



COMMONWEALTH
SCHOLARSHIPS

Consultation and content development for new event series

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 118 members.

In 2019, the CSC Alumni and Evaluation Teams conducted two surveys to understand the reintegration experiences of recently returned Scholars, or 'new alumni'.

Survey responses highlighted key concerns and challenges experienced by both groups and suggestions on ways they could be better supported by CSC to tackle these. Based on feedback, the CSC Alumni Team developed activities to address the challenges new alumni may face during the initial return home period and in the immediate years following this.

In 2023/24, the CSC Alumni Team seeks to develop more accessible, creative, and interactive opportunities to communicate this information. The team proposes to deliver a fireside chat event series which aims to spotlight successful and senior alumni leaders and through an informal conversation learn more about the positives and challenges that have influenced their achievements and success, and identify important lessons and takeaways that new alumni can learn from.

Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel 2023-2025 were invited to consult on the proposed event series and topics to support the development of this area of work and a pilot project.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended qualitative questions. The questions were designed to gather feedback on the proposed event series concept note and support the development of the series content and identification of appropriate speakers and ensure the series delivers to its overall aims and objectives.

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

- Fireside chat series- concept note
- CSC Report on Scholar and Alumni Reintegration Experiences
- New alumni resources webpage

The task was open to all panel members. 72 completed the survey and submitted feedback, a response rate of 61%.

Results

Key findings from the panel are summarised below under the following headings: Content development; Delivery format; Existing and additional support.

Content development

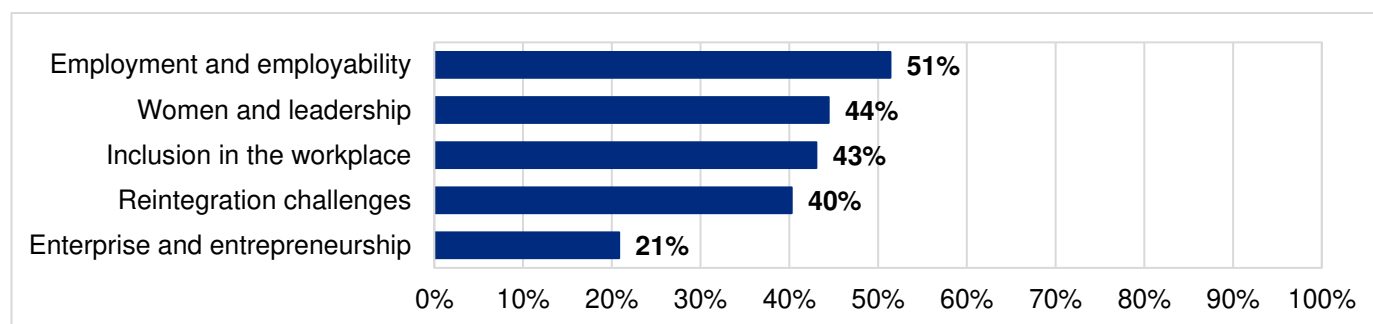
Five topic areas were initially identified for exploration as part of the proposed fireside chat event series, based on the responses to the 2019 reintegration surveys and data collected through other evaluation surveys and alumni engagement activities.

Respondents were asked to share personal experiences and insights on a maximum of three of the topic areas to support the development of session content. The topic areas were:

- Women and leadership
- Reintegration challenges
- Enterprise and entrepreneurship
- Employment and employability
- Inclusion in the workplace

Selections are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Topic areas selected to provide personal experience and insights



n=72

The following sections outline the feedback shared for each topic.

Employment and employability

Respondents were asked to share experiences following their Commonwealth Scholarship or Fellowship in seeking relevant employment.

Some respondents shared that they returned to previous roles as part of a contract/agreement with their employer for undertaking studies in the UK. Whilst respondents noted that this meant they did not have to worry about finding new employment, their return to the workplace was not always well received by colleagues and new opportunities based on increased skills were not forthcoming. Respondents also shared frustrations at returning to unchanged workplaces following their period away and exposure to new ways of working and skills.

'I felt overqualified for my job position. I also felt like people in higher positions were intimidated now that I have gained a higher qualification. Promotion did not come immediately for me.'

'It did take time to be considered for a position relevant to my training as my supervisors felt that my skills were transferrable hence useful in my current position.'

Mixed experiences were reported by those who had to seek new employment on their return home.

Some respondents reported proactively reaching out to employers at the point of completing their studies and seeking career guidance through UK university services. It was felt that this helped them to secure employment, or at least feel prepared for the task by gaining insight into recruitment trends.

'After completing my Commonwealth Scholarship, the pursuit of a research position in a developing nation was a journey filled with both challenges and prospects. The outset of this journey was defined by extensive networking and collaborative efforts. I actively connected with my alma mater, the local university where I pursued my undergraduate studies, establishing ties with key players in the industry. This

engagement provided valuable insights into the industry's expectations, enabling me to align my acquired expertise with the dynamic demands of the job market.'

