and outputs;
- generating relevant data and establishing appropriate monitoring and evaluation processes in order to judge the success of implementation;
- committing to reviewing and revising policies and programmes based on emerging evidence; and
- establishing an effective programme of stakeholder engagement and management.

### 3.3.1.5 Financing

Educational reform is not costless and often hard choices need to be made about priorities and their sequencing. Robust educational financing, therefore, will be essential if SDG 4 is to be achieved. This includes:

- mobilising adequate and sustained resourcing from budgetary, other domestic and international sources;
- quarantining funding to deal with contingencies;
- identifying and establishing sustainable financing systems;
- establishing and maintaining transparency and accountability in the financial management of education;
- building systems and cultures that base funding on performance against SDG 4 and other national education objectives; and
- maximising the efficiency of education systems in terms of value for money and ensuring the minimisation of transaction costs in administering education.

### 3.3.1.6 Institutions and processes

Successful educational delivery also requires that the right people, institutions and processes are in place to allow goals to be met. This necessitates:

- clarifying the roles, responsibilities, outcomes and accountabilities of organisations, stakeholders and individuals;
- planning processes of educational decentralisation so that the appropriate structures and procedures are in place to deliver education functions appropriately at all levels; and
- ensuring that there is sufficient capacity to deliver infrastructure, services, functions and operations.

### 3.3.1.7 Quality

A well-functioning and efficient quality assurance mechanism will be a fundamental component for effective governance of education systems that possess a capacity to continuously improve quality across the system. As discussed in Section 3.2.2, quality is broadly defined under the CEPF. It reflects a humanistic inclusive vision of SDG 4. It cares about the learning outcomes of all. It includes and extends beyond foundational skills to high-level cognitive skills, values and attitudes. And it concerns itself with the inputs and processes necessary to advance them. It is thus important that standards are set to uphold quality. In 2016, the Commonwealth Secretariat convened a roundtable in collaboration with the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility (CTEF), Malaysia, on quality standards in education where six key attributes to quality education were agreed. These are identified below.

- *equitable* – that education is fair and accessible for all;
- *effective* – that educational decisions at all levels are grounded in the best available evidence and that programmes and interventions deliver their intended outcomes in a cost-effective manner;
- *empowering* – that education enables all participants to imagine and achieve their human flourishing;
- *sustainable* – that educational provision can be maintained at an acceptable level over time

and that education contributes at individual and societal levels to the achievement of development that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable;

- *appropriate* – education that is relevant to the needs of the society and economy as well as meeting rights-based concerns regarding the appropriateness of learning provision in terms of physical accessibility and acceptability of message and medium; and
- *well-being and safety* – education that is safe and nurturing and which contributes to individual, community and societal well-being and resilience.

### 3.3.1.8 Accountability

SDG 4 is appropriately ambitious in terms of increasing quality, breadth and participation in education. However, countries will have to achieve this in the face of serious budgetary constraints. Thus, they are under pressure to provide education more effectively and efficiently, at the same time as doing so more equitably. Accountability is a key mechanism for improving the performance of education systems and, hence, for delivering on the SDG 4 commitments. Key priorities for the promotion of educational accountability include:

- greater attention to ways in which learners and parents and communities can be empowered to have a choice about learning options and a voice regarding their quality and appropriateness;
- the eradication of corruption at all levels of educational expenditure;
- clear and agreed professional standards for educators and adequate support to these professionals to meet such standards;
- further professional development for senior officers of education providers and of district officials in order to support decentralisation efforts;
- strengthening systems of financial accountability to ensure efficient, effective and equitable resource allocation to education and that providers deliver on the same criteria;



- improving regulatory accountability (including effective inspection regimes) to build compliance with rules and regulations;
- improved approaches to using learning assessments to influence practices at all levels, incorporating the lessons from community-based, national, regional and global initiatives; and
- strengthened global accountability mechanisms so that countries are held accountable for their performance in delivering on SDG 4 but are also active participants in establishing appropriate performance measures.

### 3.3.2 Knowledge

Education is about the development of individual, community and societal knowledge.

Much of the transmission of knowledge takes place in education systems, while the production of new knowledge is a core function of tertiary education. Moreover, education policy also requires a strong knowledge base in order to be effective. This requires attention to research and development; innovation; monitoring and evaluation; and dissemination and uptake (see [Figure 3.5](#)).

It is also necessary to adopt a broad conceptualisation of what knowledge is, and how it is created and disseminated that includes and goes

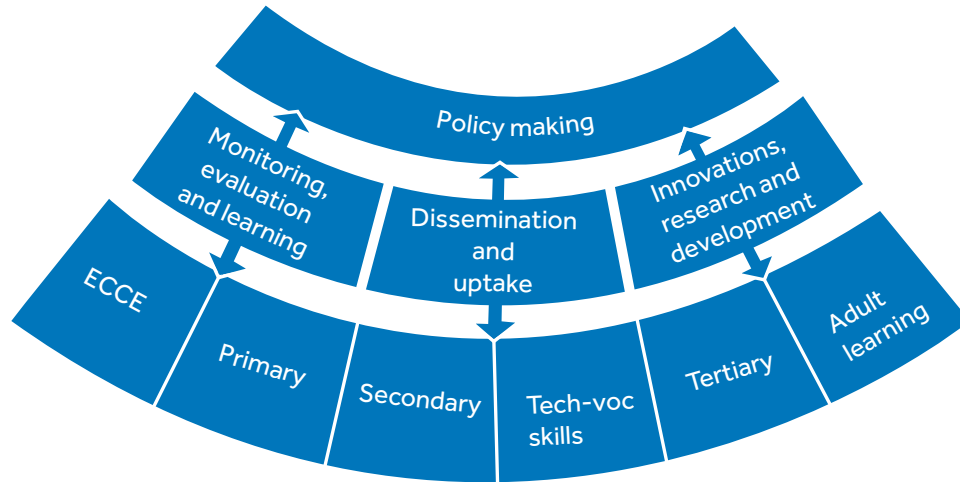
beyond narrow western scientific understandings. Included within this broad conceptualisation is Indigenous and local knowledge. UNESCO defines local and Indigenous knowledge as the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. These unique ways of knowing are important facets of the world's cultural diversity and provide a foundation for locally appropriate sustainable development and education.

#### 3.3.2.1 Research and development

Research and development are key enablers to formulate effective education policy. There is a need to:

- identify, fund and make use of quantitative and qualitative research that can inform policy;
- build the capacity of local researchers to undertake in-country research;
- address particular research gaps regarding the elements of education that were not previously priorities;
- fund new Commonwealth research collaborations on emerging education policy challenges and innovative practices;
- ensure that all officially funded research is compliant with open-access provisions for data and outputs;

Figure 3.5 Flows of knowledge production and transmission in education.



- build capacity within education systems to access and use economic and labour market research;
  - strengthen the linkages between and improve coordination of research, policy and planning/development across all relevant authorities;
  - strengthen the collection, use and dissemination of available information;
  - improve access to and use of data to support more evidenced-based decision-making – including data warehouses;
  - share evidence for education practice and policy internationally;
  - benchmark against regional and national standards; and
  - revise learning assessments and curricula to make them more reflective of the changing needs of learning systems including delivery on SDG 4.7.
- communities, for the purpose of increasing access to all relevant sources of knowledge and inspiration;
  - understanding that much innovation builds on what is already there and is a matter of incremental improvement;
  - identification of key educational risks and opportunities, and the carrying out of feasibility studies for new innovations;
  - inculcation of national and institutional cultures of innovation that encourage organisations and their staff to experiment, and facilitate the sharing and peer review of promising practices;
  - facilitation of innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, including the use of ICTs and online and blended modes; and
  - improved understandings of how education can support innovations.

### 3.3.2.2 Innovation

Innovation is complex and contextualised, social as well as technological. Educational innovation needs to be encouraged when designing approaches suited to the particular challenges and priorities of each Commonwealth country. It requires:

- emphasis on finding solutions appropriate to context that address local challenges and priorities;
- encouraging conversations with a wide range of groups, including local and Indigenous

### 3.3.2.3 Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation need to be seen as valuable to all organisations and their staff. This requires:

- sensitising and educating officials and decision makers on the value of monitoring and evaluation;
- making monitoring and evaluation integral to the activities of all education organisations;

- a focus that includes the outcome indicators (SDG targets) and goes beyond to include the evaluation of actions undertaken for the purpose of furthering those outcomes;
- building a culture where evaluators are seen as having a level of autonomy that allows them to be critical of performance where necessary;
- encouraging the capture of baseline data prior to the commencement of new interventions;
- developing evaluation approaches that focus on uncovering what aspects of an intervention have worked, for whom and in which contexts;
- ensuring that monitoring and evaluation result in the adjustment of activities where necessary;
- establishing cultures of self-evaluation by staff and institutions so as to make educational improvement a bottom-up process;
- tracking the progress of learning outcomes at individual, institution and system levels; and
- collecting and using key data on institutional and system performance against the four cornerstones and agreed system outcome targets.

