



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Evaluation of the Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2022

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 100 members (one resignation).

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 or received minimal engagement.

Following an internal review of the current Alumni Engagement Strategy, a first draft new strategy has been developed. Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel are invited to share feedback on this draft to inform future developments and share insights in engagement activities from the alumni perspective, as well as activities and opportunities panel members would like to see as part of a future strategy.

In May 2021, all Commonwealth Alumni were invited to take part in a feedback survey designed to help the CSC Alumni Team understand more about the current activities alumni are interested in and why, and how we can develop this offering as part of the new strategy.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions. The questions asked were aimed to evaluate interest and engagement in core activities within the existing Alumni Engagement Strategy and to assess the proposed developments for the next strategy.

Panel members were also invited to attend one of two focus group discussions to share their thoughts on the current and proposed future strategy, as well as make recommendations for additional developments.

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

The task was open to all panel members. 29 submitted feedback, a response rate of 29%. 3 panel members registered to take part in a focus group discussion and 1 attended.

Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2021; CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025; Expectation of an alumni engagement strategy; and External factors and engagement opportunities.

CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2021

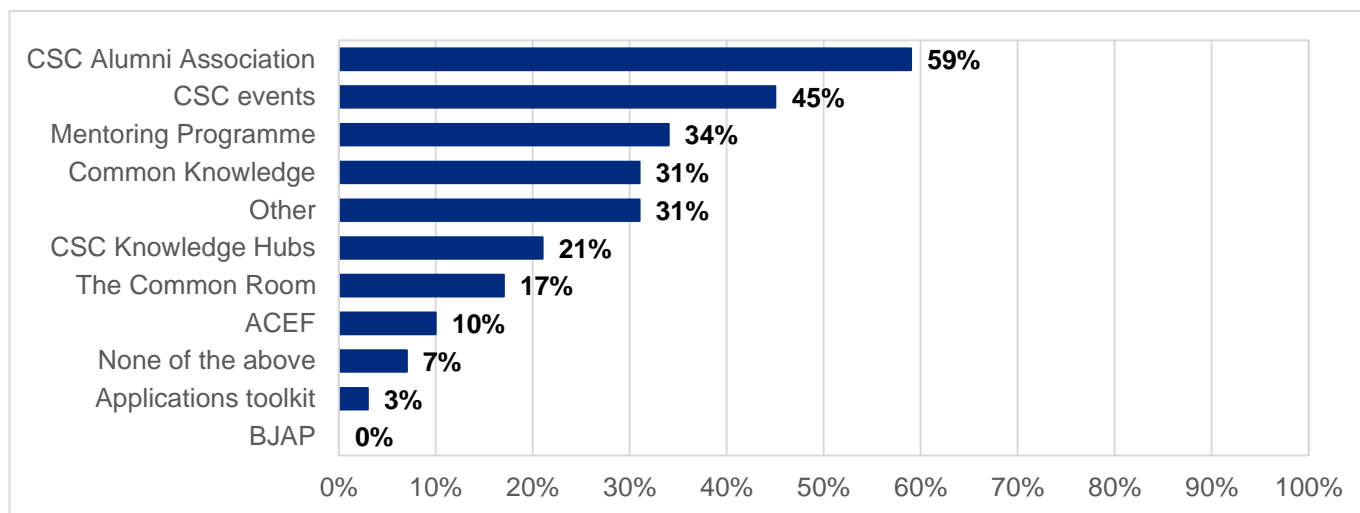
Engagement with core alumni activities

Respondents were asked to select all core alumni activities they had engaged with over the last three years of the strategy and provide further feedback on the reasons for engagement, as well as recommendations for improvements. All respondents made selections and the activity ratings are shown in Figure 1.

In-country activities and opportunities received the highest rating from respondents, followed by CSC alumni publications. More bespoke activities and those with restricted eligibility ranked the lowest.

Respondents were asked to answer a series of short follow-up questions on their reasons for engaging with the activities selected and to share recommendations for improvement. Summaries are below.

Figure 1 – Panel member engagement with CSC alumni activities



n=29

CSC Alumni Association

Responses around Alumni Associations and the engagement they provide were mixed. Amongst respondents were alumni actively engaged in leading or supporting association activities, general participants in activities, and ‘inactive’ members who had signed up to association groups or activities but received limited engagement and return. It was generally felt that associations offer a valuable in-country network, and, where regular events or engagement opportunities are provided, these were received positively with respondents keen to engage.

However, a number of respondents shared experiencing inconsistent engagement and that many associations engaged only a small number of available alumni. One respondent recommended making greater information about associations available, such as how to engage, and publishing annual reports on association activities to boost interest and accountability. Further engagement opportunities and/or mechanisms to connect alumni through associations were recommended, including funded projects and online platforms.

CSC Events

Events highlighted in response to this activity category were varied and included pre-departure briefings, Alumni Association events, activities organised by the British Council, Interchange 21, and activities discussed separately in the survey (Alumni Advisory Panel, mentoring, Knowledge Hubs, ACEF).

Respondents highlighted the networking opportunities provided by events, as well as speaking and presenting opportunities, as positive factors. It was noted by some respondents that whilst face-to-face opportunities were preferred, opportunities to connect virtually with Scholars and alumni across the Commonwealth, such as those provided by Interchange 21, pre-departure briefings, and Scholar events, were greatly appreciated and offered new ways of networking and connecting.

