



COMMONWEALTH  
SCHOLARSHIPS

# **Expanding Horizons**

The Commonwealth  
Distance Learning  
Scholarship Programme

**Executive Summary**

# Executive Summary



Forest tour in Ghana for students and staff from Bangor University in 2019.

Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships were established in 2001 as part of an initiative designed to expand the modes of scholarships offered by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK (CSC).

To date, it has funded 3,793 Scholars from 41 Commonwealth countries to study Master's programmes at 45 different higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. The objective of the programme 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 is intended to benefit '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> In addition to meeting the academic or professional qualification requirements, Scholars should also be unable to afford to undertake the programme of study without the Scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the mode of learning, the programme has several unique features that distinguish it from other Commonwealth Scholarships. **The first is that Scholars can conduct their studies part-time, allowing them to continue with their employment or other responsibilities over the course of their Scholarship.** The ability to continue working is of particular importance as this allows Scholars to immediately and **directly apply what**

**they learn from their coursework to their workplace environment.** A second feature, which follows on from the ability to study part-time, is that funding is available for up to five years, allowing Scholars to determine the pace of their studies. A third unique aspect of the programme is that Scholars have the option to exit their studies early while still gaining a qualification at the Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma level.

The Scholarship also has distinctive characteristics relating to the university Providers, including a requirement that universities first apply to be awarded Scholarship places in specific programmes prior to the recruitment of Scholars. Many university Providers also choose to **operate the programmes in collaboration with an international Partner organisation located outside of the United Kingdom.** These International Partners add value by contributing their own expertise to the programme, helping to promote Scholarship opportunities in their own communities, and running face-to-face summer schools.

1. <https://cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk/scholarships/commonwealth-distance-learning-scholarships/> Last accessed 13 April 2022.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

This report is the product of an evaluation conducted by the CSC to examine the experiences of the main stakeholders of the programme (Scholars, University Providers, Partner organisations, and Scholars' Employers), as well as the outcomes and impact realised by Alumni in the years following their Scholarship. It is based on existing survey data, routinely collected by the CSC as a part of its evaluation programme, as well as data collected through a set of surveys specifically conducted to collect information from Partners and Employers. Key informant interviews were also conducted with all categories of stakeholder to validate the survey findings and inform a series of case studies that are included in the full report. In addition to examining the experiences and outcomes associated with the programme, the evaluation sought to address several specific research questions based around the following themes:



**The impact of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars on their programmes of study and in their workplaces.**



**Engagement of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars with broader CSC engagement activities.**



**The benefits and characteristics of the relationships between university Providers and Partner organisations.**



**Investigating demographic trends in recruitment.**

The key findings from this evaluation, examining the experiences of all key stakeholders, and the overall outcomes and impact of the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships are outlined below.

## Scholar Experiences

The top motivations reported by Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars for applying to the programme are that they wanted to apply for a higher education scholarship, they wanted to apply to their specific programme of study, they wanted to continue working during their studies, and that they wanted to apply specifically for a Commonwealth Scholarship. **As a result of their Distance Learning courses, most Scholars reported substantial change in their knowledge and skills across a variety of academic and professional areas, including critical thinking, research techniques, ethical sensitivity, capacity to disseminate knowledge, and technical skills.** In fact, Scholars almost universally reported some degree of change across every knowledge or skill category.

It's the flexibility of the programme, being a distance learning course. It gives me more time to be at work and at the same time doing my studies and attending to family issues.

**Edwin Hara, 2019 Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar**

**The vast majority of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars continue to be employed during their studies, with most maintaining full-time employment.** Given that one of the unique features of the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme is that it allows Scholars to study part-time so that they can continue their employment concurrently, the programme is achieving this goal. While the plurality of Scholars indicated that they are employed in the Public sector, there is also strong representation from Scholars working in the NGO, Private, and Academic sectors.

Furthermore, almost all Scholars frequently use knowledge or skills from their studies in their employment, in their problem-solving techniques, and outside of their employment. Scholars also reported teaching what they had learned to their co-workers either through formal or informal training. Most Scholars additionally reported that they were working to promote change within their organisation based on what they were learning either through modifications to their own working practice, or by advocating changes with their senior managers.

In the module I am currently doing, I selected a management course on decision making. I'm applying a lot of knowledge gained from the module on health system management. This includes working as a team, listening to colleagues, making decisions together, and programming any issues together as a team.

**Denis Juma, 2019 Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar**

Just under one-third of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars reported that they worked or otherwise engaged with other Commonwealth Scholars, Fellows, and Alumni, demonstrating some of the collaborations that occur within the CSC community. Most engagement that did occur was professional in nature, either through cross-organisational work, co-operation, or knowledge sharing, or by collaborating with co-workers who were also members of the CSC community.





