All at Sea: Small Island Universities in the Indian Ocean

Dennis Hardy

There are now more than 200 million university students across the world, twice as many as at the start of the century.[1] When a history is written of global change in recent decades, this remarkable rate of growth will surely deserve its own chapter. There can be few, if any, countries where this is not relevant and the implications are far-reaching, cultural as well as economic. Certainly, to look at a specific region, the Indian Ocean, each year sees new graduates stepping forward to receive their degree parchments; they are often the first in their families to do so. Opportunities now abound for access to higher education but further growth is not without its challenges. This paper reviews the experience of small island states in this part of the world, and acknowledges that higher education is not only growing but also changing. Looking ahead, it is not just a question of providing more of the same but of innovating too. Future students will become ever more selective and only the best of universities can hope to prosper.

Globalization and higher education

Apart from its intrinsic value, higher education is now a global commodity. It is traded between nations in the same way as other goods and services in the world economy. National boundaries are transcended as providers as well as consumers go in search of the best options.

> *Economic rationality and commercial interests became the driving force to promote cross-border flows in education and in the production of graduates for the global labor market.*[2]

Higher education has become just one more manifestation of globalization, and governments have been quick to see financial advantage in its further development. Quite apart from its secondary effects, it may even become a pillar in itself of their respective economies. In Australia, for example, on the eve of the 2020 pandemic, the number of foreign students totalled 720,000, contributing A$37.6 billion to the national economy.[3]

The internationalization of higher education reflects the fact that the world is interconnected more than ever before. Contact between countries is nothing new but over the past three decades or so this has transcended into ‘globalization’.

> *The sudden increase in the exchange of knowledge, trade and capital around the world, driven by technological innovation, from the internet to shipping containers, thrust the term into the limelight.*[4]

The electronic revolution in data transmission has been the most important factor. One cannot disagree with the above contention that containers have revolutionized maritime trade, just as the phenomenal growth in air traffic has transformed patterns of leisure as well as business. But physical changes such as these have been secondary by far to the impact of electronic forms of communication. Data flows, more or less instantaneous, are at the heart of modern international trade and financial transactions. Money can be transferred from one country to another at the touch of a button; orders for goods and services can be made from remote locations that once would have been beyond the orbit of mainstream commerce. Through the ever-widening use of laptops and cell phones, people across the world can be a part of global networks.

Although Covid-19 disrupted supply lines that had until then been taken largely for granted, globalization is already adapting to the challenge. Instead of expensive and time-consuming business travel and trips to international conferences, rapid improvements in the ease and quality of video conferencing and virtual meetings are offering different ways to interact. In schools and colleges, necessity has accelerated the use of online teaching and learning. For all the difficulties encountered in the 'new normal', the essential motivation to stay connected remains as strong as ever. And there is no reason to doubt that individuals will continue to find new ways to enhance their skills and career opportunities. This, in turn, is the product of a coalescence of interests, where governments and students alike find common ground.

Governments, for instance, see the necessity of raising education standards to enable them to compete in international markets. Certainly, in a region like the Indian Ocean, where there has been a transition from an historic dependence on primary products towards the development of knowledge-based economies, the introduction of new skill sets has been essential. For nations embarking on this long-term change, tourism has offered an intermediate stopping point, combining a traditional reliance on the environment with the application of modern services. As the ongoing pandemic has shown, this, however, has its own vulnerabilities, revealing the economic weakness of relying too much on any one activity. An enduring lesson will surely be that a more diverse economic approach is needed, calling for different and more adaptable skills.

At the same time, as well as the incentive of governments to support the development of a competent labour force, a new generation of students is intent on escaping the limitations that ruled the lives of their parents; for them, the future lies, not on the land nor in small-town businesses, but in modern offices and new industries in the burgeoning cities. Moreover, generic figures conceal the remarkable fact of a gender revolution, in which female students

often outnumber their male counterparts. This has become a trend that is evident across the world:

> *Panama, Sri Lanka, Argentina, Cuba, Jamaica and Brunei – to name a few – have some of the highest female to male ratios in higher education. In Malaysia, more than 64 percent of university enrollments are female – a number which has increased consistently for years.*[5]

Responding to the rapid growth in demand for places, not only have universities expanded but also different modes of study are now available. To illustrate the changes that are underway, the rest of this paper will focus on the example of small island states in the Indian Ocean.

Knowledge hubs in the Indian Ocean

There is a profusion of islands across the Indian Ocean but most are not themselves nations – as, for example, the many islands that constitute Indonesia – or, alternatively, they are themselves too large to be categorized as small island states. Singapore, for instance, is included in some classifications of small island states, but – because of the size of its population (close to 5.9 million) and the advanced standing of its higher education institutions – it is not part of this review.[6] Likewise, another island state, Sri Lanka is generally regarded as being too large to be grouped with much smaller entities, and that accounts in this study for the exclusion of Madagascar too. Instead, the coverage will be restricted to the following: Mauritius, Maldives, Comoros and Seychelles, and also (although they are French *départements* rather than autonomous states), the islands of Réunion and Mayotte.

