



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Knowledge, Networks and Development: 20 years of Commonwealth Professional Fellowships

Executive Summary

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Dr Tim Chancellor (University of Greenwich) with Professional Fellow Watson Matamwa and colleagues in Kilolo, Tanzania

Background

Since 2001, the CSC has supported career development through its Professional Fellowships programme, supporting mid-career professionals to spend a period at a UK Host organisation working in their sector for a programme of professional development. The purpose of these awards is to 'provide professionals with the opportunity to enhance knowledge and skills in their given sector, and to have catalytic effects on their workplaces.'¹ The programme seeks to support 'mid-career professionals (with five years' relevant work experience) working in development-related organisations in low and middle- income Commonwealth countries.'²

Having welcomed its twentieth cohort of Fellows in 2021, this programme has become an integral part of the Commission's work, with 1,390 individuals having taken up Professional Fellowships to date, representing 40 Commonwealth countries, and completing placements at 271 Host organisations across the United Kingdom.

The primary purpose of this review was to explore a number of questions specific to the outcomes and impact of the Professional Fellowship programme from the perspectives of its various stakeholders, including the Fellows themselves, their UK Host organisations, and their Employers. In particular, the review was intended to shed light on the following:

- To better understand the demographics, contexts and motivations of those applying for and completing Commonwealth Professional Fellowships.
- To better understand the experiences of Professional Fellows, their knowledge and skills development through participation in the programme, and career trajectories following the Fellowship.
- To identify the catalytic institutional impact, and wider societal impact, of Professional Fellows upon their return home, as reported by Fellows and their home Employers.

- To identify the benefits and challenges for UK Host organisations participating in the programme.
- To identify the extent to which international professional networks are established or strengthened through the programme.

Methodology and Data Sources

While the demographic overview provides a summary of all Professional Fellows since the programme's inception, the main focus of this review was to analyse the data collected following the establishment of the CSC's longitudinal survey framework, which covers the 2015-2019 cohorts of Fellows. Qualitative data collected from interviews with Fellows and from Host organisations invited to attend a focus group, were also limited to those who have participated in the programme during this same timeframe.

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

- Existing demographic data held on Professional Fellowship recipients in the CSC's database (2001-2020)³
- Data from Longitudinal surveys conducted by the 2015-2019 cohorts of Professional Fellows⁴
- Data from the CSC Alumni census conducted in 2019⁵
- Data from Host organisation surveys conducted from 2015-2019⁶
- Data from Employer surveys conducted from 2015-2019⁷
- Case study interviews with seven alumni of the Professional Fellowship programme conducted between May and July 2021
- An online focus group attended by fifteen Host supervisors conducted in June 2021

This data set was then analysed with appropriate methods, including descriptive and comparative statistical analysis of quantitative survey data, and thematic coding and analysis of qualitative survey, interview and focus group data.

1. CSC Professional Fellowships: Terms and Conditions, 2020

2. Ibid.

3. n=1390

4. The number of respondents varies for each survey interval as follows: Baseline=244, 6 months=243, 18 month=122, 36 months=105

5. n=287

6. n=58

7. n=82

Findings

1.1 The Fellowship experience

Demographically, the majority of Professional Fellows have come from Africa (78%) with a further 17% coming from Asia, and 5% from the Caribbean. There has been a slight gender imbalance, with males receiving 58% of Fellowships, and females 42%. Fellows come from a wide range of development-focused professional backgrounds, but the most heavily represented area of pre-Fellowship employment has been public health (42%), followed by education and governance (both 14%).

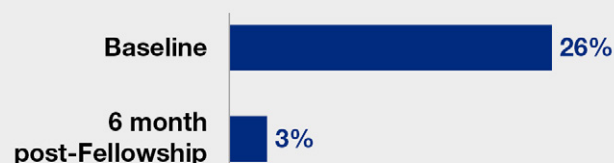
Despite their diverse backgrounds, Fellows share common **objectives for participation** in the programme, geared towards their own professional development, building capacity at their home organisations, and establishing opportunities for future collaborations. Most Fellows have a specific set of technical knowledge and skills that they aim to acquire through the Fellowship and a clear idea of how they plan to apply these to their work going forward.

'I expect to gain knowledge and skills which will help me improve on my service delivery at home in child and maternal health since our country has a high mortality rate. With the knowledge and skills gained I will be able to mentor the junior midwives, be able to network and collaborate with other organisations for better service delivery.'

