



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Skills, Networks, and Development Impact:

A Contribution Analysis of
Commonwealth Scholarships

Executive Summary

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Thank you.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission's (CSC) first application of the Contribution Analysis methodology to assess the extent to which its scholarship programmes contribute to sustainable development outcomes. Building on a well-established Theory of Change and a mature monitoring and evaluation system, the analysis examines the full results chain from inputs and activities through to outputs, outcomes, and impact. Using longitudinal survey data, administrative data, and counterfactual comparisons, this report develops an evidence-based contribution narrative, assessing whether the programme is operating as intended and identifying areas where evidence can be strengthened.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the CSC programme is functioning effectively and contributing meaningfully to development outcomes, with particularly strong evidence at the level of outputs and intermediate outcomes. While attribution remains complex at higher levels of impact, the analysis confirms that the Theory of Change is broadly valid, and that key pathways are well supported by the available evidence, especially those related to skills development and network formation.

Programme delivery and immediate experience

The evidence shows that the inputs and delivery mechanisms of the CSC programme are robust and functioning as intended. Financial support through Grant in Aid from the UK Government enables delivery of scholarships, covering tuition, stipends, research support, and administrative costs. This funding is complemented by contributions from university partners.

Scholars are the direct beneficiaries, and evaluation data consistently shows that many would not have been able to undertake equivalent study without the scholarship. Surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction with academic and living experiences in the UK, including the quality of education, research environments, and support provided by the CSC and partner institutions, however challenges such as cost of living, wellbeing concerns, and cultural adjustment are also reported.

Partnership arrangements with nominating agencies, universities, and other stakeholders were also found to be functioning as intended. Selection processes prioritise academic merit, development relevance, and equity considerations, and there is strong evidence that selected scholars are of high academic calibre and contribute positively to their host institutions. Overall, the evidence strongly supports the assumption that the foundational inputs of the programme are well aligned with its objectives.

Activities and delivery processes

The programme's activities, including academic study, research, and engagement opportunities, are also largely delivered as intended. There is strong evidence that scholars value their courses of study, which consistently meet expectations in terms of quality and relevance. While the Covid-19 pandemic temporarily disrupted delivery and reduced satisfaction levels, the subsequent recovery suggests that under normal conditions, academic provision is robust and effective.

Research support is similarly well evidenced, with scholars reporting high levels of satisfaction with supervision, access to resources, and the overall research environment. These findings reinforce the assumption that the programme provides a strong platform for academic and research development.

However, the analysis highlights a key limitation in relation to development training and broader engagement activities. While participants view these positively and report high-quality delivery, the CSC currently lacks sufficient evidence linking these activities to longer-term development outcomes. In particular, there is limited data demonstrating how training and engagement translate into post-award career progression or impact. As a result, these components represent an important area where the evidence base would benefit from further strengthening.

Outputs: skills, qualifications, and networks

At the output level, the programme demonstrates strong and consistent evidence of effectiveness. Scholars report significant development across a wide range of skills, including leadership, technical expertise, analytical thinking, and research capacity. The vast majority successfully complete their qualifications, confirming that the programme delivers its intended academic outputs.

Research outputs are also a key strength. Many alumni continue to engage in research activities related to their scholarship, and there is evidence of increased academic publishing, research collaboration, and funding applications. This highlights the sustained influence of the scholarship on scholars' academic and professional trajectories.

In addition, the programme supports the development of enduring networks and relationships, particularly with UK-based institutions and international peers. While the intensity of contact may decline over time, most scholars maintain these relationships, and comparative evidence suggests that the scholarship plays a clear role in strengthening professional and academic connections. These networks contribute both to individual career progression and to broader soft power and collaboration outcomes.

Outcomes: application and influence

The analysis provides substantial evidence that alumni apply their skills and knowledge effectively in workplace and non-employment contexts. Alumni report using their learning to solve problems in new ways, influence decision-making, and introduce changes within their organisations. Many also engage in knowledge-sharing activities, including training colleagues and developing organisational resources, demonstrating a clear multiplier effect.

Comparative data indicates that alumni are more likely than counterfactual respondents to take on leadership roles, initiate projects, pursue funding opportunities, and establish new organisations or departments. There is also strong evidence of increased involvement in postgraduate teaching and doctoral supervision, suggesting that the programme contributes to the development of future generations of researchers and professionals.

However, the analysis notes that some indicators, particularly those relating to innovation and research application, are not always directly linked to specific research outputs. This limits the

ability to fully assess how research findings are translated into practice and suggests a need to refine both the conceptualisation and measurement of this aspect of the Theory of Change.

Development impact and higher-level outcomes

At the level of broader development impact, the report identifies a credible but more complex and uneven contribution narrative. Alumni report contributions across economic, policy, social, and environmental spheres, with particularly strong and consistent trends in economic and policy-related impacts.

The programme appears to play a role in facilitating national and international-level impact, where alumni show positive trends relative to counterfactual groups. There is evidence of growing engagement in policy processes and international collaboration, although statistical associations between scholarship receipt and impact are relatively modest at earlier follow-up points.

At the local and institutional levels, differences between alumni and counterfactual groups are less pronounced, and reported impact trends are broadly similar. This suggests that the programme's influence at these levels may be more strongly shaped by contextual factors.

The analysis also highlights the interconnected nature of development impact, where outcomes span multiple sectors and levels. However, it acknowledges important limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and a lack of long-term counterfactual evidence beyond the early post-award period.

Strength of the Theory of Change and conclusions

Across the main pathways in the Theory of Change (Basic Programme, Skills and Knowledge, Network Development, and Research) the findings provide strong overall support. The most robust evidence relates to skills development and knowledge application, followed by network development and research continuity.

Three areas consistently emerge as relatively weaker in evidential terms:

- the CSC's Development Training Programme
- Other CSC engagement activities
- the application of research findings

Importantly, these gaps currently reflect limitations in available data rather than evidence of ineffectiveness. The report concludes that the Theory of Change is sound and largely validated, but that targeted data collection and conceptual refinement are needed to strengthen specific components.

Implications and next steps

The Contribution Analysis identifies clear priorities for strengthening both the evidence base and the programme's long-term impact. Key actions include:

- expanding and strengthening the counterfactual dataset, particularly over longer time periods

- collecting more robust evidence on the CSC's Development Training Programme and engagement activities
- refining how the application of research findings is conceptualised and measured
- continuing the iterative refinement of the Theory of Change based on emerging evidence

Overall, the report affirms the CSC as an effective and strategically relevant intervention for building human capital, strengthening international networks, and supporting research capacity. While development impact cannot be fully attributed to the programme alone, the analysis provides a well-substantiated account of contribution, alongside a clear roadmap for enhancing both impact and evaluative rigour over time.