CSC Mentoring Programme Scoping Activity

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.

The CSC Mentoring Programme connects Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni to support knowledge and skills development and a practical understanding of how these can be implemented post-scholarship to achieve development impact. The CSC pairs new Commonwealth Scholars with a Commonwealth Alumnus working in a related or relevant field to their studies to provide individual advice and guidance during their scholarship.

The programme is now in its fourth year and the CSC is scoping potential areas for development to enhance the value of mentoring between Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni. Based on feedback from previous participants, areas for development have been identified and include: understanding the value of the mentoring offer; ensuring adequate information is provided; reviewing the programme timeline; ensuring post-scholarship effectiveness and potential; and widening programme access.

As part of this work, members of the Alumni Advisory Panel were invited to review the existing CSC Mentoring Programme and offer ideas and feedback for how it might be developed under the five areas referenced. Panel members were also asked to consider the value of a mentoring programme to Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni, drawing on any experiences of the existing CSC mentoring offer and/or other mentoring programmes.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions. Panel members were also invited to take part in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to share feedback instead of or in addition to the survey. The questions were aimed at understanding potential areas for development to enhance the value of mentoring between Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni, building on the successes of the current CSC Mentoring Programme.

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

- CSC Mentoring Programme Overview

- CSC Mentoring Programme Mentee and Mentor handbooks

The task was open to all panel members. 47 completed the survey and submitted feedback and 6 panel members attended the FGD, 4 of whom also completed the feedback survey. The activity had a response rate of 50%.

Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Mentoring experience; Mentoring programme resources; Mentoring programme timeline; Post-scholarship experience; and Delivery across CSC schemes.

Mentoring experience

60% of respondents indicated they had participated in the CSC Mentoring Programme as a Mentor (47%) and Mentee (13%). They were asked to share feedback on their experiences as an initial benchmark of the programme's value amongst these respondents.
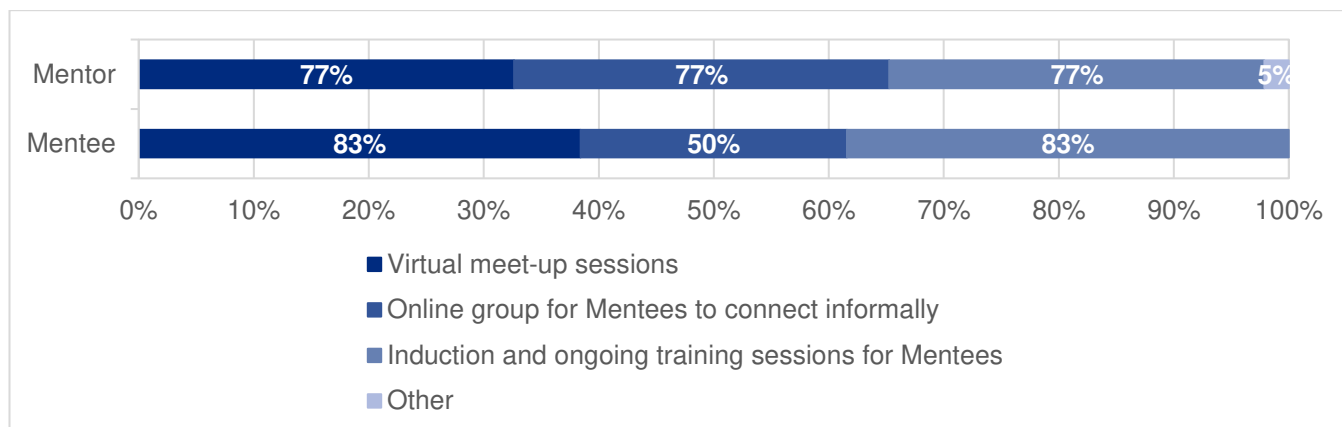
Figure 1 – Extent to which Mentor and Mentee respondents feel the CSC programme provides effective support and guidance to participants
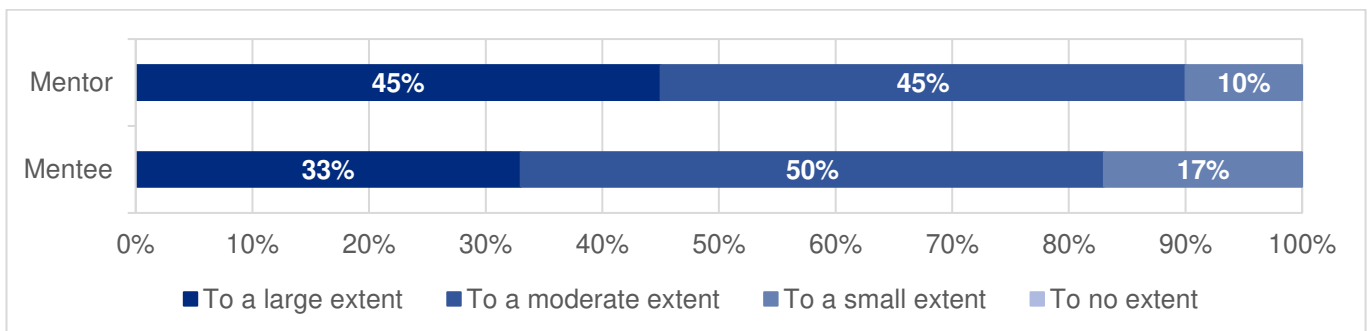
n=22 Mentor; 6 Mentee

