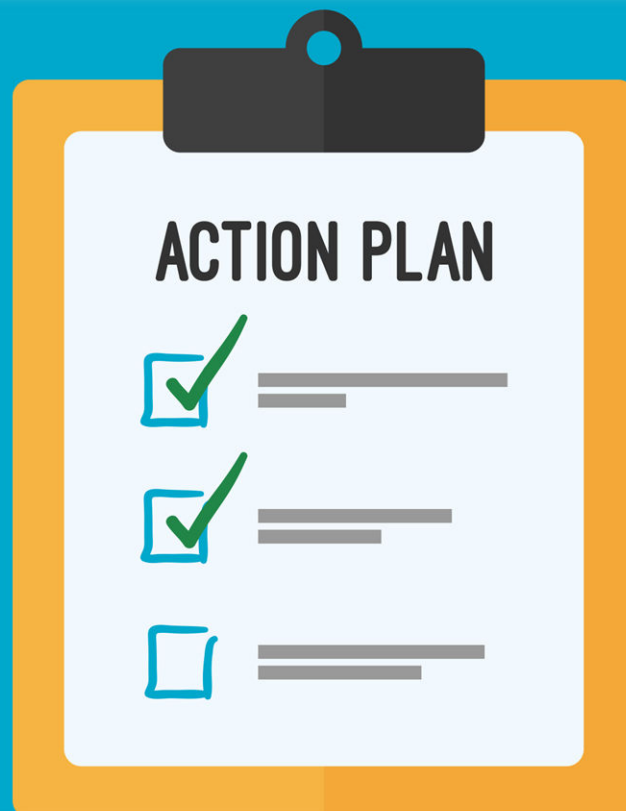




COMMONWEALTH  
SCHOLARSHIPS

# Consultation on CSC Pre-arrival and On-Boarding Communications for Scholars

Alumni Advisory Panel  
Report 2023-2025 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 117 members.

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Each year the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission completes a selection process for its scholarship programmes. Once selections have been made and agreed, the Commission reaches out to successful applicants to notify them of the outcome and start the arrangements for their arrival.

The pre-arrival process consists of emails sent to scholars and universities, as well as a travel booking process, and for some awards, the sending of a cashcard to the scholar's home address.

Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel 2023-2025 were invited to provide feedback on the CSC pre-arrival and onboarding communications and operational processes, including flight booking and cash card activation. Panel members were also asked to share ideas and thoughts on ways in which these communications and processes could be altered or amended to improve the arrival experience for future cohorts.

## 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 accessibility and clarity of communications shared during pre-arrival and on-boarding and ways in which this could be improved and/or further developed.

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

- Provisional selection email
- Notification of Award (NoA) documents
- Confirmation of Award (CoA) documents
- Scholar arrival email

The task was open to all panel members. 70 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 60%.

## Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Provisional selection email review; Notification of Award (NoA) review; Confirmation of Award (CoA) review; Scholar arrival email review; and Final comments and feedback.

