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“The Commonwealth University Interchange Scheme.

Promoting Exchanges in a Changing World (1948–60)”

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Introduction

When Eric Ashby published his informal portrait of the Association of Universities of the British Commonwealth (AUBC) in 1963, he noted that the interchange and secondment of staff between Commonwealth universities had long been one of its perennial topics of discussion. He commented: “It is extraordinary how frequently this last topic is talked about and approved and yet how difficult it is to turn pious resolutions into fruitful action.”¹

This chapter is concerned with the AUBC’s first concerted attempt to do just this through the establishment of the Commonwealth University Interchange Scheme (CUIS) in 1948. It explores both the “pious resolutions” on which the scheme was founded and the reasons why it proved so difficult to turn them into “fruitful action.” In particular, the scheme’s administrators would grapple with the profound changes that were redefining the Commonwealth and their implications for academic exchange. Their story is one of failure: although the CUIS ran until 1980, within a decade of its launch it had already been largely superseded by the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). But this is also a story that reveals the tensions inherent in using an international framework to promote a

transnational academic community whose members belonged to universities that were themselves guided by national imperatives.

As Ashby pointed out, the interchange of staff had been regularly discussed at meetings of the AUBC's predecessor, the Bureau of Empire Universities, since the beginning of the twentieth century. Tamson Pietsch has described the interwar consensus as to the importance of individual academics moving within the network of empire universities as a means of consolidating this "expansive British community."² Yet the first comprehensive program of exchanges aimed exclusively at the universities of the Commonwealth did not come into existence until after World War II, by which time the "bonds of empire" that it was arguably intended to hold in place were already unraveling.³ As we shall see, the CUIS failed to evolve into the large-scale program that its originators had imagined, largely because it did not match the pattern of development of academic communities in the "old" Dominions. At the same time, the establishment of the CUIS coincided with Indian independence and the subsequent mutation of the British Commonwealth into the Commonwealth.

At a basic level, the CUIS offered travel grants to encourage greater academic mobility between the countries of the Commonwealth. However, it was also an ambitious attempt to create a centralized, independent, university-led Commonwealth body, which would collect funds contributed by the governments of all the member states and use them to give concrete expression to the somewhat nebulous ties of the Commonwealth. Although the scheme was mainly funded by the U.K. government, and its committee met in London, it cannot be defined as a solely British enterprise. Nor did the project emanate from the U.K. government with clear foreign policy objectives in mind. The scheme sprang instead from the overlapping interests of different agencies, which did not necessarily agree as to its ideal form and purpose. This chapter deals first with the origins of the scheme, in an attempt to identify its objectives. It then focuses on its unsuccessful expansion, illustrating the tensions

at work in the field of Commonwealth exchange. At heart, the different parties involved did not share the same visions of the Commonwealth, nor did they seek the same benefits from the scheme.

Establishing the CUIS

Aims and Objectives

The conception of the scheme may be ascribed to Sir Hector Hetherington, the Principal of Glasgow University and Chairman of the British Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals. Hetherington was the driving force behind the 1948 Congress, which revived the Bureau of Empire Universities, enabling its transformation into the Association of Universities of the British Commonwealth (significantly, the qualifying “British” was not dropped until 1963). The CUIS was thus part of a wider attempt to consolidate longstanding university connections within the Commonwealth after the disruption of war. Furthermore, Sir Hector had his finger in a multitude of cultural and educational pies at an international level. He worked with the Foreign Office in re-establishing exchange with West German universities, participated in a committee on cultural relations with India and was also involved in the Fulbright Program.⁴ He was therefore particularly well-placed to judge how the refashioning of international relations would impact both the British universities and the wider British academic world. It seems reasonable to assume that he was concerned with making sure that British universities would be able to compete with their U.S. counterparts by encouraging the circulation of academics within the Commonwealth. Certainly the comparison with the Fulbright Program and the need to provide similar opportunities within the Commonwealth for the interchange of scholars was brought out explicitly in a 1953 report on the scheme.⁵

Sir Hector Hetherington (1888–1965)

Sir Hector Hetherington began his career as a lecturer in philosophy and later held chairs in that discipline at Cardiff, Exeter and Glasgow. However, it was primarily in the field of university administration that he made his mark, first at Exeter and Liverpool before returning to Glasgow. During his time as Principal of the University of Glasgow (1936–61), he also served as chairman of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals. Outside of academia, he contributed to a large number of royal commissions, public bodies and private trusts, particularly those dealing with social and economic issues. He was a committee man par excellence, occupying important positions in over fifty educational and charitable organizations.

