

## The Workplace Impact of Concurrent Employment and Study through Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships

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### Introduction

Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships began in 2001 as a part of an initiative designed to expand the modes of scholarships offered by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the United Kingdom (CSC), the United Kingdom's contribution to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). The objective of the programme is to 'contribute to the development needs of Commonwealth countries by providing training for skilled and qualified professionals in key development areas'.<sup>1</sup> It is intended to benefit 'high-quality postgraduate students who wish to access training not available in their home countries, who wish or need to remain in their home country while they study, and who have the potential to enhance the development of their home countries with the knowledge and leadership skills they acquire.'<sup>2</sup> Scholarship recipients are able to study for up to five years on a pre-selected, development-oriented Master's programme offered by a UK-based higher education institution through distance studies. Since the first cohort in 2002, the CSC has provided funding to 3,793 Scholars from 41 different Commonwealth countries who have studied at 45 higher education institutions from across the United Kingdom, many of whom would not otherwise have been able to access these study opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, the CSC has conducted an in-depth evaluation to explore the outcomes and impacts of the programme, as well as the experiences of different stakeholders associated with the Scholarship. An area of particular interest for the evaluation is the fact that many Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars study part-time, a unique feature among the different Commonwealth Scholarship programmes, and as a result continue working throughout their studies. This distinct feature of the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships affords Scholars the opportunity for continued learning and self-development within their workplaces and speaks to the spirit of lifelong learning in a practical manner.

This paper explores how these Scholars apply the knowledge and skills that they acquire from their distance learning courses in their workplaces and demonstrates the impact of distance learning for students who continue to work, both on themselves and their workplaces. It draws upon data that has been collected through an annual survey of Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars from the second year of their studies onwards (including a series of tailored questions appended to the regular survey in 2021), as well as a bespoke survey that was sent to Employers of current Scholars in 2021 to collect their views on how the Scholarship has affected both their employee's own work, and their workplace more broadly.

The ability to continue working during their studies was identified by Scholars as a significant reason for applying to the programme, with just over two-thirds (62%) of respondents identifying this feature as a factor in their decision to apply for a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Many Scholars also avail of this feature, as over four-fifths (82%) of respondents to the Annual Distance Learner Survey indicate that they maintain full-time employment, with an additional tenth indicating that they are either working part-time (6%) or self-employed (5%).<sup>5</sup> The next section briefly explores the extent of knowledge and skills development realised through the Scholarship, as reported by Scholars and Employers, before turning to the application of this knowledge and skills in the workplace.

### Knowledge and Skills Development

In the CSC's Annual Distance Learner Survey, Scholars are asked to report the extent to which they felt their Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship has developed or enhanced their knowledge and skills across

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk/scholarships/commonwealth-distance-learning-scholarships/> Last accessed 11 April 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

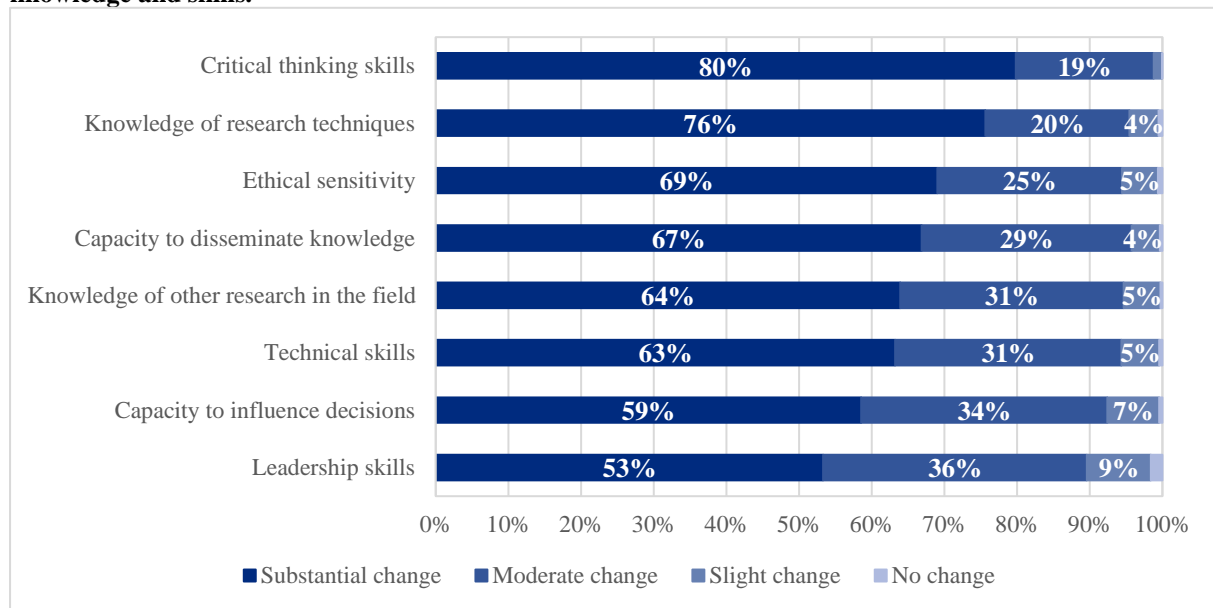
<sup>3</sup> Source: 2016-2020 Scholar Baseline Surveys. 90% of respondents indicated they would not have had the means to study on their study programme were it not for their Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship; n = 782.

