COMMONWEALTH SCHOLARSHIPS

Review of the CSC's Application Forms for Master's and PhD Scholarships

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.

The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission is currently reviewing the content of our application forms as part of the development of a new online application system due to launch in 2024.

The Commission has a separate application form for each of its Programmes, with several sections being common to all while each form also has sections specific to the type of study. The application forms are accompanied by guidance documents as well as the top line of the selection criteria used by our selection panels.

Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel 2021-2023 were invited to provide feedback on the revised application form questions, against the core criteria used to assess applicant responses, and the supporting guidance documents.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions on each activity via an online survey. The questions were aimed at understanding the clarity of information and questions, usefulness of the selection criteria in supporting applicants, and the language and phrasing used at all stages of the application process.

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

- Master's study application form

- Doctoral study application form

- Selection criteria

- Guidance (for applicants) for Master's Scholarships

- Guidance (for applicants) for PhD Scholarships

The task was open to all panel members. 25 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 26%.

Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Application forms; Selection criteria; and Guidance to applicants.

Feedback and suggestions for improvements fell into two categories:

- Presentation and communication changes to improve the user experience; and
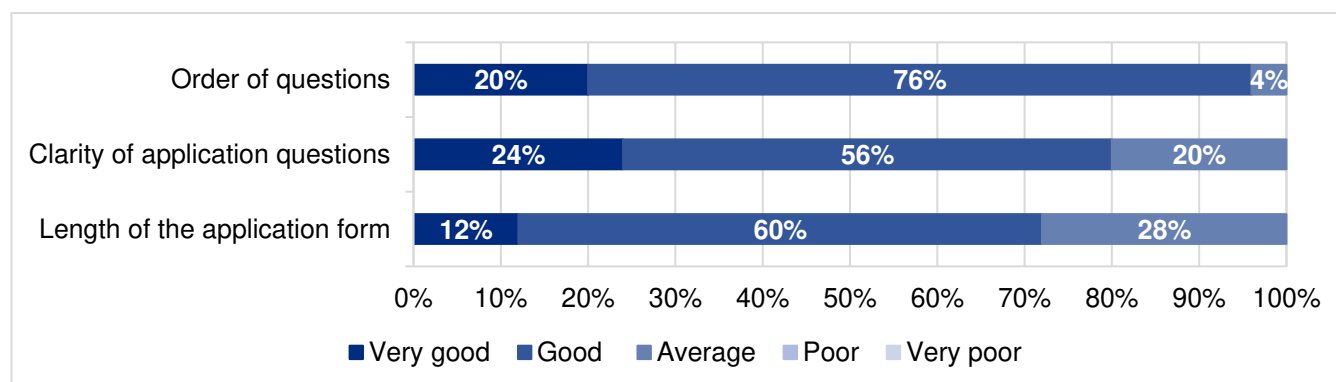- Substantial changes to what applicants are being asked.

The presentation changes can be implemented in advance of the 2024 application round, while the substantial changes will feed into a wider review of the CSC's selection policy and materials to take place before the 2025 application round.

Application forms

Panel members were asked to rate application forms in three categories and advise on areas where improvements could be made.
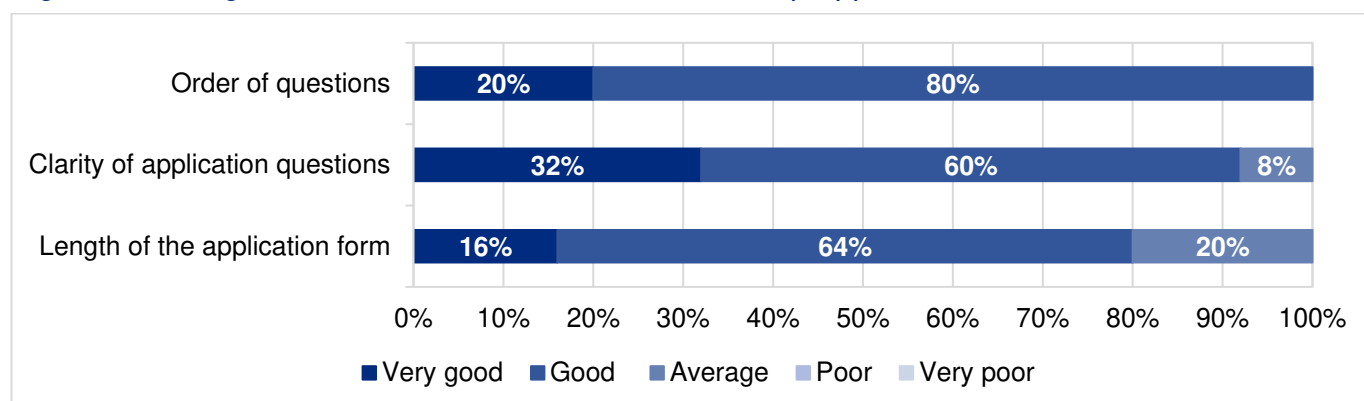
Responses were favourable overall with some key areas highlighted in open comments questions.

