

CSC Distance Learning Engagement and Experiences- 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 Distance Learning Scholars form a different relationship with the CSC due to the level of engagement provided during their studies and the contrast to post-scholarship engagement.

To further explore these suggestions, members of the Alumni Advisory Panel were invited to a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on the topic of 'CSC Distance Learning Engagement and Experiences'.

Methodology

Panel members who had studied through a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship were invited to attend a FGD on the topic of 'CSC Distance Learning Engagement and Experiences' and share their thoughts and insights.

As part of the consultation, a briefing was prepared on existing engagement and opportunities for Distance Learning Scholars and Alumni and their uptake.

Results

Key findings from the FGD are summarised below.

3 alumni attended the FGD, representing 2 countries.

Feedback and responses have been collated under the following headings: Motivations for studying via distance learning; Distance learning journey; Commonwealth Scholarships connection; and Ways of engaging Distance Learning Scholars.

Motivations for studying via distance learning

To understand the type of engagement and activities that may be of interest to Distance Learning Scholars, it is important to understand the motivations or reasons for studying via distance.

Key motivations identified included:

- Complement professional ambitions by putting learning straight into practice
- Not wanting or able to spend time away from work/family
- Serving bonds and other barriers to studying in another country but wanting to continue studies
- Access new opportunities alongside work

Professional development was a key motivator to distance learning, with participants stressing the importance of continuing in their professional roles whilst pursuing further studies. It was noted that distance learning is a demanding mode of study, particularly alongside full-time work and over a long period (5-years), however participants felt this was rewarded in staying employed and applying their skills and learning in real-time.

Distance learning journey

Building on discussions regarding the challenges of distance learning, participants shared that it was an interesting mode of study that required a significant life and mindset adjustment.

Critical adjustments participants made included devoting all their free-time to their studies, impacting their personal lives and limiting time for non-work and study-related activities, re-

learning how to learn without a physical peer environment and in-person course schedule, and developing digital skills.

All participants experienced struggles in staying focused and motivated during the first year of distance learning, after which it became easier as they adjusted to the pace and demands and became more familiar with interactive opportunities. These included peer learning spaces and digital networking opportunities, such as discussion groups and live meet-ups.

One participant noted that distance learning can be an isolating and lonely experience, with discussion groups and access to the peer network forming an important mechanism to stay committed and break-up the self-taught and asynchronous elements of the course.

Commonwealth Scholarships Connection

Asked about their engagement with the CSC during their Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, participants shared that they did not feel part of the CSC community. Reasons for this included limited communications from the CSC and lack of activities offered.

Participants noted that on becoming alumni, they felt their engagement with CSC increased as they received regular communications and updates and invitations to events and activities.

They shared there would have been little time to engage in activities and events whilst completing their studies, however felt disengaged from the CSC during this period, adding to the more isolating aspects of the distance learning experience.

Ways of engaging Distance Learning Scholars

Given the limited time to participate in activities whilst studying, participants were asked what, if any activities, could be valuable if designed appropriately.

Suggestions included:

- Introduction to the Commission and/or CSC Secretariat and Distance Learning Scholar community
- Networking opportunities with Distance Learning Scholar cohorts across courses and countries
- Additional communications to receive news from the CSC
- Skills training, with an emphasis on skills for distance learning
- Mentorship

Asked to share further thoughts on mentoring, participants flagged the importance of tailoring a mentoring programme to be sensitive to the time constraints and particular needs of distance learners. Suggestions included moving away from the one-on-one pairing model to small subject/course support groups managed by 2-3 mentors, and focusing on skills development, such as emotional resilience, adapting to distance learning and problem solving.

Participants noted the importance of recruiting mentors that have been Commonwealth Distance Learners and therefore personally understand the experience, and having a more

relaxed approach to the programme, such as less frequent meeting expectations. It was felt that the programme would be most valuable at the start and the end of the study period.

Summary

Participants highlighted the different study experience of Distance Learning Scholars and the barriers to their engagement with the CSC. Overall, they felt more communication during their studies would be appreciated and that a small number of activities or opportunities tailored for this programme would be beneficial.

Next steps

Based on the feedback gathered, the CSC Secretariat will:

- Explore mentoring models to potentially offer a tailored mentoring programme for Distance Learning Scholars and Alumni
- Review the regularity and content of communications provided to Distance Learning Scholars to identify ways of improving engagement during the study period
- Identify potential events and opportunities to connect Distance Learning Scholars with each other to support the distance learning experience, skills development and identity as Commonwealth Scholars