



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Review of the CSC Scholar Handbook and Fellows FAQ Onboarding Experience

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.

Each year, the CSC provides a Handbook for Commonwealth Scholars to help them prepare for and adjust to living and studying in the UK as a postgraduate student. The Handbook includes practical information about scholarship regulations and administration, as well as guidance on accommodation, health and welfare, and how to get involved in CSC activities. Commonwealth Professional Fellows receive information through a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) resource.

The Handbook and FAQs are shared with Scholars and Fellows prior to their arrival in the UK and form part of their wider onboarding experience.

To ensure the Handbook and FAQs provide relevant, comprehensive, and user-friendly information on the issues that Scholars and Fellows face, the Alumni Advisory Panel were consulted on their own experience of using these resources.

There were three main areas under consideration:

1. Usability and presentation of the Handbook
2. Usefulness and relevance of the content
3. Improvements to better support Scholars and Fellows

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions on the Handbook for Commonwealth Scholars and the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Commonwealth Professional Fellows.

The questions were aimed at understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the current onboarding resources and finding out how far the Handbook and FAQs met the needs of Commonwealth Scholarship award-holders based on panel members own experiences.

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

- Handbook for Commonwealth Scholars
- Commonwealth Professional Fellowship Programme Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

The task was open to all panel members who had completed their Commonwealth Scholarship and/or Fellowship in the UK. 39 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 40%.

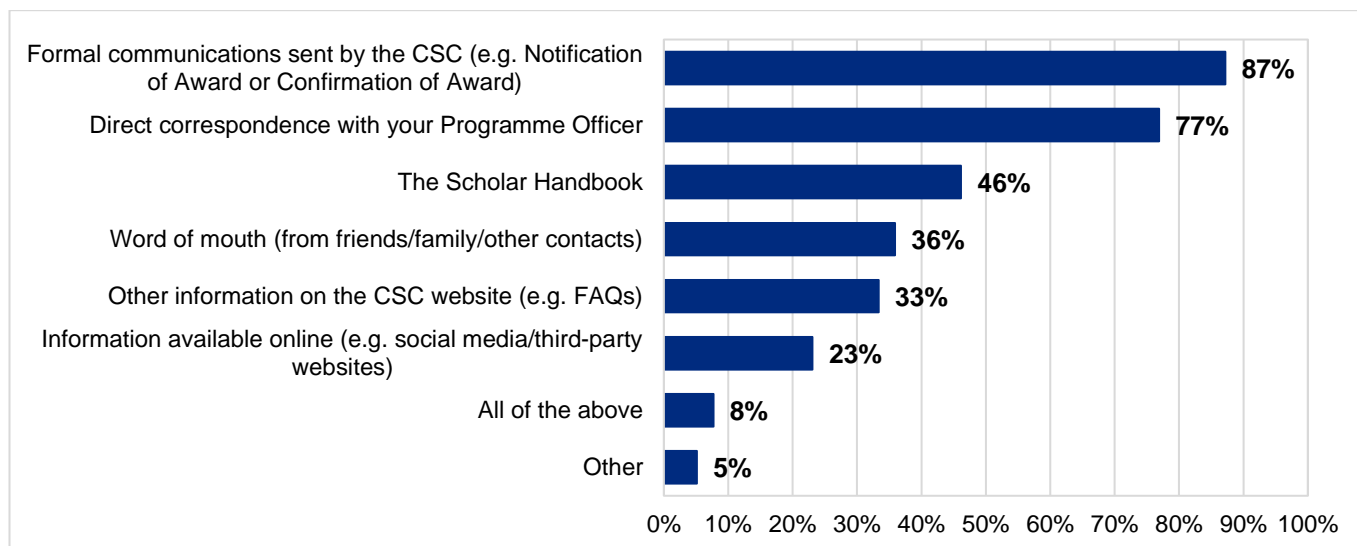
Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Information before your Scholarship/Fellowship; Handbook: presentation and layout; Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): presentation and layout; Assessing the usability of the Handbook; Usefulness and relevance of the Handbook content; Areas for development.

Information before your Scholarship/Fellowship

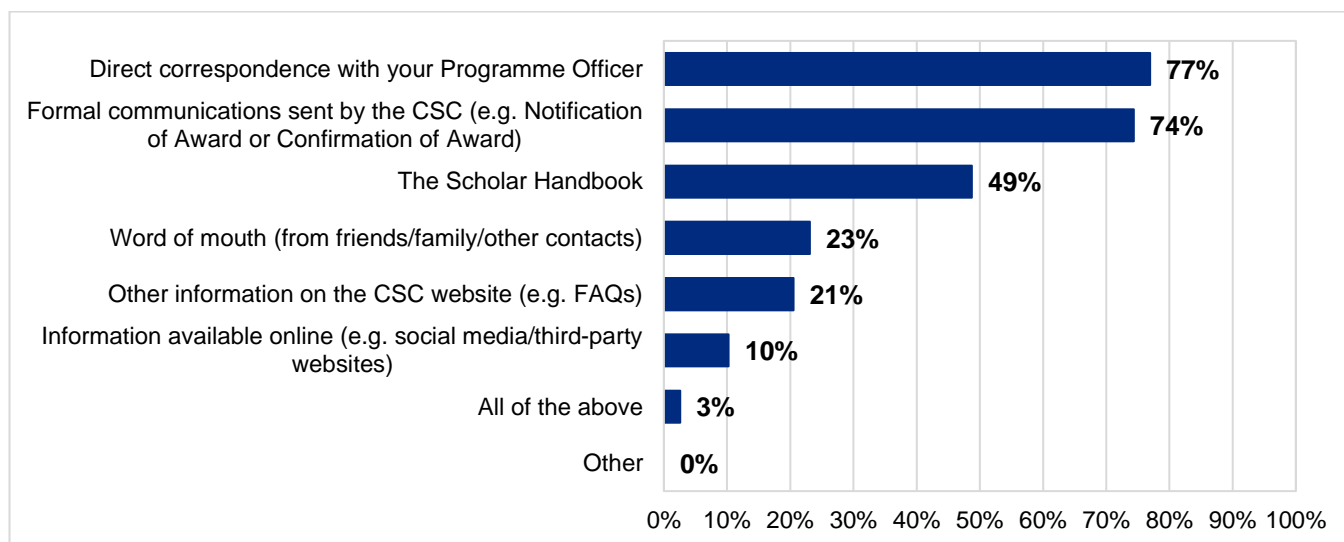
Before providing feedback on their impressions of the onboarding resources, respondents were asked a series of questions about the information provided prior to their own scholarship/fellowship and how useful this was to them. These questions helped the CSC teams identify where Scholars and Fellows sourced important information about their award and whether the Handbook figured among the resources they used.