Mentoring Programme

Respondents who had participated in the Mentoring Programme highlighted that this activity enabled them to give back to the CSC by supporting current Scholars and offered alumni an

opportunity to learn from Scholars. The diversity of the programme in pairing across subjects and nationality was cited as a strength for those who had experienced this in their pairing, whilst others requested more diversity in pairings. Several respondents noted the experience had been mutually rewarding for the Scholars and alumni engaged. One respondent noted additional informal follow-up support could be a further development.

Common Knowledge

Common Knowledge was reported as a means of staying engaged and up to date with the work of Scholars and alumni and alumni activities. One respondent noted they use the publication to 'benchmark' their own impact and contributions. Areas for improvement included reducing the variety of content in issues, reducing the length of articles, and to diversify outputs beyond the magazine, utilising social media and video channels for content for example.

CSC Knowledge Hubs

Respondents who were members of the Knowledge Hubs reported joining these online groups to connect with Scholars and alumni working in similar areas, to build their networks, collaborate, and engage in online discussion. One respondent had formerly held the role of a Knowledge Hub Coordinator. Nearly all respondents reported low engagement and felt that the groups did not meet their expectations. Potential areas for change included identifying alternative online platforms, posting focused content as per the Hub theme, and providing opportunities for members beyond the Hub platforms.

The Common Room

Similar to Common Knowledge, respondents noted that they read this publication to understand the work of Scholars and alumni. One respondent shared that they look for potential collaborators through the publications and news item sections.

CSC Alumni Community Engagement Fund (ACEF)

Reasons for engagement given by respondents who had taken part in this activity included a passion to connect and work with their community. One area suggested for development was in the expansion of this offering and the range and impact of activities as a result.

Applications toolkit

This was cited as an excellent source of information to promote Commonwealth Scholarships.

Other

Several respondents selected 'Other' in answer to this question. All respondents noted the Alumni Advisory Panel as a further CSC activity they were engaged in. A few respondents shared details on ways in which this activity had enabled them to improve their skills and apply these in the workplace. Evaluation of this activity will be conducted separately.

None of the above

Of the two respondents who selected 'None of the above', both noted they were not aware of the activities listed and how to get involved and did not always have the time to engage. Previous experience of unsuccessful applications was also noted as a factor in disengaging alumni.

Reasons for not engaging in activities

Respondents were asked to provide reasons why they had chosen not to participate in some of the alumni engagement activities listed. Common responses included: lack of time to engage with activities; lack of awareness of some of the activities; too many activities provided; limited time to participate; limited scope and scale of activities; geographical location. One respondent noted that publications were passive activities and therefore engagement was difficult to measure. Another shared that they did not feel they could contribute to Common Knowledge and shied away from this opportunity.

Whilst most responses noted general reasons for not engaging, in some cases specific activities were cited. These activities included: the applications toolkit; Knowledge Hubs; Common Knowledge; The Common Room; and ACEF. ACEF received the most comments, with some respondents noting that they had submitted unsuccessful applications but would have appreciated feedback for future cycles. Another suggested this activity be expanded to enable more alumni to participate and for this to be offered as a project within existing activities, such as the Knowledge Hubs.

Not all activities listed are available to all alumni, such as the Taylor & Francis Commonwealth Scholar Best Journal Article Prize (BJAP, now CSC Research Impact Awards) and in-country Alumni Associations. Respondents were asked to select any activities not available to them that they would have liked to participate in. The activities highlighted by respondents were: mentoring; Alumni Associations; events; and BJAP.

Mentoring and BJAP received the highest number of selections. Regarding mentoring, some respondents noted that they had applied but had not been paired, whilst one respondent noted that as a Distance Learning Scholar they had not applied as the programme supports Scholars studying in the UK. Whilst BJAP was a popular choice amongst respondents, it was noted that many did not want to participate in this specific activity but would like the opportunity to showcase their work and impact more broadly where it is related to their CSC funded studies.

CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2021: objectives and priorities

The CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2021 is underpinned by five objectives and priorities. The objectives are to support and develop:

- Alumni as Commonwealth Scholarship advocates or ambassadors in their own country
- Alumni in international, borderless roles
- Alumni taking a more active role in evaluation and monitoring
- Alumni awareness and understanding of the current work of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission

- Alumni as a collective of experts, providing valuable input to support a range of sustainable development issues both nationally and internationally

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the activities they had engaged in met the objectives they were developed to support. Ratings were from 'Greatly exceeded' to 'Did not meet'.

For most activities it was felt they matched or exceeded their overall objective. The Mentoring Programme received the highest ratings, with respondents selecting that it exceeded or greatly exceeded the objective under which it was assigned. The Knowledge Hubs scored the lowest, with respondents sharing that interaction and activity within the Hubs was low and that the online platform used may not be ideal. The related webinar series, however, was positively received.

CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025

A renewed draft alumni engagement strategy for 2022-2025 was shared with respondents. The new strategy is proposed to be supported by four objectives which seek to support and demonstrate the:

- **Knowledge, expertise, and impact of Commonwealth Scholarship recipients** in responding to critical global challenges and the value of these Scholarships to the recipient countries
- **Value of a global Commonwealth Scholarships Alumni Network in facilitating and encouraging ongoing personal and professional development** amongst recipients to achieve development impact at a local, national, and international level
- **Role and contributions of Commonwealth Alumni in the ongoing promotion and development of CSC activities and programmes**
- **Impact of Commonwealth Alumni at a national and community level**, implementing and sharing their skills and knowledge to support and empower citizens on key development issues

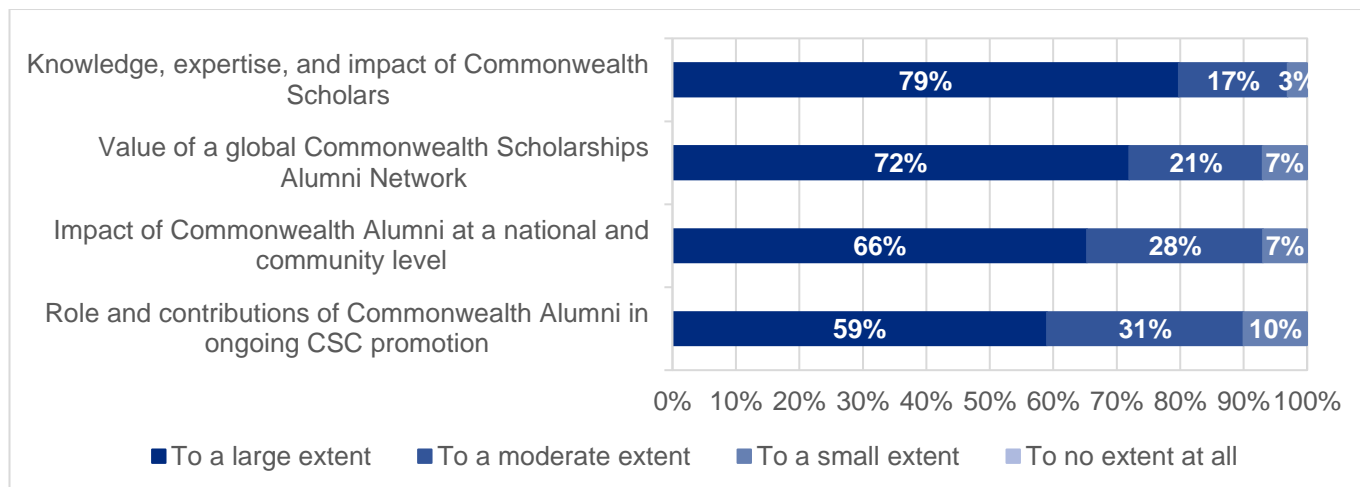
Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the four objectives reflect the broader objectives of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships in supporting recipients to gain the skills and knowledge to achieve sustainable development impact in their home country and beyond. You can see responses in Figure 2.

Asked to elaborate on the ratings given to the listed objectives, comments were positive with most respondents noting that the proposed objectives were aligned with the broader objectives of the CSC and Commonwealth Scholar identity. It was also felt that they reflected the ambitions and expectations of Commonwealth Alumni and identified core values within the alumni community.

Respondents also shared thoughts on areas for further review. Points for further consideration included: reviewing the latter part of the first objective and its distinctiveness to the other objectives; focusing on new global challenges and innovations; assessing expectations around individual impact compared to collective impact; and the global outlook of scholarship/fellowship

impact. Additional comments highlighted the importance of a strong global and national network of alumni to achieve the objectives outlined and the need for a clear, robust, and organised implementation cycle.

Figure 2 – Extent to which the draft objectives reflect broader CSC objectives



n=29

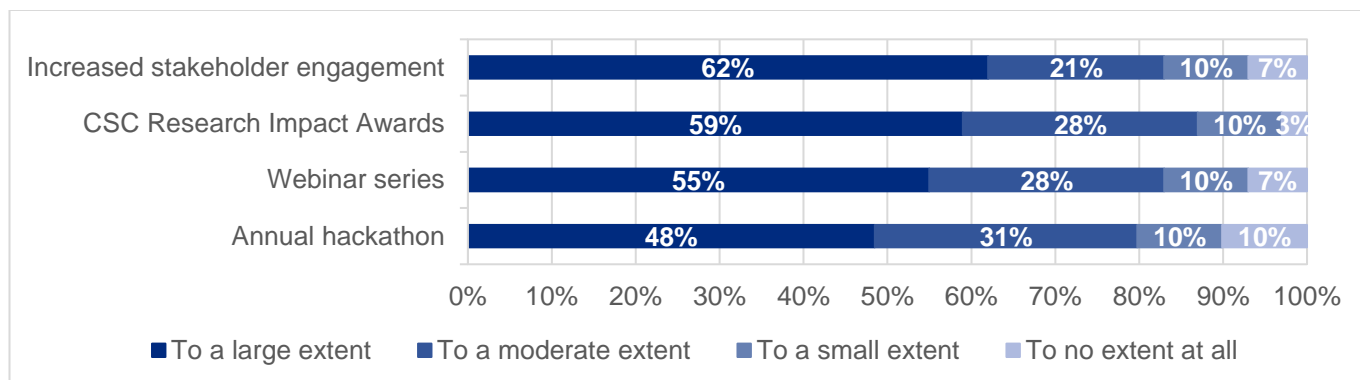
Proposed new or redeveloped activities

Referring to ‘Draft 1: CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025’, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the proposed new or redeveloped activities supported the objectives to which they had been assigned and the value activities would bring to alumni. For both questions, respondents were asked to elaborate on the ratings given and refer to specific activities where relevant.

Responses are organised by objective.

