



COMMONWEALTH  
SCHOLARSHIPS

# Exploring Diary Methods to Measure the Outcomes and Impact of International Scholarships

CSC Diary Studies Methodology  
Working Paper

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Thank you.

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# Executive Summary

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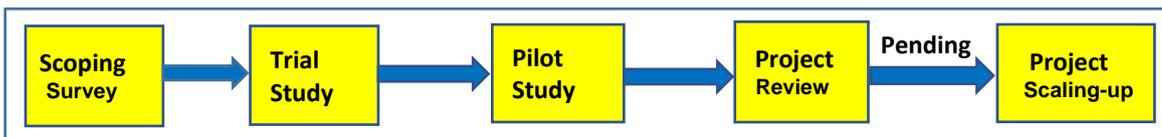
## Background

The CSC Evaluation Team is responsible for developing and refining evaluation tools and methods that effectively measure and report the outcomes and impact of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (CSC) and inform its operations and policy. Diary Studies were identified as a potential data collection tool that could be employed to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships by collecting real time data (in-the-moment and in context) on the experiences of Commonwealth Alumni post-Scholarship. This method mainly collects qualitative information in the form of record entries made in a diary or log by the participants over a specified frequency and duration.

In designing the CSC Diary Studies project and testing its feasibility as a data collection method that can be used to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships, it was key to establish the following elements:

- Appropriate data collection tools
- The frequency of recording diary entries
- Appropriate duration for a diary study

These are crucial for the success of a Diary Studies project, not only in terms of ease of use for the participants, but also effectiveness in terms of gathering rich, reliable, and usable data. A participatory approach was used to design and implement the CSC Diary Studies project, which involved engaging recent and longstanding Alumni from the onset, drawing from their expertise and their contexts to inform the project design and implementation. Below are the steps taken to design the CSC Diary Studies project.



## 1. Scoping

A scoping survey was conducted in May 2019 with 412 Alumni from 1960 through to 2018. The aim of the scoping survey was to establish the views of Alumni on the appropriate tools to record diary entries. Also, to establish the optimum timing of the project, that would be suitable for Alumni, while allowing rich data to be collected from which the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships can be identified. From the scoping survey it was determined that survey-based diaries, completed at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, for a duration of three months was appropriate for most Alumni participants.

## 2. Diary Studies

The trial project was conducted between July and October 2019 with 56 Alumni recruited from the scoping survey. The aim of the trial study was to test the feasibility and effectiveness of Diary Studies to collect data on the experiences of Commonwealth Alumni and the impact of their activities in their local communities. To do so, the tools identified in the scoping survey as appropriate to record diary entries (as stated in the section above) were used. On completion of the trial study the participants were requested to complete a feedback form to share their experiences with the trial project.

### 2.1– Findings from the Diary Studies trial project

Drawing from the experiences of Alumni who participated in the trial study, some lessons were learned on the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection method to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

#### Diary entries

The Diary Studies trial project participants were asked to complete diary entries at a frequency of one every two weeks, for a duration of three months.

- Just under half (45%) of the participants completed their entries at the correct specified times regardless of how many entries they ended up completing. A proportion of 47% completed multiple entries on the same day or within the same week, while 7% signed up for the trial study, but did not complete any entries at all.
- Overall, 56% of the participants completed 4 or more entries for the study (12% completing four entries, 12% completing five entries, and 32% completing all six entries).

#### Effect of the Scholarship: Successes

- Most of the Commonwealth Alumni who participated in the trial study were employed (71%) or employed and pursuing further studying (20%).
- A high proportion (83%) of the participants were involved in training/teaching activities (37% were training others within their organisations, 29% were training their local community members-formal/informal, and others, 17% were involved in training and creating awareness at regional/international level).
- The impact of participants is felt by people they interact with, 42% of the participants have interactions at workplace, 51% with local communities, 32% with other stakeholders, and 19% with extra-local communities.
- The participants reported to have been using skills acquired on Scholarship to conduct activities in their home countries. Only 69% of the participants mentioned the specific type of skills acquired from the Scholarship and applied in the home country. From these participants, the

most used skills are research (12%) and management (10%). Other skills mentioned by the participants are presentation skills (7%), writing skills (7%), and leadership skills (7%).

### **Challenges faced by Alumni**

- Two-thirds (66%) of the participants said they faced some challenges in making an impact in their organisations and communities
- The most common challenges faced by the participants are lack of equipment, tools, materials, and infrastructure (38%), lack of support within an organisation (30%), and lack of funding (30%).

## **2.2– Findings from the Diary Studies trial project feedback**

Following the trial, participants were asked to complete a short feedback survey, 37 (66%) of the participant did so. Drawing from the feedback given by the 37 Alumni, a large percentage (82%) of the participants were generally content with the overall experience of participating in the trial project.

### **Frequency of recording diary entries and duration of the study**

Participants in the trial were asked to complete diary entries at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, for a duration of three months.

- Some participants (41%) found this frequency appropriate. Nonetheless, 24% found it difficult to commit to recording one entry every two weeks, while 32% were neutral. Some of these participants recommended one entry per month.
- Three-fifths (62%) of the participants felt the duration of the study was appropriate. However, 24% found the duration too short, and 11% thought it was too long.

### **The structure of the questionnaire**

Some improvements to the questions were suggested by 17% of the respondents of the feedback survey. These include:

- Broadening the questions, some participants found answering the same questions six times repetitive and boring.
- The questionnaire to be designed such that it is straight forward, and easy to understand.
- Adding a question on enabling factors, as this would help to understand if the same approach used by Alumni to make an impact can be used to achieve successes in the future.

### **Accessibility of the online surveys**

While most participants were able to access the online surveys to input their diary entries, a few (3%) recommended that the survey be accessible by a wide range of devices.

## Communication tools and instructions provided by the CSC Evaluation Team

All communications were done electronically using emails. We learn from the survey that instructions given by the CSC Evaluation Team on how to complete the diary entries were useful for most of the participants (89%). In addition, 87% of the participants found the automated email reminders to complete diary entries useful. However, a few participants (3%) recommended that the start and end of each entry be specified.

### 2.3– Lessons learned from the trial project and implications for the pilot study

The findings showed that to improve the effectiveness of the Diary Studies tool some adjustments were required, and these are summarised below.

#### Frequency and duration of the Diary Studies

After carefully considering the findings from the trial feedback, the CSC Evaluation Team decided to maintain one diary entry every two weeks for the pilot study as the purpose of Diary Studies is to capture activities and events 'in the moment', therefore every data collection point is key. However, to make this approach flexible, the participants of the pilot study were informed that if they had no activities /events to record after two weeks, they should record 'No Activity' and this would be counted as a diary entry. A duration of three months was maintained for the pilot project.

#### The structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire for the pilot study was designed, taking into consideration the findings from the trial, and recommendations made by the participants. Some adjustments were made in designing the pilot study questionnaire as follows:

- Free text questions now followed immediately after the relevant closed questions. In addition, the six diary entries were to be sent as six separate online surveys to limit the possibility of completing more than one diary entry at a specified time.
- A question on enabling factors was included, as recommended by the trial study participants.

The amendments to the questionnaire aimed at making the questions clearer to the participants, in the hope that more and rich data can be gathered that might have been missed in the trial study because of the structure of the questionnaire.

#### Making the online surveys more effective in collecting diary entries

To facilitate the accessibility of the online surveys used to record diary entries by the participants the CSC Evaluation Team set-up the surveys for the pilot study such that they were accessible through a wide range of electronic devices.

## Improving communication with the participants

To improve communication and provide clearer instructions to the participants, the following actions were taken for the pilot study:

- The start and end period for each diary entry was specified, both in the email reminders, and at the top of each diary entry online survey form.
- Automatic email reminders were used for the pilot study (as in the trial study) as a means of communication with the participants to remind them to complete their diary entries. For the pilot study, email reminders were programmed using the Snap survey tool (used to design the online surveys) so that they were sent only to those participants that had not completed and submitted the diary entry as scheduled, whereas in the trial study they were sent to all participants.

## 3. Diary Studies pilot

The pilot study was conducted between November 2019 and February 2020, with 52 Alumni from the 2019 cohort who were within three months of returning home following the Scholarship. The participants were requested to complete a total of six diary entries at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, over a duration of three months. On completion of the pilot project the participants were asked to complete a feedback form to share their experiences with the pilot study. The purpose of the pilot was to further test the effectiveness of the Diary Studies tools with adjustments made following the trial and with Alumni at the intended reintegration stage after their Scholarship. In addition, the data obtained from the diary entries was scrutinised for quality, relevance, and adequacy. The pilot study also tested the project process, resources, and management.

### 3.1– Findings from the Diary Studies pilot project

Drawing from the experiences of Alumni who participated in the pilot project, some lessons were learned on the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection method to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

#### Diary entries

The pilot study participants were asked to complete a total of six diary entries at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, over a duration of three months. Out of 52 participants, a quarter (25%) completed all six entries. Overall, just over half (58%) of the participants completed four or more entries. This indicates that a fair proportion of the participants were able to commit to completing diary entries at the specified frequency and duration.