'Following my Commonwealth Scholarship experience, my reintegration into the workforce was marked by positive changes. The international exposure and skills I gained during my scholarship significantly enhanced my employability. I found that employers were more attracted to my profile, recognising the value of a global perspective and the unique competencies I had developed. This led to more lucrative job opportunities and the chance to excel in competitive fields.'

Distance Learning respondents noted that they had a different employment reintegration experience to other scholars as they continued to work during their studies. It was noted, however, that maintaining existing and developing new home country networks was important during the study period, as well keeping work colleagues and managers informed of their studies. Respondents felt this open communication approach supported requests for advancement and promotion in the workplace.

Many respondents felt that their higher education qualification, international exposure, and new skills and knowledge would make them highly competitive in the job market, however a number reported that this did not positively impact their employability and instead struggled with long periods of unemployment and job seeking.

'While I was finalising my master's scholarship I had a lot of anxiety about getting a job on return home. This was because I had acquired relevant knowledge and skills that I highly believed would have made me extra competitive in the job market. However, upon my return home, finding a full-time job was a nightmare within the first 6 months despite making several job applications.'

'It was not easy seeking relevant employment after my Commonwealth Scholarship. However, being employable made all the difference. I had the skills, knowledge, abilities, and personal attributes that made me suitable for employment and be successful at it... I sought old friends and colleagues and with my skill set, both hard and soft, my agility and adaptability, it was a matter of time.'

Recommendations:

Based on these experiences, respondents shared important takeaways and advice that could be addressed in the event series and other materials to completing scholars. This includes seeking voluntary opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge whilst searching for employment, seeking networking opportunities to connect with sector leaders, and being realistic about the job market they will return to, and that immediate employment may be unlikely. Emphasis on preparing early for the return home period and seeking out job opportunities and/or understanding the job market is key advice to share as well.

‘Entering the job market is a transformative journey marked by challenges and opportunities. One should be prepared to embrace a continuous learning mindset. Academic achievements are valuable, but the real-world landscape demands adaptability and a willingness to learn beyond the classroom. Networking is crucial in this endeavour.’

Content should address:

- The importance of volunteer opportunities
- Skills development and continued learning
- Seeking relevant and new networks, maintaining existing networks
- Understanding the job market
- Coping with unemployment
- Preparing in advance for potential challenges

Women and leadership

Respondents were asked to share insight into the challenges or issues facing women accessing leadership positions, challenges or issues facing women in leadership positions, and their understanding and experiences of the ‘glass ceiling’ and ‘sticky floor’ in relation to women and leadership.

It is important to note that this section was open to all respondents. 81% of respondents identified as female, 16% as male, and 3% prefer not say.

Respondents were asked to outline in what ways their personal and professional experiences relate to the topic area. Respondents represented a breadth of roles and sectors in their employment, as well as personal experiences of being a woman leader, facing barriers to becoming a woman leader, and observing the challenges women face in leadership.

Respondents were scientists, gender equality experts, academics and researchers, female mentors and role models, managers and team/department leads, mothers, wives, partners, and carers. Many respondents also reported being the first women to achieve their workplace position in a senior and/or leadership role. They also represented a range of countries and regions, highlighting that their experiences and challenges regarding women in leadership are shared on a global scale.

‘In the world of science, people often assume that scientists from developing countries are male, not female. When you mention a female scientist, some may expect her to work less, focus on family, or pursue research as a hobby or for teaching purposes, often related to issues in developing countries. Throughout my journey, I've faced numerous changes, but the most disheartening challenge has been the constant discouragement from society. That's why I am constantly working to promote gender, ethnic and cultural diversity in STEM.’

‘I have worked for more than 10 years as a woman in leadership positions. The major problems I have encountered as a woman leader who is also a wife is balancing professional responsibilities with family and personal commitments, [which] can be a significant challenge for women in leadership roles. Striking a balance between work and personal life is crucial for overall well-being. Second is gender bias. I encountered biases and stereotypes that affected my opportunities for leadership positions. Gender bias can influence hiring decisions, performance evaluations, and perceptions of leadership capabilities.’

‘As the Head [of a large national organisation] my role is pivotal in shaping the landscape of women in leadership. In a traditionally male-dominated industry, my position serves as a beacon of inspiration for aspiring female leaders. My experience challenges stereotypes and reinforces the idea that gender is not a barrier to success in the financial sector. By steering the strategic direction of the organisation, I contribute to a more inclusive and diverse corporate culture. This does not only benefit the organisation's performance but also serves as a model for other organisations. Moreover, my achievements highlight the importance of gender diversity at the decision-making level.’

