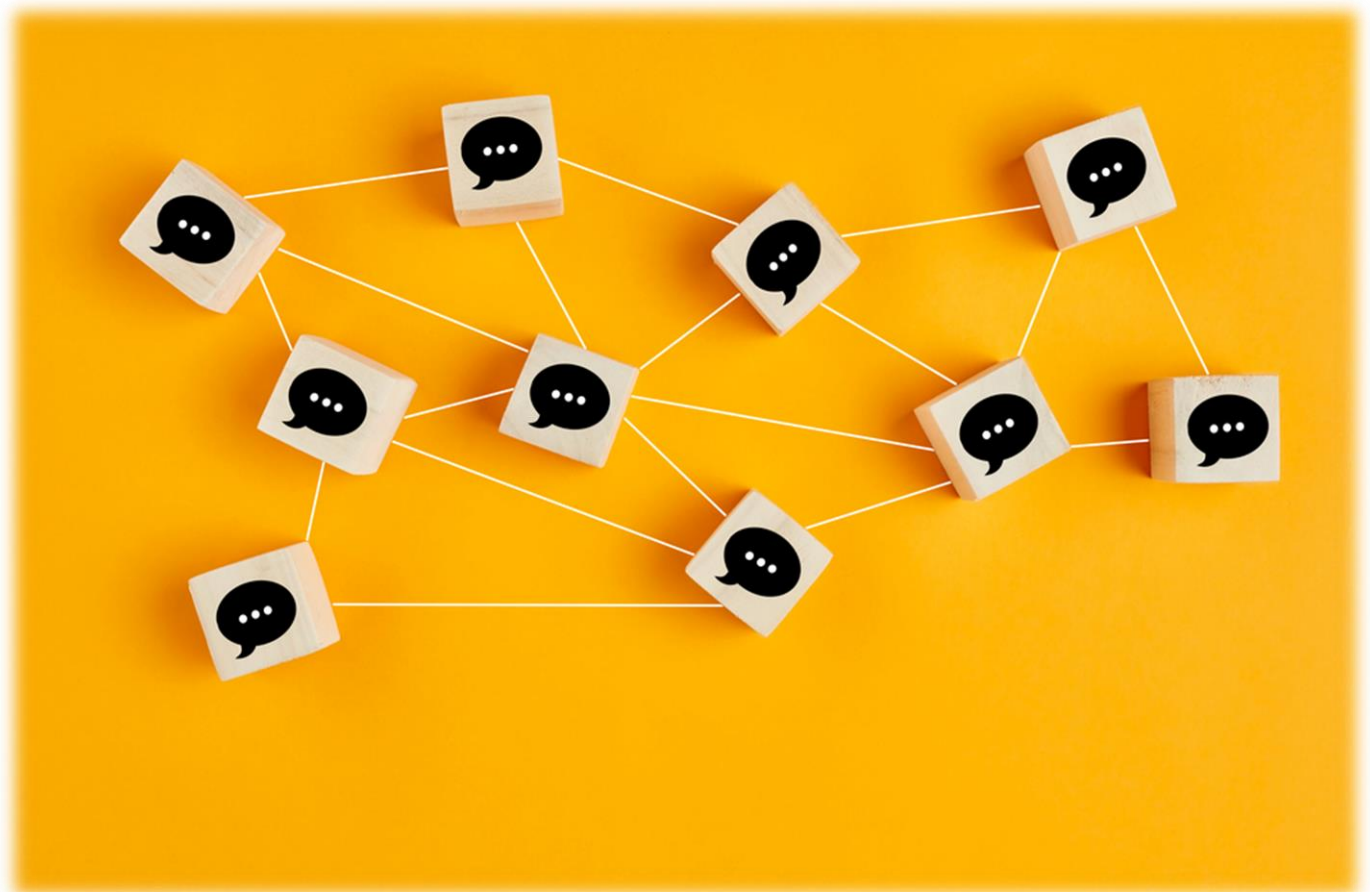




COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Networks and Communities- 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 opportunities for collaboration, field and sector specific networking and fostering connections with CSC stakeholders, partners and Commonwealth organisations would be valuable.

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

Methodology

Panel members were invited to attend two FGDs on the topic of 'Networks and Communities' and share their thoughts and insights.

As part of the consultation, a briefing was prepared on existing CSC networks and communities and feedback gathered from the panel and wider alumni on potential new networks and communities that could be developed in the next strategy.

Results

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

49 alumni attended the FGDs and represented 18 countries.

Feedback and responses have been collated under the following headings: Motivations for joining a network and/or community; Types of training and events; CSC unique selling point of networks and communities; Measuring the success and value of networks and communities; and Brand and visibility.

