

The Contribution of Commonwealth Scholarships to UK Soft Power

Policy briefing paper

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Introduction

Soft power allows countries to build partnerships and consensus in areas of mutual interest to address global challenges, and the enhancement of the United Kingdom's soft power is a core policy goal of the UK government. A key benefit of government-supported international scholarships is the expansion of the soft power of both the sponsor country and the home country of the scholarship recipient.

Commonwealth Scholarships strengthen the United Kingdom's soft power by building transnational networks, increasing intercultural understanding of the UK, and providing scholars with positive experiences in the UK.

Soft power is most effective when built on **strong international networks, deep intercultural understanding, and positive experiences and attitudes**. Commonwealth Scholarships contribute to this by expanding the UK's networks and creating knowledgeable intercultural facilitators who have positive attitudes about the UK. These outcomes support ongoing collaboration and partnerships between the United Kingdom and other countries in the pursuit of mutually beneficial goals.

Commonwealth Scholarships contribute directly to the soft power of the United Kingdom by:

- **Supporting the creation and strengthening of personal, professional, and academic networks** between the UK and other Commonwealth countries.
- **Providing the opportunity for Commonwealth Scholars to learn about UK culture and society**, strengthening their intercultural understanding and equipping them with the skills to act as intercultural facilitators.
- **Maintaining and strengthening positive impressions of the United Kingdom** and its higher education sector.

Discussion

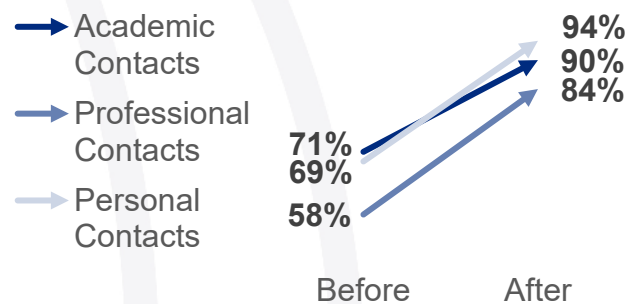
Commonwealth Scholarships support the creation and strengthening of the UK's soft power in three ways.

Building International Networks

Commonwealth Alumni report substantial increases in their networks of contacts in the United Kingdom compared to before their scholarship. Not only did the proportion of Alumni who have academic, professional, and personal contacts increase as a result of their scholarship, the strength and frequency of these interactions also increased.

These networks also endure well after the completion of their studies, meaning that upon graduation Alumni have greater networks of contacts in the United Kingdom with whom they can work with on collaborations and partnerships during their careers. Commonwealth Alumnus [Femi Adekoya](#) is a co-founder of Integrated Aerial Precision, an agritech company that supports drone use in the Nigerian agriculture sector. Femi met his UK-based business partner while studying at Harper Adams University on a Commonwealth Scholarship:

Figure 1. UK Networks Before and After Scholarship



‘I met my co-founder, this perfect fit I call a partner, because I was awarded a CSC Scholarship to study in the UK.’

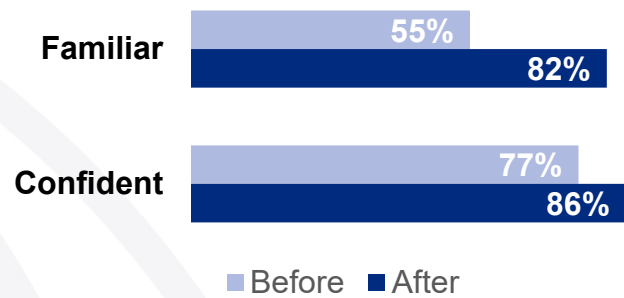
Building Intercultural Understanding and Competency

Commonwealth Alumni also report a much higher level of familiarity with the UK after their scholarship. While just over half of Scholars agree that they were familiar with UK society and culture before their scholarship, this increases significantly after their Commonwealth Scholarship, reflecting the broader exposure to the United Kingdom that their study experience provided.

Similarly, Alumni have an increased level of confidence in navigating UK society and culture as a result of their study experience. This reflects an improved ability to operate in UK contexts due to the increased intercultural understanding and experience they have gained during their studies.

This experience and exposure also equips Commonwealth Alumni with greater intercultural competency skills that they are able to apply during their careers, not just when working with partners in the United Kingdom, but in broader international contexts. This was a learning experience highlighted by [Vincent Buobodaare Dari](#) when reflecting on his time as a Commonwealth Shared Scholar studying Geospatial and Mapping Sciences at the University of Glasgow:

Figure 2. Familiarity with and Confidence Navigating UK Society and Culture



‘Working in teams during my Master’s programme at the University of Glasgow exposed me further to group dynamics and how to manage them, particularly being sensitive to cultural differences.’

By learning this important soft skill and increasing their familiarity and confidence with UK society and culture, Commonwealth Alumni are able to more easily engage with individuals and organisations in the UK long after their studies. These traits also position them to act as **knowledgeable intercultural facilitators** for others looking to work with the United Kingdom, **an important enabler of transnational collaboration and partnership.**

Impression of the United Kingdom

Commonwealth Alumni also maintain extremely positive dispositions towards the United Kingdom after the completion of their scholarship. While these impressions were already high, as demonstrated by their interest in applying for a Commonwealth Scholarship to study at a university based in the United Kingdom, their continued strong positive impressions of the United Kingdom and its higher education sector speak to the quality of both their academic studies and their experience living in the United Kingdom during their Commonwealth Scholarship.

These positive sentiments are further reflected by the fact that **100% of Commonwealth Scholars would recommend studying and living in the UK to others in their home country.**

Figure 3. Positive Alumni Sentiments Towards United Kingdom



Policy Implications

Every year, Commonwealth Scholarships support hundreds of high-quality scholars from across the Commonwealth to study at UK-based universities. Scholars' experiences during their studies support the formation of lasting academic, professional and personal networks with the UK, increase knowledge of UK society and culture and develop intercultural competency skills, and reinforce positive sentiments towards the United Kingdom and its higher education system.

By supporting Commonwealth Scholarships, the FCDO grows and strengthens the soft power of the United Kingdom. Every Scholar funded is another international network connected to the United Kingdom, another facilitator of collaboration and partnerships for the United Kingdom, and another proponent of the United Kingdom and its higher education system.

Summary

- Commonwealth Scholarships provide important soft power benefits to the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries.
- These benefits last for several years after scholars complete their studies, providing long-term benefits to the United Kingdom from short-term investments.
- Commonwealth Alumni act as important enablers of collaborations and partnerships between the UK and other Commonwealth countries.
- The soft power outcomes are in addition to both the economic benefits to the UK and the global sustainable development impact of Commonwealth Alumni.

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