Universal Health Coverage: The Contribution of Commonwealth Scholars
Policy briefing paper

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Introduction

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission regularly asks Alumni to report on their contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals. One of the goals most frequently cited by Alumni is SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being. Between 2019 and 2024, 1,192 Alumni reported that their work resulted in progress towards SDG 3, including Universal Health Coverage (UHC). UHC is achieved when all people and communities can access high-quality health services when they need them, without exposure to financial hardship. Generative AI was used to develop a coding framework based on the WHO's
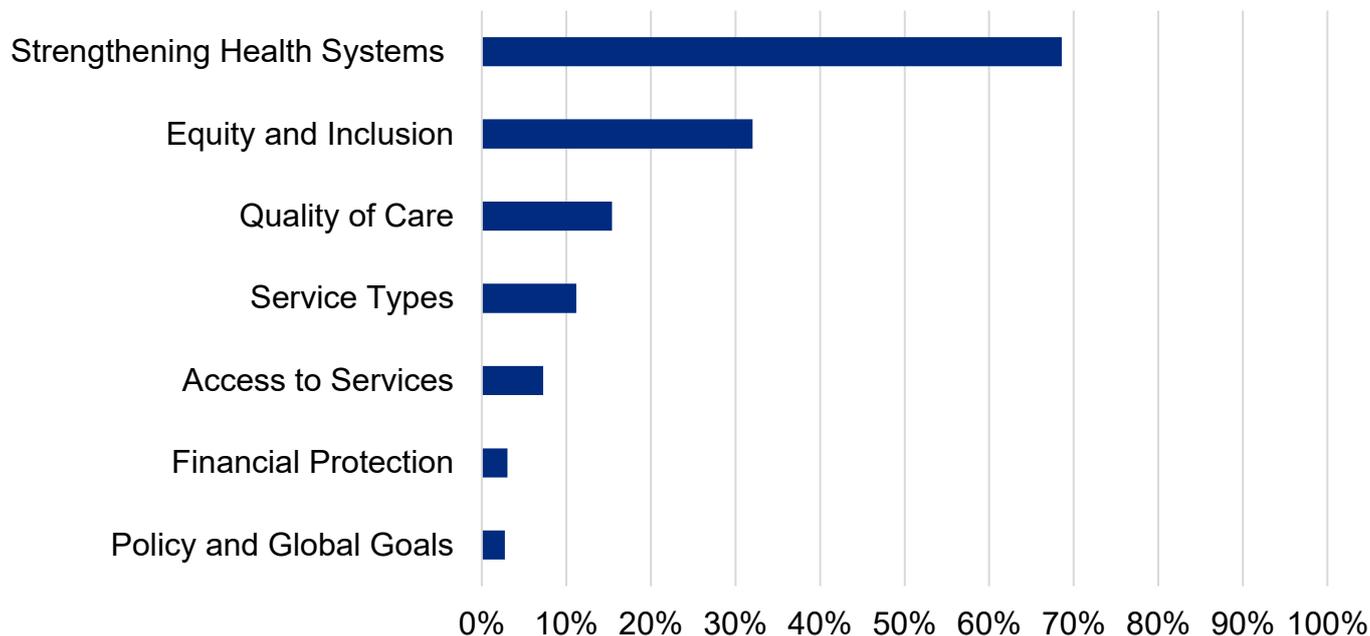

A training session on rights in maternal care, coordinated by Commonwealth Alumnus Fahmida Akter.

Summary

- Commonwealth Alumni are driving progress towards Universal Health Coverage.
- Between 2019 and 2024, 1,192 Alumni reported that their work resulted in progress towards SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being, with 541 Alumni reporting contributions towards Universal Health Coverage.
- Prevalent areas of focus include **governance and policy development**. Many Alumni are working to **protect vulnerable groups** and are advocating for **equity and inclusion in healthcare**, while some Alumni work on **financial protections** aimed at preventing catastrophic out-of-pocket spending on healthcare.

factsheet on UHC, which identified 541 Alumni who mentioned keywords relevant to UHC. Seven key themes relating to UHC were identified: strengthening health systems; equity and inclusion; quality of care; service types; access to services; financial protection; and policy and global goals.

Figure 1. Proportion of responses tagged under top-level themes

Discussion

Strengthening Health Systems

Of the seven key themes, Strengthening Health Systems was by far the most frequently mentioned. This theme focuses on the need to build strong, efficient and equitable health systems, achieved through adequate infrastructure, a trained workforce, and good governance. More than half of the Alumni working on UHC were working on the sub-theme of good governance. The large over-representation of this sub-theme in the dataset can be attributed to the large number of Commonwealth Alumni working on the development of health-related policies, a broad field with a wide spectrum of engagement by alumni.

