

## CSC Evaluation Programme Working Paper: 1

# The Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship Programme: Rapid Analysis

## Introduction

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (CSC) has offered scholarships for Distance Learning since 2002. The purpose of these awards is ‘to contribute to [the] development needs of Commonwealth countries by providing training for skilled and qualified professionals in key development areas.’<sup>1</sup> It seeks to support ‘high-quality postgraduate students who wish to access training not available in their home countries, who wish or need to remain in their home country while they study, and who have the potential to enhance the development of their home countries with the knowledge and leadership skills they acquire.’<sup>2</sup>

The CSC has worked closely in partnership with 42 Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the United Kingdom to provide scholars with opportunities to study a variety of subjects, ranging from Public Health to Forestry to Human Rights to International Development. Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars typically conduct their studies part-time over a 3-5 year period with the scholarship covering tuition fees while they study, as well as the costs of attending any in-person summer schools run by the HEI as a part of the programme. Since scholars remain in their home country and generally continue employment while studying, the scholarship does not provide a stipend for living expenses. However further support and engagement opportunities are provided by the CSC, such as the CSC’s bespoke online training module on international development, targeted scholar newsletters, and the CSC Alumni Association. These activities provide scholars with additional benefits, and help to link Distance Learning scholars with each other, scholars from other programmes, and the broader CSC community.

This working paper has been produced by the CSC Evaluation Team with the aim of providing a high-level summary of the CSC’s Distance Learning programme, and a selection of the data collected to date through its routine evaluation processes. The paper is divided into five sections: The first section provides some information about the scholars the CSC has funded and the UK-based institutions that they have studied at. Section Two looks at the immediate effect that Distance Learning scholars have on their workplace, as the vast majority continue to work full-time during their studies. Section Three looks at the longer-term effect that Distance Learners have, both compared to their pre-scholarship activities and following the completion of their programme. Section Four provides examples of the impact that Distance Learners have reported to the CSC over time. The final section provides a summary of the paper and identifies some of the key areas of investigation that will be examined as part of the CSC’s upcoming Distance Learning programme evaluation.

## 1. Commonwealth Distance Learning at a Glance

The CSC has funded **3,287 Distance Learning scholarships** since the programme began in 2002, averaging 183 awards per year over the lifetime of the programme. While the number of awards has varied year over year, the broader trend has been to offer a greater number of awards over time. This can be

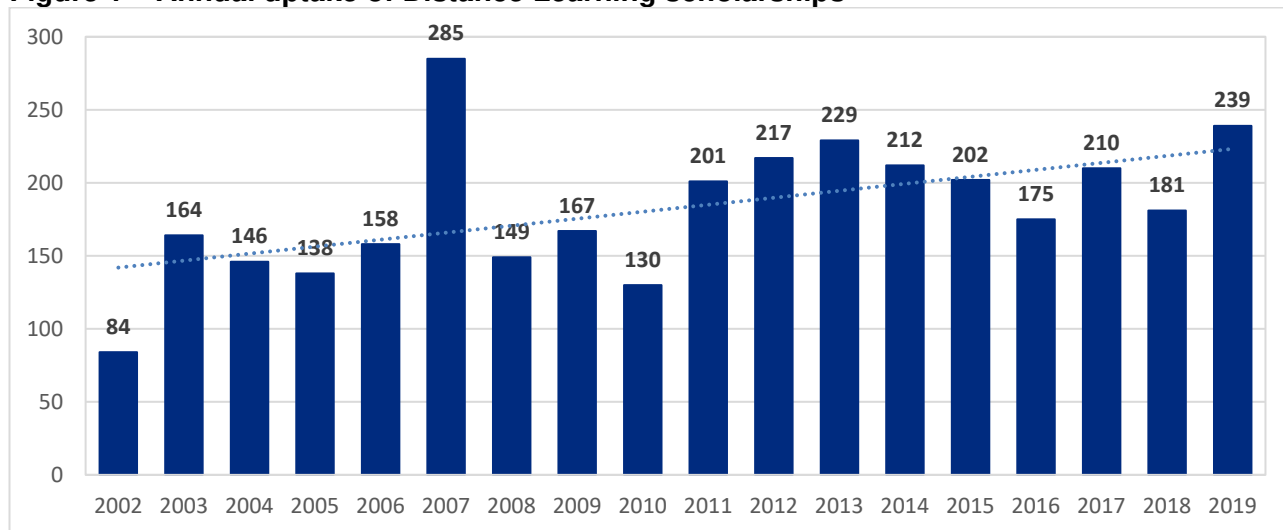
---

<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships 2019 Terms and Conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

seen in Figure 1, which illustrates both the annual uptake of Distance Learning scholarships and the trendline for the number of awards offered over the last 18 years.

