

ESSAY

The small state in higher education: a conceptual assessment

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In spite of the large number of small sovereign states, there have been limited attempts at mainstreaming the study of the small as a small state in higher education. This paper reviews the context and development of both the category of, and research on small states; it then reviews the challenges involved in implementing any of the four broad ways of mainstreaming the study of the small state in higher education.

Keywords: small state; higher education; mainstreaming; Malta; Commonwealth

Introducing small states: typical, yet marginal

‘The style of educational development...is too frequently modeled on what is appropriate and fashionable in large states. Small countries are not simply a scaled-down version of large countries. They have an ecology of their own. We believe there is a cluster of factors which suggest particular strategies in the smaller states of the world’. (Commonwealth Secretariat 1986, 6)

Out of 237 jurisdictions listed in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) *World Factbook* (CIA 2009), only 23 have populations of over 50 million; while 158 have populations of less than 10 million (of which 41 with a population of up to 100,000). Clearly, the so-called ‘small state’ today is the typical state size. And yet, in spite of this ubiquity, the small state *qua* small state is hardly dealt with in programmes of higher education. While the number of centres, books, journal articles and study modules dedicated to the study of small states seems to have gained some momentum in recent years, there has hardly been any attempt at mainstreaming such initiatives in higher education, and to analyse their implications in terms of teaching, learning and curriculum development. This anomaly includes, perhaps most spectacularly of all, those higher education institutions that are to be found on, and presumably for, small states themselves. Is a small state, often relatively recently independent, perhaps driven by a need to establish its statist and nationalist credentials in spite of its small size, therefore loath not to present itself as some kind of disparaging, dwarf, carbon copy of its larger counterparts (Baker 1992; Crossley and Holmes 2001; Farrugia and Attard 1989; Harrigan 1972; Jacobs 1975; Murray 1981)? The irony is telling: to survive, small state citizens may need to seek out and grasp every opportunity for purposeful economic activity. And so, ‘the nature of the education that students in small states receive could . . . prove to be the key factor in their future

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economic, social and cultural development' (Bacchus 2010, 25). Yet, there remains little evidence that people from small jurisdictions have honed their entrepreneurial skills from their educational experience (Baldacchino 2010; Mayo 2010, 3).

The category of small states: origins

It may appear ironic that the study of small states (however defined) was not an initiative of small states but rather of the international community that developed an interest in the explosion of smallish sovereign units onto the world stage after the 1940s. The probable formal starting point in small state studies is the volume reporting the proceedings of the September 1957 conference of the International Economics Association, held in The Hague (Robinson 1960), a month before the launch of Sputnik: thus, the systematic study of small states *per se* is only as old as the space age. In the 1960 volume, most contributors – all of whom came from self-styled non-small/large countries – identified small states as those with a population of 10 million or less (e.g. Kuznets 1960).

Not long after, US-based political scientists in particular voiced a concern as to how newly independent 'small states' or 'micro-states' would be both unable to even minimally execute their international obligations, as well as being pesky and unreliable players in the context of strategic, big-stakes, cold war superpower politics (East 1973; Keohane 1969; Plischke 1977; Vital 1967). The small state was then considered to be one having 'a population of 10–15 million in the case of economically advanced countries; and a population of 20–30 million in the case of underdeveloped countries' (Vital 1967, 8). Increasingly, small states have been seen as synonymous with weak or failed states in political science literature, lumping them in the same category with many larger developing countries. Even today, the definition of a 'small state' in politics and international relations can include such countries that have felt threatened by much larger neighbours: Finland, Israel, Singapore and Taiwan (e.g. Gayle 1986; Inbar and Shaffer 1997; Ingebritsen et al. 2006).

Thirdly, it was the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development that pioneered a series of studies that led to a specific program initially dedicated to landlocked and island developing countries. This evolved, for island states, into a program for small island developing states (SIDS), a category recognized as such since a landmark Barbados summit in 1994 (Hein 2004). These are 'low lying and island nations that share similar physical and structural challenges to their development. Most SIDS are remote, small in land area and population (less than 2 million), with a very narrow resource base and fragile land and marine ecosystems that are highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Their economies are open and heavily dependent on trade for national income' (http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd_aofw_sids/sids_members.shtml). The UN currently recognizes 38 SIDS, of whom four – Belize, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana and Suriname – are not even islands; although they 'have low-lying coastal areas and thus share similar SIDS characteristics'.