#### 3.3.2.4 Dissemination and uptake

There is no point in producing education data, information and knowledge that will not be used. Therefore, there is a need to:

- build in plans of how research, data collection and monitoring and evaluation are intended to be used from the beginning, including how access to them can be maximised;
- give careful attention to how any outputs are communicated in a timely and accessible manner to other stakeholders; and
- extend the capacity of education officials and providers to understand how to access and use all relevant knowledge resources, including local and Indigenous knowledge.

### 3.3.3 Engagement

Education is a complex human system that is based on a negotiated set of values. Successful delivery on SDG 4 will require multidirectional processes of

communication, collaboration and co-production at all levels: between education institutions (for example, the network of Commonwealth universities), institutions with in-country stakeholders, government and the private sector, with international organisations, and all variants in-between. Important aspects of this process include advocacy, leadership and ethics; social mobilisation and community engagement; and communication (see [Figure 3.6](#)).

#### 3.3.3.1 Advocacy

Advocacy for particular interpretations and prioritisations of what approaches to education should be followed is central to the advancement of SDG 4. The purpose of advocacy is to inform and influence the political will of decision makers.

#### 3.3.3.2 Leadership and ethics

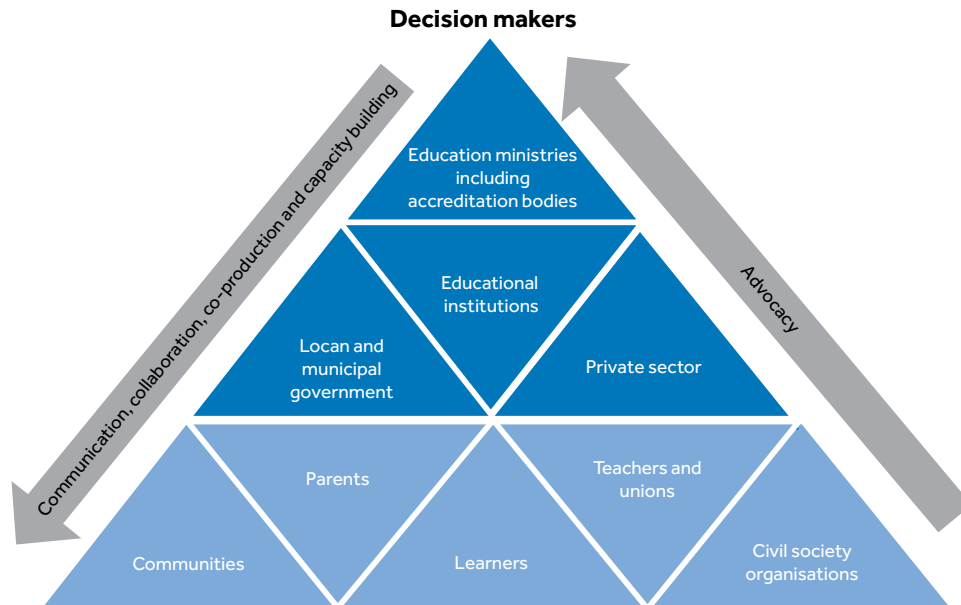
We have moved away from the days in which educational policymaking was seen as a top-down process in which Ministers decided what needed to be done; officials determined how this should be done; and other actors were merely supposed to implement. Now, the place of other stakeholders is accepted as crucial, while many systems have undergone decentralisation, with education often a concurrent function of different levels of government. In this environment, it is important that:

- ministries adopt an approach that sees them share leadership and responsibility with other actors, while communicating their own vision for educational change;
- steps be taken, where necessary, to empower other stakeholders to become active in educational policy and implementation processes;
- where appropriate, high-level multistakeholder consultative forums are established; and
- respectful dialogue be nurtured between all educational stakeholders.

#### 3.3.3.3 Social mobilisation and community engagement

The vision contained in SDG 4 will not be achieved unless students, parents and communities are active supporters. Equally, other national, regional

Figure 3.6 Forms and flows of education engagement.



and global actors, such as the private sector, trade unions and civil society organisations, are also crucial to educational change, as is any engagement between educational institutions. Pre-COVID, UNESCO identified the need for more interlinkages, collaboration, joint projects and partnerships as important for implementing education for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2019). With COVID-19, both depleting the finances of many that can be devoted to education, while concurrently causing changes and increases in learner needs and demands, improved coordination, collaboration and co-production to make best use of joint resources is of elevated importance. Active engagement within and between levels cannot simply be assumed. Steps may have to be taken to facilitate it, including:

- strengthening and expanding educational partnerships, including improved interactions between school, home and community;
- constructing stronger partnerships between other key stakeholders, such as regional and global bodies;
- paying particular attention to engagement with minority and marginalised groups;
- raising awareness that these actors should not be seen simply as supporters of the government's vision to be mobilised for

implementation but as legitimate initiators of policy debates themselves; and

- building the capacity of partners to initiate policy dialogue.

### 3.3.3.4 Communication

Communication is clearly central to effective, democratic education policymaking. This increased democratic impetus and the rapidly changing environment of communication technologies bring new challenges to ministries and other official education organisations. An effective response may require:

- a realisation that communication must be multidirectional;
- emerging government protocols and structures for explaining how to communicate more effectively through new technologies, including social media;
- an approach to communication that stresses hearing and informing more than defending and selling;
- new staff development programmes to make officials more comfortable with using social media; and
- the revision or development of internal and external communication strategies, including environmental scanning.



### 3.3.4 Capacity

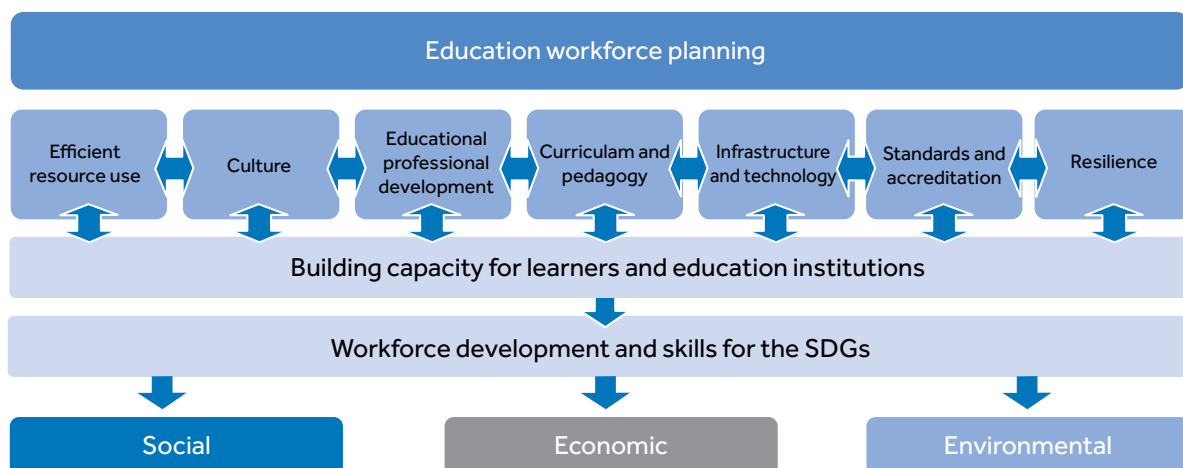
Education seeks to build individual and societal capacities. Education policies and programmes depend on adequate capacity and often necessitate a focus on capacity development. Elements of this include the efficient use of resources, culture, professional development of educators, of institutional leaders and of the officials of ministries and other agencies; the construction of relevant curricula; the development of infrastructure and technologies of delivery; the creation, review and renewal of appropriate standards and accreditation mechanisms; and

strategies and initiatives designed to build resilience so that learning continues in the face of change (see Figure 3.7).

#### 3.3.4.1 Workforce planning for delivering the SDGs

Education has a key role to play in the delivery of all 17 SDGs. Nowhere is this more true than in the domain of workforce development: education is central to developing nurses, agronomists, environmental scientists and all the other professional and skilled workers who will be key actors in SDG delivery. More generally, education

Figure 3.7 Capacity building in the education workforce.



must play a key role in developing the skills needed across the workforce to build blue and green economies, grounded in decent work. These mandates for education require that it is:

- informed by multisectoral analyses of labour force needs;
- supported by forecasting and planning exercises that can identify the particular opportunities and challenges of generating decent and sustainable work;
- built on multistakeholder and multisectoral partnerships;
- driven by a vision that seeks to limit the negative impacts of greening economies on the lowest skilled and most vulnerable; and
- underpinned by adequate resources devoted to building SDG-related skills.