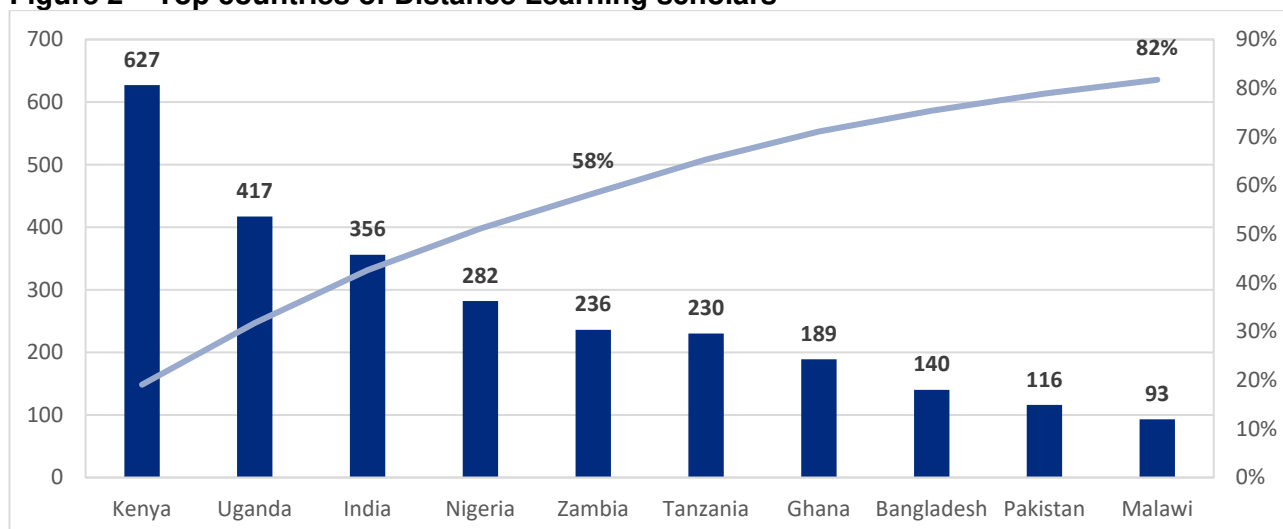
**Figure 1 – Annual uptake of Distance Learning scholarships**



Source: CSC Awards Data

In total, the CSC has funded scholars from **41 countries** from across the Commonwealth. The countries with the largest proportions of scholars are Kenya (19%), Uganda (13%), and India (11%), followed by Nigeria (9%), and Zambia (7%) rounding out the top five. As Figure 2 illustrates, the cumulative percentage of awards received by scholars from these countries accounts for 58% of the total number of Distance Learning scholarships funded since 2002. Expanded further to include Tanzania (7%), Ghana (6%), Bangladesh (4%), Pakistan (4%) and Malawi (3%), the top 10 countries comprise 82% of all awards.

