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# Bursary Scheme To Help Distance Education Students

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**V**ANCOUVER— Hundreds of students around the Commonwealth are pursuing distance education courses on bursaries awarded to them under what is thought to be the first scheme of its kind in the world.

Many of the award winners are mature students, who are seeking to improve their standard of living by gaining educational qualifications they were unable to obtain earlier in life.

The scheme was launched last year by The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, jointly with the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), the developmental arm of the Commonwealth Secretariat in London.

Bursaries are awarded under the scheme exclusively to students following courses by distance who, unlike those doing conventional courses at universities, do not normally get any financial assistance. Yet, they often also have to support families as many are married with children.

The scheme, under which at least half of the bursaries are reserved for women, is run by COL in collaboration with a dozen Commonwealth institutions offering distance education programmes.

These are the University of Guyana; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, India; the College of Arts, Science and Technology, Jamaica; the University of Nairobi, Kenya; Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan;

University of Papua New Guinea; the University of the South Pacific; the Open University of Sri Lanka; Makerere University, Uganda; the University of the West Indies and the University of Zimbabwe.

Nearly 25 Commonwealth members, mainly small island states, are served by the Universities of the South Pacific (USP) and the West Indies (UWI). All participating institutions administer the scheme in the countries covered by them to keep overheads to a minimum.

The institutions are given a grant by COL, whose own resources were augmented by a contribution from the CFTC. The institutions use the grant to award bursaries to students pursuing courses by distance.

It is a cost-effective scheme, as COL founding president and chief executive James Maraj, a former Vice-Chancellor of the USP, pointed out.

Professor Maraj, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, said the resources usually required to support a single full-time student for three or four years at a University would cover a much larger number of those following courses at a distance.

For example, the \$5,000 nominal cost of a full-time scholarship for one year at the USP would pay the tuition fees for up to 100 students

studying from home. Even more students could be supported where costs were lower.

COL received a positive response from Commonwealth institutions when it asked for their reaction to the scheme before its launch.

Dr. R.V.R. Chandrasekhara Rao, Vice-Chancellor of Andhra Pradesh Open University in India, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University was previously known, congratulated COL on its initiative and told Professor Maraj:

"In India it is not merely necessary that those missing out on higher education earlier should be given a new opportunity, they should also be offered financial incentives."

"This is particularly so because a majority of our students are unemployed, and the bursaries would be a life-sustaining opportunity for them."

Mr. R.M. Zinyemba, registrar of the University of Zimbabwe, said: "The scheme comes at a time when we are embarking on a big distance education programme. The scholarships will give a big boost to our plans and efforts."

The bursary scheme followed a fellowship scheme for Commonwealth educators started by COL soon after it began operations in 1989.

The annual fellowship scheme enables the educators to visit British Columbia (BC) to study with the Canadian province's institutions promoting education through distance learning.

They are thus able to share Canada's experience in this field and to introduce the ideas they gain to develop their own distance education programmes.

The scheme also enables BC educators to visit other Commonwealth countries to talk about their work and to assist local institutions.

And it contributes to the personal and professional development of fellows whose horizons are broadened by the opportunities offered by the scheme, a joint initiative of COL and the government of BC.

The Commonwealth of Learning was created by Commonwealth leaders to promote human resource development in member countries through distance education and the application of communication technologies to education. The leaders have identified development of human resources as the key to social and economic development.

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