



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Pre-Departure Briefing Review

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.

Every year before they travel to the UK, the CSC invites scholars (living in countries where there is a British Council office working with the CSC) to attend a Pre-Departure Briefing session (PDB), either in-person, online, or by telephone. The briefing is an opportunity for the CSC to introduce Scholars to life in the UK, provide information on practical concerns such as finding accommodation, and generally prepare Scholars for their time studying abroad. Following several internal pieces of work looking at scholar experience, the CSC's Policy and Programme teams would like to update the briefing to make it more relevant to the challenges Scholars are likely to face.

In particular, two main areas are under consideration. Firstly, ensuring the advice on accommodation and settling into the UK are useful and directly applicable. Secondly, following growing awareness of the issues of racial and sexual harassment, we want to ensure Scholars and Fellows know what is expected of them as representatives of the CSC and under UK law, and make resources available to them if they are the victim of abuse or harassment.

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.

Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel were asked to review the existing PDB PowerPoint presentation and, reflecting on their own experience of attending a PDB session, offer ideas and feedback for how it might be improved. Alumni who did not receive a formal briefing were invited to share their insights on key information to be included in the briefing presentation, based on their experiences.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions on different aspects of the PDB. The questions were aimed at understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the current briefing and to learn more about panel member experiences in the UK to inform changes.

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

- Pre-Departure Briefing PowerPoint presentation

The task was open to all panel members who had completed their Commonwealth Scholarship and/or Fellowship in the UK. 47 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 48%. An additional panel member partially completed the survey. Their responses have been included in the below analysis where submitted.

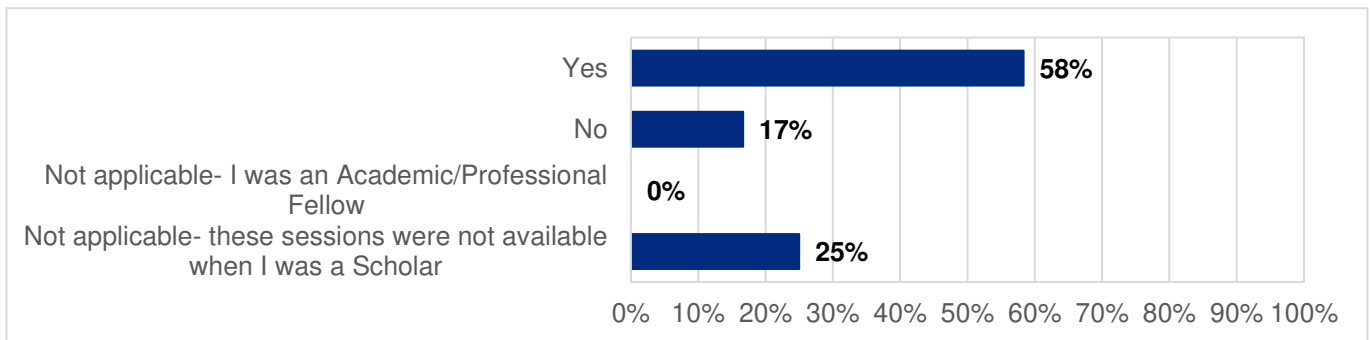
Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Your Briefing; About the UK; Before you leave home; Travelling to the UK; When you arrive in the UK; Living in the UK; Studying in the UK in 2021-22; Looking after yourself; and Overall thoughts.

Your Briefing

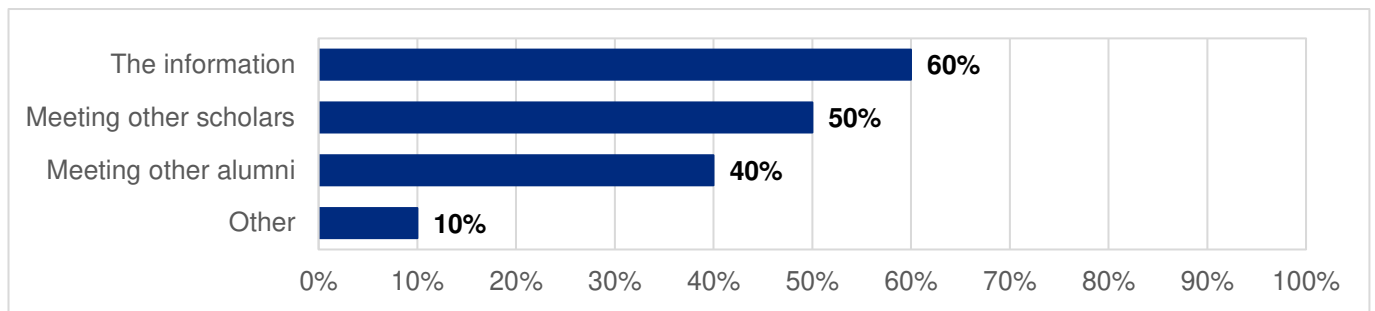
Before providing feedback on the content of the presentation, respondents were asked a series of questions about their own pre-departure briefing. These questions helped CSC teams get a sense of who completed the survey and provided valuable insight into which elements of the briefing session they attended had been the most useful.

Figure 1 – When you started your award, did you take part in a PDB?



n=48

Figure 2 – What was the most valuable aspect of the CSC PDB for you?



n=48

Whilst not all respondents had taken part in a CSC PDB, those that did, did so almost exclusively at an in-person event in their home country organised by the British Council. Despite ultimately being able to attend the PDB, 22% of attendees identified cost of travel and accommodation as barriers to attendance. As PDBs are almost exclusively held in British Council offices located in capital cities, several respondents described having to travel long distances to take part.



‘The nearest venue was a 6/7 hour trip from my base by [road]. This meant I had to pass a night at pre-departure briefing location. So, it was a big financial burden on me, since the trip wasn’t funded neither was accommodation provided.’