Figure 1- Rating of elements of the Master's Scholarship application form

	Very good	Good	Average/Poor/Very poor
Order of questions	20%	76%	4%
Clarity of application questions	24%	56%	20%
Length of the application form	12%	60%	28%

n=25

Figure 2- Rating of elements of the Doctoral Scholarship application form

	Very good	Good	Average/Poor/Very poor
Order of questions	20%	80%	
Clarity of application questions	32%	60%	8%
Length of the application form	16%	64%	20%

n=25

While some responses noted the form was long, others mentioned that it is an appropriate length for a competitive scholarship. The length and number of questions will be looked at separately in the 2025 review.

Recommendations:

There were a significant number of comments in this section which have led to the following presentation changes being taken forward:

Order of questions:
- Special category questions to be moved later in the form with other administrative information.
- Additional clarification required on why personal information is requested in special category questions.
    - This question was raised in numerous responses; while the guidance states that the responses are not considered by or shared with selection panels, there was some concern about the personal nature of the questions and why the questions are being asked.

Clarity of application questions:
- Add wording clarifying the need for evidence or indicators to assessment of impact.
    - Changing from 'How will the impact of your work be best measured'.

o   To 'How will the impact of your work be best measured and evidenced? Please include details of what indicators are used to measure this impact'.

- Username and password reminder to be clarified by amending from a question to a statement.
- Provide further guidance on including relevant work experience.
    - o   Changing from 'List up to five jobs you have held that are relevant to your application, starting with the most recent'.
    - o   To 'List up to five jobs you have held and outline how the experience gained supports and is relevant to your application, starting with the most recent'.

Further responses raised suggestions for substantial change which will be considered within the future policy review:
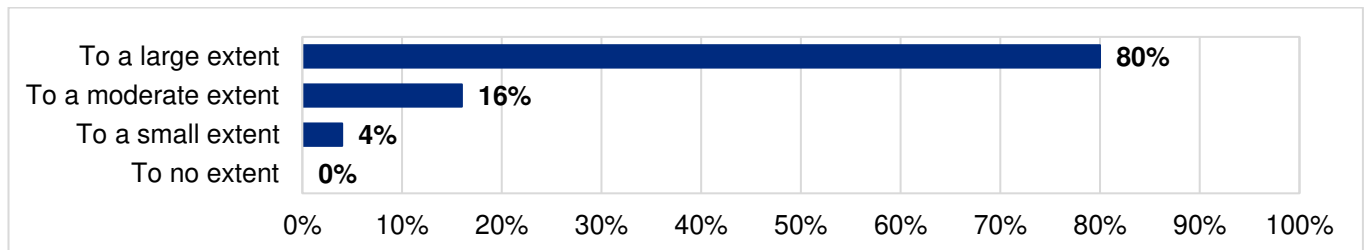
- Adding question about training undertaken
- Adding question about contribution to the UK and public engagement on award
- Allow PhD applicants to include further documentation e.g., Gantt charts
- Review word limits for all statements

