

## **Chapter 2    The Fellow's perspective: summary of focus group discussion**

On 20 November 2012, the CSC Evaluation Team held a focus group discussion (FGD) with a group of Commonwealth Professional Fellows who were currently on award. The purpose of holding the FGD was to collect qualitative data that answers key questions regarding pre-, during, and post-award experiences, as well as determining methods of increasing Professional Fellows' participation in the CSC's evaluation activities. Holding the FGD was also a good opportunity to foster relations between the Evaluation Team and the Fellows, which had the benefit of identifying individual case studies for future reports. Additionally, the FGD served as a platform for Fellows to voice their opinions regarding the programme, and therefore was an important information-gathering session and networking tool that helped to enhance the Evaluation Team's review of the Professional Fellows programme.

The FGD lasted approximately two hours, and was held at the CSC's offices in Woburn House, London. As only 15 Fellows attended the event, the group was not split up into smaller groups for discussion. The structure of the FGD consisted of three parts: the first part addressed 'Before the award'; the second part discussed 'On the award'; and finally the last part answered questions about 'After the award'. The exact questions asked were as follows:

### **Before the award**

- How did you find out about the programme?
- What was your main motivation for taking up the award?
- How did you determine the objectives you set on your application?

### **On the award**

- Are the objectives you set on your application being met so far?
- Are you learning anything you didn't expect?
- Are there things you feel are missing from your learning experience?

### **After the award**

- Is there anything you think you will do differently upon your return home?
- Do you think your employer will benefit from your take-up of the award and, if so, how?
- In the past, we've had relatively low response rates to our Professional Fellows' surveys. What do you think are some ways that we could motivate you to respond?
- What do you think is the optimum time for us to contact you regarding the longer term outcome of your award?

## **Participants**

The 15 Professional Fellows that attended the FGD were mainly from countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, but there were also two Fellows from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. This is reflective of the overall regional spread of Professional Fellows, as the vast majority (77%) come from a country in sub-Saharan Africa. The second largest group of Fellows come from South Asia, but they comprise only 15% of the overall number. The majority of Fellows undertook a placement at an NGO/charity/community organisation, but two worked at education institutions, while another two had their Fellowship in a private sector company.

## **Summary of FGD results**

### **How did you find out about the programme?**

One trend in the discussion showed that some organisations had partnership links with host organisations. Another common theme was Fellows learning about the scheme through other Fellows' positive experience. One Fellow stated that they were impressed with one of their colleagues who undertook the Fellowship, as they were able to increase their performance from 'a 3/10 to a 9/10'. Others reported hearing about the programme through host organisations, government departments, and professional associations.

## **What was your main motivation for taking up the award?**

There were several reasons given as motivation for taking up the award. An interesting point was being motivated by positive feedback from former Fellows. Respondents also cited social reasons and a desire to effect change as a strong motivation. Many Fellows also stated a desire and need to build technical skills and learn best practices that were not available in their home countries. Others reported wanting to have a cross-cultural experience, as well as personal interests.

## **How did you determine the objectives you set on your application?**

Fellows mentioned a few different avenues through which objectives were set. Some stated that objectives were set directly with their own organisation, while others said that they were determined by the host organisation. There were also a number of Fellows who set their objectives in conjunction with partner organisations. Others were allowed to establish their own objectives, which they set based on their country's context and needs. Another Fellow looked at organisational gaps and set their objectives based on those needs.

## **Are the objectives you set on your application being met so far?**

Quite a few Fellows affirmed that their objectives were being met. Some even mentioned that their expectations were exceeded, due to their host organisation's strong commitments. Many stated that more objectives were added to their programme which served to be beneficial. There was a general belief that the UK has clear-cut systems in place that enabled Fellows to learn new skills not available in their home countries. However, there were also some Fellows who stated that they were unable to meet their objectives due to time constraints, as the Fellowship duration is three months. One Fellow in particular was unable to complete his project, which was the main objective of his stay in the UK. However, he hoped to have gained enough general knowledge and skills to finish the project in his home country.

## **Are you learning anything you didn't expect?**

A general theme was that Fellows reported gained an unexpected understanding of British culture. The Fellows also found it very interesting to gain insight into how the UK seemingly views Africa. They were also surprised to be able to share their own experiences from their home countries. While some Fellows said that they were able to gain unexpected technical skills, learning other important assets such as interpersonal skills was also brought up.

