CHAPTER 8

Case Study: Balancing Change and Continuity—The Case of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan

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8.1 Introduction: Origins and Structure

International scholarship programs are too readily assumed to have constant, if varied, objectives. Constant objectives are important in establishing traditions. Well-established programs, with clear and recognizable aims that have the backing of generations of alumni, tend to be more prestigious than newer ones.

The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) provides a remarkable example of a program maintaining a high profile, while continually responding to changing environments. Its reach, objectives and scholarship offers vary significantly since that specified to the first cohort of Commonwealth Scholars in 1960 and yet the Plan retains its identity.

The 'Commonwealth' to which the CSFP relates is a grouping of 52 countries, mostly (but not quite exclusively) former British territories, designed to preserve a special collaborative relationship between them in a post-independence era. The concept dates back at least to 1926, when the

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'Imperial Conference' agreed that 'the UK and its dominions are 'equal in status, and no way subordinate to one another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs … and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations' (The Commonwealth 2017).

Eight countries were represented at that influential meeting. Thirty years later the idea of Commonwealth was changing in a radical and relatively unplanned way, as the trickle of newly independent states turned into a flood. Hilary Perraton, author of the only authoritative history of the CSFP, explains that 'hoping to retain the cosiness of Commonwealth meetings, attended by a handful of countries, the British tried to find a formula for a two-tier Commonwealth' (Perraton 2015). They failed. Eleven countries attended the Prime Ministers Meeting in 1960. The newly styled 'Heads of Government Meeting' in 1971 attracted 32. The Commonwealth was no longer a 'white mans' club. Not all members persisted with the Queen as Head of State, and were certainly not uncritical of Britain.

The idea of a voluntary association of former colonies had few templates from which to work. The first Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, held in Oxford in 1959, declared that the Commonwealth was 'a new experiment in human relationship. It is founded on a belief in the worth and dignity of the human individual and a recognition of the value of freedom and cooperative action' (Commonwealth Relations Office, 1959a). The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, formally established at the 1959 conference was a reflection of these aspirations.

The Plan was introduced at a time when the Commonwealth played a much more prominent role in British policy than today. Ironically, the idea was conceived not in any educational forum, but at a meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers held in Montreal in 1958, the most acceptable of a package of alternatives first put forward by the hosts across a range of policy areas. Education Ministers resolved the details at their Oxford meeting the following year (Commonwealth Relations Office 1959b). This determined that the Plan would be based around five specific principles:

1. The Plan would be additional to, and distinct from, any other Plan in operation.
2. The Plan would be based on mutual cooperation and the sharing of educational experience amongst the nations of the Commonwealth.
3. The Plan should be sufficiently flexible, to take account of the diverse and changing needs of Commonwealth countries.

4. While the Plan would be Commonwealth wide, it should be operated on the basis of a series of bilateral agreements to allow for the necessary flexibility.
5. Awards should be designed to recognize and promote the highest standards of intellectual achievement.

The emphasis on flexibility was deliberate, and reflected in the structures through which the Plan would be implemented. No central body was established to offer or manage Commonwealth Scholarships. Instead it was left to each Commonwealth country to identify an agency through which its involvement would be managed; in most cases this was a relevant Ministry, but some of the developed nations established new structures for the purpose. The 'agencies' would serve two principal functions—they would select award holders for any scholarships being hosted by their country, and they would nominate candidates for scholarships being offered to citizens of their country. Nor was any central funding mechanism established; awards would be financed by the host country, and it would be for each country to determine how many awards to offer.

Some intentions can be discerned from the above principles. The vision of the Commonwealth as a partnership is reflected in the desire for both host and home countries to be involved in identifying award recipients. The expectation that scholarships would be hosted by developing, as well as developed countries (a function which some newly independent states were better able to fulfill in the 1960s than 30 years later), reflected the vision of independent states. The principles are also underpinned by the belief stated in the Oxford declaration of the importance of the individual, and perhaps recognition that if the Commonwealth were to succeed as an institution, then it must be meaningful to individual citizens. There is also an emphasis on quality. Awards should support the 'highest level' of intellectual achievement, whatever the subject of study.