#### 3.3.4.2 Efficient resource use

As the demands on funds and resources available are ever changing, it is essential that there is agility in their allocation so that they can be directed to where they can have the greatest positive effect. This necessitates that:

- funds follow learners who need it most;
- education providers are responsive to the needs of learners and their parents;
- providers have autonomy to make resource use decisions, including the ability to pursue supplementary funding initiatives;
- innovation is encouraged and efficiency-enhancing ideas are set free.
- there is an ability to learn and adapt initiatives in like countries that lead to efficiency gains.

#### 3.3.4.3 Culture

A prerequisite for each of the capacity-enhancing aspects identified here is the willingness of ministries, institutions and other education stakeholders to create the space, encouragement and stimulation to unleash ideas on how either to make best use of existing resources and/or to grow available resources. This depends on the leadership, values, traditions, beliefs, interactions, behaviours and attitudes that contribute to the

emotional and relational environment of people and places of authority, in other words their culture.

#### 3.3.4.4 Educational professional development

Those that deliver, manage and direct education are central to the generation of high-quality learning outcomes. This requires:

- an approach to workforce management and development that is aligned to the SDGs;
- the development of appropriate professional standards for the wider educational workforce involved in delivery on SDG 4;
- the creation of new programmes and providers of initial education for those parts of the education workforce not currently served by such delivery;
- the extension of access to high-quality continuous professional development;
- the rollout of programmes to develop and strengthen new pedagogical skills, particularly online and blended approaches, thereby ensuring the risks that learning is disrupted if a health crisis or natural disaster were to strike is minimised;
- new approaches to certification and licensing of educators appropriate to new needs and to the diverse education workforce;
- the expansion of educational leadership programmes, particularly to the less well-developed elements of education;
- the growth of specialised programmes tailored to the needs of ministry officials, staff of national education agencies and for those responsible for educational administration in devolved systems; and
- appropriate funding regimes that allow educators to implement their professional learning in settings that are well-resourced and where staff:student ratios are conducive to high-quality teaching and learning.

#### 3.3.4.5 Curriculum and pedagogy

Quality curricula and pedagogies are at the heart of effective education, addressing the essential outcomes of any learning programme.



To promote curricula and pedagogical quality, it is necessary to:

- ensure that all curricula and pedagogical approaches reflect Commonwealth values and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs;
- cater for the needs of diverse individuals and groups in the curricula designed and pedagogies utilised;
- integrate local and Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and ways of sharing the same;
- create flexible curricula and pedagogies that are suitable to different modes and patterns of learning;
- develop innovative approaches that incorporate the benefits of new learning technologies into curricula and pedagogy;
- place particular attention on curriculum and pedagogical development activities for elements of the education system where least attention has historically been given;
- focus on appropriate pacing and sequencing of learning within and across levels of study;
- produce and disseminate learning materials and educator guides that support the achievement of curricular goals, including the development of locally produced educational software;
- deliver appropriate training to educators on how to use new curricula and materials; and
- build strong cadres of curriculum and pedagogy leaders in education institutions in order to make improvement effective and sustainable.

### 3.3.4.6 Infrastructure and technology

The capacity of education to contribute to meeting the SDGs will be shaped by access to good-quality infrastructure. When learning moved online in response to COVID-19, it underscored the criticality of technology and supporting infrastructure to ensuring the learning continues. At the same time, the spreading use of new information and communication technologies in society means that education has a vital role to play in equipping and empowering learners to use such technologies to support their human flourishing.

In order for infrastructure and technology to support quality and inclusive education, it is important that there is:

- improvement in educational facilities and infrastructure, including provision of a safe and enabling environment that respects diversity and the individual needs of learners;
- specific attention paid to the challenges of developing infrastructure that is economically, environmentally and socially sustainable, and resilient in the face of environmental shocks;
- strong focus on the infrastructural challenges of providing universal access to ICT within learning institutions, including access to sustainable energy and network connectivity;
- greater integration of ICTs into education curriculum and pedagogies across all levels;
- localisation of educational software and the promotion of open educational resources;
- access to digital learning platforms to support better teaching and learning, and improved certification and portability for learning through such platforms;
- better utilisation of digital systems for monitoring attendance, learning and institutional performance; and
- development of the capacities of teacher educators and teachers' colleges to train new teachers in the latest approaches to technology-enhanced learning.

### 3.3.4.7 Standards and accreditation

It is impossible to have quality education without attention to what standards should be met in individual learning, in institutions and at the national level. Similarly, often individuals or institutions struggle to signal the quality of their learning or teaching. This may require further attention to processes of accreditation. In this area, it is important to:

- develop clear standards regarding what are appropriate learning outcomes for both learners and providers;
- ensure that standards support and are not a barrier to the increasing diversity in modes of learning;

- ensure that such standards are consistent with Commonwealth values and the priorities of SDG 4;
- establish robust and affordable systems for checking performance against standards;
- create systems of accreditation and certification that are widely accepted within and beyond the education sector, thus enhancing portability and employability, and which deliver value for money; and
- build platforms for delivering information about educational quality that are accessible to relevant stakeholders.

#### 3.3.4.8 Resilience

Resilience is the ability to accept and adapt to any situation and be able to move forward despite challenges, setbacks or failures. It may mean returning to how things were before. In the case of education, it is more likely to mean adjusting to a new and potentially better normal, appropriate to changed conditions. Resilient education systems:

- monitor and analyse the situation to provide early alerts that change is coming;
- plan for and set aside resources for contingencies;
- invest in the technologies and infrastructure necessary to support learning in the face of change; and
- build the capacity of educators to be adaptive and innovative when change occurs.

### 3.4 Elements

The six learning stages identified below form an essential part of a country's education policy and, by extension, the education system. As highlighted earlier, the SDGs articulate full commitment to the entire education cycle and the role of education in supporting the achievement of the other SDGs. In doing so, member countries must ensure that there is a seamless transition through each cycle, ensuring that no learner is left behind. To this end, the cornerstones and enablers play a critical role in facilitating this smooth transition and ensuring that students are flexible and equipped with the necessary skills for their future lives.

The elements follow learning over life courses. They recognise that learning starts when a child is born,

continues throughout life and is not linear. Learners move in and out of the elements as they live, learn and work.

Nor is it always undertaken with traditional education providers for the purposes of gaining formal qualifications. Non-formal education with traditional and non-traditional providers for the purposes of learning new things or skills is on the rise. It may or may not be recognised through microcredentials outside of formal qualification and credential frameworks.

Informal learning is a constant but is no less important. It occurs with elders in villages, where young people may be immersed in oral histories, traditional practices, and learn skills transferrable to future life and work contexts. It occurs in homes and at workplaces as people learn through exposure, experiment and others how to make best use of new technologies. All, young and old, learn when watching television or engaging with their technological devices.

UNESCO advises that formal education is not enough for transformative action (UNESCO, 2019). The challenge is to leverage, build on and recognise the knowledges and skills gained through non-formal education and informal learning.

#### 3.4.1 Early childhood care and education

*Target 4.2* – By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) supports critical holistic childhood development. The COVID-19 outbreak placed this at risk, particularly for vulnerable children and exposed the challenges of ECCE, which is characterised by large numbers of poorly trained educators and managers in small-scale providers, weak regulation and multiple ministry mandates.

The Nadi Declaration records the recognition by Commonwealth Education Ministers of the importance of providing all young children with access to quality early childhood education and the need for a multisectoral approach to support and promote their early learning and development (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018).

As mandated by the Ministers, the Commonwealth Secretariat developed an ECCE Toolkit

(Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022). Its aim is to provide a resource to Ministers and senior officials in the ministries and departments of Commonwealth member countries an understanding of how best to enable and support a multisectoral approach for increasing access to quality early learning and development. It provides guidance relevant to many of the priorities identified here.

