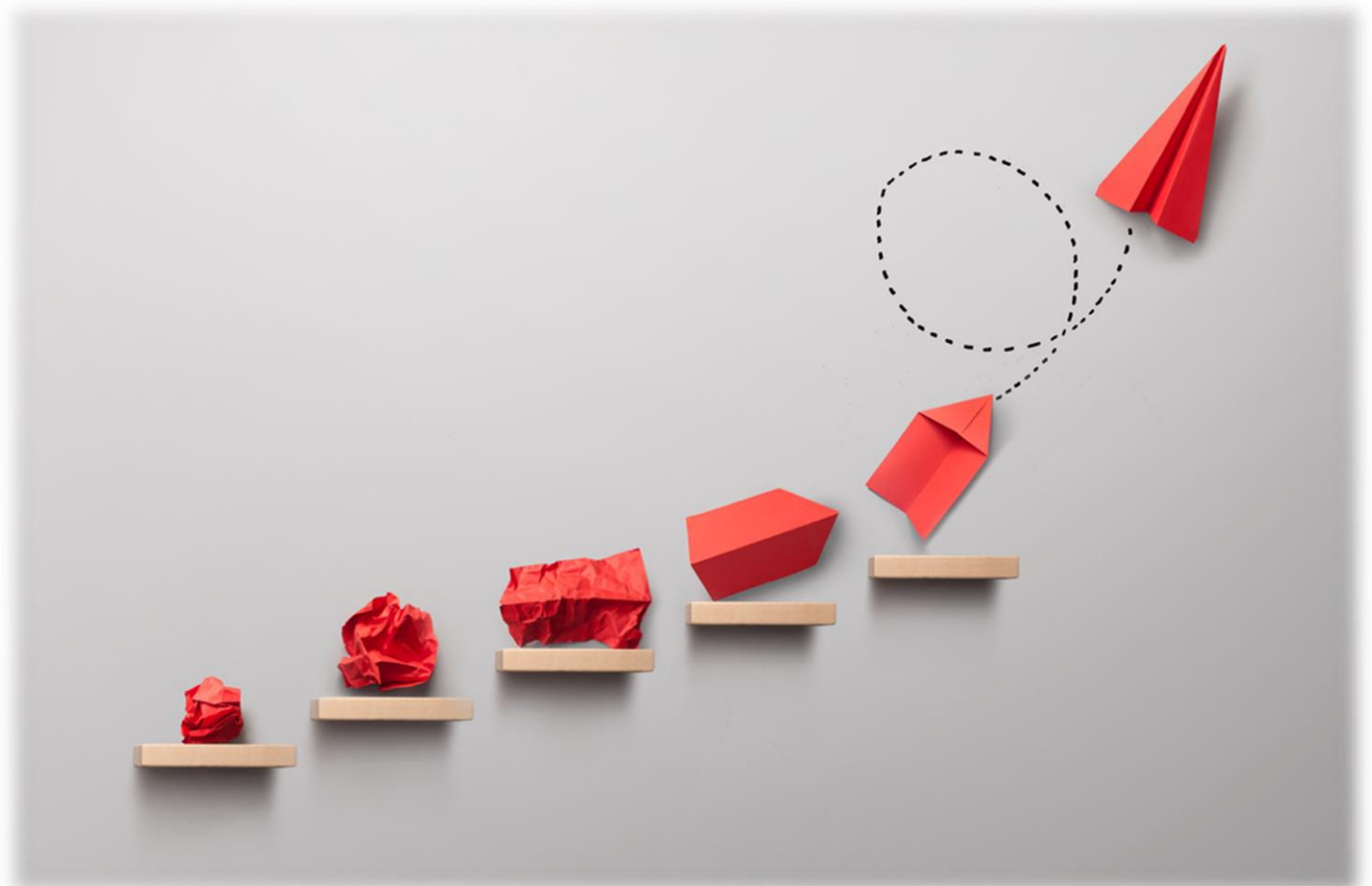




Low Alumni Engagement- Regional Focus Group Discussion Findings

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. One area was low alumni engagement across regions, namely the Caribbean, Europe, North America, and the Pacific.