There are important differences, as well as commonalities, between each of these, which has a bearing on the resultant pattern of higher education and other social institutions. For a start, until the second half of the twentieth century, all of these island territories remained under the colonial rule of either Britain or France. In the second half of the twentieth century, national independence was achieved by all except Réunion, which in 1946 assumed the status of a *département d'outre-mer*, as did Mayotte (though not until 2011, following a referendum when the people of that island chose to be part of France rather than Comoros). English and French remain the dominant languages across the region, although there is a growing recognition of mother tongues.

A second feature is that these island states all have a background of plantation economies, in which a majority of the population would have worked on the land. Spices and other crops were grown for export, with annual returns dependent on the vagaries of the weather coupled with the uncertainties of world markets. In the early years of their existence, the various colonies were reliant on slave labour, until, during the nineteenth century, Britain and then France ended the practice. In many respects, though, the material conditions of otherwise free labourers barely improved and poverty was rife for the remainder of the colonial era. When indentured workers were brought in from the Indian sub-continent, they endured conditions little different from those of the established workforce.

The result in all cases was a mixed ethnicity. As well as the French and British settlers, slavery resulted in the forced migration of large numbers of labourers and their families from Madagascar and the African mainland. To the mix was added the Indian element, as well as Chinese traders and shopkeepers. From the ethnic variety, in three of the islands under review (Mauritius, Seychelles and Réunion) a distinctive Kreol culture emerged, with its own language and cultural traits. This varies in detail from one island to another but, to differing degrees, it has become recognized in its own right and can now claim a small but evolving place as a subject in higher education.[7]

Independence was a watershed in the development of these nations, although resultant changes did not occur overnight. As already noted, a common trajectory has been one of less dependence on primary products and more on other activities, in particular, tourism. The islands can all boast a tropical environment that appeals not only to visitors from Europe but also from China, India and the Middle East. With their over-dependence on tourism sharply exposed, however, a need to diversify their respective economies has become ever more urgent. To facilitate this process, higher education has an essential role and it is not surprising that universities are of growing importance in the various economies. This trend is by no means uniform and, although there are some commonalities between all of the states, Mauritius is undoubtedly further ahead than the others.

Mauritius

Mauritius, with a population of about 1.3 million, is larger than the other small island states in the Indian Ocean, so, in that respect, its experience is not typical. Its history of higher education is not typical either, with the idea of its own university dating back to when it was still a colony.[8] Repeatedly rejected on the grounds that it was unrealistic and would result in a second-rate institution where qualifications would not be recognized by the rest of the world, the tide finally turned in its favour in the early 1960s. Legislation was passed in 1965 (three years before independence) to herald the birth of the University of Mauritius. The university has grown steadily since then, widening its scope of provision and increasing student enrolment to a figure in excess of 12,000.[9]

Nor is this the only public university, with successive governments recognizing the importance of higher education to enable Mauritius to diversify from its traditional economic base of sugar cane, and to compete effectively in the post-colonial world. With an eye, especially, on high-level vocational education in Management and ICT, the University of Technology Mauritius (UTM) was established in 2000. It has embraced other subjects since then and now provides programmes for some 4500 students. More recently, in 2012, two more public universities were added. One was the Open University of Mauritius, with about 8000 students following undergraduate and postgraduate programmes through distance learning. The other, the Université des Mascareignes, is a joint venture with the University of Limoges, designed to offer programmes modelled on the French system.

As well as these four public universities, there are two independent institutes, named after Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore respectively, which are jointly funded by the Mauritian and Indian governments; and four more with a specialist function and jointly classified as public providers.[10] Together, these ten institutions offer a comprehensive menu of provision that alone puts Mauritius in a different league from other small island states in the region. This, however, is only part of the story, with public provision matched by a varied assortment of privately-funded projects.[11]

At the latest count, private initiatives numbered close to fifty and range from branch campuses of foreign universities at one extreme, to what might be little more than offices to process applications and facilitate a link with parent institutions overseas. The lure for private investment is not just the young population in Mauritius itself but the vast potential of the African continent, where demand for university education far outstrips supply. Investors see Mauritius as a stable base for their various projects, which is promoted as a higher education hub for the wider region. One successful example is the African Leadership College, which opened its purpose-built campus in 2015, complete with residential accommodation.[12]

For all the country's aspirations as a regional hub for higher education, however, the Mauritian system is certainly not without its problems. In relative terms, the public sector is underfunded, revealed by mediocre-quality campuses, by academic salaries that do not match those of overseas competitors, and by limited support for research. Another recurring problem is that the increase in student places has not been matched by job opportunities on graduation: the appealing catchphrase of 'one graduate per family' was within a few years redefined by critics as 'one unemployed graduate per family'.[13] Yet still the goal of providing more places is pursued. With an eye to the domestic market, at the start of 2019, the then prime minister announced in future there would be no fees for students in public universities. While this was popular in some quarters, the change was also decried for being an election tactic that would take away much-needed funding from the sector as a whole.[14]

