Consultation on the Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025

Alumni Advisory Panel Report
2021-2023 Panel

Executive Summary

The CSC's Alumni Advisory Panel provides a platform for Commonwealth Alumni to support the future of the programme and its Scholars by sharing personal insight and expertise to contribute to the development of CSC activities. Panel members are appointed for a two-year term and are expected to advise on at least one activity per year. The panel is comprised of 98 members.

In 2018, the CSC approved a renewed three-year Alumni Engagement Strategy for the period 2018-2021, which built upon the 2014-2017 holistic alumni engagement strategy. The strategy introduced five core objectives under which ongoing activities were categorised and new activities developed. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CSC engagement activities in 2020-2021, the three-year strategy was extended for a further year until 2022.

A renewed three-year Alumni Engagement Strategy is now required for the period 2022-2025. The renewed strategy will draw on successes of the previous strategy, areas for development, and consider activities which are no longer relevant.

As part of the strategy development, the CSC Alumni Team sought feedback from alumni in May 2021 to assess the level of awareness of CSC alumni activities, engagement, and interest in these activities to identify further areas for development as part of a renewed strategy and approach. Following this feedback and internal consultation, a draft strategy was developed and shared with the Alumni Advisory Panel 2019-2021.

A further draft of the Alumni Engagement Strategy was developed and members of the Alumni Advisory Panel 2021-2023 were invited to consult on this to inform further refinement and activity delivery.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions on each activity via an online survey. The questions were aimed at understanding current engagement levels and awareness of existing alumni engagement opportunities, gathering feedback on the draft Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025 and areas for further development, and identifying priority areas for alumni engagement.

As part of the consultation, the following documents were shared with participating panel members:

- Draft CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025

- CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2021

- CSC Alumni Engagement survey 2021- report (optional reading)

The task was open to all panel members. 51 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 52%. An additional 7 panel members partially completed the survey. Their responses have been included in the below analysis where submitted.
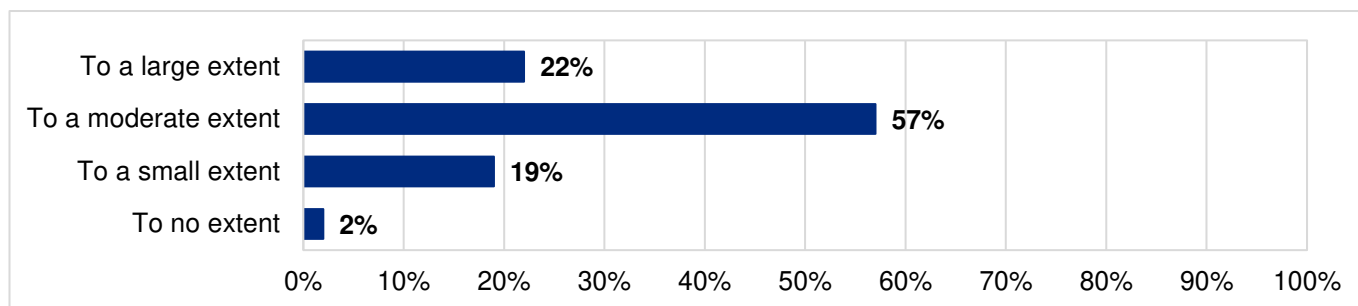
Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Self-assessment; Assessing strategy objectives and activities; Recommendations for further development; Strategy delivery; Final comments and feedback on the draft Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025; Event delivery and engagement; and
Final review.

Self-assessment

Before providing feedback on the draft Alumni Engagement Strategy, respondents were asked a series of short questions designed to assess their level of awareness and engagement in existing alumni activities and provide further insights on strategy development.
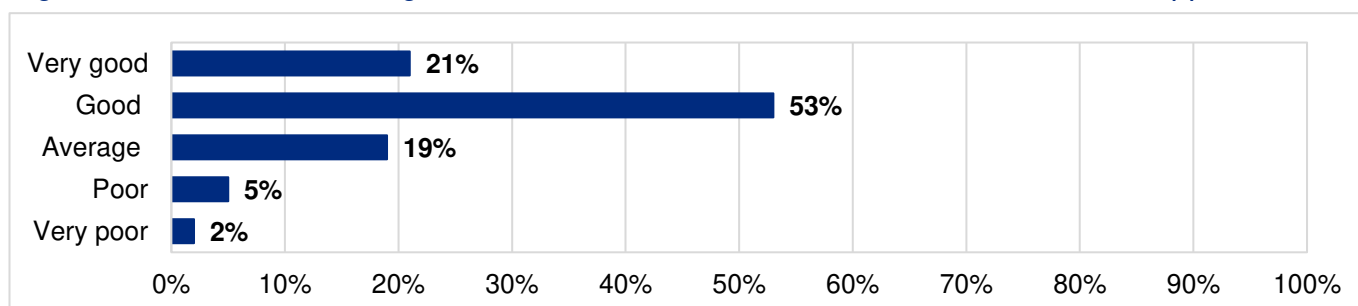
Figures 1-3 provide an overview of responses.

Figure 1 – To what extent do you feel you are engaged with the CSC Alumni Network?
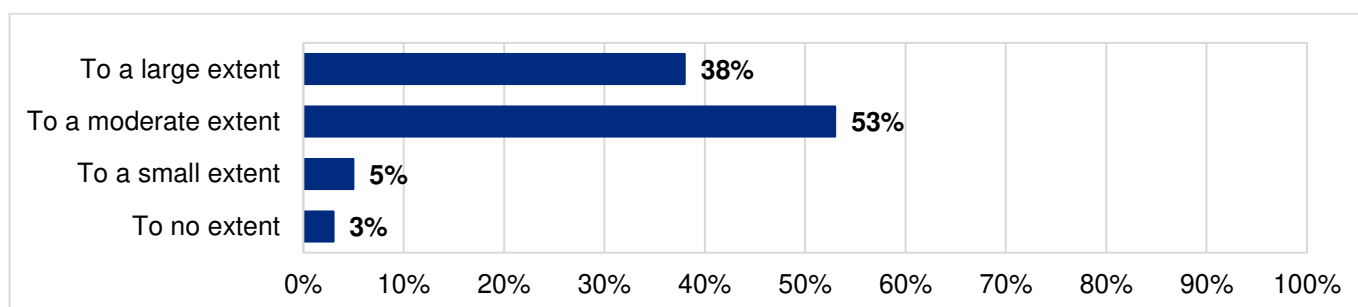
Extent	Percentage
To a large extent	22%
To a moderate extent	57%
To a small extent	19%
To no extent	2%

n=58

Figure 2 – Level of knowledge about the CSC Alumni Network and activities and opportunities

Level	Percentage
Very good	21%
Good	53%
Average	19%
Poor	5%
Very poor	2%

n=58

Figure 3 – Extent to which respondents feel connected to the CSC as a Commonwealth Scholar/ Alumnus

Extent	Percentage
To a large extent	38%
To a moderate extent	53%
To a small extent	5%
To no extent	3%

n=58

The majority of respondents self-assessed a **good understanding** of current alumni engagement activities and feeling **moderately engaged** by these offerings. Most respondents felt connected to the CSC as a Commonwealth Scholar/Alumnus, which highlighted those respondents were continuing to identify with the CSC and its community following their Scholarship.