To further explore reasons for low alumni engagement in these regions and identify strategies and activities to grow engagement opportunities over the next three years, current and former panel members and leaders of CSC Alumni Associations from or residing in these regions were invited to a series of online Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Methodology

Current and former panel members were invited to attend a series of FGDs to share their thoughts and insights on low alumni engagement in their respective region/country. Where a CSC Alumni Association existed, leaders of these groups were also invited to contribute to the discussion.

Four FGDs were held on different dates and times to capture participants across time zones and represent different regions. One FGD was specifically held for participants in the Caribbean region only. Alumni from this region were also welcome to attend the other FGDs as per their availability.

Due to the small number of current and former panel members from Europe, all contactable alumni were also invited to the FGDs. There are currently no Alumni Advisory Panel members representing the Pacific. As such, all former panel members, contactable alumni and leaders from the CSC's single Alumni Association in the region were invited to the FGDs.

As part of the consultation, a briefing was prepared on scholarship eligibility and numbers across all low engaged regions, alumni engagement insights from the current strategy, alumni association information, and challenges to engagement recorded in previous consultations and exercises.

Results

Key findings from the FGDs are summarised below under the following headings: Reflections on engagement with the CSC; Motivations for engaging; Engagement barriers and challenges; and New engagement opportunities.

Findings from the Caribbean alumni only FGD are reported in a standalone section.

18 alumni attended the FGDs, representing 9 countries and the Caribbean, Europe, North America, and Pacific regions.

Reflections on engagement with the CSC

Participants were asked to reflect on their engagement with the CSC during and post-scholarship.

Many reflected that during their scholarship they were engaged in CSC delivered activities, citing Cumberland Lodge residencies and other UK-based scholar events as opportunities to connect. Pre-Departure Briefings and Welcome Home Events were noted as important touchpoints for scholars as they embark on their study and alumni journeys. It was felt that more engagement with alumni to join and attend these in-country events would be an important means of boosting engagement.

In-country delivery of events and activities is not managed by the CSC, resulting in a loss of planned in-person engagement opportunities for some participants in comparison to the CSC managed UK-based scholar programme.

It was felt that communications and overall activities delivered by the CSC helped alumni feel connected globally, but not at the national level where the gaps in alumni engagement and lack of a CSC community were acutely felt. Some participants described this as an isolating experience.

In one FGD, participants shared that studying during the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on feeling part of the CSC community, as well as in building important soft skills to confidently network and connect with alumni on their return home.

Some participants noted that the British High Commission (BHC) in their home country provided engagement opportunities which were well received. These were often delivered alongside events and activities for alumni from other UK scholarship programmes, widening the network and connections post-scholarship.

Participants with experience of establishing and managing CSC Alumni Associations shared the difficulties in engaging geographically spread alumni and in obtaining contact information to connect with existing and new alumni, resulting in a lack of engagement opportunities.

Motivations for engaging

Motivations to engage at the national and/or regional level shared by participants included:

- Building personal connections with alumni
- Shared experiences and sharing experiences to support personal and professional development
- Opportunities to engage the public through alumni-led expert talks
- Special or occasional events to celebrate the CSC's community and/or national and Commonwealth activities
- In-person meetings and events
- Mentorship
- Cultural activities

It was felt that at the national and/or regional level, activities driven by national and regional development needs and agendas would be valuable and provide a return on engagement for alumni and wider audiences. These types of events would also define the national and/or regional importance of Commonwealth Scholarships within specific geographical contexts.

Linked to this, sharing and utilising industry knowledge was an important motivation to engage in alumni activities, as well as opportunities to promote Commonwealth Scholarships. It was felt that showcasing alumni expertise in national development priorities would encourage applicants in these important areas and increase connections between alumni and national nominating agencies and home country governments. This would provide a proactive role for alumni to share the CSC's vision and mission at their national and community level.

Engagement barriers and challenges

Thinking about barriers to motivation and engagement, participants shared that a lack of vision and mission for home country engagement, where available, was demotivating. Participants

representing countries with small alumni populations felt this on multiple levels, explaining that the impact of no/few new scholars each year was stagnating the growth of their CSC community, making it increasingly harder to identify a shared purpose for engagement.