Denis Juma (second from the right) attending training in a Research Methodology Course (RMC) hosted by Mwanza Intervention Trials Unit (MITU) in Mwanza, Tanzania.

In some cases, respondents reported collaborative activities that were working towards developmental impact such as community education projects or advocacy. Respondents also reported that they had formed study or support groups with other Commonwealth Scholars in their programme in order to further their studies.

## Employer Perspectives

Employers had overwhelmingly positive expectations for their employee's take up of a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship. While some Employers had generally positive expectations, others cited specific expectations including an increase in their Scholar's knowledge and skills, improvements in the performance of their organisation, and knowledge sharing from the Scholar to other members of staff. **All Employers confirmed that their expectations had been positively met**, with a few indicating that their expectations had been exceeded.

Supporting the self-assessment provided by Scholars, Employers reported that they had observed significant changes in their Scholar's knowledge and skills, including research techniques, knowledge of research in their field, and general technical skills, as well as soft skills such as critical thinking, leadership skills, and ability to disseminate knowledge. **Employers also reported that they observed their Scholar frequently applying what they were learning from their Scholarship in their work**, sharing that knowledge with their colleagues, as well as making or advocating for changes in their workplace based on their studies. These assessments provide strong evidence that the Scholarship is having a positive impact on both the knowledge base of staff and the overall operation of Scholars' workplaces. This is further evidenced by the examples of change within the workplace detailed by Employers, including the implementation of new policies and practices, and the

development of new organisational work strands. These outcomes were all cited by Employers as major benefits that their organisations had derived from their employee's Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship.

Approximately one-third of Employers indicated that their organisation had **formed new relationships with other organisations because of the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme**, including new international relationships with universities and multilateral bodies. Half of Employers also indicated that the programme had helped them to strengthen existing relationships with universities and multilateral bodies, as well as private companies and local and national organisations.

Employers largely indicated that they did not face significant challenges due to their employee's Scholarship. In the few instances where challenges were mentioned, these generally revolved around the need for their Scholar to manage their workload alongside their studies, however Employers were happy to accommodate their employees in these cases and noted that the Scholar's study programme reciprocated this when their obligations at work required flexibility. In rare cases Employers flagged a lack of resourcing available to implement the changes that their Scholar was advocating for, or a lack of buy-in from other employees in taking up those changes.

On the whole, **Employers had very positive perceptions of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships, strongly agreeing that they were prestigious, relevant to the needs of their countries, and valued by employers**. Notably, every Employer who participated in the survey said that they would recommend applying for a Commonwealth Scholarship or Fellowship to others.

The fact that he would remain performing his duties was always a bonus for us. This is a USAID contract where we have very tight deadlines, strict delivery goals, so for him to pursue that option was a win-win for us in many ways.

Dr Dithan Kiragga, Scholar Employer, Uganda



MSc Responsible Tourism Management 2019 cohort with hosts at DeKUTS campus in Nyeri.

## Provider Perspectives

University Providers identified many benefits that Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars receive through their programmes of study. Chief among these is the high degree of expertise that Scholars can access from their lecturers, and the quality of the education that Scholars receive through their programme. Additionally, Providers highlighted the unique and leading-edge nature of the programmes offered to Distance Learners, with many of these being at the forefront of their respective fields. Providers also highlighted the long-term benefit that the prestige of an education and accreditation from their universities offered to Scholars. The development of soft skills and international networks were also flagged by Providers as important benefits of the programme. In addition to the substantial benefits enjoyed by Scholars, University Providers recognised the benefits that they and their programmes derived through the presence of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars. First and foremost was the **variety of experience that Scholars brought into their classrooms, sharing insights into the country contexts in which they have worked with other students on their courses.**

Providers also cited the value of the wide geographic representation and multicultural experience that the Commonwealth Scholars brought to their programmes, providing greater international breadth and experience to group discussions. This benefit is also expressed through the broader international networks established through the courses. Finally, in some instances the funding and

students that Providers are able to access through the Scholarships meant that their courses became viable to run for other non-Commonwealth students both practically and financially.

## Partner Perspectives

Partner organisations, who engage with Scholars in their home countries over the course of their studies, generally echoed the benefits to Scholars that were cited by university Providers, although from a more practical perspective. Partners emphasised the **additional opportunities for practical training that Scholars received through their study programmes, including research and fieldwork experience** that is facilitated by the Partner organisations.