Respondents were asked to highlight what they felt were the most common challenges or issues facing women in accessing leadership positions.

A range of challenges were identified and have been summarised as follows: lack of leadership and training opportunities to acquire leadership skills; insufficient opportunities to progress or unequal opportunities for advancement; gender bias and stereotypes in the workplace and society more generally, including family expectations; lack of female leader role models; difficulties balancing work/life; inadequate social services, such as childcare; ‘motherhood penalty’, including perceptions of working women based on maternity leave and childcare commitments; lack of female mentorship; imposter syndrome; lack of confidence and self-assurance; expectation to take on ‘social’ or ‘caring’ roles in the workplace rather than leadership roles; gender pay gap; biased and/or inadequate recruitment policies; glass ceiling; and inflexible working culture.

‘Women continue to face several common challenges and issues when accessing leadership positions. Preconceived notions about women's capabilities and leadership styles can unfairly impact their career progression. The absence of female role models in leadership positions can discourage women from aspiring to leadership roles. Seeing few women in top positions can make it difficult to envision themselves in similar roles. Implicit biases, which often operate unconsciously, can influence hiring and promotion decisions. These biases may disadvantage women by favouring male candidates.’

‘Balancing family responsibilities with professional obligations is a significant challenge for many women. Lack of support from colleagues, superiors, or organisational policies can hinder women's progression. Organisations need to implement supportive policies such as mentorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and equal opportunities for skill

development. Women may be held to different standards than their male counterparts, facing scrutiny or criticism that is not applied equally. This can create a challenging environment for women aspiring to leadership positions.'

'Traditional gender roles and societal expectations disproportionately burden women, while implicit biases influence decision-making processes. Inflexible work environments, persistent gender pay gaps, and limited networking opportunities can also hinder women's leadership journey. Addressing these challenges requires efforts from individuals, organisations, and societies to promote gender equity, challenge stereotypes, and foster environments that support women's leadership potential. Breaking these barriers is not just a women's issue; it is a crucial step towards building more equitable and thriving workplaces.'

The challenges shared are vast and many are ingrained in workplace culture and societal expectations and stereotypes of women. Many of the challenges raised by respondents were shared across the group, with several drawing on personal experiences and observations.

To delve deeper into challenges affecting women and leadership, respondents were asked what they felt were the most common challenges or issues facing women in leadership positions.

Responses reflected some of the challenges already identified, such as the impact of limited opportunities for advancement and lack of mentoring and female leader role models, as well as limited co-worker and family support, managing work/life balance, and cultural and societal expectations.

New challenges shared by respondents spoke more directly to the pressures and biases women face once in leadership positions and the impact of these. The challenges have been summarised as follows: tokenistic hiring; perception of women leaders; overshadowing or dismissing women leader contributions and suggestions; gender bias; micro-aggressions and harassment; being undermined by male colleagues at all levels; unequal pay; accusations of flirting and inappropriate behaviour in order to achieve; lack of women in leadership networks; and hostile work environments.

'Although some of the challenges are similar to those faced by women accessing leadership positions, some of the challenges are unique to those already in leadership positions. Women often encounter stereotypes and biases related to leadership roles. Preconceived notions about leadership styles and capabilities based on gender can hinder opportunities for women to advance in their careers. Despite progress, a glass ceiling still exists in many organisations, limiting the advancement of women to the highest leadership positions. Limited representation of women in leadership positions can contribute to a lack of role models and mentors, making it harder for aspiring female leaders to envision and pursue their career paths.'

'The scarcity of women in senior leadership positions creates a sense of isolation and can make it challenging for women to find mentors, role models, or a supportive professional network. Persistent gender stereotypes and biases can influence perceptions of leadership

qualities. Women in leadership may face biases that challenge their competence, confidence, and decision-making abilities. Women may encounter expectations regarding their leadership style, with stereotypes suggesting that they should be more nurturing or collaborative. Sometimes, women who deviate from a nurturing style may be called names such as iron lady which can be demotivating to the woman leader.'

'Women in leadership face numerous challenges, including gender bias, stereotypes, and the glass ceiling. These barriers hinder women's ascent to top executive roles, despite their qualifications and capabilities. Unequal pay and compensation also contribute to these issues. Double standards and unrealistic expectations create a stressful environment for women leaders. The scarcity of female mentors and role models further complicates matters. Overcoming cultural norms and resistance to gender-inclusive practices further complicates the journey for women in leadership. Addressing these challenges requires a collective commitment from organisations, policymakers, and society to dismantle biases, foster inclusivity, and create environments where women can lead with equity and excellence.'

Reflecting on the challenges facing and experienced by women in leadership positions, respondents were clear that collective action, networks, and mentors were critical to overcoming these and implementing change.