Knowledge, expertise, and impact of Commonwealth Scholarship recipients in responding to critical global challenges and the value of these Scholarships to the recipient countries

Figure 3 – Extent to which the proposed activities support the objective set



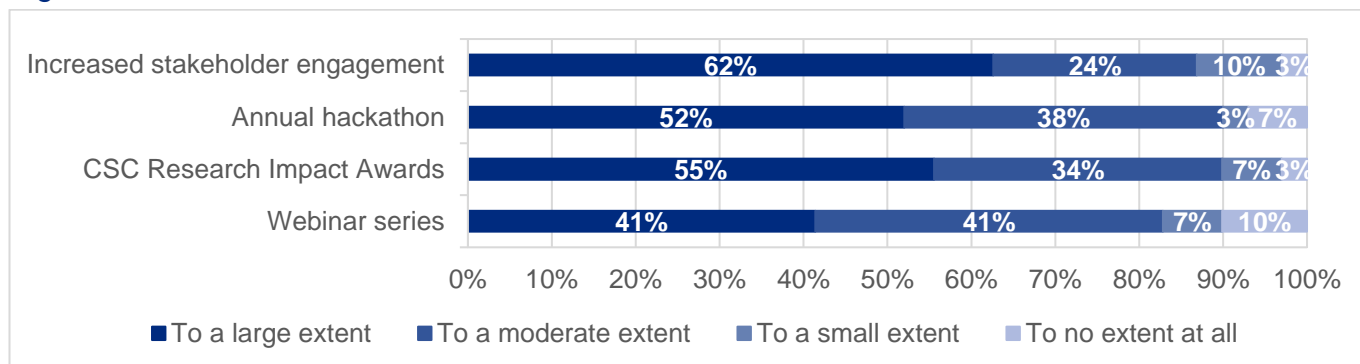
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Respondents shared that the activities listed addressed the objective under which they had been assigned. A number felt that they were motivational, engagement driven (between alumni), and inline with addressing today’s global challenges. Activities cited in these responses

included the Annual hackathon, increased stakeholder engagement, and the CSC Research Impact Awards.

It was noted that communication would be critical to engagement amongst alumni, but that activities offered opportunities for alumni to engage under this objective based on their strengths and interest. One respondent noted that not all activities listed were open to all alumni and that eligibility should be balanced, and another commented that virtual engagement was not possible for all alumni based on their location. One respondent also shared that the focus of these activities was on the individual and that articulating wider impact would be important.

Figure 4- Value of activities to Commonwealth Alumni

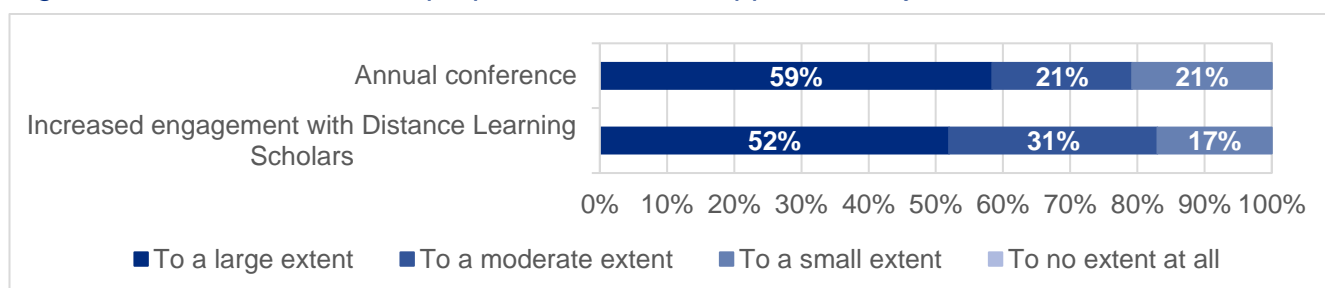


N=29

Respondents shared positive comments on the value of the activities, noting that they would encourage networking and collaboration, the development of skills and knowledge between alumni, and continued the broader objectives of the CSC in contributing to development impact. It was noted that the CSC Research Impact Awards were still limited in eligibility and one respondent commented that further communication around the hackathon would be required. Communicating the purpose and potential impact of increased stakeholder engagement to alumni was also flagged.

Value of a global Commonwealth Scholarships Alumni Network in facilitating and encouraging ongoing personal and professional development amongst recipients to achieve development impact at a local, national, and international level

Figure 4- Extent to which the proposed activities support the objective set

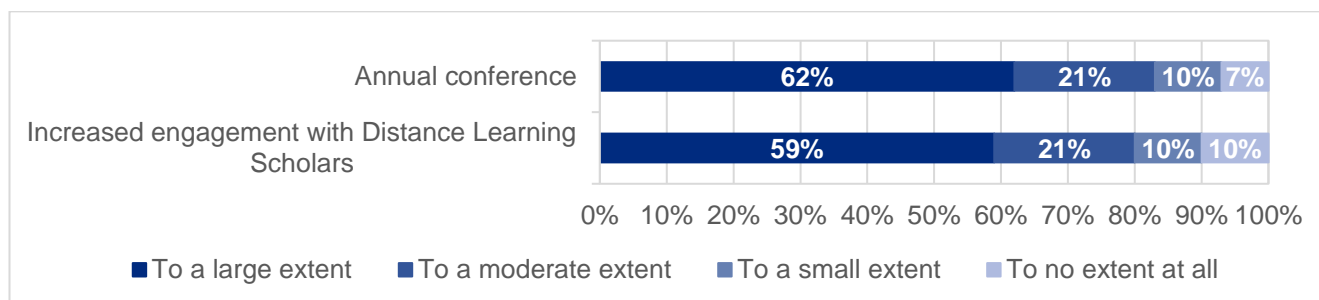


N=29

Feedback on both these activities was similar, with respondents highlighting the opportunities for networking, collaboration, and professional development amongst all Scholarship and Fellowship recipients. It was generally felt these activities would bring cohesion into the alumni network and across the different CSC schemes and that these activities addressed the

objective. Commenting on the Annual conference, a couple of respondents noted the limitations of virtual engagement and an annual event and felt that smaller and more focused activities would produce stronger outputs for participants. One respondent noted that there would need to be a clear focus on the event and value added to participants.

