

Distance Learning as a Strategic Instrument for Locally-Led Development

Policy briefing paper

Dr. Jie Ma

Introduction

Since its launch in 2002, the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship has supported locally-led development across the Commonwealth. Drawing on programme administrative data and longitudinal survey responses collected from 2016 to 2024, this briefing paper argues that the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship is a strategic instrument for widening access to international higher education in situ, strengthening local organisational capacity, and building durable international partnerships.

Key Points:

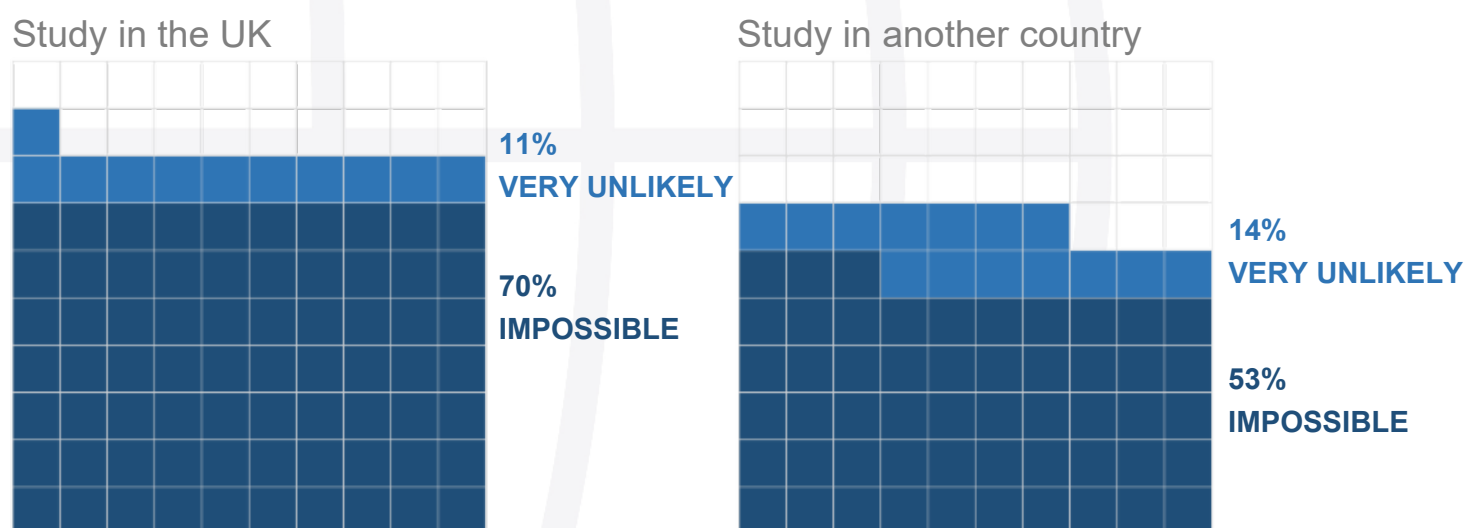
- The Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship has become a major channel for widening access to international higher education in situ across the Commonwealth, supporting **4,594 scholars** from **44 countries** since 2002 across **15 subject areas** at **51 UK universities**.
- Its distance-learning model enables scholars to **remain in post while studying**, allowing **new knowledge to be applied immediately** in the workplace. Survey findings show strong retention in existing organisations, suggesting that the programme **sustains benefits to employers and the community well beyond the award period**.
- Distance-learning Alumni **act as agents of organisational change**, frequently and consistently influencing senior managers, reshaping organisational working practices, and applying learning beyond their immediate employment after completing their studies.
- In addition to individual awards, the programme also **serves as a partnership mechanism**, linking UK universities with institutions and organisations across multiple countries and sectors, fostering **sustainable, thematic, and sector-aligned partnerships**.

Widening Access to International Higher Education

The Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship plays an important role in the CSC portfolio for expanding access to international higher education in situ across the Commonwealth. Since its first awards in 2002, the programme has enabled **4,594 scholars** from **44 Commonwealth countries** to undertake UK Master's degrees remotely, representing almost **one-third** of the **15,133 Commonwealth Scholars** supported over the same period. Scholars have studied across **15 subject areas** at **51 UK universities**, with the strongest concentration in **health- and social science-related** fields.