## Effect of the Scholarship: Successes

Of the 52 participants, over half (52%) were employed, 8% were employed and studying, 31% were not employed, but attending job interviews, while 9% did not provide details on their employment status at the time of participating in the pilot project.

- Most participants (over 85% at each diary entry) reported that they were applying a range of skills and knowledge acquired on Scholarship in their activities at workplace and local communities. Two-fifths of participants (42%) reported being involved in formal and informal training of work colleagues to share the skills and knowledge acquired on Scholarship. This indicates immediate outcomes of Commonwealth Scholarships.
- Interpersonal skills were the most reported skills used by the participants in their activities, with communication skills, presentation and networking skills being the most frequently used in this category. Other skills acquired on Scholarship and applied by the participants in their activities include research skills, writing skills, technical skills, leadership/management skills, teaching, and project management.
- The top four common activities of the participants are research (62%), management/supervision (58%), health care provision (38%), and teaching (23%).
- Through their activities Commonwealth Alumni were interacting with a range of stakeholders, who either facilitated delivery of their activities or benefited from the activities such as local NGOs, industries in the field, businessmen, media representation, police, agencies, local schools, and the local community.
- Access to library resources at their UK host universities post-Scholarship has been highlighted as a factor that enables greater impact, particularly for Alumni who are involved in research activities.

## Challenges faced by Alumni

- Less than half of the participants (41%) reported that they were facing challenges at the time of participating in the Diary Studies project.
- The most reported challenges were personal challenges (38%), lack of infrastructure and equipment (33%), lack of support within the workplace institutional challenges (33%), and lack of funding (29%).
- To overcome these challenges more than half of the participants (58%) suggested better planning and more support at organisational level, while almost half of the participants (46%) suggested reaching out to the government and other stakeholders, both local and extra-local to seek funds for facilities, equipment, and project grants, and developing partnerships and collaboration with individuals and NGOs.

Some participants were not only aware of the challenges they faced in making an impact in their home country, but also found ways to address these challenges and successfully implemented developmental activities in their home country. This indicates that apart from a range of skills and knowledge acquired on Scholarship by Commonwealth Scholars, a conducive environment is required for Alumni to apply them and make an impact in their home countries. The problem-solving ability shown by Alumni (also enhanced during the Scholarship) is an important finding for the CSC and demonstrates that rich data can be obtained through Diary Studies. These success stories can be shared in different knowledge sharing platforms for Alumni to learn from each other.

### 3.2– Findings from the Diary Studies pilot feedback

Following the pilot project, the participants were asked to complete a short feedback survey, with three-fifths (58%) of participants doing so. Drawing from the feedback given by the participants, a large percentage (87%) were generally content with the experience of participating in the pilot project. The feedback obtained is summarised below.

#### Frequency of recording diary entries and duration of Diary Studies

- Slightly more than half (53%) of the participants found the frequency of recording diary entries appropriate, while one-third (33%) were neutral. The remainder (14%) struggled to commit to recording one diary entry every two weeks. They recommended one diary entry per month.
- Two-thirds (63%) of the participants found the duration of the diary study appropriate, while one quarter (27%) found the duration too short, and one-tenth (10%) felt it was too long.

#### Instructions on completing the entries and reminder emails

A large proportion of the participants (83%) found the instructions to complete entries useful. Equally, 83% of the participants found the reminder emails to complete diary entries useful.

#### Suggestions for improving the Diary Studies project

Out of the 30 participants who completed the feedback survey, just over half (57%) provided some suggestions on how to improve the CSC Diary Studies project.

- Some participants (24%), particularly those who struggled to complete the diary entries at the specified frequency and duration, suggested diary entries of once a month and a duration of six months.
- Adding an extra dialogue box in the questionnaire for the participants to record any further information they may wish to share with the CSC.
- Adding a question on activities prior to the Scholarship to obtain baseline data.
- Adopting a longitudinal approach to Diary Studies.

## Suggestions for preparing Alumni for the re-integration period

Most of the suggestions made by the participants were focused on enhancing employment opportunities for Alumni in their home countries. The top five suggestions include creating consistent alumni networking spaces, internships while on Scholarship as part of the Scholarship, mentoring support on and after the Scholarship, workshops on employment opportunities in home country (arranged by CSC), and re-integration<sup>1</sup> training while on Scholarship.

The pilot project offered a suitable alternative to field studies, and a valuable way to engage with Alumni while revealing smaller and tangible benefits of Commonwealth Scholarships as well as obstacles that may not be picked up by existing survey instruments. The rich data obtained using Diary Studies and the vivid context that comes with it indicates that Diary Studies can be a useful tool in giving the CSC an insight on the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships.

## 4. Diary Studies Project Review

On completion of the pilot study, experts were consulted to review and validate the project. The experts were identified from Alumni Advisory Panel (AAP) members. The project review activity was completed by 20 reviewers in June 2020. To review the Diary Studies project, some project documents such as the Diary Studies Methodology paper, the questionnaire used to guide diary entries and the feedback questionnaire administered to the pilot study participants were shared with the experts. Using their experiences and expertise, the reviewers were requested to provide feedback on the CSC Diary Studies project design and implementation approach. The feedback questionnaire was accessed by the reviewers as an online survey.

### 4.1– Findings from the CSC Diary Studies

Overall, 80% of the experts thought the Diary Studies tool was effective, and 90% commended the Diary Studies project design and implementation steps taken by the CSC Evaluation Team and thought that the approach was appropriate, effective, well-structured, logical, and systematic. Meanwhile, 85% of the reviewers said that the online survey tool was effective for recording diary entries. The experts who favoured online surveys mentioned that they are easily accessible, flexible, engaging, and allow the researcher to start analysing data before completion of a diary study. Just over half (55%) of the reviewers thought that the questionnaire used to guide diary entries were appropriate, 35% did not comment on the questionnaire, and 10% thought it was narrow and vague. Recommendations were made on how to improve the structure of the questionnaire and the phrasing of the questions to gather richer data. Having said that, 75% of the reviewers thought the feedback questionnaire completed by the Diary Studies pilot project participants was effective. Suggestions were made on adjustments to the structure of the questionnaire and the inclusion of a few additional questions was recommended.

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<sup>1</sup> The re-integration training while on Scholarship focuses on empowering and preparing Commonwealth Scholars to overcome expected or unexpected challenges upon returning home following the Scholarship.

## 4.2– A summary of the recommendations made by the experts to improve the CSC Diary Studies project

The Diary Studies project review activity provided informative feedback on the CSC Diary Studies project design and implementation approach, revealing both its strengths and weakness. The key issues to consider as advised by the reviewers are:

### **Clarity on the purpose of a particular diary study and identifying research questions that can be answered using Diary Studies**

This will shape the structure of the questionnaires and the framing of the questions. Examples were given such as:

- Deciding to capture short-term or long-term impact of the activities of the participants, which should be reflected in the type of questions asked.
- Structuring the questions to focus on three phases, pre, on and post-Scholarship to identify the attribution to the Commonwealth Scholarship itself.

### **Methodological approach**

The issues raised that concern the methodological approach involve data quality, validity, and reliability. Suggestions were made on how these can be improved, and these include:

- Measures that can be taken to improve the sampling methods. These include employing a quota non-probability sampling technique as opposed to the current convenience sampling technique. Also, to consider geographical location, programme of study, current and long-standing Alumni both in sampling and to segregate responses and compare results.
- Addressing low response rate, with particular emphasis on regular communication and building relations with participants prior to conducting a diary study, and keeping the participants motivated throughout the study. The use of Alumni associations/groups in each country to boost participation rate was also mentioned. In addition, the CSC was urged to consider offering incentives for participation. These can be as in the form of publishing the names of the participants in the CSC website, book prizes, journals, CSC calendars, diaries, and lucky draws.
- Creating a theory of change with some indicators of success and expected outcomes which can be compared with the data collected to identify unexpected outcomes.
- Collection and use of baseline data for comparison.
- Triangulation of data sources, methods, and coders.

The CSC Evaluation Team will also consider the advice given by the experts to further improve the effectiveness of the Diary Studies instrument, which has shown a lot of potential to collect rich data from both Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni.

## 5. Limitations of Diary Studies

The diary methods offer a suitable alternative to field studies, as reaching out to all Alumni for field observations would be a challenge for the CSC Evaluation Team due to the volume of Alumni and limited resources. However, some limitations of the pilot study have been identified:

- Lack of direct observations means CSC has limited control of the quality of data obtained, as it relies on the self-reported data from Alumni. In addition, the type of tool used to record diary entries and the frequency of completing diary entries may affect the type and quality of data provided by participants.
- Recording diary entries is time consuming, and some data may be lost due to time constraints, as participants may fail to record a diary entry when it is due to be completed.
- The selection and use of appropriate (easy for the participants to use) and effective (ability to capture relevant and adequate data) tools to record diary entries, as well as determining the appropriate frequency and duration of the study requires a considerable amount of time, particularly when the participants are involved in this process. However, considering that the diary studies tools have been identified and tested, it is expected that less time will be required for a diary study project in the future.
- The Evaluation Team had very limited control of the sample size as it relied on Alumni volunteering to participate in the project, which can affect the generalisability of the findings. However, sample size may not be crucial if the focus of the study is to understand the phenomena - experiences of Commonwealth Alumni and their impact in their local communities.