Hetherington's commitment to public service was international in scope, starting with his involvement in the League of Nations Labour Conference (1919). He was particularly active in pursuing university interests within the Commonwealth, gaining him recognition as the "doyen" of its Vice-Chancellors. In addition to his work for the AUBC and the British Council, he acted as chairman of the Colonial Universities Grants Committee from 1942 to 1948, and subsequently provided advice on university affairs in both India and Malta. He also possessed a broad network of personal and professional contacts among North American universities, many of which awarded him honorary degrees. In addition to his Commonwealth activities, he maintained regular correspondence with the U.S. Educational Commission in the U.K. and chaired the Commonwealth (Harkness) Fellowships Committee from 1951 to 1956.

One of the most obvious obstacles to establishing a formal exchange program was financial. Although some universities already ran bilateral exchanges with Commonwealth partners, a more ambitious scheme would inevitably require substantial funding. Hetherington's position at the heart of a wide network of educational and political relations enabled him to lay the groundwork for the scheme by obtaining an informal commitment from Patrick Gordon-Walker, the parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), to provide £15,000 a year, channeled through the British Council.⁶ The scheme offered obvious political advantages to the United Kingdom. The Empire and Commonwealth remained the cornerstone of the United Kingdom's claim to great power status and yet by the late 1940s, it had become an empire of "influence and identity" rather than one characterized by commercial and military power.⁷ Reinforcing a sense of community among its increasingly independent members through cultural and educational links would serve to bolster U.K. foreign policy.

With the assurance that some support would be forthcoming from the U.K. government, Hetherington was able to invite delegates at the 1948 Congress of Empire Universities to seek funding from the official bodies of their respective countries in order to "enable teaching staffs on leave to travel within the Commonwealth, and to facilitate visits of distinguished scholars of one part of the Commonwealth to another."⁸ Attendance at the Congress was in itself proof of his audience's commitment to the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, he sought to persuade them of the importance of extending opportunities for academics to circulate within the Commonwealth by arguing:

We are very different from one another. Each of us is bent on going his own way, yet in some genuine spiritual sense we belong together. We share in a great

political and social experiment and our very diversity means that interchange between us is an experience which enlarges the resources of all of us.⁹

Hetherington's introductory remarks carefully avoided any suggestion of British predominance within the proposed scheme, while reasserting the profound sense of community that held the Commonwealth together.

Structure and Key Players

A resolution in favor of establishing an interchange scheme was easily carried by the 1948 Congress. With Hetherington in the chair, a committee was formed that rapidly drew up a plan to offer travel grants to three different types of visitors: university teachers and officers on paid study leave who would spend at least six months in another Commonwealth country (category A); distinguished scholars invited by universities for shorter visits (category B); and, finally, postgraduate researchers, who were given the lowest priority (category C). The scheme thus sought to encourage the circulation of established scholars rather than students or future leaders. It was intended to maintain the long-established links between the universities of the Commonwealth, to bind them in a unit within which academics could pursue their careers, and to spread knowledge and good practice throughout the Commonwealth.

The CUIS committee was made up of representatives of the AUBC, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of Universities in the United Kingdom and of the Universities Advisory Committee of the British Council. In practice, membership of the three bodies overlapped: Hetherington, for example, was active in all three and was largely responsible for the composition of the latter. There was an inevitable British bias and although three of the seven members were in fact Australian, they did not specifically represent Australian interests. Furthermore, the committee was comprised of university

officials rather than representatives of public bodies, the only exception being the secretary who was provided by the British Council. Despite this, the Council would come to play an essential role in running the program.