In a bid to increase investment, a dominant feature has been the promotion of international recruitment, especially from Africa. However, apart from the fact that the number of overseas students has fallen well short of targets, student expectations have not always been met. Quality has too often been the key issue. Highlighting the difficulties, there have been some high-profile cases where deals have been struck with foreign providers without first undertaking due diligence.[15]

Réunion

With a population of 860,000, Réunion has the second largest population of the small island states under review. There is only one university on the island, the Université de la Réunion, dating from 1982, currently with an annual enrolment of 15,000 students.[16] Because Réunion is part of the European Union, students enjoy the same rights as their counterparts in mainland France, including access to universities across that continent.

In theory, citizens of Réunion, with their dual French and EU status, should be in a privileged position. Through its policies for the 'outermost regions', a strategy for the *département* is designed to:

> *… help them create new opportunities for their people, boost innovation in sectors like agriculture, fisheries or tourism, while deepening the cooperation with neighbour countries.*[17]

Projects are directed to modernize agriculture and fish processing to increase food supplies for domestic consumption as well as exports; enhance the skills of young people and improve their chances of employment; and link the local university with research institutes in mainland France, as well as encouraging collaboration with neighbours elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. The potential of the fully-fledged university in this context is clear.

In practice, for all the benefits, Réunion has recorded constantly high levels of unemployment, currently close to 30% of the working-age population.[18] Tourism has filled some of the gaps

left by the once-dominant sugar industry (still important but not as much as previously), but transport around the island is difficult and infrastructure not as well developed as it might be. Given the extent of poverty (an estimated half of the population lives close to or below the poverty line),[19] Réunion bears little relationship to mainland France. Education is mandatory up to the age of sixteen but amongst the older citizens there are still pockets of illiteracy. Each year, more graduates come onto the labour market but they tend to outstrip the ability of the economy to absorb them. Many students take the opportunity to leave the island in favour of making a life in Europe, but that only removes some of the most skilled workers who might otherwise contribute to the development of their homeland.

In some ways, one might wonder why France values this distant island, to the extent that it is, administratively, part of its European territory. There may be different answers but the most consistent explanation is that France has adroitly maintained its hold on a large number of overseas possessions, not all of them necessarily inhabited. Its days as a colonial power may be over but its global influence is certainly not. As well as five *départements d'outre-mer*, it has jurisdiction (sometimes disputed) over what are termed *collectivities*, located in clusters in the southern Indian Ocean, in the Caribbean, and in the Pacific. These territories are prized for their extensive marine jurisdictions which offer exclusive fishing rights (the tiny island of Tromelin, for instance, has an EEZ of 280,000 square kilometres and is a matter of dispute with Mauritius) and also for security reasons. The latter is especially true for Réunion and Mayotte, and also the dispersed islands further south, known as the French Southern and Antarctic Lands. Together these scattered possessions are in commanding positions in relation to shipping routes between the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic.

If, as one will always expect, the national university takes its cue from priorities in the region there is no shortage of topics for academic programmes as well as research, whether the island's unique volcanic landscape or the importance of tourism, whether geopolitical and security issues or marine biology. Together with its French identity, there is undoubtedly the potential to play a more assertive role in the development of higher education not only within its own country but also in the region. Currently, however, a backlog of socio-economic problems inhibits the kind of progress that should be possible.

Comoros

The Union of the Comoros has a population a little in excess of 850,000, slightly fewer than Réunion and a little more than the Maldives. Following independence in 1975, its recent political history, however, is fractious and this has contributed to limited progress on the higher education front. The country is also desperately poor, with an annual *per capita* income of $700 and a quarter of the population below the poverty line. Many still rely on subsistence farming and suffer most in the face of the seasonal cyclones which cut across the region. There is much that should attract tourists to the volcanic landscape and the coasts of the three islands

that constitute the nation, but international transport links are poor and the domestic infrastructure is lacking. Potential tourists are also wary of health risks, including but not confined to malaria.

In spite of its inherent problems, the University of the Comoros was established in 2003 and has a presence on the three islands. At the latest count, about 15,000 students attend the university. There is also a private institution, a branch campus of Kampala University. On the surface, this might suggest adequate provision but the reality is rather different. From an initial start of 1250 students when it opened, numbers rose rapidly in the first five years to 6500 and have continued to do so since. The demand for higher education is clearly there but rapid growth has been at the expense of quality. In the words of a senior UNESCO official (writing in 2016):

> *Student numbers are continuing to rise rapidly, but the number of academic staff is not likely to experience any significant increase and there are no plans to build new academic infrastructure … other problems affecting teaching and learning conditions include regular staff and student strikes related to delays in the payment of salaries and poor living conditions on campuses, including inadequate student transport, poor water and electricity supply, lack of access to the internet and an absence of student restaurants.*[20]

The above view has been endorsed in a number of international reports, which have pointed to:

> *… problems facing the higher education sector in Comoros such as low performance, unemployment of university graduates and brain drain.*[21]

One way to improve quality is through collaboration with established universities overseas. Comoros is a Sunni Muslim nation and attempts have been made to tie up with universities in the Middle East, but so far with limited success. There is little evidence, too, of productive links with other universities in the Indian Ocean region. Few students from Comoros can afford to join courses overseas and when they have done so (often studying in France) they tend not to return.

