

Evaluating Commonwealth Scholarships in the United Kingdom:

Assessing impact in the health sector



Executive summary

Higher education is a vital contributor to socioeconomic development and growth, and international scholarships play an important role in this. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK (CSC), a major international scholarship agency funded by the UK government and responsible for disbursing 16,700 scholarships to date, is currently engaged in wide-scale evaluation of the impact of its awards. Almost 3,800 of the 16,700 scholarships awarded have been granted to individuals for study in health-related fields, and the aim of this report is to assess the impact of these awards, particularly in the light of global health priorities.

This report provides an outline of key development priorities in health and the role of Commonwealth Scholarships in development. The main body of the report considers all of our health-related alumni and the wider impact of health-related awards, before narrowing the focus to a selection of case studies and a group of survey respondents, and then looking in particular at five alumni who were interviewed in depth on the impact of their awards.

Our overview of priority areas in the health sector highlights a need for skills and expertise in areas such as maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases. Many of our alumni, who studied in a variety of different disciplines and towards different qualifications, have had an impact in areas that directly contribute towards the Millennium Development Goals, in particular Goals 4, 5 and 6: reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combatting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases.

Case studies show the long-term impact of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships in more detail. 15 case studies are presented in the report, together with five in-depth interviews, which demonstrate both long-term and immediate impact of alumni who held awards across various decades. Examples of activity include influencing government to provide clean water to flood-affected communities, coordinating the construction of a maternity hospital, leading an HIV/AIDS peer education organisation, lobbying government on malaria prevention, developing a drug to combat AIDS, and launching a research laboratory. One alumnus has been Chief Medical Officer, another Permanent Secretary of a Ministry of Health, and several have used their knowledge and skills in work with national governments, the United Nations, the World Health Organization (WHO) and international NGOs.

The main findings of the report are that:

We are providing relevant skills and expertise in the health sector

- Of those who studied a health discipline, over 99% had gained knowledge and skills through their awards, and 92% had had access to equipment and expertise not available in their home countries. Furthermore, almost 97% reported that their award had increased their ability to have influence and make changes at work, a higher percentage than across all respondents as a whole.
- The absolute number of people taking up health awards has tended to rise decade on decade, and in total represents just over one-fifth of our awards.
- The gender gap has closed since the first Commonwealth Scholarships were awarded in the 1960s. There were slightly more health-related Scholarships and Fellowships awarded to females than males in the 2000s.
- Individuals from 55 Commonwealth countries and British Overseas Territories have received awards in health-related fields. India and Nigeria have received the most health awards, though recent years have seen a dramatic rise in the number of awards made to sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.
- Fellowships have accounted for the largest proportion of awards. Awards held in hospital-based clinical subjects have declined in number, whereas those relating to community-based clinical subjects have risen.
- Whilst 16% of respondents had studied a health-related field, 38% of respondents indicated that they have had an impact in health, suggesting that our scholarships have a wide, cross-disciplinary impact.
- The greatest health impact reported was in specific projects, with almost three-quarters of respondents in this area reporting impact. In addition, 31% of respondents reported having influence on government thinking or policy, and 35% having a socioeconomic impact.
- Over 89% of health-related respondents are working in their home country.

Our in-depth interviews with alumni further established six important findings

- Awards can act as a catalyst for development, and the benefits of a single scholarship can ultimately reach many people.
- Commonwealth Scholarships allow Scholars to challenge existing practices and knowledge, not just in their home countries, but also internationally.
- Awards can 'open doors', and Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows are highly sought after.
- Much of the research undertaken whilst on award is new and innovative, and the skills and knowledge alumni gain can often be put to use with immediate effect upon their return home.
- Study in the UK has several important advantages, from the easily demonstrable – access to equipment – to the more subtle – increasing a Scholar's confidence.
- Studies or research often cut across disciplinary boundaries; awards encourage the development of a wide set of transferable skills, and lead to the ability to contribute significantly beyond the immediate area of expertise.

The report concludes that the CSC's alumni in the health sector are having considerable impact both within the sector, and also towards wider development objectives. The CSC is enabling individuals to gain skills and expertise relevant to their countries' needs, and the survey respondents and interviewed alumni show how these skills are being used in tackling current global health challenges. These challenges include those identified by DFID, the WHO and, in particular, the health-related Millennium Development Goals.