

# 136 Examining the Impact of Distance Learning in the Context of International Mobility

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## Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

## Abstract

The Commonwealth Distance Learning programme was launched in 2001 to enable development impact in the Commonwealth by providing training that is not otherwise available to skilled and qualified postgraduate students who wish or need to stay in their home country while they study thereby enabling them to access opportunities that would otherwise require them to travel abroad.

An evaluation of the programme was completed in 2022, using surveys, interviews, and case studies to investigate the impact of the programme on students, universities, and international partner organisations. This paper explores the findings of the evaluation in greater detail from the perspectives of these different stakeholders, and the longer-term impact that their involvement in the programme has had for themselves, their organisations, and their larger communities.

## Full paper

The Commonwealth Distance Learning programme launched in 2001, with 3,793 Scholars from 41 different Commonwealth countries have received funding for their studies in the first twenty years of the programme. The primary purpose of the programme is to enable development impact in the Commonwealth by providing training that is not otherwise available to skilled and qualified postgraduate students who wish or need to stay in their home country while they study. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission completed an evaluation of the programme in 2022, using surveys, interviews, and case studies to investigate the impact of the programme on students, universities, and international partners.

The majority of Distance Learning Scholars reported that without their Commonwealth Scholarship, they would not have been able to undertake their studies at an institution based in the United Kingdom or elsewhere. The most frequent motivations cited for applying for their Scholarship were to apply to their particular study programme, to continue to work during their studies, and to apply for either a higher education scholarship generally, a Commonwealth Scholarship specifically, or a distance learning scholarship. Most Scholars continue to remain employed at their job full- or part-time throughout their studies, fulfilling their desire to continue working but also providing an opportunity to immediately apply what they are learning in the workplace.

Scholars consistently reported significant gains to their soft and hard skills and knowledge in areas such as critical thinking, research techniques, technical skills, and leaderships skills. Employers of Scholars who remain working during their studies confirmed that they had observed significant increases to their employees' knowledge and skills, and that their employees' Commonwealth Scholarship met or exceeded their expectations and also brought significant benefits to their workplaces. Not only do both Scholars and Employers consistently report the application of the new knowledge and skills in the workplace, but they also reported that Scholars frequently shared skills and knowledge that they had acquired through their studies with colleagues through both formal and informal training activities. Employers reported that their Scholar's activities improved both the knowledge base of their staff, but also the overall operation of their organisations.

University Partners in the UK reported that Commonwealth Scholars gain a number of benefits from their ability to study at their institutions. These include access to the significant expertise of university staff, the quality of the

education that they receive, the cutting-edge nature of the programmes of study on offer, and the career benefits of studying at a prestigious institution. Providers also highlighted a number of benefits to their own institutions and programmes associated with the presence of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars. They note that Scholars provide a variety of perspectives to their classes based on their own professional experiences, country contexts, and cultural backgrounds which enrich the learning experience for other students, while broadening the networks that can be created among student cohorts.

Many UK university Providers also offer their programmes of study in tandem with an international Partner organisation. In these instances, university Providers benefit from the input of their Partner's local knowledge and expertise in the programme design, as well as the Partner's ability to host face-to-face sessions, and to help with Scholar recruitment. Partner organisations similarly benefit from these partnerships by being able to engage in an international partnership, sharing of expertise, and being able to offer pathways to postgraduate learning through scholarships. Both Providers and Partners also reported that the partnership provided opportunities for knowledge exchange, collaboration, and the pursuit of mutual goals.

The work of Alumni post-Scholarship cuts across many different areas of development. The majority of Alumni report that their work has an impact in the areas of Social Development, Civic Engagement, Economic Development, and Policymaking and at the Institutional, Local, National and International levels. These include significant concentrations in the areas of health, policy, economic impact, education, and community, which is also reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals that Alumni most-commonly reported contributing towards. It is this demonstrable and varied development impact that is the long-term goal of the Commonwealth Distance Learning programme.

## References

Harrison B, S Marango, and S Margolis. 2022. *Expanding Horizons: The Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship Programme*.