The British Council was an arm's-length organization through which the U.K. government pursued its international cultural and educational policies. In 1934, the Council had been assigned the task of making "the life and thought of the British peoples more widely-known abroad" and many of its senior executives had defined this task in imperial terms. Its postwar policy was to encourage the countries of the Commonwealth to set up their own "sister" councils, with the British Council playing the role of the elder sibling.¹⁰ The British Council envisaged the CUIS fitting into a comprehensive program of Commonwealth cultural relations, managed by this network of national councils.¹¹

The Council naturally accepted the CRO's invitation to provide the secretariat for the CUIS and to administer the funds it provided. Unfortunately, the Treasury initially refused to sanction the necessary increase in the CRO's grant to the British Council and, despite the 1948 resolution, none of the universities took any steps toward obtaining funds from private or public bodies elsewhere in the Commonwealth.¹² The first round of awards was therefore funded out of the Council's budget by reducing the number of the Council's own dominion scholarships, to the consternation of some of its staff.¹³ When CRO funding was finally established the following year, it was half the sum that had originally been promised.¹⁴

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that there was a certain amount of confusion as to where responsibility for the interchange scheme lay. In theory the scheme was to be run in the interests of the Commonwealth universities, not of U.K. foreign policy, but given the involvement of different partners, the selection process inevitably proved problematic. The CUIS committee insisted that candidates should be selected according to their academic merit, whereas the Council tended to take other criteria into consideration. As

the Council Representative in Australia put it: “from the point of view of the Council some candidates are good ambassadors and other of the recluse type are less good.”¹⁵ In practice, some Council representatives pressed to be given a say in the choice of candidates and their confidential comments were communicated discreetly to the CUIS committee.¹⁶ The Council also on rare occasions did contribute directly to the scheme’s budget to ensure funding for particular candidates and/or countries. The Council’s role therefore went beyond simple administrative duties.

Extending the Scheme

Obstacles to Expansion

Despite the CUIS committee’s insistence on academic criteria, the political implications of the scheme were clearly drawn out in a report submitted to the AUBC’s 1953 Congress. It stressed the role that university teachers played in training future elites and the importance of contact between universities as a means of ensuring the “mutual understanding of the differences of outlook” on which the Commonwealth depended.¹⁷ This section was deliberately aimed at Commonwealth governments in the hope that they would fund the scheme. In particular, it wished to counter the belief that the Dominions basically shared the same outlook because of their “common origin.”¹⁸ Even the U.K. government, the only one to actually fund the scheme, was skeptical of the need to support such programs with other “British” nations. As a result, the CUIS and the British Council’s Commonwealth policy were both badly affected by postwar austerity budget cuts in the late 1940s and early 1950s, culminating in the closure of the Council’s offices in Australia and New Zealand in 1954. The easing of spending restrictions in the mid 1950s coincided with a shift in the U.K. government’s policy, which, following its acceptance of the Drogheda Report (1954), directed the Council to give priority to developing countries. The Hill Report, commissioned

in the wake of the Suez Crisis, recommended boosting public spending on educational work in developing countries as a way to restore the United Kingdom's much-damaged prestige. Thus, in the late 1950s, new funding became available for the developing parts of the Commonwealth and the Empire, including money earmarked for scholarships.¹⁹ The future development of the CUIS would therefore be determined by the political priorities of Commonwealth governments, none of which considered the maintenance of a peculiarly British academic community a prime concern.

Lack of funds meant that in its first years, the CUIS remained little more than a pilot scheme. In April 1951, the CUIS committee noted with pleasure the Massey Report's recommendations in favor of widening Canada's international academic contact through scholarships, the Australian government's decision to create the Australian National University and the moves being made in India toward establishing a University Grants Committee.²⁰ All of this progress seemed to augur well for the CUIS. However, in fact, as the countries of the Commonwealth set up their own institutions, the appeal of a centralized Commonwealth interchange scheme diminished. Investment in these projects tended to detract funding from Commonwealth plans while endowing these countries with sufficient national capacity as to make foreign travel less important.²¹ When the CUIS committee tried to win more committed support for the scheme at the AUBC's Seventh Congress in Cambridge in 1953, it found itself running up against political and constitutional issues.