Respondents were asked to select the **alumni activities they had engaged in between January – November 2021.**

The **top five scoring** activities were: reading The Common Room (76%); engaging in an alumni association (48%); reading and/or contributing to Common Knowledge (47%); participating in the CSC's Mentoring Programme (33%); and attending Knowledge Hub webinars (33%) (n=58).

The **lowest scoring activities** were: taking part in CSC team interviews (8%) and participating in the CSC Research Impact Awards (RIA) (5%).

Two respondents reported that they had not engaged in any of the activities listed. The two respondents who selected 'Other' shared their participation in the Scholarships Alumni Climate Change Hackathon and referring potential applicants.

Activities respondents engaged in the most were open to all alumni, except for the CSC's Mentoring Programme, and promoted through direct mailings and across several CSC channels. The lowest scoring activities had limited participation, with alumni invited to take part in interviews by CSC teams only and RIA eligible to doctoral Scholars and alumni up to 10 years post-Scholarship.

Respondents were next asked to select from the activities they had not engaged in if there were any they were not aware of. Activities the most **respondents reported not to be aware** of were: applications toolkit (52%); taking part in CSC team interviews (40%); alumni conference, Interchange 21 (36%); RIA (31%); and in-country events (26%) (n=58).

As noted above, RIA and interviews have limited participation due to the activity set-up and eligibility. The alumni conference, Interchange, piloted in 2021 and was open to all Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni. Low awareness may be attributed to this and limited promotion both pre- and post-conference during the pilot. Of those reporting not to be aware of in-country events, most respondents were from countries which held events during this period, highlighting promotion and communication to be a factor in engagement with this activity. The applications toolkit received low engagement during the current strategy period which is supported by this response.

Elaborating on their answers, respondents shared that **more regular and direct communications** were needed to increase awareness, with a number reporting that they would be interested to learn more and engage but **did not have or could not find sufficient information.** Some recent alumni respondents noted that they were **still exploring how to engage** with the alumni network following their studies.

Reasons for not engaging in known activities included **competing commitments, time zone restrictions, eligibility, and accessibility.** Accessibility was particularly noted for in-person events which were reported to be typically held in major cities which limited the ability for some alumni to attend. For some respondents, there were no in-person events offered in their country.

Assessing strategy objectives and activities

The draft Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025 is underpinned by three new core objectives to which all existing and new activities have been assigned. Each activity is designed to meet the overall objective.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt activities met the objectives they had been assigned and provide further comments and feedback on these ratings.

Figure 4 – Extent to which activities meet Objective 1
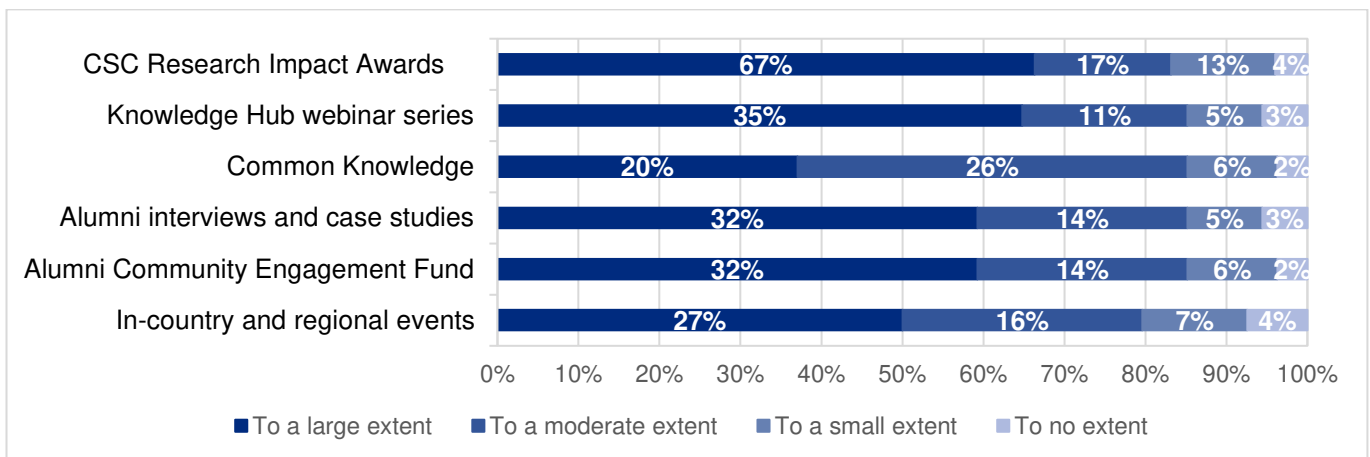
n=54

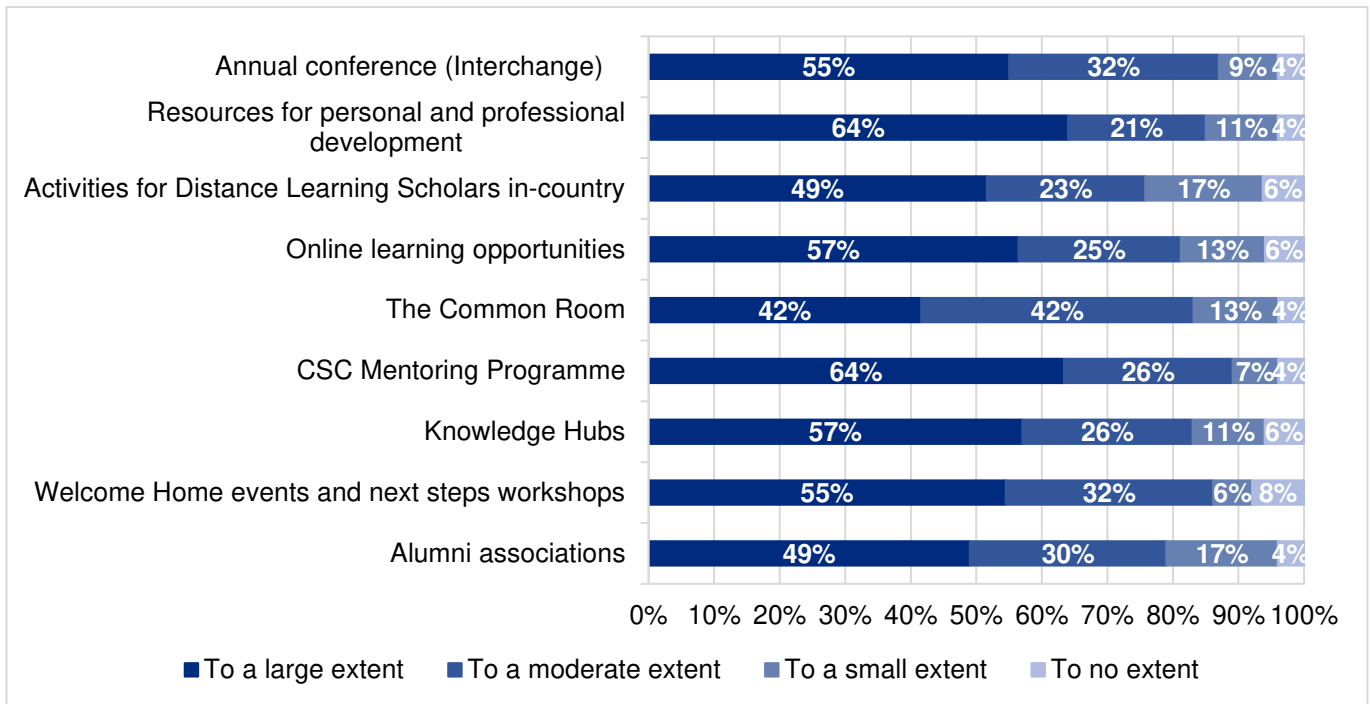Figure 4 shows most respondents felt the existing activities assigned to Objective 1 met this. Respondents shared that the activities **encouraged alumni to interact and engage** around developing innovative solutions and the activities addressed both **small and large scale impact**. RIA and the Alumni Community Engagement Fund received the highest number of follow-up comments, with several respondents commenting that they provided **practical demonstration** of alumni applying their skills and knowledge.

