



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Forging connections and collaboration across the Commonwealth:

A Review of the Commonwealth
Academic Fellowship Programme

Executive Summary

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The Commonwealth Academic Fellowship programme offered almost 2,500 early and mid-career academics from across the Commonwealth the opportunity to undertake Fellowship programmes at UK universities between 1969 and 2017.

Whilst the structure, tenure length, and sometimes the specific aims varied over the years reflecting the priorities of the CSC at the time, from the outset Academic Fellowships were broadly aimed at providing academics from eligible Commonwealth higher education institutions with the opportunity to **plan, conduct and write research**, and **to enhance their knowledge, skills and expertise** within specific disciplinary contexts. Moreover, the programme sought **to promote academic networking and collaboration**, with the implicit intention of **enhancing the teaching and future research capabilities of Commonwealth higher education institutions** through the catalytic impacts of individual placements, and completed by 46, 39 and 28 Fellows respectively.

In 2020 the CSC undertook a review of the Academic Fellowship Programme, with a focus on the most recent cohorts, those holding awards from 2015 to 2017. This decision was driven partly due to changes in the length of tenure and focus of the awards for these cohorts and partly by the fact that in 2015 the CSC Evaluation programme introduced a new Longitudinal Survey Framework to guide its data collection activities.¹ This paper reports the findings of this exercise, focusing on data gathered from the Fellows, their Host supervisors in the United Kingdom, and their home Employers between 2015 and 2017. It concludes that challenges with resources notwithstanding the programme has led to a variety of positive outcomes and long lasting impact benefitting not only the Fellows but also their Employers and Host institutions in the UK.



1. The CSC Longitudinal Survey Framework is an intervention and follow-up approach which tracks alumni through the post-scholarship period through the completion of follow-up surveys every two years over a ten-year period. This same framework also applies to the evaluation of the CSC's Fellowship programme, although follow-up surveys are distributed less frequently and to a reduced timeframe (at 6-, 18- and 36-months post-award) to reflect of the shorter duration of these awards.

2. The survey was sent to the Employers of those Fellows who returned to their pre-award employment.

Aims of the Review



To identify the knowledge and skills enhanced by the Fellowship and investigate the extent to which they were applied in the activities of the Fellows upon returning home.



To investigate the contribution of the Fellowship in cultivating and strengthening new and existing collaborations and networks in research and other areas, and how these links have influenced the activities of the Fellows and the home and Host institutions.



To identify the outcomes, impact, and the scope of the potential short and long-term benefits of the Academic Fellowships on the Fellows' Host institutions in the UK and their employing institutions in their home countries, as well as to the Fellows themselves.

Methodological approach

The review of the Fellowship programme was primarily informed by surveys that were conducted with Commonwealth Academic Fellows from the 2015, 2016, and 2017 cohorts, as well as with their Host supervisors and Employers. The aim of the surveys was to understand their experiences with the Fellowship programme and to establish their views on the outcomes and impact of the programme. Whilst resource and time limitations in this instance precluded the collection of more in-depth qualitative data, the following survey data – which included both closed and open questions – was collected:

- A baseline survey conducted with 52 Academic Fellows.
- Post-Fellowship longitudinal surveys conducted with Academic Fellows administered at 6, 18 and 36 months. 46, 39, and 28 Fellows completed the surveys respectively.
- A survey conducted with Host supervisors, 43 of whom participated.
- A survey conducted with the Employers of the Fellows, 18 of whom completed the survey.²

Overall, all (55) Fellows from the 2015-2017 cohorts participated in the surveys, of whom 56% were male and 44% were female³. Most (75%) of the participants studied STEM subjects, while others completed studies in Social Sciences (18%), Arts and Humanities (5%), and Education (2%). A high proportion (71%) of Fellows spent six months or more at their Host institution, and 29% spent less than six months.

A large proportion (96%) returned to the same employment they had before the Fellowship, with 85% of these remaining with the same Employer up to 36 months post-Fellowship. More than half of the Fellows reported having fairly supportive managers and work colleagues both pre- and post-Fellowship.

Key findings from the CSC Academic Fellowship review

Based on the survey data collected, this review identifies a range of outcomes and impacts derived by the Fellowship programme from which lessons can be learned to inform future planning of similar schemes.

1. Findings on the knowledge and skills enhanced by the Fellowship

The review assessed whether the Fellows had gained knowledge and skills from undertaking the Fellowship, and the extent to which the acquired skills were applied in their post-Fellowship activities.