One possibility explored by the CUIS committee was that of following the model of foreign university interchange administered by the British Council. In this system participating countries negotiated bilateral agreements. This was rejected almost outright, partly on the grounds that the United Kingdom would struggle to find enough candidates to send abroad.²² The implication here was that, despite the rhetoric of the Commonwealth family, exchanges with European universities were more symmetrical. The committee also

felt that decentralization was incompatible with a “unified Commonwealth project” and would not allow the whole Commonwealth to benefit from the larger contribution that the United Kingdom could be expected to make, “in view of its special position.”²³ It was taken as axiomatic that the United Kingdom would continue to play a dominant role. Although the committee was willing to admit new members if and when other Commonwealth bodies provided funding, the location of its meetings and the predominantly British nature of its composition were never called into question.

Commonwealth Reactions to the Committee’s Plans

The committee’s determination to maintain a centralized system faced opposition at the meeting of the heads of universities held immediately before the 1953 AUBC Congress.²⁴ The resolution placed before the Congress referred, with deliberate ambiguity, to a “co-operatively administered fund” and was passed without receiving the votes of the delegates from Montreal.²⁵ The 1951 Massey Report, which had called for a new federal commitment to Canadian education and culture, had stoked French Canadian opposition to federal interference in higher education, which was constitutionally the preserve of provincial government. The St Laurent government then started an “intergovernmental tug-of-war” by offering universities federal grants that Quebec instructed its institutions to refuse.²⁶ In such circumstances, the Quebecois universities were unlikely to seek federal funding for a scholarship scheme administered from London.²⁷ The National Conference of Canadian Universities subsequently informed the CUIS committee that it would not approach the federal government with a request for extra funds for the scheme because it was already trying to persuade it to establish federal scholarships.²⁸ According to Granatstein, until the Canada Council was set up in 1957, funding scholarships had simply not formed part of the “Canadian tradition.”²⁹ Given the political sensitivity of this issue, it is no surprise that the

Canada Council later refused to pay into the centralized Commonwealth fund, even though it did offer awards to candidates recommended by the CUIS committee.³⁰

The universities of New Zealand and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) also declined to approach their governments: the first argued that it was not an “opportune” moment, while the second cited university and government policy as well as emphasizing financial constraints.³¹

Requesting central government funding was also problematic for the South African universities. Although the introduction of apartheid in 1948 does not appear to have affected the position of the South African universities within the AUBC, the 1953 Congress proceedings indicated attempts by their government to make university grants conditional on the strict implementation of racial segregation among students.³² The South African universities nevertheless made a request to the National Party government, which had been returned to power in the 1953 elections. As a Afrikaner nationalist party with, at best, an ambivalent attitude to the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, it was unlikely to be sympathetic to the CUIS.³³ The South African request was refused.³⁴

Of all the Commonwealth countries, Australia was the most involved in the CUIS: it received the highest number of awards and the largest slice of the scheme’s budget, as well as being better represented on the committee.³⁵ The Australian universities proved more supportive, but opted to fund the scheme directly rather than approach the central government.³⁶ As in Canada, funding was a contentious issue as universities like Melbourne were seeking a commitment from all levels of government to finance their expansion. Their willingness to contribute to the CUIS depended on its perceived usefulness within the framework of the national development of higher education. The Australian grant averaged £ 2,000 per annum, but was not matched by any other Commonwealth country and the committee’s budget remained insufficient for the proposed expansion.³⁷

The CUIS committee had been hopeful that India would also provide a significant contribution to its funds, on a par with the £ 5,000 mooted for Canada and Australia.³⁸ No such contribution was forthcoming, though the CUIS archives do not provide an explanation. Indian and Pakistani delegates at the 1953 AUBC Congress had nevertheless spoken in favor of the scheme, inasmuch as it could work in the interests of their scientific, technological and economic development and contribute to the expansion of their universities. Dr Bashir Ahmad, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Panjab, warmly welcomed the proposed expansion of the scheme in 1953, whilst reminding delegates of the importance of supporting the development of certain parts of the Commonwealth as “real unity and solidarity can develop only between equal partners.”³⁹ In the same discussion, Sir C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar of Annamalai University, India highlighted the importance of ensuring a two-way exchange of teachers as a means to encouraging “deep ideological comprehension.”⁴⁰ The latter speaker wished to see more distinguished Indian scholars being sent abroad as a means of educating fellow members of the Commonwealth in Indian culture, serving also to enhance Indian prestige. The most recent members of the Commonwealth supported the CUIS as a way of furthering their national interests rather than consolidating a transnational academic community.

The CUIS and the “New” Commonwealth

The universities of the Indian subcontinent were clearly not integrated into the British academic world in the way that those of the “old” Commonwealth were. The CUIS committee’s lack of knowledge of these institutions and of contacts with their executives made it more difficult for it to assess their candidates.⁴¹ This partly explains why comments from British Council representatives were unofficially welcome in relation to Indian and Pakistani applicants.⁴² The secretary of the interchange scheme was aware of the danger of

“making invidious distinctions between the older and newer countries of the Commonwealth.” Yet distinctions were made, albeit off the record.⁴³ The fact that the awards only covered travel costs in itself indicates that the scheme was not devised with the needs of Indian and Pakistani candidates in mind. University teachers’ salaries were much lower in these countries; even on fully paid leave, they struggled to meet the costs of living in Britain, especially if they had families to support back home.⁴⁴ This reinforced the asymmetrical nature of exchanges with the Indian subcontinent that Ramaswami Aiyar touched on. It also explains why the CUIS committee struggled at times to find sufficient candidates to take up travel grants in the late 1950s when more funds were made available for these countries.⁴⁵

This lack of attention to the needs of scholars from these countries is perhaps surprising given that, from the point of view of both the British Council and the U.K. government, university exchanges with the newer members of the Commonwealth were of far greater political importance than the longer-established patterns of mobility between the United Kingdom and the Dominions. Cultural and educational relations were seen as a way of maintaining a degree of U.K. influence over the new states, particularly when it enabled British academics to hold positions of authority in institutes of higher education and research where they might mold future leaders.⁴⁶ The universities were defined as the most important target for British Council activities in India, not least because they were seen as “breeding grounds” for communism.⁴⁷ Keeping Indian higher education within a British sphere of influence became a Cold War objective, though resisting U.S. influence was considered equally important.⁴⁸ The interchange scheme could contribute to this objective by facilitating the circulation of academics between the United Kingdom and India. This was a concrete way of responding to a 1954 memorandum by the U.K. High Commission in India, which urged strengthening and encouraging what it termed the “healthier elements” in Indian universities, i.e. pro-British professors and students.⁴⁹

Cold War imperatives and the shift to a developmental agenda meant that when pressure to limit public spending began to ease in the United Kingdom, priority would be given to increasing the number of CUIS travel grants to candidates from the Indian subcontinent. This coincided with the decision to extend the scheme to university institutes in the colonies, for which the committee had obtained approval from both the 1953 AUBC Congress and the Colonial Office. When the CUIS budget began to rise in the second half of the 1950s, this was largely thanks to an annual £ 2,000 grant from the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund and, in 1959, an additional £ 6,000 per year from the CRO destined for India and Pakistan.⁵⁰ At the February meeting of the committee in 1958, four category A awards were made to India; in the same month two years later, thirteen such awards were made, four of them financing travel to Australia. Indeed, thanks to the Australian and Colonial contributions, a limited number of awards were finally being used to promote travel between Commonwealth countries other than the United Kingdom.⁵¹ However, sending colonial students to India elicited concern about communist indoctrination.⁵²

Conclusion

The CUIS as it was drawn up in 1948 had represented the belated application of the ideas of the interwar period. As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, Commonwealth interchange could no longer be defined in terms of traditional patterns of mobility between the United Kingdom as “mother country” and the Dominions. The failure to attract significant contributions from the “old” Commonwealth, combined with the U.K. government’s new policy, led to a repositioning of the CUIS. The Commonwealth ceased to be conceived as a diverse but organic whole. Facilitating exchanges between the developed and developing countries of the Commonwealth came to the fore, arguably placing the CUIS in a better position to ease the transition to a vastly expanded multiracial Commonwealth. However, the success of the

Canadian proposal for a Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) in 1958 indicated that the future of Commonwealth exchanges lay in a looser, decentralized program.⁵³ The academics who had sought the British Council's support ten years earlier were quick to press the AUBC's case as the U.K. government's agent in administering the new fund. The British Council was assigned a secondary role. Above all, it was the CSFP that would attempt to give body to the new academic community of the Commonwealth which resulted from the expansion of universities in both its older member states and in the countries that were acceding to independence. The CUIS lived on as effectively a British rather than a Commonwealth program.

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