Figure 1 – Before arriving in the UK, how did you find out about important information related to your award?



n= 39

Figure 2 – Which, if any, of the above sources of information did you find most useful?



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While most respondents reported that they relied on communication from the CSC and direct correspondence with their Programme Officer for important information about their scholarship and/or fellowship, many also acknowledged the usefulness of the Handbook for answering their queries.

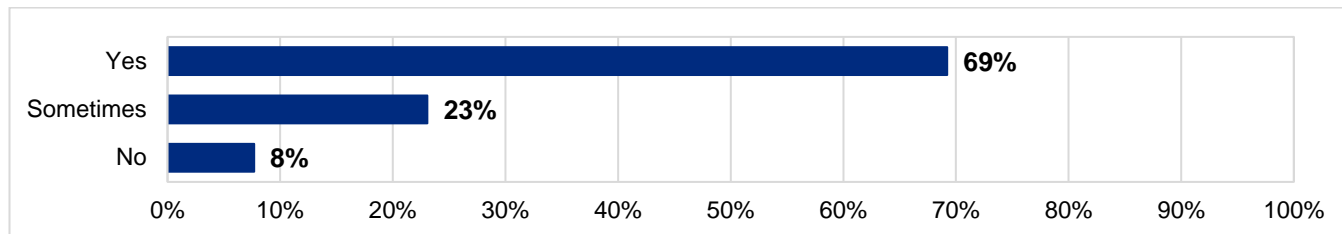


‘The Scholar Handbook was my go-to. It provided me with requisite information I need at every stage of my stay in the UK.’

Some respondents noted the value of the Handbook as a point of reference for ‘detailed explanations on the award’ processes while others observed that it was their primary source of information and could be supplemented with ‘an email dropped to the Programme Officer where in doubt’.

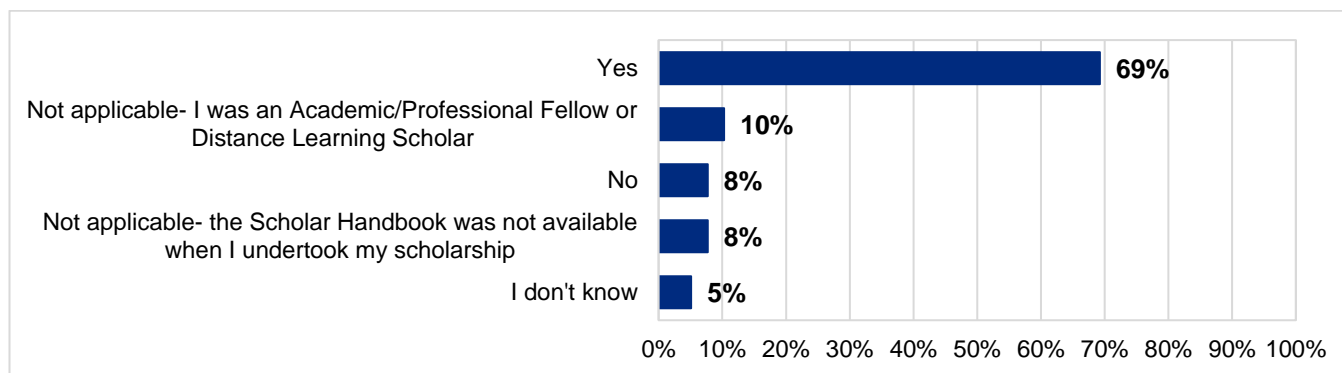
Respondents suggested that direct correspondence with Programme Officers was preferable in certain situations, for example when ‘complet[ing] the next steps towards finalising the award process’, or if they felt overwhelmed by information about their award and studying the UK generally.

Figure 3 – When you started your scholarship or fellowship, did you know where to go to find relevant information related to your award?