Motivations for joining a network and/or community

Participants were asked to share their motivations for joining a network and/or community.

Key motivations included:

- Professional networking
- Access to grants and funding
- Knowledge sharing/exchange
- Sharing cultures and beliefs
- Staying updated with industry knowledge, developments and insights
- Access to a professional community and potential collaborators
- Multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary research and opportunities
- Training and professional development opportunities
- Staying connected with people on a similar trajectory or journey

Access to a network for ongoing professional development and knowledge exchange was a key motivator for most participants. For some, this meant being part of multiple networks to access different types of training and connections.

Alongside events and training opportunities, participants also cited access to information and industry knowledge provided through network social media channels and digital content. It was also felt that networks were an important way to build connections not only for collaboration but to support future generations through knowledge sharing and mentoring.

Other motivations included the overall mission and vision of networks and how this connected to participant's own values and needs, as well as how well the network delivered to this shared

vision. Networks and communities which stayed true to these were felt to be more valuable and reliable and were rewarded with participant engagement.

Types of training and events

Building on comments in the previous section, participants were asked to provide further details on the types of training and events they attended through their networks and communities and the advantages of these.

Events and training participants had attended included:

- Topical webinars
- Capacity building opportunities
- Conferences
- Communities of practice within networks
- Fellowships and other funded opportunities
- Grant writing
- Resource libraries

Lifelong learning was an important motivation for joining and staying engaged in a network and/or community. Alongside webinars, conferences and fellowships/funding opportunities, training which enabled participants to build new skills and knowledge outside of their workplaces and develop in-demand transferrable skills were highly valued.

Being a member of prestigious networks and communities was an important motivator to join and stay connected as it boosted individual's visibility and recognition. One participant noted that by alumni being part of these prestigious networks, they were also raising the profile and prestige of the CSC by affiliation. This was seen as a way for alumni to give back to the CSC.

In the context of the CSC's alumni engagement offer, it was felt that lifelong learning and professional development opportunities designed to help alumni stay updated with global trends and policy and connect them with experts and global thought leaders would be valuable.

CSC unique selling point in networks and communities

It was noted that the CSC provided an active network, offering more opportunities and meetings than other networks participants were members of. It was felt, however, that these opportunities could be better communicated to help alumni know what was available and to increase uptake.

Participants also felt the diversity of the CSC's network was a unique selling point as it could harness skills and knowledge across and for a large audience. One participant shared that in the face of increasing global fragmentation, the CSC was positioned to address issues of a post-globalising world across all disciplines. Another participant shared that staying connected with the CSC was important for their professional and academic credibility.

Knowledge generation

Participants agreed that the CSC was in a unique position to support individuals to contribute to national development and global sustainable development goals through its network.

Learning and development opportunities for scholars was highlighted as important in supporting them to achieve post-scholarship development impact. Building a comprehensive programme at the scholar stage would contribute to the alumni experience and promote ongoing affiliation with the CSC. This could be facilitated through thematic and field related networks offering opportunities for professional development. This included promoting interdisciplinary research and networking.

Participants stressed that the CSC manages a database of researchers and collaborators but this is not accessible to alumni and scholars. Introducing ways of connecting alumni and scholars through active and purpose-driven networks and communities would provide platforms for developing independent connections and encourage greater engagement.

It was also felt that the CSC could improve how alumni contribute to national and global knowledge generation. Ideas included building more links between alumni and universities in their home countries to share their skills and knowledge and to support potential scholarship applicants.

Participants noted that the CSC's connections to the UK and national governments and Commonwealth Secretariat could be better leveraged to offer unique opportunities. Participants would value more access to leaders and policy makers through the CSC's positioning. This included opportunities to participate in roundtable discussions, channels to disseminate alumni research and online workshops with UK stakeholders. Facilitating links to other networks and organisations would also be an important opportunity for alumni and a motivator for staying engaged in the CSC's alumni network.

Mentoring

Participants shared that the CSC offered valuable opportunities for connection at the individual level through the CSC Mentoring Programme, however this programme could be improved and expanded to different groups.

Suggestions included greater emphasis on mentoring researchers on the real-world application of research, which was an important way for alumni to support the CSC's overall goals. Expanding mentoring to include alumni-to-community mentoring was felt as potentially valuable, such as supporting potential applicants and driving community change. This type of mentoring would also improve the brand visibility and local recognition of CSC.

Intergenerational networking

Thinking about mentoring and promoting inclusivity across the CSC's networks and communities, participants were asked to share their thoughts on intergenerational networking.

It was generally felt to be important to integrate across generations and that existing activities such as the CSC Mentoring Programme, Pre-Departure Briefings and Welcome Home Events contributed to this.