Priorities for ECCE include:

- *Investing in young children through early childhood development programmes*  
ECCE programmes ensure early learners receive stimulation, nurturing and nutrition, vital to realising the right to education and promoting equitable learning outcomes. Research also suggests that it is one of the smartest investments a country can make in promoting development (World Bank, 2015). The ECCE Toolkit expands on the rationale for investing early and expanding the reach of ECCE.
- *Maintaining a strong focus on the goal of building effective early socialisation of children*  
One crucial contribution that ECCE can make lies in ensuring that the development of Commonwealth values begins from the earliest educational engagements. Above all else, ECCE is about human development, which is located within a wider notion of the individual as part of society.
- *Ensuring the readiness of learners for primary schooling*  
One aspect of reducing the current crisis in learning outcomes is to ensure that children reach day one of primary education with the best possible preparation to start their formal learning journey. ECCE is a necessary foundation for learning in schools, and attention must be given to identifying what learning is needed prior to entry into grade 1 and how this can be guaranteed for all learners.
- *Developing appropriate inter-ministerial strategies for meeting the particular challenges of the distinctive early years (0–3), pre-school and reception phases*

ECCE can best be seen as a set of interventions across a life stage rather than being simply about formal education provision. While there is a need to focus strongly on the educational phase of transition to primary schooling, which may take place within the primary school, it is important to see this as having different functions and outcomes from the pre-school phase. While learning will be mainly within the home and community in the first 3 years of life, there is still an important place for thinking about how to support that learning in order to maximise the benefits of later, more formal learning. The three phases have different sets of key governmental actors and their effective coordination is vital.

- *Building effective coalitions of actors to bring about improvements in the quality and quantity of provision, mindful of the particular challenges in the ECCE phase of matters of educator development, curriculum, pedagogy and quality assurance*

Most ECCE provision, even when limited to the educational component, takes place outside the public education system. Moreover, much of it is delivered by microenterprises, often owned and managed by people from the communities they serve. There is a particular need, therefore, to develop approaches to system regulation, accountability and improvement that are sensitive to the needs and the backgrounds of the key actors but are resolute in demanding higher standards. The ECCE Toolkit provides some practical guidance.

- *Improving approaches to measuring ECCE learning that take account of its particular objectives*

Once the distinct objectives of ECCE and its sub-phases are identified, it will be important to turn attention to measuring the learning that takes place. This can pass valuable information to the school system so as to increase the efficiency of the primary learning phase. Diagnostic information is particularly important to facilitate targeted learning interventions but also to highlight equity concerns.



### 3.4.2 Primary education

*Target 4.1* – By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Globally, 64 million primary school-aged children are out of school (UNESCO-GMR, 2019). The population-weighted Commonwealth country average share of primary school-aged children who are out of school of 6 per cent (UIS, 2020) is better than the global average of 9 per cent (UNESCO-GMR, 2019), but it masks a wide distribution. In African Commonwealth countries, the average is approaching one in five primary school-aged children. Similarly, concerning rates are found in some Caribbean countries.

Many of those who do enter formal education do not complete primary schooling. Recent years have seen growing concerns about quality issues, with evidence suggesting that many learners are not meeting minimum learning outcomes (UNESCO-GMR, 2015). The sheer magnitude of school closures due to COVID-19 is likely to set back progress on not just this but other targets. Evidence continues to show that primary education has a range of important developmental impacts (UNESCO-GMR, 2011), as well as being the necessary foundation for subsequent education. Although primary education was the main focus of policy, programmes and research prior to the SDGs as part of the Education for All (EFA) Project, significant challenges remain.

Priorities include:

- *Renewing the commitment to reaching the hardest to reach and building strategies for getting them into school and helping them to complete and achieve*

As has already been noted, there are too many children still out of school and there is a rights imperative that this be addressed. Many of these children are out of school for complex reasons, which require multidimensional responses. Enrolment alone is not enough, for too many children are not staying in school and/or are not learning enough. Addressing these issues is unfinished business and remains a major priority for the SDG era.

- *Ensuring a strong focus on building literacy, numeracy and socialisation in the first phase of primary education to serve as a foundation for later learning*

There is value in making a distinction between lower and upper primary schooling. The first two to three grades are about inducting children into schooling and ensuring that they acquire the two most essential cognitive foundations for future learning: literacy and numeracy. Otherwise, their future learning careers, and lives, will be negatively affected.

- *Building upon this with a broader curriculum in the upper primary phase aimed at providing the foundations for secondary schooling*

In the upper primary phase, it is more appropriate to expand the curriculum. With the strong policy commitment to ensuring that primary education is not terminal for the majority, the focus can usefully turn from what any school leaver needs to know to what the necessary knowledge and skills foundations are for lower secondary education.

- *Introducing early assessment of learning, and health and development checks in order to identify any issues quickly and to develop intervention strategies*

The importance of introducing more rigorous measurements into ECCE is identified above. However, particularly because ECCE coverage is still far from universal, this does not mean that there should not be a very clear commitment to early assessment of learning in the lower primary phase. It is essential that primary schools and class teachers have a diagnostic sense of what their students can and cannot do as early as possible. By combining such assessments with health and development checks early in grade 1, it should be possible to identify those with special educational needs and to ensure early and appropriate interventions. Thus, such testing has an important equity dimension.

- *Implementing strategies to ensure that all primary learners have access to appropriate gender role models among staff*

In some parts of the Commonwealth, it is rare to find a male teacher in a primary school. In other parts, nearly all primary teachers are male. The primary years are a crucial period for children's primary socialisation to occur. It is also the time that ensuring there are appropriate gender role models inside and outside of the classroom is of great importance. National ministries and local hiring authorities are encouraged to address this issue.

- *Addressing the complex issue of language policy so as to balance a respect for parental preferences with an awareness of how language of instruction choices impact upon learning outcomes*

The primary years are often where school systems make a transition from an initial use of the home language as the language of

instruction to a national language or English. However, there are sensitivities here, both regarding the status of minority languages and as a result of increasing parental demand for schooling to begin in English in a number of member countries where this does not happen as a matter of course. In some cases, this is resulting in a large-scale flight to private schooling. Yet matters of the language of instruction are not just about identity and aspiration. There are concerns that an early shift to English may be a factor in poor learning outcomes in some settings. Careful attention to language policies, therefore, is necessary, so as to respect parent and community views while maximising learning efficiency.

### 3.4.3 Secondary education

*Target 4.1* – By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Access to lower secondary education has increased significantly and many countries have introduced free lower secondary education. However, this is highly unequal. Whether a child is male or female, urban or rural dwelling, poor or middle class, or living with a disability or not all make a difference to their participation.

Access and equity are worse in upper secondary, and there are quality concerns at both levels (UNESCO-GMR, 2015). As with primary education, secondary education provides important benefits and, moreover, is a necessary foundation for the vocational and higher education and training that are essential to social and economic progress (UNESCO-GMR, 2012). The SDGs imply an expanded commitment to supporting secondary education.

Priorities include:

- *Differentiated policies for lower and upper secondary education that make clear the distinctive purposes of each*

As with the earlier levels of education, it is important to note the differences in the focus of lower and upper secondary. For a number of member countries, lower secondary will be the end of formal schooling for a large proportion of the age cohort, and it is vital that learning outcomes reflect what young people need to know and be able to do for

their lives as adults, citizens and workers. Upper secondary education is primarily a preparation for advanced studies and a major focus here must be on building the necessary foundations for future study.

- *Strategies for building the subject knowledge of secondary teachers and resolving the unequal distribution of teachers in key subject specialisms*

Subject knowledge is a more important matter in secondary than in primary schooling. Broader issues of teacher shortages in rural and disadvantaged urban areas are likely to be even more serious in subject areas where there are national shortages. Thus, strategies for effective and equitable teacher workforce deployment are crucial to ensuring quality education for all.

- *Ensuring that all secondary schools are safe and accessible and tackling specific threats to this such as cultures of violence*

The right to education lacks meaning if young people lack practical access to safe and conducive learning environments. One important issue here is making schools disability-friendly. Unfortunately, schools are too often sites of violence, related sometimes to drugs, gangs and weapons. Gender-based violence in schools is a scourge of a number of national systems. These threats to the right to education and wider human rights need tackling in order for schools to serve their core functions.

- *Addressing the specific gender-based factors that lead to non-attendance of many boys and girls*

Millions of learner days are lost every year because girls lack the right personal sanitary equipment and schools lack adequate facilities. This reinforces other forms of disadvantage and depresses learning outcomes. Gender-based violence also reduces girls' attendance and learning. Early pregnancy means that many girls drop out of school and not all systems yet offer practical programmes for the return to study of young mothers. At the same time, cultural norms and economic realities mean that boys are more likely to drop out of school in a number of Commonwealth countries. Policies must be gender-aware and related carefully to the specific gender-based issues faced in national contexts.

#### 3.4.4 Technical and vocational skills

*Target 4.3* – By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.

*Target 4.4* – By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

*Target 4.5* – By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable,



including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

*Target 4.b* – By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small-island developing states and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) connects education and the world of work and life (Marope et al., 2015). It enables youth and adults to develop the skills they need for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship.