The phrases the 'glass ceiling' and the 'sticky floor' are often associated with women's experiences in the workplace and in advancing to leadership or other senior positions. To understand the prevalence of these within the workplace and country contexts of respondents, they were asked to share their experiences and understanding of these issues.

Speaking to the issue of the 'glass ceiling', respondents summarised this as an invisible but pervasive barrier that may be both actively and unconsciously used to prevent women accessing leadership positions. In many cases, respondents shared observing women passed over for promotion in favour of male counterparts and unable to progress due to a lack of mentorship, training and networks to support skills development and career advancement. Respondents reiterated the challenges of gender bias, poor workplace culture, unequal pay, and poor recruitment practices as significant factors in encountering and understanding the 'glass ceiling'.

'The glass ceiling refers to invisible barriers that limits a group's (in this case women) abilities to rise beyond a certain level, and in my opinion, this could exist in two ways - 'perceived' and 'actual'. The 'perceived' glass ceiling exists when women place limitations or undermine their abilities in accessing leadership positions. I have had to work on this personally, especially in my professional life, when I read Sheryl Sandberg's book Lean In, where she pointed out that women may have about 80% of the skills and knowledge needed for a job, but will feel inadequate and not apply, whereas a man who has 20% will feel qualified enough to apply. This was a game-changer for me not to place limitations on myself and assure myself that the worse answer to my application will be a 'no', and that does not also mean I am not good

enough. On the other hand, the 'actual' glass ceiling can be systemic and structural, where, for example, a job advertisement will very subtly communicate 'we're looking for an unmarried, with no children, young man' because of the requirements of the job. In such instances, the glass ceiling, although invisible, can become quite apparent if you read in between the lines.'

'To remove such biases, it is important to work at the policy level as well as among the staff in an institution. For instance, gender representative recruitment panels are currently in the policy where I work, and during the recruitment process we have removed any discriminatory questions or other such statements. These were not in place before I joined this position and I ensure that we adhere to these equality principles. Likewise, it is very important to build confidence among staff that the preventive mechanisms in the workplace are actually functional and that if a staff member has any grievances relating to sexual harassment or abuse, they can report without fear or retaliation.'

'In my professional experience, I have observed the impact of inclusive policies on breaking the glass ceiling. Companies that actively promote diversity and equity, offering equal opportunities for career advancement, tend to have a more diverse leadership team. Mentorship and sponsorship programs play a crucial role in my observations. Women who have access to mentors and sponsors are often better equipped to navigate the challenges associated with the glass ceiling, receiving guidance and advocacy as they progress in their careers. Leadership development programs that focus on identifying and nurturing talent without gender bias have proven effective. These programs create a pipeline for women to ascend the corporate ladder, challenging the limitations imposed by the glass ceiling.'

Speaking to the issue of the 'sticky floor', respondents summarised this as women getting stuck in entry and mid-level positions, with limited opportunities for advancement and limited training and development for career progression. Respondents again cited the importance of networks and mentorship to support women in career progression, particularly where workplaces may provide limited opportunities, or overlook women seeking advancement. Self-doubt and family responsibilities were also cited as factors contributing to the 'sticky floor'.

'In my professional journey, I have encountered numerous instances of the 'sticky floor' phenomenon. It often manifests as women getting 'stuck' in lower-level or mid-level positions within organisations, unable to move upward. Despite their qualifications, skills, and contributions, they seem to face a persistent barrier that hinders their career progression. To address the 'sticky floor' issue, it's essential to recognise that it's not solely a matter of individual choices or abilities. It is a systemic problem influenced by organisational culture, gender biases, and societal expectations.'

'The concept of the 'sticky floor' refers to the idea that women, especially in the early stages of their careers, may encounter barriers that prevent them from advancing to higher positions. In my professional experience, I have noticed that organisations investing in talent

development programs can effectively address the sticky floor. These programs provide early-career women with the skills, mentorship, and exposure needed to propel them beyond entry-level positions. I have also seen that women benefit when organisations provide options for career growth that accommodate diverse life stages. This flexibility can prevent the 'stickiness' that often occurs at certain career junctures. In addition, in organisations where inclusive leadership training is prioritised, I have observed a positive shift in breaking through the sticky floor. When leaders understand and actively address biases in early career stages, it creates a more supportive environment for women to advance.'

Asked to share further comments on this topic, respondents highlighted the importance of male allyship in the workplace, raising awareness of the challenges women face and policies that could support their progression, promoting different leadership styles regardless of gender, and the need to tackle systemic problems that prevent women from accessing and performing in leadership positions.

Recommendations:

Respondent feedback highlights the crucial importance of discussing challenges facing women in leadership and of advocacy, networks, and mentorship. Feedback also raised the different types of experiences women may face depending on their family situation, support networks, and workplace. As such, it is apparent that more than one fireside chat may be required to adequately discuss these specific challenges and experiences at different life-stages. There is also value in highlighting the importance of support systems and male allyship, which could form a separate session.