Fourthly, the Commonwealth Secretariat early on adopted a reference to 'small states' as a focus of its operations and has been a pioneer in peddling their 'distinct features' (Crossley, Bray, and Packer 2009). The rationale for this is largely pragmatic, since 32 of the 53 current members of the Commonwealth are considered to be small, in this case also meaning a population of 2 million or less. The initiative was launched formally at a 1977 conference in Barbados, but was really galvanized

after the US military intervention in Grenada in 1983 which sent shock waves through the international system (Bray and Packer 1993, 20). The concern with the vulnerability of a small but sovereign state to external intervention or invasion, spearheaded by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Bray 1987; Bune 1987; Diggins 1985; Harden 1985; Lyon 1985) has not really abated since; the deficit discourse has found fertile ground both in the vocabulary of small state policy-makers, as well as of mainstream neo-classical economic advisors (Briguglio and Kisanga 2004; Commonwealth Advisory Group 1997; Easterly and Kraay 2000; Shaw and Cooper 2009).

Of greater relevance to the subject matter of this paper is another Commonwealth-led initiative – via the Commonwealth of Learning – to set up a Virtual University for Small States (more below). The Commonwealth has also sponsored a long-standing series of workshops and publications that focus on the challenges of educational planning and management in small states, kick-started by a workshop held in Mauritius in 1985 (e.g. Baldacchino and Farrugia 2002; Bray 1991a,b; Bray and Packer 1993; Farrugia and Attard 1989). A Commonwealth Ministerial Group on Small States (MGSS) used to meet alongside the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM); but, ironically, this group has failed to meet at and since the Malta CHOGM of 2005.

Fifthly, the origins and evolution of the European Union (EU) has led to a definition of the ‘small state’ by elimination. Conscious that some member states are larger and more powerful than others, the mechanisms, negotiations and lobbying within the EU often unfolds with a tacit understanding that the ‘Big Six’ – founding members Germany, France and Italy; joined by the United Kingdom in 1973, Spain in 1986 and Poland in 2004 – must not be allowed to exercise too strong a hold over EU affairs and agendas. The ‘Big Six’ themselves are just as conscious and wary in not allowing the small members of the EU to dominate. The Netherlands is thus the largest of the EU’s current 21 ‘small member states’, with a resident population of around 16.5 million (Goetschel 1998; Van Staden 1995).

Sixthly and lastly, the main, small state driven lobby on the global stage has been AOSIS.¹ Set up in 1991, the Alliance of Small and Island States has 39 members – and including again Belize, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana and Suriname – plus four, non-sovereign observers. Of late, it has emerged as perhaps the most vociferous and best organised pan-national block in the run up to the ‘COP 15’ Copenhagen Climate Change summit held in December 2009. The vulnerability to climate change and sea level rise has become the most visibly pressing agenda of small, especially island and low lying, states today. Cuba is the AOSIS member with the largest population (11.2 million); Papua New Guinea is the AOSIS member with the largest land area (almost 462,000 km²). Perhaps unsurprisingly, AOSIS has no educational thrust or mandate.

A small state approach to higher education?

A small state approach to higher education has meant, until recently, that the provision of university education at home was both unachievable and inappropriate. Small states, the argument goes, would be much better off by pooling their very limited financial, administrative and human resources in the establishment of regional institutions – including the University of the West Indies (e.g. Payne 1980) and the University of the South Pacific (e.g. McCall 1984). They have also

pooled and regionalised the administration of examinations by the likes of the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) (e.g. Bray and Steward 1998); and project planning by such initiatives as the Pacific Regional Initiative for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE) (e.g. Puamau and Teasdale 2005). Moreover, the absence of a local university has typically meant that the brightest and ablest (and perhaps the richest) would have no choice but to seek advanced study abroad, possibly securing scholarships in the process. This policy position largely explains why Cyprus was without a single local university until 1992; and Luxembourg until as late as 2003. Nationalism has however made short shrift of many of these arguments: more salient in current policy discourse is the need to develop and promote human resources at home; to engage institutions as symbols of national pride closely aligned with local development objectives; and to command expertise for engaging with wider social and economic stakeholders in a development context. Various independent, private institutions of learning, both local and foreign, have also sprung up alongside public universities and vocational colleges, or else in their absence. Nor has partaking of a regional university inhibited setting up national institutions of one's own.² The current thinking is that there is no compelling reason why even the smallest state could not have a specialised higher education institution,³ preferably aligned with one of its core competences.