**Figure 2 – Top countries of Distance Learning scholars**

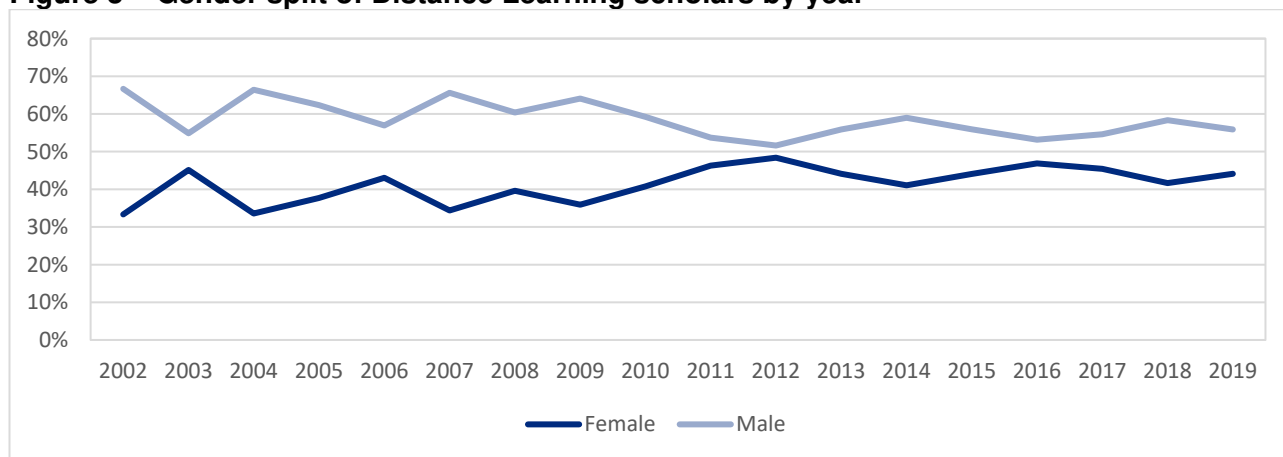


Source: CSC Awards Data

As this country list suggests, when broken down by region a large majority of scholarship recipients are from sub-Saharan Africa (76%), with a further fifth (20%) from Asia. The Caribbean (3%) and the Pacific (<1%) account for the remainder.

With respect to gender, more male scholars have been selected in every year of the programme, as demonstrated in Figure 3, accounting for 58% of all award-holders. While female scholars account for 42% overall, it is important to note that the proportions have narrowed with female scholars receiving 44% of Distance Learning scholarships over the most recent ten-year period.

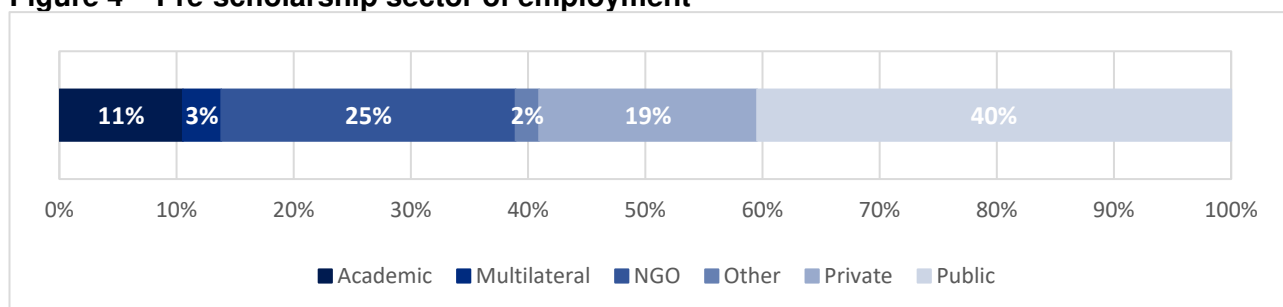
**Figure 3 – Gender split of Distance Learning scholars by year**



Source: CSC Awards Data<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of scholars are either employed (89%) or employed and studying (5%) at the time that they apply for a Commonwealth Distance Learning scholarship. While this total is only approximately 10-15% higher than the pre-application employment status of other Master’s scholars, the sectors of employment that they come from are quite different, with two-thirds of Distance Learning scholars coming from either the public or NGO sectors, and only a small proportion coming from the academic sector.

**Figure 4 – Pre-scholarship sector of employment**



Source: CSC Baseline Surveys (2016-2018)<sup>4</sup>

Subjects classified under the STEM umbrella comprise the majority of subjects studied at nearly three-fifths (58%) of all Distance Learners. This is followed by subjects in the Social Sciences (31%) and Education (12%).

More specifically, the top disciplines of study are Subjects Allied to Medicine, and Social Studies (both at 22%). Among the former, this includes various areas of Clinical Medicine, Nursing, and Environmental Health, while the latter comprises of subjects such as Development Studies, Health and Welfare, Public Policy, and Economics. Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and Related Subjects (12%), Education (12%), and Business and Administrative Studies (6%) round out the top five.