Selection criteria

Respondents were asked to rate the clarity of information on the CSC's selection criteria and how applicants can apply this in their answers and the format of questions.
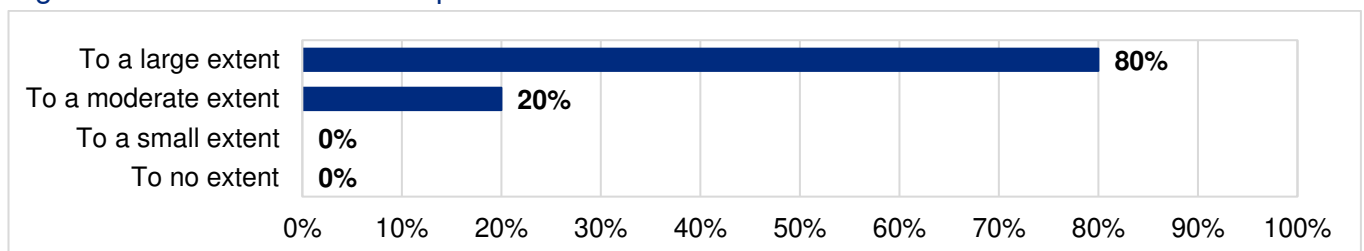
Responses in this area were particularly positive and show that potential applicants can understand the basis on which selections are made.

Figure 3- Extent to which the section on planned course and institution of study is clearly set out
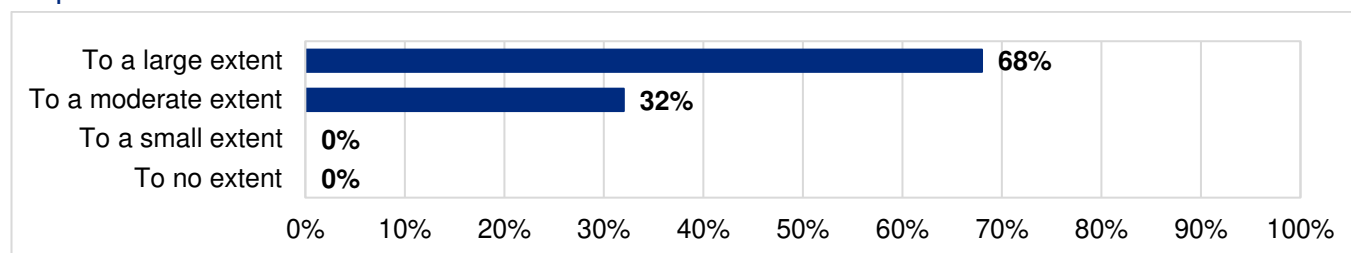

n=25

Figure 4- Extent to which the questions relate to the selection criteria on the CSC website

n=25

Figure 5- Extent to which an applicant will be able to incorporate the selection criteria in their responses

To a large extent	68%
To a moderate extent	32%
To a small extent	0%
To no extent	0%

n=25

Recommendations:

Suggestions in this area were fewer in number, however some flagged how additional guidance and FAQs sections would be of use; this is an area where there is already work being undertaken at the secretariat which will address the issues raised.

- Link to guidance and FAQs on each programme page and provide application checklist.
- Amend website tab on 'Selection Process' to 'Selection Process and Criteria' and add wording emphasising importance of linking application answers to the selection criteria.
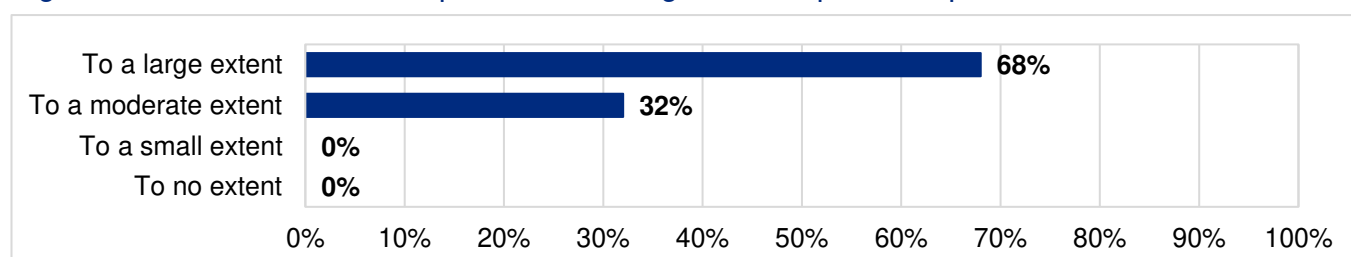
Another response to be taken forward for the review:

