

Expanding Horizons: Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships

Effective Partnerships Promote Responsible and Sustainable Tourism

Leeds Beckett University offers a Master's Degree in Responsible Tourism Management. Since 2010, the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has funded a total of 45 Scholars from Commonwealth countries to study for this course on a part-time basis, as distance learners.



Leeds Beckett University.

The course aims to complement responsible industry practices that improve quality of life and conserve the environment as well as the culture of destinations within travel and tourism. It is designed to develop the professional experience of the Scholars in tourism, heritage, and sustainable development, and equip them with skills and knowledge to implement responsible tourism strategies within marketing, operations, and product development.



MSc Responsible Tourism Management students join a Maasai Welcome dance at Tepesua cultural eco camp CBO and village for widows and vulnerable women the Narok.

Leeds Beckett University has delivered this course to Scholars in several countries in partnership with the University of The Gambia, the International Centre for Responsible Tourism in West Africa, the Institute of Travel and Tourism of The Gambia, Rushmore Business School (Mauritius), Welcome Ideas Tourism Incubator (Zanzibar) and Dedan Kimathi University of Technology, Kenya in East Africa.

The CSC Evaluation Team conducted in-depth interviews with Lucy McCombes, Senior Lecturer in Responsible Tourism Management at Leeds Beckett University (LBU) and Dr Juma Misiko from Dedan Kimathi University of Technology in Kenya, one of LBU's key Partners in delivering the distance learning programme, to understand their experiences with the programme and their ongoing partnership.

Motivations and Expectations for Participating in the Distance Learning Programme

Both the UK-based university Provider and Partner organisation shared their motivations for participating, and their expectations in delivering the distance learning programme. Lucy identified the drive to build the capacity and reputation of its existing international partner universities as one motivation for seizing the opportunity to access 'prestigious' Commonwealth Scholarships, 'The University of The Gambia and Dedan Kimathi University of Technology were interested to develop their experience in Master's provision, so that they could deliver their own Master's course eventually. For our university and the Partners, to have the prestige factor of having a recognition is good.'

The potential to collaborate with Partners on external research outside the Scholarships also stimulated LBU's interest in delivering the distance learning course, **'Possible collaborative research opportunities between the UK and partnering countries was attractive to both sides too.'**

Being part of the programme was also viewed by Lucy as an opportunity to create a platform for knowledge exchange between Scholars, lecturers, and other organisations participating in the delivery of the programme. Moreover, the study programme intended to leverage alumni networks to build Scholar capacity and improve the student learning experience, while promoting opportunities for research collaborations, **'We have a hub of alumni all over the world, and over the years that network of practitioners is valuable for us as it provides support for our current students as well as research opportunities.'**

Leveraging Key Partnerships to Deliver the Distance Learning Programme

Lucy reflected on the fact that longstanding, pre-existing individual and institutional relationships facilitated partnership formation to deliver the distance learning programme.

There's a longstanding relationship with the university and tourism partners in The Gambia, and we felt comfortable that they could support us in-country. While we have partnered with University of The Gambia, and the International Centre for Responsible Tourism in West Africa, we now also have courses we're delivering in partnership with Dedan Kimathi University of Technology, Kenya in East Africa. So, there is collaboration between partner universities plus we have our in-country contacts who are working within the industry and help with guest lectures and research placements.

She added that the reputation and ethos of Dedan Kimathi University of Technology closely matched that of Leeds Beckett University, and therefore emerged as an 'ideal' delivery partner, **'In Kenya we wanted a university that had the same reputation for sustainable and responsible tourism, and they were the first and only university that had demonstrated that subject interest. It so happened that we had connections through our alumni from the course, so we felt confident. And it's been the most successful, interestingly, in terms of efficiencies.'**

LBU alumni who completed the distance learning course play a pivotal role in identifying potential Scholars for LBU to recruit and they also support course delivery.

We are partnering with some of our alumni from our Master's course who have set up Welcome Ideas, which is a Tourism Incubator College in Zanzibar. They help us with recruitment. Our alumni network who are based in these different countries support us to identify students, and support the delivery of teaching, and support students as well in-country.

Dr Misiko confirmed that the partnership of LBU with Dedan Kimathi University of Technology was facilitated by a Commonwealth Alumnus, and that the relationship developed organically over time based on the discovery of mutual institutional interests and synergies, **'This relationship was established courtesy of the LBU student who had benefited from the Commonwealth Scholarship. LBU wanted to have one of its sessions in Kenya and they were looking at a university that can partner with them to deliver the session. We facilitated it by making the necessary logistical arrangements. But as we moved along, things evolved and they involved me to identify some of the places where the students can undertake field studies and I managed to link them to the industry in the management of the national parks and, to the private conservancies. They requested me to give a guest lecture on tourism policies from a Kenyan perspective. And from there on, we started working together. And to me, I would say that only happened because there is trust and the team has confidence in my expertise in that area, given that my research is around the Mount Kenya region. When you look at such communication and such engagement, it means that our relationship has had an impact on either side. The relationship started on a very small scale, and we started discovering what we can share, and we have a lot to share. So, based on that relationship, we are in constant communication with the LBU team, and many times we worked together on different projects which has strengthened the collaboration.'**



MSc Responsible Tourism Management 2020 cohort during fieldtrip to Enonkishu Conservancy.

