

THE POWER OF GIVING BACK



photo: CP (Derek Oliver)

Academic dream: Kolawole Olaiya is studying for a PhD in Canada through the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan.

For more than four decades, African students educated at Canadian universities through the Commonwealth Scholarship have enriched the academic, cultural, business and political life of their home countries—and Canada.

Kolawole Olaiya grew up dreaming of a career as a professor. But it seemed like a long shot. The eldest of seven children born into a family of modest means in western Nigeria, Olaiya spent his early years moving around with his father, who was posted throughout the country as a soldier in the Nigerian army. However, Olaiya's father valued education and made sure his son stayed in one place for high school. From there, Olaiya went to university, earning degrees in dramatic arts and African literature before joining the Nigerian Television Authority to teach scriptwriting.

Still, he dreamed of becoming a full-fledged academic. In 1999, he

applied to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan and won a coveted spot. Olaiya could have pursued his studies in more than half a dozen Commonwealth countries, but chose Canada for its high quality of life. This year, as he heads home with a PhD in drama studies from the University of Toronto, he credits the prestigious scholarship with helping to fulfill his dream.

"I am on a mission for knowledge," says Olaiya, 40, who will rejoin the Nigerian Television Authority and also plans to teach at the University of Jos in central Nigeria. "Now it's time to complete my mission and go home and start making use of my knowledge for others."

His ambition is what the architects of the Commonwealth Scholarship had in mind when they established the post-graduate study program. First proposed by Canada and presented by then Secretary of State for External Affairs Sidney Smith at a 1958 meeting of Commonwealth officials, the award enables high-achieving scholars to expand their academic horizons through study abroad at a

Commonwealth university. Participants receive about \$25,000 per year of study to cover tuition, travel for research or conferences and living expenses.

Equally important, though, scholars are expected to return to enrich the academic, cultural, business and political life of their home country.

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After more than 40 years, the Commonwealth Scholarship is a landmark achievement in Commonwealth cooperation. There are some 500 scholars in the program each year and more than 22,000 scholarship alumni around the world. Some of them are the first PhDs in their countries, becoming leaders in academia, research, business and government. A distinctive feature is the two-way flow of students: Canadians travel abroad to study, for example, while scholars from Commonwealth nations come here.