This is particularly important as Commonwealth nations grapple with the COVID-induced fall in economic activity, loss of working hours and rise in unemployment and underemployment. The situation places in jeopardy the accomplishment of SDG 8: “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. Similarly, Target 8.5, which calls for the achievement, by 2030, of “full and productive employment and decent work for all”. While the pandemic created practical difficulties for the delivery of courses and programmes, it also elevated the need to invest in technical and transferrable skills that both suit and flex with the rapidly changing world of work.

Even prior to the ravages wrecked by the global pandemic, Commonwealth Education Ministers noted with concern the high rates of youth unemployment in rapidly changing job markets, the increased numbers of young people entering the labour market with little or no skills for employability or entrepreneurship in many Commonwealth Member States (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). COVID-19 has made a bad situation worse and underscored the importance of TVET.

Furthermore, COVID-19, alongside the digital revolution, climate change and the rapidly evolving world of work, have driven innovation within the TVET sector. One of the direct implications of COVID-19 for the sector has been to establish online and blended modes for delivery of vocational training which traditionally has been face to face or via apprenticeships. The digital revolution has enabled innovative approaches for sustaining and

delivering skills training. Climate change has driven a focus on green skills and a greening of the practices and cultures of TVET institutions. And the impetus to remain relevant in the local market context has caused a strengthening of the linkages and bridging mechanisms between providers and industrial partners.

Commonwealth Education Ministers encouraged use of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s TVET Self-Assessment Toolkit and related initiatives (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). The Toolkit was developed in 2016 and updated during the pandemic. It serves as a resource to assist policymakers, TVET institutes and partners in member states to identify and address policy gaps in this critical area of youth skills development. It does this by focusing on six key features: governance, employer engagement, occupational standards, qualifications framework, quality institutions, and delivery and assessment. By assigning a level of development and scoring each, the Toolkit equips countries to assess the strength and effectiveness of their TVET programmes.

Statistical data for TVET enrolment are not yet fit for purpose, due to the complexities of TVET, which is found as an element of comprehensive schooling and as distinct streams of schooling; located in formal post-school institutions under the jurisdiction of many ministries and offered by a mixture of public and private providers, both for-profit and not-for-profit; delivered in enterprises, both formal and informal; and often falling under non-formal provision.

Priorities include:

- *Addressing the widespread negative image of TVET*

TVET often has a poor reputation. Although vocational learning is a universal experience, the image of public vocational learning for young people is largely negative, reflecting a history in which the learners’ class and race strongly affected whether they were directed to vocational routes.

Yet TVET is seen by employers as vital to economic performance and many TVET graduates are earning better incomes than would have been possible otherwise. There is also much evidence about high-quality provision and strong rates of return to investments.

Commonwealth signatories to the Nadi Declaration recognised the need to elevate the importance and status of TVET in the national education agendas of Member States (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). Redressing TVET's negative image begins with policymakers taking the sector seriously. Information campaigns highlighting the successes of TVET graduates have proved popular in some settings and are worth considering more widely.

- *Clarifying the multiple purposes of TVET in national contexts*

TVET is highly complex. It is partly aimed at making up for disadvantage in the school system by providing a second chance for the acquisition of essential skills, knowledge and attitudes. It is also concerned with helping youth with low educational attainment into the world of work. At the same time, it is a vital tool in providing the skilled workers for industry and, increasingly, this requires higher level cognitive skills to enter advanced technical and technological work. It is arguably not so much a level of education, but a vehicle for delivery in post-compulsory learning settings, including upper secondary school and higher education. The starting point in developing an effective TVET system is a clear articulation of what the principal goals of TVET are and how it intersects with other elements in a particular setting.

- *Building stronger links between public provision and industry*

A core function of TVET is to prepare young people for the world of work. For public providers, it is essential that they understand the needs of industries. Greater levels of industry involvement in curriculum development, work experience and the like are associated with better quality vocational learning and improved labour market outcomes. New approaches are required to build stronger links between public providers and industry.

- *Strengthening mechanisms for successful and timely transition to decent work*

Effective teaching and learning have to be the bedrock of getting young people into decent work. However, links with industry that make

employers aware of what young people can do are crucial. Equally, the government has a responsibility to work with other actors to promote the growth of decent work and the eradication of the most indecent forms of labour. It needs to get TVET providers involved in this process to ensure that they support the transition to decent work by developing the necessary skills.

- *Ensuring that vocational learners receive a wider set of skills, including literacy, numeracy, business and entrepreneurial skills that can equip them for sustainable livelihoods*

Too often, vocational learning systems have grown in the absence of economic and employment growth. As a result, young people have found themselves in great difficulty accessing the jobs for which their programmes are supposed to equip them. This points to the need for a greater focus on entrepreneurial and business skills in initial TVET. However, these skills should not be seen as being simply about a safety net for those that cannot expect to get "real" jobs. Rather, the building of business and entrepreneurial skills also makes young people more employable and productive wherever they work.

- *Recognising that TVET is accessed over the life course and facilitating access to it when required and smooth transitioning between academic and vocational pathways, and between TVET and work*

TVET is not simply a phase of post-secondary education but plays a vital role in upgrading skills and retraining across adulthood.

Developments in the cognitive content of work mean that workers increasingly need new combinations of advanced academic and vocational learning. TVET must be seen as a lifelong learning system and not just a set of youth programmes.

- *Acknowledging and addressing the particular challenges of educator/trainer professional development and the need to combine the pedagogic and occupational domains*

TVET providers and learners are diverse and so are TVET educators. They range from teachers of foundational skills such as mathematics, who closely resemble



their school counterparts, to production workers with a secondary focus on in-house training. Many vocational educators require both workplace experience and skills, as well as pedagogic and subject knowledge. They may have very different levels of prior attainment across the range of knowledge and skills in which they are expected to show mastery.

This makes the development of vocational educator programmes particularly challenging. Many national systems lack appropriate qualifications. Even where these exist, they may be poorly reflected in career pathways in both public and private TVET sectors, and this needs addressing.

- *Understanding the particular complexities of certification in the TVET*

TVET systems are characterised by large numbers of national, sectoral and international qualifications, and the rise of national qualifications frameworks has done little to address this complexity. Understanding the complexities, simplifying and ensuring the equivalency with qualifications elsewhere, has become increasingly important as learning and work transcend national boundaries.

- *Developing national approaches to the place of vocational education in the school system*

An important part of an overall vocational education system is learning that takes place within schooling. National approaches to vocational learning in schools vary hugely, from separate institutions, to separate tracks, to vocational content within a comprehensive curriculum. As secondary enrolments grow, it is inevitable that the vocational aspect of secondary schooling requires renewed attention.

### 3.4.5 Tertiary education

*Target 4.3* – By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and high-quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.

*Target 4.b* – By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small-island developing States and African

countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries.

Since the turn of the century, an increased supply of secondary graduates has led to rapid growth in enrolments in tertiary education and an explosion of both local private providers and transnational tertiary education in many Commonwealth member countries. Quality has struggled to keep pace with these changes, as have systems of funding, staff development and regulation. There are growing concerns about the comparability of degrees and the employability of graduates (British Council, 2014). Higher education is very important to a country's economic, social and environmental development and is crucial to innovation and foreign direct investment. Tertiary education plays an essential role in supporting teacher training and curriculum development, and in providing professionals for other sectors that will be major contributors to SDG achievement, such as health (Oketch et al., 2014).

Priorities include:

- *Adequately resourcing tertiary education*

There are at least three reasons for Commonwealth governments contributing adequate resources towards meeting the cost of a tertiary education for its citizens. The first is the returns to higher education benefit society as a whole, including economic growth through human capital development. As Commonwealth countries focus on recovering from the impacts of COVID-19, now is not the time for skimping on this end. The second is that government funding is necessary to address failures in credit markets, notably the difficulty in getting a loan from a private supplier in the absence of suitable collateral. The third reason is equity based: government funding is necessary to support the affordability of a tertiary education for more than just a privileged elite. Despite this, education expansion has not been matched by commensurate growth in public funding. It is time to redress this.

- *Addressing concerns about the non-comparability of qualifications*

The expansion and growing complexity of tertiary provision in many countries have led

to widespread public and employer concerns about the comparability of qualifications across providers. Given the close relationship between socio-economic status and type of institution attended, there are also strong equity reasons for being concerned with ensuring that newer providers deliver comparable quality to existing providers and are seen to do so.

- *Limiting overspecialisation and rationalising the supply of graduates across disciplines in line with broad high-level workforce needs*

A major purpose of higher education is to increase the quantity of high skills available to the economy. However, in their expansion of programmes, providers are often driven by what programmes they can find students for and what they can deliver at the lowest cost. This can lead them to deliver overly specialised courses for which there is no labour market demand, or to over-produce graduates in certain disciplines, especially in the arts and humanities. There is a need for stronger national planning processes around higher education programming and new mechanisms for incentivising offers that are better related to economic needs.