- Inclusion of planned extra-curricular activities
- Inclusion of more information about selections, including scoring and weighting

Development impact

Respondents were asked to review the questions relating to development impact and how well applicants would be able to answer these and meet the selection criteria.
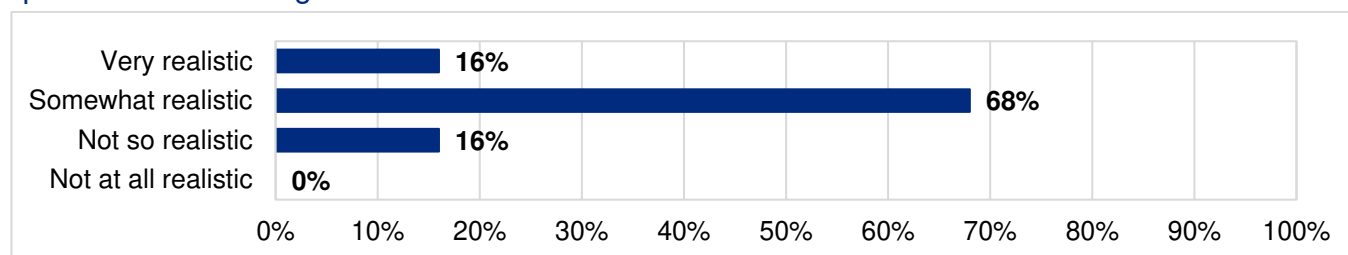
A small number of recommendations came from this section; panel members were largely positive in their responses and praised the clarity of the questions and how they relate to the CSC themes. Although there were some points raised relating to how realistic the development impact questions were particularly for Master's applicants, others felt they gave candidates a framework in which to present their answers.

Figure 6- Extent to which the questions relating to development impact are clear

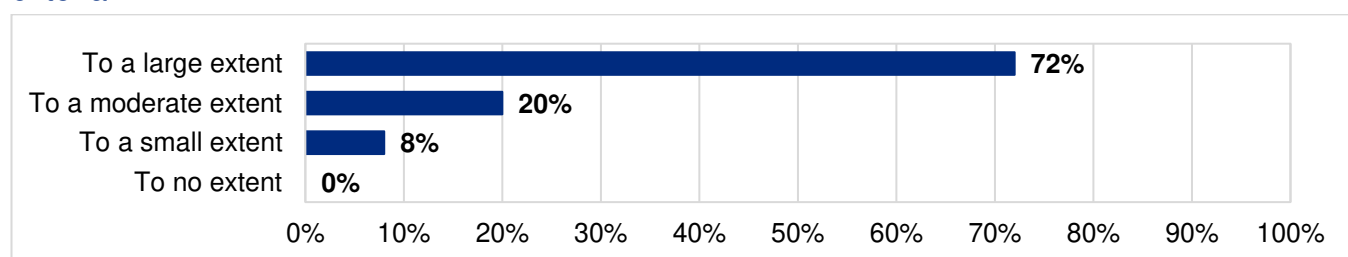|	
To a large extent	68%
To a moderate extent	32%
To a small extent	0%
To no extent	0%

n=25

Figure 7- Extent to which it is realistic to expect an applicant to answer development impact questions at this stage in their career

n=25

Figure 8- Extent to which the questions relating to development impact relate to the selection criteria

n=25

Recommendations:

The development impact statement is structured in four parts, and communication changes relating to development impact are summarised below.

- Question 2 is currently worded as follows:
    - How you intend to apply your new skills and qualification when you return home?

- The panel suggested that it should include the following qualifying text:
    - You may wish to reference innovation and application of knowledge at a global, national or local level, and to include intended methodologies and implementation strategies.

- Question 4 is as follows, including changes outlined above:
    - How the impact of your work could best be measured and evidenced? Please include details of what indicators are used to measure this impact.

- The panel suggested the inclusion of the following qualifying text:
    - You may wish to detail small and incremental changes as well as more significant goals.