Distance Learning scholars have undertaken study through **42 UK universities** from every region of the country. The top five course providers are: The University of Edinburgh (253), Leeds Beckett University (244), The Open University (223), UCL’s Institute of Education (184), and The University of Stirling (169). A total of 15 institutions have supported over 100 Distance Learning Scholars each. These institutions support Distance Learning scholars in their learning and in building their relationships with other learners throughout their scholarship with course tutors, discussion boards, in-person summer schools, and in some cases funding in order to meet tuition fees.

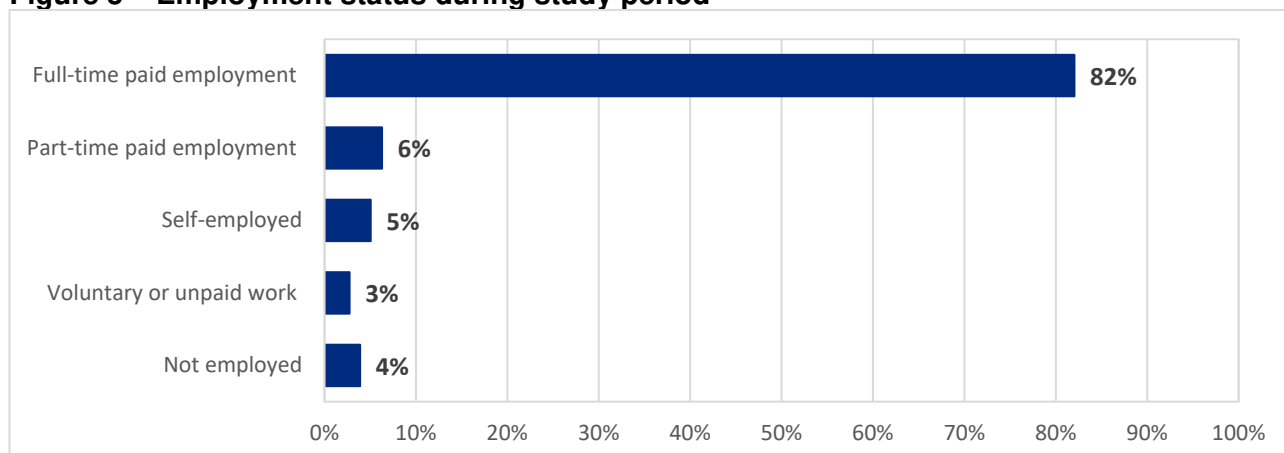
<sup>3</sup> n = 3,287

<sup>4</sup> n = 398

## 2. The Immediate Effect of Commonwealth Distance Learning

One of the most important differences between Distance Learners and other CSC scholars is that over four-fifths of them remain employed full-time during their studies, with only a tiny fraction (4%) not engaged in some form of employment or work.

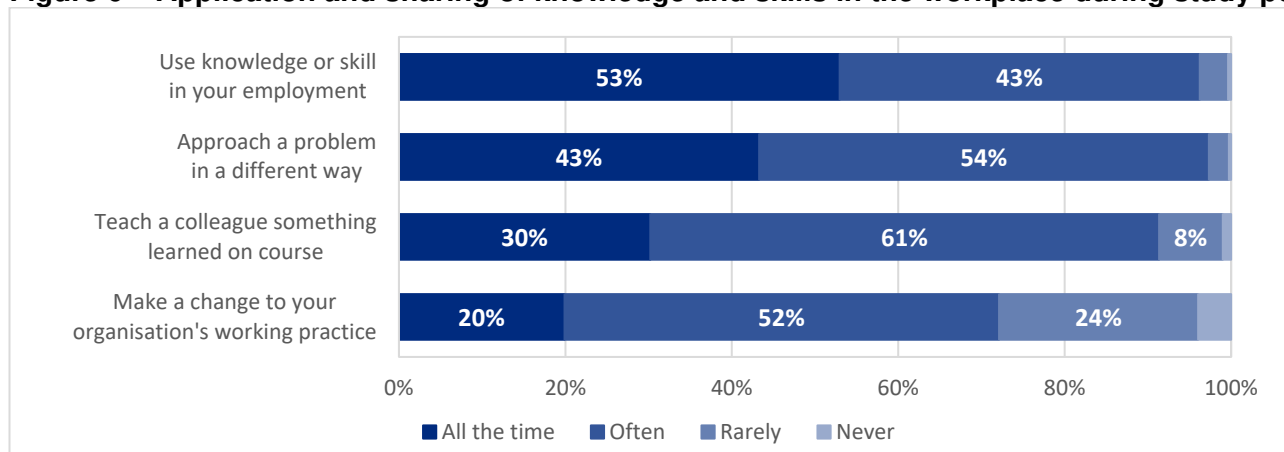
**Figure 5 – Employment status during study period**