- *Building national strategies for meeting the challenges of offshore provision and graduate mobility*

A significant part of the growth in tertiary education in many countries has come from the rise of offshore providers, whether through distance, blended or face-to-face modes. This brings particular challenges for planning and regulation. In some member countries, the majority of graduates are outside the country and others face particular issues in retaining graduates in certain professions. Strategies for managing brain circulation thus require attention.

- *Creating stronger university–industry partnerships*

In order to pursue both employability and innovation mandates, higher education providers need to build stronger relationships with industries. National policies can play an important role in facilitating this.

- *Supporting student learning and building employability and entrepreneurship skills*

As tertiary education systems expand, so too does the need to support the employability and entrepreneurship skills of learners, regardless of their chosen fields of study. This includes study skills, mathematics and communication skills. As with vocational learners, tertiary graduates are more likely than ever to set up their own enterprises.

- *Strengthening research capacity, particularly for applied research that can support SDG achievement*

Large parts of the Commonwealth higher education system produce little research that is of academic or practical value. There is a need to grow research capacity but to pay particular attention to developing the capacity to do research that is developmentally useful.

- *Increasing the numbers of scholarships and exchange programmes*

Capacity in Commonwealth tertiary institutions cannot be fully developed unless continued attention is given to creating scholarship programmes for staff and students. This may require far more attention to shorter and more flexible programmes. Scholarship and exchange programmes are also important as a means of building a shared Commonwealth higher education space.

- *Finding innovative new ways to fund tertiary education to improve institutional financial sustainability and reduce learner poverty and drop-out*

The final priority under this element is linked to the first: tertiary education expansion has not been matched by a commensurate growth in public funding. Therefore, providers are under great pressure to diversify funding, and attention is required to make sure that it is sustainable and equitable. Families and learners are under increasing pressure to part-fund studies, and it is important that bursary programmes and other forms of financial assistance are designed to reach those who would otherwise be forced to devote too much attention to income generation or are likely to drop out.

### 3.4.6 Adult education and learning

*Target 4.6* – By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

Adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills face multiple sources of disadvantage. They find it more difficult to make use of opportunities in society and to exercise their rights. They are also more likely to be in poor health (UNESCO, 2015). Adult learning is an important element of lifelong learning.

While the target focuses on improvements in literacy and numeracy, there are benefits to be gained for individuals and society from broader adult learning as part of a quality and inclusive lifelong learning opportunities. Opportunities exist in formal systems, non-formal offerings, such as microcredentials not recognised in national qualification and credential frameworks, and via informal opportunities to learn, such as through webinars, podcasts, seminars and learning through experience.

Priorities include:

- *Finding ways to tackle reasons for poor take-up of adult education programmes, particularly among men*

Adults engage with learning programmes for a variety of reasons, and it is important to understand motivations for enrolment and drop-out better.

- *Building into programme design an understanding of the multiple motivations individuals have for adult learning*

An improved understanding of motivations for learning can also assist in the designing of programmes that better meet the needs and capture the interest of actual and potential learners.

- *Designing flexible programmes that minimise barriers to access*

Adults generally need to balance their learning with other commitments. Programmes that fit around existing commitments are far more likely to succeed. Adult learning is also likely to be episodic, and mechanisms are required that respect this and do not require a fixed timescale for programme completion.

- *Constructing new basic adult education programmes that address the set of skills, knowledges and attitudes adults need to live enriched lives*

Adult basic education needs to address the broad human needs of learners and not be focused simply on employment and/or income generation.

- *Addressing the particular challenges of educator development and certification that are found in the adult learning sector*



As with ECCE, much of adult learning takes place outside formal institutions. Most adult education programmes do not require staff to hold particular certification as adult educators, and career progression routes for adult educators are often weak. Without attention to these matters, improvements in adult education quality are likely to be constrained.

- *Increasing the availability of programmes that reintegrate adults into work and society and meet the particular circumstances of migrants and refugees*

Many adults come back to learning programmes at moments of crisis and major life change. For some, this is when in prison, but it may be in rehabilitation after a major injury, on demobilisation, on divorce or on arrival in a new country as a refugee. Adult learning at such points in life thus has a powerful role to play in helping successful integration into new communities and jobs. This deserves greater policy attention.

### 3.4.7 Overarching issues

Some priority areas for action cut across more than one and sometimes all of the six stages of learning that comprise the elements.

Priorities include:

- *Ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development*

Across all elements, SDG 4.7 highlights the need to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of cultures' contribution to sustainable development. Curriculum reform in the Commonwealth must thus focus much of its attention on addressing SDG 4.7 across all education subsystems.

This focus on values resonates with the Commonwealth Charter as does SDG 4.a: Building and upgrading education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and

effective learning environments for all. Again, this imperative must be addressed across the six elements.

- *Increasing the supply of qualified teachers*

SDG 4.c calls on all states to substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small-island developing states. While the language of the sub-goal implies a focus on the two elements of primary and secondary schooling, the above analysis demonstrates that issues of educator development are relevant to all six elements and may indeed be more pressing elsewhere in the system due to a comparative lack of attention historically.

However, educator issues are not reducible to issues of "the supply of qualified teachers". Rather, across all elements, there are broader educator workforce challenges. These include the matters of making the profession attractive to potential entrants, especially those with stronger qualifications; addressing absenteeism; retention; reward; and career progression. Many of these issues have a spatial dimension. Remote rural settings typically face particularly serious challenges across these dimensions, although the challenging circumstances of poorer urban settings should not be forgotten. Also, the emphasis on initial teacher education in SDG 4.c should not be pursued to the detriment of attention to continuing professional development. This is linked further to questions of registration and licensing. All of these matters require attention within national policy frameworks.

- *Facilitating access to advice on learning and career pathways*

As the worlds of both learning and work become increasingly complex and fluid, learners' need for access to impartial and high-quality information, advice and guidance is elevated. These are needed to assist in identifying which educational paths and work opportunities to pursue. A lifelong perspective on education also necessitates a new approach to funding that looks to supporting learners when they need it rather than being tied to a particular age bracket.

- *Recognising in legislation and regulations and by standard setting and quality assurance bodies courses taught online or via a blend of online and on campus experiences*

COVID-19 has accelerated innovations in the different modes that learning is delivered, notably online and blended forms of learning. Standards that are purposive, focused on outcomes, and avoid unnecessary prescription regarding resources and approaches create the space and flexibility necessary to support innovations while at the same time preserving or enhancing quality.

- *Developing appropriate and cost-effective approaches to the recognition of prior learning and transparency and portability of qualifications*

There are difficult policy challenges in trying to balance a desire to promote national qualifications with the attractiveness of international qualifications in a number of sectors. Migration adds to the complexity of this issue, increasing the importance of qualification and credential portability.

Millions of adults have significant amounts of knowledge and skills that are uncertified and this lack of recognition of what they already know holds them back from better wages, more decent work and further formal learning opportunities. Developing better systems to signal what people know provides learners with both confidence and proof of their abilities. It avoids having to relearn what they already know and, thereby, facilitates and speeds education pathways. It signals to employers the capabilities and competencies of candidates. And attests to the skills of prospective migrants. In other words, there are strong equity and competitiveness rationales for recognising prior learning in informal and non-formal contexts.

- *Monitoring and analysing big data to provide early alerts that disruptive change is coming*

Advances in large data sets that may be analysed computationally can reveal patterns, trends and associations at speed. Done well,

predictive analytics could provide early alerts that change is coming that threaten to disrupt learning if anticipatory actions are not taken.

- *Planning for contingencies so that learning continues should changes occur and could otherwise compromise learning*

Resilient education systems plan and resource for contingencies. Contingency plans set out a course of action for events that may or may not happen but, should they, could disrupt learning. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of being prepared. Education systems need to prepare for all contingencies where the risk and likelihood of disruption is high.

- *Providing guidance and training to teachers and students in online and blended pedagogies and the use of VLE/LMS*

Virtual learning environments (VLEs) or learning management systems (LMSs) simplify lesson-building and delivery for educators and its uptake by students, particularly when working with files and online resources. Ensuring the proficiency of both parties in their use is critical, particularly as modes of online and blended learning continue to evolve.

- *Extend the reach of internet and access to digital devices*

COVID-19 demonstrated the risk of loss of learning for digitally excluded learners. There are three vital dimensions to digital inclusion: affordability, access and ability. That is, relevant is whether students: come from households that can afford sufficient digital resources so that they do not have to compete with others in their household for their use; have sufficient internet connectivity or data necessary to access learning online; and have the ability or support to make best use of the platforms and other technological tools used to facilitate learning online. Policies that address each of these dimensions are essential to ensuring the equity and quality of learning when it moves online.