Most respondents felt they were provided support and guidance 'To a large extent', with a small number reporting support to be 'To a small extent'.

Figure 2 – Activities respondents feel would be useful during the programme, based on previous participation

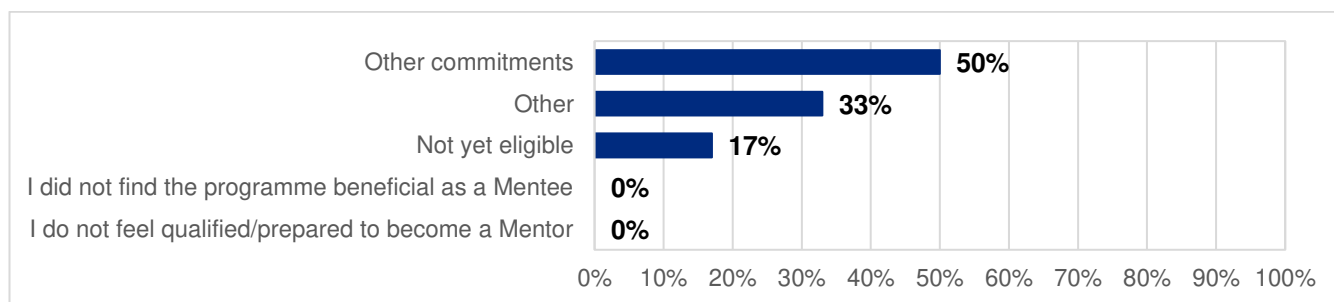|	Virtual meet-up sessions	Online group for Mentees to connect informally	Induction and ongoing training sessions for Mentees	Other
Mentor	77%	77%	77%	5%
Mentee	83%	50%	83%	

n=22 Mentor; 6 Mentee

Currently, the programme provides an induction session for Mentors and Mentees and virtual meet-ups throughout the mentoring cycle.

Respondents reported that all the activities listed would be useful to Mentors and Mentees during the programme. One respondent shared that virtual meet-ups and induction sessions would be valuable to Mentors to understand what to expect from the programme. Two respondents who had participated as Mentees during the early years of the programme shared that they wished an induction session and virtual meet-ups had been available at that time. The respondent who selected 'Other' added that academic support for pairs could be useful.

Figure 3 – Reasons former Mentees had not participated in the CSC Mentoring Programme as Mentors

Other commitments	50%
Other	33%
Not yet eligible	17%
I did not find the programme beneficial as a Mentee	0%
I do not feel qualified/prepared to become a Mentor	0%

n=6

Figure 4 – Reasons for not participating in the CSC Mentoring Programme as a Mentor or Mentee

