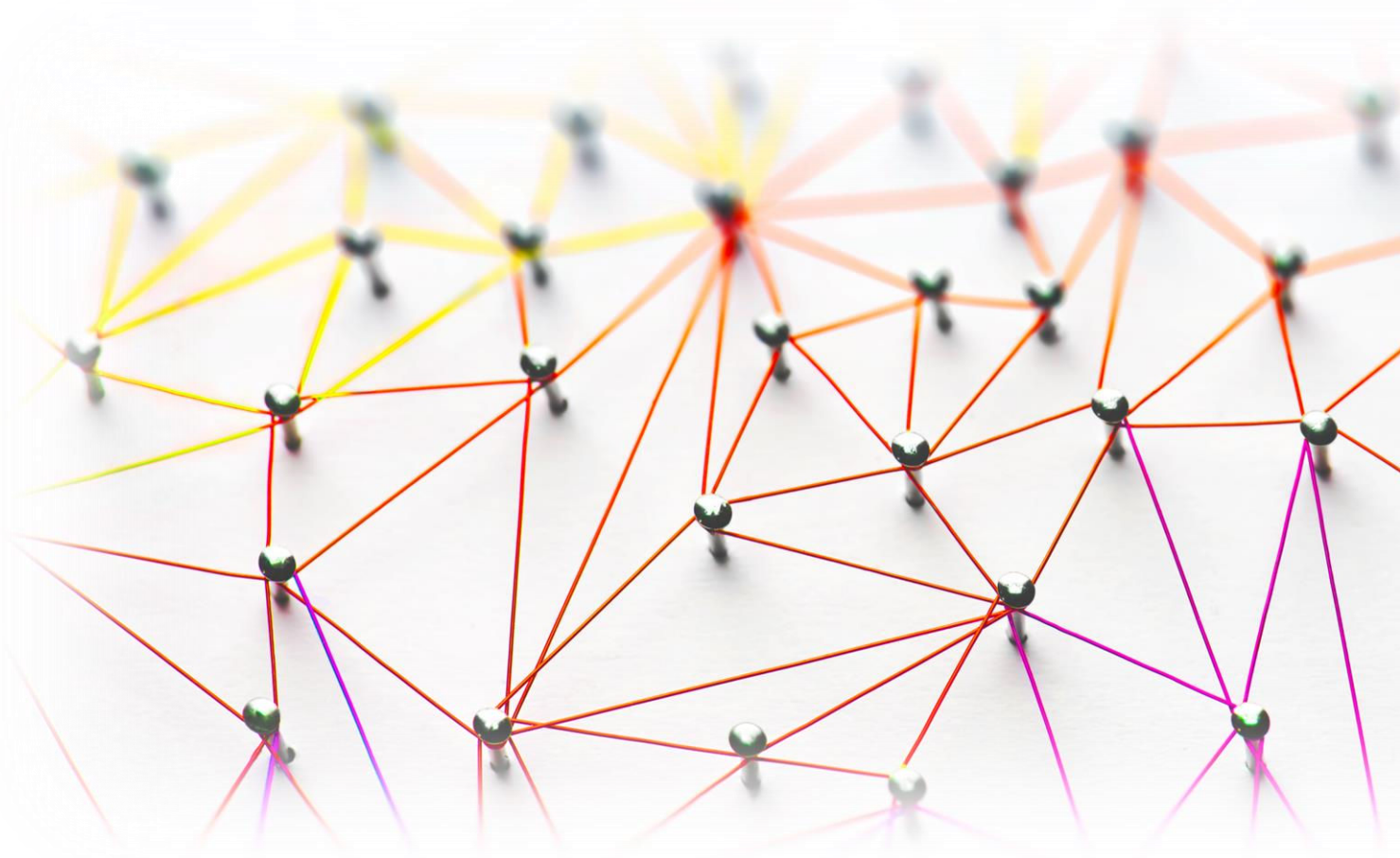




Consultation on Interchange23: the CSC's global alumni conference

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 97 members.

Interchange is the CSC's global alumni conference delivered by the British Council. The online event brings together Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni to take part in panel discussions, skills workshops, and networking events to meet and share expertise.

The conference provides an opportunity for alumni to showcase their work and the impact it has in addressing global development challenges and forms an important point in the alumni engagement calendar.

Following the last two years, the 2023 programme will explore a new model for delivery. Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel were asked to provide feedback on the current draft programme for the 2023 conference and share ideas and thoughts on ways to develop activities and opportunities in future.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions. The questions were designed to assess the potential success of changes made to the 2023 programme and identify further developments for future years.

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

- Interchange23- Draft brief and programme

The task was open to all panel members. 23 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 24%.