Member countries responded to the challenge in different ways. Scholarships were concentrated on those countries best able to finance them—the UK agreed from the outset to support at least half of the total—however as many as 14 countries were hosting awards by 1967, including smaller numbers in newly independent states such as Ghana, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. There were no common criteria to determine who was nominated for awards from home countries. Some hosts expanded provision to embrace Fellowships for mid-career professionals, some focused on formal degree programs in their awards. Some developing countries suggested that

lower-level qualifications could be added to the menu of degree level, mainly postgraduate, awards on offer.

There were also differences of emphasis within countries; in the UK, the different perceptions of the balance between developing leaders, public diplomacy, international development and pure academics were evident from an early stage. These partly reflected political differences—Conservative governments have tended to tie international development objectives more closely to foreign affairs objectives, while Labour ones have given development objectives more independence. Similar tensions can be seen in the more recent decisions of Canada and Australia to merge their development functions into wider foreign affairs portfolios. For Britain, the desire to link development, foreign affairs and trade functions has taken a new shape in recent months, as the government has sought to link foreign assistance policy to the development of new trading relationships in response to the referendum vote for Britain to leave the European Union.

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (CSC), established by the British government to manage its contribution to the Plan, partly protected it from these policy shifts. Although its founding legislation (HMSO 1959) makes clear that it must carry out any Ministerial directive, no such formal directives have been issued since 1960. The legislation also forbids Ministers from involvement in selection of specific students. It has thus allowed an arms-length relationship, in which academic and other specialist presence has afforded a degree of continuity. Nonetheless the Commission remains dependent on government for its annual funding allocation. It may have no legal requirement to select award holders in conformity with prevailing government priorities, but it would be foolish not to reflect these priorities in its wider thinking.

8.2 A Changing Environment

Despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of any effective mechanism to direct the Plan, the basic 'offer' of postgraduate scholarships, supplemented with smaller numbers of Fellowships, has remained throughout its history. The political environment in which it has operated, however, has changed markedly. This can be traced in the series of Reports on the Plan to the triennial Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers.

The 1960s were a period of confidence and expansion—for both scholarships and the Commonwealth. As noted above, awards were offered in several African and Asian countries, and in some cases attracted students

from the UK and other developed nations; a high proportion of these pursued a long-term interest in their host regions on returning to the UK, following careers in diplomacy, development or academia. The Plan enjoyed gradual expansion in its early years.

Thereafter the picture was more mixed. Universities in developing countries were not able to maintain the progress of the 1960s, victims of economic crisis, internal disruptions and, by the 1980s and 1990s, disillusionment of donor bodies about the role of higher education in development. International scholarships were not a priority. Some countries have also reduced their focus on the Commonwealth. In the mid-1990s, Australia decided not to offer awards: part of its concentration on the Pacific region. Hong Kong left the Commonwealth in 1997. Canada has been an inconsistent supporter of the scheme, having withdrawn twice and returned once in the last decade.

For all of these reasons, the Plan became less diverse, although this did not necessarily affect overall numbers. International students were becoming more important to the developed world, particularly, in the case of the UK, following the introduction of full cost tuition fees from the early 1980s. High-cost higher education tends to be good for scholarship numbers: universities become more competitive in their recruitment, while government wants to demonstrate that high-quality students can still access the system. The UK Commonwealth Scholarship Commission received increased funding to help demonstrate this; part of a wider package to expand UK international scholarships announced in 1983 (Hansard 1983).

By 1993, both the UK and the Commonwealth-wide Plan reached a peak in numbers. However, skepticism was growing, both domestically and internationally, about the value of international scholarships. British Government funding for Commonwealth Scholarships was cut four times during the remaining years of the decade, while a report to the 2000 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers revealed that the number of countries offering awards had reduced to six (UK, Canada, India, New Zealand, Brunei and Jamaica)—the lowest ever. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations 2000) encouraged governments to focus their development efforts on primary education. This approach was eagerly endorsed by the UK's new Labour government elected in 1997, which distanced development from foreign policy through the establishment of a new Department for International Development (DFID).

