

# **THE CANADA CARIBBEAN DISTANCE EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME: A NEW FRAME OF REFERENCE FOR SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME DELIVERY**

By:

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*This case study seeks to outline and to identify the lessons learned from a Commonwealth of Learning (COL) initiative to add a new dimension to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) by using distance learning for undergraduate studies especially in employment-related fields that are of growing significance in many countries. This initiative is financed by a substantial contribution from Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and could lead to transforming the present CSFP into a new kind of instrument that would widen its access and also make it relevant to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

## **Introduction – the CSFP**

The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) was launched at the inaugural Commonwealth Education Conference, held in Oxford, England, in 1959, with the following guiding principles:

- being additional to and distinct from any other scholarship programme;
- recognising and promoting the highest standards of intellectual achievement;
- accommodating the diverse and changing needs of countries and the special needs of the less well-developed;
- being based on mutual co-operation and sharing of educational experience; and,
- being operated on the basis of a series of bilateral arrangements.

It was designed to enable:

students of high intellectual promise to pursue studies in Commonwealth countries other than their own so that, on their return, they can make a distinctive contribution in their own countries while fostering mutual understanding within the Commonwealth. (DFAIT, 1998)

Since then, the CSFP has attracted some of the most brilliant young scholars. To this extent, it ranks as one of the very successful education initiatives in Commonwealth co-operation and, indeed, as a model worthy of emulation within and beyond the Commonwealth.

From the outset, the CSFP has enjoyed the generous and sustained support from Commonwealth governments. Other features are the number of scholars supported under this scheme and the contribution it has made to student mobility, “mutual understanding within the Commonwealth” and academic links and exchanges. More than 20,000 scholars have studied in countries other than their own through the CSFP. Notwithstanding its success, calls for changes and improvements to the CSFP's modality have been made in recent years, most notably and recently from the 13<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (13CCEM), held in Botswana in August 1997.

## **The case for change to the CSFP**

While continuing to acknowledge the CSFP as “the flagship scheme of Commonwealth higher education”, Ministers noted that there was “a general desire by most participating countries that the CSFP could and should be more flexible in terms of modality” (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997c:5). In its 1993 *Report* on the CSFP, the Third Ten-Year Review Committee recommended “experimentation by awarding countries with certain new modes for CSFP awards to make provision for e.g. partial degree programmes [and] distance courses...” (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1993:5). The Committee furthermore suggested that the CSFP's relevance and impact could be strengthened by building upon the Plan's “flexibility and responsiveness so as to increase access, to improve the quality of academic programmes and to foster institutional development in both recipient and donor countries” (*ibid*:22), using distance courses as an illustration.

Also in 1997, the Commonwealth Secretariat prepared and circulated a survey to all Commonwealth countries' Ministries of Education and furthermore consulted Ministry and CSFP-implementing agencies' representatives on the future of the CSFP. Some respondents expressed their desire for an increase in undergraduate awards, prompting the observation:

With an overall call for flexibility in the modality of awards, an opportunity now exists not only to respond to changing requirements of participating countries, but also to increase the number of awards available. (Bost, 1998:18)

As the above comments and suggestions attest, there are compelling reasons, other than financial, to support the case for a change to the CSFP. Yet the unfortunate reality is that the major driving force for change is declining funding from Commonwealth governments. Current trends indicate a decrease in funding to the CSFP, resulting in the reduction in numbers of awards. Results of the 1997 Commonwealth Secretariat survey affirmed that:

With the exception of Australia ... principal awarding countries have indicated that, in general, reductions reflect current economic circumstances and are consistent with budget cuts across a variety of government sectors. Similarly, although several developing countries wished either to renew or to begin offering awards, financial stringencies have prevented them from doing so. This situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. (*ibid*)

Against this background, a number of different approaches and responses are currently under consideration. An approach employing distance education methodologies undoubtedly deserves to be among them.

### **The case for a distance education approach – a case for COL**

Until recently, the CSFP's basic structure has remained largely unchanged since its inception. For the most part, it does not reflect the tremendous transformation occurring in higher education where life-long learning and skills upgrading have assumed greater importance. Nor has the CSFP capitalised on the new and innovative means of delivery resulting from the communications and information revolution which make it possible to extend access to education while reducing per student costs and increasing institutional co-operation. These considerations justified reassessment of the current CSFP modality, while the budgetary realities prompting donor countries to reduce their Plan contributions added urgency to the need for reform.

The merits of distance education are abundant. In the context of an alternative approach to the CSFP, distance education allows for a greater number of students at a lower cost and minimises the disruptions to the personal lives, work and work-related situations of students. These factors may well explain why in the Caribbean, for instance, there has been such a gap in recent times between the number of scholarships available and those actually taken up. According to the last report on the CSFP, between 1993 and 1996 students took up only about 25% on average of the scholarships on offer. Moreover, distance education presents a compelling response to the Third Ten-Year Review Committee's and Commonwealth Education Ministers' calls for a more flexible CSFP. At the same time as acknowledging the CSFP's flagship status, many delegations at 13CCEM also:

expressed a desire to see COL play a significant role in their use of technology to enhance access to education for their peoples [and] recognized the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of distance education systems. (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997c:5)

The Third Ten-Year Review Committee also "noted the possibility that CSFP awards may be able to incorporate distance-learning methods" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1993:9) and suggested that COL "could usefully be associated with such developments" (*ibid*:23).

