

# Understanding Development Impact

Alumni Advisory Panel Report  
2019-2021 Panel



# Executive Summary

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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.

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Commonwealth Scholarships aim to meet a development, as well as an academic, agenda, and have a responsibility to ally academic excellence with development potential. Commonwealth Scholars are selected in part based on their plans to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Measuring the capacity to deliver a development outcome from a scholarship award is more difficult to assess, both at the application and post-award stages, than measurement of academic achievement, and therefore requires particular attention.

The online development module (ODM), 'Understanding Development Impact' has been developed by the CSC as an introduction for all new Scholars to international development and has been developed as the cornerstone of the CSC's commitment to improving the development impact of its Scholarships.

Panel members were asked to review and feedback on the current version of the online development module, 'Understanding Development Impact', rolled-out to 2019 Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars. This report summarises the responses shared by participating panel members on the effectiveness of the ODM in meeting its core objectives and preparing Scholars for development impact, and the potential of the module to be adapted to support alumni working in development.

# Methodology

The task was split into two activities and panel members were asked to complete up to 9 open-ended questions in each activity via an online qualitative survey. The questions addressed aspects related to the course content, objectives, skill development, and platform design.

The online module seeks to address two core objectives, in providing:

- An introduction to international development issues, including changing perspectives on development; and
- Professional development skills training

In Activity 1, panel members were asked to assess 'To what extent does the module meet its core objectives and prepare Scholars for development impact?'

In Activity 2, panel members were asked to feedback on the potential of the module to support alumni working in development, should an adapted version be made available to this group.

The task was open to all panel members and 55 registered to take part. 34 submitted feedback, a response rate of 60%.

# Results

Key findings from Activity 1 are summarised under the following four headings: Module content; Introduction to development; Skills development; and Understanding the role of the CSC international development.

Key findings from Activity 2 are summarised under the heading Relevance of the ODM to alumni.

## Module content

Respondents shared positive feedback on the content of the module. Overall, 85% agreed that the content is pitched at a suitable level for someone new to development, while 64% indicated that the content is comprehensive and covers key development challenges and issues. Generally, respondents commented that the module is well designed and easy to follow and provides a practical introduction to development. It was felt that having introduced key international development concepts and issues broadly, the module leaves room for participants to adapt the learnings to their respective disciplines and/or professional background.

5 respondents observed that the module adopts a suitably non-academic tone and language and uses strong examples. Of those who noted the diversity of the content, 21% felt the module communicated the importance of connecting their studies with wider international development goals. They also noted that the module helped them understand key development concepts from their own national context.

Suggestions for improvements to the course content included making the course more interactive by reducing the number of text heavy components and including more non-STEM related examples, grass roots level social development concepts, and regional development organisation case studies. It was felt these changes would encourage diversity and inclusion in the overall impact of the course, and somewhat alleviate time constraints to complete the module.

## **Introduction to development**

Reflecting on their time as a Scholar, 58% of respondents indicated the module would have been useful before embarking on their programme of study. Some commented it would also have been useful following their studies, as a re-fresher course or as a way of consolidating their academic studies and developing workplans/objectives through a development lens (implication that they would have accessed the module pre-studies as well).

Respondents felt the module would build Scholars' basic concepts on development and prepare them to grow links between their studies, career, and development goals from the outset of their Scholarship in a systematic way. Others commented that the module would help Scholars set post-study objectives, as well as build transferrable skills, allowing them to maximise on available opportunities while undertaking their studies.

## **Skills development**

Responding to questions enquiring about the usefulness of various topics and activities in the course, 73% felt the activities built basic professional skills, while 55% indicated that the topics consolidated their understanding of development issues. Generally, it was felt the activities and topics are engaging and compliment participants' understanding of topical issues in development.

48% found some activities more useful than others. The theory of change was noted as the most useful in building transferable skills. The comments section at the end of each step was popular amongst respondents as it supported interaction between participants and the formulation of diverse perspectives on development issues, as well as fostering relationships. The most popular topics are unconscious bias, followed by managing expectations, and integrity.

## **Understanding the role of the CSC in international development**

61% of respondents indicated that the module helped them better understand the role of the CSC in international development. Of this number, 79% felt confident in the capacity of the module in building the knowledge and skills required for sustainable development. In general, respondents felt that reminding participants to align their study and future goals with development objectives is important and relevant for the CSC.

## Relevance of the ODM to alumni

In Activity 2 respondents were asked to feedback on the relevance of the module to alumni. Approximately 94% confirmed that the module is an empowering tool and a great way to motivate alumni to continue aligning their objectives with development goals, as well as in reiterating their role as agents of change.

52% indicated that the module is more relevant for those who are new to development and Scholars at the start of their studies, but feedback indicated it could be useful to alumni who have recently completed their studies, as highlighted by panel members who had completed their studies within the last 5 years.

94% of respondents answered questions regarding the usefulness and relevance of the module to alumni. Generally, feedback was positive and indicated that the content successfully builds basic knowledge and information about development and related concepts. Of the total, 64% indicated that they found the module useful in expanding their knowledge and understanding of a new or previously known topic. 15% indicated that they found some modules more useful than others.

The dataset implied that the module could be made useful to alumni at mid-career stage by introducing advanced skills development exercises and including components on professional skills development. Of the respondents who suggested providing new skills development exercises for an alumni version, 27% recommended topics including evaluation, participatory methods, networking, proposal writing, budgeting, financial management, and change models. Respondents were asked to provide feedback on two key activities included in the module to understand their relevance to alumni: the Learning Portfolio and Peer-Review Assessment. 70% of respondents indicated that the Learning Portfolio activity would be useful for alumni, while 88% confirmed the relevance of the peer-review assessment. Those who favoured these activities noted that they helped in building diverse perspectives on development and encouraged participants to use and develop critical thinking.

Those who did not agree, felt that developing a Learning Portfolio was more suitable for those new to development. Regarding the peer-review assessment, respondents noted that for alumni to complete this activity they would require strong motivation due to the demands on their time for such an activity.

## Recommendations

Based on the review's findings, the following recommendations are made to further develop the online module, 'Understanding Development Impact':

- Inclusion of a broader range of case studies, covering current global challenges, such as climate change, food security, humanitarian crises, and wider health related examples.
- Inclusion of case studies and examples from alumni across all regions in the Commonwealth and wider range of countries featured.



- Scoping work to be undertaken to develop a version of the module for recent alumni (up to five years post-Scholarship) to support their understanding of development impact at an early career stage.
- Revision of the Learning Portfolio to better implement this as a learning tool.