One respondent described being given very short notice about the briefing, but as a virtual or telephone briefing wasn’t offered, they felt unable to decline despite it causing disruption to their work plans.

Despite some difficulties in getting to a PDB, those that were able to attend felt the event was helpful and informative. Many respondents described meeting an alumnus in person and reported that learning from their experience first-hand as the most valuable part of the event. Several respondents also highlighted the value of meeting other Scholars, with some even forming long-term friendships after the event.

Criticisms of the event included a heavy focus on city life in the UK as opposed to life in smaller campus or town-based universities and not enough emphasis on the specifics of travel or accommodation, particularly given that such a large proportion of Scholars are travelling internationally for the first time.

About the UK

The first section of the PDB highlights key facts about the UK and its culture. Respondents were asked to describe what their perceptions of the UK had been prior to their studies to provide an idea of the types of preconceptions the PDB should address.

Overall, respondents reported having a positive view of the UK before they arrived. Expectations included a cosmopolitan country with friendly people and a rich culture. Many cited television programmes as the source of their understanding of UK culture and several respondents had also studied in the UK prior to receiving their Commonwealth Scholarship.

The main reservations expressed were a fear of people being unfriendly or very reserved, concerns over whether they would face racism, as well as the implications of the class system, and people being uptight. Bad weather was also cited as a concern by several members of the panel. Positively, when asked to describe their views of UK culture post-award, respondent views were almost exclusively positive. A summary of responses can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – What four words would you use to describe UK culture to future Scholars now that you have completed your studies/time in the UK?



Before you leave home

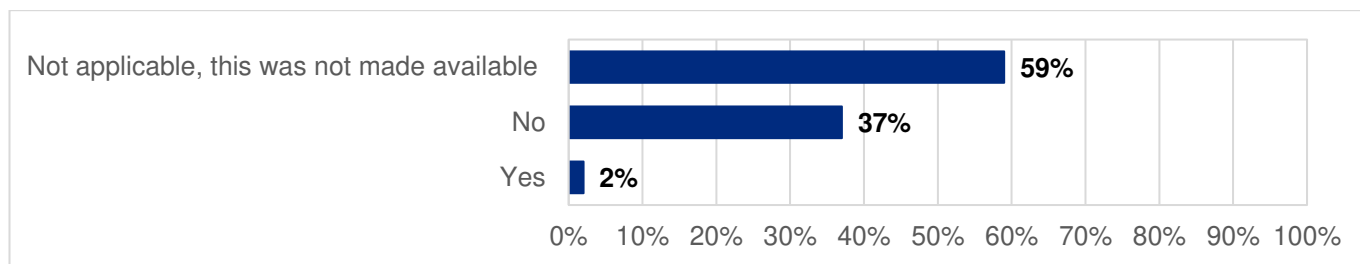
The second section of the PDB advises Scholars how to prepare for coming to the UK. Activities currently listed in the briefing include:

- An online module Scholars can complete to prepare for academic differences in the UK system such as referencing
- Information about how to apply for a visa
- A checklist of items Scholars should arrange before setting off for the UK

FutureLearn Course

The FutureLearn course, 'Study UK: Prepare to Study and Live in the UK', is designed to support international students studying in the UK. Through the course, participants will become familiar with studying in English and how higher education courses are structured, gain a clear understanding of what to expect, and develop self-study skills, whilst getting a taste of life in the UK.

Figure 4 – Did you complete the FutureLearn course, ‘Study UK: Prepare to Study and Live in the UK’, before starting your Scholarship?

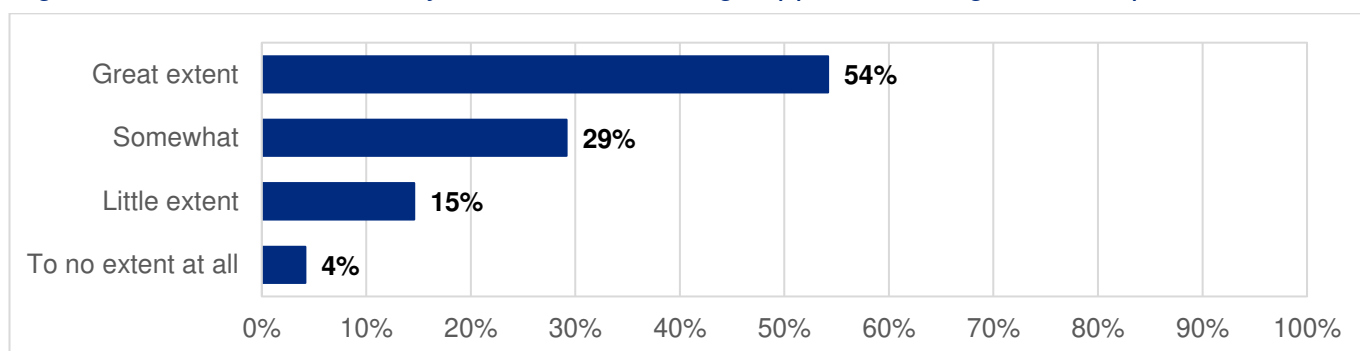


n=49

Only one respondent of the 49 who answered this question completed the FutureLearn course before travelling. Whilst many respondents were not offered the course at the time of their Scholarship, a significant number of respondents chose not to do it. Further analysis is required to identify why this was the case and what additional information could be added to the module to encourage more people to try it. The respondent who did complete the course reported that it was useful and they would recommend it to other Scholars.

Visa Process

Figure 5 – To what extent do you remember feeling supported through the visa process?



