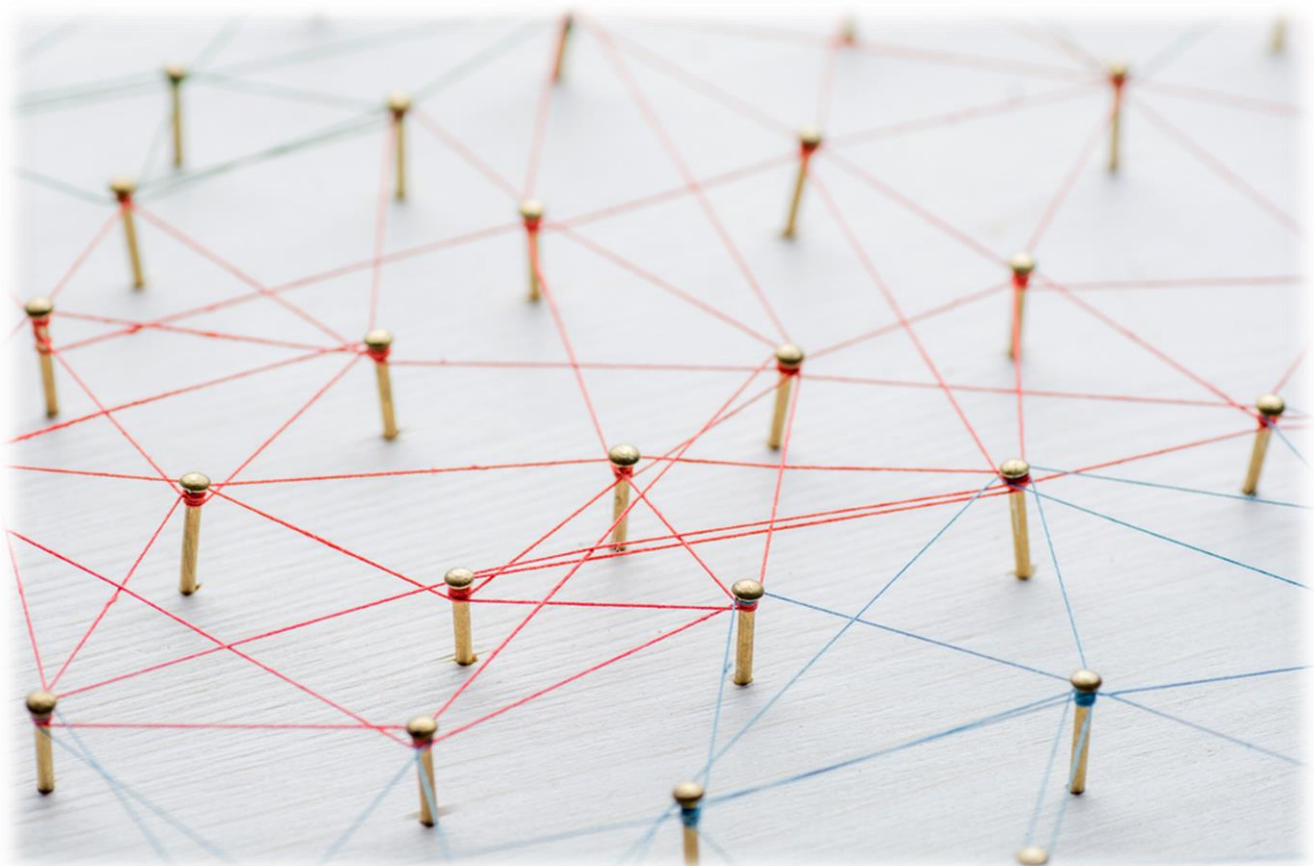




COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

CSC Alumni Associations- Focus Group Discussion Findings

Alumni Advisory Panel
Report 2023-2025 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 116 members.

In April 2025, the CSC will launch a new three-year Alumni Engagement Strategy designed to continue to support and engage Commonwealth Alumni. The strategy will build on the successes of the previous strategy spanning 2022-2025 and potentially introduce new engagement opportunities for alumni.

As part of the strategy development, the CSC Alumni Team have conducted an evaluation of the current strategy to assess the extent to which its objectives have been met and the value of activities to alumni and the Commission. Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel 2023-2025 were invited to provide feedback and reflections on this evaluation and the current Alumni Engagement Strategy more broadly.