<sup>4</sup> Source: 2021 Annual Distance Learner Survey; n = 232.

<sup>5</sup> Source: 2017-2021 Annual Distance Learner Surveys; n = 1,745.

eight different areas. With a minimum of nearly nine-tenths of Scholars reporting ‘Substantial’ or ‘Moderate’ change across all categories, the gains in these areas for Distance Learning Scholars in the midst of their studies are considerable.

**Figure 1 – Extent to which Scholars report their Commonwealth Scholarship has led to changes in knowledge and skills.**

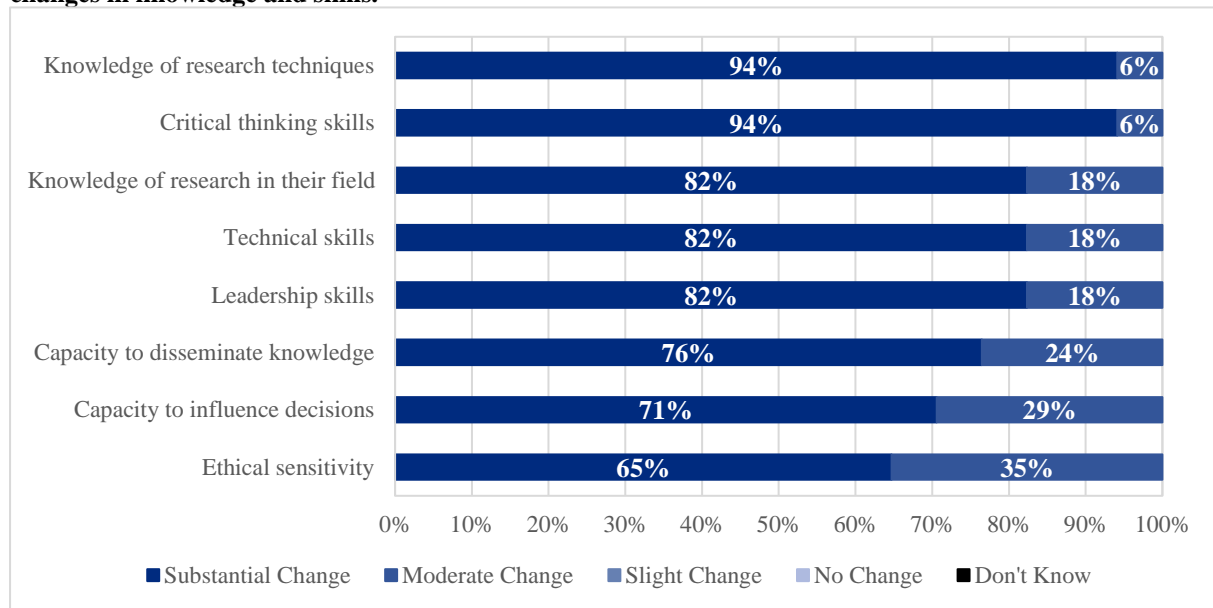


Source: 2017-2021 Annual Distance Learner Surveys  
n = 1,745

Scholars reported the most significant changes in the areas of critical thinking skills and knowledge of research techniques with virtually all respondents indicating ‘Substantial’ or ‘Moderate’ change in these areas. Scholars reported the least intensive change in their capacity to influence decisions and their leadership skills, however at least half of respondents still reported ‘Substantial change’ in these areas with the majority of remaining respondents reporting ‘Moderate change’.