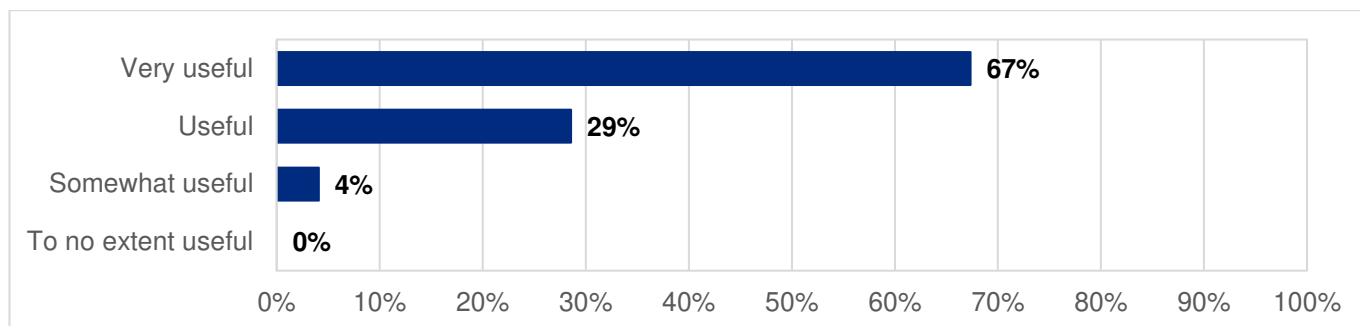
n=49

Whilst the majority of respondents felt they were supported through the visa application process to a ‘great extent’, a significant minority reported feeling less than adequately supported. This is concerning for a process as integral as getting a visa. Further research is therefore required to understand how the CSC can provide more support to new Scholars going through this process and what additional information can appropriately be added to the PDB and/or CSC website to address this number.

Departure Checklist

The ‘Checklist of things to arrange’ provides a list of documents Scholars should organise before setting out for the UK. The list includes items such as details relating to their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP), travel and medical insurance, and their Confirmation of Studies certificate.

Figure 6 – Referring to the 'Checklist of things to arrange', how useful do you think this checklist is?



n=49

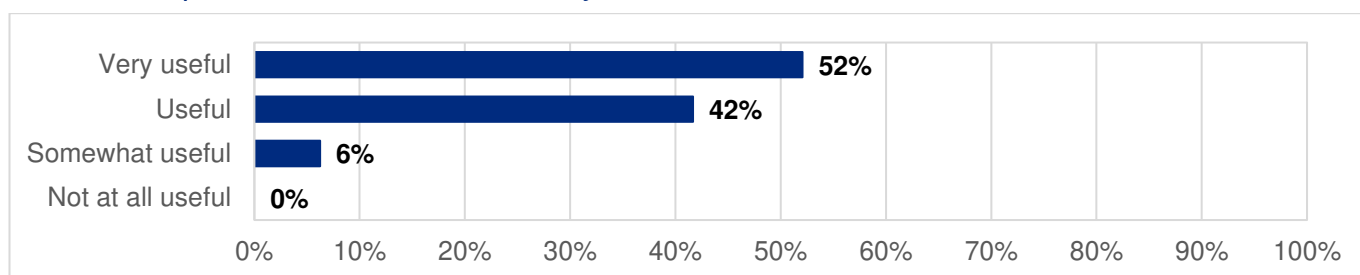
The majority of respondents found the 'Checklist of things to arrange' to be useful. The most common suggestion of what could be added was cash to help during travel and to cover any delays in opening a UK bank account and receiving the first stipend payment. Other suggestions included having roaming telephone credit for the first week, ensuring visa timelines were clearly laid out, and carry their TB certificate. These responses will be reviewed by teams internally to determine whether the current list should be amended.

Travelling to the UK

The third section of the PDB focuses on the process of flying from home countries to the UK. The CSC is aware that many Scholars may not have travelled internationally before and that it is therefore vital this part of the briefing is helpful and alleviates any fears first-time travellers may have.

'What to bring in your main luggage'

Figure 7 – Referring to 'What to bring in your main luggage' in the Pre-Departure Briefing PowerPoint presentation, how useful do you find this list?



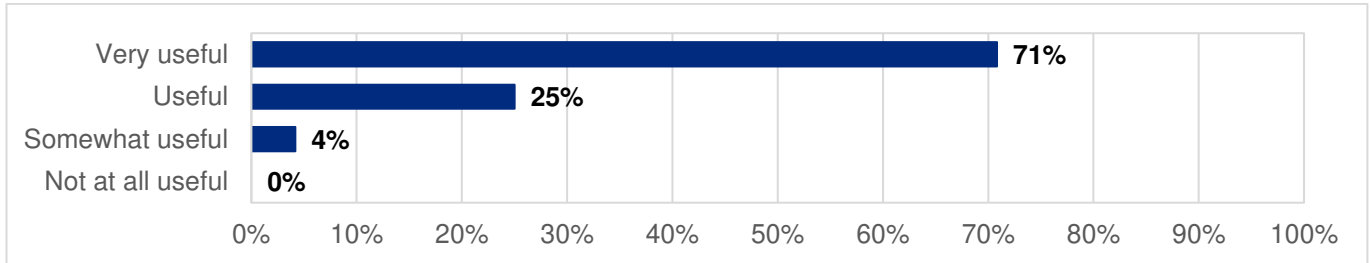
n=48

The 'What to bring in your main luggage' list focuses on the average temperatures of each season in the UK. 94% of respondents found this list to be either 'useful' or 'very useful'. The most common suggestions of things to add were: European adaptor for phone charger; copies of original transcripts (as some universities would require you for verification purposes); traditional/home country food stuffs; and more specific advice on the types of clothes Scholars will need.

‘What to bring in your carry-on luggage’

The ‘What to bring in your carry-on luggage’ list suggests a range of different items to pack including Scholars’ university offer and their confirmation of accommodation.