One respondent noted that the monitoring and evaluation approaches for these activities would be critical in assessing their impact, with some requiring more robust approaches to understand how they meet the objective. This was reiterated by other respondents who noted the **passive and active nature** of some of the activities, highlighting the need to **re-frame and articulate** these activities within the scope of the objective as part of their promotion.

Some respondents felt RIA should be opened to masters alumni to increase this opportunity, with one respondent adding that it could be expanded to encompass other award streams for those not working in research, for example professional impact.

Figure 5 – Extent to which activities meet Objective 2

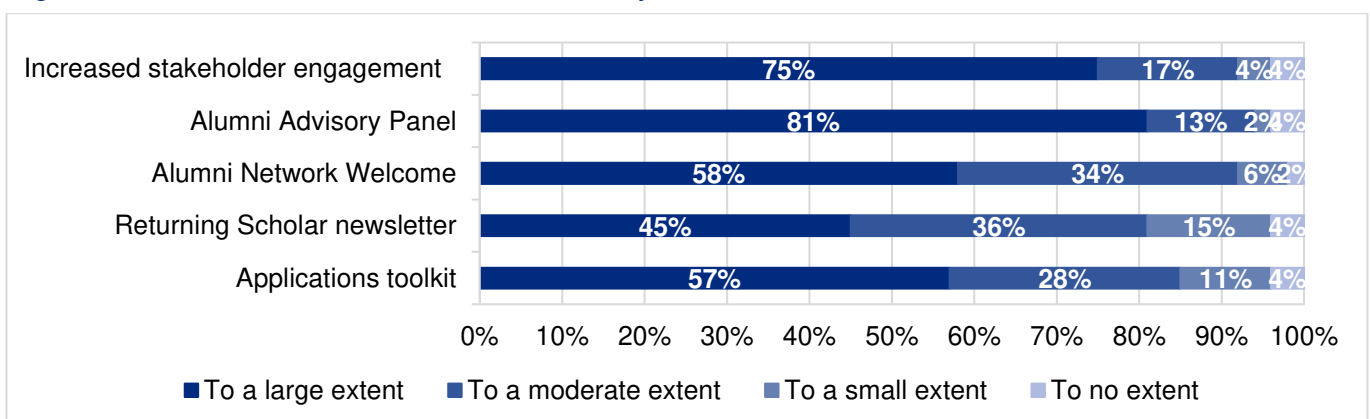| Activity	To a large extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	To no extent
Annual conference (Interchange)	55%	32%	9%	4%
Resources for personal and professional development	64%	21%	11%	4%
Activities for Distance Learning Scholars in-country	49%	23%	17%	6%
Online learning opportunities	57%	25%	13%	6%
The Common Room	42%	42%	13%	4%
CSC Mentoring Programme	64%	26%	7%	4%
Knowledge Hubs	57%	26%	11%	6%
Welcome Home events and next steps workshops	55%	32%	6%	8%
Alumni associations	49%	30%	17%	4%

n=53

Figure 5 shows most respondents felt the existing activities assigned to Objective 2 met this, with one respondent sharing that they felt this was a **needed objective within the strategy**. The mix of in-person and online engagement opportunities were popular amongst respondents as it was felt this would **enable greater participation**. A few respondents noted that online opportunities were not accessible in all cases and that **in-person delivery** should be considered where possible.

A few respondents shared that **alumni associations were not active** in their country and that they would need to be revived to support this objective and offer a valuable opportunity for alumni. The same was noted for the Knowledge Hubs, which have limited user engagement.

Respondents highlighted the **importance of communication and promotion** to increase engagement and that the scope of implementation should be considered to monitor and evaluate these activities and return on engagement.

Figure 6 – Extent to which activities meet Objective 3

| Activity	To a large extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	To no extent
Increased stakeholder engagement	75%	17%	4%	4%
Alumni Advisory Panel	81%	13%	2%	4%
Alumni Network Welcome	58%	34%	6%	2%
Returning Scholar newsletter	45%	36%	15%	4%
Applications toolkit	57%	28%	11%	4%

n=53

Figure 6 shows most respondents felt the existing activities assigned to Objective 3 met this. Most respondents felt **increased stakeholder engagement would provide greater opportunities** for alumni to network and demonstrate the impact of their Scholarship and work to important potential contacts, as well as promoting Commonwealth Scholarships more generally. A couple of respondents queried the impact at the UK institution level.

On respondents noted that in their country there was **minimal potential for impact with these activities due to lower Scholar/alumni numbers** and issues in delivering these activities in a consistent manner. This was reflected in further comments which highlighted the **'one-off' nature** of some of these activities and queried how momentum and impact would be managed. Awareness of the applications toolkit, returning Scholar newsletter, and Alumni Network Welcome was low amongst respondents. One recent alumni respondent shared that the information in the returning Scholar newsletter was useful but intense and that more **evidence-based information** from alumni would be appreciated.

Following these ratings and open feedback respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt activities under each objective will provide a valuable opportunity for engagement for Commonwealth Alumni.

Figure 7 – Extent to which activities under Objective 1 will provide a valuable engagement opportunity
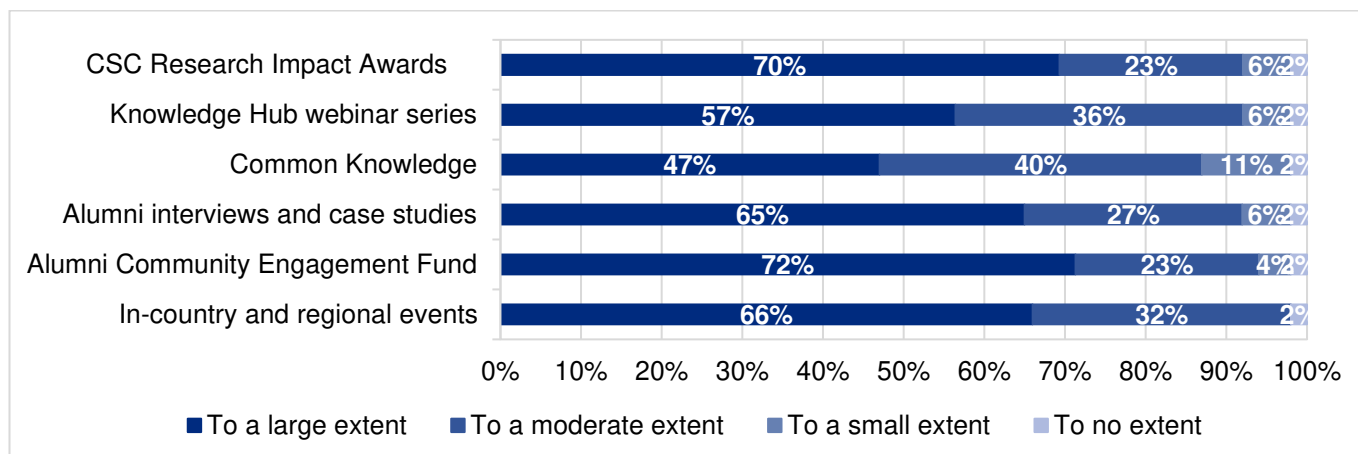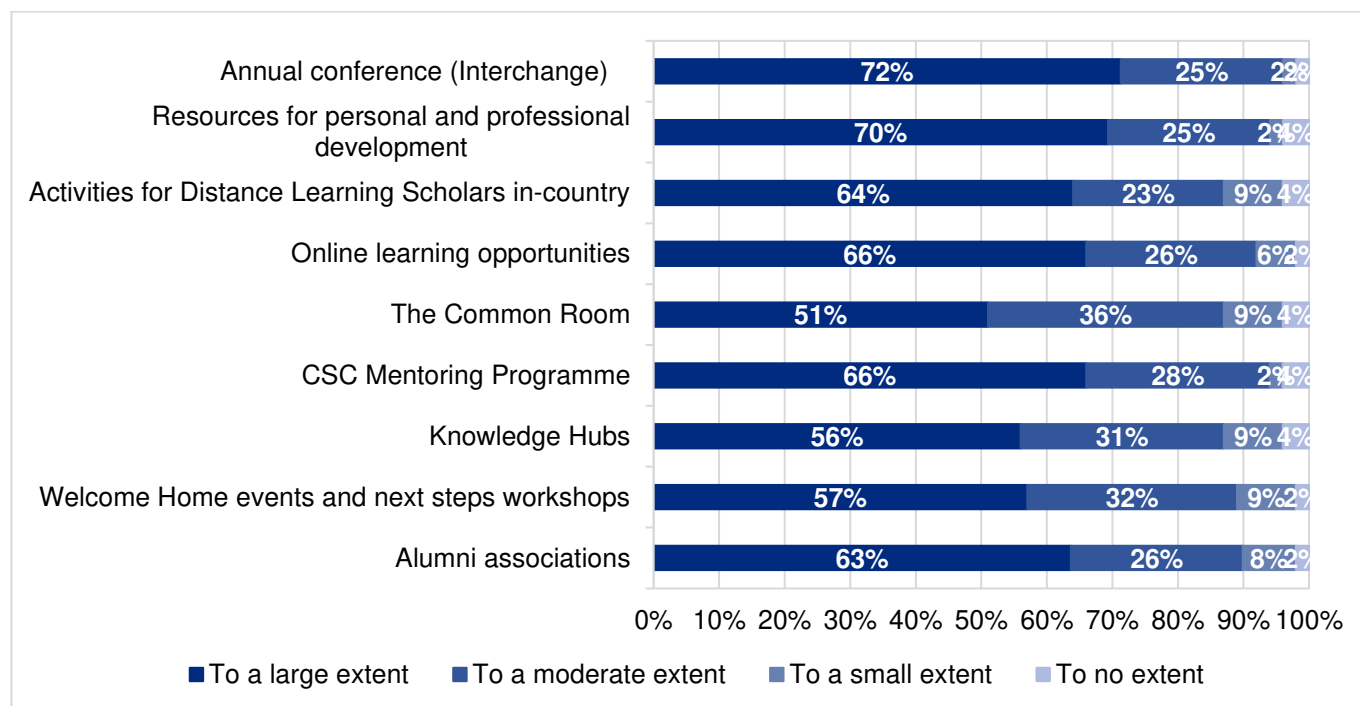

n=53

As outlined in figure 7, respondents reported that activities under Objective 1 would provide a valuable engagement opportunity for alumni. In-country and regional events received a high number of comments, with respondents noting that **regional events would open greater networking opportunities** between alumni and opportunities to discuss global challenges at a wider regional level.

Limited participation in some activities was raised again, with some respondents reiterating increasing eligibility for RIA, or the addition of further award categories. It was also noted that activities such as Common Knowledge and reading of interview case studies had limited participation, but these could be **better promoted**. This was similarly felt for the Alumni Community Engagement Fund.

Activities which put **Scholars/alumni at the centre** were felt to add greater value, with outputs from alumni interviews, the Alumni Community Engagement Fund, and Knowledge Hub webinar series noted for this.

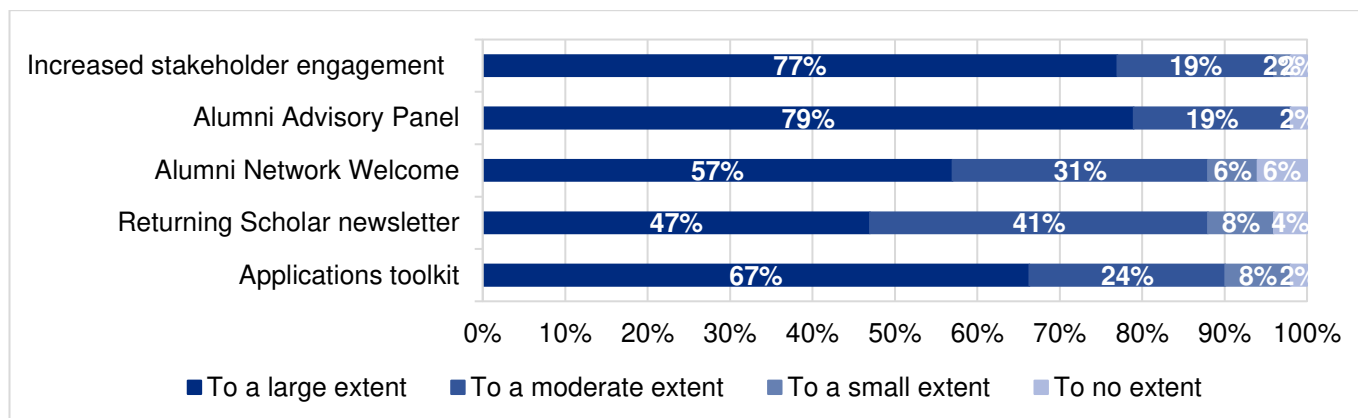Figure 8 – Extent to which activities under Objective 2 will provide a valuable engagement opportunity

n=53

Respondents reported that activities under Objective 2 would provide a valuable engagement opportunity for alumni, as shown in figure 8. Calls for a **mix of in-person and online activities** were reiterated with respondents noting that different experiences and takeaways would be felt dependent on the mode of delivery. A **greater and consistent scale of delivery** was noted by one respondent to increase impact.

Discrepancies in the running of alumni associations was raised by some respondents, noting that not all associations were active or existed in all countries. One respondent raised **different degrees of support** would be required at the country/regional level to deliver some of these activities, particularly where they had not been delivered previously. It was felt by others that the introduction of new activities and opportunities would help to **bridge gaps in delivery** and strengthen local alumni networks.

Activities which offered **personalised engagement opportunities** were felt to be more valuable amongst respondents, for example the Mentoring Programme and welcome home events, as well as those which fostered discussion and connections across alumni and Scholar communities.

Figure 9 – Extent to which activities under Objective 3 will provide a valuable engagement opportunity

Figure 9 – Extent to which activities under Objective 3 will provide a valuable engagement opportunity

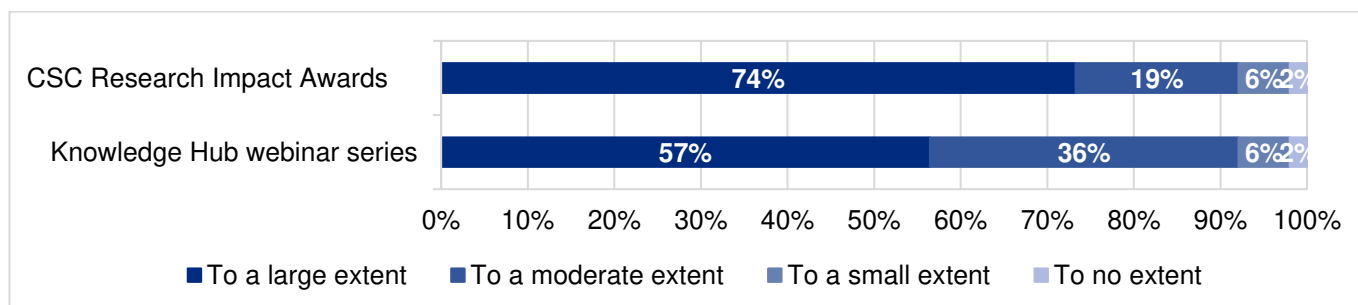| Activity	To a large extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	To no extent
Increased stakeholder engagement	77%	19%	2%	2%
Alumni Advisory Panel	79%	19%		2%
Alumni Network Welcome	57%	31%	6%	6%
Returning Scholar newsletter	47%	41%	8%	4%
Applications toolkit	67%	24%	8%	2%

n=51

As seen in Figure 9, activities under Objective 3 were also rated as valuable by respondents, despite several respondents noting they were not aware of these prior to the consultation. Respondents shared activities that would have a **direct impact on personal development** and require a **level of personal responsibility** would be most valuable, such as the Alumni Advisory Panel and returning Scholar newsletter and resources. It was also noted that activities under this objective would build CSC identity amongst alumni.

Implementation in countries with lower engagement levels and existing alumni structures was highlighted as a point for consideration.
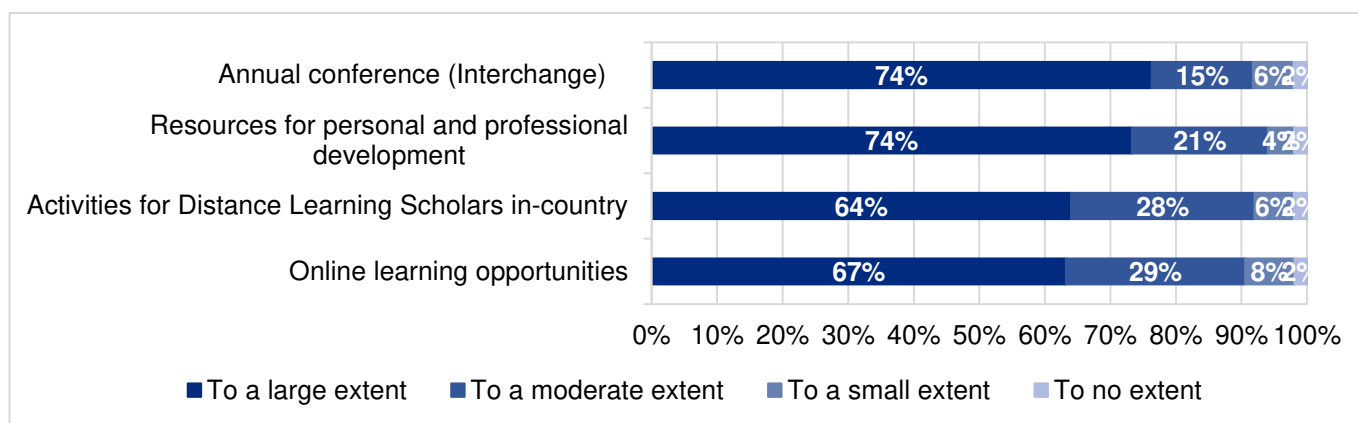
The draft strategy identified new activities for inclusion and assigned these to the three objectives. Some activities had been piloted to assess interest and delivery methods during the current strategy period. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the new activities added value to the overall strategy by providing expanded or new opportunities for alumni and, in some cases, Scholars.

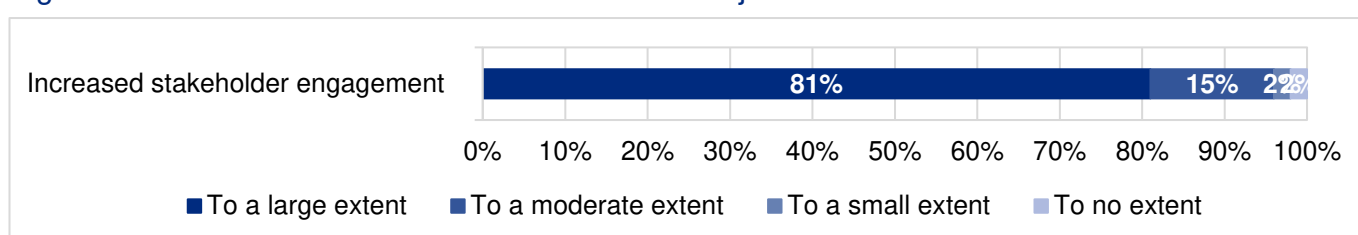## Figure 10 – Extent to which new activities under Objective 1 add value

Figure 10 – Extent to which new activities under Objective 1 add value

Activity	To a large extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	To no extent
CSC Research Impact Awards	74%	19%	6%	2%
Knowledge Hub webinar series	57%	36%	6%	2%

n=53

Figure 11 – Extent to which new activities under Objective 2 add value

	To a large extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	To no extent
Annual conference (Interchange)	74%	15%	6%	2%
Resources for personal and professional development	74%	21%	4%	2%
Activities for Distance Learning Scholars in-country	64%	28%	6%	2%
Online learning opportunities	67%	29%	8%	2%

n=53

Figure 12 – Extent to which new activities under Objective 3 add value

	To a large extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	To no extent
Increased stakeholder engagement	81%	15%	2%	2%

n=53

As can be seen in the three figures above, respondents felt that new activities added value to the objectives they had been assigned. It was noted that new activities provided **increased opportunities to create connections and share knowledge**. One respondent shared that the activities were **complementary** and would not compete for attention or space for those wanting to participate.