Dr Tanjir Rashid Soron conducting training in the Maldives on the core symptoms of depression.

The range of potential avenues for strengthening health policy is exemplified by, Commonwealth Alumnus, Tanjir Rashid Soron. Tanjir is a clinical psychiatrist based in Bangladesh, who was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to complete a Master's in Global eHealth at the University of Edinburgh in 2019. Since his graduation, he has worked as a consultant for the World Health Organisation as an expert on mental health supporting the development of a national mental health

strategic plan in the Maldives. Furthermore, Tanjir has also worked on developing disability-inclusive policies around access to healthcare in Bangladesh. He recognised that disabled patients often faced additional barriers to accessing healthcare and has developed policies to address this.

Other Commonwealth Alumni are working to strengthen health systems through governance in entirely different fields. Babajide Milton Macaulay received scholarships to complete a Master's in Sustainable Environmental Management and a PhD in Environmental Geochemistry and Geomicrobiology. Since his graduation, he has worked on the management of medical waste in hospitals in Nigeria. Healthcare waste poses a serious health risk due to its hazardous and infectious components, which can pose a threat to environmental and public health if handled incorrectly. Babajide's research in this area, conducted in collaboration with one of his students, found that whilst regulations for waste management were generally in place, these policies were often poorly implemented. He took these findings to the Waste Management Board of Ondo state, which responded by implementing legislation prohibiting the disposal of medical waste alongside household waste. These are key examples of the ways in which CSC Alumni are working to implement policies that strengthen healthcare systems.

Equity and Inclusion

Commonwealth Alumni are also actively working under the theme of equity and inclusion in health care, with particularly strong representation seen in relation to the protection of vulnerable groups. For example, Fahmida Akter, a 2018 Commonwealth Alumnus from Bangladesh who completed a Master's in Global Food Security and Development at Nottingham Trent University, worked with Enfants du Monde to engage families and communities to improve maternal, newborn and child health:

'The project also strengthens healthcare providers and establishes community action groups to ensure accountability and advocacy for maternal health rights and respectful care. My contributions span operational research, process documentation, and impact evaluation, shaping interventions based on findings. Seeing real change in healthcare providers and communities has been deeply rewarding, making this project a testament to the impact of evidence driven interventions.'

Work in this area is further exemplified by, Commonwealth Alumni, John Bosco Tumuhairwe. John works in rural Uganda, where he project-managed an HIV prevention and care programme. The project focussed on individuals who were stigmatised by the community and who were subsequently reluctant to access HIV healthcare, including men who have sex with men, transgender people, female sex workers, and long-distance truck drivers. To engage with these communities, John and the project team collaborated with local government, district health offices and community leaders to promote HIV prevention and testing. The project reached over 3,000 people who received targeted HIV and TB screening, and over 300 were linked to care services.

Financial Protection

While fewer Alumni were engaged in sub-themes related to expenditure on health as a percentage of total household expenditure, it is still a critical component of achieving UHC, and Commonwealth Alumni are making valuable contributions in this field.

John Bosco Tumuhairwe has also contributed to progress in this area. In John's community in Uganda, health insurance is widely misunderstood and largely absent. When health insurance is suggested, John found that communities often questioned the value for money provided by these schemes, reasoning that the money they paid may be wasted if they did not fall ill. To address this misapprehension, John partnered with local community groups to engage in an education campaign. As a result of this sensitisation, the uptake of health insurance in rural Uganda increased, with 6,228 beneficiaries enrolled in health insurance schemes across four rural Ugandan districts between 2017 and 2018.

John Bosco sensitising members of a community saving and lending group about Community Health Insurance and saving for health, at Muzira Health Centre 2 in Sheema District.

Conclusions

- Commonwealth Scholarships contribute to Universal Health Coverage, aligning with the UK's policy of supporting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.
- The WHO have identified Universal Health Coverage as an area of stagnating progress, in need of further focus and development.
- Commonwealth Alumni are actively contributing towards Universal Health Coverage.
- Healthcare governance is a particularly well-represented area, for example Commonwealth Alumni developing mental health strategies in the Maldives and medical waste management policies in Nigeria.
- Commonwealth Alumni are also contributing to the protection of vulnerable groups. Examples include Alumni working on improved provisions for maternal health, and the promotion of HIV care for marginalised communities.

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