

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Creativity Through Commonwealth Collaboration: An Evaluation of Split-site Doctoral Scholarships and the role of UK Universities

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**Research Domain:** International Perspectives and context (IPC)

**Abstract:**

**Paper:**

**Introduction:**

The 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework has explicitly identified international scholarships as a tool for development. [\[1\]](#) Reflecting higher education's recent recasting as a key driver of socioeconomic growth, SDG Target 4.B seeks to 'substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available...for enrolment in higher education'. [\[2\]](#) Consequently, scholarships have been posited as an essential mechanism for aligning the individual gains of higher education to those society-oriented "global public goods" prioritised by national governments and international bodies. [\[3\]](#)

Central to this process is the mobilisation of peoples and resources across (trans)national boundaries and the development capacity of the university itself – both its institutional configuration and teaching/research capabilities. [\[4\]](#) These issues often underpin concerns regarding the efficacy of international scholarship programmes in producing development-oriented research. Threatening researcher autonomy, the undermining of local knowledge and higher education systems and the creation of resource dependencies: such programmes often run the risk of compounding long-established global north-south asymmetries. [\[5\]](#) Nevertheless, this need not be the case. As Baxter argues, traditional mobility patterns can be challenged through innovative programme designs that institutionalise international collaborations and combine the strengths of partnering universities. [\[6\]](#)

The CSC's Split-site Doctoral programme provides one such example; it seeks to strengthen collaborations between (host) UK and (home) Commonwealth universities, enhancing the teaching and research capacity of the latter through the sharing of UK-based equipment and expertise. In doing so, it facilitates the production of development-oriented research that is locally rooted and contextually relevant to home-country priorities.

## **Research Questions:**

This paper presents findings from the CSC's evaluation of this programme, undertaken to assess whether these aims are being effectively achieved and guided by the following research questions:

- What are the demographics, contexts and outcomes of those applying for and completing Split-site Scholarships?
- What are Commonwealth Scholars' experiences both while in the United Kingdom and once they have returned home?
- What are the benefits and challenges of these scholarships to partnering home and host institutions?

Having funded 529 Split-site Scholars from 185 Commonwealth institutions placed at 116 UK universities, this paper focuses on the third research question. Specifically, it examines how these collaborations have worked in practice whilst emphasising the innovative role of UK universities and supervisors in navigating these partnerships across multiple disciplinary and country contexts.

## **Methodology:**

We adopted a sequential mixed-methods approach beginning with a series of initial research activities, including: an environment scan for similar programmes; a demographic analysis of existing programme participant data held by the CSC; and responses from programme alumni to our ongoing longitudinal survey instrument.<sup>[7]</sup> These were analysed alongside relevant CSC policy documents to establish the key programme priorities that have shaped its design and implementation over its twenty-year lifetime.

These activities informed the design of specific cross-sectional surveys that were targeted at: former/current Split-site scholars; supervisors from home-country institutions; and host UK supervisors. These were sent to all potential respondents for whom the CSC held details, garnering 330 survey responses across all cohorts.

The surveys included closed questions based upon a range of probable responses reflecting specific areas of research interest and programme priorities. Open-ended free-text questions were also employed to capture additional insights based on respondents' specific experiences. Each set of survey data was analysed using quantitative methods including descriptive statistics and crosstabs (where appropriate) for all closed survey questions, and qualitative thematic analysis for open-ended questions.

These analyses were subsequently used to develop the questions that formed the semi-structured key informant interviews conducted during the second stage of data collection. A total of 70 interviews were completed, including one focus group with UK supervisors. Providing qualitative depth rather than a necessarily representative view of the programme, there was nevertheless a strong overlap between the free-text survey and interview respondents.<sup>[8]</sup> Whilst coding allowed for the identification of issues particular to each target group, thematic triangulation across data sets also identified commonalities across different institutional and country contexts. Doing so thus provided a more holistic view of the outcomes and impacts of the programme thereby mitigating some of the limitations of this self-reported data.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Findings:

The evaluation has captured unique perspectives into how the sharing of resources and knowledge between UK and Commonwealth institutions has most effectively occurred in producing development-oriented research. Findings have emphasised the creative collaborations established between supervisors, with many either already engaged in, or signalling plans for future partnerships, owing to their involvement in the programme.