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Other	47%
Other commitments	37%
Unaware of the programme	21%
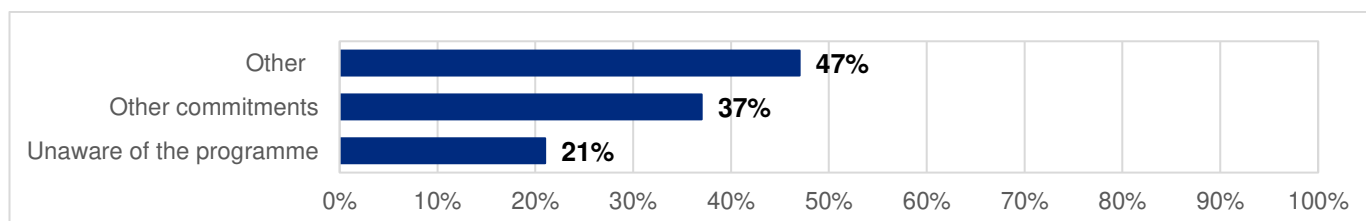
n=19

The greatest barriers to participation amongst those who had and had not participated in the programme was a lack of time due to other commitments. The two former Mentees who selected 'Other' reported that they had applied and were not paired or their pairing had been unsuccessful. Of the 40% who had not participated before, the second greatest barrier reported was being unaware of the programme. The respondents who selected 'Other' added they were unsure of eligibility and did not receive information on applying.

Respondents were asked to reflect on the information shared about the programme and how to participate and share suggestions on ways this could be improved to encourage greater participation amongst alumni. The programme is currently promoted via invitation mailings and reminders to eligible alumni and on the CSC website.

Figure 5 – Ways to better promote the programme to encourage more alumni to apply
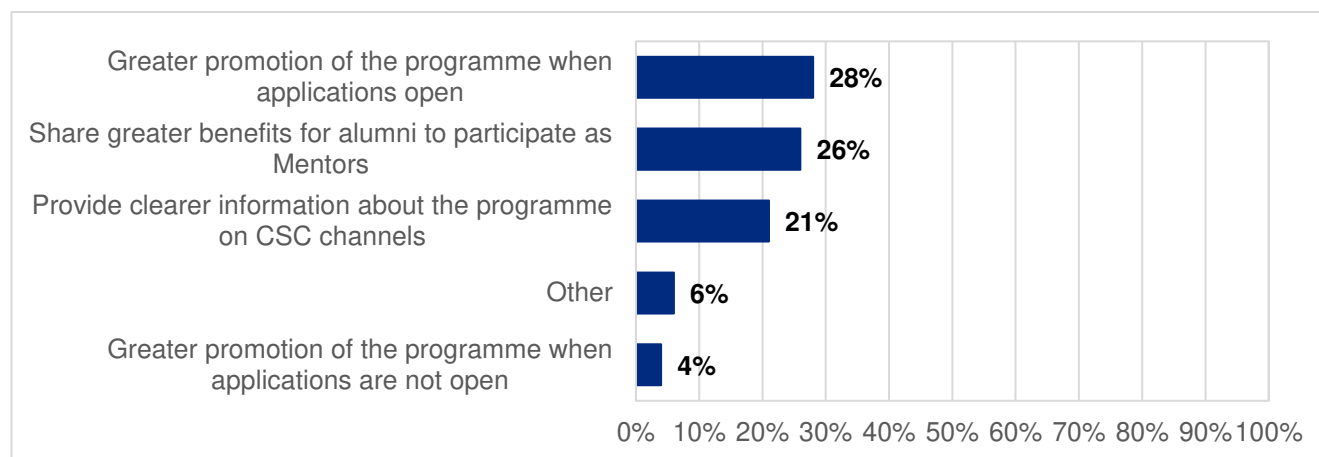
n=47

Respondents shared that increased promotion and greater information about the programme would encourage more alumni to apply. 28% of respondents felt the programme should be promoted extensively when applications open and that clearer information on the eligibility criteria, benefits of participating, roles and expectations of Mentors and Mentees, and examples of pairings should be included. It was also noted that information on the reason for unsuccessful pairings be shared to better explain this potential outcome.

Experience of participating in other mentoring programmes

30 respondents had experiences as a mentor and 17 as a mentee on another mentoring programme(s). Examples of the types of mentoring they had been involved in included providing support to junior graduate students, doctoral students, fellow colleagues, and interns in the workplace.

Respondents shared that being a mentor gave them a sense of giving back to society by providing an opportunity to share guidance and support the professional development of others. Those who had been mentored shared that the support received included skills development, workplace guidance, and advice on further study opportunities and applications. These experiences are similar to those reported by CSC Mentoring Programme participants.