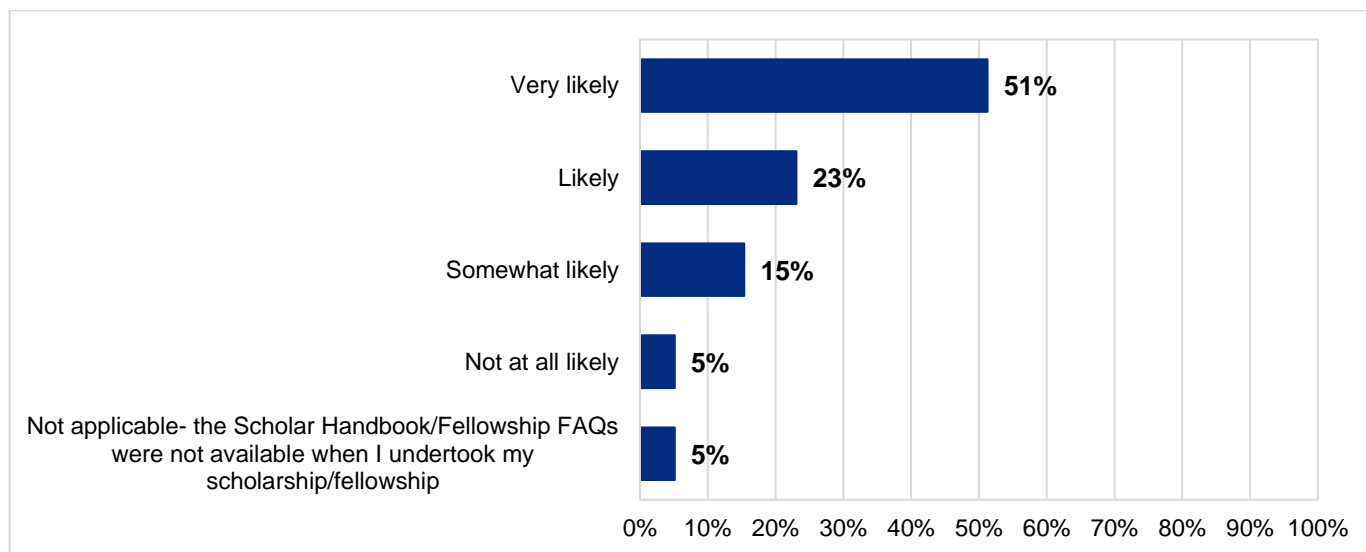
n=39

Figure 4 – When you started your scholarship, did you receive a copy of the Scholar Handbook?



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Figure 5 – During your scholarship or fellowship, how likely is it that you would have referred to the Scholar Handbook or Fellowship FAQs in the first instance if you had a query about your award?



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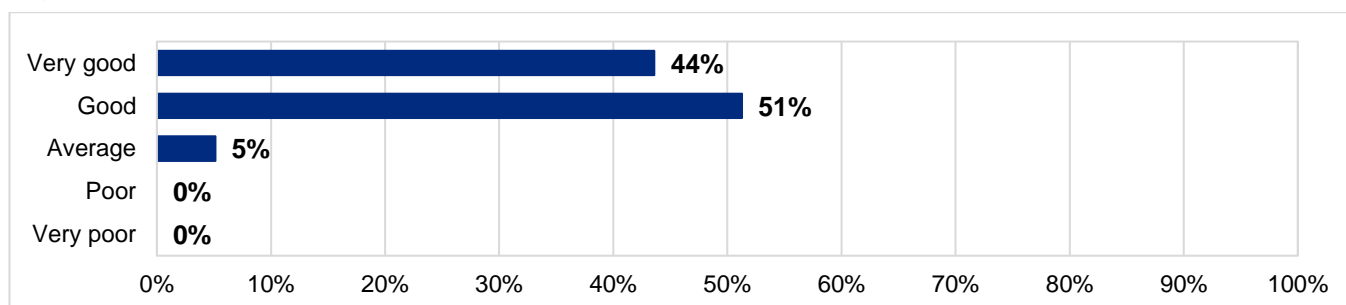
Overall, most respondents reported that they knew where to find information about their scholarship at the time of their award although the responses indicate that clearer signposting of different sources of information may have been beneficial.

Most respondents, where applicable, received a copy of the Handbook or Fellowship FAQs when they started their scholarship and/or fellowship. Similarly, a majority reported that they would refer to this in the first instance if they had a query.

Handbook: presentation and layout

In the next section, respondents were asked to consider the visual presentation and arrangement of information in the Handbook.

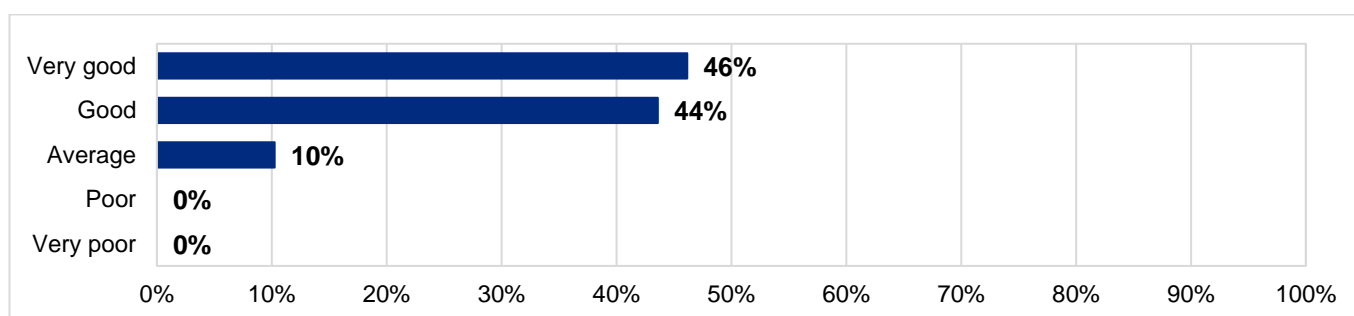
Figure 6 – How would you rate the visual presentation of the Scholar Handbook?