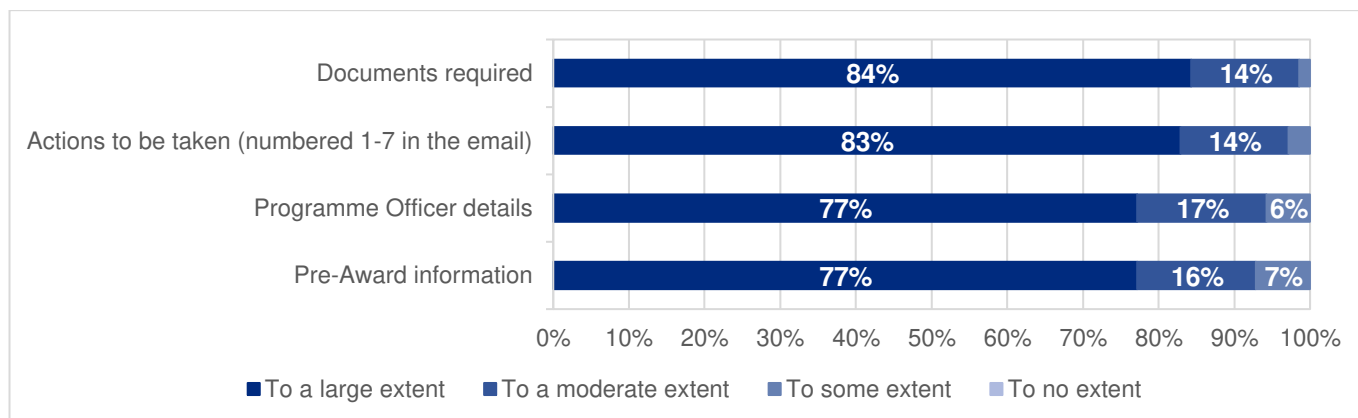
### Provisional selection email review

The 'Provisional selection email' is sent to all candidates selected for the scholarship. It outlines next steps for candidates to confirm if they intend to accept their offer and the documentation required by the Secretariat to start the placement process with their UK university.

Overall, 90% of respondents felt the guidance on how to accept the scholarship offer is clear.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which different information outlined in the email is clearly communicated.

Figure 1 – Extent to which the information outlined in the Provisional selection email is clearly communicated



n=70

Most respondents reported that the information is clearly communicated and well organised, presenting clear actions for candidates and contact information if they require further support.

**‘The provisional selection email provides an enormous amount of information in terms that are both clear and concise. The use of headers & enumeration helps to discipline this information & make it manageable.’**

Reflecting on the information and their personal experiences, respondents shared some suggestions to improve the information. These included providing clear deadlines for returning documents and additional guidance on the initial steps that must be taken towards the visa application. It was also suggested that more information on potential Programme Officer changes should be included.

Some respondents noted that for those travelling outside of their country for the first time, this could be better acknowledged and/or signposting to when additional information on preparing for travel will be shared.

## Notification of Award (NoA) review

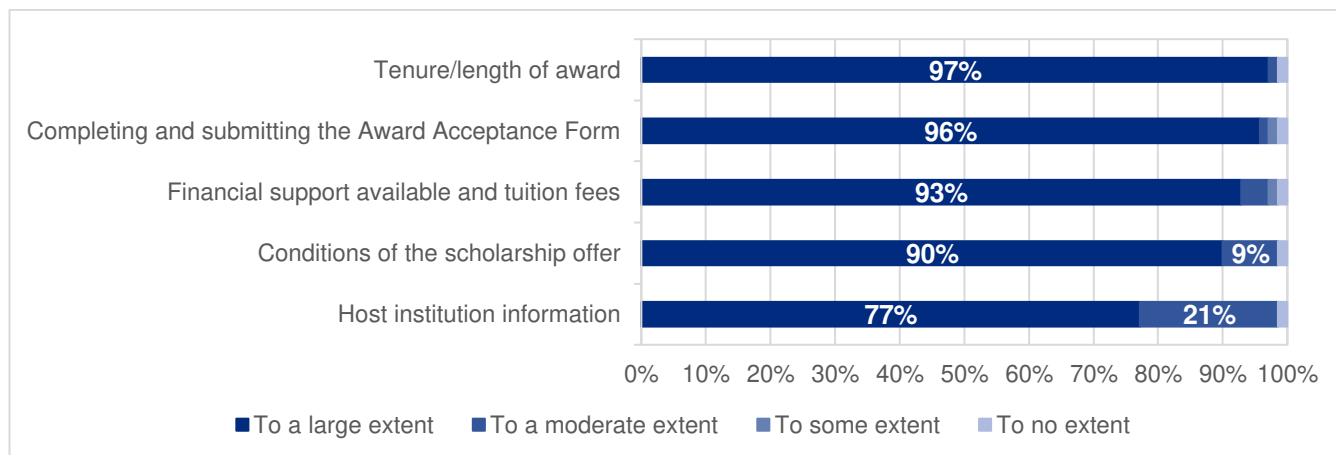
The Notification of Award (NoA) correspondence outlines to candidates what their Commonwealth Scholarship offer entails and provides links to further information about their scholarship. Candidates receive the NoA after they confirm their intention to accept the scholarship and the universities return a placement form.

