

# Improving Access to Higher Education for Underrepresented Groups

Policy briefing paper

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## Introduction

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (CSC) works to deliver widespread access to higher education through its scholarship programmes, particularly to those from underrepresented groups, and has an ongoing commitment to equity, access, and inclusion. The CSC also supports progress towards reaching global sustainable development objectives including SDG 4: Quality Education.

### Underrepresented groups

Since 2021, the CSC has collected selected equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) data from candidates for monitoring purposes. This data demonstrates the progress the CSC has made from 2021 to 2025 in increasing the number and proportion of applications received from, and scholarship selections made to, candidates in four key underrepresented groups: women, people with limited economics means, persons with disabilities, and forcibly displaced people.

### Summary

- The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has a clear goal to increase the proportion of applications from, and selections to, those within underrepresented groups in higher education.
- Over the last five years, **the CSC has successfully seen increases in applications and selections for women, people with limited economic means, disabled persons, and forcibly displaced people.**
- **The CSC continues to work with national and NGO nominators, and other partners, to promote access for these underrepresented groups** and further raise their levels of representation in applications and selections.

Applications and selections for each underrepresented group across all programmes are higher in 2025 compared to 2021. Within each group across the five-year period, there have been rises and falls, but the overall upward trend from 2021 to 2025 is a positive indicator and gives a strong starting point to continue work in this priority area, as set by the second KPI in the [CSC strategy for 2025-2028](#):

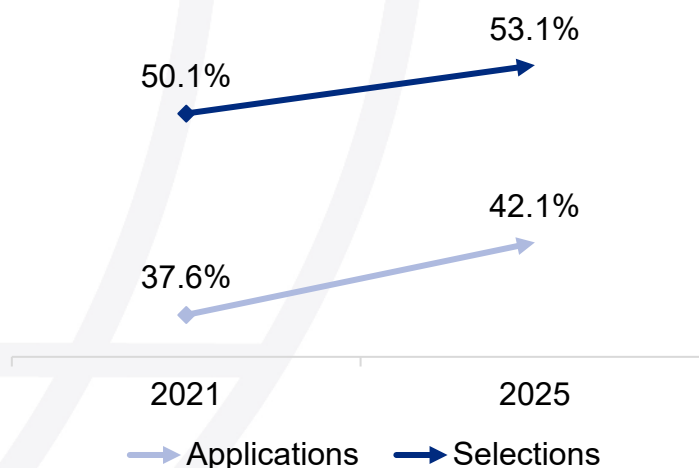
‘We will increase year-on-year the proportion of applications from, and awards to, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, while maintaining the excellent gender balance achieved over the period 2022-2025.’

## Women

While women now make up a larger share of undergraduates and postgraduates than men worldwide, the proportion of females studying at doctoral and post-doctoral level is still lower. Additionally, there are significant subject field and regional variations that mean improving access to higher education for women continues to be a global focus. The CSC has worked to increase the representation of female candidates across all scholarship programmes, realising a 4.5% increase in applications and 3.0% increase in selections between 2021 and 2025.

An important partner of the CSC in this work is the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a pan-African non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting gender-responsive education for girls and women across Africa. Its mission centres on transforming education systems through advocacy, evidence-based policy influence, community engagement, and practical interventions that expand access, retention, and completion for girls in schools. FAWE partners with governments, communities, and international organisations to enhance gender equity in education and shape education policy. It has a longstanding relationship with the CSC as a recognised nominating agency, annually nominating female candidates from across its member Commonwealth countries for Master’s and PhD scholarships.

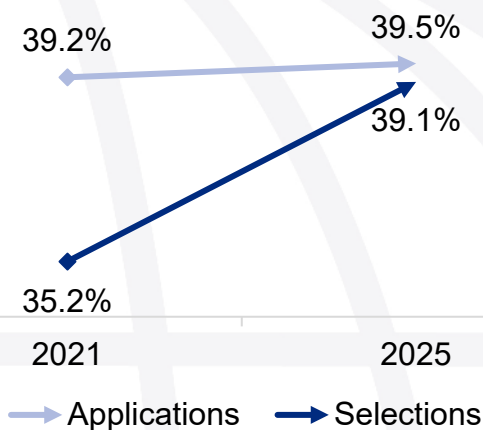
**Figure 1. Applications and selections in 2021 and 2025 - Women**



## People with limited economics means

The financial commitment of higher education continues to be an obstacle to access for people with limited economic means. Not only is the cost of study itself an issue, additional costs such as food, housing, and technology further increases the barrier to entry for students from lower-income backgrounds.

**Figure 2. Applications and selections in 2021 and 2025 - Limited economic means**



Applicants for Commonwealth Scholarships can indicate their relative socio-economic status compared to others in their local community, and the proportion of applications received from candidates with limited economic means has remained similar across the five-year period, with a slight 0.3% increase. However, the proportion of selected candidates has increased from 35.2% in 2021 to 39.1% in 2025, bringing it nearly in line with the proportion of applicants from this group.