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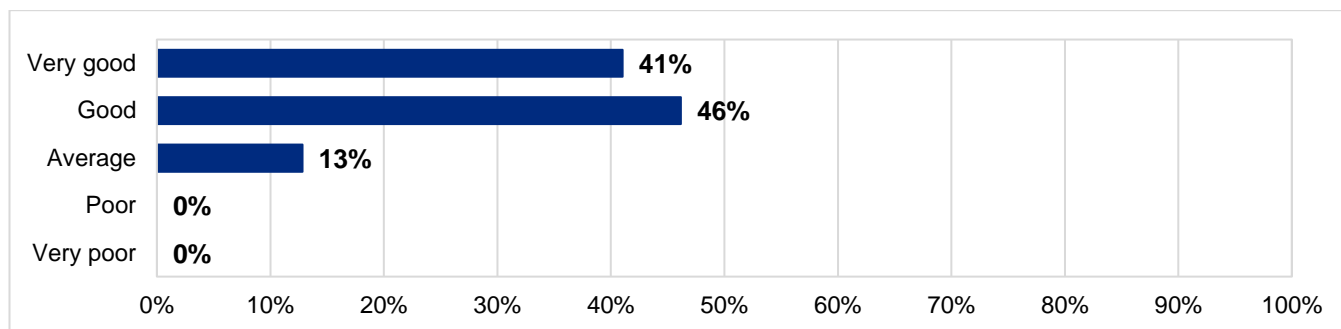
Respondents rated the visual presentation of the Handbook highly but acknowledged that more could be done to improve its visual appeal, for example, using images and quotes to break up the informational text. The layout and density of text was seen as appropriate and enabled respondents to follow information easily.

Figure 7 – How would you rate the navigation features (sidebar menu, drop-down links) in the Handbook?



n=39

Figure 8 – Thinking about the Handbook as a resource which Scholars might read on one go or only refer to occasionally, how would you rate its overall usability?



n=39

100% of respondents reported that the flow of information in the Handbook was easy to follow. Respondents commented on the ‘sequential’ and ‘thematic’ ordering of information in the Handbook as a positive feature of this onboarding resource. In addition, it was noted that information in the Handbook was ‘succinct and informative’ and ‘easy to follow because it is written in plain English’.

‘The layout of the handbook is helpful in the way the subject areas have been grouped together and navigation features make it easy to read in one go or to select the reference subject required.’



While respondents valued the inclusion of navigation features allowing users to move between different sections of the Handbook quickly, there was a recognition that the functionality of these features could be improved to make the user experience better.

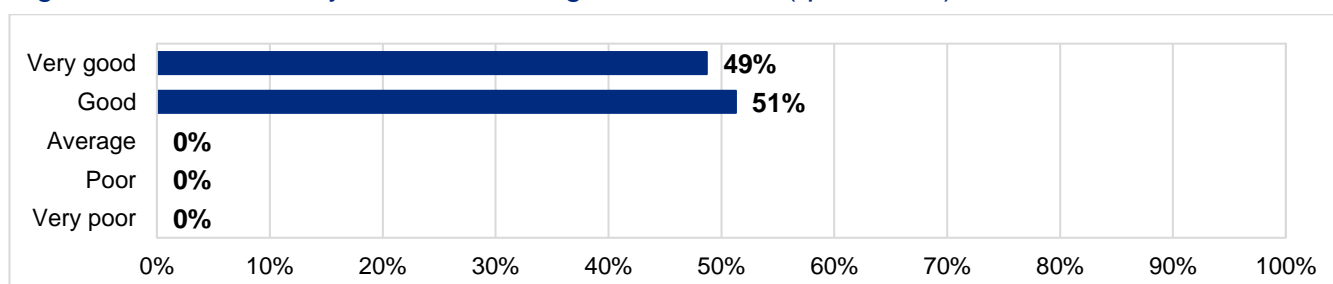
Respondents also queried whether the Handbook could be made more accessible to users with a visual impairment, for example by including an audio description feature.

‘It would be great for the navigation menu to automatically appear by the side as...one is reading the online handbook. It is slightly inconveniencing for one to have to scroll back up to see the menu and select another subject.’

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): presentation and layout

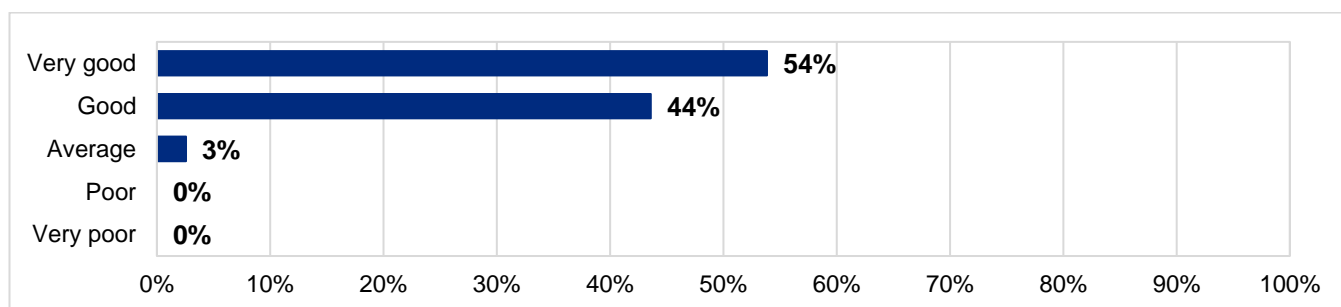
In the next section, respondents were asked to consider the navigation and usability of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Professional Fellows.

Figure 9 – How would you rate the navigation features (quick links) in the FAQs?



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Figure 10 – Thinking about the FAQs as a resource which Fellows might read in one go or only refer to occasionally, how would you rate its overall usability?



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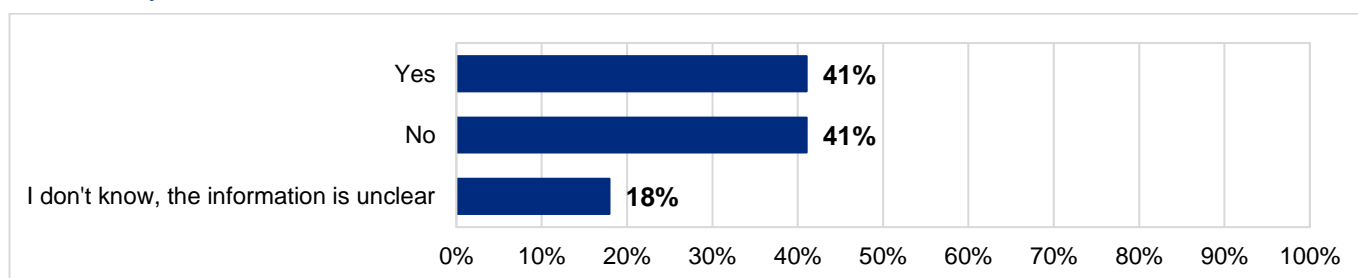
100% of respondents reported that the flow of information in the FAQs was easy to follow. Overall, respondents reported that the navigation and usability of the FAQs was good and that, as with the Handbook, the flow of information was easy to follow. The indexing of questions addressed in the FAQs was seen as useful feature for navigating the information swiftly and respondents observed that a similar indexing feature could be deployed in the Handbook to support rapid referencing of information.

In terms of improvements, respondents suggested that the information contained in the FAQs could also be categorised by keywords to provide another route for users to quickly seek out specific information. There were also concerns raised about the usability of the FAQs on mobile devices and respondents highlighted the need to devise a mobile-friendly format of FAQs.

Assessing the clarity of information in the Handbook

In the next section, respondents were asked a selection of questions to test the usability of the Handbook and the clarity of communication about CSC policies and guidance for Scholars and Fellows. The questions presented different scenarios that Scholars and Fellows might encounter during their award and asked respondents to decide on the correct response according to the regulations and guidance set out in the Handbook.

Figure 11 – I am a Commonwealth Master’s Scholar with two children under the age of 16. My husband shares responsibility for looking after our children and would like to join me in the UK when I undertake my scholarship. Would this Scholar be entitled to financial support based on their family circumstances?



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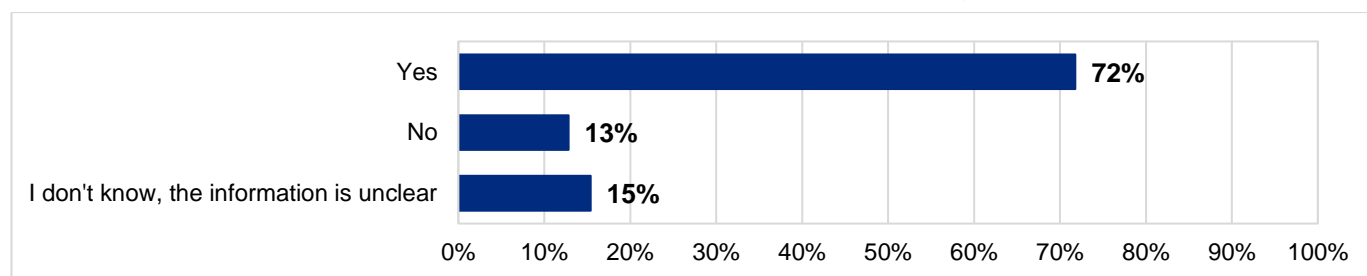
According to the CSC's regulations, the Scholar in this example would not be entitled to financial support because only single parents are eligible to claim family allowances if they are undertaking a Master's Scholarship.

The even split in responses to this question indicated that more needs to be done to clarify the financial regulations and allowances for Scholars with dependants. However, further investigation is needed to establish whether respondents who answered 'yes' to this question were unsure about the allowance policy itself or how it was communicated in the Handbook.

In addition, while nearly half of respondents noted correctly that this Scholar would not be eligible for financial support, some of those same respondents indicated that this was because it would be inadvisable for them to travel to the UK with their spouse and dependants rather than because it was not permitted under the scholarship regulations. In other cases, respondents gave the reason that 'The scholarship only takes care of the Scholar' or 'If the scholarship is less than 18 months, the Scholar is not entitled to receive spouse or child care support'.

Overall, this suggests that greater clearer communication on this issue is needed.

Figure 12 – I am a third year Commonwealth PhD Scholar and would like to be involved in teaching a module to undergraduate students at my university this term as part of my academic development. Would this Scholar be entitled to take up this teaching role?