The NoA email provides links to important information for candidates to read, including the Handbook for Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows, visa guidance, and the CSC’s Student Wellbeing page. The email includes the official NoA letter which confirms the university where the scholar is being offered placement, the tenure time, and the financial support provided by CSC and the UK university (if relevant).

90% of respondents rated the NoA correspondence as useful 'To a large extent'. Reasons given included clarity and conciseness of language, clear outline of processes and next steps, and presentation of information in the attached documents.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which different information was clearly communicated in the email and supporting documentation.

**Figure 2 – Extent to which the information in the Notification of Award (NoA) documentation is clearly communicated**



n=70

A considerable number of respondents felt the information provided about the host institution is insufficient. Some respondents suggested minor revisions of language to provide additional clarity, particularly where conditions to the offer are referenced. A few respondents felt more information or emphasis on Pre-Departure Briefings could be provided.

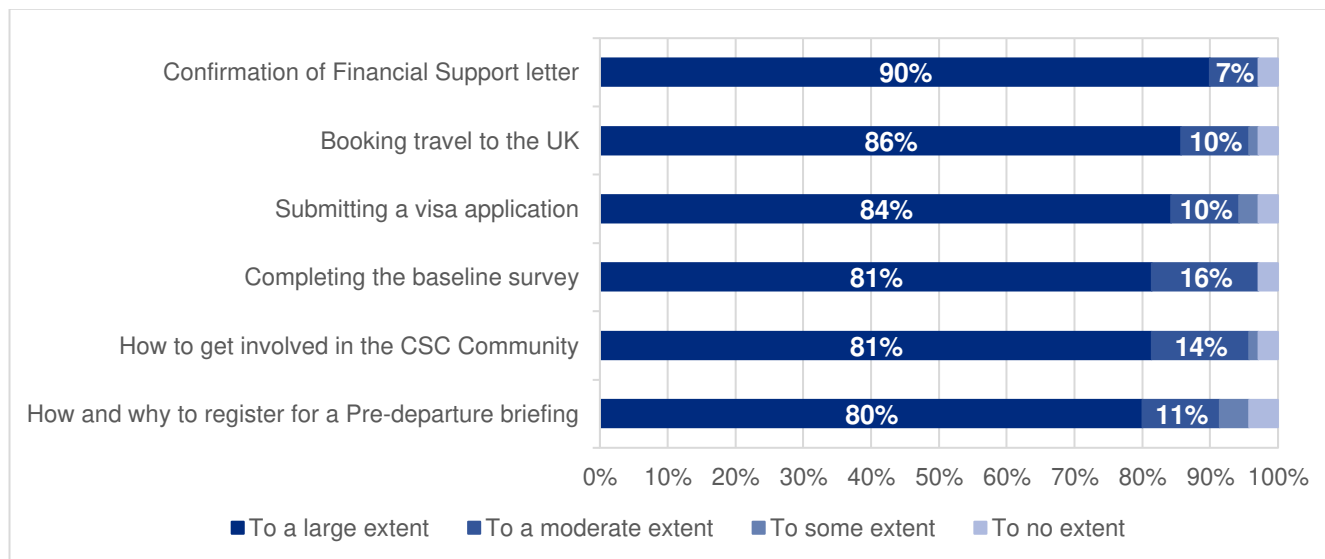
For some respondents it was felt that information on preparing to travel to the UK, finding accommodation, and what to expect on arrival could be included. Due to the number of UK universities scholars are placed at across the UK, it would be difficult to generalise information on the institutions and accommodation available. As such, the Secretariat relies on UK universities to liaise on accommodation and arrival matters and some general guidance is provided in the Handbook for Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows. Additional guidance on contacting UK universities for this type of information will be considered for inclusion in the NoA, as well as earlier citing of the Handbook for Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows.

