

Commonwealth scholarships: a success story

Asif Khan

Thousands of bright young men and women from Commonwealth countries who received higher education as Commonwealth scholars have achieved high positions in their chosen fields, a study has found.

Among them are a Governor-General, numerous ministers, many permanent secretaries of government ministries and a large number of professionals.

More than 500 went on to become university professors, thus helping with the education of countless other young people.

These facts and figures are revealed in a report of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, one of the largest and most successful schemes of its kind in the world.

Nearly 13,000 awards have now been made since the Plan was established in 1960 to enable students of high intellectual promise to study in Commonwealth countries other than their own.

The report, published by the Commonwealth Secretariat, results from a study by the Plan to trace former scholars. The idea was to see how many gained qualifications and how the awards helped them in their careers and contributed to their countries' development. Another aim was to improve the Plan's operations, based on the study's findings.

The Plan, which normally makes awards for post-graduate study, expects scholars to return home after completing studies so they can "make a distinctive contribution to life in their own countries."

The Plan is a series of bilateral arrangements under which awarding countries offer scholarships to men and women from other

Commonwealth countries to enable them to study in the awarding country.

It is administered by national Plan agencies with the joint participation of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

This was the first tracer study undertaken by the Plan, set up on a recommendation by Sydney Smith, a former Canadian Minister of External Affairs and previously president of the University of Toronto. He believed forging educational links between Commonwealth countries was of vital importance.

The study was conducted by Dr. Alastair Niven of Britain, a former director of the Asia Centre in London, who was himself a Commonwealth scholar in Ghana from 1966-68. He was assisted by Margaret Albrechtsen and Peter Mayer of the ACU, which is based in London.

The study was confined to scholars in the first 25 years of the Plan. About one third of the 9,800 students who held the

awards during this period were traced.

Their response to a questionnaire showed that most of them regarded the scheme worthwhile. The scholarship benefited them as well as their countries, they said.

A respondent was Dr. Dame Minita Gordon, Governor-General of Belize, who studied at the University of Nottingham in Britain.

Many of the former scholars are now working as doctors, engineers, scientists, lawyers, managers, financial experts and civil servants.

The largest response came from those engaged in education as professors, lecturers, teachers and administrators. Out of these, 528 were professors.

The report regrets that only 58 of the professors are women, "confirming the difficulty that women experience throughout the Commonwealth in being appointed to the highest education positions."

On the other hand women accounted for nearly a third of all school teachers who responded. This, says the report, reflects the stereotype of women being suitable for these jobs.

Only one sixth of the responses from people in science and engineering came from women.

Evidence that the Plan encouraged good citizenship among former scholars came through the number 42 per cent of those engaged in voluntary of community work.

"This effort is spread across the Commonwealth and refutes a stereotype sometimes suggested in western countries that developing Commonwealth nations are not prepared to help themselves."

The report notes that some scholars complete their period of award without gaining qualifications while others do not return home after obtaining degrees.

However, this brain drain does not exist only among scholars from developing countries. For example, some scholars from Australia and New Zealand chose to remain in Britain or Canada and vice versa.

The report makes a series of recommendations, including the formation of a live register of former scholars and a Commonwealth-wide association to which they could belong.

The report will be placed before the Ministers when they next gather for their three-yearly meeting in Barbados in October 1990.

COMMONWEALTH FEATURE