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**Academic Talent as the Foundation of the Commonwealth's Resilience
Infrastructure: The raison d'être for a strategic assessment****EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Commonwealth of Nations stands at a critical juncture where the mobility of human talent serves as both a primary driver of innovation and a significant threat to regional equity. For decades, the migration of highly skilled academic talent from the Global South to the Global North has been characterised as a terminal brain drain, depleting the intellectual resources of developing member states to the developed ones. However, the rise of digital connectivity and the internationalisation of research collectively provide a unique opportunity to redefine this phenomenon. By commissioning a comprehensive cross-country mapping of the academic diaspora, the Commonwealth can transition toward a brain-sharing model. This approach does not seek to restrict the movement of scholars but rather to find ways to harness the collective expertise of the diaspora in catalysing collaborative research, institutional capacity building, and equitable development across the tertiary education systems of all 56-member states of the Commonwealth.

**ACADEMIC TALENT AS THE FOUNDATION OF THE COMMONWEALTH'S
RESILIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE**

The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) Congress 2025 has formally declared universities as “resilience infrastructure”, which importantly posits tertiary education as the anchor for national stability, productivity and innovation (O'Malley, 2025). This has also crucially extended universities beyond traditional pedagogy to include driving climate adaptation and equipping graduates for a world of work that is rapidly being reshaped by technology and artificial intelligence. Concurrent to the long-term aspiration laid out at the ACU Congress has been the establishment of the high-level Higher Education Taskforce, established in 2024, dedicated to focusing on five key areas of higher education: funding and finance, access and inclusion, sustainable and inclusive research ecosystems, digital access and AI, and employability, entrepreneurship and skills development of graduates (ACU, 2024).

However, two intertwined keys to attaining this long-term aspiration for universities in the Commonwealth to become the resilience infrastructure are: first, the recognition that academic talent is the foundation of this infrastructure, and second, the distribution of academic talent as the crucial equaliser towards equitable and sustainable institutional development across all 56-member states of the Commonwealth.

THE COLONIAL LEGACY AND TALENT MOBILITY PATTERNS

The current patterns of academic mobility within the Commonwealth are inextricably linked to its colonial history. The establishment of universities across the colonies was often modelled structurally after the British universities, and inevitably created a shared academic foundation and tradition that facilitates the kind of mobility we observed today. This historical legacy established a centre-periphery dynamic where the United Kingdom was positioned as the ultimate destination for advanced scholarship and validation. This structural orientation has created deeply ingrained pathways of migration that persist long after independence.

According to the Association of Commonwealth Universities (2012), the English language and a common root of the tertiary education model and structure became a shared heritage of the Commonwealth. This shared heritage, consequently, further strengthened the pathways of migrations, initially to the United Kingdom, but gradually also to the other developed member states of the Global North, like Australia and Canada. As Table 1 presents, even after many decades of independence, the United Kingdom remains the primary destination for outbound mobility students among the Commonwealth tertiary education ecosystem.

The migration pattern can be a double-edged sword, as it enables the seamless integration of students across borders; conversely, it also disproportionately favours the flow of talent toward the traditional centres of the former empire.

Table 1: Top 5 outbound student mobility among developing Commonwealth member states and their destination within the Commonwealth tertiary education ecosystem, 2023

From to	India	Nigeria	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Malaysia
Australia	91,595(11.0%)	2,500(1.7%)	16,971(14.8%)	10,184(13%)	11,654(24.8%)
Botswana	76(0.0%)	6(0.0%)	9(0.0%)	8(0%)	-
Cameroon	-	16(0.0%)	-	-	-
Canada	137,850(16.5%)	12,072(8.3%)	3,852(3.4%)	7,320(10%)	813(1.7%)
Ghana	24(0.0%)	2,204(1.5%)	9(0.0%)	-	-
India		1,387(0.9%)	28(0.0%)	2,606(3%)	127(0.3%)
Malaysia	4,415(0.5%)	3,397(2.3%)	4,174(3.6%)	5,931(8%)	
New Zealand	5,864(0.7%)	115(0.1%)	244(0.2%)	132(0%)	879(1.9%)
South Africa	374(0.0%)	1,945(1.3%)	99(0.1%)	39(0%)	2(0.0%)
United Kingdom	171,871(20.6%)	71,756(49.1%)	34,440(30.0%)	14,748(19%)	12,923(27.5%)
Outbound	833,835	146,286	114,849	76,328	47,047

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, data extracted 27 March 2026.