## 6. The strength of Diary Studies compared to the existing CSC data collection methods

Diary Studies are a promising tool that can be used to complement other traditional tools such as self-administered longitudinal evaluation surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews currently used by CSC to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships. While these research tools have enabled the collection of large amounts of data on Scholar and Alumni experiences, and on the outcomes and impact of Commonwealth Scholarships, they do have limitations however in that they mostly gather data about events and activities of Alumni that may have occurred months or years after the Scholarship, at which point some experiences and activities may not be recalled. This might lead to missing small or unexpected benefits and outcomes of Commonwealth Scholarships.

- Diary Studies can offer an opportunity for Commonwealth Alumni to report their experiences and events in-the-moment and in context, capturing thoughts and feelings on the impact they are making in their working environment, local communities, and wider contexts, while giving the CSC a vivid picture of how the skills and knowledge obtained on Scholarship are being applied in Alumni activities to make an impact in their local communities. As seen with the pilot project, rich data can be obtained from the Diary Studies tool on enabling factors, including stakeholders

that interact with Commonwealth Alumni in planning and delivering their activities, as well as the beneficiaries of these activities, and how or what they benefitted. While understanding the context of Alumni activities was key in analysing and interpreting qualitative data from the diary entries, it also gave an in-depth understanding of the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

- The challenges and obstacles met by recently returned Scholars are often missed by the CSC's existing survey instruments. As seen with the pilot study conducted at re-integration stage of Alumni, Diary Studies are an effective tool to pick up Alumni challenges (and their context) and the early detection of these challenges is key to inform CSC strategies and activities focused on preparing Alumni to make an impact upon returning home following the Scholarship.
- The method can be particularly useful at the re-integration period (within 3-6 months of returning home following their Commonwealth Scholarship), thereby bridging the gap in data collection between the completion of studies and administration of the first longitudinal survey (two years after completion of studies). The CSC Evaluation Team will also consider other research questions that might usefully be answered or better understood through this method, whether on its own or in conjunction with other tools
- Diary Studies can be carried out virtually, and therefore can be potentially an effective use of resources and of relevance at this current time of a global crisis where the ability to travel and undertake on the ground field work is limited.

Alongside the need to incorporate a range of methods, thereby triangulating data collection methods to investigate the outcomes and impact of Commonwealth Scholarships, the participatory approach of engaging Alumni in the design and implementation approach used by the CSC Evaluation Team contributes to the Alumni Engagement Strategy. In addition, piloting of the Diary Studies project lays the foundation for a more participatory approaches when planning evaluation work.

## Summary

While the Diary Studies method has its limitations, the approach used in designing the project helped to mitigate them. It appears that with suitable adjustments and taking into considerations the advice from the experts, it is a promising and feasible tool that can be adopted by the CSC to better understand the experiences of Scholars and Alumni as well as identify the outcomes and impact of Commonwealth Scholarships. Moreover, it can be used in combination with other traditional methods used by the CSC to triangulate data collection methods. In addition, the methodological approach used in designing the Diary Studies project can be transferred to methodological designs to be explored in the future, particularly the participatory aspect of the design, where Alumni are actively involved in the design and implementation of the data collection tools. The selection and use of appropriate (easy for the participants to use) and effective (ability to capture relevant and adequate data) tools is crucial to the success of a project. Diary Studies can also be a valuable tool in identifying potential candidates for case studies and Alumni profiles which will also feed into ongoing and future evaluation work, and other CSC projects.

The next stage is for the Evaluation Team to compare and collate the feedback from the project participants and the advice from experts on how the Diary Studies tool can be improved. Following this review the team will decide whether to incorporate the method into its workplan on a more routine basis, if so, identify areas of particular interest and the research questions that can be answered using Diary Studies. Alongside this process the findings will be shared with Commissioners and colleagues within the CSC secretariat, particularly the CSC Alumni Engagement Team and thus inform future work with Commonwealth Alumni.

# Section 1 – Introduction

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The CSC Evaluation Team has the responsibility of measuring and reporting the outcomes and impact of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships to inform CSC operations and policy work which relies on the ability to gather evidence on the experiences of the Scholars and Alumni. Over the years, the Evaluation Team has developed both its quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments and introduced a mixed methods approach to its evaluation work. As part of this evolution, Diary Studies were identified as a potential data collection method that could be employed to better understand the experiences and challenges of recently returned Alumni. This method mainly collects qualitative information in the form of record entries made in a diary or log by the participants. In line with the purpose of the research/study, the participants provide temporal information by recording experiences or activities over a specified frequency and duration.

## 1.1– Justification for using Diary Studies to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships

When evaluating Commonwealth Scholarships, the main methods of data collection used by the CSC Evaluation Team are self-administered longitudinal evaluation surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews. Diary Studies will serve as an additional means of collecting qualitative data in real time from Commonwealth Alumni, thereby expanding and triangulating the data collection methods.

While the CSC Evaluation Team endeavours to explore other data collection methods (including field studies) to identify and measure the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships, financial and human resources are a limitation. Although Diary Studies cannot provide as much detailed information as a field study, the research tool was identified by the CSC Evaluation Team as having the potential to capture qualitative data and offer a vast amount of contextual information in identifying the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships. Also, Diary Studies offer an opportunity for Commonwealth Alumni to report their experiences and events in-the-moment and in context, capturing current thoughts and feelings on the impact they are making in their working environment, local communities, and wider contexts. Understanding the context<sup>2</sup> of the event or statement is key in qualitative data analysis and interpretation, thereby giving an in-depth understanding of the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

If successful, an initial focus of Diary Studies might be as a means of collecting data from Commonwealth Alumni during the initial re-integration period (within three months of returning home after the completion studies), thereby bridging the gap (in data collection) between the completion of studies and administration of the first longitudinal survey (two years after completion of studies). It is hoped that the evidence on the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships collected through Diary Studies will also inform other areas of research interest to CSC. Overall, the data collected from Diary Studies will inform future planning and policy, as well as contribute to the wider strategic objectives of the evaluation programme and wider understanding of the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

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<sup>2</sup> Context has been defined by Tennant (2017) as; The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.

## 1.2– Approach used to design and implement the CSC Diary Studies project

In designing a Diary Studies project, the selection and use of appropriate tools is crucial to the success of the project, not only in terms of ease of use for the participants, but also effectiveness in terms of gathering rich, reliable, and usable data. To guide the design and implementation of the Diary Studies project, two key steps were taken by the CSC Evaluation Team as follows:

### 1.2.1– A literature review on Diary Studies

To inform the CSC Diary Studies project design and implementation, a literature scan was conducted to identify studies that have used Diary Studies as a data collection tool, both in the Scholarship evaluation domain, and elsewhere. The aim was to investigate the type of tools that have been used for completing diary entries, how they were selected, and their limitations.

### 1.2.2– CSC Diary Studies project design steps

The design of the project involved four key steps, the scoping survey, trial study, pilot study, and the project review activity. Using these steps, the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection method that can be used to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships was assessed. More details on each of these steps are found in Section 3 of this paper.

## 1.3– Data analysis

In implementing each of the CSC Diary Studies project steps mentioned above, semi-structured questionnaires were administered to Commonwealth Alumni to collect data. These consisted of a combination of closed questions (Yes/No), semantic differential scale questions, and open ended/free text questions. To analyse data obtained from closed questions and semantic differential scale questions, the frequency distribution of various outcomes was established. Data from the free text questions was coded to identify themes and categories. The frequency of codes under each category was established and presented as percentage of the total number of participants. Where appropriate (particularly for the trial and pilot studies), quotes from the participants were used to give context and as further evidence of the findings.

## Section 2 – Findings from the literature reviewed on Diary Studies

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To inform the design and implementation of the Diary Studies project, a literature scan was conducted to identify studies that have explored Diary Studies as a data collection instrument, the approaches used in designing a Diary Studies project, and the selection of tools to record diary entries. A review of 17 Scholarship evaluation reports shows that Diary Studies have not been explored by Scholarship evaluators as a data collection instrument to measure the impact of Scholarships. It is therefore hoped that the CSC Diary Studies project will contribute knowledge in the Scholarship evaluation domain on the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection method to measure the impact of Scholarships. Having said that, it was established from literature that Diary Studies have been used (elsewhere) in social research both as the only data collection tool, and in combination with other data collection instruments. Moreover, literature reveals various tools that have been used to record diary entries for Diary Studies. These include:

- Paper-based diaries that were explored to investigate health issues by Hutchesson. *et al.* (2015) and Krogh. *et al.* (2016)
- Email-based diaries used by Jones and Woolley (2015) to measure the impact of hosting the 2012 Olympic Games on commuters in London.
- Text-based diaries have been used in obesity management research (Sultan, *et al.* 2015) and activity travel in Sweden (Susilo *et al.*, 2016)
- Voice-based Diary Studies selected by Basil *eta l.* (2015) to study social marketing, and Williamson. *et al.* (2015) to understand the experiences of breast-feeding women
- Social media-based diaries, such as photographs, audio recordings, and location information were used by Carter and Mankoff (2005), and web-based Diary and companion smartphone app for travel/ activity surveys conducted by Greaves. *et al.* (2015)
- Survey-based diaries used by Meier and Dumani (2016) to investigate work reflection and well-being. Beutels, *et al.* (2006) also used survey-based diaries to understand contact infections, and Zacher and Wilden (2014) to investigate leadership and employee motivation

A combination of paper-based diaries, email-based diaries, text-based diaries, and voice-based Diary Studies has been explored by Scholars such as Boyle (2017) in studying relationships between mothers and midwives. This approach gave the participants a choice to select a tool that best suits them in giving feedback. Some researchers such as Sullivan (2012), Williamson *et al.*, (2015), and Kozak, *et al.* (2017) have gone a step further to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of different tools used to record diary entries. A summary of the findings, as adapted from Sullivan (2012) is available as a separate document. This study also draws from the works of Santafe (2011), Flahert (2016), and Janssens, *et al.* (2018) on approaches to Diary Studies project design and implementation.