Maldives

Fourth in terms of size is the Republic of Maldives, a middle-income country with a population of more than half a million. Until the second decade of the present century, local degree-level programmes were restricted to three private colleges: Mandhu College, Cyryx College and Villa College. The establishment in 2011 of the Maldives National University happened none too soon and an independent report published in that same year observed that:

> *… higher education enrolment in the Maldives is low for a middle-income country. If only university degree level enrolment is considered, the gross higher education enrolment rate is about*

6 percent … Countries at the per capita income level of the Maldives would normally have a larger gross enrolment rate in higher education.[22]

In its short history the national university has set out its stall, with a structure and programmes that would generally be recognizable in any university. Reflecting the country's religious and cultural traditions, a distinctive feature is the provision of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Shari'ah Law and Islamic Studies. It currently has a student population in the region of 10,000 and of its first graduates approximately 75% were women. Many students from the Maldives also take the option of going overseas for their higher education, often to a Muslim country like Malaysia or Indonesia.

To the extent that a national university will respond most readily to the challenges facing successive governments, its agenda is self-evident. Apart from doing what all universities seek to do, namely, to raise the general level of skills amongst the population, there are some important priorities that it can help to address. One results from its unique geography as an extensive archipelago, extending from north to south over a distance of some 800 kilometres. About 200 from a total of 1200 islands are inhabited, but one feature they all share is that they are barely above sea level, with none rising above 1.8 metres. Inevitably, there is great concern about the likely effects of climate change and the prospect that even a modest rise in sea level will submerge much of the barely-surfacing land.

A second agenda item must be the dependence of the economy on tourism. Fishing is important, too, but economic progress over the past few decades has been driven by the large number of tourists attracted to the otherwise remote tropical islands. Shortly before the pandemic, the number of visitors totalled 1.5 million. As elsewhere, the sudden fall in numbers cut deep into this crucial source of revenue, leaving the country with the question of how to meet the resultant deficit and, perhaps too, find ways to reduce its dependence on tourism.

Finally, the location of the Maldives, close to the Indian sub-continent and traditionally with strong ties in that direction, is one aspect of contemporary geopolitical issues. For India, especially, it is important to maintain these ties, although over the past decade China has increased its own influence. Not only investment in infrastructure but also a growing number of tourists from the PRC has already upset the traditional balance of relations with India. The Maldives also features on America's strategic map, with that nation's own concerns about China's expansion into the Indian Ocean.

Whether for research or degree programmes, ideally both, there is great scope for the university to strengthen its role. But there is also a long way to go before it achieves this.

Mayotte

Mayotte is one of four islands in what was formerly French-administered Comoros; strictly speaking, it comprises two islands but one is much larger than the other and the two are joined by a short causeway. Mayotte voted overwhelmingly in successive referenda (at the time of independence and after) not to join the Union of the Comoros; instead, the people opted to retain ties with France. Eventually, the island was granted the same departmental status as Réunion. This is a source of considerable grievance for its neighbouring state, which argues, with the support of the United Nations, that Mayotte should be part of Comoros. The situation is aggravated by the traffic of illegal migrants seeking a better standard of living and perhaps, too, French citizenship. If so, they are often disappointed; not only is their arrival fiercely resisted by Mayottians, who see it as putting extra strain on essential services, but life is not all they might be expecting. Although Mayotte is a French department it is by far the most impoverished of them all:

> *77% of the population lives below the poverty line and 30% of households do not have running water. The employment rate is the lowest, the illiteracy rate the highest, and the largest share of the population remains below the poverty line. In 2017, 40% of households lived in very precarious dwellings, mainly 'tin huts'.*[23]

Given the conditions that exist, and with a total population of about 280,000, it is not surprising that investment in higher education has so far been quite restricted. In 2011, the year that it was granted departmental status, the French government established the University Center for Training and Research.[24] It is a first step towards forming a fully-fledged university and is intended to offer local access to teacher training and the first levels of higher education programmes. Close links are provided with universities in mainland France, especially Aix-Marseille and Montpelier, and students are prepared locally for the award of national higher education diplomas. In its first decade, student numbers have grown to 1500, including 360 at Master's level. A strong selling point for local candidates is that the withdrawal rate is lower than if they studied in France and, on completion, more than four in five can find jobs in Mayotte.