Participants also noted that alumni face many personal and professional demands on their time and that in some countries they were receiving multiple asks which felt overwhelming. Whilst opportunities to engage with BHCs and other scholarship alumni were appreciated, some participants shared experiences of being a very small group compared to other programmes, which detracted from the opportunity and promoting the CSC's national community.

Commenting on global level CSC engagement, the range of activities was appreciated by many, however the delivery of some activities was cited as demotivating. In particular, the timing of the monthly Development in Action webinar series. The times for the webinars are often UK and West, East and Southern Africa focused, limiting opportunities for alumni in other regions. Moving the timings was one suggestion, as well as supporting regional and country alumni associations to deliver local versions of the series.

For many participants, engaging in globally delivered CSC activities was either not possible due to their time zone or the activities did not appeal/meet their motivations for engagement. It was felt, however, that the CSC's continued engagement through communications and sharing opportunities and outcomes was important and satisfied desires to know what was going on. It was noted that more tailored engagement was needed to supplement this and sustain interest longer-term.

New engagement opportunities

Asked for suggestions on new opportunities to engage alumni in their countries and regions, in addition to modifications to existing events already shared in this report, participants made the following suggestions:

- Annual dinners for select groups of alumni to connect in smaller settings, or hosted by BHCs
- More BHC engagement opportunities, including opportunities to share expertise and support diplomatic work
- Building Commonwealth connections with Commonwealth accredited organisations and through Commonwealth-led events
- Creating CSC-led researcher communities, with an emphasis on research and development action/application of research
- More responsive event topics, for example resilience in an age of aid cuts, preparing for challenging and competitive job markets
- Events and activities with Split-site home institutions

Participants also felt that utilising the CSC's connection to other organisations and stakeholders, such as BHCs, the Commonwealth and Split-site home institutions, could boost engagement and support in-country opportunities, particularly where alumni associations may experience challenges in engaging.

Using alumni data to create tailored activities and events was suggested during one FGD, with participants advising using employment and location data to identify professional interests and

themes. As well as potentially offering relevant engagement opportunities, this could also drive demand for engagement longer-term.

Caribbean region only FGD findings

6 alumni attended a FGD to discuss low alumni engagement in the Caribbean. Participants represented Jamaica only, however participants from more countries in the region had registered to attend and were represented in the other FGDs on this topic.

Feedback and responses have been collated under the following headings: Motivations for attending events; Other alumni networks and their importance; Connection to the CSC brand and visibility; Accessibility of opportunities; and New engagement opportunities.

Before discussion formally opened, participants were asked to share their motivations for joining the meeting. In their responses, there was a general eagerness amongst participants to use this as an opportunity to learn from the insights and experiences of fellow alumni and connect across the region, support the development of future alumni engagement, and advocate for a structured approach to boost alumni engagement in the region.

Motivations for attending events

Participants were asked to share their motivations for attending in person and online events. These did not have to be CSC or alumni-related events.

Key motivations for attending events included:

- Professional networking
- Social networking
- Learning about the work of and learning from others
- Celebrating successes
- Contributing to and feeling immersed in the knowledge economy
- Opportunities to connect across disciplines

Commenting on the feelings associated with attending events, participants noted that attending events provided an opportunity to feel motivated and energised in their work and life by meeting with other passionate people. Another shared that meeting with diverse people from different backgrounds and areas of work was a motivation not only to attend an event but to stay for a longer time.

Events as an opportunity for knowledge exchange was a popular motivation for all participants. There was strong consensus that this was something unique to the CSC alumni network and should be better supported through increased events and opportunities across the region. It was generally felt that CSC events could act as a platform or hub for alumni to unite in their goals as sustainable development leaders and work together to propose innovative solutions to pressing challenges.

In the context of CSC events and alumni engagement, participants also noted the importance of events in providing support pre- and post-scholarship, such as through pre-departure events

and those held for returning scholars. These types of events would help both new scholars and keep alumni connected to the CSC. It was noted that these events would also help to build a sense of scholarship community at the country and regional level.

Altruism was an important theme in many of the comments shared. Alumni coming together to use their skills and knowledge to contribute to development challenges and through community engagement was important to all participants. This supported both structured events and activities with a clear theme and purpose, as well as more celebratory and semi-formal events for alumni to bond and connect.