Source: CSC Distance Learner Surveys (2017-2019)<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, these scholars can immediately apply what they have learned within a work context, which they do at an impressive rate. As illustrated in Figure 6, Distance Learners almost universally use knowledge or skills they learned from their programme or approach a problem in a different way in their employment ‘all the time’ or ‘often’. Additionally, nine-tenths of working scholars reported that they had taught a colleague to do something that they learned on their course ‘all the time’ or ‘often’, strengthening the skill base of employer organisations through the upskilling of co-workers.

**Figure 6 – Application and sharing of knowledge and skills in the workplace during study period**



Source: CSC Distance Learner Surveys (2017-2019)<sup>6</sup>

Three-quarters of respondents also reported making a change to workplace practices based on something that they learned during their course ‘all the time’ or ‘often’, highlighting the potential for immediate organisational improvements based on involvement in Distance Learning. Taken together, these responses provide strong indications that scholars’ participation in Distance Learning courses translate into immediate improvements in the knowledge, skills, and practices of their workplaces.

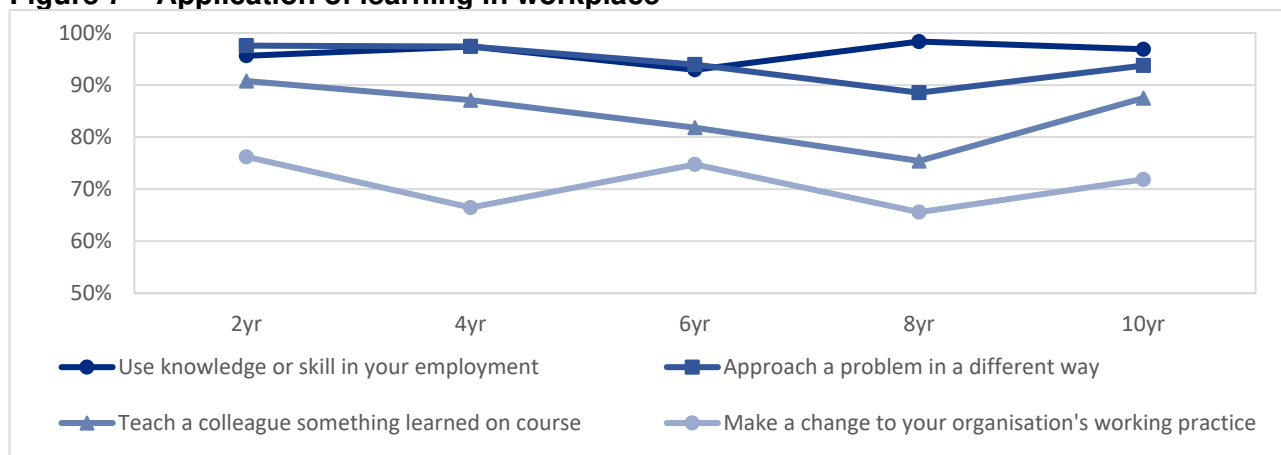
<sup>5</sup> n = 1,130

<sup>6</sup> n = 1,086

### 3. The Long-term Effect of Commonwealth Distance Learning

The workplace effects that occur while scholars are studying also continue during their post-scholarship career. As illustrated in Figure 7, the rate of applying and sharing knowledge and skills from Distance Learning remain consistently high over time.