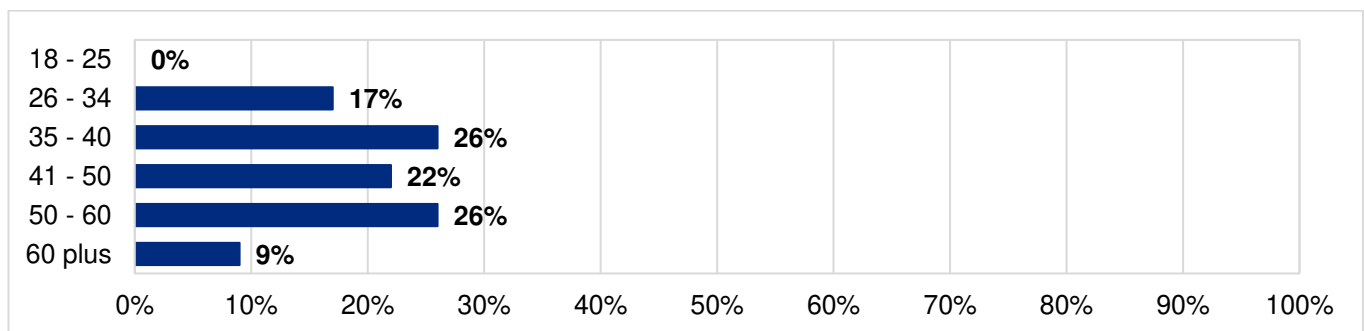
Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised under the following headings: Demographics; Perceptions and experience of Interchange; Conference format; Sessions and activities.

Demographics

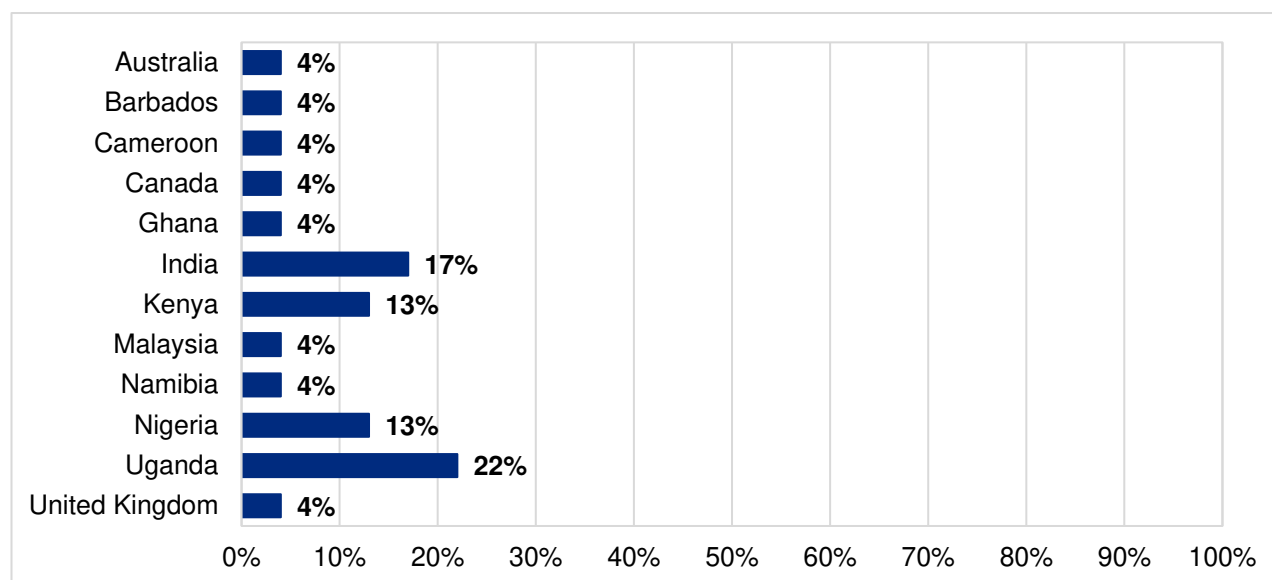
Respondents were asked to provide their age range to understand whether the age and career stage of respondents may influence perspectives of the conference format and sessions. Country of residence was gathered to assess the conference timings and whether these were accessible to those joining from different time zones.