Most of the literature reviewed was not explicit on how the tools used for completing diary entries were selected. However, a few studies used more than one tool to record diary entries for a diary

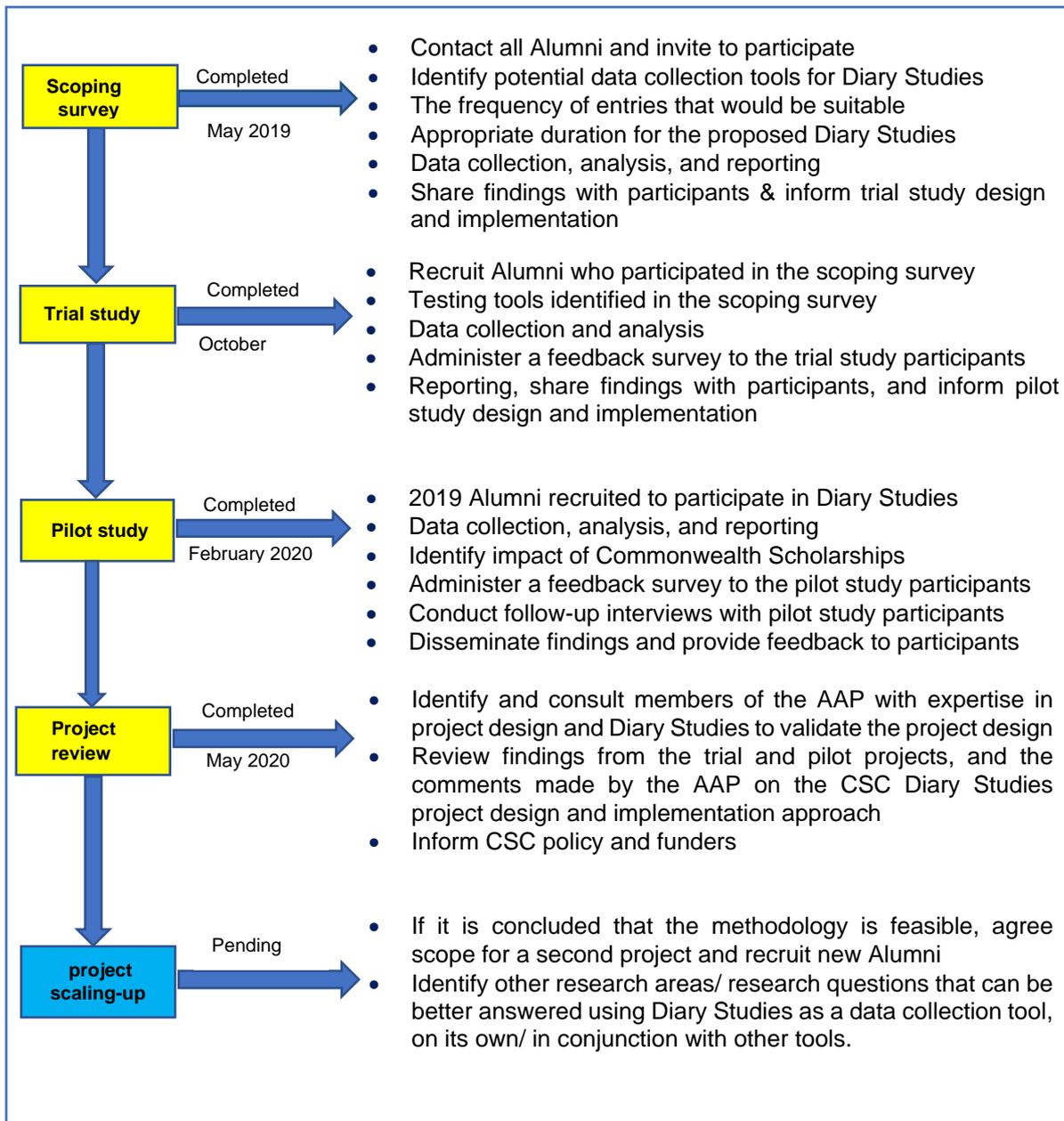
study, acknowledging that it is important that the participants select a tool that best suits them in giving feedback. This indicates that in conducting Diary Studies, the selection of data collection tools that are appropriate for the participants, while also being effective for the study is crucial.

With this very much in mind, the design and implementation of the CSC Diary Studies project took a participatory approach from the outset, engaging recent and longstanding Alumni, drawing from Alumni expertise and their contexts to inform the design and implementation of the Diary Studies project. Alumni were involved in identifying potential tools for recording diary entries, the frequency of Diary Studies entries, and the duration for a Diary Studies project that would be suitable, while allowing the capture of relevant and adequate data to measure the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships. In addition, Alumni were involved in a trial and pilot study to test the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection method, as well as the effectiveness of selected tools for recording diary and identifying the most appropriate duration for the project.

# Section 3: Designing and implementing the CSC Diary Studies project

The steps taken in the design and implementation of the CSC Diary Studies project are illustrated in the figure below.

## CSC Diary Studies project steps



## 3.1– Scoping survey

A scoping survey was conducted in May 2019. The objective of the survey was to establish the views of Alumni on the appropriate tools to collect data for Diary Studies, and the optimum timing of the project, thereby establish the feasibility of the Diary Studies as a data collection method to measure the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

### 3.1.1– Selection of the scoping survey participants

A scoping survey was conducted with Alumni who had taken up Scholarships or Fellowships from 1960 through to 2018. The survey was sent to all Alumni for whom the CSC held contact details in 2019. A total of 8,644 Alumni were contacted and invited to participate in the scoping survey, of whom 413 responded (5% response rate)<sup>3</sup> and participated in the survey. The survey was accessed via a generic survey link and was not personalised. An open invitation to participate was sent initially through the Alumni newsletter, The Common Room, followed by direct email reminders to all Alumni to register to participate in the scoping survey.

### 3.1.2– Findings from the scoping survey

From the scoping survey the Evaluation Team established the following:

- **Potential data collection tools for Diary Studies**

Survey-based diaries were the most recommended Diary Studies tools, as mentioned by 85% of the participants.

- **The frequency of recording diary entries**

Over half (67%) participants suggested one diary entry every month, and 37% suggested one diary entry every week using survey-based diaries.

- **The appropriate duration for a Diary Studies project**

A fair and equal proportion of participants (57%) recommended a duration of three months and 6 months for a Diary Studies project.

- **Identifying potential participants for the Diary Studies trial project**

A fair proportion (54%) of the respondents indicated they would like to be contacted to participate in the trial project.

The findings from the scoping survey informed the design and implementation of the Diary Studies trial project.

## 3.2– Diary Studies trial project

The primary aim of the Diary Studies trial project was to test the feasibility and effectiveness of the Diary Studies method in collecting data to understand the experiences and the impact of the

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<sup>3</sup> The sample size could not be predetermined, as the recruitment of the study participants is based on responses obtained from Alumni who volunteer to participate in the project/study

activities of Commonwealth Alumni in their local communities using survey-based diaries, completed at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, for a duration of three months<sup>4</sup> (as informed by the scoping survey). A questionnaire was designed and sent to the participants to guide the diary entries.

Apart from testing the feasibility of Diary Studies using survey-based diaries as a data collection tool, with diary entries recorded as stated above, the trial study also tested the questionnaire design (which consisted of closed-ended and semi-structured questions) to gauge its effectiveness in collecting data on the experiences of Alumni post-Scholarship, and to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

### 3.2.1– Selection of the trial project participants

The Diary Studies trial project participants were recruited from the Alumni who participated in the scoping survey. The scoping survey participants who indicated that they were highly likely to participate in the Diary Studies trial project (60 Alumni) based on a scale of 1-10 (where 1 is least likely and 10 is most likely) were contacted by email and invited to participate. The Diary Studies trial project was conducted between July and October 2019 with 56 (out of 60) participants.

The participants recorded their diary entries through a survey questionnaire which they could access using username and a unique password generated by the CSC Evaluation Team and communicated to the participants through electronic mailing. The participants were instructed to record a total of six diary entries, at a frequency of one entry every two weeks. Automated email reminders were sent to the participants when each diary entry was due to be completed. The questions asked were semi-structured, to capture as much qualitative and contextual data as possible about the successes and challenges of Alumni in applying the skills and knowledge acquired during the Scholarship to make an impact in their communities.

