



Building Bridges

**The Commonwealth Split-Site Doctoral
Scholarship Programme 1998-2018**

Executive Summary

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The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK has offered Scholarships and Fellowships to Commonwealth citizens since 1960 as the United Kingdom's contribution to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. Since 1998, the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has run its Split-site scholarship programme, offering PhD scholars who are studying at universities across the Commonwealth the opportunity to conduct research at an institute in the United Kingdom for 12 months. The programme seeks to 'widen access to UK equipment and expertise for high quality doctoral candidates from low and middle income Commonwealth countries, and to contribute to UK and Commonwealth higher education and research through collaboration and partnerships.'

As of 2018, 529 scholarships have been awarded to scholars registered with PhD programmes at 185 different institutions across 27 countries of the Commonwealth, allowing them to conduct research at 116 institutions within the United Kingdom. Scholars from Sub-Saharan Africa (45%) and South Asia (42%) have received the largest proportion of these awards, with the Caribbean (8%) receiving most of the remainder. The gender proportions are effectively equal, with males receiving 51% and females 49% of the scholarships.

This report summarises the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission's review of its Split-site programme, which sought to answer a number of questions about the programme,

as well as inform some wider questions of relevance about Commonwealth Scholarships in general. Specifically, the aims of the review were:

- To better understand the demographics, contexts and outcomes of those applying for and completing Split-site Scholarships
- To better understand Commonwealth Scholars' experiences both on-award and when they return home
- To identify the outcomes, impact, and the scope of the potential benefits of these particular awards to home and host supervisors and their institutions, and
- To gather evidence which allows the Commission to assess whether these scholarships are an effective use of Commission resources and contribute to the achievement of the Commission's Strategic Objectives.

Overall, the review found that the Split-site programme achieves its goals, providing doctoral scholars with international experience and unique access to equipment and expertise at UK-based universities that many would otherwise be unable to have. The programme also provides an opportunity for home and host supervisors and institutions to engage in international collaborations through doctoral research, in many instances leading to additional collaborations.

Methodology

In undertaking this review, the CSC Evaluation Team drew on a number of different methods and sources of data. These included:

- An environment scan of similar programmes
- Existing data held on Split-site applicants and recipients in the Secretariat's database
- Data from the Longitudinal Alumni surveys conducted in 2016 and 2017
- Three new surveys, designed specifically to solicit feedback on the experiences of all current and former Split-site scholars, their host supervisors, and their home supervisors
- Follow-up interviews with scholars and supervisors, and
- A focus group with host supervisors.

This data set was then analysed with appropriate methods, including descriptive and comparative statistical analysis of

quantitative data, and thematic coding and analysis of qualitative data. The key findings of this review are summarised here.

Scholar Experiences with the Programme

The primary **motivations** of scholars for applying for this type of scholarship were to access knowledge, expertise, equipment, and other resources that would not otherwise be available to them at their home institution. Gaining international experience was also a significant driver of interest for scholars. Secondary reasons for applying were building partnerships and relationships, exploring future collaborations, and securing funding. The flexibility offered by the programme also appealed to scholars, allowing them to access an opportunity that they might otherwise miss out on due to personal and professional obligations.

Regarding the actual **benefits** they realised from their Split-site experience, scholars overwhelmingly indicated that the international experience and ability to access otherwise unavailable resources including knowledge and equipment were major benefits from their Split-site experience. Scholars reiterated these benefits in their free text and interview responses as well. While they were less frequently cited as motivations for applying for the scholarship, the building of partnerships and relationships, the exploration of future collaborations, and exposure to the research environment and culture in the United Kingdom were also cited as major benefits of the experience. Split-site scholars also realised improvements to their academic writing skills,

Benefits for Scholar from time in the United Kingdom



Working in the UK exposed me to a world-class laboratory environment. I was able to learn new techniques through hands-on experience and improve my own expertise. It was fulfilling for me that I could do things that are otherwise abstract back at home because there are no resources for practical experimentation.



communication skills, and confidence, as cited by scholars and supervisors in the survey free text and interviews.

The flexibility offered by the Commonwealth Split-site scholarship was frequently cited as a major benefit by both scholars and supervisors. Scholars are able to choose to take their visiting study period in either a single twelve-month block, or two six-month blocks. The second option enabled scholars to engage in this type of work abroad who otherwise would not be able to do so due to family, work, or other obligations that limit the amount of time they could or wanted to be away from their home. It also allowed for scholars to learn new research methods and techniques abroad, return to their home country to conduct fieldwork, and then go

abroad again to conduct the analysis.

While the flexibility to choose the structure of the timing of the study period was cited as a strength of the programme, the inflexibility around the length of the study period was cited as a significant challenge by both scholars and supervisors. Specific issues that were mentioned included the fact that training scholars up on equipment took significant amounts of time, research timelines that would otherwise take more than a year had to be compressed, and additional avenues of inquiry related to and opened up by the research could not be explored. Consequently, the most frequently mentioned recommendation from scholars was that they should be allowed the opportunity to extend their study period.