Responding to these factors, the UK Commonwealth Scholarship Commission made a conscious decision to focus its awards portfolio toward development needs. Reforms agreed upon in 2001 marked the most radical change in provision since the Plan began. Conventional postgraduate scholarships remained, but were joined by a new program of distance learning awards—recipients of which need not visit the UK—and short-term awards for staff working in occupations linked to development. The shift placed greater emphasis on Masters, rather than doctoral, study. Within the Plan's doctoral component, the 'split-site' program through which doctoral candidates at developing country universities were supported to spend one year in the UK was enlarged, in an attempt both to recognize increasing academic capacity in some middle-income countries and to support more doctorates within a limited budget.

Attitudes toward the role of higher education in international development began to change in the new millennium, for example, through the publication of the World Bank's (2000) *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*. By the time that the UK hosted the development-focused G8 summit in 2005, higher education was firmly back on the development agenda. In the succeeding decade, the Plan has re-asserted itself. The more explicit link between UK awards and international development has been rewarded with funding increases from governments of both parties. Internationally, the 50th anniversary of the Plan in 2009–2010 was marked by the development of an endowment fund—the first ever central source of funding for Commonwealth Scholarships—to support awards in low- and middle-income countries. These developments, together with continued support from long-standing hosts such as India, New Zealand and Malaysia, have pushed up both award numbers and the number of countries hosting awards. Yet, at the same time, the proportion of awards hosted in the UK has also increased, rising to over 90% following the decision of Canada to cease funding in 2012.

8.3 Defining the 'Development Scholarship'

The increased focus of UK Commonwealth Scholarships on international development has coincided with renewed confidence of the international development community in higher education as a vehicle for economic and social development. Much of the renewed investment has rightly been devoted to building up domestic infrastructure, and some scholarship investment is being targeted at local or regional, rather than international,

awards. International scholarships have proved durable, however. The Sustainable Development Goals, announced in 2015 as successors to the MDGs, include a specific target to increase scholarship numbers to the least developed countries by 2020 (United Nations 2015).

Not all international scholarships have international development as their main purpose. A controversial aspect of the new Sustainable Development Goal target is that it does not discriminate according to why an award is being offered. Some countries offer scholarships with the intention of attracting skilled labor from developing countries, rather than building capacity there. Some also confuse subsidies for higher education generally with scholarships aimed at 'deserving' individuals. Several European countries, for example, subsidize tuition fees for all overseas students, without any selection, but regard the difference between full economic cost and subsidized fee as scholarships.

In the UK, the clearer emphasis of Commonwealth Scholarships since 2001 on development complements that of another international scholarship program (the FCO Chevening Scholarships) on public diplomacy. This leads to the question of how far it is possible to define particular characteristics of scholarships, according to their stated objectives.

International scholarships can be categorized in several ways (e.g. Balfour 2016). However, for current purposes we can propose five categories, as follows:

1. **National Interest (Narrowly Defined):** Scholarships are driven by the desire of the host country to fill particular skills or other labor market shortages. Recipients are encouraged (or even obliged) to remain upon completion of award.
2. **National Interest (Broadly Defined):** Scholarships are intended to benefit the host country in less direct or measurable ways, for example, winning long-term friends for public diplomacy purposes or enhancing the reputation of national higher education systems.
3. **Merit Based:** Scholarships are awarded to the most able candidates, regardless of their personal background or likely impact on national or development objectives.
4. **Development Based (Individually Focused):** Scholarships seek to address disadvantage, prioritizing candidates who are underrepresented in some way. The main aim is to help the individual, although by doing so there may be wider development benefits, for example, the emergence of role models.

