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Rozina Jumani and Yasmeen Jumani

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Impact of educational investment on participants from South Asian countries: A Case Study of Commonwealth Scholars of Cohort I-III

¹Rozina Jumani and ²Yasmeen Jumani

¹Director Strategic Planning and Capacity Building and Associate Professor at Higher Education Institutes At Notre Dame Institute of Education

²Head of Teacher Education Department, ITREB for Pakistan

(PAKISTAN)

¹rozinajumani@gmail.com, ²yrajumani@gmail.com

Abstract

The productivity of human capital is based on appropriate investment in education and training that yields the required benefits for the society. According to Day and Newburger (2002), better higher education with work related training also raises investment levels that might be an essential factor in increasing the productivity of human capital.

Several empirical studies evident that specific training may reward greater than the general training, employers who invest in workers through specific trainings, yield tangible economic returns; moreover, workers tend to continue their job and the risk of job separation is minimal.(Becker, 1964; Parent, 1999; Lynch and Black, 1995; Blundell, Dearden, Meghir and Sianesi, 1999)

This small scale study thus highlights the scholarship recipients' motivation, their perceptions, and experiences when they engaged in the Master program of its unique structure, as none of them have had never experienced mixed mode learning especially distance/online learning program. Thus qualitative paradigm was opted to gather more in-depth responses from participants about their opinions and perceptions. The findings informed about the positive impact in participants' personal and professional lives.

Keywords: Impact study, distance /online learning, blended learning, Commonwealth Scholars, Developing Countries, South Asian countries , qualitative paradigm

1. Background to the study

Education is one of the key to economic development and improvements in human welfare; since global economic competition grows sharper, education becomes an important source of competitive advantage, closely linked to economic growth (Sen 1999). Thus investing on human capital has become essential. The productivity of human capital is based on appropriate investment in education and training that yields the required benefits for the society. According to Day and Newburger (2002), better higher education with work related training raises investment levels that might be an essential factor in increasing the productivity of human capital.

The theoretical approach of human capital model also approves the role of education and training in the economy i.e. acquisition of knowledge and skills that raises the value of individuals', human capital which eventually increase in their employability, productivity, and earnings potential (Becker, 1964). Several empirical studies evident that specific training may reward greater than the general training; employers who invest in workers through specific trainings yield tangible economic returns. Moreover, workers tend to continue their job and the risk of job separation is therefore become minimal. (Becker 1964, Parent 1999, Lynch & Black 1995, Blundell, Dearden, Meghir & Sianesi 1999). This small scale research study tries to explore the perceptions of students from South Asian countries i.e. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, those were awarded Commonwealth scholarship to study postgraduate degree in Education and International Development (EID) at the Institute of Education- University of London. The scholarship aimed at sustaining the partnership between Aga Khan Foundation and Institute of Education, University of London. The High Commission UK and Association of Commonwealth Union (ACU) were also signatories of that partnership. Through this partnership, the aide provider aimed at investing on a pool of practitioners belonging to educational sector in their respective countries. Those selected professionals were associated with education and development for wide-ranging

years and proven extraordinary achievement in their respective fields. Participants were willing to join in the two-and-a-half year study program from Institute of Education, University of London along with their professional commitment in their jobs. They were positive about implementing the new learning at their home institutions after completion of the study.

In 2003, 10 participants were selected for cohort I then 12 participants were finalized for cohort II in 2005 finally for cohort III, 14 participants were chosen in 2007 from three South Asian countries. Each cohort went through the blended learning program i.e. both distance learning and face-to-face mode. The first two years, they studied by means of distance learning mode and in the final year, for a semester they visited to Institute of Education-University of London for three and a half months period. At IOE, they were expected to participate in two modules of their choice and accomplish an initial preparation for their dissertation based on their utilization of IOE library and other resources which were otherwise 'rare resource' in their countries; also to get feedback from their supervisors on their draft work.

This small scale study therefore highlights the scholarship recipients' motivation, their perceptions, initial hiccups and overall experience of undertaking the postgraduate study through blended learning program. It is important to note that none of them had experience learning through distance or online mode earlier as this was indeed a new phenomenon for all of them.

2. Aim and objectives

Keeping in view the investment aide donated by the High Commission UK, and Association of Commonwealth Union (ACU) to partner universities i.e. Aga Khan University and Institute of Education, University of London for identifying meritorious participants who could undertake the scholarship program for two and a half year. Also, it was authenticated that these participants would come back and serve their country at the end of the program. It was important to utilize the donation amount could benefit maximum participants from the developing countries.

Objectives of the study are to

- Explore scholarship recipients' motivation, their perceptions, initial hiccups and overall experience of undertaking the postgraduate study through blended learning program;
- Understand the impact of an international postgraduate experience on their personal and professional development.