Mentoring programme resources

At the start of the programme, all participants receive a copy of the relevant Mentor or Mentee handbook, which provides an overview of the formal cycle, programme stages, expectations of Mentors and Mentees, and tips on developing a productive pairing. Respondents were asked to review both handbooks and share feedback on the content and information provided.

Asked to report on the extent to which the current handbooks provide sufficient guidance and information on the programme and roles and expectations of participants, 79% of respondents felt they achieved this 'To a large extent' and 19% 'To a moderate extent'.

Respondents were asked to provide further ratings and feedback on the content handbook.

Figure 6 – Rating on the clarity and effectiveness of information shared on handbook sections
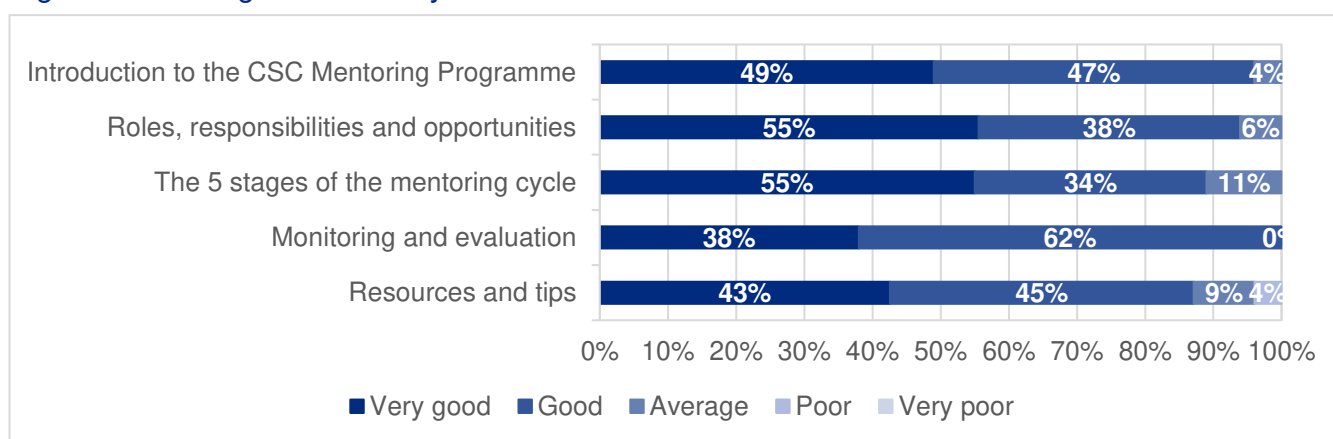
n=47

In general, respondents appreciated the in-depth information provided on the roles and responsibilities of participants, clarity on the purpose of the programme, the mentoring cycle, and tips provided for each stage of the cycle. The two respondents who rated some aspects of the content as 'Poor' shared that information on how to communicate and the frequency of communication could be better presented.

Whilst most respondents found the information in the handbooks was 'well presented', 'adequate', and 'comprehensive', suggestions were made to amend or include new information. A few respondents felt the handbooks were information heavy and suggested exploring creative ways to communicate or break-up the information.

Several respondents felt the handbooks could benefit from examples of previous home-country or cross-country pairings and examples of goals and learning objectives which could be set by participants. One respondent also suggested including information on CSC activities and opportunities, such as the Research Impact Awards, to encourage mentoring discussions around professional development. As previously mentioned, respondents also suggested providing information on the common reasons for dropouts or pairings being terminated to raise awareness and provide assurances for these occurrences.

Some respondents felt that information on how to manage certain challenges that may be experienced by pairs should be provided. Examples included mental health support and grievances. One respondent suggested summarising this through a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section. Further suggestions included outlining what is feasibly achievable through the programme and sharing what success looks like for different pairs, emphasising that the programme is delivered virtually, and that there is room for flexibility in how pairs may choose to use the mentoring opportunity to avoid overwhelming participants.

Specific to the Mentor handbook, one respondent suggested including a benefits section to showcase the impact of the programme for Mentors to encourage more participation amongst alumni. Another respondent proposed the inclusion of eligibility criteria for Mentors. To strengthen the role of Mentors, a few respondents indicated that the inclusion of guidance on the wider type of support Mentors can provide to Mentees would be useful, such as networking skills, conflict management, and how to publish research.