Figure 5- Value of activities to Commonwealth Alumni

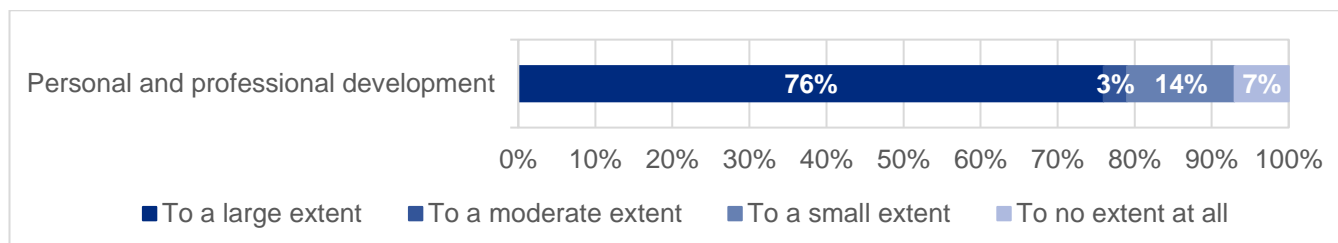


N=29

Networking and collaboration were also cited by respondents as valuable in relation to these activities. It was noted that quality of the activities would be critical to the value to participants, but these were positive steps to increasing engagement. One respondent who had studied as a Distance Learning Scholar shared that both activities would ensure the network engaged with all Scholarship experiences and schemes.

Role and contributions of Commonwealth Alumni in the ongoing promotion and development of CSC activities and programmes

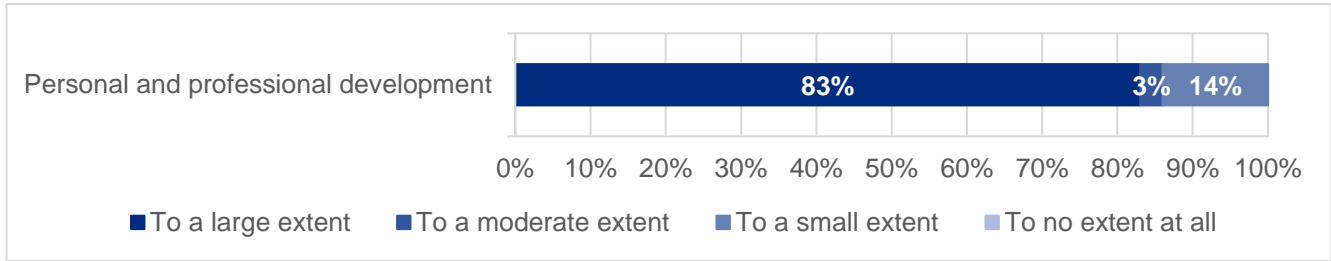
Figure 6- Extent to which the proposed activities support the objective set



N=29

One respondent noted that this activity did not address the objective under which it was assigned. Responses gathered from other respondents suggest this also. There was clear enthusiasm for professional and personal development opportunities for alumni, however this activity would be to build resources predominantly to support existing activities for current Scholars and those coming to the end of their awards or within the period immediately following. The focus of this activity requires further review and development, in particular around opportunities for personal and professional development to support alumni, as well as Scholars.

Figure 7- Value of activities to Commonwealth Alumni

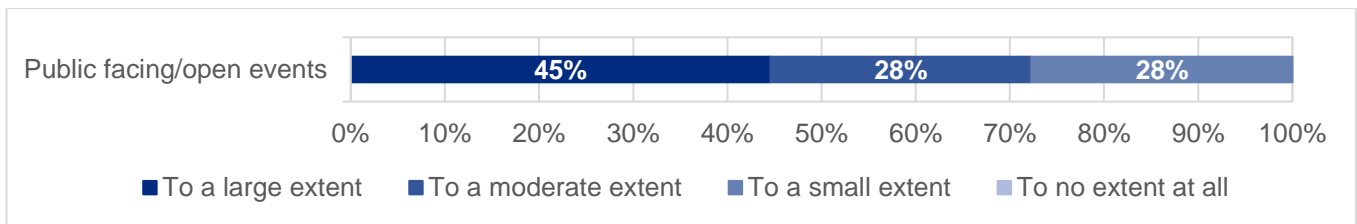


N=29

A focus on the professional and personal development of alumni was well received amongst respondents, although it was noted that elements of this activity were already evident in existing activities, such as the Mentoring Programme. It was generally felt this was an area alumni could contribute to, as well as gain from.