Content should address:

- The importance of networks, mentorship and building a support system
- Discussion of key challenges facing women accessing and in leadership positions
- Strategies to build leadership skills and key soft skills
- Building confidence and tackling imposter syndrome
- Advocating for an inclusive and flexible work environment and policies
- What you can do as a woman leader
- What you can do as a male leader and ally

More broadly, respondents consistently highlighted the lack of women in leadership networks and mentorship. Whilst not in the scope of the proposed event series and reintegration support, developing such a network or programme through the CSC's Alumni Network will be noted for consideration as a potential future activity.

Inclusion in the workplace

Respondents were asked to share their insight into challenges in creating an inclusive workplace and advocating for inclusive opportunities.

Aspects of inclusion shared by respondents included female representation, disability, socio-cultural background, and race. Asked about their experiences of inclusion, many respondents cited advocating or leading on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training and policies, managing and working in diverse teams, and experiences of workplace bias.

Asked what they felt were the most common challenges in creating an inclusive workplace, respondents highlighted unconscious bias, inadequate and discriminatory recruitment practices, lack of or ineffective EDI policies, lack of diversity at all leadership and managerial levels, restrictive cultural and religious norms, and lack of awareness of inclusive practices.

'Generally, we think that equality ensures inclusion, which is not the case. Inclusion in the workplace actually means that employees from all genders, backgrounds, and beliefs are treated so as to address their specific challenges and enable them to perform at their full capacity. This means that not all employees may be facing the same kind of issues, and hence, they can't be dealt with in the same manner. It is not like one-size-fits-all. The acknowledgement of this aspect is commonly overlooked and may present as a challenge in the creation of an inclusive workplace in the true sense.'

Addressing a lack of diversity and inclusive practice is not always easy, particularly where there is little or limited support from leadership and a lack of awareness more generally. In advocating for change to address inclusion in the workplace, respondents shared the importance of networks and safe spaces to raise concerns and/or ideas, seeking mentorship, and sharing feedback on existing EDI practices to help workplaces develop policies.

'Advocating for inclusive opportunities involves championing diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. Encourage diverse hiring practices, mentorship programs, and training on unconscious biases. Emphasise the business benefits of inclusivity, like enhanced creativity and better decision-making. It's not just a moral imperative; it's a strategic advantage for any organisation.'

'Many of the people who lead the EDI team ironically do not belong to the underrepresented group and the EDI team lacks enough representation. More representation and leadership by a person who comes from an underrepresented group, or someone who does not belong to any of the underrepresented groups but clearly understands and acknowledges his position, is crucial for an inclusive environment.'

Recommendations:

Respondent feedback and comments highlighted inclusion in the workplace was an important topic and that significant change is still required in this area. However, it is unclear how this could be translated into a practical session for departing scholars beyond understanding the importance of advocacy. Many respondents were not in a position to directly influence effective workplace change, although were aware of and involved in more informal activities.

As such, this topic area will be held from the pilot of the event series until more defined content and terms can be developed that will provide practical guidance. This may include a webinar or other event with an alumnus advocate discussing their experiences of championing inclusive practices in the workplace.

Reintegration challenges

Reintegration refers to the experiences of recently returned scholars acclimatising into their home and work environment, or new employment, following their time in the UK. Respondents were asked to share their personal experiences of reintegrating to home/work life following their Commonwealth Scholarship or Fellowship, or other periods of work and/or study abroad.

Many of the responses could be considered under other topic areas identified for the event series.

Challenges experienced have been summarised as follows: returning to the workplace; reintegrating with colleagues; re-learning skills; reverse culture shock; meeting high and/or unrealistic expectations; and returning to family life and responsibilities. A couple of PhD respondents also cited financial difficulties with having taken 3 years off from paid employment, and/or supporting family during and post-studies.

‘Re-learning some skills, change in leadership and rankings, then aligning new skills, knowledge and new perspective in public health was very challenging. My working environment was not so welcoming with this new perspective, knowledge and skills set and difficulty adapting academic ideas to real context situations.’

‘From my personal experience, re-integrating into my work was slightly smoother because of the positive expectation and trust from my employers who believed that I had acquired greater skills and abilities, thus would be more efficient at work. However, from time to time, I was confronted by the ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon where I usually received complex tasks even when it was obvious that I would not deliver due to either lack of resources or some other reasons.’

‘During my studies I lived apart from my family (spouse and children). Returning back to a life of daily providing emotional and physical support to the family made me aware of how much being away had drained me. Living alone, the demands of a PhD, constantly worrying about the family but digging deep to not buckle under the pressure of feeling guilty as a mother, had drained me and it affected my reintegration.’