Seychelles

With a population currently below 100,000, Seychelles is the smallest of the countries under review. As a small island state, it has done well to achieve high-income status and it fares well, too, in relation to important social indicators in the region and across Africa. After fifteen years of one-party rule, it reintroduced democratic elections in 1993 and has in this century edged its way from a centrally planned to a market-economy approach. The ruling party, which, in spite of multi-party elections, continued to hold power, was finally toppled in October 2020, with both the presidential post and parliament now in the hands of the former opposition. Like other countries in the region, the economy is heavily dependent on tourism, and is urgently looking for ways to diversify.

Since independence in 1976, following a long period of British administration, education has been a priority and literacy amongst the population is close to 100%. Education is free throughout the system, which includes compulsory primary and secondary schooling, leading to tertiary education in the form of post-secondary colleges. Until 2009, a selection of students who wanted to progress to degree courses overseas was supported with scholarships but, for the rest, opportunities were limited to those who could afford to meet their own expenses. The higher education system was expensive for the country and also partial in its provision, so in 2007 the then president, James Michel, announced plans for Seychelles to have its own university. That would not only offset some of the costs and offer local access, but was also intended to stem a 'brain drain' in which new graduates chose to stay in their host country.

In spite of the logic of the proposal, and the prestige offered to the small state, there was a mixed reaction across the political spectrum. For all its potential advantages, it was questioned whether Seychelles really had sufficient numbers to justify a national university. President Michel was undeterred, however, and in 2009 the University of Seychelles opened its doors to the first student cohort. Recognizing that questions would be asked about the quality of provision, a decision was taken to offer degrees provided by prestigious universities, especially the University of London and the Université de Paris 1 (Sorbonne). To boost numbers, two training organizations, one for tourism and the other for management, were incorporated within the university, as was the country's teaching institute, but their different missions led, in turn, to a return to their original status as separate colleges. The University of Seychelles also failed to attract more than a small number of foreign students, partly because of the absence of suitable residential accommodation. One attempt by the government to allow a medical university to operate in the country was ill-considered, and confusion arising from the similarity of its name, the University of Seychelles American Institute of Medicine, led to unwanted fallout and damaged reputations.[25]

In most respects, though, the university has had a beneficial impact, offering local students (including those for whom going abroad for three years was never a practical option) the opportunity to gain a well-respected degree on the main island of Mahé. Masters' programmes were soon added to the undergraduate menu, and research centres were formed to focus on subjects of importance to the nation. But, in other respects, progress has been impeded by a failure of past administrations to acknowledge the potential of a national university. It made little sense to continue a parallel scheme in which scholarships were available to students for overseas programmes in subjects which were already on offer locally. Nor did it help when government representatives signed agreements with their foreign counterparts for one-way deals that reduced the number of students locally. From the outset, too, and in spite of promises that the issue would soon be resolved, the university has shared its campus with a post-secondary institution, to the disadvantage of both.

In contrast with this past record, there are strong signs that the new government will support plans for a national university. It is hoped that this support will include the development of a modern campus with facilities (including residential accommodation) that will attract overseas students. If it specializes in subjects that are unique to Seychelles (like the Blue Economy and the country's protected tropical environment), there is every chance that the university will be able to increase student recruitment from overseas and make a direct contribution to national development.

Mixed messages

Reflecting on these different trajectories, one message is clear. In small island states across the Indian Ocean, more students are pursuing higher education than ever before. To match the surge in demand, new universities have been opened and existing ones now cater for larger classes. Foreign providers have moved in to meet some of the extra demand. As well as school-leavers, programmes are customized to suit the needs of mature students. More postgraduate courses are on offer, along with those for first degrees. In response to the closure of campuses during the coronavirus pandemic, opportunities were created to study from home. Online teaching and learning methods are being refined through experience, made possible by improved and user-friendly technologies. In addition to local provision, those who can obtain scholarships, or whose families can afford the fees and other expenses, will often choose to study abroad.

All of this adds up to a positive message. In most cases, in a very short time higher education has taken its place in each of the small island states across the region. It is an essential part of the post-colonial transition from primary production to knowledge economies. Inevitably, though, in such a short period there is only so much that can be done and it is not surprising that one sees a shortfall between the goals of providers and what they have so far achieved. Like a good wine, universities take time to mature and it will be some years before one can reasonably expect a vintage. Or is even that unrealistic? Can universities ever hope to flourish in such small countries, distant from their own neighbours and from the world's major cities?[26]

The context is not promising. These are not rich countries and the potential for investment is limited, with the result that facilities are often not as good as students expect. Sometimes, buildings are shared with other users and facilities are of a poor quality. Libraries are enormously expensive to start from scratch and collections of books and journals are necessarily selective. Nor is this necessarily compensated by fit-for-purpose information and communications technology. In spite of a heavy dependence on the internet for learning and teaching, the broadband capacity (invariably, across the various countries as well in particular

universities) falls well short of the demands made. Quality issues loom large and even the best of the local providers is not immune to difficulties.[27] Not a single institution comes anywhere near inclusion in any of the world university rankings. The *Times Higher Education*, for instance, ranks the top 1500 universities across 93 countries, using thirteen 'carefully calibrated performance indicators' to measure teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook.[28] Even what might be regarded as the leading contender in the region, the long-established University of Mauritius, does not get a mention.