The motivation stems from our mutual understanding about collaborative research, promoting the exchange of students and of academic and administrative staff and the application of learning and distance learning technologies between the two institutions.

**Dr Ernest Foli, Principal Research Scientist at the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana**



Both Partner organisations and university Providers cited a number of mutual benefits that their institutions derived from their partnership to deliver their Distance Learning programmes. These benefits include knowledge exchange, the opportunity for collaboration, the sharing of mutual goals, and the prestige of association with Commonwealth Scholarships. University Providers also cited the ability to access local knowledge, to host face-to-face sessions, and assistance with recruitment efforts as benefits that they received from these partnerships, while Partner organisations separately cited the ability to establish and strengthen international partnerships, the sharing of expertise between staff, and the ability to secure scholarship funding for local students as benefits. All university Providers and Partner organisations indicated positive professional relationships, with little in the way of challenges. In the instances where challenges were identified, they were not related to the partnerships themselves, but were instead focused on the impact that COVID-19 has had on the Partner organisations due to local conditions and their involvement in pandemic response. Many Providers and Partners indicated that their partnership has strengthened, expanded, and evolved over time.

## Alumni Outcomes and Impact

Following their completion of the Scholarship, Commonwealth Distance Learning Alumni reported significant impact across a wide range of development areas, and at various levels. Alumni continued to have an impact at the Institutional and Local levels, with the proportion reporting impact at these levels remaining consistently high from pre- to post-Scholarship and across all follow-up survey intervals. Alumni generally reported **increasing impact at the National and International levels over time post-Scholarship**.

The proportion of Alumni reporting impact in Social Development remained consistently high across all post-Scholarship survey intervals, with most Alumni also reporting stable levels of impact with respect to Civic Engagement. Alumni reported having an impact in Economic Development at a rate consistently higher than pre-Scholarship and that trended upwards across all post-Scholarship surveys, while they also reported **significantly increased rates of involvement in Policymaking** in the initial post-Scholarship survey, and this continued to stay well above the pre-Scholarship rate in all subsequent surveys.



Biodigester construction at Chadiza Boarding Secondary School.

# Summary

Overall, this evaluation has found that the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship programme provides an opportunity for individuals to participate in postgraduate studies with institutions based in the United Kingdom that otherwise would not have been possible, with many Scholars emphasising the importance of being able continue working while undertaking their studies.

There was a **strong disposition towards the health sector**, with more than half of Alumni reporting that their work contributed towards SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). Additionally, approximately one-quarter of Alumni reported that they were contributing to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 1 (No Poverty). These areas of focus were also reflected in Alumni descriptions of their work and development impact.

Significant proportions of Alumni provided details of impact that fit under the themes of 'Health', 'Policy', 'Economic', 'Education', and 'Community', with their work often overlapping across multiple themes. Other themes that were mentioned include 'Women', 'Children', 'Government', 'Agriculture', 'Equity and Access' and 'Environmental'. While the impact examples provided in this review help to demonstrate the breadth and depth of the work of Commonwealth Distance Learning Alumni, this offers only a small glimpse into the wider impact they are having on the lives of individuals, communities and across their professional fields.

Scholars and Alumni report substantial gains across all knowledge and skill areas, and consistently apply what they have learned in their work both during and after their studies. Employers of current Scholars reiterated these observations and noted that their employee's Scholarship had broader organisational impacts through the Scholar's imparting of knowledge to co-workers and the implementation of new policies and practices, leading to overall improvements in the performance of their organisation. Employers also reported that the Scholarship enabled them to either form new relationships with other organisations or strengthen existing relationships.

University Providers highlight the distinct benefits enjoyed by Scholars participating in the programme, including access to a high quality and prestigious education, while simultaneously recognising that the programme itself benefits through the Scholars' presence and the contribution of their unique international perspectives. Both university Providers and their local Partner organisations emphasised that they benefitted substantially from the collaboration and knowledge exchange enjoyed through their partnership, and that this was strengthened through their joint delivery of the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme. Furthermore, Partners flagged the added value of these partnerships for Scholars, who benefitted from the practical experience and opportunities for face-to-face engagement offered by Partner organisations.

Beyond the immediate outcomes of the programme, Alumni report broader and longer-term impact, indicating that their work contributes to at least one of Social Development, Civic Engagement, Economic Development, or Policymaking across a variety of development areas. Given that thousands of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars have been funded by the programme to date, the substantial acquisition of knowledge and skills, the application and sharing of these knowledge and skills both during and after their studies, the international networks created and strengthened, and the work that Alumni go on to do in international development, it is clear that the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme provides high value for all of the programme's stakeholders, and has a significant impact on the participants, their organisations, and their communities.