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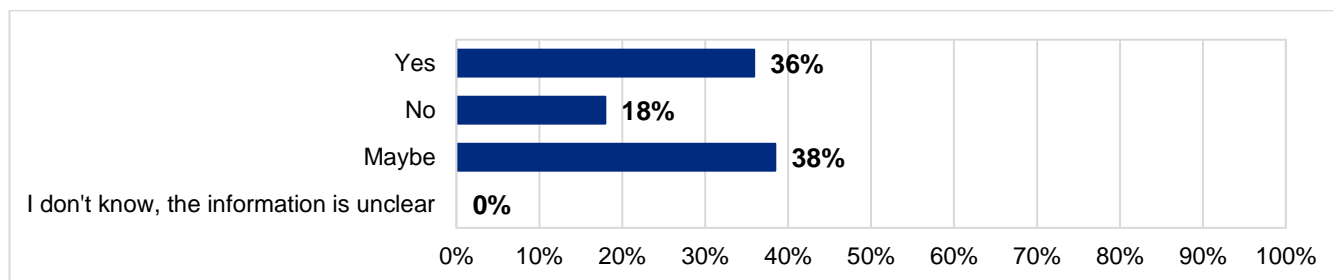
In this example the Scholar would be entitled to take up the teaching role because, according to the CSC's regulations, it would qualify as being 'employed in a role relevant to your studies'. The caveat to this is that the Scholar would not be able to undertake more than six hours of teaching per week and 'must inform [their] Programme Officer in advance of applying for any position'.

The responses to this question show that most respondents were able to interpret the employment regulations as set out in the Handbook and recognise the relevancy of a limited hours teaching role to a PhD Scholar's study programme.

In several cases where respondents answered 'no' or 'I don't know' to this question, the justification for their response was valid, for example, that the Scholar would 'Need approval [by their] Programme Officer' before undertaking such employment.

In addition, some respondents noted correctly that more information was needed to ascertain a definite response, specifically whether the teaching role mentioned in the scenario was paid or not. However, among this group some respondents expressed uncertainty about whether taking up paid employment would be permissible under the employment regulations. This indicates a need for greater clarity around the communication of employment regulations in the Handbook.

Figure 13 – I am a Commonwealth Split-site Scholar and would like to return home to visit friends during the university holidays. Would this Scholar be entitled to undertake their travel plans?



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According to the CSC’s regulations, the Scholar in this example would be entitled to undertake their travel plans if it was for two weeks only and provided that their scholarship was for one period of 12 months. As such there were two correct possible answers to this question, ‘yes’ and ‘maybe’.

The responses to this question indicate that most respondents understood the regulations around overseas travel for Scholars detailed in the Handbook and could identify the conditions stipulated for a Split-site Scholar.

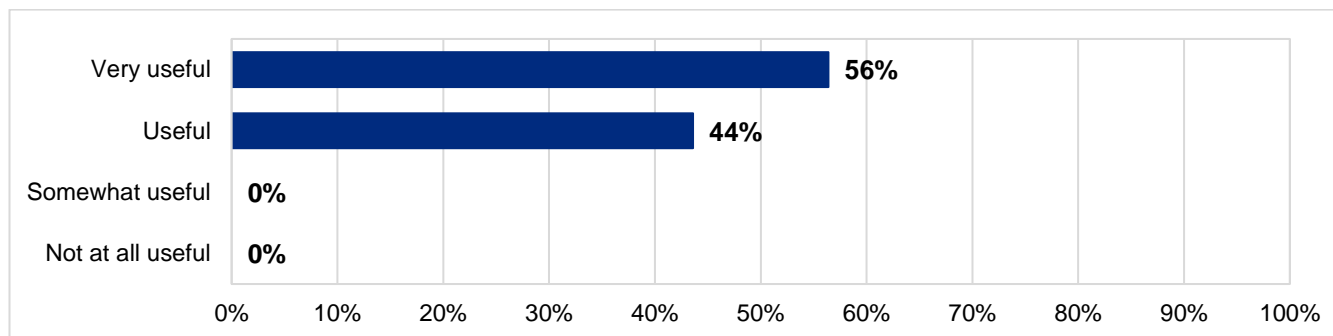
However, in some instances the reasons given by respondents for their answer deviated from the actual regulations. For example, some respondents indicated that the decision to permit overseas travel was dependent on how well the Scholar was progressing in their studies or whether it was needed for the Scholars’ wellbeing.

Again, this demonstrates that further clarification, either in the Handbook or in supplementary resources provided to Scholars, may be required to ensure full understanding of travel regulations across the different scholarship schemes.

Usefulness and relevance of the Handbook content

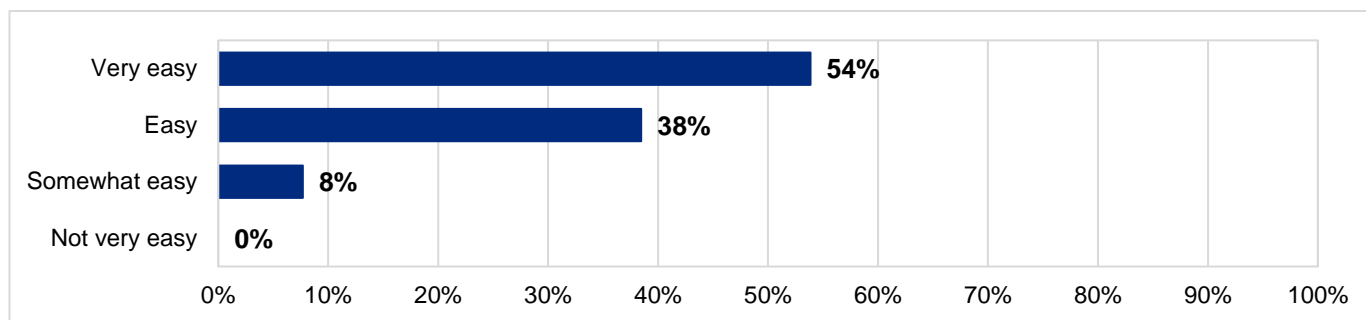
In the next section, respondents were asked to comment on the overall usefulness and relevance of the information provided in the Handbook, identify potential omissions in terms of content that might be useful to a Scholar, and suggest improvements to the Handbook.