Figure 1- Age range of respondents



n=23

Figure 2- Country of residence of respondents



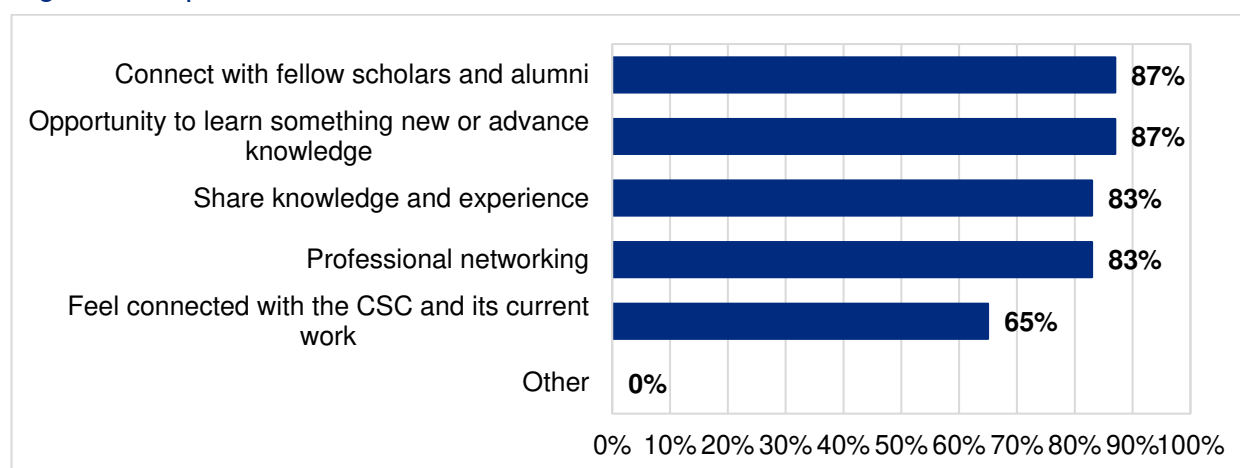
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Perceptions and experiences of Interchange

The conference was launched in 2021 and delivered in March 2021 and 2022 over two days coinciding with Commonwealth Day. Interchange23 will take place in February 2023 and will last for 5 days, from Monday 13 to Friday 17 February. The event will focus on the CSC's Time Limited Programme theme, 'Clean Energy, Air and Oceans'.

Respondents were asked to share their expectations of an online conference designed to bring together Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni.

Figure 3- Expectations of a CSC online conference



n=23

Opportunities to connect, network, and learn scored highest amongst respondents.

Elaborating on their responses, panel members shared expectations for networking opportunities across a large global community, including exposure to different experiences and cultures, opportunities to identify collaborators, and access to potential academic and

professional contacts. Respondents also highlighted the importance of learning from others and sharing their experiences and knowledge.

Given the global scale and digital platform, it was expected that the conference would reduce barriers to participation, provide the possibility of re-connecting with lost contacts, and foster a feeling of belonging to the wider CSC community. Several respondents celebrated the opportunity to engage as a global community on a critical global challenge through the conference.

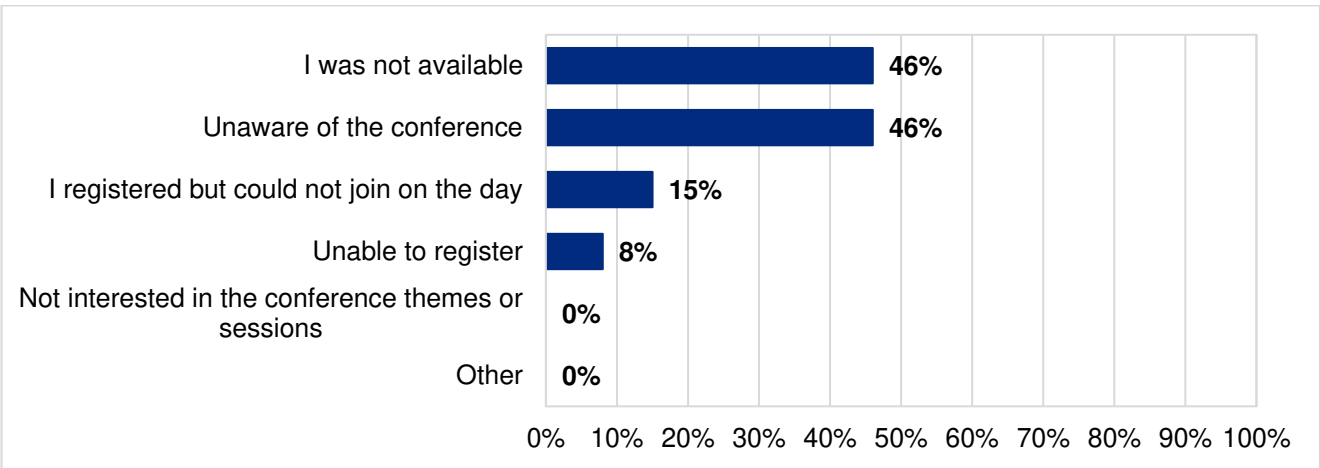
“ ‘An online conference provides a platform for meeting, sharing knowledge as well as learning from others. The online platform bridges the complex travel gap that is associated with face-to-face meetings yet offer rich opportunities for knowledge sharing and exchange.’

Previous attendees

9 (39%) respondents reported having attended Interchange previously, 6 in 2021 and 1 in 2022. 2 respondents attended both 2021 and 2022. 1 reported not knowing if they had attended the conference.