Comparing both handbooks, one respondent felt there should be variation in the format and layout of the two handbooks, as they currently mirror each other.

Mentoring programme timeline

Respondents were asked to review the mentoring timeline, which currently runs for 12 months from December to December. This covers a one-year master's programme and the period immediately post-scholarship and one year of a doctorate.

To ensure the value and efficacy of the programme, there is a need to understand the periods at which the programme will be most beneficial to Mentees and the type of support required of Mentors.

Figure 7 – Rating on potential updates to the programme timeline
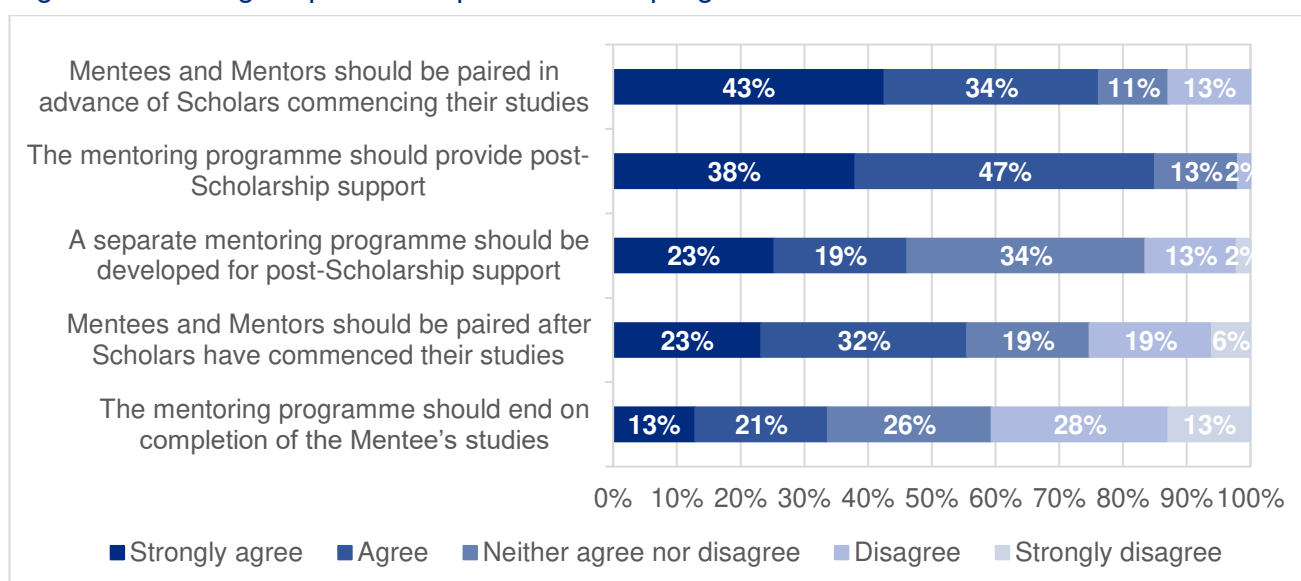
n=47

85% of respondents 'Strongly agreed' or 'Agreed' that the programme should provide post-scholarship support to Mentees highlighting the importance of the timing of the programme and the adjustment in the timeline made for 2021/22.

77% of respondents 'Strongly agreed' or 'Agreed' that pairing should be made in advance of Scholars commencing their studies. Currently, pairings are made within the first few weeks of Mentees commencing their studies in the UK. Reasons provided for pairing at this stage focused on preparing Scholars for their study and living in the UK, providing guidance on course selections, adapting to UK academic culture, and the opportunity to build rapport before Mentees travel to the UK.

> 'Pairing mentees and mentors in advance of scholars commencing their studies seems the best option. Pre-travel preparation is very crucial to mentees who have never been to the UK for a formal study. Many taken-for granted questions and worries are naturally very common at this stage and mentors could contribute to supporting this important preparation phase.'