- The findings show that prior to the Fellowship, 28% of the Fellows reported having **lower work-related skills** than needed for their current role, and none of the Fellows reported having lower skills than required for their roles post-Fellowship. Instead, 63% at 6 months and 72% at 18 months post-Fellowship reported that they had higher skills than required in their roles. This suggests that undertaking the Fellowship **significantly enhanced the work-related skills** of the Fellows.
- The main areas observed by the **Employers** to have **substantially** changed post-Fellowship were Fellows' **knowledge of research techniques** (72%), **knowledge of their research field** (67%), **technical skills** (61%), and their **capacity to disseminate knowledge and influence decisions** (61%).
- Over half of the Host supervisors confirmed that there was a 'Substantial' or 'Very Substantial Change' in the knowledge and skills of the Fellows. The top two areas of improvement observed were **knowledge of other research in the field**, and their **knowledge of research techniques**, as reported by 81% and 67% respectively. Equal proportions (54%) said the **critical thinking** and **technical skills** of the Fellows had improved.

- The skills acquired by the Fellows were applied in post-Fellowship activities. A large proportion (95%) of **Employers** said the **Fellows used the skills gained through the Fellowship at work**; 84% noted a **change to the work practices** following the completion of their Fellowship, and 83% reported the Fellow having **trained their work colleagues**.
- The top two activities of the Fellows post-award were **teaching, and research activities** as reported by 95% or more Fellows at all post-award levels. A large proportion (89%) of Employers reported that the Fellows **taught their students something new** that they had learned from the Fellowship.
- At 18 months post-Fellowship, most (90%) Fellows **had led or designed a new initiative or project** 'All the time' or 'Often' compared to 69% reported pre-award. At 36 months post-award, 79% of the Fellows were **supervising the work of other employees**, and 57% were involved in devising the strategic direction of an organisation.
- All (**100%**) Fellows at 18 months and **93%** at 36 months post-Fellowship were **applying the knowledge and skills gained** 'All the time' or 'Often' in their activities.

The review also investigated the level of impact of the activities of the Fellows, and the contribution of the activities of the Fellows to social development, economic development, civic engagement, and policymaking.

- **Over 80% of the Fellows at all post-award intervals reported making an impact at the institutional and local level.** The impact at national level was reported by less than half of the Fellows, both before and after the Fellowship.
- **Social development emerged as an area of impact that the largest proportion** (81% pre-Fellowship, 87% at 6 months, 85% at 18 months) of the Fellows reported to be contributing to, despite a slight drop (64%) at 36 months post-Fellowship.
- Notably, prior to the Fellowship, less than half the Fellows were contributing to civic engagement (47%) compared to 67% at 6 months post-Fellowship. Only 39% reported to be making **an impact on economic development** before taking up the Fellowship, and over half of the Fellows reported that their activities were having an impact in this area post-Fellowship, with **75% reporting that this was the case at 36 months post-Fellowship**.

Critically, the review also identified some important challenges that in part hindered the application of knowledge and skills in their activities post-Fellowship. These include lack of research funding, lack of equipment, resources and facilities, lack of government support, and lack of support from the workplace.

3. While a total of 55 Fellows completed the surveys for the Fellowship review, not every participant completed all four surveys. For example, 52 participants completed the baseline survey, but some of those who did not went on to complete the six months survey. Participation also varied between the surveys that were conducted at 6-, 18- and 36-month intervals post-Fellowship.

Over half of the Fellows, both pre- and post-Fellowship (53% pre-award, 52% at 6 months, and 56% at 18 months) revealed that the organisations they worked for ‘Rarely’ have adequate resources required to implement new practices suggested by the Fellows.

However, only 39% of the Fellows at 36 months post-award said this was the case. Notably, a few (11%) Fellows had changed jobs at the time of the survey, and two thirds of these had joined organisations that have slightly more resources to support their work.

2. The contribution of the Fellowship in cultivating and strengthening new and existing collaborations and networks in research and other areas