During their time in the UK, Fellows take part in a wide variety of **activities and training**, designed carefully to align with their set objectives. They overwhelmingly report achieving the goals set for their Fellowship and this is supported by Hosts, with 94% 'strongly agreeing' or 'agreeing' that Fellows met the objectives of their Fellowship. Fellows also report very high levels of **knowledge and skills acquisition** across a variety of academic and professional skill sets, with 95% reporting 'moderate' or 'substantial' improvement in their capacity to disseminate knowledge, 93% in their leadership skills and 91% in their capacity to influence decisions.

Furthermore, only 3% of Fellows still felt that their 'personal work skills were lower than skills needed' for their current role six-months post-Fellowship, down from one quarter (26%) of Fellows at the baseline. As a result of their enhanced knowledge and skills, Fellows are well-equipped to assume positions of greater influence, and affect meaningful change, upon returning to their places of employment post-Fellowship.

Fellows reporting personal work skills are lower than skills needed for current role

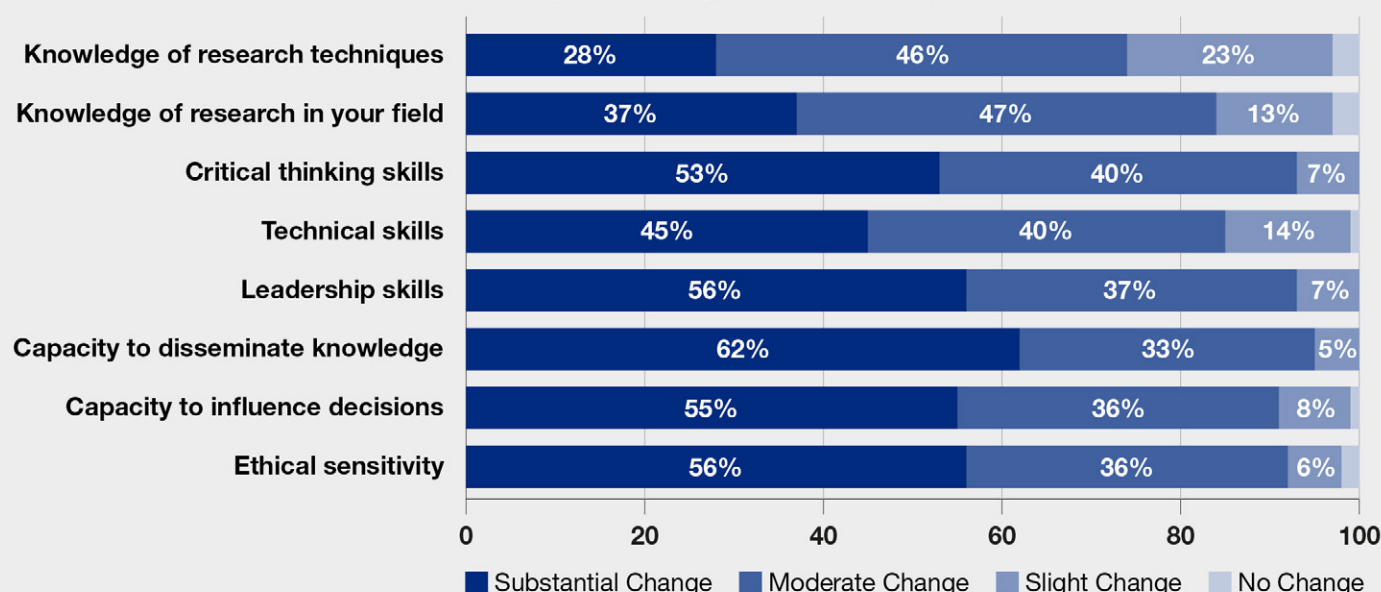


Sources: CSC Baseline Surveys (2016-2019)⁸,
CSC Longitudinal Surveys (2015-2019)⁹

8. n = 244

9. n = 239

On-Fellowship knowledge and skills acquisition



Source: CSC Longitudinal Surveys (2015-2019)¹⁰

10. n = 243

Upon returning to their home organisations, Fellows see an immediate boost to their **professional prospects**, with many receiving promotions or salary increases, as well as reporting broader areas of responsibility and a greater influence in the workplace. They **apply the learnings from the Fellowship** in their workplaces, and beyond, in a variety of ways, both immediately and consistently over the longer term, with 97% of Fellows reporting to still use the knowledge and skills gained on their Fellowship in the workplace ‘all the time’ or ‘often’ three years post-Fellowship. Surveyed and interviewed Fellows provided details of how the knowledge and skills acquired through the Fellowship influence not only their own work, but the **overall direction of their organisations**, leading to the implementation of new strategies, the upskilling of colleagues, and the initiation of innovative new projects.