Figure 14 – Overall, how useful did you find the information provided in the Scholar Handbook?



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Figure 15 – Overall, how easy was it to navigate and find information in the Scholar Handbook?



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Overall, respondents rated the usefulness and relevance of the information highly and were positive about the navigation features in the Handbook.

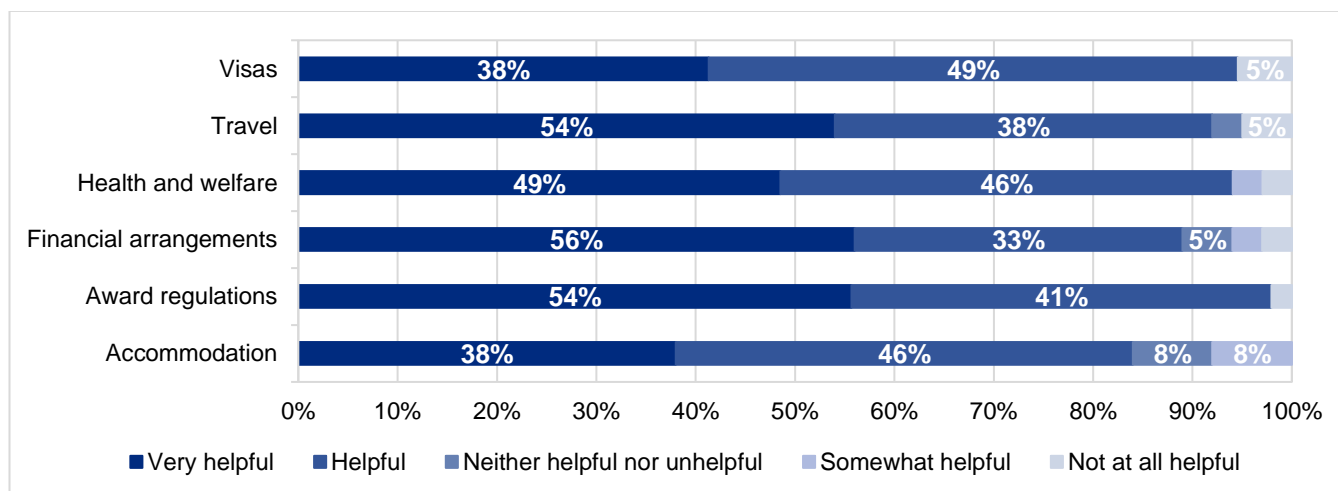
As has been previously noted in this report, some respondents highlighted the level of detail included within the Handbook as helpful, stating:

“The handbook has a wealth of information. It is like a Commonwealth Scholarship dictionary’ while others expressed concerns that it could deter Scholars from engaging with it: ‘...the handbook could be useful if users will take time to read’.”

The topical sequencing of information and navigation features, such as the programme colour coding and sidebar menu, were seen as important aspects of the Handbooks design. However, further consideration should be given to the user experience across other devices, including mobile and tablets.

Additionally, while some respondents observed that the navigation features could be developed to enable greater functionality, others valued the simplicity of navigation and design, commenting on its accessibility for a variety of users. Further investigation is needed to understand any specific accessibility benefits or limitations of the current Handbook design with a view to bringing it in line with accessibility best practice across other CSC outputs.

Figure 16 – How helpful was the information provided in the Scholar Handbook in relation to the following areas?



n=39

As indicated above, the sections of the Handbook on 'Financial arrangements', 'Award regulations', and 'Travel' received the highest number of 'very helpful' ratings among respondents. Conversely, the sections on 'Accommodation' and 'Visas' received the lowest number of 'very helpful' ratings indicating that these sections could benefit from further development to better support Scholars.

It should be noted that recent work to improve the visa guidance for Scholars has been undertaken by the CSC Programme Team and did not form part of the scope of this review exercise.

The 'Accommodation' and 'Visas' sections also both pertain to areas that are to a large extent beyond the remit of the CSC to regulate although consideration of additional support and guidance in these areas should be recommended.

Respondents noted several areas where improvements could be made to the Handbook.

As a resource, respondents mentioned that having an option to download the Handbook as a document might be useful for Scholars. There were also comments about the making the Handbook more interactive and user-friendly, and incorporating graphics or images to increase its visual appeal. Some respondents suggested specific changes to the order of content, for example placing the scholarship tenure section ahead of the scholarship regulations section.

In terms of content, there were several suggestions for improvements that could be made to existing sections of the Handbook, specific areas of policy, and information currently absent from the Handbook.

As has been noted in this report, respondents emphasised that current information on accommodation, employment, financial arrangements, travel, and visas should be expanded and clarified to provide Scholars with a more complete picture of what to expect before and during their scholarship. The discrepancy in respondents' interpretation of regulations on overseas travel, employment while on award, and family allowances indicates a need either for the streamlining of policies or the reappraisal of how information about these areas is communicated in the Handbook. This is especially important where the regulations include subtle distinctions between schemes or include certain caveats which may lead to misunderstanding.