5. **Development Based (Society Focused):** Scholarships prioritize candidates who appear most likely to address development problems in their respective countries, regardless of personal background. Recipients may be encouraged or required to return home (or work on relevant projects) following completion.

The above categories are not mutually exclusive. National interest programs, for example, are likely to bring some development benefits, and vice versa. All categories of award are also likely to be merit-based to some degree.

UK Commonwealth Scholarships conform most strongly with the final category outlined above; development impact has been defined as being at the level of society, rather than the individual. Access issues are subject to regular review—for example, the Commission has a 50% female recruitment target for its scholarship selections—but selection committees do not consciously seek out candidates from under represented backgrounds to the same extent of some programs. Rather, they prioritize applications according to likely development impact on the home country. The applicants' statements of development objectives rank equally with academic merit in selection criteria.

Other criteria can be used to indicate the extent to which scholarship programs are 'development orientated'. An obvious example is the extent to which awards are focused on developing countries. The OECD indicators used to service the Sustainable Development Goals are too broad for this purpose, not discriminating between low- and middle-income countries. Subject of study is another indicator, although not an unproblematic one since opinions vary on the development impact of specific disciplines. Within the UK, however, it is true that the development-orientated Commonwealth Scholarships Program has over twice the proportion of science awards than the public diplomacy-orientated Chevening Scholarships offered by the Foreign Office.

Other differences can be seen in the level of support provided during the award. Public diplomacy schemes tend to focus on deepening interest in the host country; development ones place more emphasis on skills development. Public diplomacy awards are more likely to require that all or most of the time on award is actually spent in the host country; development ones may be less concerned. In addition to large numbers of distance learning awards, UK Commonwealth Scholarships also permit substantial periods to be spent in the home country for fieldwork purposes and, through the

split-site awards described above, support doctoral work in the UK as part of a degree program awarded at a developing country university. All of these features could be said to tie the award more closely to the needs of the home country.

The categories above oversimplify the distinction between scholarships—they are 'ideal types'. A clear understanding of their relative importance is, however, helpful in defining whether objectives have been achieved, a topic on which scholarship schemes throughout the world are increasingly being asked to deliver.

8.4 Understanding Outcomes

For much of its first 40 years, the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission paid little attention to its alumni, and even less to evaluation. Until 2000 no alumni database existed, nor any regular means of communication with alumni: such contact as existed at local level was instigated by former scholars themselves. Occasional surveys had taken place—most notably one in the late 1980s (Niven 1989)—but these were not seen as a part of a wider, continuous program of engagement. Instead priority had been given to maximizing the proportion of expenditure devoted to the scholarships themselves.

The closer alignment of the scheme to development objectives from 2001 onward provided an incentive to change this. Demonstrating development impact depended fundamentally on knowing what alumni did in their subsequent careers. For the Commission, evaluation is a major reason for undertaking alumni work. The use of alumni for fundraising has not figured prominently, although over 200 alumni did contribute to the endowment fund established to mark the 50th anniversary of the Fund in 2009. There has also been increasing recognition of the role that alumni can play in promoting the program to future generations of applicants. From this low base, the Commission has rapidly expanded alumni tracing. In 2016, for the first time, it had more 'traced' than 'untraced' amongst its 25,000 alumni. A regular hard copy magazine is complemented by electronic communication networks that focus on professional interests and national alumni chapters in around 20 countries. The resulting network has also opened the gateway to evaluation work.

Evaluation activity has focused around two core questions—the career trajectories of scholars and fellows after their award and what types of impact they have had (particularly, in this case, on the development of their home

countries). Answers to the former can largely be obtained from analysis of alumni data: the latter, however, requires more detailed analysis and a degree of interpretation. In all cases evaluation needs to feed back into the question of whether current scholarship processes can be improved, and if so, how.

