

Climate Action Through Higher Education: The Impact of Commonwealth Scholarships

Policy briefing paper

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Introduction

Climate change is exerting widespread and intensifying effects across the globe, particularly in vulnerable regions. The urgency of environmental sustainability is reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13: Climate Action, which calls for urgent steps to combat climate change, promote renewable energy, and build resilience to climate-related disasters. This urgency is reinforced by outcomes from COP29—including a new climate finance goal to support vulnerable countries—and by the UK Government’s 2023 International Development White Paper, which prioritises climate and nature.

Commonwealth Alumni strongly contribute toward the targets of SDGs 7 and 13 through their research and the transfer of skills and knowledge upon returning to their home countries.

A large share of awards in environmental fields go to scholars from climate-vulnerable regions in Africa and South Asia—regions disproportionately affected by climate change. More than half of Commonwealth Alumni reported having an impact on climate change or the environment in their country, highlighting contributions to the advancement of SDG 7 – Affordable Clean Energy and SDG 13 – Climate Action specifically. They do this by **supporting climate resilience and adaptation, contributing to environmental governance and policy influence, and implementing green transitions and nature-based solutions.**

Climate Resilience and Adaptation

A major area of alumni impact centres on **building climate resilience among vulnerable communities and systems.** Commonwealth Alumni have implemented projects that directly address the impacts of climate change through **agricultural adaptation, water management, and disaster risk reduction.** In regions prone to flooding and drought, alumni have introduced **climate-smart farming practices,** developed **climate risk financing models,** and piloted **adaptation clinics** that support smallholder farmers and pastoralists. These efforts have improved

local livelihoods, protected food systems, and enhanced financial resilience—key development outcomes aligned with SDG 13 and the UK’s priority to support communities on the frontlines of climate change.



Emma attending the award-winning ceremony for TerraFund for AFR100.

‘Through my initiatives, the lives of local communities have improved through the introduction of alternative livelihoods such as agroforestry, beekeeping, and woodlot establishment. Several hectares of degraded land are undergoing restoration, benefiting the community, the region, and the nation as a whole.’

Emma Baah Agyapong, Ghana

CSC Distance Learning Master’s Scholarship in Tropical Forestry, Bangor University, 2017

Many alumni have played a formative role in strengthening local capacity to respond to climate variability by working closely with **community-based organisations, farmer cooperatives, and regional governments**. They have led educational initiatives on adaptation techniques, facilitated stakeholder consultations, and developed youth engagement programmes focused on **environmental literacy**. This participatory approach, often anchored in co-creation and civic mobilisation, has generated sustained behavioural change and local ownership, with measurable improvements in policy implementation, agricultural productivity, and community preparedness.

Environmental Governance and Policy Influence

Alumni are also **shaping environmental policy frameworks and governance mechanisms** at both national and international levels. They have worked with ministries, parliaments, multilateral organisations, and civil society actors to draft and implement **policies on climate change, biodiversity, land use, and pollution control**. In Bangladesh, alumni were instrumental in developing the Dhaka-Glasgow Declaration and securing climate finance for vulnerable populations. In Malawi, they coordinated the implementation of the National Environment Policy and led initiatives to phase out ozone-depleting substances.

Commonwealth Alumni have also contributed to legal and regulatory reforms that enhance **transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in environmental decision-making**. In Uganda and Nigeria, they have influenced enforcement protocols to ensure community engagement in land and resource governance. Others have helped shape **national disaster risk reduction strategies, water and sanitation policies, and sustainable infrastructure regulations**—evidence of the breadth of influence Commonwealth Alumni hold across sectors.

This policy engagement extends beyond formal institutions. Many alumni have acted as conveners of cross-sectoral dialogue, facilitating South-South knowledge exchange on adaptation and risk financing, developing climate education materials for schools, and participating in policymaking through research and public discourse. Their influence is evident in **strengthened institutional capacities, new funding pipelines, and legislative reforms** that reflect environmental justice principles—outcomes that align with the UK’s commitment to promoting locally led, systems-based approaches to development.

Green Transitions and Nature-Based Solutions

A third key theme involves alumni-led contributions to the **green transition and the protection and restoration of ecosystems**. Alumni have initiated and supported projects that advance renewable energy, reforestation, sustainable land use, biodiversity conservation, and low-carbon technologies. In Zambia, alumni helped schools transition to energy-efficient cooking stoves in response to energy shortages and deforestation. In Pakistan and Nigeria, others have piloted solar-powered systems in public infrastructure and coordinated airport operations toward cleaner energy sources.

Through their work in forestry, seedbank curation, and restoration science, some scholars have played a crucial role in **re-establishing degraded ecosystems**, including forest reserves, wetlands, and biodiversity corridors. Others have contributed to the development of metrics and indicators to evaluate restoration outcomes, demonstrating not only ecological impact but also scientific rigour and policy relevance. Their use of **nature-based solutions**, often coupled with socio-economic interventions, exemplifies integrated development approaches that promote both environmental sustainability and human wellbeing.

Alumni have also increased access to voluntary carbon markets for indigenous and marginalised communities, developed environmental strategies for private sector entities, and trained professionals in decarbonisation techniques. These efforts support **economic transformation through green growth**, echoing the UK’s objective of enabling just transitions and delivering global climate ambition through partnerships and innovation.

Key Approaches of Alumni Impact

Alumni have been instrumental in **influencing policy**, shaping national climate strategies, contributing to international frameworks such as the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and the Cartagena Protocol, and advising on carbon markets and environmental enforcement reform. These activities reflect the UK’s strategic aim of supporting institutional strengthening and effective governance for climate action.



Traditional floating farming is one of the indigenous approaches to farming in Bangladesh which Fahmida Akter researched while at Nottingham Trent University on Commonwealth Shared Scholarship.

Community development also features prominently in the work of Commonwealth Alumni. Alumni-led projects included reforestation drives, climate-smart agriculture, urban greening, and clean energy adoption in underserved areas. These activities directly align with the UK Government's emphasis on locally led development and environmental justice.

Research and innovation represent another vital pillar of alumni engagement. Alumni contributed through academic publications, innovations such as Internet of Things-based soil monitoring and sustainable aquaculture systems, and practical frameworks for biodiversity assessment. This evidences the UK's investment in cutting-edge, applied research with high developmental value.

Finally, many alumni work in **education and capacity building**. Alumni delivered environmental education in schools, trained health and agriculture workers in sustainable practices, and developed university curricula focused on climate change and sustainability. These interventions reflect the UK's commitment to systemic change through skills development and education.

This thematic spread illustrates the holistic nature of Commonwealth Alumni contributions—spanning **governance, grassroots action, scientific advancement, and public education**—underscoring the programme's value as a key vehicle for UK climate diplomacy and international development strategy. These contributions show up most often at institutional and local levels, with many also influencing national policy and practice.

Policy Implications

The impact of Commonwealth Alumni demonstrates that postgraduate education is a highly effective mechanism for advancing global climate action. Empowered by scholarships, alumni are actively addressing environmental challenges through applied research, public service, policy reform, and community innovation. Continued investment in higher education for sustainable development not only aligns with the UK's international development priorities but also offers high-value returns in terms of global climate resilience and socioeconomic progress.

Policy Recommendation

The UK Government should prioritise continued and increased investment in Commonwealth Scholarships focused on environmental sustainability, particularly for candidates from climate-vulnerable regions. This targeted support has proven to deliver measurable impact in climate resilience, policy development, and green innovation, directly advancing UK international development goals. By strengthening this investment, the UK can leverage higher education as a strategic tool for global climate action and sustainable development across the Commonwealth.

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