## **Are there things you feel are missing from your learning experience?**

The two areas that were discussed in regard to gaps in their programmes was a lack of training and programme management. Some Fellows felt that there was not enough time to fulfil their training needs. Others felt that, although they had received a lot of training, they were not given the opportunity to learn management skills, which they saw as an asset that they would have liked to take back to their home country.

## **Is there anything you think you will do differently upon your return home?**

The responses to this question varied greatly depending on the Fellow's field. Those who worked in an education institution intended to restructure school policies and introduce new classes. One Fellow working in the health sector wanted to ensure that services in their home country were being used, as opposed to only focusing on advocacy and awareness. Another Fellow working in the private sector felt that they could influence banks and corporate companies to donate to charities. Many Fellows stated that they would become more heavily involved in various kinds of advocacy. One Fellow in particular said that they would advocate for sanitation to be implemented through legislation. Others also stated that they wanted to provide training to people to teach advocacy skills. One Fellow working in education reported the possibility of meeting with the Ministry of Education to discuss ways of improving standards and practices. Fundraising and strategy skills were also cited as something that would change upon return home.

## **Do you think your employer will benefit from your take-up of the award and, if so, how?**

All of the Fellows felt that their employers would benefit from the Fellowship, through building networks which can act as a support mechanism, continuing to provide technical and capacity building. It was also asserted that there would be obvious benefits to organisations and government agencies through increased knowledge and the gaining of new skills.

## **In the past, we've had relatively low response rates to our Professional Fellows' surveys. What do you think are some ways that we could motivate you to respond?**

There were some interesting ideas that were proposed in regard to motivating Fellows to respond to evaluation surveys. One suggestion was to ensure that responses are published in some kind of format, such as a report or online. If published online, it was recommended that links to the websites of Fellows' organisations be included. The idea of involving home organisations to encourage Fellows to answer surveys was also mentioned, and it was even suggested that this should be implemented into policy. The provision of stipends and funds to support events was also proposed as a way to incentivise responses. Finally, it was recommended that specific networks for Fellows be created that could be divided by region, which could potentially promote collaboration between Fellows, and consequently between them and the CSC.

## **What do you think is the optimum time for us to contact you regarding the longer term outcome of your award?**

Almost all Fellows agreed that the optimum time to contact them would be six months to a year after their Fellowship. It was also suggested that there should be a small questionnaire leading up to a bigger survey, in order to keep them thinking about evaluation. Lastly, it was noted that it is important for the CSC to consider not only longer-term impacts, but also the short-term benefits that the Fellowships bring, such as the ability to impart knowledge to other colleagues both formally (through training) and informally.

## **Lessons learned from the FGD**

Overall, the focus group discussion revealed very positive results in regard to the Professional Fellowship scheme. All of the Fellows showed keen enthusiasm for the programme, and all stated that it provided valuable skills and experience both professionally and in their personal lives. An issue was raised regarding the length of the award, as some Fellows felt that it was too short to enable them to complete their project or gain certain desired skills such as training. However, given resource constraints and the CSC's desire to provide this Fellowship to a greater number of people, the three-month time period is appropriate. In order to address the aforementioned concerns, host organisations and Fellows must coordinate closely to set out realistic objectives and discuss the needs of the Fellows.

The Fellows expressed willingness to maintain contact with the CSC but, given busy schedules and the short duration of the award, innovative measures need to be put in place in order to facilitate this connection. Publishing responses and case studies in a report or online is a realistic and feasible option to consider. Creating regional networks is another viable choice, but would require a coordinator.

The FGD confirmed that the Professional Fellowship scheme is helping to improve the skills and knowledge of the Fellows who undertake the programme, which is consequently having a positive development impact on the various fields in which they work – a finding which is further reinforced by those Fellows who report that they learned about the scheme through former Fellows and seeing the benefits for themselves. It provides individuals with the opportunity to enhance their professional development, which in turn has a catalytic effect in their workplace. It also offers an invaluable life experience that Fellows would not otherwise have had the opportunity to undertake. It is essential to continue and improve this scheme in order for the CSC to maintain its commitment to contributing to wider international development impact.