Currently the development questions are the same for both Master's and PhD candidates; the question of whether these should be different depending on level of study, and the detail being asked for in each, can be taken forward in the 2025 review.
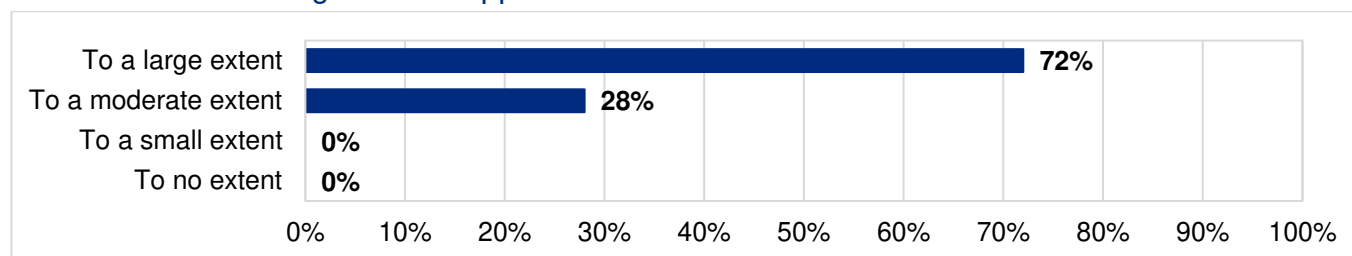
Personal statement

The panel was informed that the CSC looks to identify applicants who come from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds but that we does not want the question to

be 'leading' in a way that could encourage candidates to over emphasise challenges they have faced in an attempt to gain an unfair advantage.

Feedback was especially positive about the personal statement, with no respondents having any significant concerns and broad support for the wording being balanced.

Figure 9- Extent to which the selection criteria is helpful in guiding applicants on what the Commission is looking for in an application.
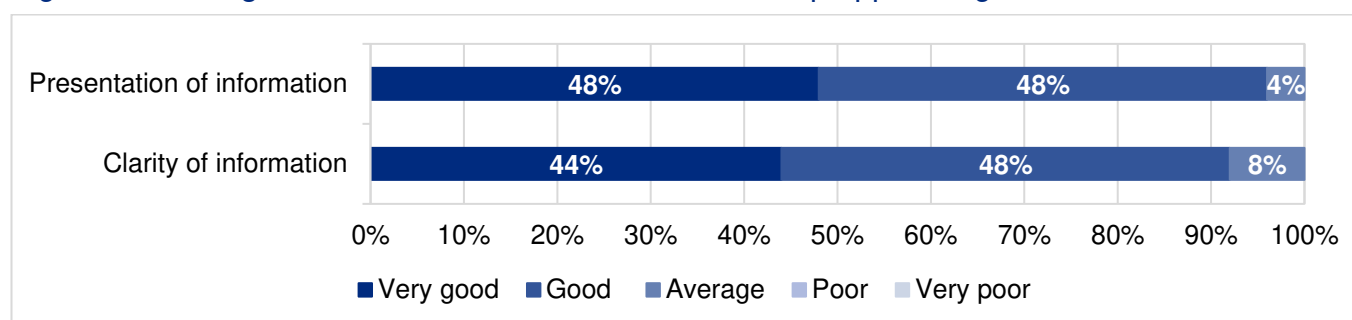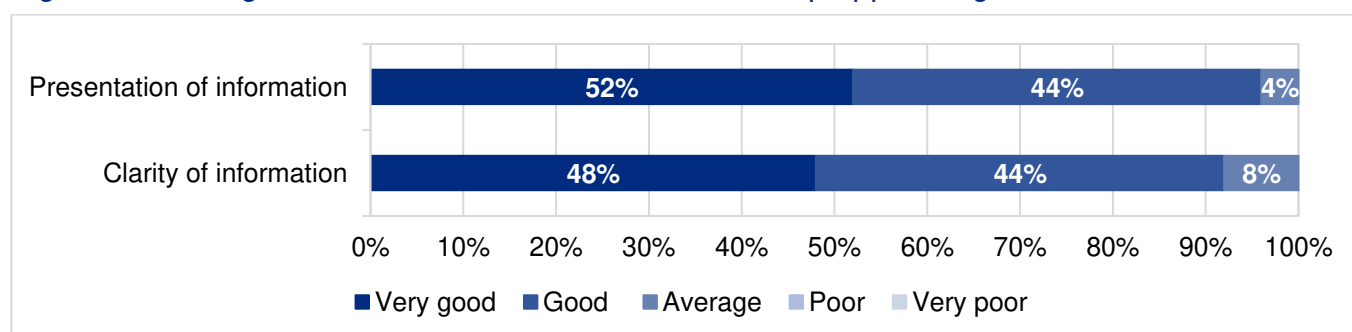

