

Executive summary

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK (CSC) is responsible for managing and evaluating Britain's contribution to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), established in 1959. In all, around 17,000 awards have been given by the CSC to citizens from all over the Commonwealth, with alumni returning for the most part to their home countries to work in a variety of fields, including academia, government, and international organisations.

In recent years, the CSC has placed increasing emphasis on tracing its alumni and evaluation. Effective evaluation allows us to determine whether the objectives of our scholarship and fellowship schemes are being met, what their impact is, and how effective our policies and procedures are. To date, a number of reports have been published examining the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships on activity in several key development-related sectors, and regions.

This paper introduces a report assessing the impact of our alumni on governance and democracy, principles which lie at the heart of the Commonwealth. The report takes as its main source the responses of a subset of the over 2,200 alumni who completed an in-depth impact evaluation survey in 2008. This subset consists of 1,035 alumni who reported having impact in at least one of four key priority areas for development – and democracy: Governance, International Relations, Social Inequalities and Human Rights, and Conflict Resolution/Humanitarian Assistance. In addition, the report includes in-depth interviews with four former Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows.

Overall, the findings of this report support the increasing recognition of the benefits of higher education, and by extension postgraduate scholarships and fellowships, for development as a whole and for activity leading to good governance, equality, and stability for communities and countries across the Commonwealth. Many examples of this activity can be seen at grassroots level, and alumni are also reporting impact at national and global levels.

Impact on democratic principles is not limited by discipline or professional background

As with previous evaluation studies, it was found that field of study does not constrain the capacity of Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows to have influence in other areas. 20% of those involved in supporting democratic principles through impact in at least one of the four key areas outlined above studied subjects categorised as Science, Technology and Engineering, 13% studied health-related subjects, and Environment and Agriculture subjects accounted for 9% each.

A further point of note is that the ability to influence democratic principles and related issues is not limited by an alumnus' category of employment. Of the 1,035 respondents, 61% work in education – 97% of those in higher education, reinforcing the argument that academics and their universities have the potential for far-reaching impact on development and on their societies.

Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships enable individuals to gain skills and experience

Of the 1,035 survey respondents, 100% reported gaining knowledge in their area of expertise. Specific skillsets have also been obtained, with almost 100% reporting increases in their technical and analytical skills while on award, and 86% acquiring management and organisational techniques.

As well as obtaining these skills, alumni have to be able to put them into practice. We found that 91% of the 1,035 respondents were working in their home countries, while others were working in their home regions or for international organisations. Almost all have been able to use their skills in their jobs, with 96% reporting using the skills and knowledge gained on award in their work, and 96% saying that their award had enhanced their ability to have influence and make changes in their workplaces.

Awards have led to positive influences on democratic principles and governance

The knowledge and skills gained on award often encompass all four key priority areas for building and sustaining democracy. 62% of the 1,035 respondents reported impact through specific projects, influencing government policy, and/or wider socioeconomic impact in the field of Governance. 52% reported the same in the field of International Relations, 58% in Social Inequalities and Human Rights, and 41% in Conflict Resolution/ Humanitarian Intervention.

The interviews highlight the importance of public policy in the field of supporting democratic principles, and the significant contribution each interviewee has made in this regard. In addition, awards have a 'multiplier effect' through capacity building by way of course development, lecturing, or training given by the awardees. This further confirms the strong long-term impact and value-for-money investment that scholarships represent for international development efforts.

Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows are able to challenge existing practices and perceptions

Key outcomes emerge from the cutting-edge research conducted during awards, as well as further work building on this afterwards. Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships enable alumni to identify problems, formulate recommendations, and stimulate debate that, in many instances, lead them to become pioneers of new strategies and policies and respected leaders in their fields.

From the analysis in this report, we conclude that Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships add value to development activity throughout the Commonwealth, through the provision of awards and international experience. This supports the findings of other reports, and demonstrates that our survey respondents have, in many cases, been able to have an impact in the areas of good governance, constructive international relations, protection of human rights, elimination of social inequalities, prevention of conflict, and assistance in humanitarian crises – thus contributing not only to socioeconomic development but also to some of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth.