



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Experiences of Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni:

Enabling and Constraining Factors
to Scholarship Impact

CSC Evaluation Programme Working Paper

Introduction

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK has offered almost 30,000 Scholarships or Fellowships since 1960, with the primary objective being to provide opportunities for talented and motivated individuals from across the Commonwealth, particularly from low- and middle-income countries, to gain knowledge and skills and ultimately contribute to sustainable development. They can study from a wide range of subjects whilst on award and return to a wide variety of contexts and sectors after their studies, all of which provides a challenge for the evaluation of the programmes and can have a significant influence on their ability to apply what they learned, make change, and ultimately have an impact.

Anecdotal and qualitative data gathered from Alumni over the years has strongly suggested that these environments and contexts can act as either enabling or constraining factors (or in some cases both) when it comes to allowing Alumni to secure relevant employment, apply and share their acquired skills and knowledge, and realise their potential for development impact. This knowledge gave us the impetus to explore the post-award evaluation data collected between 2016-2020 from various programme specific surveys in a more focussed way, with the aim of drawing out recurring themes relating to enabling factors and challenges faced by Alumni. The aim is to use these findings not only to better understand the issues faced by Alumni on their return home but also to establish how CSC and other stakeholders can support current and future Scholars and Alumni in anticipating and navigating these challenges and help them to reach their full potential.

1. Data Sources and Methodology

To investigate the experiences and activities of Alumni and the enabling or constraining factors to making development impact in their local communities and beyond, the following data sources were examined:

1. The Reintegration Survey conducted by the CSC Alumni Team in 2018
2. The Diary Studies project conducted in 2019 with recent and long-standing Alumni to collect narratives on Alumni activities and their developmental impact.
3. The Split-site programme review data
4. The 2016-2020 data set from the ongoing CSC Longitudinal Survey

The data from the Reintegration Survey and Diary Studies projects were scanned first to identify any initial themes on enabling and constraining factors that have been reported by Alumni. These were then cross-referenced with the findings from the Split-site review and synthesised into categories and a set of themes to build on when examining the longitudinal data, which was also parsed by demographic variables.

To identify the themes, the data sources were investigated for any of the following:

- On-award experiences and activities that empower Alumni to deliver development outcomes.
- The interactions and relationships established by Alumni on and post-award, and how these have supported or hindered activities of Alumni in their home country.
- Contextual factors such as workplace, community, or national environments, or resource-based factors that have facilitated or hindered the achievement of outcomes and impact.
- Any other experiences or activities mentioned by Alumni that contributed positively or negatively to the application of skills and knowledge and developmental activities post-award.

It should be noted that the enabling and constraining factors can overlap or be multi-layered, for example a lack of funding can affect how an organisation functions, with limiting resources available to Alumni like equipment or human resources.

2. Enabling Factors for Development Outcomes and Impact

Nine enabling factors were identified in the data. These were:

2.1. On-award experiences and activities that empower Alumni to deliver development outcomes

These include interactions or activities that equip or prepare Alumni to be able to apply what they learned and to better overcome challenges (expected and unexpected) upon returning home. These included attending CSC activities and training workshops such as the development module, welcome day, regional network events, and mentoring programme.

2.2. Interactions and relationships established by CSC Alumni on- and post-Scholarship

These associations have played a pivotal role in facilitating the achievement of outcomes and impact post-award. These relationships include academics, professionals, colleagues and personal contacts in the UK, home country and elsewhere. The support from these groups can be in the form of collaborative projects, activities, offering advice, and facilitating the establishment of partnerships between institutions.

2.3. Contextual factors

Contextual factors can also play a role in Alumni achieving development outcomes, particularly support from others. Alumni identified multiple areas where others' support helped them:

Support in the workplace

Support in the workplace was one factor mentioned by Alumni. Several (or many?) report that the ability to apply what they learned in the workplace or in their work activities requires a conducive work environment. Alumni that have been successful in doing this have attributed this to their work colleagues, managers and supervisors being open to new ideas and change and giving Alumni an opportunity to implement that change.

Support from the local community

The work of some Alumni involves direct interaction with local community members or community-based organisations. Alumni reported that successfully working with local community members largely depends on the **willingness of the community to participate and engage**, which requires Alumni to connect with the community. The education level of Alumni, and their demonstrated knowledge and personal commitment to community networking and engagement contributes to **building community trust and confidence**. This plays a pivotal role in implementing activities in the community.

Support from government

The local government is another key stakeholder that has supported Alumni's work. Specific support received from the government include **funding for projects or activities, employment creation, and a stable political environment**. Other Alumni also reported success in implementing development activities due to **relevant government policies and legal frameworks** being put in place.

Support from other stakeholders

Other stakeholders have also been actively involved in Alumni activities, either through their own initiative or when they have been invited to participate by Alumni. This involvement includes **participating in the planning and execution of Alumni activities** in the workplace and in the local community, as well as being open to training by Alumni where required. This is one way that Alumni share the skills and knowledge acquired on award to positively influence stakeholders and local development. This can include influential stakeholders like parliamentarians, NGOs, government ministries, agencies, and social enterprises.

2.4. Support from UK supervisor

Some Alumni reported that they were in touch with their UK Supervisors after their award and are benefiting from their **advice** or are involved in **collaboration on projects or publications**. Other Alumni have said that while working under their UK supervisors on-award they observed the research and teaching approaches used, which they have since adopted in their own workplace.

2.5. Support from the UK institution

Apart from the technical knowledge and skills gained on award, some Alumni have continued to receive support from their UK institution, mainly in the form of **partnerships** with Alumni's home institution to conduct **collaborative research projects**, in some cases **funded by the UK institution**.

2.6. Experience gained from UK institution

Alumni reported gains from the UK institution learning culture as well as exposure to resources such as laboratory equipment, and interactions with other scholars.

Some Alumni report that they have **adopted and implemented the UK education style and culture observed while in the UK**, including the teaching approaches observed while on-award. They have also improved student-lecturer relationships to ensure students are kept motivated, which has a positive impact on their learning.

The **exposure to laboratory or other equipment** has motivated some Alumni to improve laboratory standards back home. This has been achieved through the successful application for grants to purchase equipment or convincing their employers to purchase updated equipment, allowing them to conduct research or other activities more effectively.

UK institutions also provided an environment to meet and work with others from diverse backgrounds, and this **exposure to different cultural backgrounds** has been highlighted by some Alumni as having contributed to improving the way they work with others.

Others mentioned **exposure to the UK/International environment** in general, with specific reference to how they were able to adapt to a new environment and the importance of this in enhancing their ability to be resilient and adjust to challenging situations in their workplace and home country.

2.7. The role of soft skills in facilitating the achievement of outcomes and impact

While Alumni value the technical skills and knowledge which they use in their development-oriented activities, many also highlighted that the soft skills they gained on award have enabled them to successfully apply the acquired technical skills and knowledge. They also said that some soft skills allowed them to better interact with work colleagues and other stakeholders. The most mentioned soft skills were confidence, critical thinking, networking, mentoring, self-motivation, writing skills.

Other soft skills mentioned were problem-solving, leadership, discipline, presentation, and innovation. A range of teamwork skills were also identified by Alumni including communication, listening, empathy, collaboration, cultural intelligence, and open-mindedness.

2.8. Volunteering and Mentoring

The drive to positively contribute has seen some Alumni motivated to take up volunteering opportunities while between jobs or in addition to their formal employment and apply what they learned on award in their volunteering activities. Others have used volunteering activities to further enhance their confidence, to meet and interact with new people, and to learn to adjust to an unfamiliar environment.

2.9. Personal changes/efforts

Finally, upon returning home, some Alumni have made personal changes that have contributed to the successful delivery of activities to achieve development impact. These include:

- A positive change of **attitude** towards work, better planning of their workloads, and addressing family issues that may affect work activities. Some Alumni have reported being better listeners, more open-minded and more sensitive to the culture and backgrounds of the people they interact with.
- Identifying and implementing effective methods of applying new skills to the workplace and local communities to achieve change and development impact.
- Adjusting to **using very limited resources** to deliver developmental activities.
- Contacting and making use of their **existing local and external networks** and expanding these networks.

However, while the factors mentioned above can help enable Alumni in their pursuit of development outcomes and impact, Alumni may also face a number of constraints and barriers in their post-Scholarship career.

3. Constraints and Barriers to Development Outcomes and Impact

Eight constraining factors were also identified in the data. In some cases, these are mirror images of the enabling factors, but it is important to recognise the role that these opposing situations can play in impairing the ability of Alumni to achieve their full potential in terms of impact.

3.1. Lack of funding

A lack of funding has been reported as one factor that hinders the implementation of developmental activities such as **projects, networking/knowledge sharing** events or to attend activities such as **conferences, workshops**, purchase/improving the quality of **resources and equipment** and to expand the services delivered by an organisation. The government, employer, and other stakeholders have all been identified as potential funders who have not been able to provide funds for developmental activities.

3.2. Lack of support at workplace

This includes a lack of an enabling and supportive environment to conduct activities and make an impact. This can be due to the **structure of the organisation** such as limited human resources, technical support, capacity gaps, and a lack of sufficiently trained and motivated staff. It can also be due to **management approaches** such as overly bureaucratic processes that hinder progress as well as **to a lack of physical resources** such as appropriate equipment due to insufficient funds.

Lack of support from the organisation can also stem from **negative attitudes from the employer and other work colleagues** who may not be open to new ideas and are resistant to change, making it difficult to apply skills and knowledge gained on award and make an impact. In some cases, this has been worsened by **poor interpersonal relations within the workplace**. **Meeting employer expectations** around the skills sets required for the job also emerged as a challenge for some, while others complained of being overloaded with work as a result of acquiring new skills and knowledge which has affected their ability to undertake activities with tangible impact.

3.3. Lack of support from the local community

Resistance to change from local communities emerged as a challenge for some Alumni. To some extent a lack of knowledge or low literacy level in the community around a concept, and unwillingness to learn new things contributed to this resistance to change. Some Alumni have faced **criticism and poor attendance at workshops**. **Community norms and values** also emerged as contributors to gender discrimination and lack of respect for female leadership, making it difficult for some Alumni to communicate, share knowledge, or influence change. In some cases, there can be **security issues in the community** which prevent activities.

3.4. Lack of equipment/tools/materials/infrastructure

This includes **training equipment**, or **lack of transport** to reach out to communities due to poor infrastructure. Also includes **lack of access to resources** such as databases, research material, **lack of electricity power supply**, and **poor internet access**.

3.5. Political challenges/Lack of government support

Some Alumni have experienced an **unstable political environment** in their home countries which has impacted negatively on their plans/activities for development impact. Some have faced resistance from political leaders. Others have found that despite a stable political environment, some **political leaders and policy makers** can be difficult to work with as they tend to have **varied interests, views, and opinions** which are fixed and therefore **resist change**. Other Alumni struggle with **lack of legislation** or policy that can support their work towards developmental impact.

3.6. Lack of support from relevant stakeholders

Some Alumni reported that where their work involves interaction with other local/extra-local stakeholders to deliver developmental projects/activities they struggle to get **timely responses from stakeholders**. Stakeholders may also have **conflicting ideas** about the projects, making it difficult to deliver on some projects.

3.7. Corruption and terrorism

A few Alumni reported **corruption in their country** as a hindrance to achieving development outcomes, with particular mention of **lack of employment** as securing a good job was largely dependent on the networks one has in the industry, as opposed to relevant academic qualifications. This has seen some Alumni struggle to secure employment upon completing their studies and therefore unable to apply the acquired skills and knowledge to contribute to

developmental activities. Terrorism in some countries has also been mentioned as a security challenge preventing Alumni from conducting developmental activities.

3.8. Personal challenges

Finally, Alumni reported some challenges that can be categorised as personal challenges which have an impact on their ability to deliver activities. These include **re-adjusting to the local culture** (both work culture and general local community culture), and the ability to build and **maintain interpersonal relationships inside and outside the workplace**. Others faced **unemployment** upon returning home which was attributed to various reasons such as **lack of employability skills**, **changing their career paths** after their studies, and harsh economic conditions. A few also reported that **meeting family expectations** after completing their studies was a challenge.

4. Actions Taken in Response to Findings

Based on these findings, the CSC's Alumni Engagement Team and Communications and Engagement Team have worked collaboratively to maintain, improve, or introduce new training programmes, networking events, and development opportunities for CSC Scholars and Alumni that will prepare and empower them to better overcome challenges (expected and unexpected) upon returning home. Following on from the results of the work of the Evaluation Team summarised above, the ongoing Development Training Programme for CSC Scholars and Alumni has been evolved into the current 'Leaders in Sustainable Development Programme' which offers over 26 workshops.

Figure 1 – Selection of workshops run by the CSC before and after the study

Workshops offered by CSC before 2019	Workshops offered by CSC from 2019
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bid/Grant Writing • Research Impact Writing • Science Communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research proposal and grant writing for development impact • Writing for Development • Writing & communicating in diverse teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Project Management • Networking for leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Project Management • Leadership models & decision making • Mastering Networking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social entrepreneurship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social entrepreneurship • Launching your own social project • Preparing for social impact: strategy planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership and cultural intelligence • Employability Skills • Public Engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Intelligence • Transitioning to a career

The CSC Communications and Engagement Team has also taken steps to identify on-line courses hosted on the FutureLearn platform on subjects which complement the CSC's bespoke 'Understanding Development Impact' course (also hosted on the FutureLearn platform) and encouraged Scholars to complete the CSC's course during their time on Scholarship. This course covers a range of useful soft skills, including building communities of practice, working with partners, influencing stakeholders, and encouraging peer discussion on practical aspects such as project cycles and evaluation methodologies.

Following the Evaluation Team's work on enabling and constraining factors, the Alumni Engagement Team developed and introduced online resources for Professional and Personal Development that can be accessed by Alumni on the CSC website. It includes a range of resources on topics such as Employability Skills, Evaluating Impact, Research and Funding, and grant opportunities.

Another resource available to Scholars and Alumni are the CSC Knowledge Hubs, which provide a platform for Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni studying and working in similar disciplines to network and exchange ideas to support shared sustainable development outcomes. Alumni Associations are also currently running in 26 Commonwealth countries to help CSC Alumni to support each other. These are coordinated by Alumni volunteers who are responsible for organising a range of local events and activities which encourage networking and ongoing professional development.

Since 2019, the CSC has also offered a Mentoring Programme with the aim to connect Commonwealth Scholars with Alumni to support knowledge and skills development as well as provide a practical understanding for Scholars of how these can be implemented post-Scholarship to achieve development impact. Current Scholars are paired with an Alumnus working in a related or relevant field to their studies so that they can provide individual advice and guidance to a Scholar during their studies. As a Mentee, new Commonwealth Scholars have the opportunity to develop their understanding of how the skills gained during their Commonwealth Scholarship can be implemented to support development impact in their home country, drawing on their Mentor's experiences and expertise.

In addition, when Scholars return home, the British Council delivers a range of welcome home events and reintegration workshops. These events provide an opportunity to be introduced to and build relationships with in-country Commonwealth Alumni networks. The workshops also focus on equipping Alumni with employability skills and are often delivered in collaboration with a human resource consultant who provides focused information on the employability landscape specific to that Commonwealth country. Some of these workshops also seek to address reverse culture shock. The next steps will involve expanding these welcome home events to other Commonwealth countries, as they are currently only offered in 12 British Council served countries.

The CSC continues to investigate and identify more innovative ways to support Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni so that the skills and knowledge acquired during the Scholarship are effectively applied to deliver development outcomes in their respective communities and beyond.

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