Conceptualising small state studies in higher education

Where higher education institutions do not exist, conceptualising small state studies in higher education is, of course, a non-starter. But even where they do, the emphasis has been so strongly in favour of 'education for export' (e.g. Bacchus and Brock 1987, 5; Brock 1984, 1988) – providing the upwardly mobile with the credentials they need in order to be able to land employment, or entry to graduate studies, overseas – that the curricula, pedagogies, teaching styles and learning processes have habitually been diligently and uncritically aping, implementing, transmitting and reproducing received wisdom with its typical 'large state, large economy' bias. Students of politics in small states thus find themselves in scenarios where they are taught about the Whitehall–Westminster model and the lauded division of powers, even though their own small polity may not function with such an elegant separation;⁴ students of economics in small states are taught about the virtues and dynamics of freely competitive markets and private enterprise when imperfect competition, oligopolies and natural monopolies, as well as strong state involvement, are more likely to explain the operations in their own small economy.⁵ Students of organisational sociology, human resource management, auditing and public administration would be expected to understand the benefits of specialisation and the legal-rational basis of organizational life, when their own 'real' world is driven by personal contacts, messy role overlaps, a 'soft state' where decision-makers are known, role and occupational multiplicity and 'friends of friends' networking (Atchoarena 1993; Baldacchino and Bray 2001; Baldacchino and Higson 1993; Bennell and Oxenham 1983; Crossley and Holmes 1999).⁶ Students of development studies would be told of the virtues of industrialisation and of the importance of land reform for agricultural modernisation; when small states typically may not have a land owning elite, may avoid industrialisation and may contend with huge expanses of territorial waters in spite of very limited land areas (Baldacchino 1998; Dolman 1988; Streeten 1993).

Students of communication studies are taught to appreciate the importance of media in political campaigns; when it is the personal touch and rapport between voter and politician that still rules in the small state, and can explain typically high voter turnout (Hirczy 1995). And, to connect with the author's own personal experience, students of history and political sociology would study about violent struggles by colonised peoples for independence; when many small states would have no such history; indeed, most small territories today remain stubbornly and proudly articulated with respective metropolitan powers (Baldacchino and Milne 2008).

Of course, a few suitable texts about the 'reality' of small jurisdictions do exist (e.g. Baker 1992; Bray and Packer 1993). And, indeed, were small states (and small economies and small societies) to be defined functionally, a 'small scale syndrome' would gravitate around the interrelated dynamics of intimacy, monopoly and totality, with the only realistic exit option being emigration (Baldacchino 1997; *also* Bongie 1998, 18). But, ironically, such material is more likely to be used in large state universities to critique small states than in, for and by small states themselves. Moreover, some of these texts are pseudo-scientific since they tend to stereotype, essentialise and mythologise their subject matter: for example, the notions that, in small states, everybody knows everybody else; or that politics is not divisive; or that all small states have high population densities (e.g. Bray 1991a, *passim*; *for critique*, see Srebrnik 2004).

Caught in between slippage, hyped knowledge, unsuitable knowledge or no privileged knowledge at all, both academics and students easily find themselves trapped in unconscious incompetence: resigned to an institutionalised higher education experience of teaching, learning and curricular planning that is not as relevant to their daily and real life encounters and concerns. Perhaps that is also one of the destinies, and definitions, of a small state: not to be equipped with formal instruments of teaching and learning that speak directly and meaningfully to its social, economic, political and other narratives. Mainstreaming is not possible: small states are just Lilliputians in a paradigmatic world crafted by Gulliver (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006).

Studying small states: on their own terms?

It would be tempting and comfortable to dismiss small states as quirks and anomalies in the international system. They can be seen as the pesky exceptions and aberrations that justify the rules of administrative behaviour, neo-liberal economics and structural-functionalism. But such a 'deficit' model is hardly relevant to the citizens of small states themselves. Could not, and should not, such small states be studied in their own right, rather than in terms of what they are not? Is it not just as, if not more, important to recognise their specificities and peculiarities where they exist?