13 (57%) respondents had not attended before. The reasons given are outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4- Reasons for not attending previous Interchange conferences

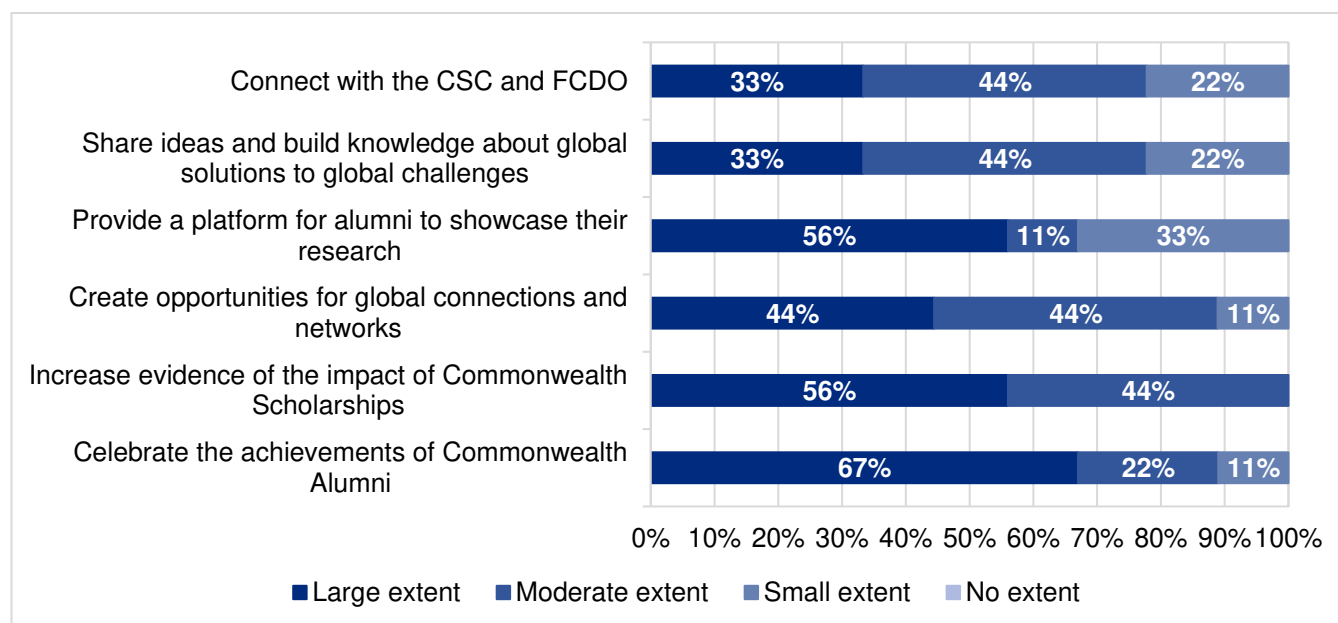


N=13

The biggest barriers to attendance were availability and being unaware of the conference.

Those who had previously attended were asked to rate the extent to which the conference had met its objectives as outlined in the draft brief.

Figure 5- Extent to which attendees felt previous Interchange conferences had met objectives



n=9

As evidenced in Figure 5, previous attendees felt the general programming and delivery had met the objectives set, in particular celebrating the achievements of Commonwealth Alumni, evidencing of the impact of Commonwealth Scholarships, and the opportunity provided by the platform.

Respondents were asked if they felt additional objectives should be included for future conferences. 6 shared responses, however these have been more appropriately summarised below as part of the open text responses provided on the reasons for the above ratings.

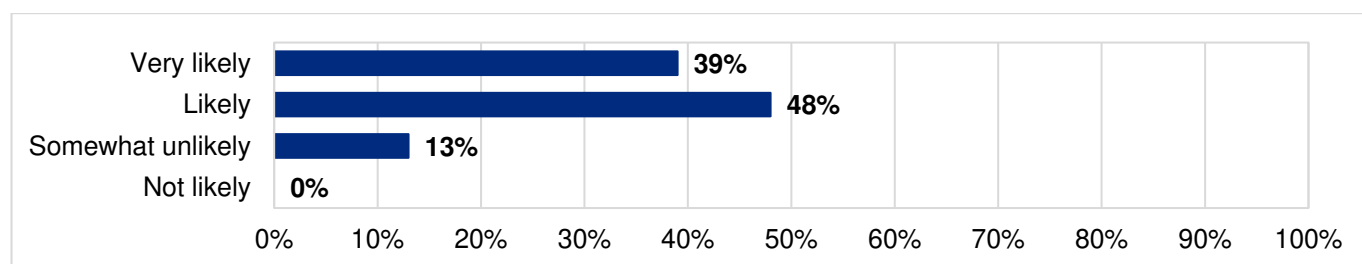
Respondents felt that the format of the conference naturally provided a feeling of belonging for Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni and previous conference delivery had enabled collaboration and networking. Themes had also highlighted global challenges affecting the CSC community, as well as ways in which Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni were tackling these.

One respondent felt that the themes were too narrow in focus given the research and work represented by the CSC community. Two respondents shared ideas around conference outcomes for attendees, such as challenges set to implement or take forward discussion points.