Impact of Commonwealth Alumni at a national and community level, implementing and sharing their skills and knowledge to support and empower citizens on key development issues

Figure 8- Extent to which the proposed activities support the objective set

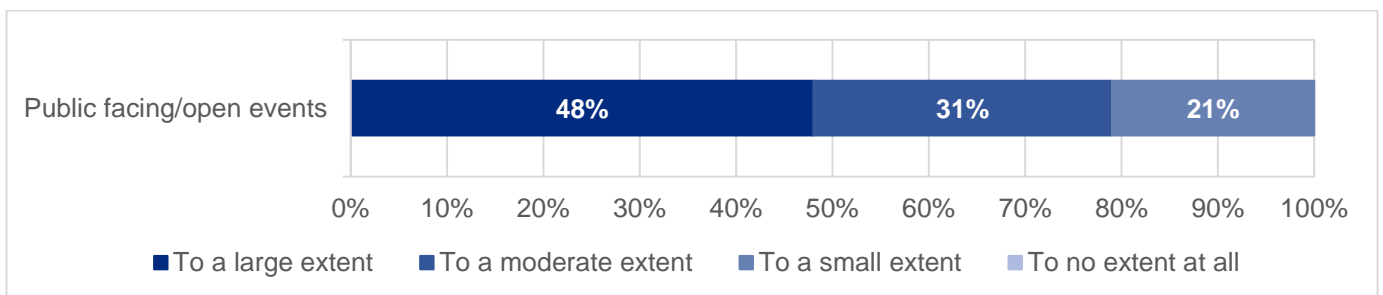


N=29

It was generally felt public facing events would support engagement between alumni and communities, provide a platform for alumni as role models or ambassadors, and promote the impact of Commonwealth Alumni. These activities would also potentially provide wider connections for alumni to relevant organisations and bodies to support their work and raise awareness.

Respondents noted that these types of events would require intensive development and roll-out and sensitivity must be given to the topics discussed. One respondent noted that the development of this activity should be a later strategy priority, with earlier emphasis on building more centrally provided activities and global and national communities.

Figure 9- Value of activities to Commonwealth Alumni



N=29

Whilst respondents generally agreed public facing events would enable alumni to connect with local communities and raise awareness across issues, as well as promote development impact and the contributions of the CSC, it was felt that in-country engagement was currently low which would impact this activity and uptake. It was also noted that the ongoing impact of COVID-19 could be long-lasting making such events impractical. As well as comments around guidance for the development of such activities, one respondent noted that training may be required to support alumni applying to engage successfully at this level.

Existing activities

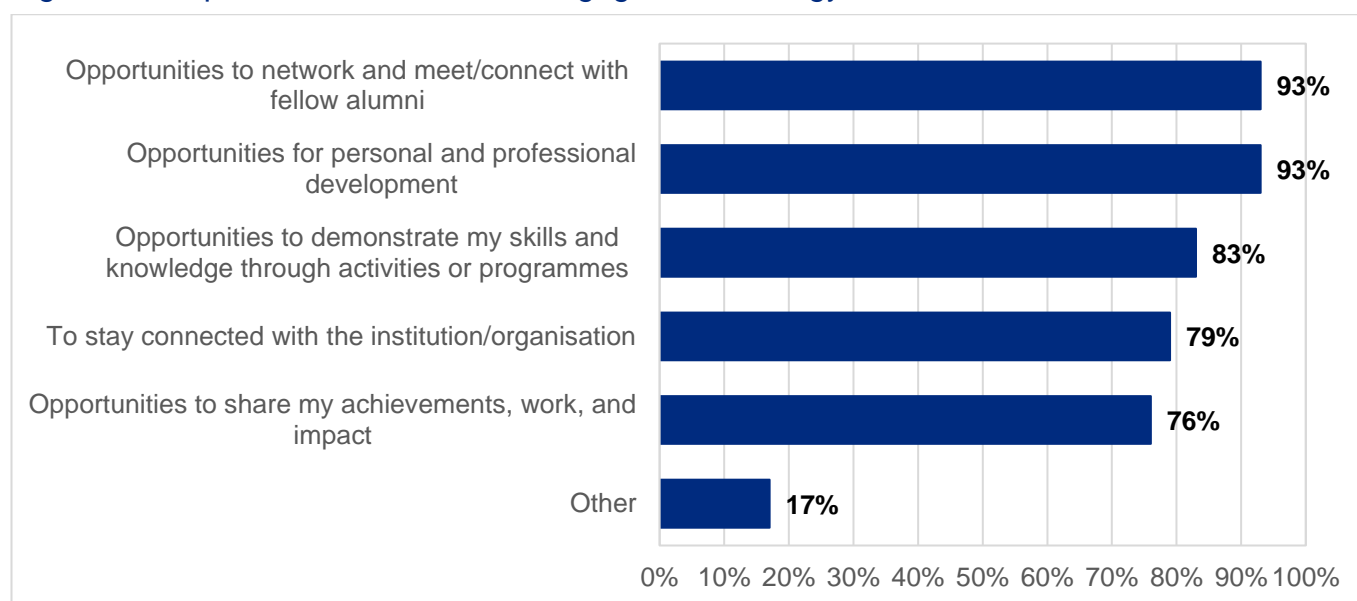
Respondents were asked to provide feedback on the existing alumni engagement activities that were proposed to be taken forward as part of the 2022-2025 strategy and highlight activities which they felt did not meet the objectives shared or add value.