Following the Panel's consultation, key areas were identified for further investigation. Panel responses indicated that alumni associations could play a significant role in national level alumni engagement and that greater resourcing and support could be given to these groups to improve their operations.

To further explore these suggestions, members of the Alumni Advisory Panel were invited to Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) on the topic of 'Alumni Associations'.

Methodology

Panel members were invited to attend two FGDs on the topic of ‘CSC Alumni Associations’ and share their thoughts and insights.

As part of the consultation, a briefing was prepared on existing and potential new CSC Alumni Associations, activity delivery by alumni associations and feedback gathered from the panel and wider alumni on their awareness and engagement with these groups.

Results

Key findings from the two FGDs are summarised below. Findings from the FGDs have been analysed and reported together.

9 alumni attended the FGDs, representing 7 countries.

Feedback and responses have been collated under the following headings: Role of national level networks; Challenges and barriers to implementation and participation; Events and activities; Identity and belonging; and Visibility and promotion.

Note: CSC Alumni Associations do not exist in all countries. Some participants therefore shared comments and experiences specific to their local CSC Alumni Associations and other respondents shared experiences of engaging with similar type networks and other local alumni-led affinity groups, and the impact a lack of a CSC Alumni Association had on their engagement with the CSC.

Role of national level networks

Participants were asked to share their thoughts on the role of national level networks, including CSC Alumni Associations.

Key roles identified included:

- Facilitating general networking
- Connecting people in or from specific institutions or working in professional industries and fields
- Building global citizens by supporting those moving between countries to acclimatise to different cultures and communities as part of their professional development
- Giving back to the unifying organisation
- Delivering peer-to-peer activities, such as mentoring, promoting study opportunities, sharing lived experiences, and providing career guidance and introductions
- Connecting members representing the past, present and future of the unifying organisation
- Participating in community service opportunities through collective action, including fundraising

Expanding on these key roles, participants felt that national networks, such as the CSC's Alumni Associations, provide an important platform to give back in a myriad of ways. These included sustaining an engaged national network of members and in building important national and community level relationships.

Sharing ideas and thoughts specific to the CSC, many participants highlighted the wealth of lived experience alumni associations could foster through their membership and mechanisms to share this with future and current scholars to support their personal and professional development. This included mentoring, career guidance, and pre- and post-scholarship events and networking, as well as alumni expert-led online and in-person events.

Community outreach and engagement was a popular comment, with many participants emphasising the power of collective action and knowledge that could be harnessed through alumni associations to support local communities. Promoting Commonwealth Scholarship opportunities and supporting applicants was noted as a potentially important part of this wider community engagement.

Positioning alumni associations to bridge gaps in the current globally delivered CSC activities was also raised. Alongside the community level engagement proposed, participants noted that existing globally delivered CSC activities were focused on academic and research support and that alumni associations could provide more social, personal and informal opportunities for connection.

In one FGD, participants discussed the role of alumni associations in helping alumni stay connected to the CSC. Whilst the scholarship was an important part of an alumnus' personal and professional development, in the period following the scholarship they noted that it can be easy to be consumed by other commitments and demands. It was felt that alumni associations can play an important role in keeping people connected to the CSC through regular communications and valuable local connections and opportunities. These participants also highlighted the importance of national level networks in creating a sense of belonging and identity.

Similar to the comments on identity and belonging, it was noted that national level networks could play a role in promoting Commonwealth Scholarships and award recipients at the national level to build awareness, pride and prestige.

Challenges and barriers to implementation and participation

Acknowledging that the CSC does not have alumni associations in every Commonwealth country, participants were asked to share their thoughts and experiences on challenges and barriers to creating these groups and/or in sustaining and ensuring they deliver meaningful engagement opportunities.

Creating and implementing alumni associations

Key challenges and barriers to creating and implementing alumni associations included:

- Stalling on knowing how to implement and execute plans
- Informality of some alumni associations removes the pressure to perform
- Accessing alumni data and geographical spread of alumni pose intimidating challenges
- Lower general engagement amongst alumni than during scholarship/fellowship makes it harder to recruit volunteers and gauge enthusiasm

It was felt that associations required more support and resources to formalise their operations and develop a clear mission, vision and goals to drive activities and engagement. Examples included funding to register associations and deliver initial activities, support to create association databases of scholars and alumni and greater incentives for associations to perform. This final point was echoed in discussions on sustaining meaningful engagement through alumni associations, as outlined below.