The colonial era also left a legacy of uneven infrastructural development. Higher education institutions in the Global North were often built using the accumulated resources and intellectual labour of the entire empire, resulting in a concentration of libraries, laboratories, and archives that remain unmatched in much of the Global South. This historical accumulation of capital continues to act as a powerful pull factor. Consequently, the mobility pattern we observe today is not merely due to the internationalisation of higher education, but a contemporary manifestation of a historical architecture designed for the centralised accumulation of knowledge and talent. Although the centre-periphery dynamic has shifted beyond the United Kingdom, to include multiple central nodes in the developed and developing systems in the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth ecosystem contains a highly mobile academic population due to the shared language and integrated educational history. Data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, as shown in Table 1, indicates that international student mobility within the Commonwealth constitutes a significant part of the global educational sector. While this mobility can be viewed through the lens of internationalisation, where the exchange of ideas and diverse research perspectives fuels talent development and scientific progress; however, the lack of a centralised tracking mechanism of talent would mean that most member states cannot accurately quantify the volume of talent leaving their borders or identify where their highly skilled citizens eventually settle. Without this vital information, the member states remain unable to measure the net effect of talent movement within and beyond the Commonwealth. The vitality of a tracking mechanism of talent is in line with a recommendation to improve data and evaluation by London Economics (2025), which was commissioned by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, to study the impact of investment in higher education on economic growth.

ASYMMETRICAL FLOWS FROM GLOBAL SOUTH TO GLOBAL NORTH

Historically, within the Commonwealth, the dominant trajectory of academic migration has been from the Global South to developed nations in the Global North. India, Nigeria, and Pakistan have been primary sources of talent for the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. Although this mobility is often celebrated for personal career advancement, its effects remain starkly asymmetrical.

Developing nations have borne the substantial cost of developing these talents through the formative years of their education, only to see their economic productive years and contribution benefiting the economies of developed nations. Notwithstanding the fact that the Commonwealth's gross tertiary enrolment rate of 25% (in 2020), which has been the situation among the large majority of 56-member states in the Global South, and this figure was significantly lower than the global rate of 52% (ACU, 2024). Additionally, the Commonwealth has a higher proportion of young people who are 'not in education, employment or training (NEET)' than non-Commonwealth countries. Thus, the pool of talent in the developing nations of the Commonwealth is comparably smaller than the developed nations.

More detrimentally, not only have developing nations lost their investment in these talents since the introduction of international student fees in the 1990s, but these talents also have to pay a premium for their tertiary education. If these talents choose to remain, this effectively was a double-gain to the developed nation economically. Thus, the brain gain by the developed nation is ‘harvesting’ the economic resources of the developing nations, which they did not labour for, and further creating critical gaps in specialised sectors such as healthcare, science and technology and academia (OECD, 2025).

However, recent trends indicate that academic mobility within the Global South is becoming a critical and overlooked dynamic. With the emergence of regional hubs, such as South Africa, Malaysia, and India, these hubs are increasingly also involved in drawing talent away from their less developed neighbours. Equally important to recognise that although South-South cooperation may seem to be a viable way to curb brain drain to the Global North, such cooperation and collaboration could further promote intra-South migration that leads to a concentration of talents in these regional centres. Consequently, this intra-South migration, as it mirrors the traditional North-South migration, often results in more severe brain drain for the less- and least- developed nations, where they lose their limited talent pool to both the developed and developing nations.

MAPPING AS EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIP AND BRAIN SHARING

The foundational step toward rectifying the talent imbalance is the implementation of a Commonwealth-wide mapping exercise to serve as the evidence base that codify capacity and capabilities of these resilience institutions. This evidence base would go beyond simple demographic tracking to create a sophisticated, dynamic, discipline-specific inventory of academic talents across the Commonwealth tertiary education ecosystem. Such a map provides the necessary data to transform lost talent into a national asset, even though these talents are abroad. Importantly, a data-driven modelling and mapping exercise will enable nations to leverage and mobilise their diaspora for national development through structured knowledge transfer (Mughogo et al., 2025; World Bank, 2019).

This mapping exercise is essential to facilitate the transition from brain drain to brain sharing, where knowledge is treated as a non-rivalrous good. By identifying diaspora clusters, member states can formalise virtual returns, allowing scholars to maintain international careers while strengthening home institutions through joint research, co-supervision and joint grant applications. Furthermore, this evidence base has the potential to facilitate institutional collaborations and partnerships through twinning programmes and technology transfer. Ultimately, a comprehensive talent map provides the empirical foundation required to support talent policies, exchanges and collaboration in ensuring that all Commonwealth tertiary education institutions unleash their fullest potential as resilience infrastructure in contributing meaningfully to a sustainable future of tertiary education for all.

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