55% of respondents 'Strongly agreed' or 'Agreed' to pairing after Scholars have commenced their studies. Reasons given for pairing at this stage acknowledged that Scholars have a lot of pre-scholarship preparations, including travelling to the UK, arranging accommodation, and settling in once they have arrived. A few respondents felt that Scholars may find the first few weeks of their studies stressful and that offering mentoring once they have settled in may be more beneficial. Another respondent highlighted that pairing Scholars after they have commenced their studies would allow them time to identify what they would like to achieve through the programme and how a Mentor can best provide support.

Post-scholarship experience

Asked about the impact of introducing a separate mentoring programme for post-scholarship support, a small number of respondents felt this support would be unnecessary for those already participating in the Mentoring Programme, as pairs could mutually decide if they want to stay in contact post-study. Some respondents noted that Scholars could seek post-scholarship support, such as job opportunities and networking, through existing alumni activities.

In 2021-2022, the CSC Mentoring Programme timeline was updated to a one-year cycle from December 2021 to December 2022, to cover the immediate period following the completion of a one-year master's study to pilot post-scholarship mentoring through the programme.

Respondents were asked to reflect on their post-scholarship experience and the potential benefits of mentoring support at this stage.

Figure 8 – Extent to which respondents feel post-scholarship mentoring may be valuable to Mentees

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To a large extent	55%
To a moderate extent	38%
To a small extent	6%
To no extent	0%
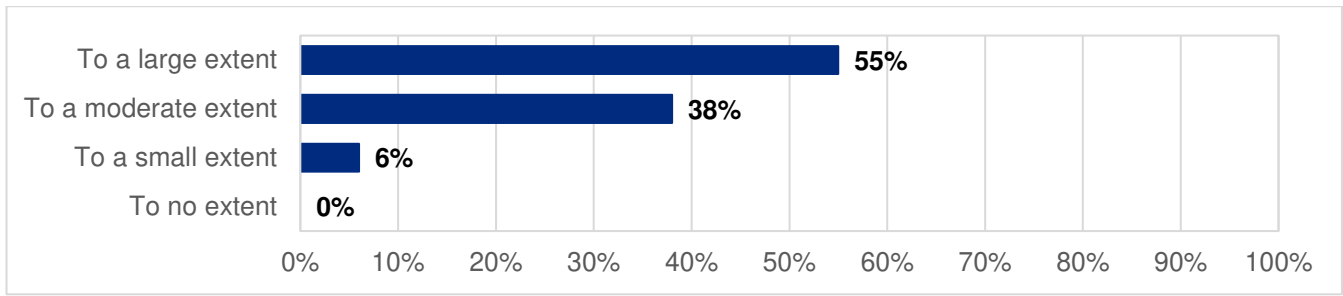
n=47

Most respondents felt post-scholarship mentoring would be of great value to Mentees as they return home. Respondents shared that during this time Mentees may find it difficult to re-orient themselves. Examples of challenges included returning to existing job roles, entering the job market with new skills and knowledge, and implementing change to achieve development impact.

'The mentoring program fills a much-needed gap in the institutional support offered to CSC scholars. However, a post-scholarship mentoring program will add a great value to the existing structure of support.'

Figure 9 – Extent to which respondents feel Mentors could provide Mentees with some level of practical support and guidance post-scholarship

To a large extent	53%
To a moderate extent	40%
To a small extent	6%
To no extent	0%
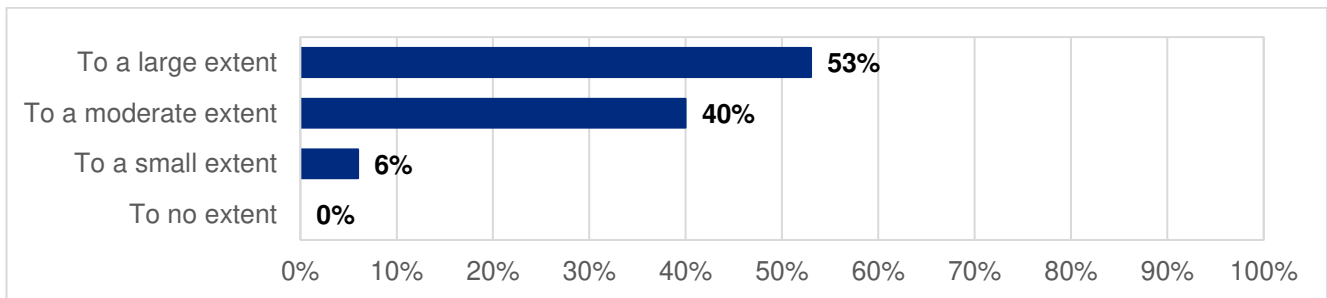
N=47