Most respondents felt that the existing activities proposed to be taken forward met the new objectives they were assigned to, however a few comments were made as to the value of some activities. Respondents highlighted the limited activity within existing Knowledge Hubs and that these groups did little to foster engagement and could not compete against other networks alumni may be members of. It was also noted that Alumni Associations were not successful in all countries where they currently existed and that more should be done to promote these groups and provide support. Where resources were provided through welcome home/reintegration workshop and the resources webpage, it was suggested further follow-up could be built into these activities and alternative channels for dissemination identified.

Expectation of an alumni engagement strategy

To understand the broader expectation of respondents in relation to alumni engagement, respondents were asked to select their expectations of an alumni engagement. All respondents answered this question and could select as many options as were relevant.

Figure 10- Expectations of an alumni engagement strategy



N=29

As can be seen from the ratings above, key expectation of alumni engagement strategy centre around opportunities for personal and professional development and opportunities to network with fellow alumni. All expectations listed rated highly amongst respondents. Those who selected 'Other' shared their expectations to engage with wider contacts or authorities and showcase alumni impact.

Based on their selections, respondents were asked to assess the extent to which the draft 2022-2025 strategy and proposed activities met these. The table below shows that expectations would be met through the activities proposed, however further work is required to develop activities and align them both with the strategy objectives and expectations for alumni engagement.

Figure 11- Extent to which the draft 2022-2025 Alumni Engagement Strategy meets selected expectations



N=29

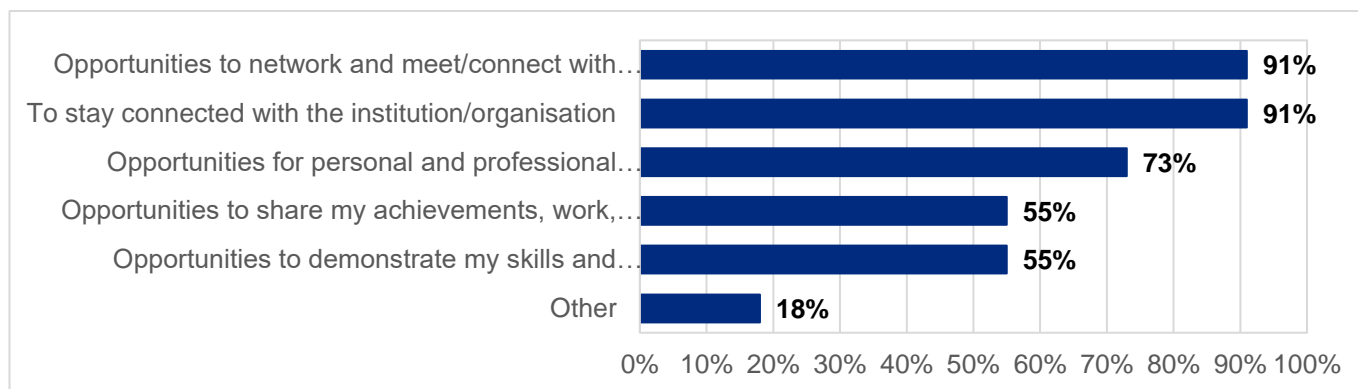
Further activities for consideration

Respondents were asked to share ideas for further activities or opportunities which could be included in the draft strategy, as well as any additional comments. Additional activities or opportunities suggested included: collaborative research activities between Scholars, alumni, and external organisations; research exchanges for alumni between fellowship host organisations and universities; and engaging renowned alumni for inspirational-aspirational outputs. One respondent further highlighted the importance of support for Alumni Associations.

External factors and engagement opportunities

Asked if they were engaged in alumni networks or opportunities provided by other institutions they have studied at, 76% of respondents confirmed they were engaged in such networks. These respondents were asked to share their motivations for engagement.

Figure 12- Motivations for engaging as alumni



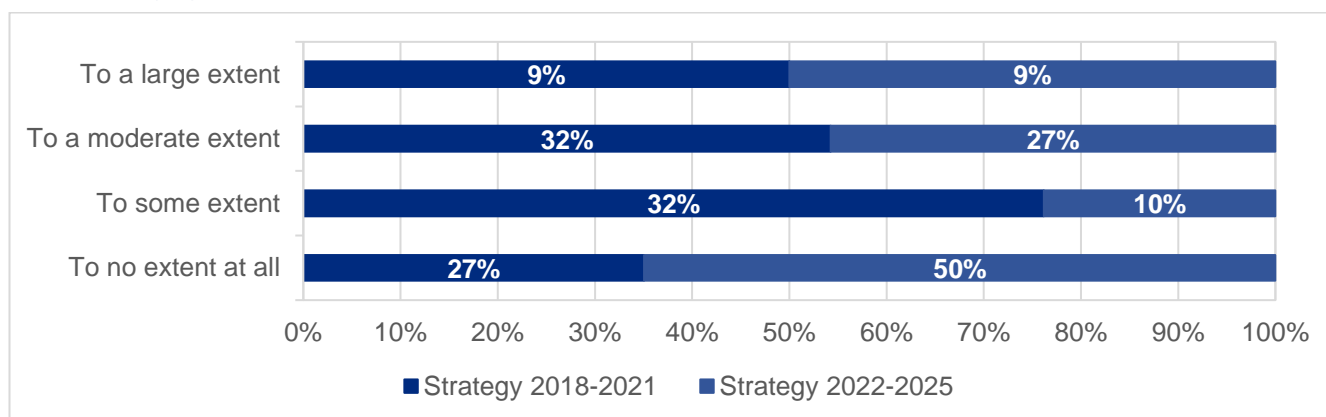
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In thinking about other alumni networks and opportunities, respondents rated the opportunity to stay connected with the network institution/organisation higher than in the previous question on expectations. This highlights the importance of institutional identity amongst alumni and how they view their relationship and sense of belonging to the institution or organisation and its alumni network. Asked to provide further detail on their motivations, one respondent shared that the activities offered were similar to those provided by the CSC, but that the opportunities to get involved were wider. Another respondent noted that their institutional network was able to provide more relevant professional support and activities.

