

Strengthening the Commonwealth Through Scholarships and Fellowships

Policy briefing paper

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Introduction

Every year the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK (CSC) and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office provide hundreds of scholarships and fellowships to citizens of Commonwealth countries to study and learn at universities and organisations across the United Kingdom.

Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships are a demonstration of the United Kingdom's ongoing commitment to the Commonwealth, its Charter, and building a stronger Commonwealth community.

The Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships delivered by the CSC are the United Kingdom's contribution to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). These awards provide opportunities for Commonwealth citizens to develop their skills and knowledge, build pan-Commonwealth networks, and deliver positive impact across the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships support the Commonwealth in several ways:

- As the largest CSFP programme in the Commonwealth they provide the backbone of the CSFP, supporting education, skills development, and long-term capacity building.
- They provide a pan-Commonwealth international mobility programme, with citizens of every single Commonwealth country having received a scholarship over the life of the programme.
- Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships support the creation of inter-Commonwealth networks and identity through the Commonwealth Alumni community.
- Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships support sustainable development outcomes, contributing directly to the goals of the Commonwealth Charter.

The CSFP was first proposed in 1958 by Sidney Earle Smith, Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, and formally established in 1959 at the first Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Oxford. Since then, it has served as the Commonwealth's principal mechanism for educational cooperation, with multiple member countries contributing scholarships and fellowships over time.

CSC as a Key Pillar of CSFP

The United Kingdom has made the largest contribution to the CSFP since its establishment in 1959. As a founding and consistently active participant, the UK has played a central role in shaping and sustaining the programme, with its contribution administered through the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission. Over time, this sustained investment has helped establish the CSFP as one of the most recognised and prestigious international scholarship schemes across the Commonwealth.

Since its inception, the UK government has funded more than 34,500 Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships, supporting study, research, and professional development opportunities for individuals across the Commonwealth. This scale of contribution reflects a long-standing commitment not only to funding, but also to strengthening skills, fostering collaboration, and building lasting connections between Commonwealth countries.

Pan-Commonwealth Opportunities

The Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships provided by the United Kingdom are available to citizens from across all other Commonwealth countries and territories, making the scheme a genuinely pan-Commonwealth mobility opportunity. This broad eligibility has enabled diverse participation since the first cohort in 1960, with individuals from 66 different Commonwealth countries and associated territories receiving awards over time.



In more recent years, this wide geographic reach has been maintained. Over the past decade, citizens from an average of 35 Commonwealth countries have received scholarships and fellowships each year, reflecting the continued inclusivity and global scope of the UK's contribution to the programme.

Building a Commonwealth Community

Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships also support the development of inter-Commonwealth networks and a shared sense of identity through the CSC's global community of scholars, fellows, and alumni. By bringing together individuals from across member states, the programme helps to foster lasting professional relationships and connections between Commonwealth countries.



Commonwealth Scholars at the 2018 Scholar Welcome Event.

The CSC's global alumni network continues to strengthen collaboration and exchange across the Commonwealth, enabling scholars and fellows to remain engaged beyond their awards. Through these ongoing links, the programme reinforces its wider role in building a connected and mutually-supportive Commonwealth community.

[Commonwealth Alumni Taibat Hussain](#) reflected upon this sense of community in her case study profile, noting:

'I have forged lasting friendships with fellow Scholars ... These friendships have not only provided a strong support network but also fostered a sense of shared purpose.'

Advancing the Commonwealth Charter

Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships contribute directly to the values and principles set out in the Commonwealth Charter. Awards are provided to individuals whose study and work align with sustainable development objectives, organised around six of the CSC's development themes:

- Science and technology for development
- Improving population health, health systems and capacity
- Promoting innovation and entrepreneurship
- Strengthening peace, security and governance
- Strengthening resilience and response to crises
- Access, inclusion and opportunity

Taken together, these development themes map to all 16 core values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter, and the work of Commonwealth Alumni across their careers contributes directly to upholding the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter.

Commonwealth Alumni contribute to the Charter's values by applying their skills, knowledge, and networks to address development challenges and support inclusive, sustainable progress in their home countries and beyond.

Furthermore, through their professional and leadership roles, they help promote principles such as equity, good

governance, cooperation, and resilience, translating the Charter's values into practical outcomes across a range of sectors.



Commonwealth Alumni Dr Terri-Ann Gilbert-Roberts speaking about the role of Commonwealth communities at the 2024 Connect and Collaborate scholar event.

Policy Recommendations

- **Sustain and protect UK funding levels for the CSFP.** This will maintain the UK's position as the leading contributor to CSFP and ensure the continued scale, reach, and prestige of the programme.
- **Maintain the UK's role as a convenor within the Commonwealth.** Use events, alumni platforms, and academic networks to bring together leaders, practitioners, and policymakers across all member states.
- **Support alumni networks as a strategic Commonwealth-wide asset.** Systematically engage alumni to support UK and Commonwealth priorities, including policy dialogue, trade links, and international collaboration.

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