The proportion of alumni who return home is often seen as an indicator of development value, but 'snapshot' surveys of return rates represent a blunt tool. Our surveys suggest that around 18% of respondents currently live outside their home region, but mask considerable variation (Mawer et al. 2016). For example, surveys consistently show lower return home rates from developed, rather than developing, Commonwealth countries. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who had undertaken fellowships—short periods of academic and professional development without a degree qualification—were also more likely to be working in their home country than those who undertook longer scholarships. Findings also suggest that figures for residency vary significantly throughout careers, with distinct peaks and troughs. For both scholarships and fellowships, alumni appear to have a greater propensity to be outside their home region, some 3–4 years following their award than in the years immediately before or afterwards, and for scholarships in particular, another peak seems to emerge a decade after the first, with absentee rates reaching 30% before subsiding again (Mawer et al. 2016). The first of these peaks may be explained, at least in part, by subsequent training. The second is more uncertain, but given the significant proportion of alumni in academic careers may reflect mid-career fellowship opportunities.

Although the 2001 reforms placed a greater emphasis than before on (relatively vocational) Masters qualifications, historically the dominant mode of provision has been for doctoral study. In these circumstances, it is no surprise to find that academic careers accounted for just over 50% of the alumni studied in the latest CSC research report (Mawer et al. 2016). Interestingly, there was a net inflow to academic life as a result of the scheme. Conversely, the public sector suffered a net outflow, with less alumni working there after the award than previously, although it was still the second highest form of employment. The growth of distance learning, professional fellowships and, to some extent, Masters courses with a stronger vocational focus, can be expected to change the dominance of academic career trajectories in the future.

Recent evaluations of Commonwealth Scholarships distinguish between socioeconomic impact and impact on government policy making

(e.g. Day et al. 2009; Scurfield and Barabhuiya 2014; Mawer et al. 2016). This moves beyond anecdotal evidence that shows how Commonwealth Scholars have risen to leadership positions, to identify channels through which impact is generated. In the latest research report, these channels are identified as: the production of analytic research; teaching and training; design, invention and development; implementation and coordination; policy development and technical assistance; advocacy; and publication and dissemination (Mawer et al. 2016). Predictably—given what we know about the employment sector and subject background of many Commonwealth Scholarship recipients—the quantity and quality of education, scientific, and research applications were commonly cited as substantive impacts from the funding. More generally, examples related to socioeconomic impact were more forthcoming than those relating to the relatively narrow area of impact on government policy.

There were also other variations suggested by Mawer et al.'s (2016) analyses. At a regional level, for instance, alumni from Africa were more likely to report socioeconomic impact than those from other regions, although these were less marked for impact on government policy. Doctoral students were generally more likely to report impact than those who had studied for Masters degrees, regardless of their geographic origin. Interestingly, there was little difference between genders, perhaps suggesting that, once over the considerable historical hurdle of getting an international scholarship, women are successful in their subsequent careers.

8.4.1 Contribution, Attribution and Commonwealth Scholarships

How much of this impact derives from Commonwealth Scholarships? Impact clearly derives from personal attributes as well as those gained through education. Even within the latter category, the Commonwealth Scholarship is only one stage of the educational process, and in many cases, only one of several scholarships obtained at various stages. For many, particularly doctoral candidates, however, it represents the highest, and often terminal, qualification in the labor market.

Unraveling this complexity is a problem for all scholarship programs, but we can draw some conclusions. Most alumni would not have been able to undertake their course of study without the scholarship. Surveys tend to show around two-thirds agreeing unconditionally with this statement, and perhaps another quarter that they would have found other means to do it via other scholarships (Mawer et al. 2016). This latter proportion is

encouraging for a development scholarship; it suggests that recruitment is taking place within the right 'pool' of candidates and is not concerned if these acquire the necessary skills from another route. A public diplomacy program, which is more likely to consider itself in competition with other countries for the best candidates, might be less sanguine. Only a very small minority felt that self-financing was a realistic option. These findings are self-reporting at present, without a control group, but over time will be set against results from a longer-term counterfactual study, which will compare the careers of successful candidates against those of unsuccessful applicants.