## 4. Implementation

Many countries find it easier to make policy than to implement it (SADC and UNESCO, 2013). Yet policy does not have full meaning until it is enacted.

Figure 4.1 summarises the steps necessary for successful implementation. This is only one option; member countries can also adopt other approaches depending on their local context and existing implementation plans.

### 4.1 Agree national education priorities

The first step is to agree national education priorities. The CEPF can assist in the identification process of the alternative ways described in Section 1.2. That is, it can be used for thinking afresh about national education policy objectives and prioritising those most likely to support progress towards the SDG 4 targets. Alternatively, it may be used to frame existing objectives and highlight gaps to be addressed for the purpose of advancing SDG 4 targets. The Appendix shares a template that Commonwealth countries may wish to employ for these and other purposes when identifying, refining or reviewing national priorities.

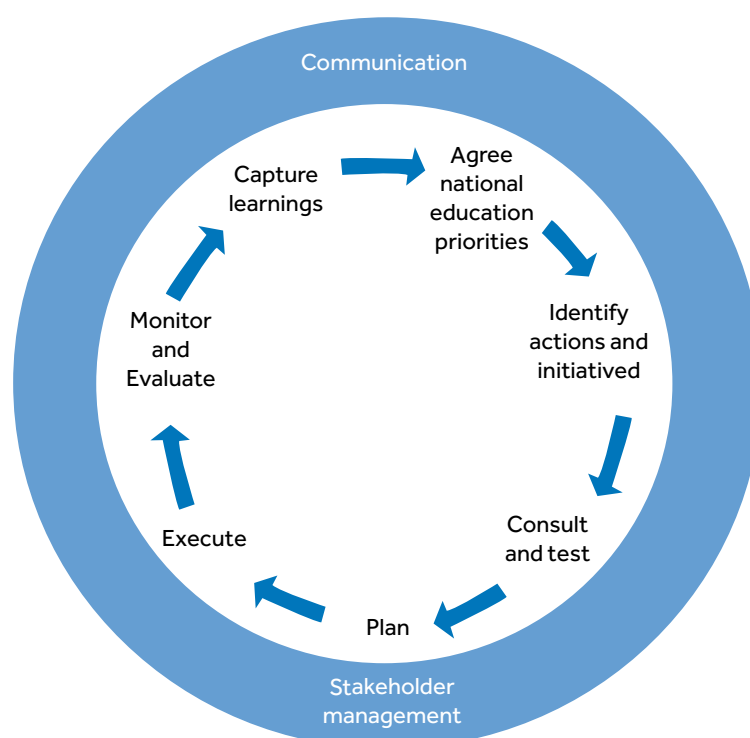
While the motivation and detail of what is prioritised might emanate from all levels and places in education systems, ideally they are supported from the very top. That is, to accelerate progress, Commonwealth Education Ministers need to own and champion them and drive their implementation. That way, Ministers can deliver on their accountabilities for progress on the SDG targets.

### 4.2 Identify actions and initiatives

The next step is to identify actions and initiatives. These should be causally linked to national education priorities. The CEPF can aid ideation. It can also assist in understanding the intended purposes and logic of actions and initiatives of like Commonwealth countries and elsewhere. This was one of the key benefits a large proportion of those consulted have associated with the CEPF.

SADC and Pacific nations have already made good progress having actively participated in the Commonwealth Secretariat led workshops. The intent is to run similar workshops for member countries in other Commonwealth regions. The workshops have provided valuable opportunities to hear and learn from other like Commonwealth

Figure 4.1 Education policy implementation cycle.



countries regarding the actions and initiatives they have implemented. This provides a rich source of ideas from which Commonwealth countries can draw upon and adapt to their local contexts and priorities. However, the workshops are necessarily time constrained and, therefore, unlikely to be comprehensive in their coverage of the full suite of Enablers for all stages of learning. It is important that the momentum is maintained and that the process of identifying actions and initiatives continues once workshop participants return to their workplaces. Through these workshops and engagements, the Commonwealth Secretariat helps identify critical issues and gaps in the planning and implementation of the policies. Furthermore, where possible, it provides technical support and guidance to assist with identifying actions, developing tailored solutions and preparing to implement initiatives. The support can be provided in various forms, ranging from extensive workshop arrangements and remotely providing virtual support to engaging local sectoral experts to provide the appropriate technical assistance and process support. Findings from the Pacific and SADC rollouts noted that these workshops offer an excellent opportunity for peer learning. In addition, through a pairing approach, member countries can share and exchange good practices against an agreed needs-based plan.

### 4.3 Consult and test

Thinking about how education actions and initiatives will be implemented is an integral yet sometimes overlooked stage of implementation. Consultation and policy testing processes, such as trials and pilots, are some of the ways practical insights can be integrated early. They allow for a better understanding of the context that education policies are being designed for and the barriers that may need to be navigated in order to minimise the risk of policy failure. Just as importantly, it helps in the other direction. That is, it grows education practitioners' and other stakeholders' understanding, support and ownership of policy intent. In that way, all are driving in the same direction towards shared outcomes.

It is at this stage that a focus should be given to engaging external non-governmental partners and stakeholders. These stakeholders should be considered, engaged and consulted while developing actions and initiatives to gain a more holistic view of agreed priority actions within the education sector as a whole. The current progress

towards SDG 4 and the challenge imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have made it impossible for many governments to work, operate and meet targets in silos. Therefore, there is an evolving need to work together, establish collaborations, strengthen public-private partnerships and engage all local and regional or international bodies to ensure support and cooperation for progressing collectively towards the SDG 4 targets.

### 4.4 Plan

The importance of planning cannot be stressed enough. While it may be cliché to point out that "failure to plan is planning to fail", it makes it no less true. When we are talking about the quality and equity of learning of young and old in Commonwealth countries the cost of failure is further distancing from the SDG targets.

At this step, it is important to:

- *Take on board the lessons from consultation and testing.* These may be relevant to some or all of the matters covered in the bullet points that follow. For instance, it may have revealed the policy confusion of some or highlighted previously unanticipated risks.
- *Be clear about what is intended.* To ensure that best use is made of scarce education resources, there should be clarity about what is in and out of scope, thereby avoiding creep or misdirection. SMART goals should be set. That is, they should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely. SMART goals can provide a basis for monitoring and evaluation (refer below).
- *Break down the work necessary to execute actions and initiatives into manageable tasks and sequence them over time.* Interdependencies should be identified and resource needs – people and other resources – assessed. Provision should be made within Budgets for the calculated cost of resources and activities.
- *Determine effective governance arrangements to support implementation.* Clear objectives and appropriate accountability, authority and reporting regimes are necessary components of the effective governance of education policy actions and initiatives. When assigning responsibilities and accountabilities, there will likely be a need to differentiate between who is responsible for the overall implementation

of the umbrella education policies and plans of Commonwealth countries, the specific actions and initiatives identified within them, and the monitoring and evaluation of the same (UNESCO-IIEP, 2015).

- Within Commonwealth country education departments, leadership by senior executives is necessary to drive implementation, mobilise resources and devolve responsibilities to the levels necessary to ensure policy success. Feedback from Commonwealth countries consulted is that it is difficult to drive policy implementation when responsibilities rest with tiers of management that lack organisational gravitas and/or access to resources.
- *Anticipate and assess risks and determine appropriate responses for those assessed to be high.* Risks may be operational, financial, strategic, reputational or compliance-related. High risks to actions and initiatives have a high likelihood of occurring and/or high severity. The impact of COVID-19 on the operations of many was severe. It provided a lesson hard-learned on the value of forethought. Appropriate responses may include avoidance, treatment, transference, acceptance and contingency. For instance, if

there is a high risk of reduced public funding, then a response that treats the risk would be to approach potential third-party funders.

## 4.5 Execute

This is the step where the plans laid are put into effect. At the point of execution, it is important to:

- *Ensure that sufficient resources are mobilised and targeted to planned ends.* That is, teams are convened, tasks assigned and Budgets and other resources are allocated, as planned.
- *Put in place meetings and systems to coordinate progress.* This is important to ensure that actions and initiatives get off to a good start, momentum is maintained, and that institutional knowledge is developed and shared, which can be important when key people move on.
- *Strengthen education management systems.* As part of the Nadi Declaration, Ministers recognised the need to strengthen education management systems. They agreed to collect and use accurate, timely and relevant data to assure quality and support the evaluation of results against targets (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). This is important to support evidence-based actions and





initiatives and ensure that the ground is laid for monitoring and evaluation (refer below). To support these and related ends, the Commonwealth Secretariat has developed an Effective Management of Education Systems (EMES) Toolkit. The EMES Toolkit is intended to serve as a 'high-level' and 'cross-cutting' toolkit, consolidating key data points to inform effective programming and interventions.