‘My fellowship was over two years ago. However, the training and exposure I got about advocacy for climate change still influences how I make decisions and communicate about climate-related issues daily.’

‘Some of our Fellows have gone on to significantly accelerate their careers and move into senior positions in their chosen fields from a starting point of grassroots programming.’

In addition to their enhanced skills sets, Fellows return with newly established, or strengthened, **international professional networks**, leading to increased contact, influence and collaboration. Three quarters (76%) of Fellows remain in contact, and more than half (58%) are engaged in collaborative projects or research with their UK Host organisations six months post-Fellowship. Fellows also provided details of ongoing networking and collaboration with other UK professional contacts and with other Professional Fellows.



2019 University of Salford Professional Fellows

‘The relationship I made with library professionals at Cardiff University continues resulting in impactful improvements in our library services. Specifically, we managed to finalize our Information Literacy programme for our first-year students, and [conduct] a quality review of our library services by a panel of experts.’

‘I’ve also maintained engagement with [other] Fellows. Some of them are also based in Kenya, so we’ve been in touch, especially in relation to some of the projects that we are leading. We see which interventions we can jointly work on and we can also avoid duplication of efforts’

Fellows have leveraged their enhanced capabilities and networks to create meaningful **impact** at various levels and relating to several distinct development areas. Impact has been strongest and most consistent at the institutional level, but Fellows also reported increased impact at the local, national, and international levels post-Fellowship, providing a plethora of examples of new and improved service provision, policy influence and wider dissemination of knowledge and skills beyond the workplace.

The most notable **challenge** reported by Fellows is an absence of the resources needed to implement their Fellowship learnings upon returning to their home organisations, with 50% of Fellows reporting that their home organisation ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ had the resources to implement their ideas six months post-Fellowship. This has been recognised as a challenge by UK Hosts and must be taken into consideration when designing training programmes, and plans for follow-up activities, if Fellows are to be empowered to realise the full extent of their developmental ambitions in the post-Fellowship period.

‘There are now plans to roll out the training module that I developed [on psychological support provision] based on Fellowship learnings throughout the country. We’ll be providing the same training [to professionals in the field], who are distributed all over the country. So, it’s building more professionals and paraprofessional, for national impact.’

1.2 The Host experience

Professional Fellows are hosted at a wide variety of development-focused UK Host organisations, ranging from universities and research institutions to charity organisations and local government. Host organisations reported being **motivated to participate** in the Professional Fellowship for reasons that closely align with the mission of the programme; namely, in order to contribute towards capacity building in Fellows' home organisations and in their professional sectors more broadly, to strengthen and expand their international networks, and to foster reciprocal learning.

'Our primary motivation has always revolved around building stronger and more meaningful relationships with our partners in developing countries. Hosting a Fellow allows for a dedicated period of training and working together which engenders new ideas and serves as a catalyst for new and better work in the future.'

In order to ensure that Fellows are best placed to benefit from the programme, and to implement meaningful institutional change, Host organisations largely recruit Fellows through **pre-existing professional networks**, often with input from local partner organisations. Two-thirds of surveyed Hosts (66%) report having previously worked or collaborated with their Professional Fellow and three quarters (76%) had worked with their Fellows' home organisation or colleagues, prior to the Fellowship. Hosts overwhelmingly report that Fellows are highly qualified, competent, and produce high quality work and that their levels of on-Fellowship knowledge and skills acquisition are impressively high.

