

"It's a proud tradition," says Alan Bowker, Director of International Academic Relations for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). "It's part of a bigger picture of encouraging the freer movement of people, information and ideas in the world."

Canada's participation in the Commonwealth Scholarship, the flagship of several major academic studies programs financed by DFAIT, complements Canadian foreign policy, Bowker says. Canada promotes its identity abroad by assisting foreign scholars, but also gains from the culture, values and experiences of the international students who come to study. "This is the human dimension of foreign policy."

Of the 180 Commonwealth scholars currently at Canadian universities, 51 come from more than a dozen countries in Africa, with the remainder from 30 other nations.

In 2002, a DFAIT-sponsored evaluation of the Commonwealth Scholarship and a similar program offered in non-Commonwealth countries called the Government of Canada Award found that more than 90 percent of recipients credited Canada with assisting their career aspirations. Some 72 percent had returned home following their studies.

Even when they do not return home to stay, Commonwealth scholars find other ways to give back to their homeland. When an attempted coup closed Kenya's universities in 1982, first-year student Njeri Marekia-Cleaveland won a scholarship to complete her undergraduate education at a small private college in upstate New York. There, at the urging of a Canadian-trained teacher,

she applied for and was granted a Commonwealth Scholarship to complete a post-graduate program in environmental studies at York University in Toronto.

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Marekia-Cleaveland later earned two law degrees in Britain and the United States, before returning home to teach at Nairobi's Kenyatta University in the mid-1990s. Now married to an American, she is currently an African specialist at the International Center for Democratic Governance at the University of Georgia in Atlanta, where she conducts specialized training programs for government officials in several African countries.

A highly decorated academic, Marekia-Cleaveland says that her experience as a Commonwealth scholar in Canada shaped her world view. She recalls the pleasant shock of rubbing shoulders at York with a diverse student body—a first in her academic career. During her scholarship-sponsored field research in Alberta and British Columbia, she also witnessed conflicts between development and conservation similar to those at home.

"When I talked about urban issues in the global sense, I could see that Canada was suffering from the same things as Kenya," she says, "and I could see that some of the things that worked in Canada might work in Kenya, too."

Her former mentor at York, Ted Spence, now a senior adviser to the university's president, sees the reciprocal benefits of the Commonwealth Scholarship. "Someone like Njeri enriches the experiences of Canadian students, just as she was enriched by coming to Canada."

Though they come from different countries and academic disciplines, Commonwealth scholars say the award's value extends far beyond the immediate educational benefit.

"It's been a liberating experience," says Olayi, who is grateful for several years of uninterrupted study that would have been impossible at home. Beyond honing his academic mission, Olayi says that his exposure to Canadian values, such as respect for diversity of people and ideas, has paid an unexpected dividend. "It has taught me to give back," he says. With Canada in mind, he plans to set up a scholarship for Nigerian students in the name of his late father. 🍁

York University: Commonwealth scholars encounter a diverse student body on campus.



To find out more about the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan and other Canadian and international scholarship programs, see www.scholarships-bourses-ca.org.