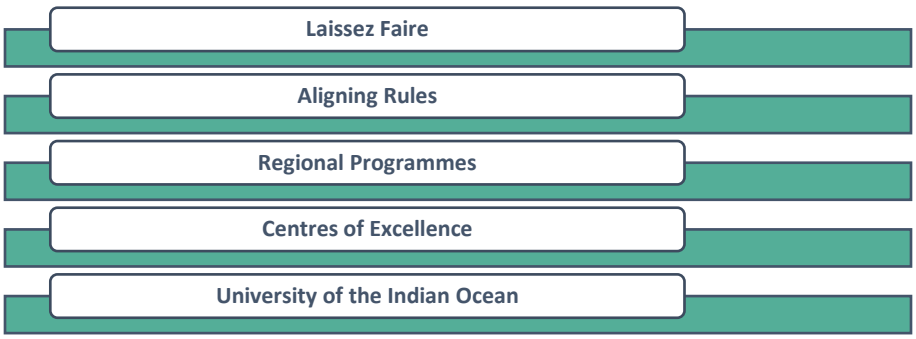
Not least of all, the underlying reason for limited progress is to be found in the inherent weaknesses of small states to compete effectively in an international market:

> *Small states have in common a number of challenges and opportunities. They face particular constraints in the organization of a diversified and cost-effective tertiary education offer because of their limited pool of highly qualified human resources and difficulties in achieving economies of scale in administration and management.*[29]

Small states have their strengths though not necessarily as providers of higher education. But all is not lost and, if there is a will to succeed, the question is whether there is any way to improve their relative standing. In the following section, different ways to achieve this will be explored.

Alternative scenarios

The immediate conclusion one can draw, from what is there now, is that these Indian Ocean universities are presently 'all at sea', competing with each other and also with long-established international universities. Is this the best use of scarce resources? Will things improve if left as they are? Or does some form of cooperation offer a better way forward? Along a spectrum of alternative scenarios, *laissez faire* is located at one extreme and the formation of a federal university at the other. Between the two extremes are various intermediate options (by no means mutually exclusive), each calling on a degree of cooperation while retaining separate identities.



Laissez faire

The most obvious course of action is to continue along the same path, in the belief that all that is needed is more time and experience. This will almost certainly lead to improvements in the various systems but will these be enough? As small island states, the providers in question will still have to manage with limited resources. Students may be satisfied in the early stages, when the idea of obtaining a degree locally remains a novelty, but the chances are that they will then call for more advanced opportunities. They will ask for a greater choice of subjects, for a background of research to inspire their learning, for centres of excellence and an international outlook. If their demands cannot be fully met within the region they will look further afield, their talents as young graduates going with them.

Aligning rules

As a step towards cooperation, there is merit in considering the European model known as the Bologna Process.[30] Basically, this provides a way of reconciling national systems of higher education within an overarching framework, with a view to achieving a common understanding of qualifications and the standards they represent. The emphasis is on transparency and the system relies on aligning quality assurance protocols across the various member countries. While it is, essentially, a bureaucratic initiative the effect in terms of student mobility between universities has been significant. The geography of the Indian Ocean would not offer the same ease of movement between universities but, for relatively little effort, a common regional scheme would mark an improvement on what exists now. This could quite easily take place regardless of any other initiatives.

Regional programmes

Higher education is remarkably inefficient. It is guilty of repeatedly reinventing the wheel. The fact is that the content of courses at undergraduate level is remarkably similar, from one university to another. So why does each one invest time and other resources to design its own, bespoke modules in, say, business studies or computing, when the difference between theirs and those of other universities is barely discernible? Alternatively, why pay another university a fee to use modules that have been designed by that institution? It is acknowledged that in its first years, a new university might wish to demonstrate its credibility by using approved material in this way. But it hardly makes sense to continue the practice. Amongst the Indian Ocean universities, it should be possible to agree a set of core modules for use by all of the small states. Not only would that cut back on costs but also the curriculum could reflect not only common principles but also cultural features that are specific to this region.

Centres of excellence

A complementary scenario would be for each of the different providers to develop centres of excellence that could attract students from other nations in the region as well as from a wider international catchment. The Maldives, for instance, could become, say, a world centre for tourism, Seychelles for a tropical environment and the Blue Economy, Comoros for weather systems and climate change. As well as its own specialisms, for example in tropical medicine

and agriculture, Mauritius could serve as a clearing house for students who want to spend part or all of their time on another island. Overseas students would be attracted to the region, so long as the various universities can also offer residential accommodation and a high-grade campus environment. But would there be sufficient will for different universities to prioritize cooperation in favour of national kudos?