On completion of the Diary Studies trial project, the participants were requested to complete a feedback form to share their experiences with survey-based diaries and their overall experience with the Diary Studies trial project. Out of the 56 participants of the trial study, 37 (66%) participated in the feedback survey.

### 3.2.2– Findings from the trial

Drawing from the experiences of Alumni (56) who participated in the Diary Studies trial project, some lessons were learned on the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection method to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

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<sup>4</sup> Ideally, the study could have been designed to have two groups of participants, one group completing one diary entry every month for three months duration, and another group completing one diary entry every week for a duration of three months, and findings compared. However, due to time constraints, and careful considerations, particularly the issue of data collection points, which is fundamental for this project, the evaluation team settled for a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, for a duration of three months to optimise data collection, as some data may be lost (or forgotten) if the participants of a Diary Studies recorded only one diary entry per month.

## Diary entries

The Diary Study trial project participants (56) were asked to complete diary entries at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, for a duration of three months.

- A total of 45% of participants completed their entries at the correct specified times regardless of how many entries they ended up completing. 47% completed multiple entries on the same day or within the same week, while 7% signed up for the trial Diary study, but did not complete any entries
- Overall, 56% (12% completing four entries, 12% completing five entries, and 32% completing all six entries) of the participants completed 4 or more entries for the study

## Effect of the Scholarship: Successes

- Most of the Commonwealth Alumni who participated in the trial study were employed (71%) and others were employed and pursuing further studying (20%).
- A high proportion (83%) of the participants were involved in training/teaching activities (37% were training others within their organisations, 29% were training their local community members-formal/informal, and others (17%) were involved in training and creating awareness at regional/international level).
- The impact of participants is felt by people they interact with, 42% of the participants have interactions at workplace, 51% with local communities, 32% with other stakeholders, and 19% with extra-local communities.
- The participants reported using skills acquired on Scholarship to conduct activities in their home countries. Over half (69%) of the participants mentioned the specific type of skills acquired from the Scholarship and applied in the home country. From these participants, the most used skills are Research (12%) and Management (10%). Other skills mentioned by the participants are Presentation skills (7%), Writing skills (7%), and Leadership skills (7%).

## Challenges faced by Alumni

- Two thirds (66%) of the participants said they faced some challenges in making an impact in their organisations and communities.
- The most common challenges faced by the participants relate to lack of equipment, tools, materials, and infrastructure (38%), lack of support within an organisation (30%), and lack of funding (30%).

### 3.2.3– Findings from the Diary Studies Trial feedback survey

Following the trial, participants were asked to complete a short feedback survey, 37 (66%) of the participant did so. Drawing from the feedback given by 37 Alumni who participated in the feedback survey, a large percentage (82%) of the participants were generally content with the overall experience of participating in the Diary Studies trial project.

## Frequency of recording diary entries and duration of the diary study

The Diary Studies trial project participants were asked to complete diary entries at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, for a duration of three months.

- Some participants (41%) found the frequency of recording diary entries appropriate. Nonetheless, 24% found it difficult to commit to recording one diary entry every two weeks, while 32% were neutral. Some of these participants recommended one diary entry per month.
- The duration of the study was appropriate for 62% of the participants. However, 24% found the duration too short, and 11% thought it was too long.

## The structure of the questionnaire

Some improvements to the questions were suggested by 17% of the respondents of the feedback survey. These include:

- Broadening the questions, some participants found answering the same questions six times repetitive and boring.
- The questionnaire to be designed such that it is straight forward, and easy to understand.
- Adding a question on enabling factors, as this would help to understand if the same approach used by Alumni to make an impact can be used to achieve success in the future.

## Accessibility of the online surveys

While most participants were able to access the online surveys to input their diary entries, a few (3%) recommended that the surveys be formatted such that it was accessible by a range of electronic devices.

## Communication tools and Instructions provided by the CSC Evaluation Team

All communications were done using emails. It was learned from the survey that instructions given by the CSC Evaluation Team on how to complete the diary entries were useful for most of the participants (89%). In addition, 87 % of the participants found the automated email reminders to complete diary entries effective. However, some participants (3%) recommended that the start and end of each entry be specified in the diary entry form.

### 3.2.4– Lessons learned and implications for the Diary Studies pilot project

The findings from the trial study informed the design and implementation of the Diary Studies pilot project, particularly on the frequency and duration of the study, the design of the questionnaire and how to make the online surveys more effective, hence improve the quantity and most importantly the quality of the data obtained from the participants.

## **Frequency of recording diary entries and the duration of a Diary Studies project**

Some participants (41%) found recording one diary entry every two weeks appropriate, while 32% were neutral, and 16% recommended one diary entry per month. However, after careful consideration, the CSC Evaluation Team decided to maintain one diary entry every two weeks for the pilot study as the purpose of Diary Studies is to capture activities and events 'in the moment', therefore every data collection point is key. However, to make this approach flexible, the participants of the pilot study were informed that if they had no activities /events to record after two weeks, they should record 'No Activity' and this would be counted as a diary entry.

The duration of the study (three months) was appropriate for 62% of the participants, while 24% found the duration too short, and 11% thought it was too long. A duration of three months was used for the Diary Studies pilot project.

## **The structure of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire for the Diary Studies pilot was designed, taking into consideration the findings from the Diary Studies Trial, and recommendations made by the participants. Some adjustments were made in designing the pilot study questionnaire as follows:

- Free text questions now followed immediately after the relevant closed questions. In addition, the six diary entries were to be sent as six separate online surveys to limit the possibility of completing more than one diary entry at a specified time.
- A question on enabling factors was included, as recommended by the trial study participants.

The amendments to the questionnaire aimed at making the questions clearer to the participants, in the hope that more and rich data can be gathered that might have been missed in the trial study because of the structure of the questionnaire.

## **Making online surveys more effective in collecting diary entries**

To facilitate the accessibility of the online surveys used to record diary entries by the Diary Studies participants the CSC Evaluation Team formatted the online surveys on the snap survey tool such that they were accessible through a wide range of electronics.

## **Improving communication with the Diary Studies participants**

To improve communication and provide clearer instructions to the Diary Studies participants, the following actions were taken for the pilot study:

- The start and end period for each diary entry was specified, both in the email reminders, and at the top of each diary entry in the online survey form.

- Automatic email reminders were used for the pilot study (as in the trial study) as a means of communication with the participants to remind them to complete their diary entries. For the pilot study email reminders were programmed using the snap survey tool (used to design the online surveys) such that they were sent only to those participants that had not completed and submitted the diary entry as scheduled, whereas in the trial study they were sent to all participants.

### 3.3– Diary Studies pilot project

The Diary Studies project was launched in July 2019 at the Commonwealth Scholar Farewell event, however the recruitment of the Diary Studies pilot participants followed in the months of September to November 2019. In addition to further testing the effectiveness of the Diary Studies tools with Alumni at re-integration stage<sup>5</sup>. The data obtained from the diary entries was scrutinised for quality, relevance, and adequacy. In addition, the pilot study also tested the following aspects of the Diary Studies project:

- Process: the assessment of the feasibility of the key steps, such as participant recruitment (how and when to recruit participants), response rate; participation rate, rate of completion of diary entries/study
- Resources: assessment of time required to plan and implement the project, collect, analysed and report findings versus the resources available
- Management: assessment of data management issues by the CSC Evaluation Team.

#### 3.3.1– Selection of the pilot study participant

The pilot study was conducted with the 2019 Commonwealth Alumni cohort who were within three months of returning home after completing their Scholarship (at re-integration stage). The participants were recruited through the CSC Common Room Newsletter of September 2019. The newsletter article on Diary Studies included a web link through which Alumni provided their contact details (name and email address). Only 9 Alumni registered to participate in the Diary Studies pilot project. This was followed by direct mailing (by the CSC Communications Team) to 375 Scholars returning home (all Scholarship Schemes) in 2019 to recruit more participants for the pilot project. Fifty-four (54) Alumni registered their interest to participate, resulting in a total of 63 Alumni (16.8% response rate) of 2019 registering to participate in the pilot project. Some of the 63 Alumni (11) dropped out and 52 participated in the pilot study. The approach used to administer the study followed the same steps as the trial study (with the adjustments mentioned in section 3.2.4).

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<sup>5</sup> For this study the Alumni re-integration period of interest to the CSC Evaluation Team to understand the experiences and the impact if Commonwealth Alumni is within three to six months upon returning home following the Scholarship.

### 3.3.2– Findings from the Diary Studies pilot project

This section reflects on the effectiveness of Diary Studies as a data collection method, and the tools used (online surveys) to record diary entries with the adjustments made as informed by the findings from the trial study. The design and implementation of the pilot study was informed by the findings from the trial which led to the following adjustments:

- Change in the structure of the questionnaire
- Making the online surveys more effective in collecting diary entries
- Improvement of the communication approach with Diary Studies participants
- Making instructions on completing the diary entries clearer to the participants

Drawing from the experiences of Alumni (52) who participated in the pilot study, some lessons were learned on the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data method to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

#### Frequency of recording diary entries

The pilot study participants were asked to complete a total of six diary entries at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, over a duration of three months. Out of 52 participants, a quarter (25%) completed all six entries. Overall, just over half (58%) of the participants completed four or more entries. This indicates that a fair proportion of the participants were able to commit to completing diary entries at the specified frequency and duration.