Main question

The research aims to explore the benefits of mixed mode delivery over face-to-face or full distance mode delivery?

Subsidiary questions

- What were the experiences of students studying by the mixed mode delivery method?
- What benefits do they associated with commonwealth scholarship obtained at a leading institution such as IOE?
- How and in what specific ways does this international masters degree prepare them for their professional careers?

3. Research method

The main purpose to conduct this study into qualitative paradigm was to gather more in-depth responses from participants about their opinions and perceptions. According to Mertens (2005:7) a "researcher's theoretical orientation has implications for every decision made in the research process, including the choice of method". The intended aim was to collect qualitative data to further investigate the perceptions, initial concerns and overall experiences of the participants.

All 32 participants as 'Commonwealth Scholars' invited to partake in an international master program but only 20 consented to share their feedback through self-administered questionnaire and focus group interviews. Gorard (2004:7) argues that such a method "requires a greater level of skill' among researcher who "can lead to less waste of potentially useful information" that often has great impact. On the other hand, many researchers such as Creswell (2003), Thomas (200) and Krathwohl (1993) view qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary to each other, choosing the most appropriate methods for the investigation is entirely the discretion of the researcher.

This research study is a case study of commonwealth scholars who partook in postgraduate degree program in the years 2003, 2005, 2007 respectively, which is 'intrinsic' in its nature (Stake 1994). In the words of (Yin 1993:3), 'The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguished from its context'.

The advantage lies in the fact that in a case study, researcher 'examine the attitudes, behaviours and the environment all together in a natural setting to give a better understanding of how things work' (Kane, 1996: 175). The case study method is the best choice for this research as it aims to investigate the impact of this program through the perceptions and experiences of the participants in a naturally occurring using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003).

4. Data collection procedure

To seek the responses from the participants, a self administer questionnaire was sent to all the Commonwealth scholars of Cohort I, II and III. The major purpose of using self-administer questionnaire was to reach out to maximum participants who were spread over far-off areas of South Asian Countries. Some participants especially in the northern parts of the countries do not even have regular access of technology therefore extended time was given to specific participants who could complete the self administer questionnaire. It was indeed difficult to have them on skype for focus group interview session.

Each data collection tool has its advantages and disadvantages so does the questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent via email because this was their preferred option. The expected response was 100% as all the commonwealth scholars consented to share their views on it; they were very excited to participate in a study that could facilitate in improving the program design. However, as they joined their regular professional and personal work, family etc they found it difficult to partake in this study; despite affirmation via email only 65% responses was received. Out of 31 participants, only 20 of them send back their responses. The details from each cohort is as below:

From Cohort I, eight respondents sent their responses, 5 from Cohort II and 7 from Cohort III. Altogether 20 participants partook in this study. The similar information is represented below:

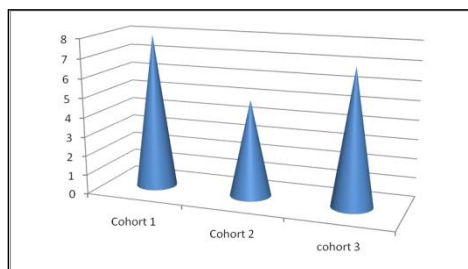


Figure A

5. Data analysis

Different strategies were used to analysis the data, for open ended questions qualitative analysis using content analysis, intensively reading and re-reading the text to identify main themes and emergent categories (Laws, Harper and Marcus, 2003) was planned. For close ended questions, statistical representation was used to shared the major findings.

6. Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations arose at initial stage in the research process. It is mainly about being clear in the nature of agreement with the research subjects (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001). These considerations are essential in order to protect human subjects from harm due to 'lack of informed consent', 'invasion in privacy' and 'deception' (Bryman 2004: 509). The purpose of the study was explained to all participants, also consent form was sent to them. After seeking their signatures, their responses were incorporated in the study for analysis.

Anonymity and confidentiality are also the essential considerations to assure that the personal details of the participants should not be used in any way to reveal their identity to the public (Cohen et al., 2000) therefore it was assured to maintain confidentiality, and participants' rights will be protected.

7. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the research were based on 20 respondents' who partook in this study. Among them there were 10 females and 10 males. Questions for questionnaire and focus group interviews were prepared based on main and subsidiary questions; thus findings are presented in form of themes which emerged during the study.

• Opportunity to obtain a foreign degree

Most of the participants were of the opinion that it was a unique experience and opportunity to seek a foreign degree via the mixed mode learning i.e. online cum face-to-face mode at the same time working at their home countries and supporting the families. Through this master program, each participant enhanced his or her professional knowledge and skills. This improvement would certainly strengthen their '*on-job performance*' (C3B) which will further result in their promotion. One of the participants shared that this was the first '*internationally recognized educational degree we have got*' (C1F), which has '*broaden my perspectives about education and development*' (C3C).