Second, we have confidence that the Scholars themselves consider that their scholarship added to their skills and knowledge. The overwhelming majority consider that skills have been advanced overall, and had accessed technology or expertise not available to them in their home country. Smaller majorities recognized specific skills, such as the ability to manage projects, as being enhanced. Our alumni also confirm that they were able to apply these skills in future employment—three-quarters said 'significantly so'. The relevance of skills gained during the scholarship appears to be confirmed by data on career mobility. Of those students who had been employed prior to taking up their scholarship, over 60% returned to a more senior position immediately, and over 80% considered the award had helped them secure advancement over the following 12 months (Mawer et al. 2016).

Although many of our questions assume that impact comes primarily through employment, this is not the only route. Many scholars included voluntary positions in NGO's or charities or political campaigning activity in this context. It would be interesting to measure whether these also have been enhanced by the scholarship experience; whether, for example, being a scholarship holder helps develop a sense of social responsibility. Alternatively, high levels of voluntary activity might be associated with the increased prospect of securing a scholarship in the first instance. Such activities tend to be sought by selection committees as evidence of future commitment or leadership.

Finally, although our analysis has focused on development outcomes, these tend to overlap with public diplomacy objectives. One area where this applies is in the propensity of scholarships to develop enduring relationships with the host country. In the case of Commonwealth Scholarships, given the high proportion of doctorates amongst the alumni, the most common form of contact was with supervisors at host universities, often manifested in concrete activities such as joint papers. Social contact was also strong, but predictably declined over time. The reverse applied with professional

contacts, such as membership of professional associations based in the UK, which were less likely to result but more durable (Mawer et al. 2016).

8.5 Conclusion and Lessons for the Future

The evidence base provides plentiful examples of scholars who have risen to senior positions and made significant impact on their societies. They value their association with the scheme and the UK as a host country, and maintain significant links. The issue of how far these outcomes are attributable to the scholarships is still being unpacked. Alumni responses suggest that they are, at least in the critical early stages of their career. Through a new longitudinal research framework and ongoing counterfactual study, we are seeking to build quantifiable evidence of this contribution.

The achievements of alumni are welcome, although they are perhaps different ones to those anticipated by the founders in 1959. Ironically, the question of whether CSFP alumni have developed more affinity with the Commonwealth as a result of their awards is one about which we know relatively little. The extent to which scholarships influence attitudes is an important area which most alumni and evaluation schemes underplay. We may know that alumni are likely to obtain influential positions (see Mawer, Chap. 13), but we know less about whether alumni are more likely to promote democracy and human rights or to counter corruption, either generally or as a result of their period on scholarship. Similarly, we have little insight into whether they are more likely to take a positive view toward the Commonwealth as a worthwhile association.

Three conclusions can, however, be stated. Firstly, that the CSFP demonstrates the importance of durability. Schemes derive added value from longevity and the recognition that comes with it.

Secondly, that to achieve longevity scholarship programs may need to adapt to changing realities. Done thoughtfully, adaptation can be achieved without damaging overall prestige and reputation. The founders of the CSFP showed foresight in anticipating the need for flexibility in their founding statement.

Finally, scholarships exist in an increasingly political environment. In a future where higher education institutions seek to reconcile full cost tuition fees with increasing access, there will be more need for scholarships, and competition will intensify further. In this environment, there will be an increasing requirement for scholarship providers to be strategic, even political in their operation, needing to define their niche in a crowded market

and ensure that key stakeholders—funders, host universities, applicants and alumni—are aware of their 'brand'. In the current UK environment, this involves a balance between maintaining Commonwealth Scholarships as a distinctive development program, and demonstrating that they work effectively with other UK Government programs in the national interest. There will also be a need for evidence to back up such claims.

At the turn of the century, UK Commonwealth Scholarships did not maintain a regular alumni or evaluation program, preferring instead to maximize expenditure on scholarships directly. In common with many other international scholarship programs, it now sees a need for such activities as being critical. This need is only likely to intensify in the foreseeable future.

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