The University of Malta, in Malta, has been ideally placed to perform such a sober evaluation of its paradigm of learning. It is the oldest small state university in existence; it has produced and facilitated cutting edge scholarship relevant to small state studies across a whole range of disciplines; its Islands and Small States Institute (<http://www.um.edu.mt/islands/>) dates back to 1989; and it has pioneered courses and graduate programs inspired by the small state and/or island studies perspective.⁷ Various members of the academic body at the University of Malta have explicitly

explored the small state perspective in their doctoral research and/or have subsequently been involved and recognised in small state scholarship internationally.⁸ They have usually been fairly enthusiastic and assiduous in carrying over not just a special appreciation, but an equally special imagination – with particular perspectives, expertise and insights – to deal with such challenges as ‘development’, ‘democracy’, ‘competition policy’, ‘career guidance’ or ‘international relations’ as experienced by a small state into their programs of teaching, outreach and research. This is occasionally borne out in publications, some of which become textbooks or recommended texts at various levels in the educational system (e.g. Baldacchino and Mayo 1997; Sultana 2006; Sultana and Baldacchino 1994). Perhaps thanks to this knowledge and skill pool, Malta now houses the Secretariat of the 33-member Small States Network for Economic Development (<http://www.ssned.org>) supported by the World Bank.

Indeed, the University of Malta would be a strong contender for having the richest depository of (mainly English language) scholarship on small states today. Close competitors would include the University of Iceland (with, since 2003, its ERASMUS-like summer school on small states studies: <http://stofnanir.hi.is/ams/en/en/courses>); the University of Hong Kong (with its Comparative Education Research Centre, which has been undertaking consultancy and research into the education of small states since 1994: <http://www.hku.hk/cerc/>); and the University of Bristol, UK (with, also since 1994, its Education in Small States Research Group: <http://www.smallstates.net/>) (see Mayo 2010, 1–2). All in all, the study of small states *qua* small states is one area of core, competitive competence at these universities and could be further and better recognised as one of their most marketable ‘brands’.

It may, however, be overly ambitious to expect the drawing up of a common conceptual framework that provides an empiricist and/or phenomenological basis for understanding small states in their own right, with a common and accepted battery of research questions and methodologies. The small state perspective can be powerful enough to alert and inform the deep structure and workings of Maltese, Icelandic and various other societies; is it perhaps for this very reason that one may prefer the approach to remain a marginal and peripheral one, only part of ‘the hidden curriculum’ (Snyder 1971)?

Approaches to mainstreaming

Still, if the intent is to mainstream the study of small states in higher education, then at least four broad, mutually reinforcing ways of going about this can be conceived.

The first is to *exploit regional or other pan-national opportunities*. The virtual university of small states of the commonwealth (VUSSC) proposes to provide electronically based and skills-related courses in areas such as tourism, entrepreneurship, professional development, disaster management and a range of technical and vocational subjects (<http://www.vussc.info/>; Daniel and West 2008). The idea is commendable, but one has yet to see how strong the small state perspective and its ‘ecology’ (Commonwealth Secretariat 1985, 6) will be in actually *informing* the pedagogy of this initiative. In other words, is this a higher education initiative for and in states that just happen to be small?⁹ Is the virtual learning environment merely a logistic facilitator for the stakeholders? These questions are pertinent, because the University of the West Indies and (less so) the University of the South Pacific have

adopted similar positions. One of the difficulties here is that quality academic staff, often recruited internationally, may have no scholarly interest or pedagogic formation in small state approaches to, and in, higher education. This presents a 'catch 22' situation.

The second approach is to *develop home-based units, modules, courses and fully-fledged degrees or graduate programs* that explicitly discuss and focus on the study of small states. This encourages a thorough and intensive exposure to the small state predicament; however, the number of students likely to afford or commit to such an approach may be meagre. Many would be concerned with the vocational transferability and career potential of such an educational pursuit. Indeed, a course on small state studies may prove more attractive to mid-career professionals who already have a job and wish to enrich and strengthen their analytic and conceptual arsenal.

The third route is to *sneak in a 'small state' perspective within conventional course material and curricula*, where student numbers are typically larger, adding a fresh, critical voice that is inspired by the circumstances of geography and scale. In such cases, where students that are citizens of small states are concerned, the experience could easily be a liberating one whereby they find themselves not so much learning new information about their small state predicament (that is, making the strange familiar); but rather privileging and reaffirming personal experience, and reinterpreting it in the light of the 'small state syndrome' (that is, making the familiar strange). Systematic, critical and reflexive accounts of lived experiences in small societies (as can be made available from diaries and auto-ethnographies, or from the discourse analysis of media content and conversations) can provide a powerful connection between classroom discussion and public life, adapting the curriculum into a tool that also celebrates tacit knowledge and inductive theorisation.