The Commonwealth of Learning was established at the 1987 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Vancouver and has been operational since 1989. Based in Vancouver, Canada, COL is an intergovernmental organisation mandated by Member Governments to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education resources and technologies. Working with and providing services to hundreds of institutions throughout the Commonwealth, COL is helping to increase the capacities of developing nations to meet the demands for improved access to quality education and training.

As COL moves towards its tenth anniversary, it has been strengthened and renewed in its mandate to assist developing countries to refashion their education and training systems in an age when communications technologies are revolutionising education. COL equips new generations of Commonwealth nationals to use distance learning and new communications technologies to become productive citizens who will lead their countries with confidence and strength into the next millennium. As a participant at 13CCEM remarked, "if COL did not already exist we would have to invent it". Arguably, this is so because of the capacity of COL to harness information and communications

technologies in support of the development and education and training needs of Commonwealth countries. In the new millennium, which everyone agrees is almost certain to be a knowledge millennium, this capability, along with the strong support and vision of Commonwealth countries, makes COL uniquely poised to bring fresh life and renewed vigour to education programmes, including the CSFP, throughout the Commonwealth.

## **The CCDESP pilot**

### Introduction

It is against the above backdrop that COL approached Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) about the potential value of distance learning and the availability of new communications technologies in adding a new dimension to the existing Canadian component of the CSFP. COL wished to explore the transformation of the CSFP into a new frame of reference that is perhaps better suited to the needs of Commonwealth countries and their young people as they enter the new millennium. At DFAIT's invitation, COL undertook a feasibility study to extend and complement the Canadian component of the CSFP by:

- Including scholarships for undergraduate study.
- Using distance education techniques to deliver courses.
- Using new technologies to support learning environments.
- Projecting some cost considerations for such a programme.

The DFAIT Academic Relations Division's hospitable and encouraging response prompted COL to prepare a detailed proposal for the Canada Caribbean Distance Education Scholarship Programme (CCDESP). The Division provided valuable advice in helping COL develop the concept and win support for it within DFAIT. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy, long an advocate of innovative reforms to existing programmes, strongly supported this initiative and approved C\$1.75M over five years for a pilot programme in the Caribbean. Perhaps foreshadowing other donor countries' reviews of their commitments to the CSFP, Minister Axworthy later noted that "if we do not take a fresh look at the higher education programs of the Commonwealth, we may over time lose them", and called for "renewal and reinvigoration" (Axworthy, 1998:1).

### The model

This pilot initially embraces three Caribbean countries, involves three Canadian universities and three specific fields of study, and uses distance learning as a tool to widen the outreach of the CSFP to undergraduate students in fields coincident with their interests and relevant to the needs of their region. The CCDESP seeks to provide them with the education, experience and expertise to equip them for today's job market in a region characterised by high levels of unemployment.

In considering an appropriate region for this pilot programme, the Caribbean was suggested as having several notable advantages, including:

- Small island nations that have an expressed need for such educational aid.
- Long traditions of academic relationships between Canada and Caribbean institutions.
- There is an appreciation of academic traditions and an understanding of cultural challenges.
- The existence of strong local and regional academic institutions, notably The University of the West Indies, with which to partner.
- Same time zones allow for greater and easier communication.
- There is recognition for distance education and its applications.
- Excellent political relationships exist between Canada and the Caribbean countries.

One large (Jamaica) and two smaller (St. Vincent & the Grenadines and Dominica) countries were identified for the pilot programme. The choice of three, rather than one location, allows COL to test the capacity of smaller nations to benefit from such a scheme.

Consultations and discussions with Caribbean advisors indicated a desire to use this opportunity to apply scholarships in vocational areas that would benefit countries immediately. Consequently, three areas were proposed and selected:

- Teacher Education.
- Information Technology.
- Hospitality Management.

Advantages to focusing on these disciplines include:

- The amenability of the disciplines for the use of technology as part of the delivery system.
- The availability of tutors and mentors to build local support.
- The availability of acceptable levels of library resources at the local level.
- Good Canadian experience in delivering distance education programmes in these areas.
- Low levels of local recurrent and Canadian infrastructure costs.
- Potential to invite public and private sector participation in both Canada and the Caribbean.

The nature of the CCDESP is such that it provides undergraduate degree “upgrading” opportunities, primarily to diploma or associate degree holders, or equivalent, in relevant disciplines. As such, the majority of scholarship recipients will already have completed two or more years of post-secondary education. In the case of Teacher Education, a post-degree Bachelor of Education programme, designed for unqualified teachers, is offered. The pilot programme is designed to provide up to two full-time equivalent years of study, paced over a period of up to 3½ years. The flexible, part-time nature of the CCDESP allows maximum access, including participation by employed individuals.