Overall, respondents felt Mentors would be able to provide some level of post-scholarship mentoring support based on their own experiences. Asked to elaborate, areas where respondents felt support could be provided included: developing employability skills; building professional networks and connections; understanding the job market; and exploring opportunities for further studies. It was noted by a few respondents that post-scholarship mentoring support would be more beneficial where Mentors and Mentees were from the same home country as the guidance on opportunities and sector trends would be more specific.

Figure 10 – Ways in which the CSC should provide support to Mentors on post-scholarship mentoring
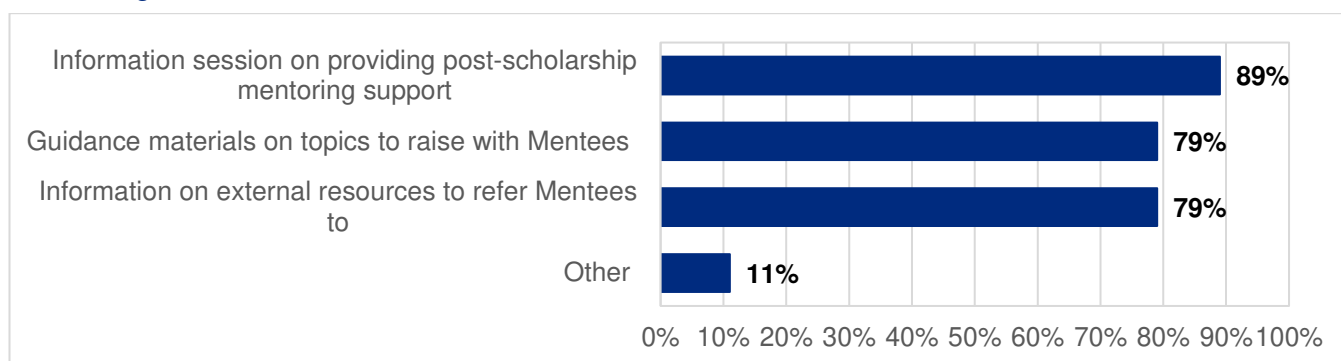
N=47

All respondents felt the CSC should provide Mentors with specific support and guidance on post-scholarship mentoring. All options presented on how support could be provided were felt to be important.

In open responses, respondents noted that Mentees may expect post-scholarship support on a range of topics including: navigating employment opportunities; developing professional networks; information on further studies; change management; and understanding how to implement their skills and knowledge to achieve development impact. A few respondents indicated that not all Mentors may feel confident in support their Mentee and that adequate resources or training would be critical.

> 'After completion of their studies on the Commonwealth Scholarship, it is important that immediate guidance be provided to the students on how to implement the skills learned as well as solve their employment-related queries. This is important as the students would not get the facilities and the environment they received in the UK when they return to their home countries (especially those who come from developing countries). It is imperative to ponder at that stage how far it is practical to implement their new learning in their own home countries and what new avenues can be created.'
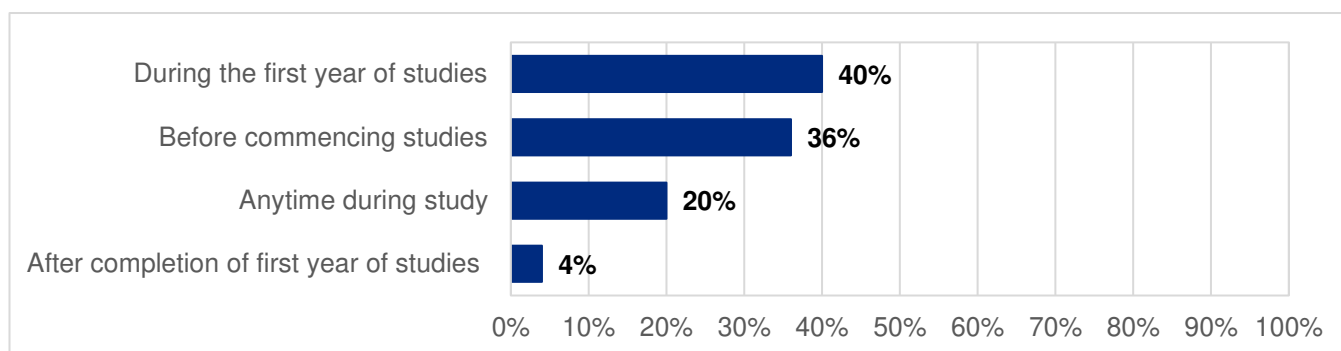
Delivery across CSC schemes