It was stressed by some respondents that success would rely on **greater communication and promotion**, with activities spread throughout the year and with **regular delivery**.

Recommendations for further development

In this section, respondents were asked to share their ideas about further activities or opportunities that could be included in a future Alumni Engagement Strategy. As well as sharing new ideas, respondents could provide feedback on ways to develop existing activities to add further value. Suggestions and ideas have been categorised as follows:

- **Events:** identifying a regional host for Interchange on an annual basis; committing to a minimum of one in-country event per year; delivering more social/cultural events for alumni alongside the existing events programme; opportunities for notable alumni speakers; opportunities for Alumni Advisory Panel members to interact and engage

- **Learning and development:** online opportunities and programmes for personal and professional development, for example leadership skills; career support; workshops on fundraising/seeking funding; alumni exchange Lobine

- **Groups and associations:** tools and support to empower alumni associations; taskforce and research groups of alumni to conduct campaigns or research outputs

- **Stakeholder engagement:** engaging with Commonwealth and other non-UK universities; seeking stakeholder support for personal development; collaboration with Association of Commonwealth Universities

- **CSC community:** earlier engagement between Scholars and alumni; alumni-focused mentoring programme; workshops for potential applicants; return home toolkit (resources for personal and professional development and returning Scholar newsletter)

- **Communications and promotion:** greater communications and promotion across channels; more alumni-led/posted content; increased interviews to generate alumni content and publicity

- **Awards and recognition:** additional award/award streams as part of RIA; alumni fellowships

- **Research and funding:** access to library resources; alumni research fund

Some respondents felt the current strategy was comprehensive enough and others felt time should be given to implementation before identifying any further gaps.

To support strategy implementation, respondents were asked to provide feedback on any activities they felt, based on their engagement experiences and expectations, should be prioritised for development in the early stages of the strategy delivery (over a three-year period).

Below shows the top scoring activities for prioritisation, organised by objective and the number of respondents citing these.

Objective	Activity
Objective 1	Knowledge Hub webinar series CSC Research Impact Awards
Objective 2	Resources for personal and professional development Alumni conference Mentoring Programme Alumni associations Knowledge Hubs
Objective 3	Increasing stakeholder engagement Applications toolkit

Reasons given for selecting these activities focused on the **collaborative nature of activities** and their **potential to increase connections and networks** amongst alumni, whilst also offering **strong introductions** to the CSC's Alumni Network for new alumni and those looking to re-engage.

Strategy delivery

As part of the delivery of the new Alumni Engagement Strategy the CSC Alumni Team are reviewing communications and general promotion of alumni activities to improve engagement and general awareness. In this section, respondents were asked how they find out about alumni engagement opportunities to identify core areas for development.

Figure 13 – Ways respondents stay up to date with news and opportunities from the CSC Alumni Network
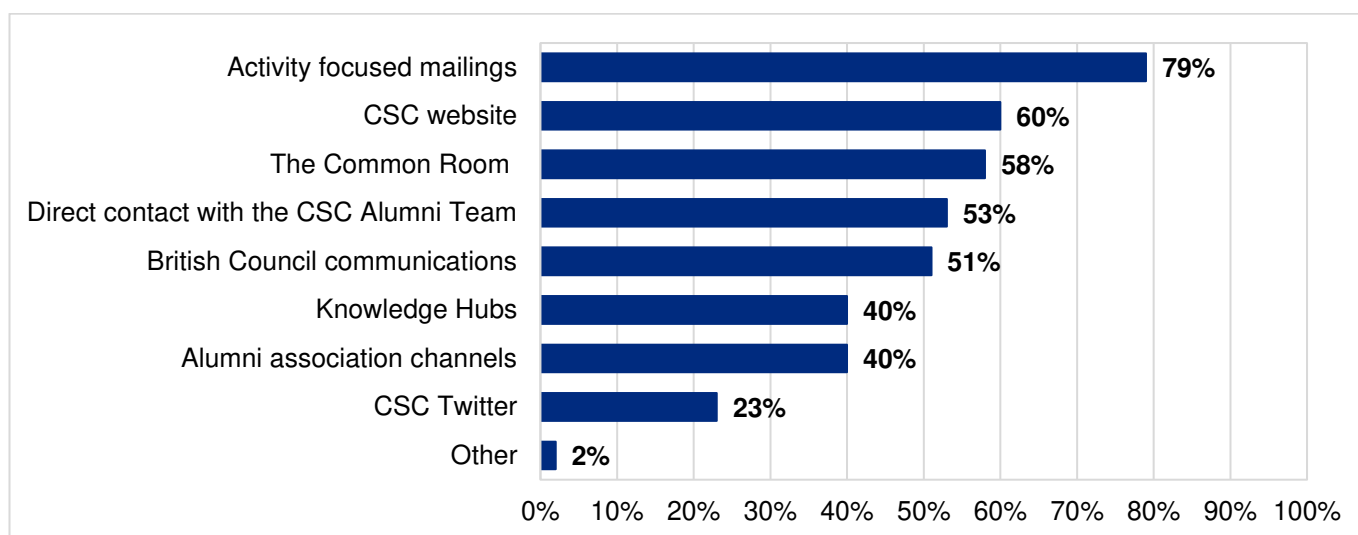
n=53

Responses gathered indicate that **methods of direct communication**, such as through activity focused mailings or correspondence with members of the CSC Alumni Team, were the main ways respondents stay up to date with news and opportunities. The CSC website also provided a platform to stay informed as well as the quarterly alumni newsletter, The Common Room, with social media groups providing a channel.

One respondent selected 'Other' and shared that they receive news and updates via the CSC Facebook group.

Asked to elaborate on their selections, respondents shared that social media channels can become too busy to see updates from the CSC, and as such direct email communications were most likely to get their attention. More **personalised content** was also most likely to encourage a respondent to read the correspondence. The **CSC website and Twitter** was noted as a way to **generally stay up to date** or see if there was wider news that may not be alumni related. Emails from British Council also provided a mechanism to stay up to date with local opportunities, as well as updates from alumni associations.

Respondents were asked to share feedback and suggestions on ways the CSC could improve alumni communications to better engage and inform Commonwealth Alumni. Given earlier responses gathered through this consultation, communication and promotion will play a critical role in the future strategy implementation and delivery.