It was generally felt that whilst online engagement was important to connect those out of country or in different countries, as well as at a regional level, at the country level, in-person events were most valued.

Other alumni networks and their importance

Participants were asked to share their experiences engaging in other alumni networks and their importance on a personal and professional level. It was noted that in the Caribbean region, high school networks were significant. Reasons for this included:

- The role of high school in developing and fostering lifelong friendships
- Personal development during the high school period
- Active encouragement of high school networks in the region
- School pride
- Use of sport, seasonal and low-key events throughout the year to keep alumni engaged and interested

Participants shared the excitement and pride they associated with their high school networks and the opportunities provided to connect in a myriad of different ways, from attending sporting events, connecting with their class cohorts, supporting the next generation of graduates, and the offering of regular programmes and projects, which were typically community focused and values led.

Examples of activities delivered through high school networks included beach cleans and fish fry. These addressed both community needs, local values and were low-key and easy to attend.

All participants reiterated the importance of school pride and brand in their motivations to stay connected through their high school alumni network which prompted further discussion on this topic.

Connection to the CSC brand and visibility

Participants shared that the CSC brand and identity in the Caribbean was not visible across the region, with little to no digital presence. Without this, participants shared it was hard to feel connected to the CSC and their scholarship and that there was a community for them on completion of their scholarship.

It was felt that more needed to be done to improve the unique selling point of Commonwealth Scholarships in the region and that developing opportunities for scholars and alumni to promote their achievements through events and storytelling would be an important focus of this. This would also help communicate the prestige of the scholarship for the CSC and alumni.

Pre-departure briefings and welcome home events were noted as key contact points for scholars and alumni, as well as opportunities for scholarship promotion and visibility and more could be done to offer and capitalise on these events.

Accessibility of opportunities

Thinking about the role of alumni in driving their local CSC community and engagement, it was noted that alumni engagement had improved over the last 10 years, with more opportunities available than ever before. It was suggested that employing better communication methods to list these opportunities would be helpful and make them more accessible, which may increase engagement and uptake.

Activities that would enhance the visibility of the work Commonwealth Alumni are involved in, as well as their achievements, would be valuable in boosting alumni engagement within and outside of the CSC community.

To address low regional engagement, it was suggested that some of the global alumni opportunities could be downscaled to the regional level, with more targeted delivery. This may also support new scholars to access opportunities, alongside better promotion of existing opportunities.

New engagement opportunities

To close the FGD, participants were asked to share 'just one thing' they felt could boost engagement in their region. Suggestions are listed below:

- Regional conference
- Regional competitive grant to deliver a project- regions compete for funding for a bottom-up project to be delivered
- Semi-structured meet-ups- cohort, UK university, country meet-ups
- Annual Commonwealth Day event
- Repository of dissertation topics
- Regular and sustained schedule of events and activities

Summary

Across the four FGDs, participants shared similar challenges and barriers to engagement and proposed options to address these.

Connecting as smaller national alumni associations was challenging and exacerbated where the number of scholarships awarded is not increasing. Running alumni associations in this context

is difficult and unappealing for some alumni volunteers, however with more support and resourcing, these groups could have a greater role in engaging alumni.

Mission, vision and values were fundamental to improving engagement. Reviewing the existing events offer to be mission and values driven and deliver more varied events was felt to be important in boosting engagement. Exploring national and regional engagement opportunities would help diversify engagement, alongside time sensitive programming. It was also raised that tailored communications would develop a shared CSC identity in these regions, as well as make it easier for alumni to know what was available.

CSC stakeholders could also play a critical role in improving engagement by inviting alumni to events and opportunities where alumni associations do not exist.

Next steps

Based on the feedback gathered the CSC Secretariat will:

- Continue to improve resources and support for CSC Alumni Associations to develop more active and engaged networks, with priority for associations in low engaged regions
- Explore the development of regional events programming, taking into considering time zones and topical priorities for different regions
- Continue to work with BHCs to identify opportunities for tailored Commonwealth Alumni engagement, as well as delivery of key scholar events, pre-departure briefings and welcome home events
- Review mailings and communications plans to identify ways to tailor content for regions and better communicate opportunities for alumni
- Discuss brand visibility and marketing, as part of wider developments to the CSC's marketing and communications strategy