COMMONWEALTH SCHOLARSHIPS

Return Experiences 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.

Over the past year, the CSC has investigated the experiences of recently returned alumni to identify the challenges faced in the months immediately following their Commonwealth Scholarship. Research conducted so far has focused on the experiences of those who completed their Scholarship in the last 1-2 years.

As part of further research into challenges experienced and the development of guidance for departing Scholars, the CSC Alumni and Evaluation Teams solicited feedback from panel members on their experiences immediately post-Scholarship or Fellowship and how they addressed or overcame challenges, as well as suggestions based on hindsight or further professional experience. Teams were also interesting in learning about positive return experiences and ways in which alumni felt enabled and encouraged to implement change to achieve development impact goals.

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 understand a wide range of return experiences from those completing Scholarships and Fellowships across the CSC's history and support the development of guidance for Scholars prior to completing their studies and in the immediate period following their return home.

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

- Reintegration experiences- summary findings, produced from 2019 survey response data from Scholars due to complete their studies and alumni 1-2 years post-study

The task was open to all panel members and 53 registered to take part. 41 submitted feedback, a response rate of 77%.

Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Challenges or barriers to impact; Enabling factors; and Reflections on experiences.

Challenges or barriers to impact

Panel members were asked to select challenges and barriers to impact experienced in the period immediately post-Scholarship or Fellowship from a pre-set list developed using responses gathered from recently returned Scholars on their return experiences.

48% of respondents identified between 1-2 challenges or barriers to impact, with 44% identifying 3 or more. 9% of respondents reported that they did not experience any challenges or barriers to impact.

Figure 1 – Challenges or barriers to impact in order of frequency
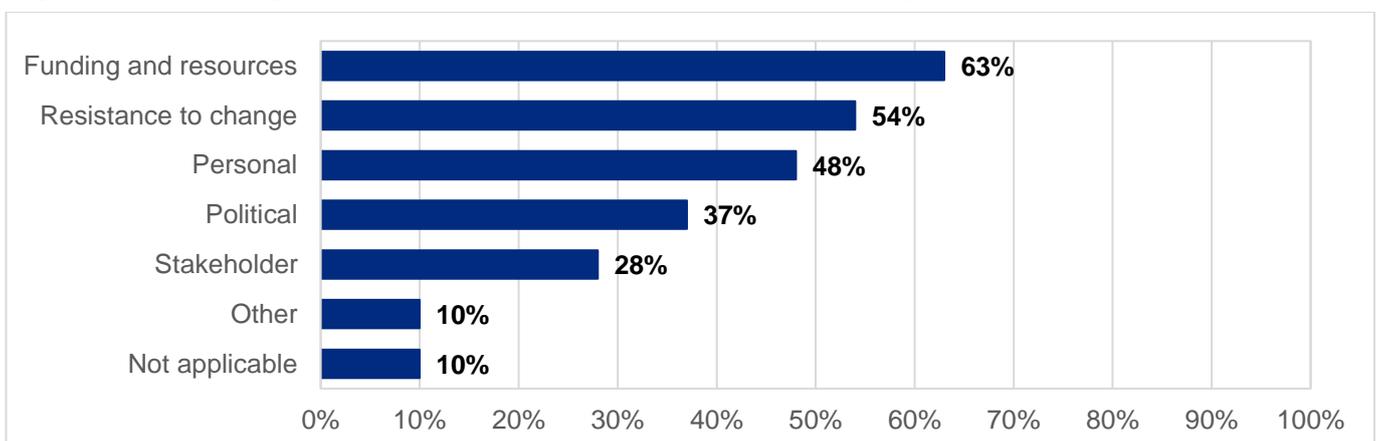
n=39

The most common challenges experienced were funding, resistance to change in the workplace, and personal challenges. Respondents were asked to provide further details on the specific challenges faced and any means employed to overcome these.

Funding

Respondents identified limited or lack of funding at their workplace as a barrier to implementing new ideas and research projects. Funding was also a barrier to conference and workshop attendance to enable personal and professional development. Additionally, the high cost of online journal subscriptions was a frequent challenge, with many respondents working in academia unable to access journals.

Respondents shared several ways in which they had overcome some of these of challenges. Where funding was not available, respondents had identified external collaborators to work with and submit proposals for joint funding, as well as utilising research networks to identify funding and grant opportunities. To access research journals, some respondents had joined research clusters which provided subscriptions to journals and other online resources, as well as registering for free access to journals. Where funding was available but limited, one respondent noted that implementing smaller pilot approaches had been successful in demonstrating the potential wider impact of a proposed project, securing funding and investment in the wider project as a result.

Resistance to change

Common resistance to change in the workplace included unwillingness amongst superiors and colleagues to accept new ideas and understand the longer-term benefits of implementing new or revising processes. A lack of understanding of the qualification and research skills respondents had gained as a result of their studies also led to resistance, with employers not acknowledging or fully comprehending the contribution respondents could make. One respondent noted that bureaucratic workplace processes were an impediment to implementing change and another cited jealousy amongst colleagues of their UK study opportunity as a factor.