Employers similarly were asked in their survey to report the observed development of skills and knowledge in the Scholars that they managed. All respondents indicated that they had seen a ‘Substantial’ or ‘Moderate’ change in their employees’ skill and knowledge across all categories, reinforcing the positive self-assessments provided by Scholars.

**Figure 2 – Extent to which Employers report their employee’s Commonwealth Scholarship has led to changes in knowledge and skills.**



Source: Distance Learning Employer Survey  
n = 17

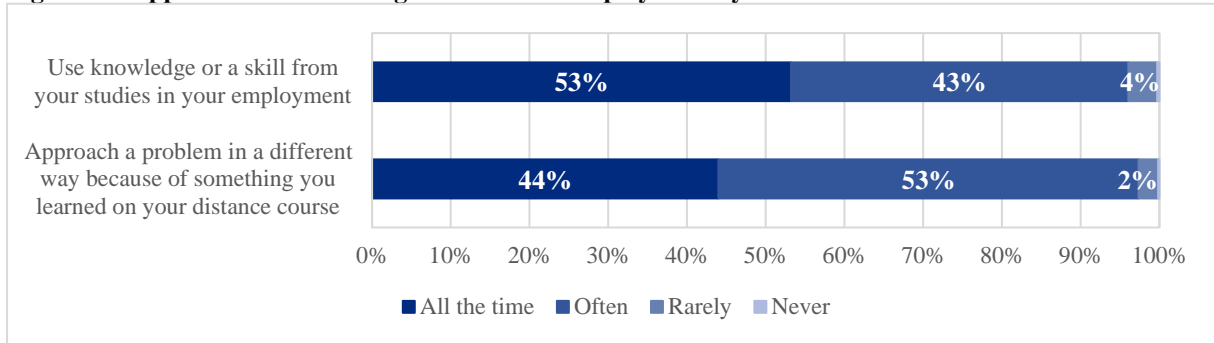
Knowledge of research techniques and critical thinking skills were the areas where Employers reported observing the most notable change, with almost all respondents (94%) indicating they saw ‘Substantial change’ in these areas. Capacity to influence decisions and ethical sensitivity were the areas with the least significant change, however once again most employers still reported observing ‘Substantial change’ for both (71% for the former and 65% for the latter), while all others observed a ‘Moderate change’ in these areas.

Employers were also given the opportunity to comment on any other observed changes to their employee’s knowledge or skills as a result of their Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship. Eleven respondents provided comments, either reiterating the areas of observed improvement cited above, including critical thinking and leadership skills, or highlighting other areas of improvement such as analytic skills, writing skills, and the use of or advocacy for evidence-based decision making. Overall, these responses paint a clear picture of significant change to Scholars’ knowledge and skill sets due to their distance learning experience.

### Workplace Applications

Employed Scholars reported using their new knowledge and skills at high rates in their workplaces, in a number of different ways. Almost all respondents reported that they generally used knowledge or skills from their current studies in their employment either ‘All the time’ (53%) or ‘Often’ (43%). This is an important finding, as it demonstrates that Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars are actively bringing their learning into the workplace during their Scholarship, giving them the opportunity to innovate and excel in their work. For example, respondents also reported that they would approach a problem in a different way because of something they learned on their distance learning course ‘All the time’ (44%) or ‘Often’ (53%).