## Confirmation of Award (CoA) review

The Confirmation of Award (CoA) correspondence is provided to scholars once they have shown they meet all the offer criteria required by the Commission and their UK university. The correspondence comprises an email containing important pre-award information, such as how to schedule a Pre-Departure Briefing, how to activate their cashcard and book travel. It includes the official CoA letter outlining specific details about the scholarship and placement which scholars require to complete the visa application process. A copy of the letter is also shared with the relevant university to confirm the tenure dates and financial support that will be provided by the CSC.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which different information was clearly communicated in the email and supporting documentation.

Figure 3 – Extent to which information in the Confirmation of Award documentation is clearly communicated



n=70

Over 80% of respondents rated information about registering for a Pre-Departure Briefing, submitting a visa application, and booking travel to the UK as clearly communicated 'To a large extent'.

Despite these ratings, open comments highlighted that the level of information shared may be overwhelming and that more emphasis could be given to the steps outlined in the email communication on what scholars need to do next.

90% of respondents rated the Confirmation of Financial Support letter as clear in its communication 'To a large extent'. This is an important document which supports the scholar's visa application.

**'I believe the CoA documents are clear in communicating important information about visa application, booking travel, getting involved in the CSC community, and the financial support provided. However, the information on registering for a pre-departure briefing and completing the baseline survey could be more detailed and specific.'**

'Overall, this information is sufficient to empower the scholar to navigate the various aspects of their scholarship, ensuring compliance with requirements, meeting deadlines, and understanding.'

## Cashcard instructions

As part of the CoA correspondence, scholars receive instructions on how to activate and use their cashcard, or Travelex Cash Passport. The Secretariat has made improvements to the instructions provided about the cashcard and was keen to gather feedback from respondents on this.

77% of respondents felt the information was clear 'To a large extent' and 13% 'To a moderate extent'. Asked to elaborate on their ratings, many respondents felt the instructions were explicit and the actions clearly outlined. Some respondents shared their personal experiences activating their cashcard using these/similar instructions and a small number reflected on the positive development made by the CSC in introducing this resource.

**'Travelex cash passport master card is very welcome development by the Commission... we did not experience this as scholars in 2010 but did in 2017.'**

'The Information provided in the Travelex Cash Passport Mastercard is very clear and simple to understand, the step by step instruction is comprehensive enough especially as it made provision for phone call in alternative for browsing network. The instructions contained in both online activation and offline is comprehensive enough.'

**'It was scary, but I followed the instructions, and it worked well!'**

'The instructions are clear on how you activate the cash card and the amounts available on it. It is great that the CSC has indicated that funds will only be credited upon arrival in the UK. It will be great if this can be amplified by stating something along the lines: "funds on the cash card will not be available until the activation procedure is followed and a scholar is in the UK". It will be great if this can be boldened.'

**'It was a life-saver and made my online transactions for certain items much easier, which would otherwise not have been possible with credit cards from my home country.'**

It was suggested that visual guidance could be added to the instructions to enhance the information and help with the registration process. Some respondents also queried the cashcard delivery method (DHL) in cases where postal addresses and/or postal systems may be less reliable and what advice is provided to scholars in this situation.

A small number of respondents noted that guidance on opening a UK bank account could be included in this correspondence. One respondent shared their personal experience of feeling alienated and discriminated against during this process. The Secretariat does not provide guidance on opening a bank account as banks have different requirements, and it would not be possible to keep this information updated. Information on how to research and approach banks could be considered for inclusion in Pre-Departure Briefings.

## Introduction to the CSC Community

As well as practical guidance on preparing for travelling to the UK and confirming the scholarship details, the CoA also introduces scholars to the CSC Community and ways they can get involved.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which the activities offered were attractive or may appeal to incoming scholars. 60% rated the attractiveness of the activities 'To a large extent' and 29% 'To a moderate extent'.

Open comments on the community engagement offer provided further insight and recommendations to better present and develop this.