The University of the Indian Ocean

Alternatively, would there be merit in seeking some form of cooperation to pool what they have and proclaim their presence in a louder voice? At the opposite end of the spectrum to leaving things as they are, is the formation of a single, federal structure, say, the University of the Indian Ocean. This has instant appeal and yet experience elsewhere invites extreme caution. It has worked, up to a point, in the case of the University of the West Indies, which offers a level of provision which any one of the Caribbean islands it serves would have been unable to achieve on its own. But the concept dates from the colonial era, when Britain could apply it at will to its own territories. Since the achievement of independence, the constituent islands have been less enthusiastic, preferring to promote their own institutions.[31] Another example of a federal structure is the University of the South Pacific, based in Fiji and intended to serve the scattered islands of a much wider region. This has proved to be enormously difficult to administer and has been the subject not only of corruption but also of political interference by the Fijian government.[32]

The fact that there have been difficulties with a federal structure elsewhere is not, in itself, a reason for saying it would not work in the Indian Ocean. However, account should be taken of consideration of the idea by the Indian Ocean Commission and heads of state as long ago as 1989, when it was concluded that the obstacles in the way of successful implementation were too great to proceed.[33] It remains an attractive idea in principle but the inherent difficulty of persuading competing nations and ambitious universities to work together is not to be underestimated.

The next level

It would be misleading to conclude that there is not already productive collaboration between some of the universities in the region. There are notable examples of joint programmes and sharing of knowledge. But their value only serves to illustrate just how much more can be done.

Of the above five options, the most promising would appear to be those relating to the alignment of rules, regional programmes and centres of excellence. As a first step, some questions which need to be answered are as follows:

(a) Would any one of these, or a combination of different options, result in an improvement in the calibre of each of the Indian Ocean universities and in their

collective impact as a regional hub? Can the sum of the various parts add up to more than the whole? Unless the answer is positive there will be no incentive to change anything?

(b) And, if some form of collaboration is favoured, who would set it in motion? Should one look for leadership from within the individual universities or national governments? Or would a lead best be taken by one or both of the Indian Ocean advisory bodies (the Indian Ocean Rim Association or the Indian Ocean Commission)? [34]

Currently, none of the universities in the region are in the world rankings and potential students from overseas are not attracted to them in large numbers. On that basis, it follows that domestic students are presently not best served by their local universities. For these various reasons, a commitment to improve what is on offer is long overdue. At the very least, it is time to begin a dialogue, looking for ways to redraw the map of higher education in this particular cluster of small island states.

Emeritus Professor Dennis Hardy graduated with a B.A (Hons.) in Geography from the University of Exeter, UK, followed by an MA in Geography by research. From there he joined the Greater London Council and qualified at University College London as a professional urban planner, in due course becoming a Fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute. He obtained his PhD through part-time research in urban planning history at the London School of Economics and in 1988 was awarded a professorship at Middlesex University London. With a series of well-received books to his name, research and writing remain important elements of his profile. He is currently a research professor in the James R. Mancham Peace and Diplomacy Research Institute at the University of Seychelles, and he chairs the Council of the University of Seychelles.

Notes and references

[1] World Bank Group (2017). *Higher Education: Tertiary Education Overview.* https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation#:~:text=Today%2C%20there%20are%20around%20200,from%2089%20million%20in%201998

[2] Varghese, N.V. (2020). Internationalisation of higher education: Global trends and Indian initiatives. In *Reimagining Indian Universities* , P. Mittal and S. R. D. Pani (eds.). New Delhi: Association of Indian Universities, p.3.

[3] What did international students ever do for Australia? *Professionals in International Education*, 28 August 2020. https://thepienews.com/the-view-from/what-did-international-students-ever-do-for-australia/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20minister%20for,increase%20on%20the%20previous%20year

[4] It is generally agreed that globalization in its present form dates from the 1990s.See, for instance, 'When did globalization start?', *The Economist*, 23 September 2013. https://www.economist.com/free-exchange/2013/09/23/when-did-globalisation-start

[5] Isabelle Bilton, 'Women are outnumbering men at a record high in universities worldwide', *Study International,* 7 March 2018. https://www.studyinternational.com/news/record-high-numbers-women-outnumbering-men-university-globally/

[6] There is no definitive classification of small island states as the three organizations representing them show different listings. However, a rule of thumb suggests that the population of any one entity will not exceed 1.5 million.

[7] See, for instance, Pascal Nadal and Aruna Ankiah-Gangadeen, 'Kreol in Mauritian higher education: a tale of grit and audacity', *Seychelles Research Journal*, Vol.3, No.1, February 2021, pp.10-27. www.seychellesresearchjournal.com

[8] University of Mauritius official website. https://www.uom.ac.mu/index.php/about-us/introducing-uom/history

[9] Higher Education Commission, 'Publicly-funded higher education institutions in Mauritius', 2020. http://www.tec.mu/public_institutions

[10] The additional four are the long-established Institute of Education, the Fashion and Design Institute, Mauritius Institute of Training and Development and Mauritius Institute of Health.