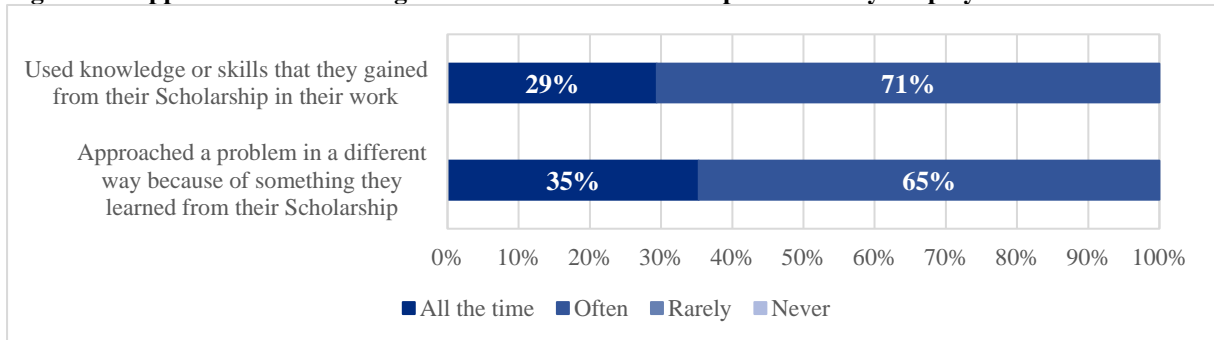
**Figure 3 – Application of knowledge and skills in employment by Scholar.**



Source: 2017-2021 Annual Distance Learner Surveys  
 n = 1,673 (only asked if Scholar was employed or volunteering)

Employers also frequently observed that the Scholar they employed was incorporating what they learned into workplace practice. All Employers reported that they saw their Scholar using knowledge or skills that they had gained from their Scholarship in their work either ‘All the time’ (29%) or ‘Often’ (71%). All Employers similarly reported that their employee had approached a problem in a different way because of something they learned from their Scholarship ‘All the time’ (35%) or ‘Often’ (65%).

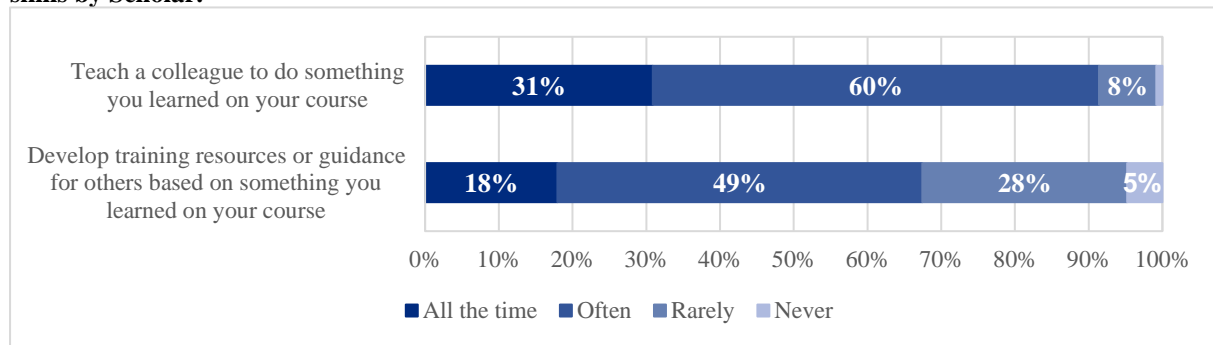
**Figure 4 – Application of knowledge and skills from Scholarship observed by Employer.**



Source: Distance Learning Employer Survey  
 n = 17

Another important finding is that Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars are actively disseminating their learnings by teaching colleagues in their workplace things that they are learning on their course. Nearly one-third (31%) of respondents indicated that they did so ‘All the time’ with another three-fifths (60%) indicating that they do so ‘Often’. This transfer of knowledge in the workplace by Scholars also occurs more formally through the development of training resources or guidance for others based on something they learned on their course, an activity that one-fifth (18%) of respondents indicated they did ‘All the time’, with another half (49%) indicating they did so ‘Often’. Out of the remaining one-third of respondents, most (28%) still said that they did so ‘Rarely’, with only a small fraction (5%) indicating that they ‘Never’ developed these kinds of training resources.