Conference format

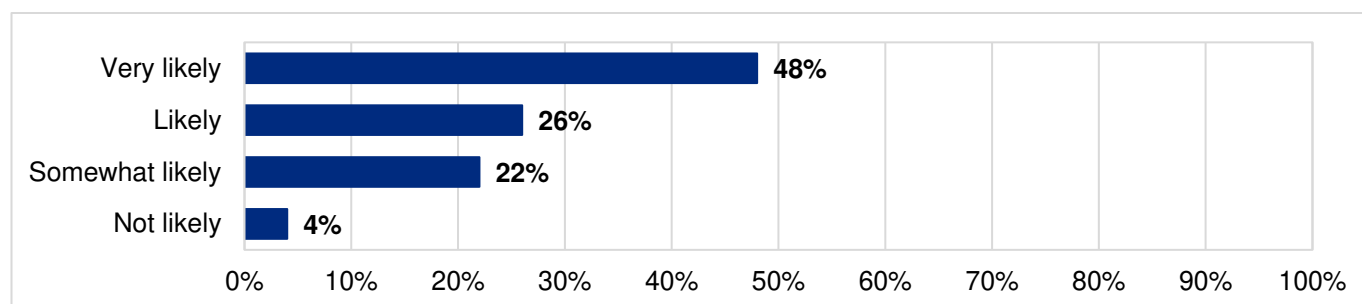
This section of the consultation survey asked respondents to provide feedback on the draft conference programme shared.

Figure 6- Likelihood of respondents being able to attend the conference in their country of residence



n=23

Figure 7- Extent to which respondents feel increasing the conference to 5 days will increase the likelihood of alumni attending at least some part of the conference



n=23

Based on the location of respondents as outlined in Figure 1, the conference timings were judged to provide a likely opportunity for Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni in these countries and time zones to be able to attend. One alumnus based in Australia flagged it to be ‘Somewhat likely’ due to the 11-hour time difference between the UK and Australia. Despite this, the respondent noted that spreading the conference over several days increased the likelihood attendees in similar situations may be able to make arrangements to attend some parts.

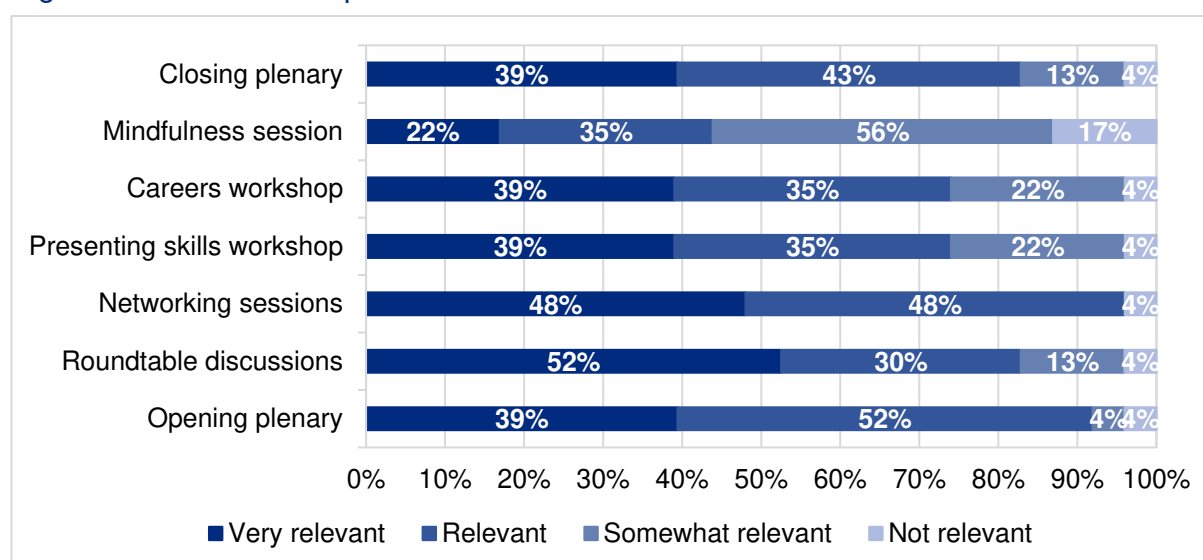
This was echoed by other respondents, who shared that spreading out the conference sessions meant attendees could join for specific sessions that interested them, making it easier to plan around other commitments.

Some respondents also flagged that due to electricity blackouts and disruption, being able to join sessions over a number of days would increase the likelihood of being able to attend should power be lost for one or more days.

Sessions and activities

As part of their review of the programme, respondents were asked to feedback on the relevance of the planned sessions and activities.

Figure 8- Relevance of planned sessions and activities



n=23

The most relevant sessions identified by respondents included roundtable discussions, networking sessions, and workshops. The mindfulness session was rated as the least relevant of all sessions available, however responses suggest this is still a valuable opportunity.