Accommodation

Respondents suggested that the information provided in the Handbook was, in their experience, insufficient for coping with the complexities and challenges of finding suitable accommodation during their scholarship. In addition, respondents noted that incorporating advice from former Scholars about how they overcame accommodation difficulties could be a good way to supplement the current information in the Handbook on this topic.

Further to this, some respondents recommended a preference for separate Handbooks for each scheme. Some respondents also suggested that guidance in the Handbook could include information relevant for specific country contexts. Many observed that the Handbook should be linked to the Scholar FAQs to supplement information in certain areas, for example the visa process.

Disability support

Respondents observed that the disability section could clearly reference the CSC's disability support statement and its inclusive policy on disability, highlighting that disability disclosure would not bar Scholars from receiving other benefits.

Travel

On travel, respondents suggested that this section should include more information on travel within the UK, including booking advance tickets, using cheaper modes of transport (e.g. coaches), and offering guidance on car hire. As well as this, respondents asked whether further information could be provided on customs requirements and benefits for PhD Scholars returning to their home country.

Employment

On employment, respondents mentioned that there should be information on UK tax requirements for those who undertake six hours of work per week during their scholarship. Similarly, respondents queried whether there should not be guidance on employment for Scholars who exceed their tenure and return to their home country.

Student engagement

Some respondents felt there should be more detail on the application and selection process for Regional Network Coordinators. Respondents also suggested that information on alumni benefits could be included in this section, specifically on the Research Impact Awards, Development in Action Webinar Series, and how to become an Alumni Advisory Panel Member.

Cash cards

On cash cards, respondents noted there should be clearer advice on selecting suitable banks with guidance, for example, on looking out for hidden charges.

In addition to these areas, it was also noted that the Handbook could provide guidance for Scholars who undertake caring responsibilities for family members. Respondents suggested that this could involve signposting practical and financial support for Scholar carers whilst they are in the UK as well as wellbeing support to help Scholars manage competing demands and avoid burnout.

Lastly, respondents observed that the Handbook could benefit from including a short user guide on how to navigate the material efficiently. It was also suggested that there should be clarification on when the guidelines within the Handbook are set and updated, and how they are applied to Scholarship recipients. There was a query around whether guidelines which are reviewed and updated annually would be retrospectively applied to Scholars (for example PhD Scholars) whose award tenure may see evolutions to policy and regulations. Respondents noted that including a page in the Handbook on authorship, citation, and date of last update might help to allay potential confusion for Scholars in this situation.

In some cases, respondents provided feedback on the policies outlined in the Handbook, beyond the scope of this panel activity. Areas highlighted for potential review by the Commission included:

Research Support Grants

It was suggested by some respondents that there should be greater flexibility around when PhD Scholars can apply for this. The reasoning given was that research methodologies can change up until the point that a PhD proposal is approved by a supervisor, which is typically later than the deadline set by the CSC for grant requests to be submitted.

Code of Conduct

On Code of Conduct, respondents suggested that there should be enhanced protocol on plagiarism, specifically in relation to the use of AI technology and platforms. Respondents also noted that the award termination conditions should be included in the Code of Conduct.

Emergency dental and eye care

On emergency dental and eye care, respondents asked whether this policy area should be extended to include emergency surgery. In addition, respondents observed that guidance on insurance for PhD Scholars undertaking high-risk fieldwork could be included.

Proposed content for development

Respondents also noted the absence of information about settling in the UK, especially around adapting to different societal norms, budgeting appropriately, securing accommodation, and dealing with everyday activities such as food and clothes shopping. Additionally, several respondents emphasised the need for further information on how to negotiate the UK schooling system for child dependants and where to find support as a parent.

There were requests for enhanced guidance for Scholars faced with unprecedented or urgent situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and when in need of emergency healthcare. Clarifying the role of home country High Commissions for Scholars facing difficulties was also suggested.

Respondents queried whether there should be a greater focus on making the most of the scholarship, for example by including information on training and development opportunities in the UK and listing organisations that support volunteering.

Finally, respondents suggested that there could be additional information included on the different stages of the selection process and fulfilling the conditions of the scholarship award. It was also suggested that there could be further advice for Scholars on how to measure and report impact after their scholarship, for example publishing in high-impact journals.

While many respondents commented on the comprehensiveness of the Fellowship FAQs, there were some suggestions about additional information that would benefit Fellows during their award.

Respondents observed that detailed practical information about matters such as accommodation, travel, settling into the UK, the visa process, managing living expenses, and wellbeing and health support were minimal and could be further developed.

Respondents also noted that including a list of relevant academic/professional contacts in the FAQs could be a useful addition for Fellows. Further to this, there was a suggestion that advice on managing the supervisor relationship would be helpful for Fellows starting out.

Summary

Overall, the feedback from respondents on the Handbook and FAQs was positive with many citing the usefulness and value of these resources for new Scholars and Fellows arriving in the UK. The feedback has provided an important litmus test of the content included in the Handbook and FAQs and how far it succeeds in delivering its objectives as a resource to support Scholars and Fellows at the beginning, middle, and end of the awards in the UK.

Next steps

The Engagement and Programme Teams will consider the feedback provided by the Alumni Advisory Panel as part of the annual review of the onboarding resources for new Scholars and Fellows.

The feedback will be used to inform:

- Redrafting of content for the new Handbook and FAQs
- Expanding the detail on specific policy or guidance areas where ambiguities or information gaps have been identified
- Review of the structure and design of the current Handbook