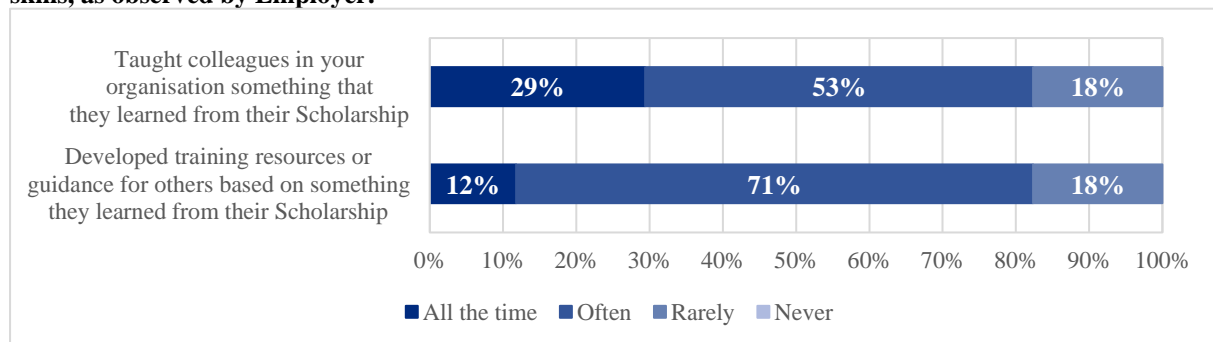
**Figure 5 – Provision of training or development of training resources based on acquired knowledge and skills by Scholar.**



Source: 2017-2021 Annual Distance Learner Surveys  
n = 1,673 (only asked if Scholar was employed or volunteering)

Employers also reported that the Scholars that they employed were teaching their colleagues things that they were learning through their distance studies, either informally or through the creation of teaching materials. In both cases, all Employers noted that they knew their Scholars were engaged in these activities to some degree. Four-fifths of Employers reported that they knew their Scholars were teaching their colleagues something from their Scholarship ‘All the time’ (29%) or ‘Often’ (53%), with all remaining respondents reporting their Scholar did this ‘Rarely’ (18%). A similar proportion of Employers reported that they knew of their Scholars developing training resources or guidance for others based on their Scholarship ‘All the time’ or ‘Often’, although were less than half as likely to have responded ‘All the time’ (12%), and more likely to respond that their employee did so ‘Often’ (71%). Less than one fifth of Employers (18%) reported that their Scholars were developing these kinds of guidance or training resources ‘Rarely’.

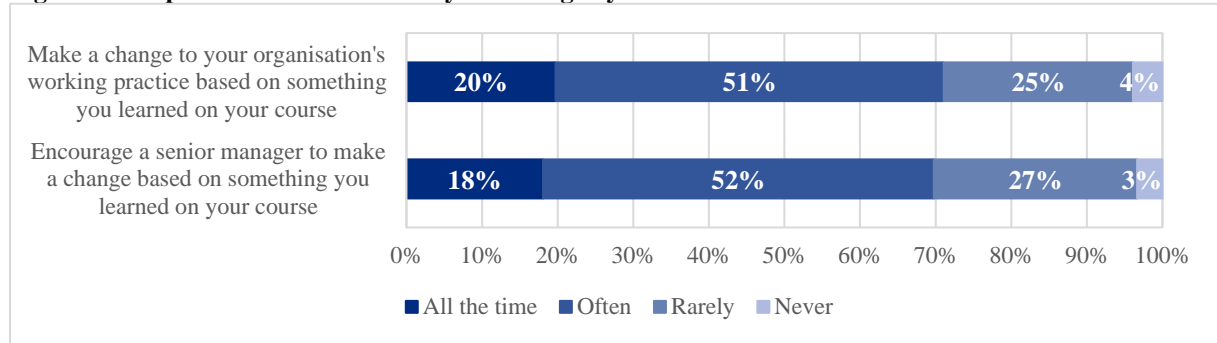
**Figure 6 – Provision of training or development of training resources based on acquired knowledge and skills, as observed by Employer.**



Source: Distance Learning Employer Survey  
n = 17

Another way in which Scholars reported applying their learning was through making or encouraging changes within their workplaces. In the case of making a change to their organisation’s working practice based on something they had learned, one-fifth (20%) of respondents indicated that this was the case ‘All the time’, while another half (51%) indicated that this was ‘Often’ the case. Most of the remaining respondents said that they did so ‘Rarely’ (25%), with only a few (4%) ‘Never’ doing so. The rate at which respondents encouraged a senior manager to make a change based on something they had learned on their course effectively mirrored the rates at which they made changes themselves.