Asked what they felt were the most common challenges or issues that may be encountered during the reintegration period, popular responses included: communicating new ideas in the workplace; applying new skills; feeling overqualified; adjusting to a different work culture; returning to cultural norms and practices that no longer feel the same; resistance to change from colleagues and family members; maintaining UK networks and wider contacts; seeking new and relevant employment; and adjusting to family life.

Building resilience is an important factor in managing the reintegration period. Respondents were asked to share guidance and suggestions on ways to build resilience to manage certain challenges. Advice shared focused on managing expectations of the return period and being prepared that not all change will be positive or expected, volunteering during periods of unemployment to stay motivated and make connections, creating a support network, and sharing challenges and difficulties with others.

‘It’s important to develop a support system, connecting with friends, family and fellow scholars who understand your experiences. Having a supportive network provides emotional validation and practical advice, fostering resilience... Acknowledging that reintegration is a gradual process with ups and downs so setting realistic goals and being patient with yourself is very important.’

‘In the face of reverse culture shock, acknowledging the emotional impact and seeking support from a network of fellow returnees or mentors can provide a crucial anchor. Embracing the changes, both societal and personal, and reframing them as opportunities for growth fosters adaptability. For the prolonged job search challenge, resilience is cultivated by viewing setbacks as stepping stones rather than roadblocks. Maintaining a proactive stance in upskilling, networking, and seeking guidance from career advisors ensures continuous progress, even in the face of adversity.’

Recommendations:

In acknowledging the importance and challenges posed by the reintegration period, a few respondents felt that greater emphasis could be placed on this period by the CSC in advance of scholars returning home.

‘A major challenge during the reintegration period is lack of fore knowledge. When you go to the UK, you are given information about what to expect, culture shock etc., but on return to home country, no one prepares you for the reintegration process.’

‘In addressing the challenges in securing employment, I believe that scholars should be encouraged to begin working on this even before they leave. In their scholarship essays, they write about the impact and sometimes they have to indicate which organisations they plan to work with in return to make the impact that they indicate in their essays. I think that the CSC, together with the local alumni associations, should begin to link scholars and their research to these potential institutions even before they depart for their study abroad.’

‘It was challenging reintegrating into home life following my Commonwealth scholarship. The main thing that helped was to plan ahead and not wait till I got home before thinking of what I was going to do. I had a few plans several months before my scholarship ended.’

Feedback suggests that delivering the event series a few months before scholars return home would increase its value and enable scholars to use the remaining time on award to prepare for the return home period.

As previously noted, several responses given in this section could be applied to developing content for other topic areas. However, guidance related to planning ahead, understanding the different challenges scholars may encounter in relation to reintegration, and the focus on personal and family relationships and mental health and welfare highlight the need to dedicate specific time to discuss these issues.

Content should address:

- Reverse culture shock
- Preparing and planning to return home
- Communicating personal and professional change in the workplace and with family/friends
- Wellbeing and mental health
- Creating return home plans
- Preparing in advance for potential challenges

Enterprise and entrepreneurship

Respondents with experience of establishing or working in entrepreneurial spaces were asked to share the key skills entrepreneurs need to be successful, and in what ways they would advise aspiring or new entrepreneurs to build these. This topic was identified as of potential interest to completing scholars as entrepreneurship is important in addressing low employment opportunities and contributes to job creation. Some Master's courses also now incorporate elements of entrepreneurship in their teaching.

14 respondents shared insight into their entrepreneurial work and expertise. This group included company founders and those involved in start-ups, as well as those involved in teaching enterprise and entrepreneurship courses and skills development.

The skills identified by respondents included problem solving, technical skills, market research, open-mindedness, leadership skills, adaptability, networking skills, financial literacy, communication skills, and self-awareness.

'I imagine that most entrepreneurs would at the early stages of the journey have identified a problem and have confidence that they have a better solution than what is out there. I have found that it is really important to break down the solutions into small well-defined steps and milestones and focus on executing them to realise the intended vision.'

'Entrepreneurs need a diverse skill set for success. Adaptability is crucial: continuously learn, stay informed, and embrace change. Resilience is key to overcoming setbacks: cultivate a positive mindset and view failures as learning experiences. Creativity fuels innovation: engage in activities that inspire and regularly brainstorm ideas. Effective communication is essential for conveying vision and building relationships. Decision-making skills, financial

literacy, and time management are fundamental for business sustainability. Networking opens doors to opportunities; actively engage in industry events and social platforms. Continuous learning, embracing feedback, and self-awareness are vital for entrepreneurial growth.'

Respondents emphasised the importance of financial literacy and understanding legal frameworks for new entrepreneurs, as well as an in-depth understanding of the market and context. Soft skills such as flexibility, perseverance and networking were all highly rated. Whilst highlighting the challenges of building a business, most respondents also shared the positives of this pathway, including contributing to emerging sectors and employment and creative independence.