#### Effect of the Scholarship: Successes

- Of the 52 participants, over half (52%) were employed, 8% were employed and studying, 31% were not employed, but attending job interviews, while 9% did not provide details on their employment status at the time of participating in the Diary study pilot project.
- Most participants (over 85% at each diary entry) reported that they were applying a range of skills and knowledge acquired on Scholarship in their activities at workplace and local communities. Two-fifths of participants (42%) reported being involved in formal and informal training of work colleagues to share the skills and knowledge acquired on Scholarship. This indicates immediate outcomes of Commonwealth Scholarships.
- Interpersonal skills were the most reported skills used by the participants in their activities, with communication skills, presentation and networking skills being the most frequently used in this category. Other skills acquired on Scholarship and applied by the participants in their activities include research skills, writing skills, technical skills, leadership/management skills, teaching, and project management.
- The top four common activities of the Diary study participants are research (62%), management/supervision (58%), health care provision (38%), and teaching (23%).

- Through their activities Commonwealth Alumni were interacting with a range of stakeholders, who either facilitated delivery of their activities or benefited from the activities such as local NGOs, industries in the field, the private sector, media representation, police, agencies, local schools, and the local community.
- Access to library resources at their UK host universities post-Scholarship has been highlighted as a factor that enables greater impact, particularly for Alumni who are conducting research activities.

### **Challenges faced by Alumni**

- Less than half of the participants (41%) reported that they were facing challenges at the time of participating in the Diary study project.
- The most reported challenges were personal challenges (38%), lack of infrastructure and equipment (33%), lack of support within the workplace institutional challenges (33%), and lack of funding (29%).
- To overcome these challenges more than half of the participants (58%) suggested better planning and more support at organisational level, while almost half of the participants (46%) suggested reaching out to the government and other stakeholders, both local and extra-local to seek funds for facilities, equipment, and project grants, and developing partnerships and collaboration with individuals and NGOs.

Some participants were not only aware of the challenges they faced in making an impact in their home country, but some have also found ways to address these challenges and have successfully implemented developmental activities in their home country. This indicates that apart from a range of skills and knowledge acquired on Scholarship by Commonwealth Scholars, a conducive environment is required for Alumni to apply them and make an impact in their home countries. The problem-solving ability shown by Alumni is an important finding for CSC and it highlights the richness of data obtained from Diary Studies. These success stories can be shared in different knowledge sharing platforms for Alumni to learn from each other.

### **3.3.3– Findings from the Diary Studies pilot project feedback**

Following the pilot study, the participants were asked to complete a short feedback survey, with three-fifths (58%) of participants doing so. Drawing from the feedback given by the participants who gave feedback, a large percentage (87%) were generally content with the experience of participating in the pilot project. The feedback obtained is summarised below.

### **Frequency of recording diary entries and duration of a diary study**

The Diary study pilot participants were asked to complete a total of six diary entries at a frequency of one diary entry every two weeks, for a duration of three months.

- Slightly more than half (53%) of the participants found the frequency of recording diary entries appropriate, while one-third (33%) were neutral. The remainder (14%) struggled to commit to recording one diary entry every two weeks. They recommended one diary entry per month.
- Two-thirds (63%) of the participants found the duration of the Diary study appropriate, while one quarter (27%) found the duration too short, and one-tenth (10%) felt it was too long.

### **Instructions on completing the Diary study entries and reminder emails**

A large proportion of the participants (83%) found the instructions to complete Diary Studies useful. The same number found the reminder emails to complete diary entries useful.

### **The structure of the questionnaire**

Rich data was obtained from the diary entries, demonstrating the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships, as the stories from the participants followed the sequence below:

- Are Alumni applying skills and knowledge acquired on Scholarship in their activities in home country?
- What type of skills and knowledge are acquired on Scholarship?
- Where and how they are applied by Commonwealth Alumni?
- In what type of activities?
- Who is involved in these activities, and how or why are they involved?
- Who are the beneficiaries of Alumni activities?
- What challenges are faced by Alumni?
- How can the challenges be overcome, and by whom?
- What support is required by Scholars on Scholarship and upon returning home to prepare for re-integration period, and from whom?

From the data obtained, it was established that apart from acquiring skills and knowledge on Scholarship, Commonwealth Alumni require support and a conducive environment to apply the acquired skills and knowledge and make an impact in their local communities, and wider communities. The data obtained from Diary Studies can be used to identify potential interviewees and case studies for ongoing and future evaluation work.

While there were no complaints from the Diary Studies pilot participants on the existing questions and structure, an additional question was suggested, that is focused on identifying activities of Alumni prior to the Scholarship and the findings to be used as baseline data for comparison. Some Alumni recommended adding an extra dialogue box in the Diary Studies questionnaire for any other information the participants may wish to share with CSC.

## **Making the online surveys more accessible and effective for recording diary entries**

There were no complaints about the online survey tool from the Diary Studies pilot participants, and the staggering of the surveys worked well. However, from the researcher's experience of the process, extra care was required in handling data, particularly at data analysis stage to ensure that the collated data from the six separate surveys could accurately be matched with the specific participants.

Overall, all the adjustments made to the design and implementation of the Diary Studies pilot study tools were worthwhile, and we believe to some extent they positively influenced the type and the quality of data obtained from the study.

## **Suggestions for improving the Diary Studies project**

Out of the 30 participants who completed the Diary study feedback survey, just over half (57%) provided some suggestions on how to improve the Diary Studies project.

- Some participants (24%), particularly those who struggled to complete the diary entries at the specified frequency, and duration suggested diary entries of once a month and a duration of six months.
- Adding an extra dialogue box in the Diary study questionnaire for the participants to record any further information they may wish to share with CSC.
- Adding a question on activities prior to the Scholarship to obtain baseline data.
- Adopting a longitudinal approach to Diary Studies.

## **Suggestions for preparing Alumni for the re-integration period**

Most of the suggestions made by the participants were focused on enhancing employment opportunities in the Alumni's home country. The top five suggestions include creating consistent alumni networking spaces, internships while on Scholarship as part of the Scholarship, mentoring support on and after the Scholarship, workshops on employment opportunities in home country (arranged by CSC), and re-integration training while on Scholarship.

These suggestion on improving the Diary Studies project and preparing Alumni for the re-integration period will be taken into consideration when Diary Studies are incorporated as a data collection tool to measure the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

### **3.3.4– A reflection on the process, resources, and management aspects of the Diary Studies project**

In addition to testing the feasibility of Diary Studies tools, the pilot study tested the process, resources and management aspects of the project, and a reflection on these is given below.

## The process

The participation rate for the Diary Studies pilot was very low. Only 52 (14%) out of 375 Alumni invited to participate in the Diary Studies pilot project. This can be attributed to the participant recruitment process and the timing. At the CSC Farewell event held in July 2019, the Scholars were issued with information cards on Diary Studies and asked to register their interest to participate. When contacted later and invited to participate most of them did not sign-up to participate. If it is decided to scale-up the project, earlier communication, and recruitment (before the Farewell event) for Diary Studies is recommended going forward, however we note that it was not possible for the pilot project as it was first launched at the Farewell event. The farewell event could be used in the future to re-emphasise the project and remind Scholars to participate when they return home.

## Management of resources

The time required to plan and implement the project, collect, analysed and report findings versus the resources available was assessed for this project and therefore should be considered if the Diary Studies project is to be scaled-up. A Diary Studies project is time consuming, both for the researcher and the participants, considering the participatory approach used in the design of the CSC Diary Studies project, where Alumni were involved throughout the design and implementation of the project, the project will take a year to complete. However, considering that the diary studies tools have been identified and tested, it is expected that substantially less time would be required for a Diary Studies project in the future.

## Project management

This involved data management and storage of data collected from the Diary Studies project. The CSC Evaluation Team handled the data obtained from the Diary Studies participants as required by the CSC data protection policy, which is in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

## 3.4– Diary Studies project review

Upon completion of the Diary Studies pilot project, the CSC Evaluation Team reviewed the project design to guide decision making on project feasibility and possibility of scaling-up. The review of the project involved consulting external experts to review and validate the CSC Diary Studies project design.

### 3.4.1– Consulting external experts to review the CSC Diary Studies project design and implementation approach

The external experts were identified from the Commonwealth Alumni Advisory Panel (AAP). This is a panel that provides a platform for Commonwealth Alumni to share personal insights and expertise to support the development of CSC projects and activities. The AAP was introduced by CSC in 2019, and it consists of 101 members with various expertise and experiences. While the

Diary Studies project took a participatory approach from the outset, engaging recent and longstanding Alumni both in its design and implementation, engaging the AAP members with experience and expertise in project design and in using Diary Studies as a data collection method further informed the final CSC Diary Studies project design.