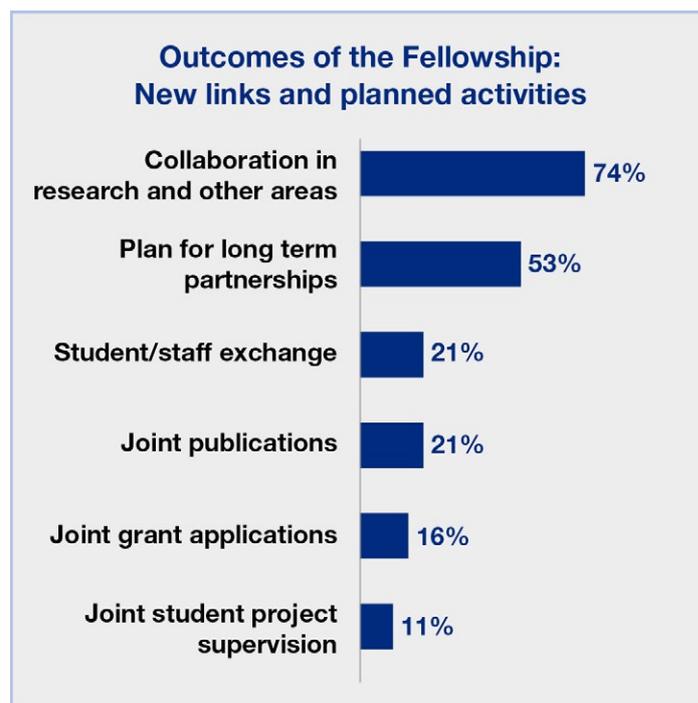
The review revealed a chain of consistent evidence from the Fellows and their Host supervisors and Employers that suggest that the Fellowship contributed to cultivating and strengthening new and existing collaborations and networks in research and other areas.

2.1 Evidence from the Host supervisors and the Employers of the Fellows

Of the 18 respondents to the Employer survey, a large proportion 13 (72%) reported that their organisation or university had not worked or collaborated with the Fellows’ Host institution prior to the Commonwealth Fellowship. Following the Fellowship, **over half of the Employers (56%) reported that the Fellowship resulted in new and strengthened links with academic contacts in another country, and 50% said they had interacted with academic contacts in the UK.** 44% also noted the cultivation of new professional contacts in another country outside the UK, while 28% reported interaction with professional contacts that were made in the UK. Therefore, the Fellowship provided the Employers with a platform to network and build relations with other international academics.



The findings show that 60% of Host supervisors had not worked with the Fellows prior to the Fellowship and 72% reported not having worked with the Fellows’ colleagues or home institutions. Following the Fellowship, 72% of Hosts reported having planned future collaborations and activities with the Fellows and their home institutions. Of these, 61% had no pre-existing relations with the Fellows. As shown in the figure below, a range of activities were planned, indicating that the Fellowship had provided a platform for the Fellows, Hosts, and home institutions to cultivate new links and establish long-lasting relationships. This was elaborated upon by two Hosts as follows:



‘We will continue to collaborate on paper-writing for this project, and we have agreed to co-supervise an MSc student from my institution to work with the Fellow on another element of their work next summer, which will be a good way of continuing our collaboration. This will also enable stronger links between the institutions to develop. Potentially we can have ongoing student exchanges if this one goes well.’

‘I am currently planning a research funding application for collaboration with East African universities, and the Fellow’s institution would be a good partner for this project. The Fellow’s visit has also led to the establishment of further contacts at their institution’.

Some Hosts also reported the immediate benefits of the Fellowship to the Host institutions while the Fellows were on-award, and these included mentoring and supervising MSc and PhD research students, and contributions made to seminars and conferences at the Host institution and at external events. Cross-cultural exchange also emerged as a substantial benefit for half (51%) of the Hosts. The creation of new links was also confirmed by Employers, one of whom described the benefits as follows:

‘Most importantly, his Fellowship culminated in the signing of an MOU between our universities. The MOU has resulted in collaborations in the areas of joint curriculum development, joint PhD supervision and student and staff exchange. Specifically, two teams from the Host institution have visited our university to discuss areas of collaborations. We also received donations of books to our department, a PhD scholarship was awarded to one of the students on a joint supervision basis. Similarly, two PhD students and staff of the department will be at the Host institution for a three-month visit under a student exchange project in 2018.’

Moreover, **over half (56%) of the Employers reported that their organisations had experienced substantial benefits from the Fellowship** with regards to capacity development and increased understanding of the UK. In addition, the Employers reported the following outcomes of the Fellowship:

- Enhanced research practices, new research projects being initiated and implemented by the Fellow and increased academic publications.
- Knowledge transfer to the students through teaching and supervising student research projects, and training and mentoring of work colleagues.
- The contributions made by the Fellows to developing new curriculum, and introducing new ways of learning, such as technology or platforms for learning.

Some Employers added that these activities cumulatively contributed to improving the learning standards at the universities, therefore increasing the rating of the institutions.

