

**NOTES OF A MEETING OF THE BIRMINGHAM COMMONWEALTH
ASSOCIATION EDUCATION FOCUS GROUP HELD ON WEDNESDAY 16 JULY
2014 AT 3.00PM AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE BIRMINGHAM**

Present:

Keith Stokes – Smith – BCA Chairman

**Melvyn Pryer – University College Birmingham – BCA Education Focus Group
Chairman**

Mike Murray – International Team, BCC

Louise Toner – Birmingham City University

Robert Berry – Aston University

Naz Khan – South & City College

Background and purpose of meeting

KSS informed colleagues of the background to the establishment by Sir Albert Bore in late 2013 of the Birmingham Commonwealth Association (BCA). Counterpart groups had also been created for North America, China and Europe.

With reference to papers already circulated to colleagues reference was made to the broad and self- determining purpose of the group as outlined in the BCC strategy document “Distinctly Birmingham”.

It was clear from the views expressed by colleagues that there was mutual practical benefit to be gained from the participation of individuals and their respective organisations in the work of the BCA and this particular Focus Group.

Matters of interest

From a broad discussion on the objectives, aspirations, role and longer – term development of the Focus Group, the following matters were highlighted as being of specific interest:

- **There was a need for an audit of Birmingham FE and HE establishments to identify the scope and extent of activity in the Commonwealth, to include numbers of Commonwealth students recruited to the city region; also, their key areas of expertise / specialism.**
- **The importance of recruitment of international students to the financial viability of the Birmingham FE and HE sectors.**
- **Appropriate sign posting of potential foreign students, as for example by staff at Education Fairs abroad, to the appropriate Birmingham institutions.**

- There was a need for a faster procedure by UK Government for potential Commonwealth students to obtain visas to study in the UK. This was of major concern in relation to Bangladesh and India.
- There was a need to work with visa issuing authorities in Birmingham for the faster administration of visas by staff (and students) from Birmingham institutions.
- A sharing of information and experience around the procedures and protocols for sending UK students abroad and receiving foreign students would be helpful for Birmingham education establishments.
- Benefits would be gained from a greater integration of foreign students with their host country counterparts as part of the 'internationalisation' debate.
- Recognition should be given to the enormous financial and social contribution made by Commonwealth and other foreign students to the life of Birmingham.
- The financial cost of FE and HE education in the UK as well as visa constraints was encouraging potential Commonwealth students to study in the Australia and the USA. However , Birmingham did have an advantage over London as a place to study due to the lower cost of living; this fact should be given a higher profile.
- Recognition was given to the considerable benefits to be gained by all Birmingham FE and HE establishments working together to promote their overall educational offer and to act as a pressure group for change.
- Birmingham FE colleges had gained benefits from working together through their collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce through the FE / Chamber Education Group.
- The creation of International Deans and a Director of International at Birmingham City University has facilitated the engagement of Commonwealth and other foreign students.
- The BCA Education Group would benefit from a Birmingham schools input.
- Promotional / travel materials with the Birmingham offer for young people was required.
- The offer of placements as an integral part of FE / HE courses was considered to be an added attraction.

ACTIONS:

- 1. MP to draft and circulate an FE / HE audit template for completion by colleagues.**
- 2. Attendance at the next meeting to be sought from FE and HE establishments not represented at this meeting.**
- 3. Identify if there are any barriers which inhibit Academic/Educational establishments engaging fully with each other in the context of the BCA Focus Group's "open" agenda and with Commonwealth Countries**

Date of next meeting

**Wednesday 8 October at 2.00pm at University College
Birmingham.**