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Guidance to applicants

This section again was broadly positive. The feedback requested regarding additional guidance which the Policy team are already working on was well received.

Figure 10- Rating of elements of the Master's Scholarship applicant guidance
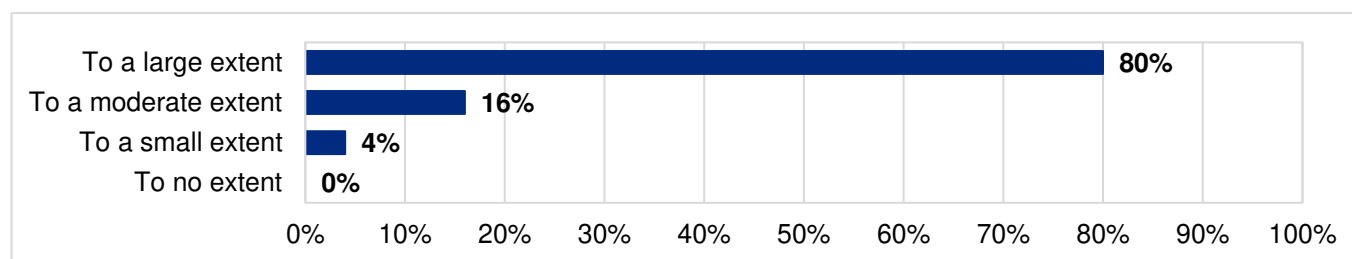

n=25

Figure 11- Rating of elements of the Doctoral Scholarship applicant guidance

n=25

Figure 12- Extent to which a checklist would be helpful for applicants

n=25

Recommendations:

There were some useful recommendations made in the final comments and feedback section, summarised below:

- Responses to checklists and timelines were highly positive; these are currently being rolled out and will be linked from all programme pages on the website.
- Ensuring visibility of rule that there is no age limit for applicants
- Making clear a nominating agency is required and increasing the visibility of these on the programme pages
- Link to alumni page under 'Choosing a university/course' on programme pages so candidates can see what successful scholars from their countries have studied previously

Some suggestions which can be looked at in the context of the wider review are as follows:

- Using multimedia guidance, for instance with videos of example questions
- Reworking guidance text on the website be formatted more with bullet points rather than paragraphs
- A recommendation to include how professional work can be linked with academic background can be taken forward in the 2025 review
- Review process for collecting references and supporting statements
- Involve AAP again when this review takes place

Summary

The following is a summary of the recommendations for immediate implementation:

- Move special category questions and update supporting text clarifying the purpose of these questions
- Improve wording for questions relating to development statement and employment
- Roll out guidance and FAQs with application checklist
- Improve Selection Process and Criteria sections
- Ensuring visibility of no age limit rule, nominating agency role and alumni

This section outlines points to be considered within the future policy review:

- Adding questions about:
    - Training undertaken
    - Proposed contribution to the UK and public engagement on award

- o Planned extra-curricular activities
- o Professional work with academic background

- Reviewing:
    - o Word limits for all statements.
    - o Process for collecting references and supporting statements.
    - o Format of guidance text on website and use of multimedia guidance.
    - o Inclusion of more information about selections, including scoring and weighting.
    - o Allowing PhD applicants to include further documentation e.g., Gantt charts.

The recommendation to involve AAP again when this review takes place will also be taken forward.

Next steps

- Implement presentation and clarification changes so forms and website guidance are updated with the points outlined in this report to make the application form and accompanying guidance more user friendly for applicants.

- Prepare substantial recommendations for inclusion in wider review of selections policy including a more fundamental review of our application materials to be undertaken with the Commission in advance of 2025 application round opening.