Figure 8 – Referring to ‘What to bring in your carry-on luggage’ in the Pre-Departure Briefing PowerPoint presentation, how useful do you find this list?



n=48

76% of respondents found this list to be either ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’. The most common suggestions for things to add were: clothes for a few days in case of lost luggage; emergency numbers/contact details and screenshots of key documents; as well as a copy of the address of their accommodation.

In addition to incorporating the responses above, it may be useful to include more practical information on the process of travelling internationally in future PDBs, in reference to the fact that many Scholars will not have travelled internationally before.

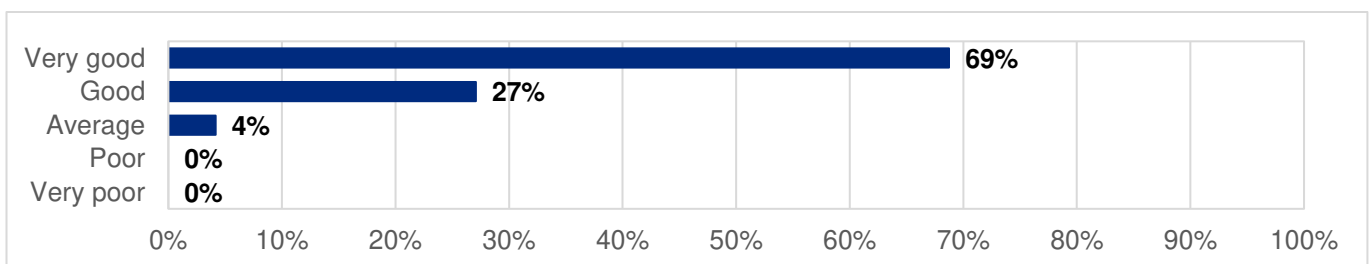
When you arrive the UK

Section four of the PDB looks at Scholars’ arrival in the UK. It includes sections on travelling through the airport, getting to places of study, and registering in the UK.

Getting from the airport to their university is often the most stressful part of a Scholar’s journey as they must navigate the British public transport system after a long trip, often with a lot of luggage. Clear and reliable information prior to their departure on how best to navigate this part of the trip is therefore very important.

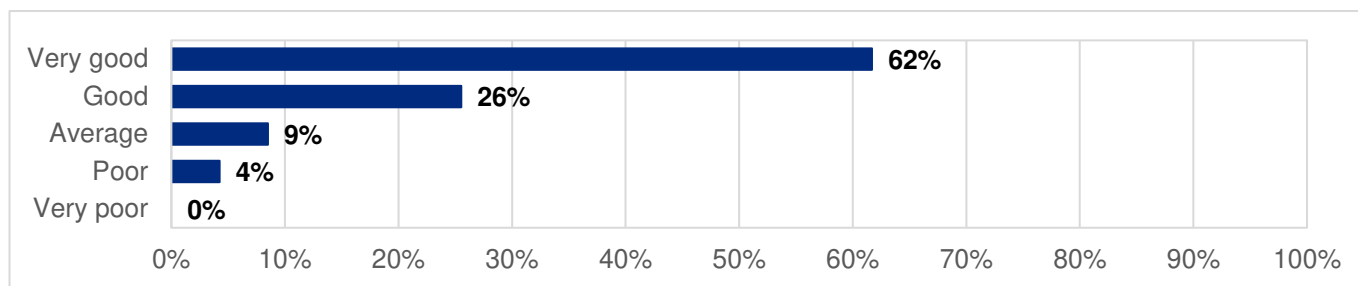
‘Travelling through the airport’ and ‘Getting to your place of study’

Figure 9 – How was your experience of travelling to the UK?



n=48

Figure 10 – How did you find travelling to your institution?



n=47

As you can see from figures 9 and 10, most respondents rated their trip to the UK overall and their trip from the airport to their institution as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. Despite many respondents describing their journey overall as positive, there were several things respondents highlighted they wish they had known prior to their journey that would have made it easier.

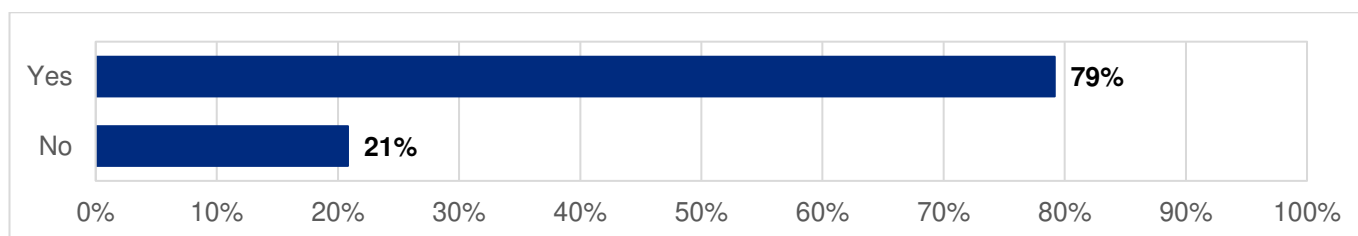
One of the most common suggestions was including more comprehensive information on the different types of public transport and related costs. One respondent, for example, chose to take a London taxi from the airport not appreciating until it was too late that this is a very expensive option. As many Scholars do not have extra funds and must live within their stipend, a large expense such as this at the beginning of the year could have significant implications on what they are able to afford for the rest of that term.

One respondent also pointed out that the relative costs may be very different from Scholars’ own countries so it is important not to assume any prior knowledge in the information presented. Respondents also suggested a list of where to find different local transport timetables may be useful to help Scholars navigate that first trip.