While COL is responsible for the overall programme, it works closely with Canadian and Caribbean institutions and governments, particularly to facilitate co-operative working relationships between Canadian and Caribbean educational institutions and study centres. Unlike most other study-abroad schemes, this one ensures that local institutions are partners in arrangements, providing them with opportunities for further collaboration and growth.

In particular, The University of the West Indies (UWI) is a full and contributing partner in the CCDESP, providing it and the Canadian institutions the knowledge, experience and local infrastructure to enrich both the curriculum and learning environment. The Canadian partner institutions selected for the CCDESP pilot are: Athabasca University, providing information technology programmes in Jamaica; Memorial University of Newfoundland, developing teacher education in Dominica and in St. Vincent & the Grenadines; and, Mount Saint Vincent University offering tourism management in St. Vincent & the Grenadines. COL, UWI, and the three Canadian institutions have signed a series of Memoranda of Understanding in support of the CCDESP, ensuring that partners:

- Work together to develop strategies and to implement mutually acceptable programmes.
- Work under the basis of the agreements to maximise the collaboration and mutual involvement of UWI and the Canadian institutions in the offering of the respective programmes up to the potential offering of a joint degree.
- Co-operate to explore such other areas of mutual interest leading to joint programmes, research in distance education, and others as might be of interest to any of the partners, and which may lead to separate or subsidiary agreements.

COL has negotiated with the Canadian partner institutions the fee structures, selection procedures, programme format, courses, delivery systems, assessment and credential protocols. It assists host Governments with student selection procedures, student recruitment strategies, study centre facilities and locations and recruitment of tutorial staff; and identifies and recruits tutors and provides training in conjunction with Caribbean and Canadian partners.

The Canadian partner institutions have designed the basic curriculum, and will create learning materials and deliver them using the most appropriate technologies in consultation with Caribbean partners. They will prepare assessment systems, conduct the assessments and award credits and credentials on successful completion of the programme. They will arrange for students to spend a semester of conventional mode study on campus in Canada, thereby ensuring that the CCDESP remains faithful in part to the fundamental CSFP tenet of facilitating a “multilateral trade in ideas”. They assist in the recruitment of tutors and their training; and, in conjunction with COL and local institutions and authorities, determine the infrastructure needed for local learning centres.

Host Governments have worked out protocols necessary to implement the pilot, and will assure, through their respective national authorities, that full recognition is granted to the qualifications obtained through this programme. They help select local and regional partner institutions; identify appropriate study centres and assist in their management; assist in the recruitment of candidates; assist in the recruitment of tutors and their training; and assist in managing and monitoring the project.

COL was able to launch the CCDESP in under a year from the time it was approved by DFAIT. In October 1998, the first 30 students, from Jamaica, commenced studies in Athabasca University’s new Bachelor of Science in Computing and Information Systems (Post Diploma) programme. Approximately 50 more students from Dominica and St. Vincent & the Grenadines are scheduled to commence studies in Memorial University of Newfoundland’s Bachelor of Education and Mount Saint Vincent University’s Bachelor of Tourism and Hospitality Management programmes in January 1999. Notwithstanding its pilot status and early stage of operation, the CCDESP appears to be on track for success. COL and its partners will monitor the programme constantly and are committed to as much flexibility as possible, making adjustments when and where necessary, to optimise conditions for success. Economies and areas of saving are, of course, most notable in terms of maintenance costs and, in the human dimension, personal disruption,

which in this case are minimal because of the short in-Canada component. Results should indicate an up to 50% reduction in overall costs compared with the conventional Canadian CSFP model. As distance courses and programmes and supporting technologies become more widely available, accessible and affordable, a “DESP” model such as this one will become increasingly attractive and compelling, and not only for its financial advantages.

## **The Future**

The CCDESP is an opportunity for COL to be a leader and an architect in fashioning a new model of educational co-operation geared to today’s realities. COL can thereby play a critical role in stemming the tide of weakening donor support for the present CSFP. This model also equips new generations of Commonwealth nationals to use distance learning and new communications technologies to become productive citizens equipped to lead their countries with self-assurance into the next millennium. It is an innovative means of dealing with the human dimension of globalisation, empowering individuals to confidently play effective and meaningful roles in the global knowledge-based economy. The CCDESP not only adds a new dimension to the CSFP in the short term, it lays the foundation of, and potentially transforms the CSFP into, a revitalised programme more suited to today’s world and to the human challenges that the new millennium is likely to offer. Not least, the CCDESP gives new meaning to the concept of Commonwealth co-operation in education and to the expansion of educational opportunities for citizens of small states in ways consistent with their aspirations and conducive to the preservation of their sovereignty. It is COL’s hope that, just as the CSFP is a model worthy of emulation, so too will be the CCDESP, resulting in a “DESP” becoming a permanent feature of the CSFP around the world.

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