In open feedback, respondents shared that sessions facilitating any discussion or networking with fellow attendees would be highly valuable. The roundtables were well rated as they provided a platform to critically address the conference theme and related topics and could potentially offer longer term benefits for attendees. A few respondents felt that the conference theme may be limiting in terms of engaging a broad range of alumni through the roundtable discussions.

Despite mindfulness not being as highly rated in Figure 8, some respondents noted that the general mix of sessions presented in the programme were important for the overall success of the conference and in providing different opportunities and experiences for attendees.

‘Despite all the activities being relevant and important for a conference, roundtable discussions provides a platform for people to air their opinion and thus expose their skills to others leading to a better and more focused networking session, that may offer long-term benefits.’

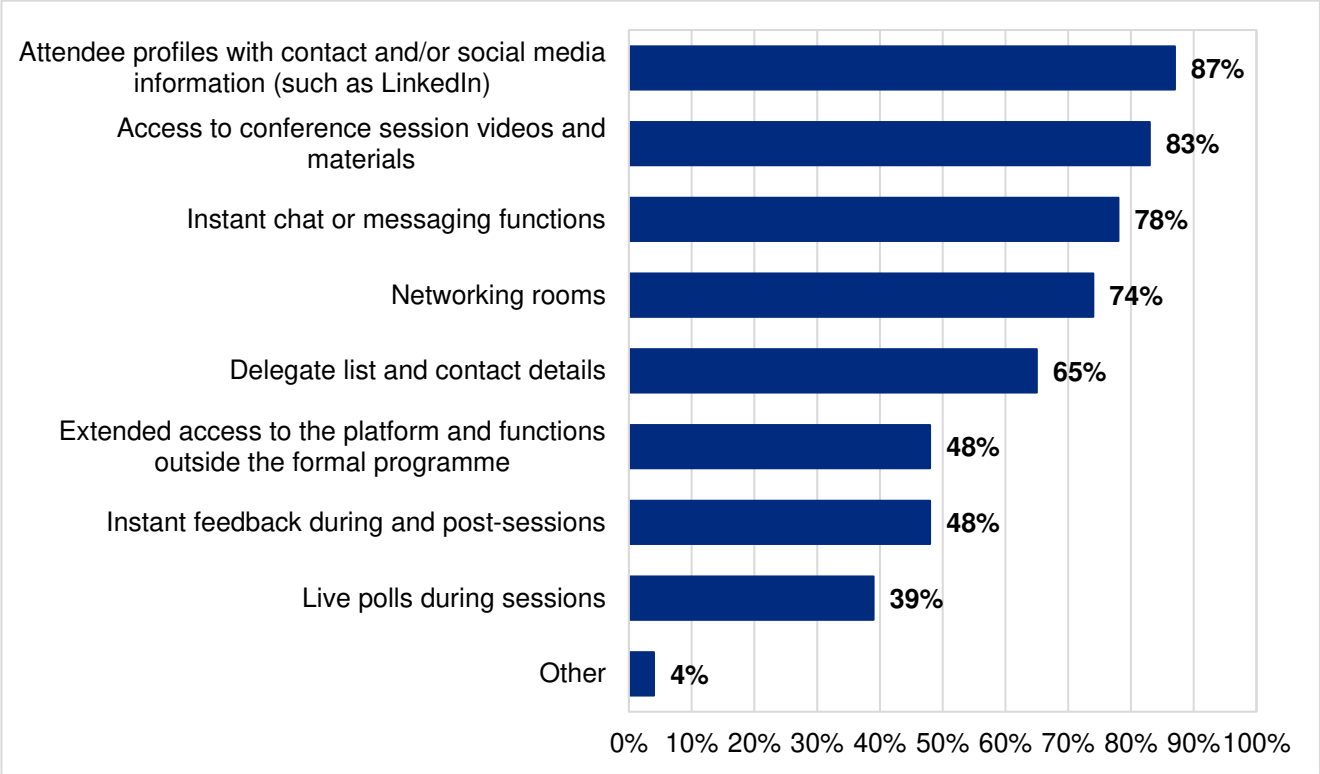


‘The presenting skills workshop is very important as many will improve their presentation skills. It will help in communicating one’s research. Career workshop will enhance collaboration and partnerships within the various fields. Personally, mindfulness is not my style of relaxing or releasing stress because I have other activities I undertake. However, I do not mind joining in this time around.’

Interestingly, there was no clear correlation between the age range of the respondents and the sessions they rated as ‘Very relevant’ or ‘Relevant’. Whilst the presenting skills and careers workshop may be seen to be more relevant to younger alumni or current Scholars, respondents representing all age ranges rated these highly for relevance.

Asked to share additional activities that could be considered for the conference, respondents suggested a reflection on COP27, presentations by Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni on country specific issues related to the conference theme, thematic speed research networking, leadership presentations or workshops, workshops for attendees to develop climate solutions, and online games or quizzes.

Figure 9- Expected functionality of an online conference platform



n=23

As highlighted in previous questions, the ability to network and connect with fellow attendees both during and post-conference are key and expected functions of an online conference.