### 3.4.2– Selection of experts from the Alumni Advisory Panel

To identify AAP members to consult for the Diary Studies project, the CSC Evaluation Team informed the AAP about the Diary Studies project and the planned project review process through the AAP newsletter of January 2020 which included a link to a CSC webpage which provide more detailed information about the Diary Studies project, and highlighted the expertise and experiences required for the Diary Studies project review exercise. The AAP members who felt they met the selection criteria and were interested in participating in the review of the Diary Studies project were requested to register with the Alumni Engagement Team. Twenty-five (25) AAP registered to participate in the Diary Studies review. These participants were provided with more details about the Diary Studies project and the activities they were to be involved in, to review the Diary Studies project design. As part of the review activity, the following documents were shared with the AAP to review:

- **A draft methodology paper for the CSC Diary Studies project**

This paper provided details of the Diary Studies project design and implementation steps, including a summary of the aims of each step and the key findings and lessons learned in the process.

- **A questionnaire used to guide the completion of diary entries**

The CSC Evaluation Team provided the participants of the pilot and trial projects with a questionnaire to guide completion of the diary entries.

- **A feedback questionnaire**

On completion of the trial and pilot projects, the participants were requested to give feedback on their experiences with participating in the Diary Studies projects and identify areas that could be improved to make the Diary Studies tool more effective in collecting data.

To review the Diary Studies project, the AAP were requested to read through the documents listed above and give feedback via a questionnaire on the Diary Studies project design and implementation approach.

### 3.4.3– Findings from the Alumni Advisory Panel

Overall, 80% of the reviewers thought the Diary Studies tool was effective, while 20% did not comment on the effectiveness of the tool but offered suggestions on how to improve the Diary Studies tool. The reviewers gave feedback on the following aspects of the Diary Studies project:

## **The design and implementation approach used by the CSC Evaluation Team**

Most reviewers (90%) commended the design and implementation steps taken by the CSC Evaluation Team to design and implement the Diary Studies project and thought that the approach was appropriate, effective, well-structured, logical, and systematic. However, concerns were raised on the following:

- Relying on the participants volunteering is not sustainable in the long-term
- Low response rate makes the implementation approach used for the CSC Diary Studies project less effective
- Adjustments after the trial did not result in increase in completion of all 6 diary entries

## **Suggested improvements to the project design and implementation**

To improve the response rate, the reviewers suggested sensitising Scholars about Diary Studies at the start of their Scholarship and engaging and building relations with Scholars before the diary study. Continued engagement throughout the diary study is also key to keep the participants motivated. This can be achieved by using online platforms, thereby giving the participants an opportunity to share their experiences. One expert suggested that recording diary entries should be made mandatory for Scholars and Alumni to enable tracking progress post-Scholarship.

Other suggestions made by the reviewers to improve the Diary Studies project design are:

- Conducting interviews with key informants such as other Scholarship evaluators to establish why they have not used Diary Studies in Scholarship evaluations.
- Creating and sharing of a theory of change with the Diary Studies participants and reviewers.
- Using a quasi-experimental methodology/ reflexive comparison approach and collect data before and after the diary study.

## **Effectiveness of the participatory approach taken in designing and implementing the CSC Diary Studies project**

Most of the participants (95%) thought the participatory approach taken, engaging recent and long-standing Alumni in the designing and implementation of the Diary Studies project was effective. It was commended for accounting for the diversity of contexts and experiences over time, the potential to contribute to evidence-based policy and decision making and encourage easier ways of sharing experiences and establishing the social history of Alumni while identifying the challenges faced by Commonwealth Alumni.

Notable suggestions on how to improve the participatory approach to the project design and implementation approach are:

- The differentiation of the data collected from recent and long-standing Alumni, and according to study subject areas
- Long-standing Alumni participating in the trial project should have been specialists-evaluators

## **The effectiveness of the online survey tool for recording diary entries**

A large proportion (85%) of the reviewers thought that the online survey tool was effective for recording diary entries. The reviewers thought the tool was effective because it's easily accessible, flexible, engaging, and allows the researcher to start analysing data before completion of a diary study. To improve the effectiveness of the tool, 25% of the reviewers advised the inclusion of recorded audio/ video/ videoconferencing, while (15%) cautioned that online surveys are dependent on availability and accessibility to the internet and electricity supply, and this can affect the response/ participation rate. Others (10%) recommended that the surveys be accessible through a range of devices including mobile phones. A few (10%) said quick and short surveys with close ended questions should be used.

## **The effectiveness of the questionnaire used to guide diary entries**

Just over half (55%) of the reviewers thought that the questionnaire used to guide diary entries was appropriate, 35% did not comment on the questionnaire, and 10% thought it was narrow and vague. Recommendations were made on how to improve the structure of the questionnaire and the phrasing of the questions.

## **Things to consider when designing the questionnaire to guide diary entries**

The experts highlighted some key things to consider when designing the questionnaire for a diary study, and these are:

- Deciding to capture short-term or long-term impact of the activities of the participants. This should be reflected in the type of questions asked.
- Consider structuring the questions to focus on three phases, pre, on and post-Scholarship to identify the attribution of the Commonwealth Scholarships.
- Design questions to be completed within a short period of time to avoid sending too many reminders

## **Suggestions on additional questions**

- A question prompting Alumni to provide contact details of people who could be reached to verify their responses.
- A question on restrictions for collaborative research or opportunities (if any).
- Questions on the benefits of exposure to different environment and change in world view.
- The benefits of institutional opportunities such as access to library and laboratory facilities.

## **The effectiveness of the feedback questionnaire completed by the Diary Studies pilot project participants**

A large proportion (75%) of the reviewers thought the feedback questionnaire was effective, and 25% did not comment, instead offered advice on how to improve the questionnaire.

## **The structure of the questionnaire**

The experts made recommendations to improve the feedback questionnaire as follows:

- Use of four-point scale, instead of the five scale by removing the 'neutral' option whose meaning is not clear.
- Use of more open-ended questions with adequate space to record responses guided by word count to keep it short.
- Adding space for any other information the participants may wish to provide.

## **Suggestions on additional questions**

Additional questions to be included in the feedback questionnaire as suggested by the reviewers are as follows:

- A question prompting the participants to comment on the appropriateness of duration for a diary study.
- Establish if the participants would like to participate in the future.
- Establish if the participants acknowledge the acquired skills.
- Find out if participants would recommend participating in a diary study to other Alumni.
- Ask the participants what they would like changed about the diary study and why?

### **3.4.4– A summary of the recommendations made by the experts to improve the CSC Diary Studies project**

The Diary Studies project review activity provided informative feedback on the CSC Diary Studies project design and implementation approach, revealing both its strengths and weakness. The key issues to consider are:

#### **Clarity on the purpose of a particular Diary Study project and identifying research questions that can be answered using Diary Studies**

This will shape the structure of the questionnaires and the framing of the questions. Examples were given such as:

- Deciding to capture short-term or long-term impact of the activities of the participants, which should be reflected in the type of questions asked.
- Structuring the questions to focus on three phases, pre, on and post-Scholarship to identify the attribution of the Commonwealth Scholarship.

## The Methodological approach

The issues raised that concern the methodological approach involve data quality, validity, and reliability. Suggestions were made on how these can be improved, and these include:

- Measures that can be taken to improve the sampling methods. These include employing a quota non-probability sampling technique as opposed to the current convenience sampling technique. Also, to consider geographical location, programme of study, current and long-standing Alumni both in sampling and in segregating responses/findings which can be compared.
- Addressing low response rate, with particular emphasis on regular communication and building relations with participants prior to conducting a diary study, and keeping the participants motivated throughout the study. The use of Alumni associations or groups in each country to boost participation rate was also mentioned. In addition, the CSC was urged to consider offering incentives for participation. Suggested incentives include, publishing the names of the participants in the CSC website, book prizes, journals, CSC calendars, diaries, and lucky draws.
- Creating a theory of change with some indicators of success and expected outcomes which can be compared with the data collected to identify unexpected outcomes.
- Collection and use of baseline data for comparison
- Triangulation of data sources, methods, and coders

The CSC Evaluation Team will consider the advice given by the experts to further improve the effectiveness of the Diary Studies instrument, which has shown a lot of potential to collect rich data from both Scholars and Alumni.

# Section 4– Limitations and challenges of the diary method as a tool to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships

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The diary method has shown a lot of potential as a data collection tool to obtain data on the outcomes and impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships, particularly in capturing Alumni experiences, activities, and events ‘in the moment.’ While this method offers a suitable alternative to field studies, as reaching out to all Alumni for field observations is a challenge for the CSC Evaluation Team due to limited resources, some limitations of the diary method have been identified as follows:

- **Selection of appropriate tools**

The selection and use of appropriate (easy for the participants to use) and effective (ability to capture relevant and adequate data) tools to record diary entries, as well as determining the appropriate frequency and duration of the study is important, yet time consuming.

- **Quality of data**

Lack of direct observations means CSC has limited control of the quality of data obtained, as it relies on the data reported by Alumni which depends largely on the ability of the participants to express themselves to give detailed stories. In addition, the type of tools used to record diary entries and the frequency of completing diary entries may affect the type and quality of data provided by the participants.