Recommendations:

Feedback from respondents confirms the value of supporting scholars to think about entrepreneurship and the skills required to pursue this route. Many of the skills identified are available through existing CSC workshops offered to UK-based scholars during their studies, but understanding the importance and applicability of these within the context of entrepreneurship would be useful in the event series and for Distance Learning Scholars.

Content should address:

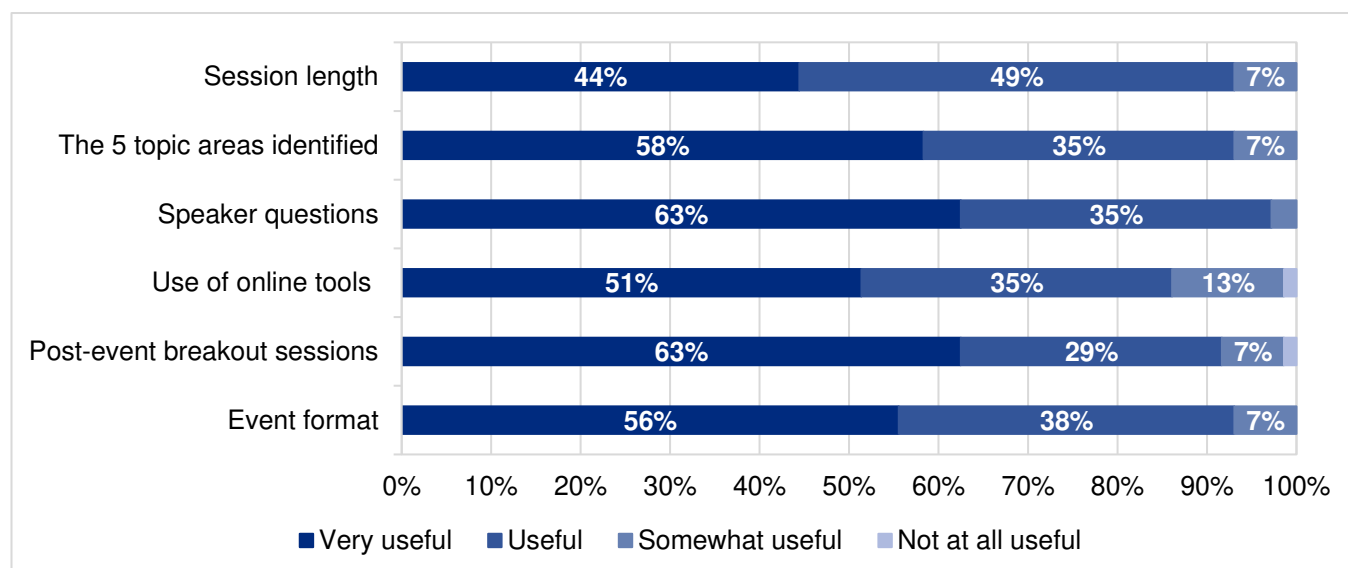
- Key skills for entrepreneurs
- Challenges and opportunities in entrepreneurship and enterprise
- The importance of market research
- The lifecycle of a project
- Financial literacy and funding

Delivery format

As part of the consultation, respondents were asked to review the proposed 'Fireside chat series- concept note' and share comments and feedback on the delivery format and feasibility of the approach.

Respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of different aspects of the delivery format. Responses are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Rating of usefulness of delivery format



n=72

Respondents were asked to elaborate on their ratings.

Generally, respondents felt the topics identified were good and met the event series objectives and brief, as well as needs of scholars at this stage. It was felt that the generic questions identified for the speakers were broad enough to facilitate in-depth discussion and a few respondents suggested some personalisation depending on the final speaker selected.

The format of the event series was well received, although many respondents highlighted that in-person events would be preferable, however accepted the limitations of this in the context of a global audience. Mixed responses were received on the length of the sessions and breakout groups. For an online session, respondents felt discussion could be reduced to 30-45 minutes and feedback on the length of the breakout groups ranged from 15-30 minutes, or open-ended depending on engagement.

It was felt that online tools would be useful for attendees as long as these were purposefully used to limit distraction and that attendees could also engage effectively in the session without using these tools if they were unable or preferred not to. Respondents also noted the importance of clearer guidance on how attendees would be assigned to breakout groups and information for attendees on how to make the most of these.