Most of them visited London for the first time, therefore they praised highly the mixed mode component, one participant said, '*international exposure which I considered important for my personal and professional development*' (C3C).

Furthermore they all commented that duration of stay at London has to be increased as within the limited time of three and half months, they were expected to attend two modules and also prepare for their research study that was time consuming. Many participants shared that due to this burden they missed many learning opportunities on campus, such as seminars, conferences, social events etc. they confirmed that although they learnt a lot but it would have been better if a month or two would have been given to them to allow more learning opportunities.

Most participants found the entire learning process '*relevant*' (C2E) to what they have been practicing at their home country, through this foreign degree they got a chance to:

(a) critically examined their role and practices as educational practitioners, (C3B, C2E, C1F, C3D)

(b) explored the link between education and development, (C1C, C2E, C2B, C1B, C2D)

(c) also discussed the ways to bring improvement in their context, (C1F, C3D, C1C, C2E, C2B, C1B, C2D, C3G) as after completing this international degree, they will have to work with developing countries to bring necessary improvements.

Overall, this international degree enabled them to '*enrich their conceptual understanding about education and development*'. (C2D, C2E, C1F, C3D, C1C, C2E, C2B, C1B, C2D, C3G)

• Investment on Human capital

Responding to the question on the conferment of this scholarship, they regarded it as an investment for themselves and for their country. They shared that having an international degree through blended learning mode enabled them to continue with their job for entire two years and study at the same time.

The idea of part time study was a unique feature of this program. Because of this scholarship, they did not have to pay rather a heavy investment was made on them to enhance their knowledge, skills and abilities to compare and contrast the global methods of practitioners vs. local phenomenon. This indeed instilled in them the new ways of analysing things and concepts in regard to education and development at a broader level. How far scholarship is perceived to be an investment, a participant shared that '*this scholarship has provided me an opportunity to gain an academic degree in the field of education and development which I did not possess earlier on*.

The program has provided me enormous learning both in areas of historical and current perspective of education and development which will improve the way I plan for the education development field in future.

I also feel that through this program, I have developed linkages with academic and students who work in the development field in various parts of the world and these linkages will facilitate in progressing my learning further' (C3E)

Another participant was of the view,

'This scholarship enabled me to understand my role as an educator at micro and macro level, before availing the scholarship, I was with the opinion that education has a limited scope, with in the locality or nationality, education cannot do much about economic, social and cultural development at national and international development but now I am of the view that the origin of all the development starts from education(school) where the students are prepared for above mentioned field'(C3G)

Participants appreciated the role of the partner institutions i.e. Aga Khan University and Institute of Education, University of London, along with donor agencies including Association Commonwealth Union and High Commission UK for their '*generosity*' (C3D) and *supporting learners from developing countries*(C1C, C2E).

They were of the views that this scholarship enable them to '*upgrade their role as educators*' (C2A) in the field of education and development. It was indeed incredible experience and it would truly facilitate the educational institutions at home county where these graduates work to '*provide quality education of international standards to those selected people from developing countries, this indeed is great help in strengthening the human resource of developing countries such as Pakistan* (C1F). This intervention will certainly impact their institutions whether government or non- government to improve their quality work and other institutions and especially Higher Education Commission could seek benefit from the participants. A participant stated that, '*since I am working for an NGO in my country (India), I am contributing indirectly to the growth and development of the nation however minimum it might be. I am working in the education section which needs a major over-hauling of the system so I may be able to impact systemic change. Besides, since I work with teachers and children I have it my hand to make a difference even if it is to one! And play a part in the development of my country and its progress*' (C1C)

- **Self financing vs. financial assistance for further studies**

Responding to the question, If there were no scholarship, would you have applied for this postgraduate study? 18 out of 20 participants stated clearly that they could not afford to apply for international program because their earning capacity is limited as '*remuneration in governmental and non governmental institutions are not very high*' (C1F, C3D, C1C, C2E, C2B, C1B, C2D, C3G). Secondly if they have enough money they would '*wish their children to seek better education of international standard*' (C1H, C2B).

Participants from cohort III replied that they would have applied for further education programs at international institutions but only for '*doctoral studies*' (C3G, also C3E), and not for master degree as they had enough experience and qualification to compete as doctoral student.