- **Loss of data**

Recording diary entries is time consuming, and some data may be lost due to time constraints, as participants may fail to record a diary entry when it is due to be completed.

- **Sample size**

The Evaluation Team has very limited control of the sample size as it relies on Alumni volunteering to participate in the project, and this can affect generalisability of the findings. However, sample size may not be crucial if the focus of the study is to understand the phenomena- experiences of Commonwealth Alumni and their impact in their local communities.

## 4.1– Measures taken to mitigate limitations of Diary Studies

Below are some steps that were taken by the CSC Evaluation Team to mitigate the limitations and challenges of Diary Studies and the selected tools to record diary entries.

#### 4.1.1– Engaging participants (Alumni) in designing and implementing the Diary Studies project

A participatory approach to the Diary Studies project was taken from the outset, engaging recent and longstanding Alumni both in its design and implementation. Through the scoping survey which was administered to Commonwealth Alumni prior to implementing the trial project, Alumni (most of whom participated in the Diary Studies trial project) had an opportunity to shape the design and implementation of the CSC Diary Studies project. Alumni were involved in determining the potential tools for recording diary entries, the frequency of recording Diary Studies entries that would be suitable, while allowing the capture of relevant and adequate data, and the appropriate duration for a diary study. In addition, a feedback survey was conducted with the trial and pilot study participants to identify areas of improvement for the Diary Studies project from the perspective of the participants. This approach helped to improve the effectiveness of Diary Studies as a data collection method, not only in terms of ease of use for the participants, but also effectiveness in terms of gathering reliable and usable data to measure the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

#### 4.1.2– Testing the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection tool

To test the feasibility of Diary Studies as a data collection method that can be used by CSC to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships, the effectiveness of the tool was assessed with regards to the following:

- The extent to which the Diary Studies instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. This includes the type and quality data that can be obtained to measure the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships.
- The extent to which the questionnaire accurately assesses what CSC would want to know about the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.
- The overall design of the Diary Studies project.

The following steps were taken to address the issues raised above:

- A scoping survey (to identify tools for recording diary entries, appropriate frequency of recording diary entries, and the duration of a Diary Studies).
- A trial study to test the feasibility of the Diary Studies tools (survey-based diaries) identified by the scoping survey, and to gauge the effectiveness of the questionnaire used to guide the diary entries in collecting data on the experiences of Alumni post-Scholarship, and to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.
- A pilot study to further refine the tools, and to assess issues such as the project process, resources, and management (of the project and the data).
- A feedback survey was conducted with the trial and pilot participants to understand their experiences with survey-based diaries and the Diary Studies project as a whole
- The findings were shared with the trial and pilot participants to validate the findings.

- Members of the AAP with expertise in research design and experience in using Diary Studies were consulted to review and validate the Diary Studies project design.

#### 4.1.3– Generalisability of findings from Diary Studies

The sample size determines the generalisability of the findings of a study. However, for CSC it is a challenge to get a representative sample size. In addition, while the Diary Studies project was designed to collect mainly qualitative data on the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships from Alumni who are in different countries and contexts, generalisability of the research findings is a debatable attribute, and yet pertinent particularly with the rising trend of knowledge synthesis in qualitative research. In the event of project scaling-up, this could be mitigated by segregating participants of Diary Studies for each Alumni cohort used making use of parameters such as geographic location, study programme and gender. The data collected could be then collated and compared between Alumni cohorts (to observe if there are any trends that can be country specific/ sector specific/ specific to re-integration period) for example, the type of challenges faced by Alumni. Baseline data can also be collected prior to a diary study for comparison. This approach would help the CSC to better understand the experiences of Alumni and the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships as well as identify factors that contribute to the success of Alumni activities and possible measures that can be taken to support Scholars pre and post-Scholarship.

#### 4.1.4– Reliability of Diary Studies as a data collection method

Triangulation of data collection methods and data sources could be adopted, as a pragmatic approach to improve the reliability of data. The original project plan included the possibility of conducting in-depth interviews with the pilot study participants, but this activity has not been executed at this point due to resource and time constraints. It is recommended that interviews be conducted in future (with stakeholders, employers, and beneficiaries of Alumni activities-as identified by Alumni in their diary entries), in combination with Diary Studies to triangulate data sources and to verify the data collected from Alumni, hence improve internal validity of data and reliability (consistency) of the findings. Meanwhile, the Evaluation Team is considering conducting follow-up interviews with some of the pilot study participants, particularly those that were unemployed at the time of the study.

# Section 5: The strength of diary methods compared to the existing CSC data collection methods

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Overall, Diary Studies offer a suitable alternative to field studies, as reaching out to all Alumni for field observations may be a challenge for the CSC Evaluation Team due to limited resources. Diary Studies can be carried out virtually, and therefore can be potentially an effective use of resources and of relevance at a time when the ability to travel and undertake on the ground field work is limited. But how effective is the tool in identifying the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships?

The CSC Diary Studies project tested the feasibility and effectiveness of Diary Studies as a data collection tool for CSC evaluation work. The findings reveal that Diary Studies are a promising tool that can be used to complement other traditional tools such as the self-administered longitudinal evaluation surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews already used by CSC to identify the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships. While these research tools have enabled the collection of large amounts of data on Scholar and Alumni experiences, and on the outcomes and impact of Commonwealth Scholarships, they do have limitations in that they mostly gather data about events and activities of Alumni that may have occurred months or years after the Scholarship, at which point some elements of experiences and activities may not be recalled. This might lead to missing small or unexpected benefits and outcomes of the Commonwealth Scholarships.

Meanwhile, Diary Studies will offer an opportunity for Commonwealth Alumni to report their experiences and events in-the-moment and in context, capturing thoughts and feelings on the impact they are making in their working environment, local communities, and wider contexts. The participants of the Diary Studies pilot recorded their activities as they happened and sent their diary entries to CSC Evaluation Team every two weeks for a duration of three months. Over this short period, rich data was obtained giving the Commission a vivid picture of how Commonwealth Alumni are using the skills and knowledge obtained on Scholarship to make an impact in their local communities.

The participants described their responsibilities in their current employment, and identified specific skills and knowledge gained or enhanced on Scholarship, and where and how they were applied to influence the success of their activities at workplaces and local communities. This demonstrated the relevance of the acquired skills to the local context. Apart from applying the acquired skills, the participants also identified stakeholders they interacted with in planning and delivering their activities, as well as the beneficiaries of these activities, and how or what they benefitted. While understanding the context of Alumni activities was key in analysis and interpreting qualitative data from the diary entries, it also gave an in-depth understanding of the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships.

While Diary Studies have the potential to reveal the benefits of Commonwealth Scholarships, the pilot study also identified challenges and potential obstacles met by recently returned Scholars that may not be picked up by our existing survey instruments. From the Diary Studies pilot project, we learn about the challenges faced by Alumni, and how some Alumni have successfully found mechanisms to overcome their challenges and are making an impact in their local communities.

The findings also provided information about the support required by Scholars while on Scholarship to prepare for the re-integration period and the support required upon returning home, and from whom. This information is key as it informs CSC strategies and activities focused on preparing Alumni to make an impact upon returning home after the Scholarship.

Since 2016, the CSC Evaluation Team has been administering longitudinal surveys to measure the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships scheduled at two-year intervals for a duration of 10 years, with the first longitudinal survey administered two years after returning home following the Scholarship. If judged successful, an initial data collection point using the Diary Studies tool could be the initial or early re-integration period (within 3-6 months of returning home after the completion of their Commonwealth Scholarship), thereby bridging the gap (in data collection) between the completion of studies and administration of the first longitudinal survey (two years after completion of studies). The CSC Evaluation Team will also consider other research questions that might usefully be answered or better understood through this method, whether on its own or in conjunction with other tools

Alongside the need to incorporate a range of methods, thereby triangulating data collection methods to investigate the outcomes and impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships, the participatory approach of engaging Alumni in the design and implementation approach used by the CSC Evaluation Team contributes to the Alumni Engagement Strategy. In addition, piloting of the Diary Studies project lays the foundation for a more participatory approaches when planning evaluation work.

## Summary

While the Diary Studies method has its limitations, the approach used in designing the project and the precautions taken to minimise the limitations of the tool, it appears that with suitable adjustments while taking into consideration the advice from the experts, it is a promising and feasible tool that can be adopted by CSC to identify the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships. Moreover, it can be used in combination with other traditional methods used by CSC to triangulate data collection methods. In addition, the methodological approach used in designing the Diary Studies project can be transferred to methodological designs to be explored in the future, particularly the participatory aspect of the design, where Alumni are actively involved in the design and implementation of the data collection tools. The selection and use of appropriate (easy for the participants to use) and effective (ability to capture relevant and adequate data) tools is crucial to the success of a project. Diary Studies can also be a valuable tool in identifying potential candidates for case Studies and Alumni profiles which will also feed into ongoing and future evaluation work and other CSC projects. The findings from this study will also be shared with Commissioners and colleagues within the CSC Secretariat, particularly the CSC Alumni Engagement Team and thus inform future work with Commonwealth Alumni.

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