[11] Higher Education Commission, 'Private higher education institutions in Mauritius', 2020. http://www.tec.mu/private_institutions

[12] https://www.alueducation.com/campuses/alc-mauritius/

[13] See, for instance, Jane Marshall, 'Mauritius: Minister sets out ambitious plans', *University World News*, 11 July 2010. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2010070918110316 and Par Shaffick Hamuth, 'Jobless graduates: will 2016 bless them with bliss?', *Defimedia.info*, 13 April 2016. https://defimedia.info/jobless-graduates-will-2016-bless-them-bliss. For a more reflective article, see Verena Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Harshana Kasseah, 'Youth unemployment in Mauritius: the ticking time bomb', Proceedings Book of ICEFMO, 2013, Malaysia Handbook on the Economic, Finance and Management Outlooks. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Tandrayen-Ragoobur%20and%20Kasseeah.pdf

[14] 'Populist free higher education could cause problems', *University World News* (Africa Edition), 11 January 2019. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190108091406412 See also Goolam Mohamedbhai, 'What are the implications of free public tertiary education?', *University World News*, 1 February 2019. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190128092709847#:~:text=In%20his%20traditional%20New%20Year's,and%20part%2Dtime%20courses%20leading

[15] Ramola Ramtohul, 'Globalisation, internationalization and higher education in Mauritius: the compromise of quality', *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, Vol. 41 (2016), No. 3, pp. 117-138. https://www.jstor.org/stable/90013882

[16] University of Réunion Island, official website. https://www.univ-reunion.fr/university-of-reunion-island

[17] European Union, 'The Outermost Regions: European lands in the world', La Réunion, 2014-2020. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/themes/outermost-regions/pdf/rup_2017/rup_partner_reunion_en.pdf

[18] Charlotte Bellomy, 'Poverty in Réunion: Six things you need to know'. Borgen Project, Washington DC https://borgenproject.org/poverty-in-reunion-six-facts/

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Wagdy Sawahel, 'Higher education struggles under multiple pressures', *University World News* (Africa Edition), 15 July 2016.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Aturupane, H. *et al.* (2011). *Higher education in the Maldives: An evolving seascape*, World Bank Document, Report No. 36. http://crossasia-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/3464/1/Higher%20Education%20Maldives.pdf

[23] Didier Breton, Claude-Valentin Marie and Maude Crouzet, 'Graphically yours: In Mayotte, the population has quintupled in less than 40 years', *The Conversation*, 21 July 2020.

[24] The University Center for Training and Research website: http://www.univ-mayotte.fr/fr/le-centre-universitaire/le-mot-du-directeur.html

[25] The problem was that the qualifications awarded by the incoming university, USAIM, were not recognized by relevant medical authorities. Unfortunately, disillusioned students and media reports were not convinced that USAIM was a totally different body, with no legal affinity to the University of Seychelles.

[26] This question was pursued in different ways in *Island* Studies, a publication of the University of Seychelles. See, for instance, Dennis Hardy, 'Making small universities bigger: networks of knowledge for small island developing states', 2014; Mark Bray, 'Higher education in small states: evolving patterns in the context of globalisation', 2016; and Michael Crossley, 'Rethinking, applying and extending research on education in small island states', 2016.

[27] Roopchund, R. and Alsaid, L. (2017). 'Higher education in Mauritius has a serious quality problem', CRM Framework for Higher Education in Mauritius. *Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 25(4), pp.1515–1528. http://oro.open.ac.uk/53634/

[28] *THE* World University Rankings 2021. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

[29] Martin, Michaela and Bray, Mark (eds.). (2011). *Tertiary Education in Small States: Planning in the context of globalization*. Paris: UNESCO.

[30] Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Framework (2005). *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.* Copenhagen: Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. http://ecahe.eu/w/images/7/76/A_Framework_for_Qualifications_for_the_European_Higher_Education_Area.pdf

[31] N. Jayaram. (1999). Regional university and national development: the case of the University of the West Indies. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, Vol.2, No.1, pp.88-100. http://irgu.unigoa.ac.in/drs/bitstream/handle/unigoa/1120/J_Social_Econ_Develop_2%281%29_1999_88-100.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[32] John Ross, 'Scandal plagues University of South Pacific', *Times Higher Education*, 17 July 2020. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/17/university-south-pacific-plagued-scandal

[33] This initiative is referred to in Aruna Ankiah-Gangadeen and Pascal Nadal in their article, 'Curriculum responsiveness in teacher professional development programmes: a case study of language education in Mauritius', *Alternation*, 24, 2 (2017), pp.120 – 139.

[34] Neither of these bodies has a remit for all six of the small states under review. IORA has no remit for the two French *départements* while the IOC's jurisdiction does not extend as far as the Maldives.

♦

Dr Pascal Nadal, Deputy Director/Head of Training at the Mauritius Diocesan Service of Catholic Education, has generously provided ideas and information to assist me in writing this article. I am greatly indebted to him for his perceptive insights.