- **Professional development programs at tertiary level**

Responding on the questions about developing countries' inability to invest on tertiary level education for youth and experienced people, a participant said, that '*Youth from developing countries are not financially capable to bear the opportunity cost*' (C3B). They responded that with global interaction, each developing country feels a dire need to invest on '*researchers and skilled human resource to combat shortage of financial resources, decrease poverty, develop programs and policies which results in improving the current issues especially related to education in any developing country*'. (C3C)

Skilled labour is a treasure for a country as they have gone through their basic academic and professional education, these are able to apply their thinking to question systems, organizations, ideas to bring required changes, thus '*investment at the tertiary level to prepare a pool of educational practitioners* (C3E) to critically analyse the current deliverables and suggest how to make it more effective, is extremely needed, especially those participants who have gone for international study programs can be catalyst due to their studies, interaction with international community and their critical feedback after contextualizing the global learning into national and local level'.(C3G)

Another participant commented, '*creating a pool of HR to analyse the country situation and issues pertaining to the development field and is apt enough to plan in participator manner- country can enormously benefit*'. (C3E) A participant referred it as '*until and unless country's tertiary education is not sound enough, the country cannot develop effective policies and implement them, because most learners join practical life after getting Tertiary Education*' (C3B)

Another participant highlighted by saying that *'different studies have proven that rate of return on tertiary education is higher than any other education level. Only 2% people in Pakistan gets opportunity to get higher education and therefore it is important that these people are prepared to take lead in country's decision making.'* (C1F)

The insights presented by the participants of the program above informs that the impact of this investment was huge. Both the partner institutions and international investor would develop a strategic intervention for continual facilitation to capable and meritorious participants from South Asian countries to avail such learning opportunities in future.

- **Overall rating of their learning in this blended program**

Based on participants' overall learning from the master program using blended learning model, almost all of them highly recommended this learning to prospective students in future.

Rating	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Total
5	3 participants	1 participant	0	4
4	0	4 participants	4 participants	8
3	5 participants	0	1 participant	6
2	0	0	0	0
1	0	0	0	0

* 2 participants did not fill this column

Figure B

Similar representation is illustrated in graphic:
Overall learning

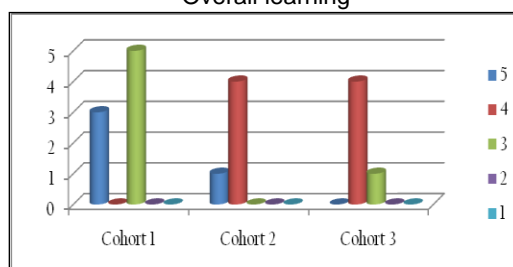


Figure C

- **Non availability of basic necessities in home county context**

In this research, it was aimed at gathering commonwealth scholars' views and perceptions about their professional learning through blended learning program from Institute of Education, University of London. It was evident based on their responses that they enjoyed this learning experience which lasted for two and half years, along with their professional and personal commitment. Not many people aspire for virtual or online programs and they preferred face-to-face component most rewarding, but there because the scholarship was designed in that manner thus all went through the blended mode i.e. online/distance learning and later face-to-face component at the IOE.

The first ever experience of learning via online was thrilling though all the participants were quite naïve to online learning component as it was not common to them though, initially it had various hiccups in the earlier phase but the issue was resolved as they got acquainted with the technology gradually.

Many participants had shared that online module though provided *'self learning ability at our pace'* (C2C), but it had its grave constraints especially in the context of developing countries where in most of the cities and areas, the basic

necessities of electricity, internet connectivity etc were not accessible. Learning through www was in itself a big challenge as participants lack the basic competence of IT furthermore, meeting the deadlines, uploading the activities was quite challenging in the first year but later it became part of life.

- **Prosperity at personal and professional level**

Despite their intent of seeking higher education of international repute, finance plays a major role and has implication too. Therefore all participants appreciated Association of Commonwealth and High Commission UK for investing a huge funding for strengthening a pool of educational practitioners from developing countries. The partnership between AKU and IOE-University of London was highly regarded by the participants through which they were able to pursue an academic degree and were successful in achieving their goal. Seeking an international master degree is regarded as an M Phil degree in developing countries that will certainly bring economic and social prosperity in their personal and professional lives.

8. Implications

The study presents certain implications for planners of blended learning programs, also partners institutions including the donor agencies to improve the program.

Though each year a questionnaire was sent to all commonwealth scholars to audit the program based on positive and critical feedback but it is evident from the findings that partner institutions i.e. IOE and AKU should also conduct an impact study of cohorts those have already passed out since 2005 till date.

While modifying the design of the MA program for other developing countries using blended mode of learning, it is suggested to review cohort I- III participants' feedback where necessary.

The researcher intended to study the impact of investment made on participants from developing countries especially South Asian Countries i.e. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Though the scope of the study was very limited but it enlightened the stakeholders on various ends. it is therefore suggested to include future cohorts to expand this study from South Asian countries to African countries etc.

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