Supervisors also underlined the benefits to both home and host universities and the crucial role of the Split-site scholar themselves in broadening the intercultural experience of staff and students by bringing new perspectives based on their backgrounds and experiences. Doing so has enabled a two-way exchange of knowledge; not only did scholars bring new knowledge and experiences back with them to their home university that was subsequently shared with others in their department, but they also introduced new knowledge and research methods to the department that hosted them.

These insights offer a way to better understand *how* this mutual transfer has occurred: under which administrative arrangements, the stage and type of research in question, the range of home-host supervisory relationships, and the pathways and barriers to the sharing of resources and expertise. This is important. Whilst similar schemes were identified as part of the environment scan, little analysis of the implementation of these programmes exist; how they interface with existing UK university administrative policies and institutional infrastructures for facilitating equitable global south-north collaborations are questions left largely unaddressed.

The findings also illuminate some of the key challenges involved when facilitating international collaborations of this kind: intellectual property concerns, competing home-host assessment frameworks, institutional accreditation and the difficulty in capturing the contribution of UK supervisors to degrees ultimately awarded elsewhere.

In exploring these issues, this paper highlights both the successes and (un)intended challenges inherent in the Split-site programme. By foregrounding the perspectives of UK supervisors and departments, it also sheds light on the role of UK universities in facilitating creative collaborations across the Commonwealth that have produced developmentally-oriented research intended to address an array of global challenges.

[1] Anne C. Campbell and Matt Mawer, 'Clarifying Mixed Messages: International Scholarship Programmes in the Sustainable Development Agenda', *Higher Education Policy*, 32:2 (2019), pp. 167-184.

[2] Liam Roberts and Patrice Ajai-Ajabe, 'Higher Education and the Millennium Development Goals: Where are We Coming from, and Where are We Going', (London: The Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2013); <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>

[3] Simon Marginson, 'The Public/Private Divide in Higher Education: A Global Revision', *Higher Education*, 53:3 (2007), pp307-333; John Kirkland, 'Case Study: Balancing Change and Continuity – The Case of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan', in Joan R. Dassin, Robin. R. Marsh and Matt Mawer (eds), *International Scholarships in Higher Education: Pathways to Social Change*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p. 153.

[4] Campbell and Mawer, 'Clarifying Mixed Messages', p. 168; Tristan McCowan, Universities and the Post-2015 Development Agenda: An Analytical Framework', *Higher Education*, 72:4 (2016), pp. 505-523.

[5] Taya Louise Owens, 'Higher Education in the Sustainable Development Goals Framework', *European Journal of Education: Research, Development and Policy*, 52:4 (2017), pp. 414-420; Johnson Muchunguzi Ishengoma, 'North-South Research Collaborations: A Southern Perspective', in Tor Halvorsen and Jorun Nossun (eds), *North-South Knowledge Networks: Towards Equitable Collaboration Between Academics, Donors and Universities*, (Cape Town: African Minds, 2016), pp. 149-186.

[6] Aryn Baxter, 'The Benefits and Challenges of International Education: Maximizing Learning for Social Change', in Dassin et al, pp. 105-130.

[7] As described in Nataliya V. Ivankova, John W. Creswell and Sheldon L. Stick, 'Using Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design: From Theory to Practice', *Field Methods*, 18:1 (2006), pp. 3-20; for a comparable example can be found in Laura Dean, Janet Njelesani, Helen Smith and Imelda Bates, 'Promoting Sustainable Research Partnerships: A Mixed-Method Evaluation of a United Kingdom-Africa Capacity Strengthening Award Scheme', *Health Research Policy and System*, 13:81 (2015), pp. 1-10.

[8] Iain Wilson, *International Education Programs and Political Influence: Manufacturing Sympathy?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 152.

[9] Jelke Bethlehem, 'Selection Bias in Web Surveys', *International Statistics Review*, 78:2 (2010), pp. 161-188.