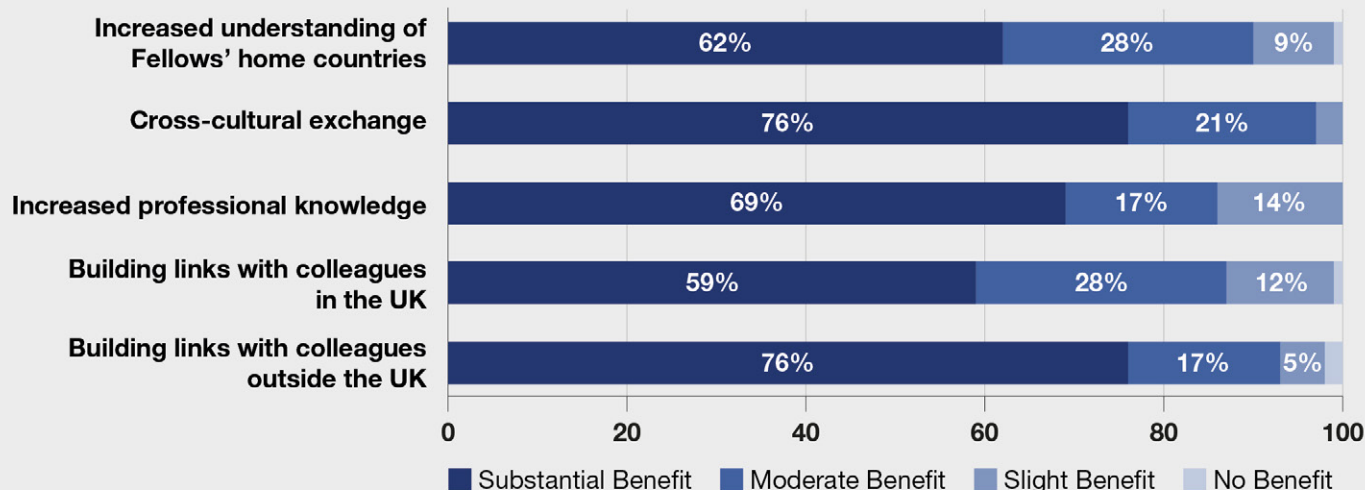


Professional Fellow Watson Matamwa at a farmer field school supported by the University of Greenwich in Kilolo, Tanzania

Administrative and logistical **challenges** were flagged by Hosts, with roughly three quarters of those surveyed citing 'substantial' or 'moderate' costs relating to logistical planning (75%), programme planning (72%), and other time and resource costs (77%). Additionally, several Hosts in the focus group highlighted that hosting Fellows was very resource intensive and significantly stretched their staff capacity. Funding limitations and lack of opportunities for follow up face to face interaction with Fellows were also flagged by some Hosts as inhibiting potential for sustained mentoring and collaboration.

However, these challenges appear greatly outweighed by the numerous **benefits** reported by participating Host organisations, including greater cross-cultural understanding, reciprocal learning, and developing key links to Fellows' home institutions and countries. This is reflected in the high levels of ongoing contact between Hosts and Fellows, with the vast majority engaging in mutually beneficial **professional collaboration** post-Fellowship.

Benefits to host organisations



Source: Professional Fellowship host surveys: 2016-2019¹¹

11. n=58

‘The stronger human and professional relationships which are developed with the Fellows help cement our partnerships with the prison services and other justice institutions. This allows us to strengthen the organisation’s presence in the country and foster a more conducive environment to implement new projects and run its current programmes.’

1.3 The Employer experience

Analysis of Employer surveys provided key insights into both the immediate outcomes, and longer-term impact of the CSC Professional Fellowship programme. Feedback from Employers reinforced the significant **knowledge and skills acquisition** achieved by Fellows, as reported by Host organisations and Fellows themselves. Additionally, they confirm that Fellows were able **apply these new skills** at a very high and consistent rate upon their return to the workplace, using the learnings of the Fellowship to improve their own work, to disseminate knowledge to colleagues and, crucially, to make positive changes to their organisations’ working practices, with 90% of Employers reporting a ‘substantial’ or ‘moderate’ benefit from capacity building of their workplace. They also described Fellows as applying their enhanced skills to make positive contributions in their wider professional fields.

‘As a result of the Commonwealth Fellowship, his level of competence and confidence in his area of experience and training has greatly increased which has created a positive impact on our organisation, colleagues, clients and students.’

Employers themselves are key **beneficiaries** of the Professional Fellowship. In addition to returning employees’ contribution to overall **organisational capacity**, Employers benefitted from the expanded **professional networks** established by Fellows during their time in the UK, with 90% of Employers reporting that their relationship with the Fellows’ UK Host organisation had become stronger following the Fellowship. The majority also reported new

or strengthened relationships with wider professional and academic contacts in the UK and internationally, as a direct result of the Fellowship.

‘The Fellowship was indeed hugely beneficial to both the recipient and the entire University. As a result of the Fellowship, more fundamental collaborations have been reached with Lancaster University in particular, and this has resulted in wider understanding and cross-cultural collaborations. There is currently a joint bid for a multidisciplinary project involving multiple organisations, and the University is part of this. There is no way this would have been possible without the Fellowship.’

Summary

It is clear, from the evidence outlined in this review, that the CSC Professional Fellowship programme has been successful in its mission to equip talented mid-career professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to have catalytic effects in their workplaces. Through the analysis of multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data from Fellows, Hosts and Employers, this report demonstrates that the Fellowship programme plays a role not only in empowering individuals but also contributing to institutional capacity building and the development of strong international networks. Leveraging their enhanced expertise, networks and greater influence in the workplace, Professional Fellows are enabled to create meaningful, long-term impact in a variety of development-focused sectors across the Commonwealth.

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