The CSC Mentoring Programme is currently only available to Scholars completing their studies in the UK. In this section of the survey, respondents who had studied as distance learners were asked to provide feedback on how the programme could be opened to include Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholars. Earlier in the survey, respondents were also asked to provide insight into how to ensure the programme is appropriate for doctoral Scholars. These responses are also summarised below.

Doctoral Scholar mentoring provision

53% of respondents had completed doctoral studies as a Commonwealth Scholar, including all six members of the FGD. These respondents were asked to share information on the timing of the programme and any specific requirements for doctoral Mentees.

Figure 11 – When to provide mentoring support for Commonwealth doctoral Scholars

During the first year of studies	40%
Before commencing studies	36%
Anytime during study	20%
After completion of first year of studies	4%

n=25

Respondents reported that the first year of doctoral studies is a crucial time for mentoring as it lays the foundation to become an independent researcher which Mentors could support. Reasons given for pairing in advance of studies were similar to those already shared in an earlier question.

During the FGD, participants shared the ways in which doctoral Mentees could benefit from mentoring. Examples given included: developing data management, academic writing, comprehensive analysis and time management skills; undertaking systematic reviews; applying for grants, funding, and patents; navigating research career opportunities.

Distance Learning Scholar mentoring provision

17% of respondents indicated they had studied via distance learning. 88% of these respondents felt that receiving mentoring support as a distance learner would be beneficial 'To a large extent'. 12% felt it would be beneficial only 'To a small extent'.

Asked about the ways in which Distance Learning Scholars may require different mentoring support to those studying in the UK, it was felt that those studying via distance have similar academic and professional goals to those studying in the UK and that offering mentoring support would help to address these, as well as challenges specific to distance learning experiences. Challenges shared by respondents included feeling isolated, struggling with work-life balance, and adapting to online learning.

Most respondents reported that, as a Mentee, they would have preferred to be paired with a Mentor with experience in distance learning. It is interesting to note that the majority of respondents indicated no country preference for pairing, with some reporting that a cross-country pairing would be beneficial in terms of gaining a different cultural perspective.

'Distance learning can be an isolating experience and without the self-discipline and the motivation to connect and network with others, the benefits of the course may not be fully realised. A mentoring programme that addresses some of the isolation and the skills required to network would be beneficial to distance learners.'

Respondents suggested a tailored mentoring programme would be required for Distance Learning Scholars. Reasons given included the focus on online learning, work-life balance, and the opportunity for in-person mentoring where pairs are in the same country.

> 'As a distance learner, I faced lots of challenges in managing the work-study-life balance, from studying to assignment and research projects, as well as preparation for the examination. Expectation greatly differs from those who study in the UK physically. Perhaps less support in term of culture, environment etc as distance learners usually do not need to adjust to their living/work environment.'

Summary

Overall, feedback on the existing CSC Mentoring Programme was positive and validated some areas of current delivery. Respondents shared insightful feedback on ways to develop resources, the programme timeline, and ways in which the programme could be tailored to different CSC schemes and modes of study. Respondents also shared information on ways to better promote the programme and develop communications, such as increased promotion through mailings and social media, and the use of testimonials.

Next steps

The CSC Alumni Team will further review the feedback from members of the Alumni Advisory to update the mentoring programme and explore longer-term developments.

The feedback will be used to inform the following steps:

- Updating the mentoring handbooks and resources to include clearer information on the programme
- Liaise with the CSC Communications Team to develop a new communications strategy for the programme
- Review newly developed materials for post-scholarship support to ensure points shared by respondents are included
- Conduct further research into the possible development of a programme for Distance Learning Scholars as a longer-term development