Feedback from respondents highlighted continuing to use **email communication as a primary contact method**, with some modifications. Several respondents felt that **regular and more consistent mailings** with a **clear focus and simplified messaging** which linked to **website content** would be the best and easiest approach to keep alumni interested and engaged. Content such as alumni stories, alumni news, and a calendar of events were suggested. Some respondents highlighted the importance of reminders for certain activities.

Regarding new communication methods, a few respondents cited the use of **WhatsApp** to keep alumni engaged, as used most commonly by alumni associations, as well as **online platforms** where news could be posted and alumni could engage with each other.

Asked if there are any types of **content that respondents would like to see published on CSC channels** that are not currently available, respondents shared a number of suggestions which have been categorised below:

- **Alumni stories and case studies:** narrating alumni experiences, impact, successes, and lessons learned; video content; applicant experiences

- **Celebratory messages:** career achievements and successes; selected Scholars; published papers and research

- **Impact reports:** evaluation data on CSC Scholarships and Fellowships

- **Events and opportunities:** updates on alumni opportunities; local and regional events

Some of the content suggested is already published across CSC communications channels, however clear information on where to find information and ways to consolidate this for easy access could be explored.

Final comments and feedback on the draft Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025

Final comments from respondents were positive, with many sharing that the proposed draft strategy was **comprehensive, achievable, and reflected the aspirations of Commonwealth Alumni**. One respondent noted that the **alumni-centred, value-based, and measurable strategy** would support long term engagement between the CSC and alumni. Another felt that the draft strategy demonstrated improvements from the current strategy through the addition of **innovative activities**.

Areas for further development and focus included **increasing virtual and in-person engagement**, with in-person engagement returning to pre-COVID levels as a baseline for events. There were also calls for **more discipline/field specific content and opportunities** that would bring alumni together, as well as more **welcoming/alumni community-centric opportunities**. One respondent further noted that **increased focus on collaboration** and how to encourage and support this in a meaningful way would add value to the strategy and some activities.

In implementing the strategy, respondents highlighted the need for a **steady approach** to enable monitoring and evaluation of activities as these were developed/introduced. It was flagged again that **additional support would be required for alumni in countries with low levels of engagement** to achieve the objectives and deliver activities.

Event delivery and engagement

Over the last 18 months, events have been delivered virtually, with in-person events resuming, where possible, over the last couple of months. Respondents were asked to share their engagement with virtual CSC events to help assess the potential of delivering a hybrid event programme, with both virtual and in-person opportunities, in future.

Figure 14 – Attendance of virtual CSC events over the last 18 months
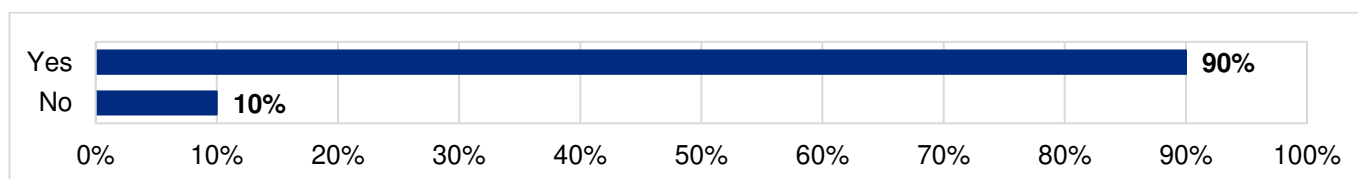
n=51

Respondents reported attending the following events virtually: Alumni Advisory Panel induction; Mentoring Programme induction; Interchange 21; Knowledge Hub webinar; Scholar Farewell event; HMG Scholarships Alumni Climate Change Hackathon; Climate Action webinar series; welcome home event; professional development workshops; alumni association event; pre-departure event; CSC welcome event; Scholar Regional Network event.

Of those who attended a virtual event, 4% reported that they would not attend a similar event delivered virtually in future. Reasons given included **challenges connecting virtually**, **data charges**, and **fatigue from virtual events**.

Respondents who reported they would attend virtually in future also shared they would **prefer in-person events where possible**, however reasons for attending virtually included **costs** saved in attending (travel, for example); **personal safety**; **trying out new topic areas** at low cost/inconvenience; **carbon footprint** of in-person events; and the **global reach** of the audience.
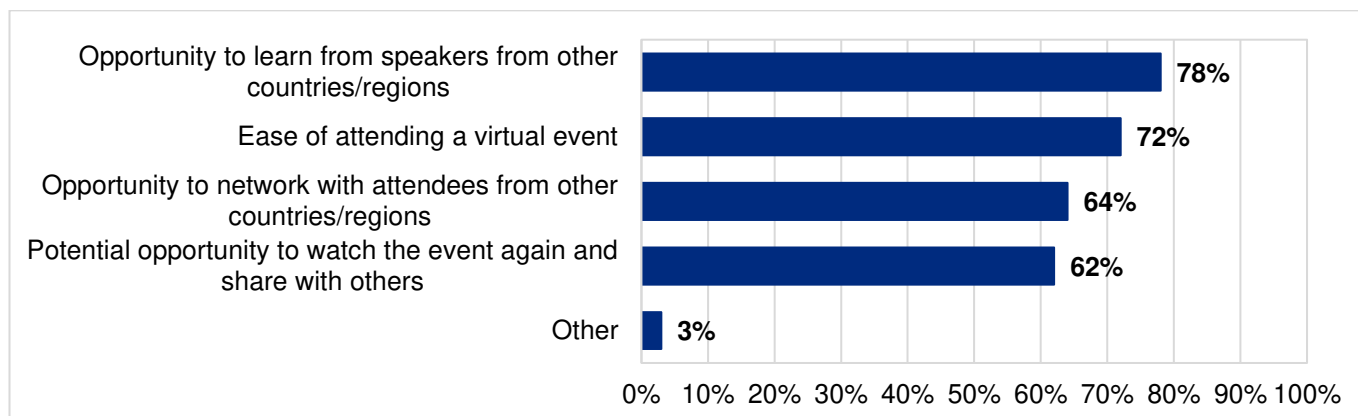
Figure 15 – Type of events respondents would prefer to attend virtually