**'CSC offers great community support in terms of connecting with the existing and previous scholars from the same country, studying at the same university, or studying in the same city. Anyone seeking to connect to a relevant person can easily find this information.'**

'It is hugely attractive. It offers the opportunity to get to know community members and network with people from related fields of study. The benefits of networking can range from academic to social, including making friends and avoiding loneliness.'

**'I am not sure that the engagement offer is really 'attractive' to incoming scholars in the way it is currently worded. It seems more like a chore that they need to do rather than them wanting to actively engage.'**

'Personally, I believe that there is limited to no understanding on the magnitude of the offer - especially for those visiting the UK for the first.'

**'I would elaborate on the 'why bother' within this section... what benefit is it to network with fellow scholars, or with scholars/alumni in the Knowledge Hubs? What does a Mentor do? What benefit is it to have one?'**

Feedback suggests that whilst the activities outlined introduce scholars to the CSC Community, there is little incentive or clear reason on why scholars should get involved and what they can gain from participating in these activities. A review of the style of this communication and more engaging language and examples could be considered.

Asked what additional opportunities may be valuable at this stage, respondents noted a general LinkedIn group or page for more professional networking and exposure and CSC initiated regional/university groups to enable scholars to virtually meet-up in the build up to starting their studies.

A small number of respondents suggested welcome events at the early stage of the scholarship. The CSC provides an in-person 'Connect & Collaborate' event in February each year, as well as a virtual welcome event in late September to facilitate initial scholar interaction. Signposting of these activities as part of these early communications could be considered.



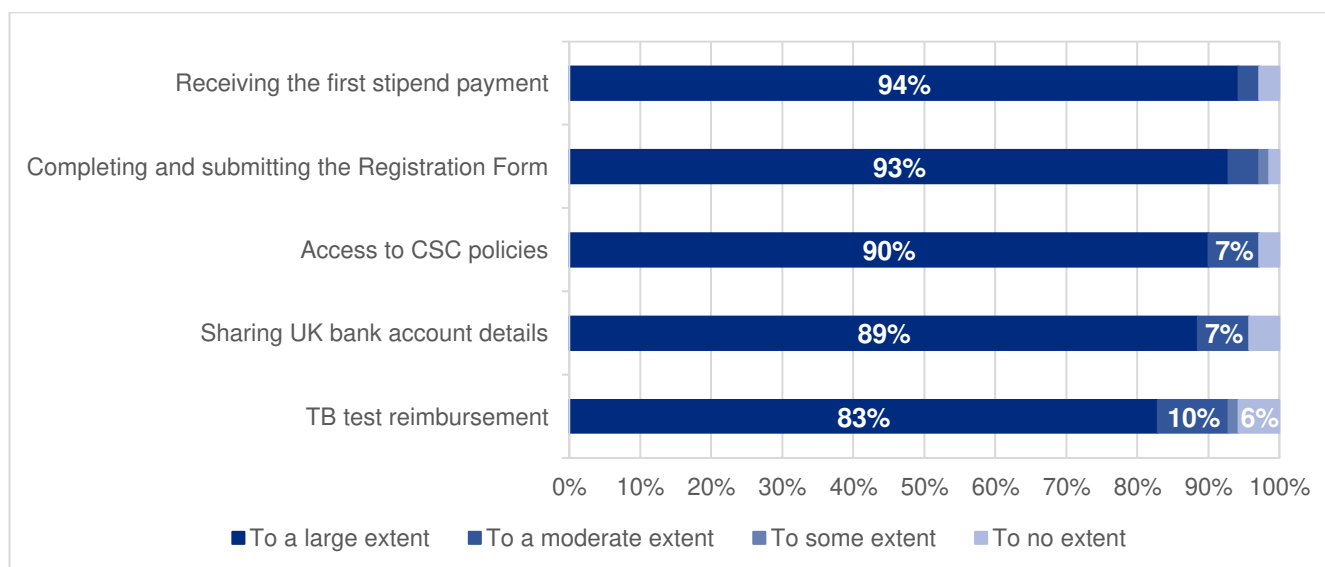
## Scholar arrival email review

The 'Scholar arrival email' is shared on the first working day that the scholar arrives in the UK. It is expected that selected scholars will have read all the information provided previously, and they will arrive in the UK with some knowledge of what to expect.