Benefits for Home University or Department after Scholar Returned from the United Kingdom



Another significant **challenge** for scholars was the need to acclimatise to a new environment, both within their host institution, and the United Kingdom more generally. Adjusting to different cultural practices and expectations, both socially and professionally, was mentioned as a significant area that needed to be overcome by scholars, particularly if they had never been to the United Kingdom before. Homesickness was another significant challenge cited by scholars, which in most cases was a consequence of being away from their families and extended social support

networks for long periods of time. In some instances this was aggravated by the lack of a family allowance, or difficulty securing visas for immediate family members, both of which being areas where scholars felt more could be done by the CSC. Finally, housing was another area where scholars encountered challenges, including difficulty securing a short-term lease, unfamiliarity with what areas of their host cities were safe, and the overall cost of housing. The cost issue was also intensified in instances where scholars had to continue to pay housing costs in their home country to maintain their residence there.

However, despite these challenges all scholars rated their Split-site experience positively.

Supervisor Experiences with the Programme

Supervisors from both home and host universities said that their departments realised a number of **benefits** from participating in a Split-site scholarship. In addition to

the contribution of the scholar to their departments' research outputs, the scholar helped to broaden the intercultural experience of staff and students at both universities by bringing new perspectives based on their backgrounds, travels, and experiences. The presence of Split-site scholars also helped to raise the reputation and international profile of their universities.

The Split-site scholarship was also a vehicle to build and strengthen partnerships and collaborations for institutions and supervisors. The majority of Split-site supervisors said that there were plans in place for additional work and collaborations between institutions and departments as a result of their involvement with the scholarship, with many already engaged in these activities.

Supervisors also mentioned in their free text answers and interviews that the experience personally benefitted them by expanding their subject knowledge, cultivating research relationships, and providing opportunities to develop joint publications with international collaborators. They also mentioned that Split-site scholars enabled a two-way exchange of knowledge between the universities: not only did scholars bring new knowledge and experiences back with them to their home university that was subsequently shared with others in their department, but they also introduced new knowledge and research methods to the department that hosted them.

While the benefits realised by home and host departments and supervisors were relatively similar, the **challenges** (when they occurred) were markedly different. Host supervisors most frequently cited the length of the study

Benefits for Host University or Department from Hosting Scholar



period in their free text responses, feeling that the amount of time it took to orient scholars and get them trained up on equipment to the point where they could work independently took up a significant portion of the study period, compressing what was already a tight research timeline. Administrative issues were also cited by host supervisors, with either the difficulty in finding the most appropriate way to register the scholar at their university, or visa issues comprising the bulk of these challenges. Coordination with the other supervisor and institution was also cited by some host supervisors, specifically the need to incorporate two sets of goals, policies, and expectations when working with the scholar. One final issue of note was the fact that in cases where the scholar was further along in their PhD programme and research project, the host supervisor felt that they did not have enough input into the research design of the project. In some cases, host supervisors felt that this was not really an issue and accepted the role that they had to play in those projects, but others felt that it would be better if the scholarship was awarded earlier in the scholar's PhD programme so that they could have a greater input in the design of the research project. Host supervisors recommended a greater emphasis on setting reasonable expectations and improving communications between supervisors and the scholar to address these last two issues.

Data sharing was also identified by some host supervisors as an issue, in that in some instances scholars were extremely protective of their research data and reluctant to share with the host supervisor or other members of the research team. They also expressed uncertainty as to how credit should be attributed in

instances where they felt the home supervisor was not actively involved in the scholar's research. While this was not a common issue, host supervisors felt that some guidance around intellectual property would be fruitful.

For home supervisors, difficulties communicating was the most frequently mentioned challenge, with supervisors detailing that it was difficult to keep up to date on the progress of the scholar while they were in the United Kingdom, due to both the lower quality and frequency of conversations when the scholar was away compared to in-person discussions, and the practical challenge presented by time differences. There were also some instances where the home supervisor felt that the scholar's research project changed substantially upon arriving in the United Kingdom, and they did not have sufficient input into the changes. Home supervisors also felt that there were differences in expectations, or that the expectations that they had were not met by the Split-site experience. In some instances, this meant an inequality within the collaboration caused by host supervisors or institutions being unresponsive or otherwise indifferent towards the home supervisors and institutions, similar to the situation outlined above, or neglecting to share authorship of publications. In others, home supervisors felt that host supervisors neglected to consider or understand the departmental environment within the home institution that the scholar was coming from, which in some cases was further aggravated by an expectation that supervisors would visit each other's departments (which occasionally did happen, but is not an integral part of the programme).

Overall, the vast majority of both home and host supervisors indicated that they would be happy to be involved in another Split-site scholarship in the future.

Summary

Based on the review's findings, the Split-site programme is clearly meeting the intended goal of widening access to UK-based resources for international PhD scholars. This is evident both in the motivations cited by scholars for applying for the programme, and the benefits they realised while in the United Kingdom that they reported. The

Split-site programme is also recognised as an avenue through which scholars, supervisors, and departments can initiate, foster, and grow partnerships, although this could be developed further. This could be potentially be done through clearer communication of expectations, encouragement of closer and more frequent communication between supervisors, and a strong recommendation to participants that some form of intellectual property sharing agreement is put in place as a part of the scholarship. These actions should serve to strengthen and enhance an already effective programme.



My UK supervisor made it his responsibility to make sure that I was comfortable and progressing in my lab work and importantly, he made sure I gained other skills that I needed as an early career researcher. He supervised me throughout my laboratory research sessions to make sure I was doing all that he taught me. Any time that I encountered a challenge, he was always there to listen, and he always made time to show me how to do these techniques in the lab.





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