Factors critical to intergenerational networking included:

- Growing the CSC's global and national networks
- Supporting the accumulation of wealth and knowledge by learning from others
- Promoting different perspectives and lived experiences
- Acquiring new skills and knowledge based on generational strengths/trends (for example digital skills)
- Providing continuous opportunities, regardless of age and experience level

It was also felt that intergenerational networking provided a valuable dynamic for learning. In particular, new alumni learning from the lived experiences of previous alumni to support their career development and in understanding how to apply their studies to achieve development impact.

Events and activities

Participants were asked to share suggestions on events and activities that could be unique to the CSC and offered through its network.

Suggestions included:

- Annual prestigious event
- Notable alumnus lecture
- Social events
- Global meetings/conferences
- Events geared at capacity strengthening and development impact
- Scholarship promotion and ambassadorial/role modelling events
- Events addressing locally important topics
- Regional conferences

Online vs in-person delivery

Asked about preferences for in-person and online events and activities, participants felt that alumni were missing important in-person connections. It was shared that where these were offered, they were often sporadic which was disengaging and disappointing. Utilising in-country alumni groups was proposed as a keyway for the CSC to address this whilst strengthening these groups.

Thinking about the CSC community, one participant described it as a global village, with many participants reflecting on the size and global scale of the CSC's network.

Despite the feeling that in-person events and opportunities carry more value and are more conducive to connecting with others, participants shared that online and hybrid events were appropriate in connecting alumni across the world and promoting the CSC's diverse community. These could be advantageous to attendees in enabling them to connect with people they would otherwise not meet. It was noted that hybrid events had not been explored in the CSC's delivery and this could be a new opportunity.

Measuring the success and value of networks and communities

It is not enough to create networks and communities. They must both attract and continually engage their members and provide value. As such, participants were asked to share what kept them engaged in networks and communities and what was valuable to them as members.

Key indicators of a successful network and/or community included:

- Feeling part of a wider community and the opportunities that may come with that
- Meaningful connections between members (for example, collaboration)
- Human centric opportunities and environment
- Access to funding
- Access to resources and information
- Delivery of opportunities that enable new learning/knowledge and sharing of skills
- Diversity of members
- Those that seek and incorporate member values, needs and wants to support growth
- Clear and consistent delivery to the vision and mission of the network and therefore its members

Participants noted that it was important to be part of an externally recognised and known to be successful network. This helped with the prestige of affiliation but also in sustaining engagement. Some shared that the CSC's network was overshadowed in their country by other scholarship programmes and that more could be done to boost CSC presence.

Participants stressed that events and activities were important offerings of networks and communities, however engagement must be more than surface-level. Engagement must be outcome driven and ensure value.

Brand and visibility

Participants were asked to reflect on the brand visibility of the CSC as a network and community.

It was felt that there were challenges to driving and convincing alumni they were part of the network due to low visibility of the CSC brand. Alumni were keen to support this improvement with the necessary tools. This included access to branding materials, key information and lines about the CSC to disseminate in their networks, greater social media presence to re-share content, and good news stories.

One participant stressed that alumni can choose if they affiliate with the CSC and therefore the CSC needs to earn this space.

Summary

Both FGDs clearly articulated the motivations to join networks and communities and participant expectations. Meaningful and value driven activities were important factors in sustaining

engagement and membership, as well as supporting connections and lifelong professional and personal development. Supporting intergenerational networking was cited as an important offer within the CSC's network, with some activities already embracing this.

Given the number of networks and communities participants may join over their lifetime, it was emphasised that the CSC needs to embrace its unique position to offer opportunities not otherwise available. This would enhance engagement and build the prestige of the network to alumni. Suggestions included more large-scale events, events which celebrated members of the CSC's network and professional skills training for development impact.

Improving the visibility of CSC opportunities and outputs was raised. Some participants shared that they wanted to be part of successful and prestigious networks and greater visibility of the CSC's network would support this.

Next steps

Based on the feedback gathered, the CSC Secretariat will:

- Review the existing events programme, in liaison with CSC Alumni Associations and external partners, to identify ways of delivering more consistent and engaging opportunities for alumni
- Explore opportunities to deliver more globally engaging event opportunities, such as regional lectures or symposia, conferences, and prestigious touchpoints
- Identify mechanisms to more effectively connect alumni across fields and areas of research, including promoting real-world contributions and achievements of scholars and alumni
- Investigate opportunities to work with CSC partners and stakeholders to deliver more bespoke events and engagements, utilising alumni knowledge and expertise to contribute to policy discussions
- Review learning and development opportunities for scholars and alumni and ways of offering lifelong learning
- Discuss brand visibility and marketing, as part of wider developments to the CSC's marketing and communications strategy
- Update mailings to better communicate opportunities for alumni, as well as review the timing and reporting on events and activities