Existing and additional support

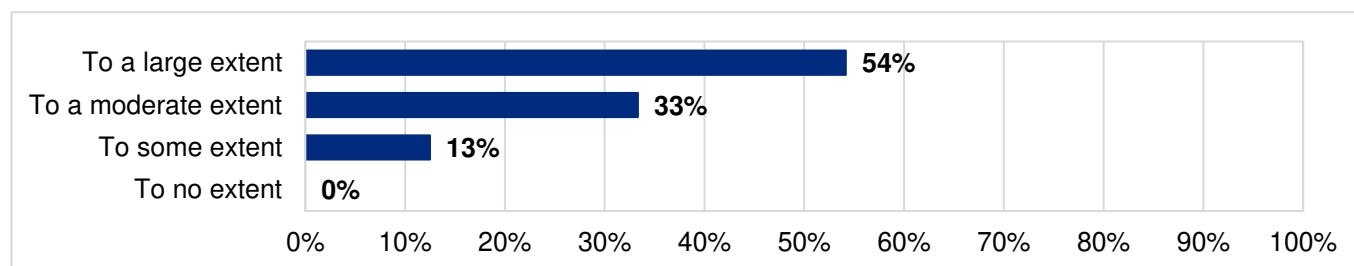
Respondents were asked to reflect on the wider findings of the Reintegration Surveys Report and consider the extent to which they felt the current support developed sufficiently addresses these.

Current support includes:

- Welcome Home Events (in some countries only)
- A [resources webpage](#), which includes content and guidance on reverse culture shock, employability and workplace skills, guidance for aspiring women leaders, and links to research and development impact resources.

- Newsletter introducing new alumni to the CSC Alumni Network and signposting ways to get involved and use the network to support their professional and personal goals.

Figure 3: Extent to which the current reintegration support addresses challenges experienced



n=72

Respondents were asked to elaborate on their rating.

Respondents acknowledged that the current support was adequate and addressed a range of important topics, however several felt that more resources should be provided to support scholars at this critical point. Emphasis on financial support and challenges was highlighted by respondents, both in accessing funding for work and research, as well as during potential periods of unemployment. This could include financial literacy and budgeting skills.

Many respondents felt increasing support for this area of work could be done by better utilising the CSC Alumni Network and volunteers, as well as tapping into in-country networks provided by alumni associations. This would also help address how common challenges may be experienced differently in each country and increase in-person opportunities for alumni and recently returned scholars to connect. Some respondents highlighted the importance of continuing to develop reintegration support and materials with alumni.

The addition of inspirational stories and accounts was highlighted by a small number of respondents and making more practical materials, such as action plans, available to scholars to help them prepare for their return home and consider challenges in advance.

One respondent noted it would be useful to understand the uptake of the resources, which highlights an important point in understanding the impact of utilising these, rather than whether they are provided.

It was generally felt that the proposed event series would be a welcome and important addition to the existing resources and several respondents felt this level of support would have been useful to them before returning home.

Respondents were also asked to reflect on their personal experiences at the end of their Commonwealth Scholarship or Fellowship and to share the type of support, if any, they would have liked to receive at this time.

Responses were varied and have been summarised as follows: connecting and returning to an active in-country network; engagement with British High Commissions; advance notice of challenges they may face, such as reverse culture shock and employment; communications from the CSC during this period; pre-departure session for the return home; funding to attend graduation; mentorship; career guidance; and introductions to networks and partnerships.

Asked what support, if any, they did access, respondents shared limited resources. Those who responded highlighted receiving communications from the CSC, attending Welcome Home Events, seeking career guidance, and joining in-country networks.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to share any further feedback or reflections to support the event series development and/or this area of work more broadly.

Respondents used this space to emphasise the importance of learning from and engaging with the alumni network to develop this work and promoting these resources across multiple channels and over a longer period. Increasing the importance of the global and in-country alumni networks was reiterated, as well as in-person opportunities to help build networks and seek mentorship.

Summary

Respondents shared a wealth of experiences and feedback on the proposed event series topics and exposed nuances in experiences which can be used to further develop the content areas and in identifying appropriate speakers. There was general enthusiasm and support to develop existing resources through the addition of the event series and to increase awareness of the challenges scholars may face on their return home. Utilising the alumni network in developing the series and materials was well supported.

Respondents also highlighted limitations to the existing offer and proposed event series, in particular in providing country specific information and in-person connections. It was generally felt, however, that global reach was important.

Next steps

- The CSC Alumni Team will review the Fireside Chat Series concept note to develop a more defined brief, including specific content areas, attendee guidance for maximum engagement, and integration of online tools and the breakout groups. Based on this brief, a pilot series will be developed and speakers identified and approached. Panel members may be approached in the first instance to volunteer as speakers, based on their responses.
- A review will be undertaken of the timeline and existing communications to scholars on the return home period to ensure key messages are clearly communicated and to potentially increase communications with this group. This will include an additional check-in mailing post-return home.
- As part of ongoing work with CSC Alumni Associations, the CSC Alumni Team will sound out opportunities and resources to increase the role of associations in supporting recently returned scholars and facilitating connections to networks and alumni mentors.
- The team will also explore the publication of case studies and quotes to increase the visibility of alumni experiences during this period and provide role models for the CSC community.