n=58
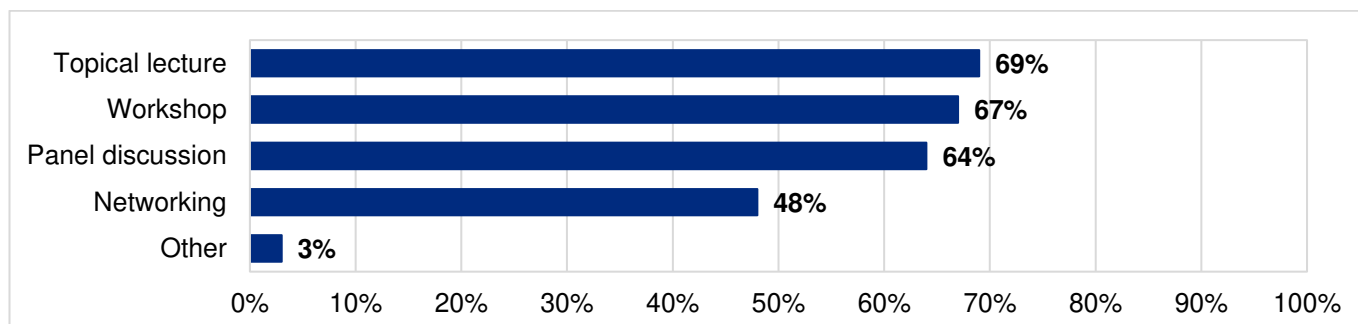
Respondents who selected 'Other' shared a writer's retreat and external stakeholder engagement.
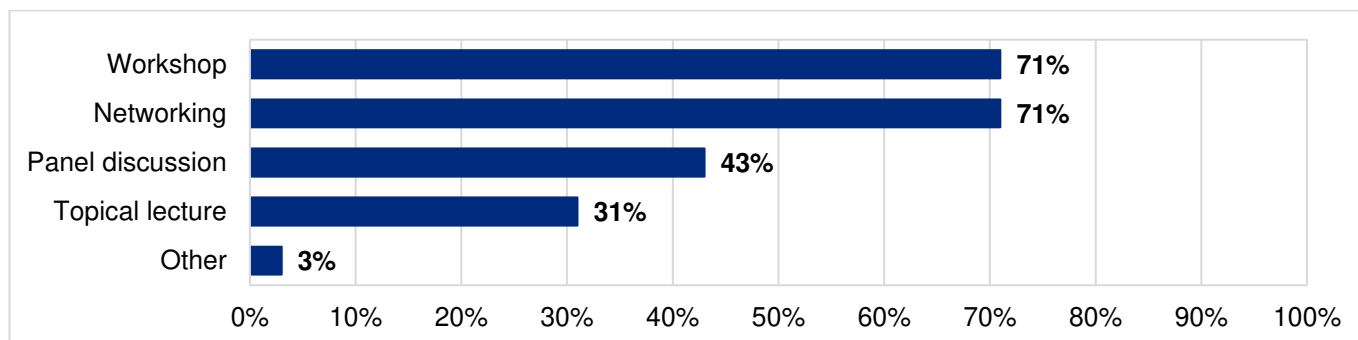
Figure 16 – Reasons for attending events virtually

Reason	Percentage
Opportunity to learn from speakers from other countries/regions	78%
Ease of attending a virtual event	72%
Opportunity to network with attendees from other countries/regions	64%
Potential opportunity to watch the event again and share with others	62%
Other	3%

n=58

Respondents who selected 'Other' shared they would attend virtually where travel was not possible and to reduce their carbon footprint.

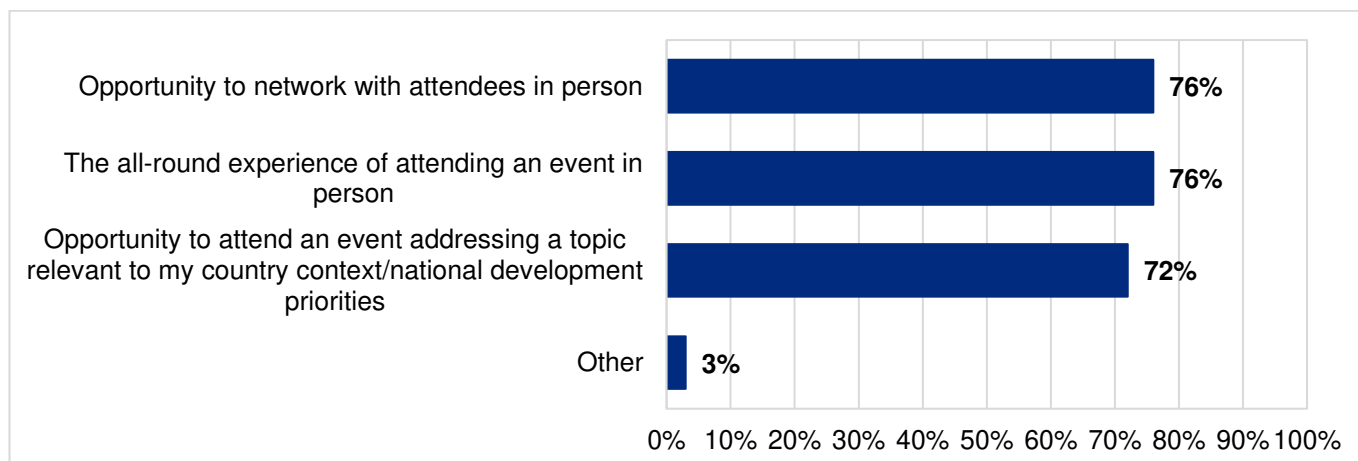Figure 17 – Type of events respondents would prefer to attend in-person

Event type	Percentage
Workshop	71%
Networking	71%
Panel discussion	43%
Topical lecture	31%
Other	3%

n=58

Respondents who selected 'Other' shared international conferences and social events.

Figure 18 – Reasons for attending events in-person

Reason	Percentage
Opportunity to network with attendees in person	76%
The all-round experience of attending an event in person	76%
Opportunity to attend an event addressing a topic relevant to my country context/national development priorities	72%
Other	3%

n=58

Respondents who selected 'Other' shared more scope for discussion and networking and minimising distractions.

four figures above show the types of activities respondents feel are more suited to virtual and in-person engagement and the reason for their selections. It should be noted again that **most respondents reported a preference for in-person events generally**.

Events which could increase learning and exposure to the wider alumni community scored highly for virtual delivery, with networking and workshop-based events being preferred for in-person delivery.

Final review

At the end of the survey respondents were asked to share further comments or suggestions on the draft strategy. Final comments shared included a note to provide information around self-employment opportunities; creating action-based projects and campaigns for alumni; attaching benefits for participating alumni; and findings ways to increase co-operation and collaboration between alumni.

One respondent noted that the strategy outlined good and timely activities, but that **promotion and communication** would be important to ensure alumni take advantage and benefit from these. This was similarly raised by other respondents who stressed the **importance of implementation strategies at the country level**, particularly where engagement was already low.

Summary

Overall, feedback from respondents was positive, with the majority reporting that the objectives and activities were appropriate and would provide valuable engagement opportunities for alumni. Activities designed to connect alumni and demonstrate their work and impact received the highest number of comments in favour of their development and delivery. Comments on the mode of delivery of events and ways to communicate with alumni identified key areas for action and consideration in the implementation of the new strategy.

Respondents also shared ideas for further development within existing and activities, as well as further new activities which could be considered under the new strategy.

Next steps

The Alumni Team will further review feedback from members of the Alumni Advisory Panel to finalise the Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025 and its implementation.

The feedback will be used to inform the following steps:

- Create the final draft Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025 for implementation from April 2022
- Identify activities for priority development/re-development, as part of the development of an implementation plan across the three years of the new strategy. This will also take into consideration engagement in each country
- Consult with the CSC Communications Team on improving communications and promotion of alumni activities across CSC channels
- Review event programme and mode of delivery depending on event type to create a balanced hybrid offering
- Increase focus on activities which encourage collaboration and connections between alumni and Scholars and how these are presented, promoted, and supported