Fourthly and finally, one may decide to *focus on policy, research, consultancy and outreach* activities rather than education proper (e.g. Lloyd and Packer 1994). Various university research and advocacy centres have been adopting a 'small state' perspective of late. The experiences of the Universities of Bristol, Hong Kong, Iceland and Malta remain somewhat unique however in terms of the explicit alignment of institutional structures with full-blown graduate programmes in small state studies, permitting a rare exchange between graduate students and professional scholars.

Conclusion

'Smallness' can and should also be told in critical multiple (and including positive) ways. If small states are so prolific on the world stage – in accordance with the terms of *any* definition adopted – the scholarly investigation of their predicament is even more pressing and warranted; and their distinct ecologies need acknowledgement, not least by their own citizens and academics. The representation of small states cannot be allowed to pass by, as if a victim of collective amnesia; or else persist in gross caricature: Gulliver does not allow us to see Lilliput through Lilliputian eyes. Rather, small states spring to our consciousness through the eyes of foreigners whose sojourn in small states is typically brief and touristic; whose self-imposed cultural superiority is unquestioned; whose diagnoses of small state affairs is couched in a pettiness which however is hardly confronted and challenged as betraying ignorance. 'Uncritical international transfer' is all the rage (Louisy 2001, 435–6). Small state

citizens can however, like Swift's Lilliputians, demonstrate some remarkable tacit skills which go beyond the naturally passive and submissive and include the pinning down of the giant (Baldacchino 1997; *also* Keohane 1969; Swift 1726/1965).

Teaching presents intellectual challenges that remain inadequately acknowledged or theorised in higher education; and the predicament of small states is illustrative. A fundamental rethinking of educational provision *in and for* small states is called for, and particularly in the present day context of rampant globalisation (Jules 2010; Thorhallsson 2006). The conceptualisation of small state studies in higher education is a timely clarion call to usurp the academic tyranny of a small state as being historically subjected to being summarily 'aestheticised, sanitised and anaesthetised' (after Connell 2003, 568).

The future beckons. An initiative to set up an academic, peer reviewed journal dedicated to the study of small states would no doubt increase the credibility of such studies as a legitimate area of academic and policy inquiry and widen still further its recognition and visibility in both scholarly and policy circles. It would be equally important however to encourage an international cross-disciplinary drive to have articles focusing on the small state perspective, occasionally intertwined with such other pertinent dimensions as the postcolonial one, appearing in mainstream scholarly journals and other media, even if only to avoid the danger of ghettoisation.

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Notes

1. One of the most impressive forms of *regional* cooperation by small states since 1981 is the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS): <http://www.oecs.org>
2. A suitable example of this is the National University of Samoa, which is also affiliated to USP.
3. Note, for example, that the College of the Bahamas shares programs with the University of the West Indies on its main campus in Nassau; but has plans to become a fully-fledged university itself.
4. An excellent analysis of this role overlap is by Singham (1968) in the context of Grenada.
5. One example is the study by Armstrong and others (1989) of price setting in the Isle of Man.
6. Examples of inductive small state scholarship in politics include Richards (1982). The origins of social network theory from fieldwork in Malta can be traced to Boissevain (1974). 'Occupational multiplicity' is a term credited to Comitas (1963) and his work in the insular Caribbean. The classic account of the characteristics and workings of the 'soft state' is by Hyden (1983).
7. These include: a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Planning and Management in Small and Island States; and a Master of Arts Degree in Islands and Small State Studies.
8. These include current members of staff Maria Attard, Joseph G. Azzopardi, Rose Marie Azzopardi, Peter J. Baldacchino, Lino Briguglio, Gordon Cordina, Peter Mayo, Paul J. Pace, Godfrey A. Pirota, John A. Schembri, Ronald G. Sultana and Edward Warrington.

9. Similar to the proliferation of foreign satellite campuses, such as medical schools in the Caribbean and the Seychelles, often registered as offshore institutions. Proposals include the St James School of Medicine in Anguilla, the British International University in Montserrat and the University of Science, Arts and Technology in Montserrat (Parkins 2007, 7–10).

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