- *Be agile.* Robert Burns once observed that “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry” (sic). There was a sense by some of those consulted that this is not always appreciated as well as it should. Even when much energy and thought has gone into the preceding steps, the best laid plans may still come up against “execution gaps”. Execution gaps represent disconnects between what is envisaged and reality. They may arise for all sorts of reasons, such as resources being pulled off and moved on to competing priorities, as can so often occur in education ministries and departments. When gaps are encountered, initial plans need to be adapted so that goals are still met, even though the approach, coverage, timing or quality may change.

#### 4.6 Monitor and evaluate

Arrangements that support the effective monitoring and evaluation of actions and initiatives developed under the CEPF include the:

- *Periodic use of the EMES Toolkit.* This allows for insightful analysis of an education system's current performance, including relevant challenges and opportunities. The EMES Toolkit comprises a 'Dashboard' of high-level indicators to inform interventions and policy-decisions, thus facilitating the effective management of education systems. It also provides guidance for Ministers and senior policymakers to inform effective use of the reporting tools included in the 'Dashboard', including explicit guidance on likely effective and ineffective approaches, as well as “Quick Wins” and resilience programming.
- *Design of a system of targets and indicators.* To some extent, the SDGs and targets have this covered at the outcome level. The EMES Toolkit provides clear monitoring of progress towards SDG 4 Indicators. More regular

reporting by all Commonwealth countries would enable better use to be made of the data and the Tool for monitoring and evaluation purposes. It would also facilitate benchmarking against the progress of like countries. A challenge for Commonwealth countries is to view the SDGs and their targets in context and have a sense of what is achievable by when. A further challenge is attribution as developments outside of the actions and initiatives under consideration may impact outcomes.

- Outcome-level targets and indicators should be supplemented by the same closer to the ground, thus providing insights on whether specific actions and initiatives are being implemented well, within the budgets, timelines and scope intended. At the planning stage, it is advised above that SMART goals be identified. These can provide the basis for identifying targets and indicators at the activity level.
- *Assignment of clear responsibilities for monitoring and evaluation.* This may be within the same or another department. Alternatively, an outside party could be brought in to bring a fresh perspective. A balance will need to be struck between being close enough to be familiar with what is being implemented, yet sufficiently distanced to see the bigger picture and formulate an independent view.
- *Adoption of a planned approach.* This may include periodic reporting cycles, a regular cycle of data gathering and analysis, holding regular meetings, and identifying at the outset when an action or initiative will be evaluated. Preferably, evaluations are scheduled for the mid-term and end point of actions and initiatives.

#### 4.7 Capture learnings

The purpose of monitoring and evaluation is not to police but to provide insights on whether actions and initiatives are advancing their desired ends, identify early and overcome issues and barriers, and derive lessons to inform and enrich the development of future policies and programmes. It is, therefore, important to capture the learnings and nurture a constructive culture of continuous improvement.

## 4.8 Communication and stakeholder management

Traditional project and programme planning approaches advise developing a communication and engagement plan at the planning stage of the implementation cycle. The suggestion here is that is not soon enough. Careful thought needs to be given to both messaging and engagement at each stage of the implementation cycle depicted above. Particularly, at the outset, where the ownership of education policies by Commonwealth Education Ministers and community support for actions and initiatives are key.

Communication and stakeholder management are of particular importance for policies, actions and initiatives designed to enhance the quality and equity of education for all stages of life and learning given the complexities of the authorising environment, the composition of teams and the

extensiveness of external stakeholders. Within the authorising environment are Commonwealth Education Ministers, ministerial advisors, the education department, ministry executives and other ministers and departments. Teams may draw on resources within, across and outside of education systems. Stakeholders may include learners, providers, industry and others.

For each – key players in the authorising environment, people in the project hierarchy and external stakeholders – a communication and engagement plan should be developed that addresses the basic questions of: *why* is communication and engagement important, *who* to communicate and engage with, *when*, *what* to communicate and engage, and *how*. Good communication and engagement can be a key determinant of the success and continuity of the policies, actions and initiatives of Commonwealth countries.

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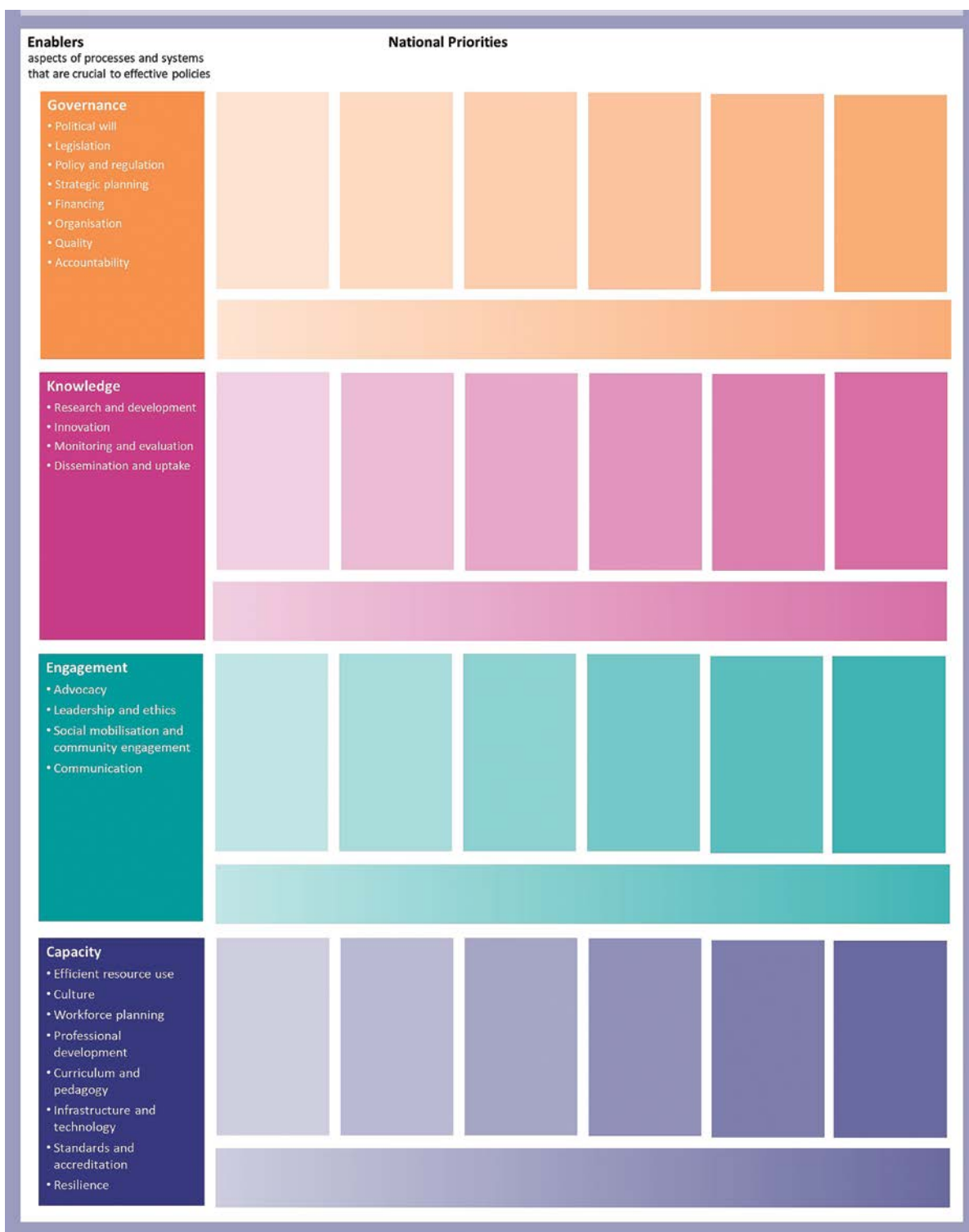
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# Appendix A

## National priorities template

<b>SDG 4</b>	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all					
<b>Cornerstones</b> guiding principles that drive a Commonwealth view of what constitutes a good education system	Equitable Access	Quality	Relevance	Sustainability		
<b>Elements</b> educational subsystems	ECCE	Primary School	Secondary School	TVET	Higher Education	Adult Learning
<b>Targets</b>	<p>4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable ...</p> <p>4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development</p> <p>4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all</p> <p>4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers ...</p>					
	<p>4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education</p>	<p>4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes</p>	<p>4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university</p> <p>4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries ... for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training ...</p>	<p>4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy</p>		<p>4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship</p>



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