Best of Both Worlds: The Role of Providers and Partners in Co-delivering the Programme

In delivering the distance learning programme, Partners adopt different roles and responsibilities based on their respective contexts and strengths. Lucy highlights, for example, that Leeds Beckett University plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the course materials are easily accessible to Scholars and that course content provides multiple international perspectives, **‘Having our cohorts of Commonwealth Scholars really helped us and pushed us to make sure that our content was accessible from a technological point of view, but also in terms of having multiple international perspectives on our content and our cases.’** The internationalisation of the programme is also intended to build and strengthen diverse networks, and to lay the basis for future collaborations in research and other areas.

Lucy added that apart from the academic courses offered as part of the study programme, LBU provides additional support to Commonwealth Scholars to strengthen their wider skillsets, which are critical to their success in the programme, **‘The other journey alongside doing a Master’s course for some students is to get up to speed with skills such as critical thinking, referencing and using databases which we support them with.’** Additional support includes access to recorded lecture sessions and providing a platform for Scholars to meet virtually and network, **‘We have several contact points, such as the online course and weekly live lounges, that’s live teaching where all our students come together. These sessions are also recorded so that the students who are unable to attend can catch up.’**



MSc Responsible Tourism Management students speak to Maasai herders about their involvement with tourism and sustainable rangeland project run by Mara Training Centre.

Meanwhile, Dedan Kimathi University of Technology, as a partner organisation, has been instrumental in organising Scholar tours which offer practical learning and exposure for students while promoting interaction and knowledge exchange between Scholars and local tourism practitioners. Lucy highlights the importance of this practical element of the course, **‘We rely on our partner institutions for the local in-country protocol in terms of delivering education overseas.’**



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

Dr Misiko confirmed how the role played by Dedan Kimathi University of Technology in delivering the programme contributes to student learning and knowledge exchange, **‘We are expecting a visit from Leeds Beckett University to Kenya to deliver a session, and it does add a lot of value because these students are drawn from different corners of the world to come and experience the tourism and interact with the practitioners. Having the tours around the mountains and seeing the sustainability initiatives is a very rare opportunity to enhance the students’ understanding of the subject. The tours also create an opportunity for the students to interact and learn from each other, and for our faculty members to interact with the other experts and exchange knowledge, particularly on the trends in the industry and they learn from each other.’**

Internationalisation and Networks: Benefits for Providers and Partners

Participating in the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme has seen Providers and Partners realise individual and mutual benefits. From Lucy’s perspective, the internationalisation of the online course delivery by LBU has contributed to improving the curriculum and the quality of teaching, while providing a platform for the wider student body to establish international networks.

‘Having our cohorts of Commonwealth Scholars helped us with internationalisation of the course and it keeps us on our toes in making sure that we weren’t ethnocentric in terms of our curriculum and delivery. It’s also been helpful in terms of networks, all our students [full-time or part-time] take part in these networks and they benefit from having that exchange of perspectives. We also invite other students (who are not from the Commonwealth countries) to join the field trips, so that they can then interact and benefit from learning about responsible tourism in the destination of our Commonwealth Scholars.’

By facilitating the recruitment of Scholars, supporting programme delivery through hosting tours, and guiding current students on their field work, alumni of the programme add substantial value to the course and this has had an overall positive impact on the reputation of LBU, as Lucy explained, **‘Our alumni in-country are very helpful in identifying people who would be a good fit for the programme and because we’re recruiting people within the tourism industry who are established mid-career and senior professionals working in the sector, it helps us be perceived very positively from our industry partners and students.’**

Similarly, Dr Misiko mentioned that partnering with LBU to deliver the distance learning course has contributed to establishing more international research collaborations, increased networking opportunities for students and staff, and consequently increased the international visibility of Dedan Kimathi University.

‘We have an internationalisation programme which depends on students having collaborative working relationships with students from other universities. So, working with LBU in the delivery of this programme, to us it is a plus because it’s from there that we generate these collaborations.’

He added that the study programme creates a platform for networking and this contributes to personal development, **‘Scholars can undertake joint research and mentoring of young researchers. And in that process, you find that apart from developing personal goals it offers an opportunity to increase their network and to learn from each other.’**

Benefits of the Distance Learning Programme to the Scholars and their Communities