Sustaining meaningful engagement

Key challenges and barriers to sustaining meaningful engagement through alumni associations included:

- Informality of alumni associations is off-putting and can be disruptive to developing positive relationships with these groups
- Lack of direction and sense of belonging generated by alumni associations
- Limited reach of engagement and activities in larger countries and those with more geographically spread alumni
- Associations aren't visible in-country and/or through CSC channels to attract/encourage members
- Negative and disengaging onboarding and stewardship of members

Participants shared negative experiences of reaching out to their local alumni association and a lack of clear information about how to join and the value of joining the association, and limited outreach and engagement from associations to encourage new members, especially returning scholars.

It was also raised that there is little visibility of alumni associations in CSC communications and in-country. There was a feeling that better signposting of alumni association activities would encourage membership and a sense of prestige about these groups.

Events and activities

Drawing on comments regarding the role of national level networks, participants provided further details on the ways in which alumni associations could involve their members to deliver engaging member and community activities.

Suggestions included:

- Skills development events
- Mentorship, with a focus on career development, immediate post-scholarship support and pre-scholarship preparation

- Distance Learning Scholar events to connect these learners with each other and wider alumni
- Forums to share stories and discuss national and international development priorities and opportunities
- Commonwealth Scholarship promotion events, including roadshows and talks
- Networking opportunities, including events which connect alumni with senior leaders both within the alumni community and externally
- Youth outreach
- Keeping in touch sessions to help scholars prepare for their return home
- Social and cultural activities which help members bond informally

A key theme to all activities raised was the opportunity to connect, network and give back under a shared goal and with a clear sense of purpose. Utilising the experiences and knowledge of alumni was an underlying theme.

Identity and belonging

The importance of identity and belonging was raised under different discussion points and by both FGDs. There was a feeling that alumni associations should instil a sense of achievement and a shared sense of feeling by galvanising members around a central vision which defines the role of alumni and the CSC at the national level.

For some participants, it was felt that these values were not clear in the information about and actions of alumni associations and therefore it was hard to understand the purpose of the groups or to feel an affinity to them.

It should be noted that some of these comments were not only in relation to CSC Alumni Associations but to the CSC as well. Having a more defined identity would support alumni in feeling a longer-term belonging to the CSC, which, if reflected in local alumni associations, would provide a more defined and meaningful value addition to be being part of both communities throughout the scholarship cycle.

Visibility and promotion

As shared elsewhere in the discussion, improving the visibility of CSC Alumni Associations was a popular observation amongst participants. Suggestions included better and consistent promotion of the existence and activities of CSC Alumni Associations across CSC communications, national level reporting and visibility, more community level engagement through association activities, and the implementation of robust onboarding and stewardship for alumni association members.

Linked to the last point, many participants understood the barriers to alumni association performance, such as limited contacts, geographical spread of alumni and limited funding. However, it was felt that consistent communications from alumni associations on activities or updates on the achievements of members would help in keeping members engaged and feeling part of the local community.

In raising the visibility of CSC Alumni Associations, it was suggested that increased engagement with British High Commissions would be beneficial, as well as seeking collaborations with Commonwealth accredited organisations.

Summary

Overall, national level CSC Alumni Associations were felt to hold an important role in connecting alumni in-country and supporting longer-term affinity with the CSC. Participants acknowledged the barriers to introducing and sustaining these groups, however it was felt that these were not insurmountable and that with more resources and support, existing and new alumni associations could provide a valuable function and opportunity for alumni and the public in their country.

Areas for improvement included defining the vision, mission and goals of alumni associations and how they would achieve these, harnessing the skills and knowledge of members to deliver meaningful activities, and raising the profile of alumni associations with the CSC community, its key stakeholders and nationally.

Next steps

Based on the feedback gathered, the CSC Secretariat will:

- Update mailings to better communicate information about CSC Alumni Associations and their activities, potentially through more tailored mailing content
- Review messaging on the purpose and role of CSC Alumni Associations and work with associations to refresh this and improve signposting
- Discuss brand visibility and marketing, as part of wider developments to the CSC's marketing and communications strategy
- Continue to improve resources and support for CSC Alumni Associations to develop more active and engaged networks