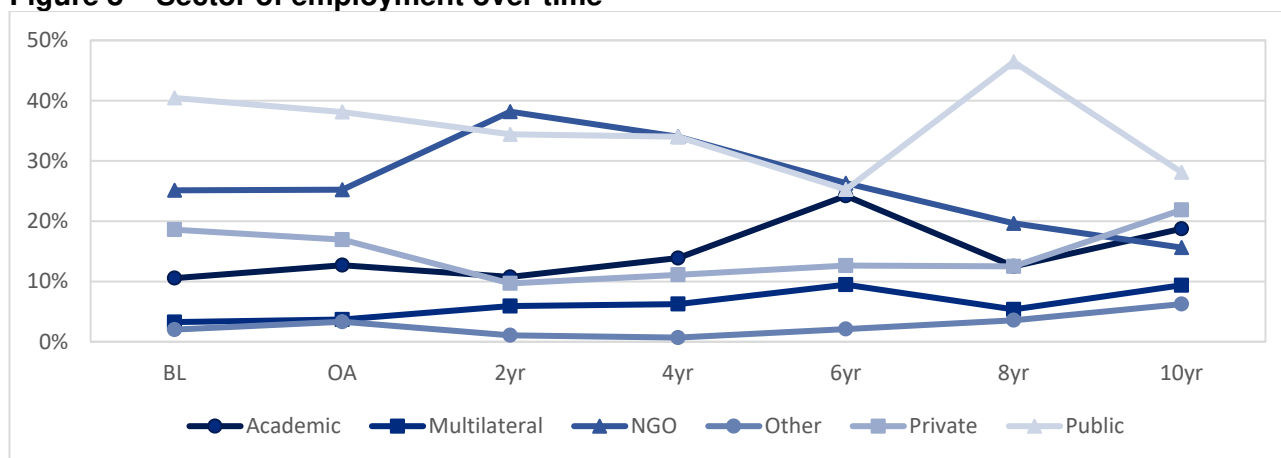
**Figure 7 – Application of learning in workplace<sup>7</sup>**



Source: CSC Longitudinal Surveys (2016-2019)<sup>8</sup>

However, the mix of sectors that scholars are employed in post-scholarship does change significantly, particularly in the immediate years after completing their course. As can be seen in Figure 8, the ratios remain the same from the pre-scholarship baseline (BL) to the on-award (OA) responses, however there is a sizable movement towards the NGO sector within two years of completing the scholarship.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 8 – Sector of employment over time**



Sources: CSC Baseline Surveys (2016-2018), CSC Distance Learner Surveys (2017-2019), CSC Longitudinal Surveys (2016-2019)<sup>10</sup>

Despite changes in the sectors of employment, the ratio of scholars and alumni reporting different types of impact remain quite similar from their pre-scholarship (BL) responses into their post-scholarship responses, as illustrated in Figure 9. The one exception is in the area of policymaking, which sees a significant shift from the baseline to the post-scholarship rate.

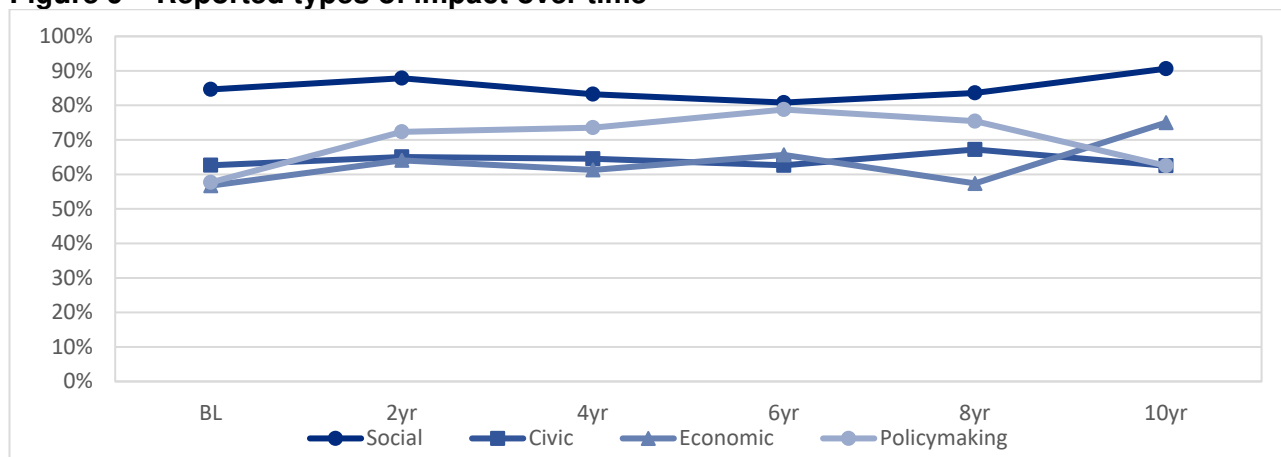
<sup>7</sup> This graph uses the combined top-two responses ('all the time' and 'often') in order to simplify the visualisation of the time-lapse analysis. On the whole, the ratio of 'all the time' to 'often' responses for each question is similar to that found in the study period responses illustrated in Figure 6.