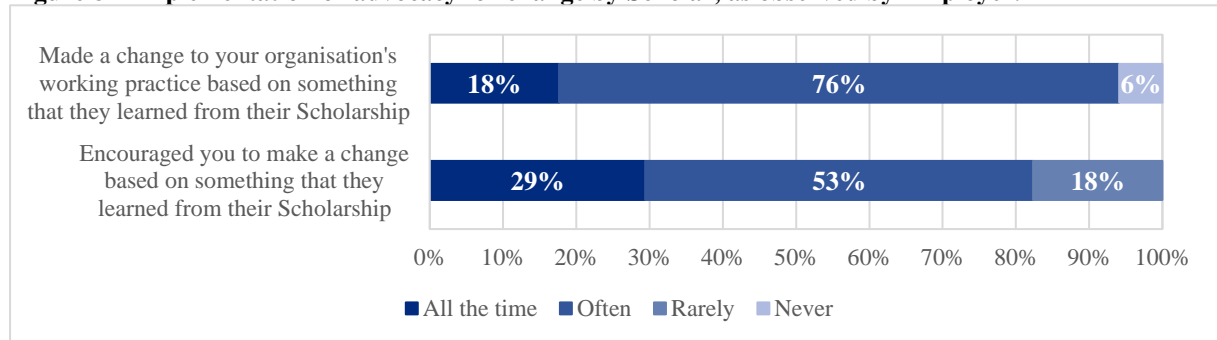
**Figure 7 – Implementation or advocacy for change by Scholar.**



Source: 2017-2021 Annual Distance Learner Surveys  
 n = 1,673 (only asked if Scholar was employed or volunteering)

Employers also reported that they frequently observed Scholars advocating for change within their workplace. Almost all Employers reported that Scholars either made a change to the organisation's working practice themselves or directly encouraged them in their role as managers to make a change based on their Scholarship learnings either 'All the time' or 'Often'.

**Figure 8 – Implementation or advocacy for change by Scholar, as observed by Employer.**



Source: Distance Learning Employer Survey  
 n = 17

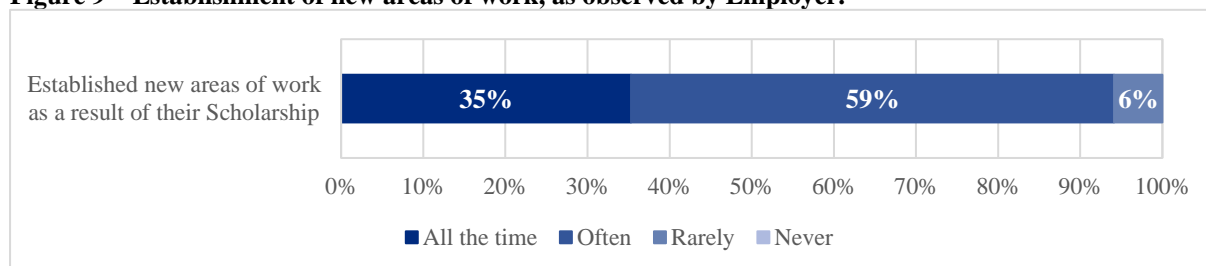
Almost all Employers also noted that their Scholar had themselves made direct changes to their organisation's working practice based on something they had learned from their Scholarship, with one-fifth (18%) reporting that this had happened 'All the time' and three-quarters (76%) noting that this happened 'Often'. Only one Employer (6%) reported that they had 'Never' observed this. All Employers noted that their Scholar had encouraged them to some degree to make a change in their workplace based on something they had learned from their Scholarship. Just under one-third (29%) of Employers said that their Scholar did this 'All the time', while just over half (53%) said they did so 'Often', and the remainder (18%) said they did so 'Rarely'.

These responses provide strong indications that Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars are not only developing a broad range of knowledge and skills, but almost all of them are immediately applying these learnings in professional settings. Significantly, they are passing these skills and knowledge on to their co-workers either through informal training or to a lesser extent through the creation of formal training materials. Scholars are also working to make changes to their organisations' working practices either through their own actions or by advocating for changes through their senior managers.

## Organisational Impact

Finally, Employers were asked in their survey to feed back more directly on the broader organisational impact of their employees' participation in the Scholarship programme, including any changes to policies, practices, or work. They were also asked to describe any benefits or challenges that their organisation has encountered as a result of the Scholarship. Almost all Employers noted that they were aware of their Scholar establishing new areas of work due to their Scholarship 'All the time' (35%) or 'Often' (59%), with only one Employer (6%) reporting that they knew of their employee being involved in this activity 'Rarely'.