Survey evidence further emphasises that the programme reaches learners who would otherwise be excluded from international postgraduate study due to financial constraints, inability to relocate, and work or caring responsibilities. **Between 2016 and 2024, 81% of 1,327 respondents** reported that, without Commonwealth Scholarship support, it would have been **impossible** or **very unlikely** for them to **undertake the same programme in the UK**, while **67%** said the same about studying **in another country other than the UK**.

Figure 1. Likelihood of studying in the UK or elsewhere without a Commonwealth Scholarship



Without Commonwealth Scholarships, most respondents would have been **impossible** or **very unlikely** to study in the UK or elsewhere internationally

These findings suggest that the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship widens access not only by increasing the number of learners it reaches but also by enabling professionals who would otherwise be excluded from international postgraduate education.

Immediate and Sustained Organisational Strengthening

The Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship functions as a low-disruption model for immediate and sustained organisational strengthening across the Commonwealth. The flexible design of the programme enables working professionals to remain in employment and immediately apply new skills while they study. Among the **1,327 respondents** surveyed **between 2016 and 2024**, around **nine in ten were employed at the time of application**, most in public, NGO,

academic, or multilateral organisations, and **four in five remained in the same full-time job while studying**. This low-disruption model allows learning to be applied immediately in the workplace, strengthening organisations in real time. Longitudinal survey evidence also suggests that **four in five** had returned to, or remained with, their pre-scholarship employer two years after completion, indicating a high level of retention and the potential for more embedded and durable institutional impact. As shown in Figure 2, distance-learning Alumni act as agents of organisational change, frequently and consistently influencing senior managers, reshaping organisational working practices, and applying learning beyond their immediate employment up to at least ten years after completion.

Figure 2. Applying learning: distance learning Alumni drives organisational change



Percentages show the proportion of alumni who reported doing each activity **all the time** or **often**.

One plausible mechanism through which distance-learning Alumni contribute more to organisational change is their greater uptake of strategic roles within their organisations. Longitudinal survey findings indicate sustained responsibility for '**devising the strategic direction of an organisation or department**', reported by approximately **seven in ten distance-learning alumni from completion to 10 years post-completion**.

These findings suggest that the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship is an effective long-term investment in strengthening local organisational capacity across the Commonwealth, delivering immediate and durable benefits for organisations well beyond the completion of awards.

A Co-Delivery Model for Sustainable Partnership Building

Beyond supporting individual Scholars, the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship promotes a thematic- and sector-aligned partnership model that links UK academic provision to overseas organisations that hold local knowledge and sectoral expertise across the Commonwealth.

From 2021 to 2025, 31 UK universities participated in the program, with nearly **a third working directly with 40 partner organisations** across at least **12 countries** and **10 subject areas**.

These collaborations extend beyond university-to-university ties to include non-governmental, non-profit, regional, and international organisations. The UK universities often partner with these same organisations for multiple years across fields such as **forestry, global health, surgery, environmental management, ageing, and human rights law**. Examples include Bangor University's longstanding forestry collaborations in Uganda and Ghana, the University of Edinburgh's wide-ranging partnerships in development and surgical fields across Africa and Asia, and the University of Southampton's ageing-focused portfolio in South Africa and India.

Interviews further suggest that this co-delivery model can both deepen existing partnerships and create opportunities for new ones by sustaining regular contact, building trust, and enabling exchange beyond the immediate delivery of scholarships. As one of the long-standing partners between Ghana and the UK observed, *'relations with the UK Provider have improved because engaging in the programme' (Ghana)*; and trusted partnerships make one *'much more able to respond or develop new opportunities' (UK)*.

Policy Recommendation

The Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship is a valuable addition to mobility-focused programmes. Delivered in situ, the programme provides a resilient and embedded approach to locally led development by enabling scholars to remain embedded in their organisations and communities, apply their learning in a real-time and be retained within local systems. The programme should be seen as a strategic policy tool to expand access to international higher education in situ within the Commonwealth while promoting UK strategic goals, including fostering locally-led development and building mutually beneficial partnerships.

Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK

Woburn House

20-24 Tavistock Square , London WC1H 9HF

Email: evaluation@cscuk.org.uk

Website: cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk

