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Careers in development: Robin Sherbourne discusses the ODI Fellowship Scheme

By Robin Sherbourne and Jonathan Pryke

Robin: I'm Robin Sherbourne, head of the [ODI Fellowship Scheme](#), which is a 50-year-old program placing young professional economists from anywhere in the world in developing country governments around the world.

Jonathan: *Before discussing your current position, it's my understanding that as well as running the program you are in fact also a fellow of the scheme?*

Robin: That's correct, I was an ODI Fellow in 1991. I was the first to be sent to Namibia in southern Africa, which at that time had just won independence. I worked for four years in economic planning at the National Planning Commission. During two of those years I was supported by the fellowship scheme and the rest by the UK aid program.

Jonathan: *And what happened after those four years?*

Robin: I returned to the UK public service for two years before heading back to Namibia, where I ended up doing a whole variety of things including helping to establish a stock broking firm, lecturing at the University of Namibia, setting up a local research institute, establishing a monthly current affairs magazine and working for the central bank. I ended up spending a total of 14 years in Namibia.

Jonathan: *Namibia certainly endeared itself to you! I imagine going straight from your Masters into a fellowship in Namibia would have been quite an experience. What were some of the highlights of the fellowship scheme for you?*

Robin: Well, the beauty of the scheme is that you work as an embedded economist in a local government structure. So you're working with, in my case, Namibian civil servants. You really are part of the local team.

I think that the main challenge is to get your colleagues to see you as part of the team. I think I managed to do that. In the four years I was there we did some exciting things: we put together the country's first national development plan; established the development budget; developed Namibia's first macroeconomic model; and worked out a lot of other budget related issues that are still in place today.

It was all very exciting. The biggest highlight was being at the centre of the action. Working with ministers and senior officials in government gave me that feeling - and it might be a false feeling sometimes - that I was helping to influence things for the better.

Jonathan: *Could you provide a bit more information about the scheme? How many people are involved? What kind of backgrounds are you looking for?*

Robin: Well, we've got about 100 fellows in the field at any one stage, making it around 50 a year going on two year placements. As a fellow you can end up anywhere: from Africa to the Caribbean to the Pacific.

In terms of background, we are looking for highly motivated and well qualified junior professional economists, people who have Masters or PhD in economics or a related subject. These people are being placed in economic posts in governments so, while they may have done something like public administration or development economics, they still need to have a strong economic base. We are also looking for more Australian nationals.

Jonathan: *And once applicants are accepted, how do they get placed?*

Robin: Once the applicants are selected we start talking to governments and they

tell us what posts need to be filled in their structures. It's important to remember that these are civil service positions of the government you are going to. While the ODI supplements your local income, you are still a staff member of that country, which is what makes this scheme a really unique opportunity.

We like to think it's demand-led and that fellows fill the gaps in government where they are most needed. Generally these gaps are in a central finance, treasury or planning agency of the government. And this is why you need to be prepared to go anywhere, we aren't matching you up to where you would most like to go, rather we are matching you up with the position where your background will make you most useful.

Regardless of where they go, fellows invariably enjoy themselves and gain tremendously in terms of experience and exposure to the mechanisms of government.

Jonathan: *Do you get many fellows that find it hard to finish?*

Robin: We have a very small attrition rate with only a few dropping out of the scheme each year, mostly for personal reasons back home. Some are for professional reasons, and a few are simply because certain posts don't work.

Jonathan: *How competitive is the scheme?*

Robin: This year we had over 700 applicants. Not all of those were top quality economists I have to say, but a lot of them were. So it is quite competitive. But we aren't just looking for academically good people, you need people who are willing to get stuck in, adapt to local circumstances and take the rough with the smooth because it doesn't always work out smoothly.

Jonathan: *What kind of support does ODI offer once you are in-country?*

Robin: Well, to be honest, most of our fellows really want to be left alone, so

there's not much support to provide. They see themselves as an employee of that country and really want to jump in. We do provide medical cover, a housing allowance and a certain number of flights home and, of course, if everything goes pear-shaped and there's a coup or something, you can rely on us to get you out safely. But I honestly think, by and large, that the type of people that go into the scheme don't really want to have much support from us once they are on the ground.

Jonathan: *A lot of problems with other aid funded TA and volunteer positions is that you are so bound by your assignment description that you can't work effectively on the ground. Do ODI Fellows face that challenge?*

Robin: That's a great question. This comes back to the unique nature of the fellowship scheme. ODI Fellows are in-country in a line position with a manager and a proper employment structure. Being in that hierarchy allows them to be much more dynamic and responsive to the needs of their superiors. Our requirement is only that they carry out useful economic or economic-related work that furthers the economic aims of the governments they work for. Obviously we don't want them doing anything illegal, but they are completely at the disposal of the governments they work for. So there is a great degree of flexibility.

Applications for the 2014-16 Fellowship Scheme open in November 2013. For more information on the scheme, check out their [website](#).

Robin Sherbourne is head of the ODI Fellowship Scheme. Jonathan Pryke is a Researcher at the [Development Policy Centre](#).

About the author/s

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