The CSC partners with the HALI Access Network in order to support both

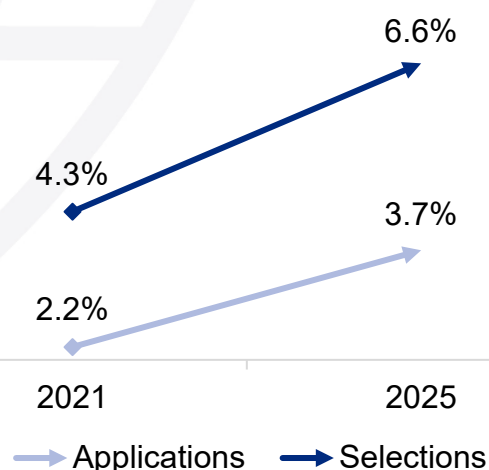
organisations' goals of increasing access to higher education for people from low-income backgrounds. HALI is a pan-African association of non-profit organisations that support high-achieving, low-income (HALI) students to access international higher education opportunities. Its mission is to create equitable conditions by increasing access, inclusion, and scholarship support for academically strong students who lack financial means. HALI works through advocacy, professional development, and collaborative partnerships to address structural and financial barriers that limit students' ability to enrol in world-class universities, and nominates candidates for Commonwealth Master's and PhD Scholarships.

### Persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities is a wide-ranging underrepresented group with no 'one size fits all' solution to improving access to higher education. The challenges faced by disabled people trying to access higher education vary greatly depending on the nature of their disability and the impact this has on an individual's day-to-day life. For example, the physical design of institutions or the academic practices for teaching and assessment may not be inclusive of the diverse needs of these students. Additionally, this group may also face barriers associated with discriminatory attitudes.

In their application, candidates can indicate whether they have a physical, mental, or health-related disability. The CSC's data shows that both applications and selections for Commonwealth Scholarships from candidates declaring a disability have increased from 2021 to 2025, and disabled candidates continue to be selected at a higher rate compared to applications. The Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF) works to advance the rights of persons with disabilities across the Commonwealth. It advocates for policy change, supports Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), and promotes equal

**Figure 3. Applications and selections in 2021 and 2025 – Persons with disabilities**

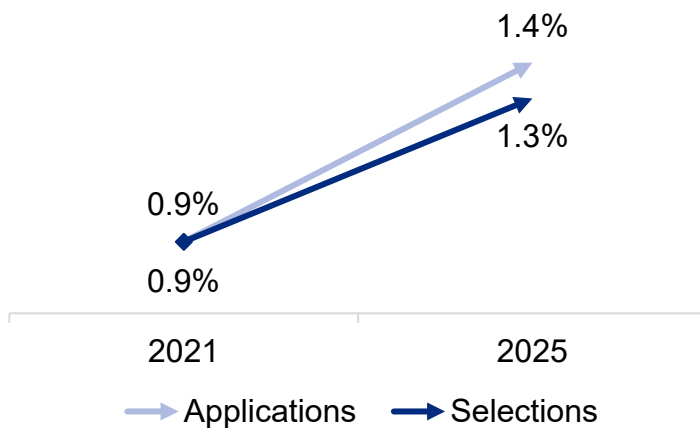


access to education, employment and public life. The CSC works with the CDPF which nominates people with disabilities from all Commonwealth countries for Master's and PhD Scholarships, who also are able to demonstrate how their studies will lead to an improvement in the position of disabled people in their home country.

### Forcibly displaced people

The population of forcibly displaced people (FDP) includes refugees, internally displaced people, and asylum seekers, and is growing globally. This group also continues to face significant barriers to accessing higher education opportunities. Despite many having strong academic potential, their experience of conflict and displacement often leads to interrupted or incomplete schooling, or a lack of recognised qualifications and official documentation, meaning they are unable to meet standard university entry requirements.

**Figure 4. Applications and selections in 2021 and 2025 – Forcibly displaced people**



Commonwealth Scholarship candidates can declare at the point of application if they are a forcibly displaced person, and the proportion of FDP represented in both applications and selections in 2021 was at the same level. However, representation has increased in both areas by a similar degree in 2025.

The CSC partners with Windle Trust International (WTI), who acts as a nominating agency to provide an application route for Master's candidates from Kenya and Uganda who are refugees, internally

displaced or have otherwise been affected by conflict. Windle is an education-focused organisation working across East Africa to expand access to high-quality learning for refugees, internally displaced people, and marginalised communities. Its mission is to challenge poverty and inequality by improving both access to, and the quality of, education for groups affected by conflict, discrimination, or displacement. WTI also works with the CSC's Shared Scholarship partners to assist with recruitment of scholars with similar backgrounds from across the Commonwealth.

### Policy Recommendations

The UK Government should continue to fund Commonwealth Scholarships to expand access to higher education for underrepresented groups across the Commonwealth and support progress towards the UK's development priorities and SDG 4 (Quality Education). This investment enables the CSC and NGO nominators to support high potential candidates who would otherwise face systemic barriers to accessing higher education opportunities.

### Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK

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