



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Diary Studies Project Review

Alumni Advisory Panel Report
2019-2021 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 101 members.

The CSC Evaluation Team introduced the Diary Studies project in 2019 to test the feasibility of using diary studies to collect data to monitor and evaluate the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarships. The tool was trialled with Commonwealth Alumni, and further tested by conducting a pilot study with recent alumni who completed their Scholarship in 2019 and were within three months of returning home after their studies.

Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel were asked to review and validate the project, drawing on their experience and expertise in developing diary studies or similar evaluation projects and data collection methods.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of up to 12 open-ended qualitative questions. The questions asked were aimed to understand the experiences of panel members in using diary studies as a data collection tool, and to seek feedback on the CSC Diary Studies project design and implementation approach.

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

- Draft methodology paper
- Questionnaire used to guide participants in submitting diary entries
- Feedback questionnaire completed by pilot project participants

The task was open to all panel members and 25 registered to take part. 20 submitted feedback, a response rate of 80%.

Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Diary Studies experiences amongst panel members; and Findings from the review of the CSC Diary Studies project.

Diary studies experiences amongst panel members

Of those taking part, 65% had used diary studies to collect data for their projects, which were all social research oriented and focused on understanding a particular phenomenon as experienced by the study subjects. Projects on youth studies were the most reported by the participants (31%), followed by projects in finance management (15%). Other projects mentioned by individuals include women's time use, mixed-methods investigations, tracking rainy days in a calendar year, a PhD research project, and projects on intellectual property rights. Half (50%) of the studies used online surveys to record diary entries, and 60% used paper-based diaries. To note, in some cases, online surveys and paper-based surveys were used at the same time depending on what the participants preferred to use.

Challenges of using diary studies

Panel members reported encountering challenges such as lack of commitment of some participants to completing all the diary entries for the duration of the diary study, and response fatigue, resulting in diary entries being completed as a compliance and without the level of detail that was required. Some panel members reported that participants had committed to recording diary entries earlier on in the study and later stopped completing diary entries and dropped out of the study.

Actions taken to address identified challenges

Most of the actions taken to mitigate challenges were focused on keeping the participants motivated to complete diary entries as required. These included the following:

- Regular reminders to ensure that most participants record their entries.
- Engagement with participants throughout the process by holding periodic meetings for data presentation and data comparison.
- Briefings on the expectations in completing diary entries at the start of the project.
- Keeping the questionnaire to guide diary entries short to boost completion rates.
- Providing incentives for participation to increase response rates.

Lessons learned

Panel members revealed they had learned the following from their diary studies projects:

- Diary studies are effective to capture detailed information.
- It is important to triangulate diary studies with other data collection tools to capture different dimensions of the same phenomena and ensure validity of the research.
- Engaging participants throughout the study is effective.
- Participation rates and data quality are affected by the type of participants and their ability to provide very detailed responses.
- The use of incentives improves the participation rate.
- It is difficult to manage too much information, particularly where there is a high number of participants.
- More than one researcher is required to analyse data to address subjectivity and reduce bias.
- Where possible, data collected from diary studies should be compared with data collected by other organisations.

The challenges shared by panel members on low response rates and lack of motivation among participants to complete all diary entries resemble those experienced by the CSC. Learning from the experiences of panel members, the Evaluation Team should consider the use of incentives to encourage participation. The team will also consider consulting other scholarship evaluation organisations (users of diary studies, if any) to establish the type of data obtained, and their views on the effectiveness of the diary studies tool. Non-users of the tool can also be approached to establish why they have not used diary studies in scholarship evaluations to assess the feasibility of the tool.

Findings from the review of the CSC Diary Studies project

Overall, 80% of panel members thought the diary studies tool was effective, and 90% commended the Diary Studies project design and implementation steps taken by the Evaluation Team and thought that the approach was appropriate, effective, well-structured, logical, and systematic.

Meanwhile, 85% of the panel members said that the online survey tool was effective for recording diary entries. The online surveys were favoured by panel members who noted that they are easily accessible, flexible, engaging, and allow the researcher to start analysing data before completion of a diary study.

Regarding the diary studies questionnaire used to guide diary entries, 55% thought it was appropriate, 35% did not comment, 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. On the final feedback questionnaire completed by the Diary Studies pilot project participants, 75% felt the feedback questionnaire was effective. Suggestions were made on adjustments to the structure of the questionnaire and the inclusion of a few additional questions.

Recommendations

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

1. Clarity on the purpose of the 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 given included:

- Making a decision 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 the three Scholarship phases- pre, on, and post-Scholarship- to identify changes that can be attributed to the Commonwealth Scholarship.

2. 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, which included:

- Measures that can be taken to improve the sampling methods used to select diary studies participants. 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 log-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 in each country to boost participation rate was also mentioned. In addition, the CSC was urged to consider offering incentives for participation. These could be in the form of publishing the names of the participants on the CSC website, or awarding books, journals, CSC branded materials, or offering 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 Evaluation Team will consider the advice given by panel members 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.

Next steps

- The findings from the project review will be incorporated in the Diary Studies Methodology paper
- The Evaluation Team will also compare and consolidate the feedback and lessons learned from the trial and pilot studies, and the project review.
- Following this review, the team will decide whether to incorporate the method into its workplan on a more routine basis and, if so, identify areas of particular interest and the research questions that can be answered using diary studies.