Respondents selecting 'Other' shared their motivations to access learning opportunities, give back to their institution/organisation, and keep track of the institution/organisation developments.

These respondents were then asked to assess the extent to which they felt other alumni networks or opportunities provided more relevant activities than the current 2018-2021 strategy and the draft 2022-2025 strategy. Responses are below.

Figure 13- Relevance of activities in strategies 2018-2021 and 2022-2025 compared to external alumni engagement opportunities

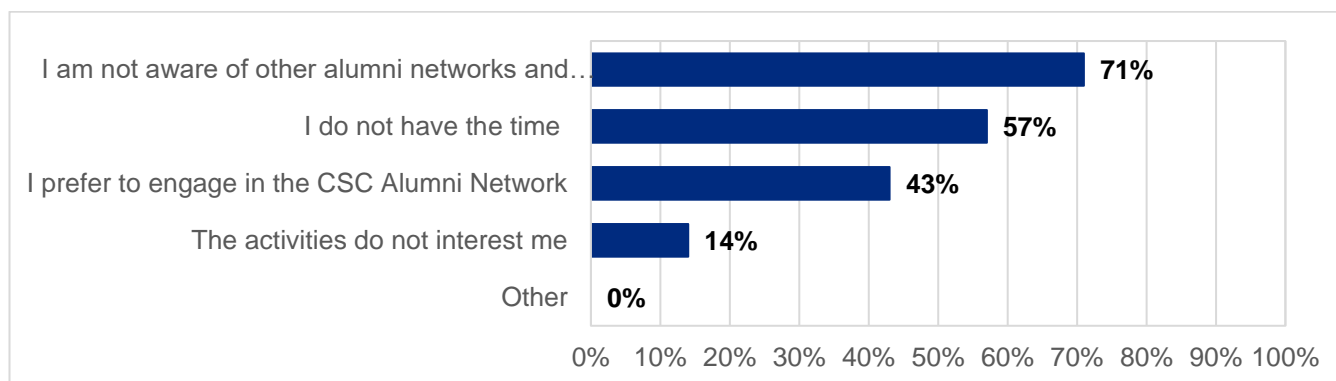


N=29

Ratings show that external alumni engagement networks and opportunities were not perceived to be more relevant than those offered in either CSC strategy. Open comments shared on the ratings indicated that differences in objectives and activities meant that offerings were not seen as more or less relevant, but rather different. Ratings for the draft strategy 2022-2025 were significantly higher than those for 2018-2021.

Respondents who answered that they were not engaged in other alumni networks or opportunities were asked to share reasons for this.

Figure 14- Reasons for not engaging in external alumni engagement opportunities



N=29

Lack of awareness and time received the highest ratings. One respondent expanded on their answer to note that they had not looked at other offers open to them, whilst another added that they did not engage in another opportunity as it was not as developed or proactive as the CSC Alumni Network.

Final comments and reflections

In their final comments and reflections on the Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2021 and the Draft 1: CSC Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025, respondents highlighted positive developments were proposed to strengthen the CSC's alumni engagement offering and that a variety of activities were being provided to engage alumni at different levels and motivations.

One respondent noted that the execution of activities would be important in ensuring successful delivery and that inclusivity of activities should be assessed. Another noted that flexible and adaptive delivery should be considered as new activities were rolled out and that ongoing and monitoring and evaluation be built into the strategy. A further review of opportunities for collaboration and increasing communication was noted.

Summary

Overall, feedback from members of the Alumni Advisory Panel showed that positive progress had been made through the Alumni Engagement Strategy 2018-2021 and that many existing activities would be positively received in a future strategy. Proposed objectives for 2022-2025 were reported to provide a strong framework on which to build the strategy and that activities currently assigned to support these were appropriate.

Areas for development included the further review and development of both existing and proposed new and redeveloped activities to ensure that delivery and expectations are clear, and that appropriate support is provided. Clearer communication will be critical for any new strategy, as well as providing opportunities to as many eligible alumni as possible. Further considerations should also be given to the value added by activities and the quality of implementation and outputs.

Next steps

The Alumni Team will consider the feedback from members of the Alumni Advisory Panel and from the broader Alumni Engagement Survey to develop a further draft Alumni Engagement Strategy 2022-2025. The Alumni Team will consult with internal CSC teams, CSC Commissioners, and the British Council in this process. A later draft strategy will be reviewed by the next Alumni Advisory Panel (2021-2023).

At this stage, the feedback will be used to inform the following steps:

- Refinement of proposed objectives and review of activities assigned to support these
- Review and further development of existing, re-developed, and new activities to ensure they meet both the objective set and that delivery and expectations are clear. Activities requiring early review include Alumni Associations, Knowledge Hubs, and communications/and publications.
- Internal consultation of the alumni engagement calendar to ensure activities are delivered throughout the year and open to as many eligible alumni as possible
- Ongoing research as to alumni opportunities offered through other institution and organisations to assess and benchmark the CSC alumni engagement offer