Further detail shared by respondents emphasised the importance of real-time chat opportunities, supported by comprehensive ways to search delegate lists (such as links to LinkedIn profiles, discipline and research areas, and further contact details). Access to the conference platform post-conference was noted by two respondents as important to take the time to fully digest the information held in the platform, such as materials and delegate lists, as well as access more generally to materials post-conference. The use of polls was felt by one respondent to offer visible and instance engagement where questions or follow-up chat may not be necessary.

‘After the conference I will like to take time to go through the materials again to learn one or two things I could understand during the conference probably due to time constraints. I will also love to get in touch with other conference attendees to work on some projects.’



Hybrid programming

As part of changes to the conference programming in 2023, the British Council are exploring the possibility of delivering additional conference sessions using a hybrid format. This would include

delivering in-person panel discussions, roundtables, and workshops in a small number of countries with the option for global attendees to join virtually.

Respondents were asked to share feedback on potential benefits and limitations of including hybrid activities in the conference programme. Initial feedback shows high interest in delivering a hybrid conference.

The benefits highlighted by respondents included: in-person networking and interaction can provide more personal and valuable connections; opportunities to glean greater knowledge from speakers as timings may be more flexible; accessibility; greater support to speakers in seeing their audience; and no technical skills or issues for in-person attendees.



‘Despite virtual platforms allowing people to meet virtually, they cannot entirely offer the potential provided by in-person meetings. In person meetings create a personal connection that has long-term effect in relation to how people decide to work together in the future. In person meetings allow people to build trust that is a foundation for collaboration and networking.’

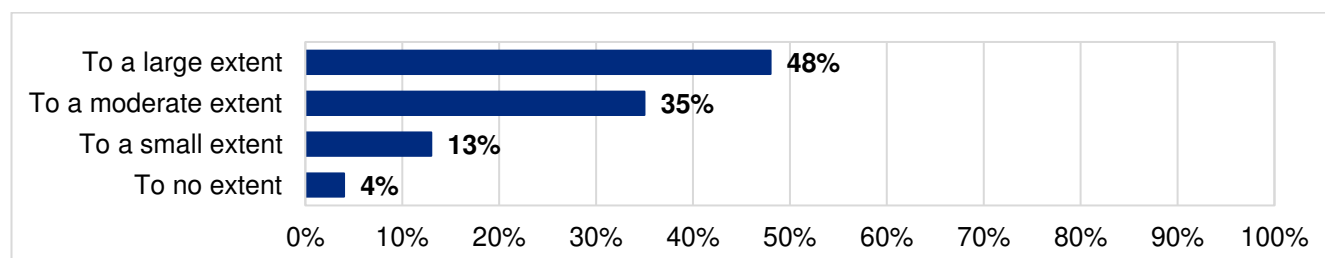
Thinking about potential limitations, respondents shared: a limited number will be able to attend the in-person sessions; further complexities of time-zones and travel; and conference and personal costs. It was also highlighted that delivering an effective hybrid conference would require considerable planning to address an online and in-person audience simultaneously.

Single conference theme

A further change to the 2023 programme is the selection of one conference theme, Clean Energy, Air and Oceans, and introduction of topical roundtable discussions. These will replace the presentations delivered by alumni volunteers, with roundtable speakers invited in advance to share their work and research.

Respondents were asked to share their feedback on these changes to the conference content and opportunities for participation.

Figure 10- Extent to which respondents feel it helpful to select one overarching conference theme



n=23

Asked to share the benefits of conference organisers selecting speakers to address the conference theme, respondents felt positively about the selection of one theme addressing a critical global issue. Whilst one respondent felt that the topic was not necessarily appealing to those not working in this area, it would enable organisers to invite expert alumni speakers and provide an opportunity for attendees to learn from leaders in the field. This was echoed by other respondents who felt this would be inspiring, particularly to Scholars. It was also felt by one

respondent that different speakers would allow for various perspectives on the theme to be discussed and another highlighted the opportunity to promote individuals and the CSC.

‘Having one conference theme despite limiting scholars from other disciplines ensures the conference is discipline focused, therefore highly specialised. This provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the theme and generate relevant and useful knowledge and recommendations.’



‘It will help provide in-depth knowledge on the conference theme. Selecting alumni to present on the topic will give a multidimensional approach to understanding the topic.’

With regard to limitations, few respondents felt there were limitations posed by this approach, although one noted there are already a number of conferences already delivered on the theme selected and others shared that not everyone may be interested in the topic or be able to actively take part.