‘Registering in the UK’

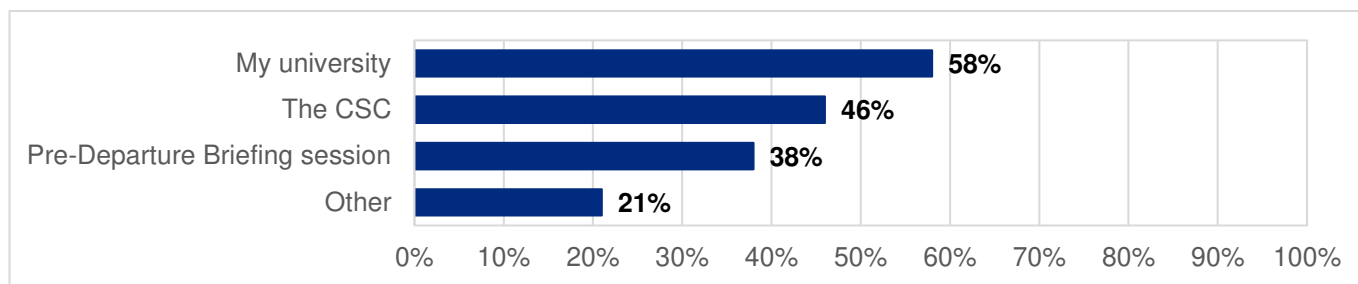
The final part of the ‘When you arrive in the UK’ section looked at the process of registering with the Police on arrival.

Figure 11 – Were you aware that you needed to register your stay when you arrived in the UK?



n=48

Figure 12 – How were you informed of this information?



n=48

A significant minority of respondents reported they were not aware they were required to register with the Police once they arrived the UK, suggesting it could be stated much more explicitly in the briefing and early documentation. Based on responses, UK universities appear to be diligent in informing Scholars of this requirement.

Living in the UK

The 'Living in the UK' section of the PDB covers the basics of adjusting to life in the UK and looks at finding accommodation, managing finances, and adapting to UK culture.

Settling in

This section begins by looking at the process of settling into UK life. Respondents were asked to describe the biggest culture shocks they experienced during their studies.

Responses to this question were highly varied. Several respondents described experiencing very little culture shock, though this wasn't the norm. Some common causes of culture shock included the weather and UK drinking culture, as well as the inability to find food from home countries, and struggling to make friends in the early stages of the Scholarship.

When asked what helped respondents to settle in, most answers referred to making friends and building relationships in their new home, as well as support from their university.



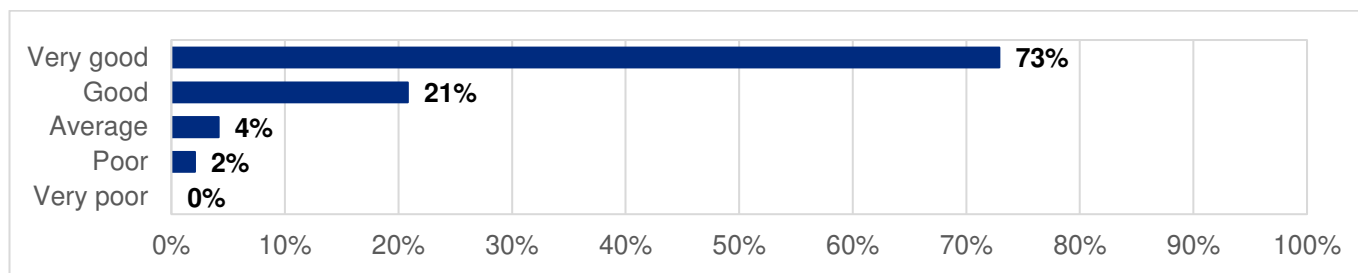
'My university had a welcome team who were very helpful in showing me around and helping me to do the various registrations I needed to get done. Also, I was connected to other scholars in my university and we quickly became friends, and this was very helpful especially in the first few days in the UK.'

'I spoke to the mentor once which helped overcome the first crying spell, after that it was learning by example and talking to peers, supportive seniors etc'.



Transport

Figure 13 – How did you find transport links whilst living in the UK?



n=48

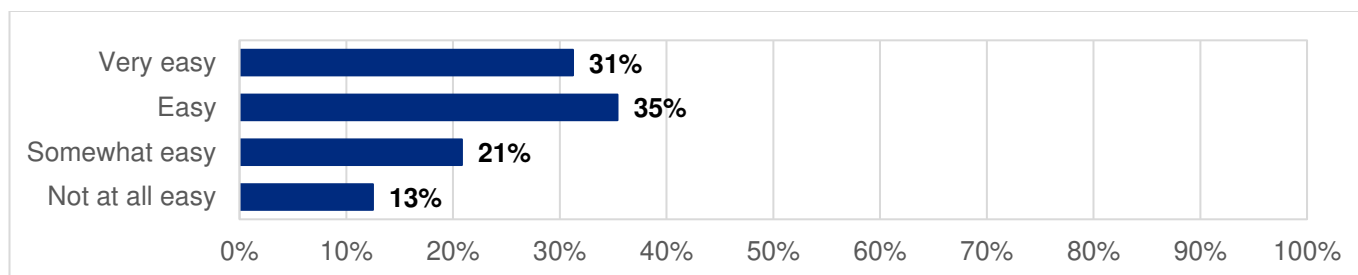
The next set of questions focused on accessing public transport during their studies. As you can see from figure 13, 94% of respondents rated public transport as either 'good' or 'very good' suggesting a high level of satisfaction.

When asked what would have been useful to know about public transport before they arrived, many highlighted the relatively high cost of public transport in the UK, as well as the use of credit/debit and Oyster cards. Many respondents also suggested more information about using student cards for discounts and the fair capping system.

Several respondents had used taxis at the beginning of their stay assuming they would be less expensive than they were. As discussed previously, this is particularly important for the initial trip from the airport to the university, as these can often be long trips leaving Scholars out of pocket very early in the term.