Understandably, the arrival process can be difficult for those that have never travelled abroad. During the arrival period, Programme Officers are available during working hours to support scholars with their queries.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which different information was clearly communicated in the arrival email.

Figure 4 – Extent to which information in the Scholar arrival email is clearly communicated



n=70

Overall, the response to the information provided in the 'Scholar arrival email' was highly rated, with 86% rating clarity of the communication 'To a large extent'. As outlined in Figure 4, over 90% of respondents rated the information on CSC policies and stipend as well communicated 'To a large extent'.

**'Overall, I am quite satisfied with the correspondence shared during the pre-arrival and communications stages...The information is generally clear, well-structured, and helpful in guiding scholars through the necessary steps and requirements. However, there is room for improvement in certain areas. For example, the information on registering for pre-departure briefings and accessing CSC policies could be more specific and detailed. Additionally, some scholars may benefit from more personalised support or guidance, particularly those who come from diverse backgrounds or face unique challenges.'**

Asked what additional information could be included in the 'Scholar arrival email', respondents highlighted accommodation support, mental health support, with particular reference to culture shock, and more explicit instructions on how to return documents (e.g. via email). One respondent flagged that whilst the information was clear and comprehensive, it wasn't engaging or overly welcoming despite this being an arrival email.

Acknowledging how difficult this initial period may be for scholars, some respondents noted that mentorship may be useful, as well as pre-arranged CSC or Regional Network facilitated opportunities.

The CSC Alumni Team has provided a mentoring programme since 2019 which runs from January-December. This cycle is designed to provide important post-scholarship mentorship and that applications open post-arrival in the UK when scholars have had time to settle into their studies. It also ensures that scholars can focus on important communications about their award documentation and arrival processes.

As noted earlier in this report, in September scholars are invited to a virtual welcome event to connect and have access to other online groups during the early months of their scholarship.

## **Final comments and feedback**

In their final comments and feedback on the overall pre-arrival and onboarding communications, respondents reiterated sharing mental health support and guidance for scholars and signposting information about accessing accommodation and UK travel guidance. There were a small number of comments on the role of alumni in this process although this is outside the scope of this consultation.

## **Summary**

Overall, respondents shared largely positive feedback on the existing pre-arrival and onboarding communications. It was generally felt that the information was comprehensive and clearly communicated and that the step-by-step approach outlined to help candidates and scholars complete tasks was useful.

Areas for improvement identified were largely focused on reviewing the guidance given for larger processes, such as completing the visa application, opening a bank account and seeking accommodation. Whilst the Secretariat cannot provide information on the latter two points, inclusion of guidance on where to find advice could be considered.

Respondent feedback has reinforced the value of the information provided in these communications. Whilst the official information on the scholarship and financial support must follow a formal layout and specific language, it has been noted that the emails could utilise a more engaging format to better promote information and opportunities that sit outside these administrative tasks.

## Next steps

Based on the feedback gathered, the CSC Programme team will:

- Develop a timeline to support candidates to complete the 'next steps' outlined in the Provisional selection email.
- Revise information on the visa application process and securing accommodation and where to seek guidance on opening a bank account.
- Include visual aids to some of the correspondence, such as cash card instructions.
- Signpost selected candidates to the CSC's online communities on Facebook and LinkedIn (Knowledge Hubs) and Regional Networks and Alumni Associations at an earlier stage.
- Include a short explanation on the benefits of attending a Pre-Departure Briefing to encourage sign-up.
- Provide more detailed information on the host institution and the scholar's contact point. Where this is not possible, signposting to key teams and resources could be included.

It may not be possible for these changes to come into effect for the 2024 scholar cohort. Some may be timetabled for the 2025 cohort.