Ways in which respondents overcame some of this resistance centred on workplace relationships. Respondents reported seeking informal opportunities to share ideas and develop colleagues' skills to enable and encourage them to participate in discussions around change, as well as seeking out new colleagues and workplace networks which may be more supportive.

Where resistance was specific to new ideas, respondents had sought alternative ways to pitch ideas to appeal to superiors and implemented slower and more sensitive approaches to broach these. One respondent had actively taken on challenging projects in order to demonstrate their skills and ability to gain trust from colleagues.

Personal

Personal challenges shared were predominantly related to employment opportunities, with respondents highlighting difficulties in seeking relevant employment and a lack of employment

opportunities in their area. One respondent noted that they struggled to identify a clear employment pathway to best utilise their skills and knowledge. Another respondent reported experiencing the pressure of raised expectations from family members and their employer which impacted their mental health during this period. Reverse culture shock was an unexpected personal challenge experienced by one respondent.

In facing employment challenges, respondents reported seeking voluntary or community work to implement their skills and build up work experience in lieu of employment opportunities, or where their employment was not directly relevant to the skills gained. Some also found proactive attitudes to seeking employment opportunities successful, such as reaching out to industries and employers, as well as identifying contacts, within the workplace or externally, to provide support and guidance.

Political

Civil war and political tensions were reported by one respondent as a significant barrier to impact on their return. Political change was also noted amongst respondents as impacting continuity in policy plans, and the position of universities under government influence also impacted the focus of institutions. In response to political challenges, respondents became flexible and prepared for changes to plans and programming and developed neutral positions to present to all stakeholders, where possible.

Stakeholder

Challenges related to stakeholders included securing buy-in, working with multiple stakeholders across single projects, and experiencing resistance to ideas from stakeholders. One respondent reported that high competition amongst researchers to work with stakeholders, rather than seek collaboration, was an additional challenge.

Maintaining continuous contact with stakeholders was one method employed to improve engagement, as well as developing communication models to ensure ongoing contact. This included reviewing stakeholders and identifying the best ways to engage with each to sustain interest and buy-in.

Other

65% of respondents reported other challenges and barriers to impact on their return. In the workplace, these included a lack of support and facilities to enable ongoing research, such as resources and reliable electricity and internet, re-establishing productive contacts and relationships with colleagues and networks, and ingrained organisational hierarchy. Two female respondents reported facing sexism in the workplace which prevented opportunities for professional development. Additionally, one respondent reported that cultural beliefs amongst the communities they worked in limited the impact of their interventions.

With regard to employability, additional barriers to impact included having to move into roles with lower salaries in order to use skills in more relevant employment and identifying and

understanding which sectors were now relevant to the skills and knowledge gained to seek new job opportunities.

On a personal level, one respondent who had studied in the UK with their family reported that family members experienced challenges in adjusting to their home country on return.
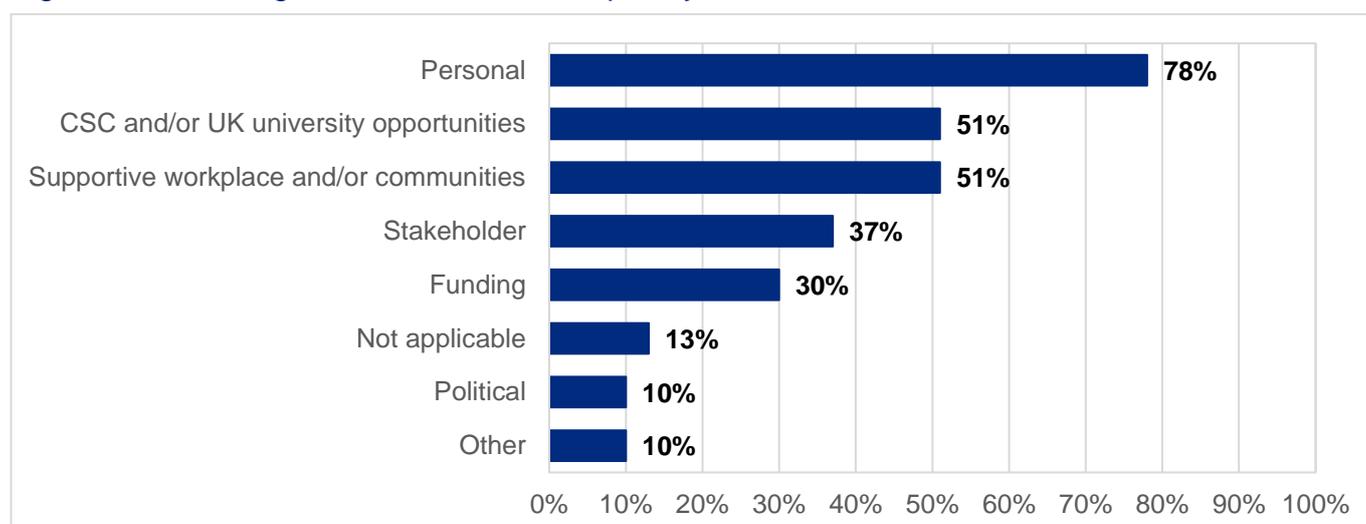
Enabling factors

As part of this activity, Teams were also interested in understanding positive return experiences and ways in which alumni had felt encouraged and/or enabled to achieve development impact in the period immediately following their studies.