**Figure 9 – Establishment of new areas of work, as observed by Employer.**



Source: Distance Learning Employer Survey  
n = 17

With respect to new policies, practices or work pursued by their organisation, just over half (53%) of Employers indicated that this had occurred due to their employee's Scholarship. Employers who reported that this had occurred were asked to provide details of these new developments in a free text response. Three Employers provided details of policy-related developments, with specific mentions of the introduction of (or changes to) workplace policies around HIV treatment and prevention, clinical approaches to diabetes, COVID-19 policies, and the use of general clinical guidelines. Six Employers mentioned changes to practice (including some associated with the policy changes described above). These changes included improved teamwork and transparency, the integration of a Scholar's new skills into the organisation's research methodology, and expansions in workplace training offerings. Finally, four Employers described new work that had been initiated and was at least partially enabled by the Scholarship, including the procurement of increased funding (leading to recruitment of additional staff), the expansion of organisations' scope of work and offerings, increased capacity through investment in additional equipment or lab resources, and the development of a new department within their organisation.

Employers who responded that there had not been any developments in these areas were asked whether there were any particular reasons why this was the case. The most frequently cited reason was that their organisation did not have authority to make those types of changes themselves, with the mandate and policy of the organisation being set by their government. In one instance the Employer indicated that despite these constraints, they hoped to advocate for changes to take advantage of their Scholar's learnings in the next organisational planning period. COVID-19 was another major issue cited by Employers, who indicated that the pandemic had slowed or restricted the work of their organisation, limiting the opportunity for changes to policy or practice, or the pursuit of additional work.

Employers also attributed a number of other organisational benefits to their employee's Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship. In some cases, these benefits were specific to the improved job performance of the individual employee, while in others they were broader organisational effects. On the individual level, Employers reported that their organisation benefitted from their Scholar's enhanced job performance, improved creative and critical thinking, the application of new knowledge and skills, greater leadership, and improved teaching of students. Organisationally, Employers reported the enhanced use of research techniques and planning, increased organisational capacity and resourcing, the internationalisation of the organisation (in terms of perspective, reputation, and partnerships), improved teamwork, and an increased standard of performance and service delivery.

Conversely, Employers reported very little in the way of organisational challenges because of their employees' Commonwealth Scholarship. In fact, two-thirds (69%) of respondents explicitly stated that they had not encountered any workplace challenges associated with their employee's distance learning studies. For the few Employers who did report challenges, the most frequently cited issue was the amount of extra time or energy that their staff member had to dedicate to their studies on top of their normal workload. However, it was noted by Employers that this issue cut both ways. In some instances, studies pulled their staff away from work (with

their Employer's blessing), while on other occasions, work duties pulled staff away from their studies (with specific mention of increased work due to the pandemic), although it was noted that universities were very accommodating when this happened. The other two challenges that were mentioned were a lack of resourcing needed to make changes in the organisation, and difficulties encountered when trying to implement organisation-wide changes, particularly slow uptake of changes to strategies and work plans.

## Summary

Overall, the CSC's evaluation of its Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship demonstrated that distance learning can be a viable pathway to continued learning and development for individuals who continue to work during their studies. Not only do Scholars report significant changes to their knowledge and skills due to their studies, but Employers also recognise these changes in their employees and Scholars are able to immediately apply what they have learned from their studies in their workplace. Scholars do this in several ways, including using their new knowledge and skills in their own job, passing knowledge and skills on to co-workers through informal training or the creation of formal training resources, and by making or advocating for changes in the workplace.

Many of these applications of knowledge and skills also benefit Scholars' employing organisation more broadly. In addition to improved job performance on the part of the Scholar, organisations benefit from broader upskilling of their workforce, improvements in organisational policies and practices, and expansion into new areas of work. Employers also reported a bevy of additional benefits from their employee's Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, including improved organisational planning, capacity, standards of performance, and resourcing. And while most Employers did not report encountering any challenges associated with their employee's distance learning studies, those who did report challenges found them to be largely manageable. Consequently, the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship experience provides a strong case for distance learning as a mode of postgraduate study for individuals who wish to continue to be employed, providing benefits not only to the learners themselves, but also to the organisations at which they work.