2.2 Evidence from the Fellows

The Fellows reported on their interactions with different groups of individuals, as well as the influence of these groups in their professional development both pre- and post-Fellowship. The findings reveal that the Fellowship provided a platform for the Fellows to establish links and enhance existing networks from which the Fellows, their institutions, and wider communities have benefitted.

- A large proportion (**89%**) of the Fellows interacted with **academics in the UK** (‘All the time’ or ‘Often’) at 6 months post-Fellowship, compared to 49% prior to the Fellowship. Meanwhile, **84% of the Fellows who responded to the 6 months post-award survey said their post-award activities were influenced by academic contacts in the UK** (‘All the time’ or ‘Often’) compared to 67% reporting that this was the case prior to the Fellowship.
- Moreover, **76% interacted with professional contacts in the UK post-award** (‘All the time’ or ‘Often’) at 6 months post-Fellowship compared to 22% prior to the Fellowship, and **71% said their professional development was influenced by professional contacts in the UK**, compared to 39% pre-Fellowship.
- The review also revealed that **85% of the Fellows interacted with personal contacts outside their home country** (‘All the time’ or ‘Often’) at 6 months post-award compared to 69% pre-award. In the same post-award survey, **78% said their professional development was influenced by personal contacts outside their home country** compared to 50% reporting that this was the case prior to the Fellowship.

The benefits of these new or enhanced links were detailed by two Fellows:

‘In summary my CSC Fellowship has conferred some measure of prestige and validation on my profile as a researcher: this has opened up tremendous opportunities for me both within and outside my home country. The research skills, networks and contacts that I cultivated during my Fellowship as well as the associated international exposure [has] boosted my confidence to take up more responsibilities and challenging leadership roles within my university.’

(2015 Academic Fellow, 36-month survey)

‘I was able to initiate and formalise research collaboration between my Host university and a company in the USA. I also initiated a collaborative research project between my home and Host institution on formulations in selected tropical diseases.’

(2017 Academic Fellow, 6-month survey)

As evidenced above, **the Academic Fellowship programme provided a platform to cultivate and enhance new and existing individual and institutional relationships** which have resulted in the development of collaborations in research and other areas. The planned future collaborative activities also indicate the potential of having long-term relationships that will have an impact beyond those individuals directly involved.

3. A summary of the findings and lessons learned from the Academic Fellowship Programme review

This review was primarily concerned with the outcomes and impact of Fellowships held between 2015 and 2017. The findings demonstrate that the Fellowship programme enhanced the knowledge and skills of the Fellows and that these acquired skills and expertise were applied in teaching and research, amongst other areas. Furthermore, the programme provided a platform to cultivate relationships, research collaborations and networks. The comparisons drawn between pre- and post-Fellowship experiences indicate the positive influence of these fellowships on the activities, interactions and career/professional development of individual recipients. At an institutional level, the programme clearly contributed to the creation of new and enhancing of existing relationships between institutions – from which a range of subsequent benefits were also identified. These include a range of planned and already operational activities such as staff and student exchange programmes, joint PhD supervision and examination, joint curriculum development for graduate programmes, joint research grant applications, and continued collaborations in research and other areas. Overall, the review demonstrates the importance of the Fellows’ individual placements, and their catalytic impacts on the capacity development of Commonwealth higher education institutions.

Lessons learned from the review of the Academic Fellowship Programme

Drawing from the surveys conducted with Employers, Hosts, and the Fellows this review triangulated different perspectives in providing a more holistic view of the outcomes and impacts achieved by the Academic Fellowship programme. A chain of evidence on the benefits and challenges of the Fellowship was obtained as a result, and the findings as well as the methodological approach used will inform current and future planning of similar CSC programmes. The longitudinal approach used for the post-Fellowship surveys (6, 18 and 36 months) allowed for the tracing of the outcomes and impact of the Fellowship over time, as well as identifying certain activities, outcomes and impact of the Fellowship that were more likely to occur at a specific timeframe following the Fellowship.

It is important to flag that lack of resources by the organisations to implement new practices emerged as a major constraint, reported by at least half of the Fellows, both pre- and post-Fellowship. These include lack of research funding, lack of equipment and facilities and, to a lesser extent, lack of support from the workplace. This should be borne in mind and factored into future programme design where possible so as to maximise on the capabilities of the Fellows and the institutions to achieve developmental impact. Nonetheless, the review revealed the importance of understanding the diverse range of contexts in which the Fellows conduct activities and pursue their careers and that the work environment and professional interactions before, during, and after the Fellowship appear to be central to enabling or hindering the developmental activities of Fellows

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