Partners felt there were many benefits of the programme to Scholars. Lucy highlighted that for some Scholars it is a prerequisite to acquire a Master’s qualification to be considered for a promotion in their employment, **‘Scholars who are recruited from educational institutes in Kenya need a Master’s to be promoted to a more senior teaching role. So, it’s a requirement to have a recognised Master’s.’** The prestige attached to getting the Master’s qualification through a Commonwealth Scholarship is yet another benefit for the Scholars and their employers. The Scholars also use the acquired skills and knowledge in their current roles to deliver their work tasks more effectively. For example, application

of research findings to improve practices or to apply different approaches at workplace, application of knowledge to influence policy and strategies for address community problems, and improved work skills such as report writing skills, as Lucy explained, **‘One Scholar is working at a national parks in Tanzania and he was doing his research on the impact of tourism on the wildebeest migrations, to see how the accommodation and infrastructure was influencing those movements. He’s got some research findings and recommendations for accommodation for tour operators on how to avoid interfering with their movements. So, he’s directly applying his research to his role. Some of the candidates who are working for the local government, the local tourist board or the Ministry of Tourism have got promoted to roles where they are involved in policy and strategic planning. Here they apply their improved report writing skills. And in the government, to have a recognised UK Master’s in your field does have that prestige attached, and it equips them with skills on how they might apply a different approach to doing tourism through the workplace. Some Scholars from the industry use knowledge gained to increase the benefits their local communities get from Tourism, while others will address an issue in the community, hence it is an applied course to their respective contexts.’**

From Lucy’s observations, obtaining a Master’s qualification has also opened avenues to acquire higher academic qualifications and therefore career progression for some Scholars, **‘We also have several students who are now going on to PhDs following their Master’s studies.’**

When asked about his perceptions on the benefits of the distance learning programme to the Scholars, Dr Misiko felt the course was relevant to the Scholars’ work tasks as most Scholars are in positions where they influence policy to champion sustainable tourism development. Therefore, they can build on what they learn and make a change in their organisation or communities, **‘One of the students from Kenya was a very senior government official in the Ministry of Tourism, a position where they influence policy. There were also two other students, again from Kenya working for a very reputable organisation championing sustainable tourism development in Kenya, they put into practice and build on what they have been taught which will make their organisations successful. The course equips students with novel skills and knowledge that they use to go out and try new models and approaches to solving societal problems.’**

Student exposure to diverse ways of learning was also commended by Dr Misiko for giving the students an opportunity to interact with each other and share knowledge, **'The connectivity of students and the establishment of networks and connecting with the industry is important. For those taking on PhD studies following their Master's, they can use the established networks to help them grow not only in their career, but also boost the image of their institution by virtue of having studied in a university in UK.'**

He added that the long-term impact of the programme to Scholars will be visible in terms of policy outputs produced to inform development and the active participation of the students in policy discussions.

Looking Ahead: The Expected Long-Term Impact of the Distance Learning Programme From the Perspectives of the Partners

Lucy highlighted that the engagement of LBU in delivering the distance learning programme has strengthened the pre-existing relationships with its Partners and also promoted the establishment of potentially long-lasting relationships between UK academics, industries, and practitioners who will continue to collaborate in devising and implementing more sustainable approaches and policies to make a change in society. **'The networks and the relationships that we've been able to build between our academics, and industries, and practitioners in a destination, all working in tourism have also embraced a more sustainable approach to doing things. I now see it happening that they are working together, doing new policies, or new products, or new approaches, and then they're working together and applying this change. And I feel motivated that I can see people doing things differently as a result.'**

The long-term impact would be sustainable research and networks. Because when we create very strong research or scholarly networks, those networks are to outlive our lives. I will not be there, but because of the relationship and the framework that guided the framework exist, and the two institutions will be able to work, there will always be a collaboration.

Dr Misiko Juma concurred with Lucy adding that very strong research or Scholarly networks have been created as a result of participating in the distance learning programme, and that establishing frameworks for guiding the partnership will ensure continued collaborations.

The Future of the Partnership

Strengthening collaborations and the partnership emerged as a top priority for Dedan Kimathi University of Technology. This would involve exploring the possibility of joint student supervision to enrich student research outputs or sharing expertise with partners on curricula review to achieve a globally competitive curriculum. Currently, possibilities for joint research and how to share expertise, and jointly seek funding for proposed activities are being explored. Other planned future activities include staff exchange to share knowledge and expertise and exploring the possibility of offering a similar study programme at partner institution as Dr Misiko explained, **'We were moving towards planning future collaborative activities. One of the activities is to strengthen the partnership. And therefore, we're looking towards a programme for exchange of academia. We are looking at the possibility of offering similar programme here in Kenya, so we are planning to have a faculty member from UK coming to Dedan Kimathi University of Technology and being able to spend some time working within the Institute of Tourism and Hospitality Management sharing their expertise, under a formal arrangement, that is. Also, we see the same happening where we have the faculty member travelling to UK to offer their expertise, and dissemination of their knowledge. So that was something that we were really exploring as part of strengthening the collaboration. Because we have graduate students, we are also exploring the possibility of joint supervision. We want to complement each other as partners, rather than looking at ourselves as competitors. We have started exploring possibilities of joint research, we came up with a clear framework on how to work together and share the expertise, and possible benefits coming out of that. We are situated in central part of Kenya, near Mount Kenya and in the northern corridor where new forms of tourism are coming up. That provides an interesting field of research to leverage and a good opportunity to pursue.'**