

Award's demise 'shortsighted,' supporters say Backers of the Commonwealth scholarship program hope to get a British government decision on Canadian eligibility reversed

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The British government is axing its Commonwealth scholarship program for students from Canada and several other countries - a move advocates say is shortsighted.

Instead, Britain will focus on funding awards for scholars from countries such as China and India, which it considers more important to its "foreign policy success."

In Canada, the decision is reverberating through education circles. Commonwealth scholarships are prestigious, highly sought-after graduate awards, and promoters say both Canada and the United Kingdom will suffer as a result of the change in direction.

"Canada has traditionally been a very strong partner for the U.K., so it's a slap in the face. It's of great concern," said Jennifer Humphries, vice-president of membership and scholarships at the Canadian Bureau for International Education.

The non-profit organization, which administers Commonwealth scholarships in Canada on behalf of the federal government, plans to brief former Commonwealth scholars on the situation today at a reception to celebrate the program's coming 50th anniversary. It is also calling on Ottawa to intervene.

"We're hoping our government will put pressure on the U.K. to reinstate the program," said Jim Fox, president of the CBIE. "That would be, I think, something that they should do and I'm not even sure at the higher echelons they're aware."

A spokesperson for the Foreign Affairs Department did not respond to requests for comment.

Stephen Toope, a former Commonwealth scholarship recipient who is president of the University of British Columbia, called the elimination of funding "tremendously shortsighted." He argued the awards foster close ties between the U.K. and scholars who go on to become leaders in their home countries, which often benefits Britain.

"I really hope that the U.K. government will reconsider, because I think it's just a really sad lack of commitment to traditionally very important political and social relationships," said Prof. Toope, who obtained his doctorate in law at the University of Cambridge between 1983 and 1986.

Parker Mitchell, another alumnus and co-CEO of Engineers Without Borders, an international charity, said the move will deprive Canadians of "invaluable" educational opportunities. He got a master's degree in development studies at the University of Cambridge in 2001-2002.

Under the Commonwealth Scholarship Plan - the brainchild of Sidney Smith, a former University of Toronto president and secretary of state for external affairs - countries provide scholarships to top students from other member nations to help maintain and strengthen "the common ideals on which the Commonwealth is founded," according to a Canadian summary of a 1959 Commonwealth meeting. The report also says the program "should be based on mutual co-operation and the sharing of educational experience among all the countries of the Commonwealth."

In recent years, about 30 Canadians have been awarded Commonwealth scholarships annually to study in the U.K., chosen from some 500 applicants. Since 1960, roughly 1,500 Canadians have received the awards, which provided full financial support for master's or doctoral degrees and were funded by the British government.

David Miliband, the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, quietly announced the changes to his government's academic programs in a written ministerial statement in March. The elimination of Commonwealth scholarships, which has received scant attention in Canada, also affects the Bahamas, Brunei, Cyprus, Malta, New Zealand and Singapore. (However, British Commonwealth scholarships will still be available to students from developing countries.)

In the statement, Mr. Miliband said his office's Commonwealth scholarship program had not always been "well aligned to foreign policy goals" and Britain had "not always sought out students we thought could become international leaders."

"We will maintain a global scheme, but we will focus scholarships particularly on those countries such as China and India, which are going to be most important to our foreign policy success over coming years," he said.

The funding cuts, which will save the British government about £10-million a year, do not affect Canadians who have recently been awarded Commonwealth scholarships or those in the midst of their studies.

In 2006, the Canadian government changed the terms of its Commonwealth scholarships, deciding to no longer fund full graduate programs for foreign students in Canada. It eventually chose to support postdoctoral research fellows and short-term graduate-level exchanges.

Former scholarship recipients

Notable Canadian recipients of Commonwealth scholarships for study in the United Kingdom:

George Bain
Former president of Queen's University in Belfast

Peter Boehm
Assistant deputy minister in the Foreign Affairs Department

Mark Carney
Governor of the Bank of Canada

Edward Greenspon
Editor-in-chief of The Globe and Mail

Janice Kulyk Keefer
Author of The Ladies' Lending Library and Thieves

Steven Langdon
Former NDP member of Parliament

Kevin Lynch
Clerk of the Privy Council

Parker Mitchell
Co-CEO of Engineers Without Borders

Jayson Myers
President of Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters

Allan Seckel
Deputy attorney-general in the B.C. government

Stephen Toope
President of the University of British Columbia

Source: The Canadian Bureau for International Education