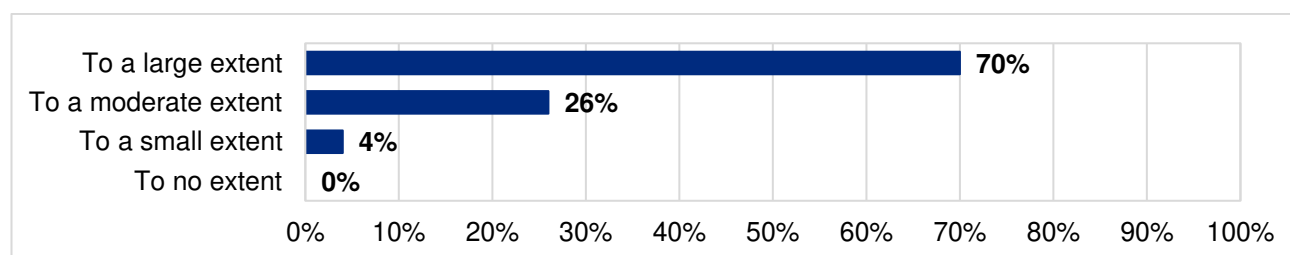
‘I do not see any limitation, except that choosing an overarching theme for the conference limits the number of Commonwealth Alumni who can actively contribute to the conference as not many would be working in the area chosen as the theme.’



Networking opportunities

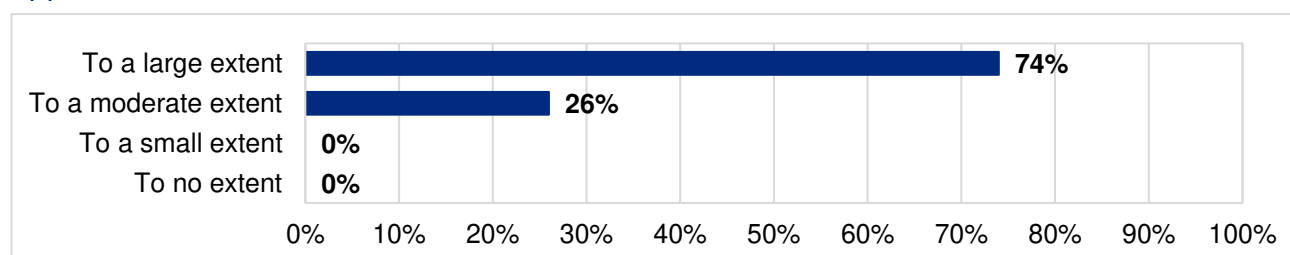
An important part of the conference is to facilitate connections and networking between attendees. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt the activities and sessions designed to create these opportunities may deliver.

Figure 11- Extent to which roundtable Q&A sessions will provide suitable opportunities for attendees to network



n=23

Figure 12- Extent to which themed networking sessions will provide a useful and engaging opportunities for attendees to network



n=23

As evidenced in Figures 11 and 12, most respondents felt the roundtable Q&A sessions and networking sessions would provide suitable, effective, and engagement opportunities for attendees to network.

Elaborating on their ratings, respondents shared the importance of being able to openly share responses and experiences to the roundtable content, taking part in open discussion with speakers, and expanding the topics discussed or raising new areas. For those working in the theme area, the networking sessions would provide attendees with an opportunity to showcase and share their research in an open forum.



‘A roundtable followed by Q&A provides an opportunity for even non-specialists in the domain to get clarifications and take back to other alumni.’

‘Roundtable discussion will help attendees better understand speaker presentations, challenge assumptions and solutions and share experiences. The networking session will provide the forum to exchange contact information which is vital for continued connections.’



‘This approach would enable attendees to join conversations that are of relevance to them. They can come into the room prepared to converse and share their ideas.’

A few respondents highlighted that not all attendees will be working in relation to the theme area and therefore may not be able to engage in these sessions as effectively as others.

To support the ongoing development of the themed networking sessions, respondents were asked to share suggestions for skills based or subject matter areas that could be covered through this activity. Suggestions included: building networks; climate and health; climate and education; climate finance; developing community level interventions; access, inclusion and rights; higher education; public health; and promoting Commonwealth Scholarships.

Summary

Feedback from respondents indicates that the planned changes to the conference format are positive steps to creating an engaging online conference opportunity for Commonwealth Scholars and Alumni and that the planned sessions should meet a range of expectations and motivations for attending.

Delivering the conference across 5 days was well received with panel members citing an increased ability for attendees to join sessions of interest, plan other commitments around attendance, and greater opportunity to join the conference should they experience technical issues. It was, however, noted that in some countries, access to internet could be costly and restrictive.

Moving to a single conference theme, whilst potentially limiting for some attendees, will offer a valuable opportunity to showcase leaders in the field from across the global alumni network and inspire others to share their work and research. More practical and learning-based sessions will also enable attendees to access different opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge.

Next steps

The British Council and CSC Alumni Team will further review the feedback from members of the Alumni Advisory Panel alongside planned conference programming and sessions to assess any additions or changes that can be made considering comments.

The feedback will be used to inform the following steps:

- Providing clear information to attendees on creating effective participant profiles to support networking
- Developing tips and support to make optimum use of the platform's functions
- Creating post-conference communications to notify attendees when and how to access session materials and recordings
- Future development and potential trialling of a hybrid programme