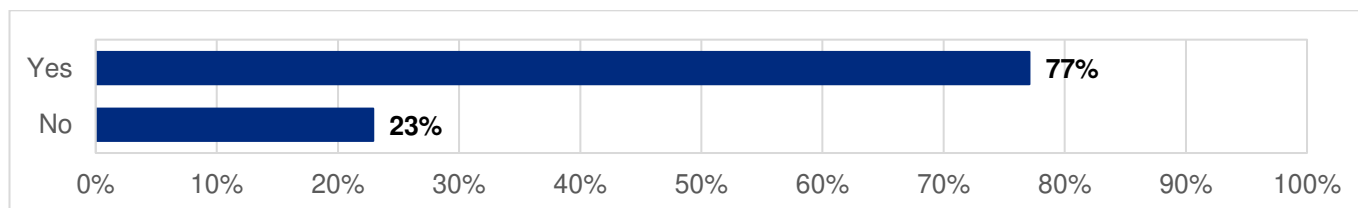
Accommodation

Figure 14 – How did you find securing accommodation for your stay?



n=48

Figure 15 – Did you feel the CSC and/or your university provided you with sufficient information to arrange your accommodation?



n=48

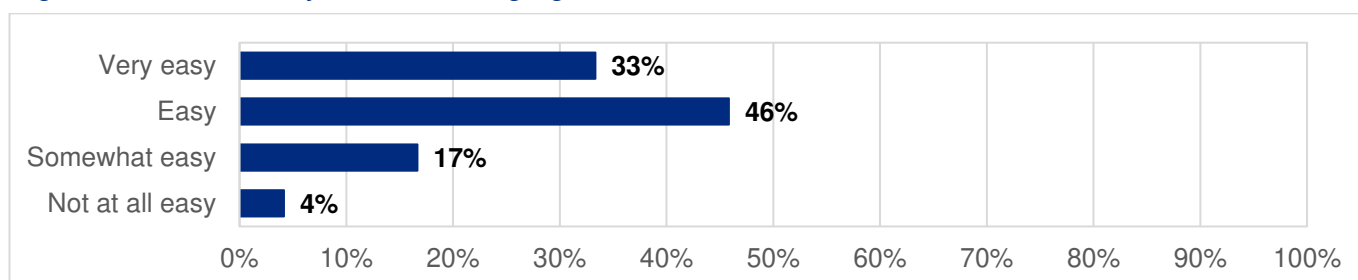
Respondents generally reported finding accommodation to be relatively easy, with only 13% experiencing real difficulties. However, almost a quarter felt the information and support they received from the CSC and their university was inadequate.

To help advise future Scholars about the process, respondents were asked to share things they wish they had known whilst trying to secure accommodation. Suggestions included: talking directly to other CSC scholars in the area who are likely to have the best advice for your town/city/university; looking for accommodation with students who have a similar lifestyle to your own (for example, living with a fellow PhD student rather than a master's student whose schedule is likely to be very different); remembering to look at private residential offerings as well as university accommodation as it is likely to be cheaper; and ensuring you read the accommodation agreement thoroughly before signing it as letting arrangements are often much longer and harder to terminate in the UK compared to other countries.

Respondents also strongly advised Scholars to have accommodation in place before travelling to the UK as it is very difficult and/or expensive to find anything short term. In addition, respondents felt the CSC could provide more guidance for Scholars travelling with young families and could help by providing a rough breakdown of costs (as accommodation tends to be much more expensive in the UK).

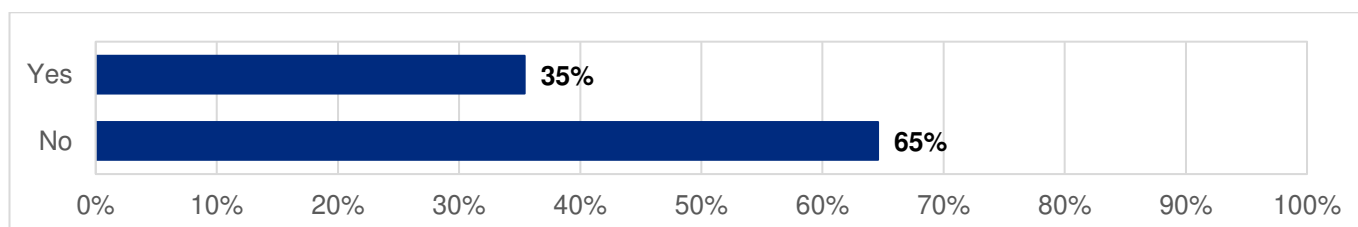
Managing your finances

Figure 16 – How did you find managing finances whilst in the UK?



n=48

Figure 17 – Did you have any unexpected costs?



n=48

Whilst financial circumstances differ significantly between Scholars, it appears most respondents were able to manage their finances well. 79% of those who responded said they found managing their finances to be 'easy' or 'very easy', whilst 65% said they didn't face any unexpected costs whilst on award. Respondents were asked to share any advice they would give to Scholars who were just starting their award. A selection of responses can be seen below.



‘Use the budgeting resources provided, develop a budget and try to stick with it. The UK is an expensive place to live and it is easy to spend on expensive conveniences - take away food, entertainment, taxis, outings etc. when less expensive options are available.’

‘Pay attention to the rent rates across all the terms - sometimes they may vary across terms or be upgraded from second term onwards. Also confirm all the costs that are included in your rent and bills. ... Monthly budget might also vary because expenses vary from winter through spring and summer. For students coming from countries where seasons did not warrant such drastic change of budget, this might be a surprise.’



‘Once a scholar arrives in the UK, they need to familiarize themselves with British currency and adjust to it rather than making a comparison with the currency of their home country.’

‘I have some unexpected costs regarding the pandemic outbreak, and it was a hard time for everyone. I want to say to keep some money aside for the rainy days. You may take some money from your country to manage any emergency there.’