Panel members were asked to select enabling factors experienced in the period immediately post-Scholarship or Fellowship from a pre-set list developed from ongoing research into return experiences.

33% of respondents identified between 1-2 enabling factors, with 56% identifying 3 or more. 12% of respondents reported that they did not encounter any enabling factors or encouragement in the time immediately post Scholarship or Fellowship.

Figure 2 – Enabling factors in order of frequency

n=39

The most common enabling factors were personal factors, such as resilience and determination, a supportive workplace and/or community, and CSC/UK university opportunities. Respondents were asked to provide further details on the specific enabling factors experienced, which are summarised below in the order of frequency.

Personal

Personal determination, self-belief, and growth in confidence were common enabling factors, alongside development in soft skills including leadership, communication, and report writing skills. Several respondents reported taking the initiative to enrol in further learning and training

opportunities via online platforms, particularly in cases where these opportunities were not available in the workplace, to enable them to continue their professional development. Personal networks were also cited.

Supportive workplace and/or communities

Those who returned to supportive workplaces highlighted greater opportunities to attend senior meetings, present on their work, and share their skills and experiences with colleagues as key enabling factors. One respondent noted that working with colleagues with similar international study exposure enabled greater impact.

CSC and/or UK university opportunities

Exposure to new ways of learning and seeking knowledge as experienced in the UK were noted as enabling factors in widening learning and understanding ways of transferring and sharing knowledge post-study. Some respondents had maintained ongoing links with their UK institution, supporting continued research and publishing opportunities. Contact with fellow Scholars and alumni was also noted.

Stakeholder

Respondents noted that in growing their networks and contacts they were able to increase stakeholder engagement and opportunities. Enabling factors regarding stakeholders included efforts to improve engagement by actively seeking to understand stakeholder roles and using networking and online platforms to meet and engage with potential stakeholders.

Funding

For those who had been able to secure funding for projects and work, they identified using networks and contacts to make connections and identifying funding agencies with similar focus and ideas to gain positive outcomes.

Other

55% of respondents reported other enabling factors on their return. Additional factors included supportive family members, maintaining a proactive stance towards seeking new opportunities, including being open to all and any opportunities available, and continuous networking. One respondent also highlighted that timing had worked in their favour, returning at a point where the needs of their sector and organisation were shifting, which their studies and skills complemented.

Reflections on experiences

Facing challenges

Respondents who had identified challenges and barriers to impact were asked to reflect on these and identify ways they would have prepared for or faced these differently with hindsight. Key changes respondents would have made to their return preparation included staying in touch with their employer while in the UK and contacting them prior to and immediately after their return. One respondent shared that they would have looked beyond their workplace for employment opportunities and ideas, with another noting they would have utilised their university career service.

Developing networking skills, maintaining networks in the UK, and reviving former relationships were also key changes amongst respondents. Understanding the need and how to be adaptable, as well as broaching change in a sensitive and deliberate way was also raised.

Key takeaways

Panel members were asked to reflect on their experiences immediately post Scholarship or Fellowship and identify key takeaways which returning Scholars and Fellows could learn from. 88% of respondents provided reflections which echoed responses shared throughout the activity.

Key takeaways included the importance of personal resilience and determination, such as managing personal expectations for how quickly change can be implemented and staying focused despite setbacks and unexpected limitations. Networks and partnerships were common responses and respondents highlighted the importance of maintaining and growing networks, as well as staying in contact with employers, colleagues, family, and friends throughout studies. Respondents also noted taking time to plan in advance of returning home, which included seeking job opportunities, re-engaging with networks, and identifying how to implement skills and knowledge.

Summary

Based on experiences shared by members of the Alumni Advisory Panel and the experiences reported by recently returned Commonwealth Scholars, similar challenges and barriers to impact remain in place for those returning from their UK studies and in the time immediately following this. While responses have validated previous research conducted in this area, panel members have shared insight into ways they overcame some of these challenges, as well reflections on further measures to potentially reduce the impact of these. Responses from panel members provides rich examples for future Scholars to learn from, as well reinforce that the period immediately post-Scholarship or Fellowship can be challenging and that in many cases, this is to be expected.

Responses to questions around enabling factors have revealed key areas of support returning Scholars require to implement change early in their careers and continue to develop personally

and professionally. Understanding these factors provides useful insight into where returning Scholars should look for support during this period.

Next steps

- Findings from this review will be used to validate and contribute to ongoing CSC research investigating barriers to impact and enabling factors.
- Methods employed by panel members to overcome challenges will be used to create guidance for returning Scholars to help them prepare for potential challenges and ways to mitigate these, as well as signpost them to useful online resources.
- As part of guidance development, panel members willing to provide further contributions to this area of work may be contacted to share further information or provide case studies to share real examples from across the CSC community.