<sup>8</sup> The number of respondents varies for each time point. They are: 2yr = 206; 4yr = 155; 6yr = 99; 8yr = 61; 10yr = 32.

<sup>9</sup> While there is a significant spike in employment in the public sector at year 8, this appears to be an outlier.

<sup>10</sup> The number of respondents is the same for the time points in Figure 7. The two additional points are: BL = 398; OA = 1,086.

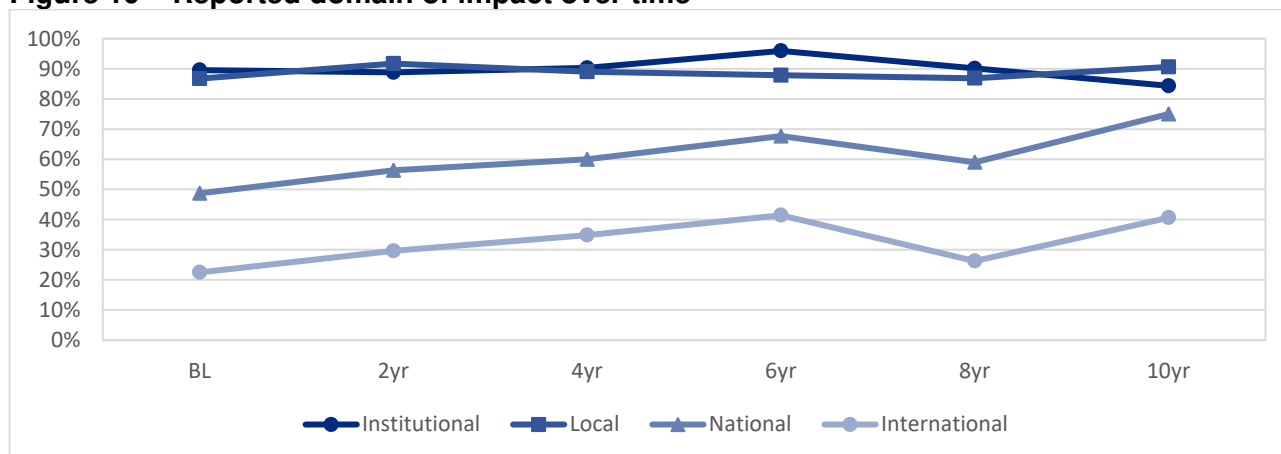
**Figure 9 – Reported types of impact over time**



Sources: CSC Baseline Surveys (2016-2018), CSC Longitudinal Surveys (2016-2019)<sup>11</sup>

More significant, however, are the shifts in the reported **domains** of impact, illustrated in Figure 10. As can be seen, the rate of impact at the institutional and local levels remain consistent over time, however the rate of reported impact at the national and international levels sees significant growth in the post-scholarship period compared to the pre-scholarship baseline level.

**Figure 10 – Reported domain of impact over time**



Sources: CSC Baseline Surveys (2016-2018), CSC Longitudinal Surveys (2016-2019)<sup>12</sup>

The next section provides some illustrative examples of the types of development impact that Distance Learning scholars have had in their post-scholarship careers.

## 4. Examples of the Impact of Commonwealth Distance Learning

As a part of the longitudinal data collection undertaken by the CSC, alumni are asked to provide details about the work that they are doing and the impact that they are having as a result of that work. The following are four such responses provided by Distance Learning alumni.<sup>13</sup>

### 2009 Distance Learning Scholar from the Gambia.

**SDGs: 3. Good Health and Wellbeing; 6. Clean Water and Sanitation.**

I participated in the development of the National Health Policy and strategic Plan for the Ministry of Health, intended to promote access to health care for all living in the Gambia. I am able to promote hand washing in communities through hygiene education to reduce diarrhoeal diseases, make water safer, and increase

<sup>11</sup> The number of respondents is the same for the time points in Figure 7. The additional point is: BL = 423.