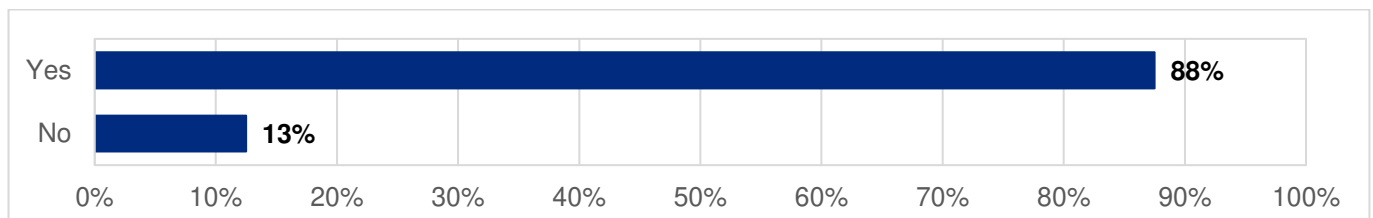
Studying in the UK in 2021-2022

This section of the PDB covers a variety of topics relating to student wellbeing, including discrimination and sexual harassment. Awareness of these issues has risen in recent years and following a series of internal discussions and data collection, it is important to ensure Scholars and Fellows know what is expected of them as representatives of the CSC and under UK law, and make resources available to them if they are the victim of abuse or harassment. Information on these issues was added in 2021.

Respondents were asked to answer the questions below based on the information given in the PowerPoint presentation.

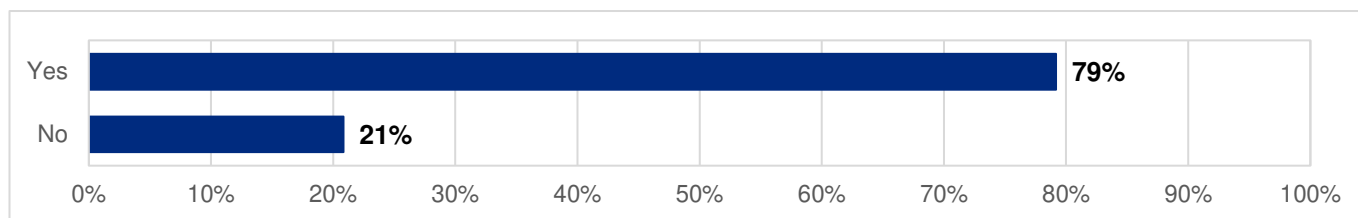
Discrimination

Figure 18 – Do you feel confident in what constitutes discrimination under UK law?



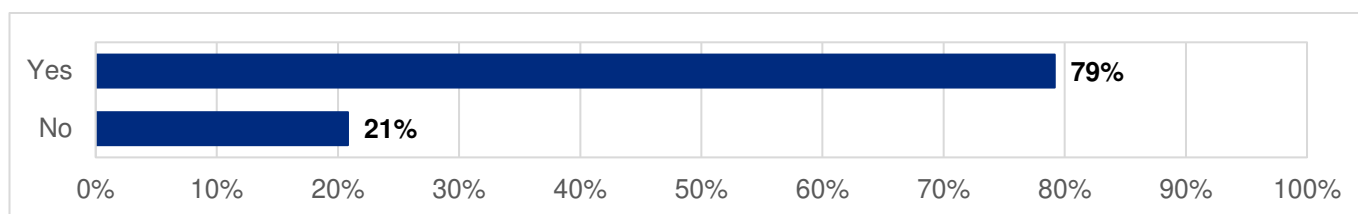
n=48

Figure 19 – Prior to reading this slide, did you have the same understanding?



n=48

Figure 20 – Do you feel reporting mechanisms are adequately described?



n=48

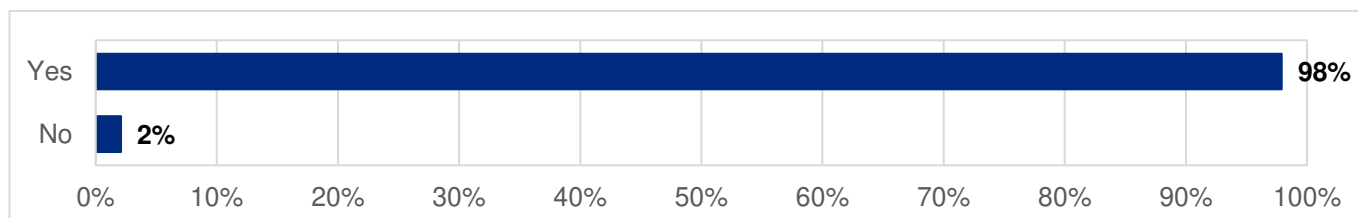
From the responses above you can see that understanding of what constitutes discrimination under UK law is high, with 88% of respondents saying they felt confident in their understanding of the term. Encouragingly, 21% of the panel felt their understanding changed as a result of engaging with the briefing, which shows the value of covering basic definitions in the presentation.

79% of respondents felt that reporting mechanisms were made clear. In addition to the questions above, respondents were given space to feed back any further thoughts on the subject. It was suggested in those comments that universities might be better placed to talk to students about experiencing discrimination as they are able to give specific advice about the reporting mechanisms at that university.

Whilst universities undoubtedly play an important role in tackling this issue, the CSC has a responsibility to Scholars to have its own systems in place and communicating the role of the CSC in tackling discrimination clearly will be an important part of the updates to the briefing.

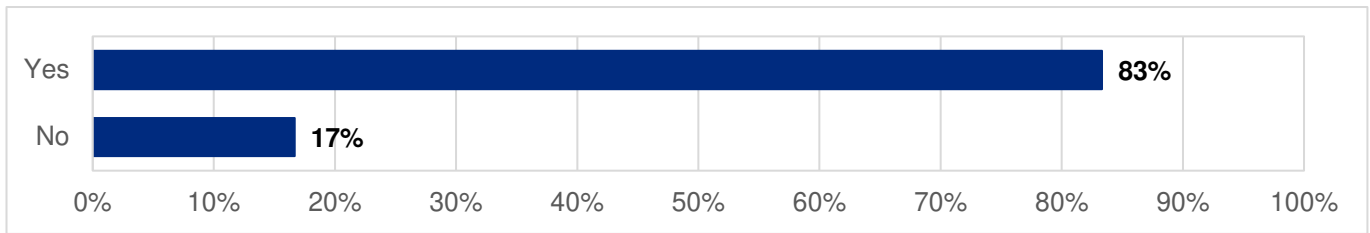
Sexual harassment

Figure 21 – Do you feel confident in what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual assault?



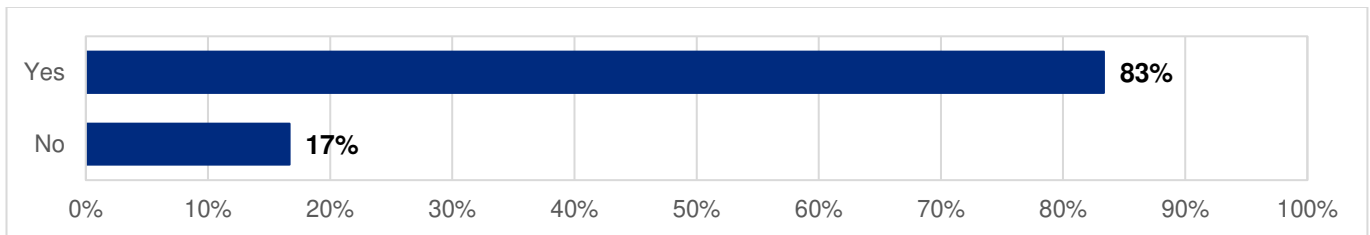
n=48

Figure 22 – Prior reading this slide, did you have the same understanding?



n=48

Figure 23 – Do you feel reporting mechanisms are adequately described?



n=48

Similar to the questions on discrimination, respondents felt confident in their understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual assault. 98% of respondents reported they felt confident in the meaning of the terms. 17% of respondents reported that the information included in the briefing had changed their understanding, suggesting again there is value in including basic definitions at the pre-departure stage.

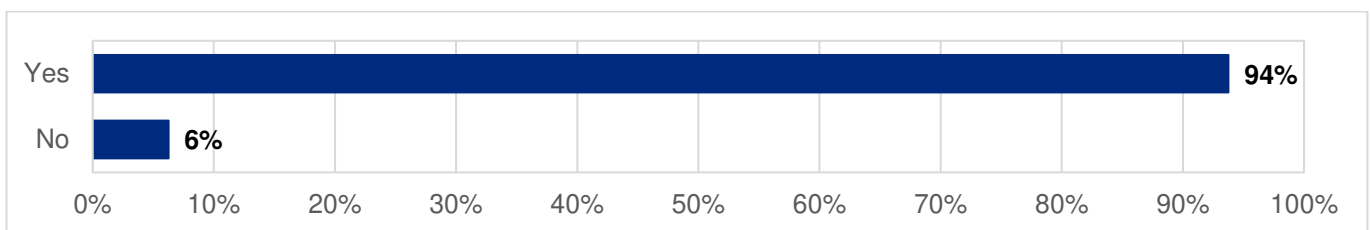
Responses indicate respondents were slightly more confident in how to report an incident of sexual violence than acts of discrimination. In the comments section however, two respondents highlighted the need to ensure that when complaints are made, they are followed up.

Looking after yourself

The final section of the PDB looks at health and wellbeing with a specific focus on the NHS and ensuring Scholars can access the healthcare they need. The NHS is a very large organisation that can often be difficult to navigate and it is hoped basic information at the pre-departure stage can make navigating it significantly easier for Scholars.

The NHS

Figure 24 – Were you able to access healthcare when necessary during your studies?



n=48

As seen in figure 24, most respondents were able to access healthcare when they needed to during their studies, with 94% saying they had accessed NHS care when necessary.

Respondents were asked to describe anything they didn't understand about accessing the NHS that might be useful for future Scholars to know. The most common response was not expecting to have to pay for prescriptions. Several respondents pointed out that the cost could be substantial, particularly if multiple prescriptions were required. The cost of dental care was also raised, as well as in registering with a GP and accessing GP appointments.

Final thoughts

The final section of the survey asked respondents to reflect on the briefing as a whole and to offer any final thoughts on where work should be focused. In general, comments were positive with a number of respondents describing it as useful and comprehensive. Outside of the briefing itself, several respondents reiterated the value of talking to previous Scholars and suggested that the most useful and specific information usually comes from these opportunities.

Summary

Overall, feedback on the existing briefing was positive with respondents generally reporting the information was useful and comprehensive. Feedback on the availability of the Pre-Departure Briefing and worries about costs associated with attending will be considered when deciding how best to deliver it in future. Respondents provided a number of helpful suggestions in relation to the content of the briefing, particularly the advice about organising accommodation and the process of travelling to the UK. All the information provided by respondents will be taken into consideration when putting together the new presentation.

Next steps

The Policy and Programme Teams will further review feedback from members of the Alumni Advisory Panel to finalise the Pre- Departure Briefing and its implementation.

The feedback will be used to inform the following steps:

- Redrafting of content for the new Pre-Departure Briefing
- A review of how best to deliver the briefing given the time and financial constraints we know scholars face
- A review of the structure of Pre-Departure events and the role alumni play within that
- Advertising and marketing of the briefing