<sup>12</sup> The number of respondents is the same for the time points in Figure 9.

<sup>13</sup> Note: This text has been lightly edited for clarity.

toilet use. No assessment is done yet but visits to those communities show tremendous improvements in the ways water is managed, more toilets built and used, with less people open defecating. Also reported is fewer diarrheal diseases. I am also part of a social mobilization committee on WhatsApp that is mobilizing one million Dalasi for my village to fund identified projects, and both members and non-members are participating. Currently we are supporting the establishment of a health facility refurbishment in the community to improve access to health care. I also spearheaded the establishment of village by-laws on water and sanitation in communities to promote the use of toilets and the hygienic management of water sources and supplies.

#### **2005 Distance Learning Scholar from Bangladesh.**

**SDGs: 1. No Poverty; 5. Gender Equality; 12. Responsible Consumption and Production.**

Currently managing an aquaculture and fisheries program and building the capacity of partner NGOs' staff and farmers on nutrition sensitive aquaculture and the inclusion of high valued fish in carp polyculture systems to improve production, income and consumption of poor farming households. The farmer guidebooks on aquaculture and fisheries are published by CARE and WorldFish Bangladesh. 5,000 farmers from poor farming households have been practicing improved aquaculture and fisheries technologies which they learnt from learning sessions, leading to improved food security and income security. More than 80% of farmers improved their income by 50% from aquaculture using these improved technologies.

#### **2008 Distance Learning Scholar from Uganda.**

**SDGs: 2. Zero Hunger; 6. Clean Water and Sanitation; 13. Climate Action.**

Have supported construction of over 20 solar powered water supply and irrigation facilities and training communities in water management in agriculture. This increased access to water for livestock watering and irrigation using clean energy for the communities in the cattle corridors of Karamoja and central area of Uganda. It also strengthened the adaptive capacities of both agropastoral communities and the District Local Government (DLG) to reduce climate risks and improve strategic planning and response to climate risks and shocks. 5,400 Agropastoral communities and 30,000 household members have been served with water for production.

#### **2011 Distance Learning Scholar from Mauritius.**

**SDGs: 4. Quality Education; 10. Reduced Inequalities; 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities.**

I embarked on a personal voluntary project in 2018 to set up a Learning Corner at the Verdun Village Hall which provides basic services to nearly 2500 inhabitants. Following my visits and assessments, I devised a plan with the green light of the local council to revamp the existing facilities and provide a better environment to local children, youth and adults. Given the positive feedback of this project, the District Council of Moka has approached me to conduct an assessment of how the project at Verdun Village Council can be used as a model to be implemented in the 15 other village councils and nearly 82,000 inhabitants it serves. I founded an NGO with the aim of promoting reading and literacy culture within all age groups in Mauritius. We have been able to achieve small projects with our limited resources for the benefit of the community. We sponsored the creation of a 'Learning Corner' at the Gayasingh Ashram in Port Louis for the benefit of the nearly 130 children aged between 3 and 14 years. My NGO has partnered with Maison de Paix foyer, in Roche Bois to help the children who attend the school and who come from vulnerable families and struggle with their literacy and reading skills. Hence, my NGO sponsored a storytelling session during their 'Activity Week' in November 2019. The session was led by a Mauritian author and was a lively and engaging activity with around 40 children attending junior classes.

## Summary

This paper provides several strong indications that Distance Learning scholars have had substantial effects on their co-workers, their organisations, and their communities. Of particular note is the immediate effect that Distance Learners can have on their workplace through the application of their learning in their work, sharing that learning with others, and making direct improvements to workplace practices. More broadly, it is evident that Distance Learners are positively changing the lives of others through their post-scholarship activities across several development priorities.

The CSC is planning an in-depth evaluation of its Distance Learning programme over the coming year, which will further investigate these findings, as well as delve into a number of specific areas of inquiry. These include an examination of the causes of the current gender disparity among scholarship recipients, further investigation into the tangible impact scholars have on their workplaces during their study period, and the effect that the clustering of awards within institutions, industries, or sectors has. This project will provide a much more in-depth analysis that should complement the initial overview that has been provided in this paper.

**Brendan Harrison, William Bramwell, Susan Marango, and Rachel Day**

**CSC Evaluation Working Paper Series  
April 2020**