

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0542

Tue 07 Dec 2021

12:30 - 12:50

International Education Scholarships: Pathways to Social Change

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract: Many international scholarship programs are geared towards future economic benefits. Only a few have targeted social change outcomes, including improving civic engagement, promoting democratic values, and nurturing social change agents. Drawing on interviews with 95 scholarship alumni, this paper examines how graduates of two Kazakhstani government scholarship programs for higher education view their contribution to the development of their home country and to creating pathways for social change. The findings show that although alumni foster and lead many positive changes at the individual, organizational, and society levels, their pathways to social change are impeded by a range of factors, including economic, cultural, and scholarship regulations. The findings provide valuable insights into the more effective implementation of these programs.

Paper: International scholarship programs provide an opportunity for citizens of low- and middle-income countries to pursue quality international education (Campbell et al., 2020). While many international scholarships are geared towards future economic benefits, few have targeted social change outcomes. Examples of such international scholarship programs are Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (2001-2013), and Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. These programs aim to improve civic engagement, promote democratic values (Clift et al., 2013), and nurture leaders able to produce social benefits for local communities (Cosentino et al., 2019; Dassin & Navarrete, 2018). Similarly, Kazakhstan's two major government scholarship programs for international education - 'Bolashak' ('Future' in Kazakh language) and Nazarbayev University (NU) aim their graduates to boost economic development and foster social change. Despite the significant financial investments in both programs, there is limited research on the contribution of these graduates to their home country and especially to social change. This paper examines how graduates of Bolashak and NU scholarship programs view their contribution to the development of their home country. We specifically focus on the alumni contribution in creating pathways to social change in Kazakhstan and identify factors that support and hinder their contributions. The following research questions guide the paper: (1) How do government scholarship alumni perceive their contribution to their home country's development and to creating pathways for social change? (2) What contextual

factors and program characteristics support or impede alumni contributions?

Our paper is guided by the conceptual framework developed by Campbell (2018) in which she combines human capital theory (Becker, 1993) and the theory of change (Campbell, 2018; Rogers, 2014) to demonstrate the contribution of international education. Regarding international education, the human capital theory implies that educational investments enhance individuals' capabilities and bring economic and social benefits to their home country. The theory of change maintains that an international education experience of individuals will result in social and economic improvements in their country of origin due to graduates' involvement in social change. Both theories suggest that international education may eventually lead to positive changes at the individual, organizational and community levels (Campbell, 2018)

Participants for our study were selected based on purposeful maximum variation sample. The three key criteria for the selection of participants included: alumni who received full funding from Bolashak and Nazarbayev University scholarship programs, alumni who currently reside in Kazakhstan, alumni who studied at Master's level. The data for the study consists of individual semi-structured interviews with 95 alumni of the two government scholarship programs out of which 50 were from fields of social sciences and 45 from STEM. The data collection was completed in April. We are currently in the process of data analysis and hoping to present the final results at the SRHE conference.

Our preliminary findings demonstrate that international experience plays a vital role in developing social change agents. The majority of the participants reported an increased desire to bring positive changes at the individual, organizational and societal levels.

At an individual level, alumni motivate their relatives, friends, and colleagues to pursue international education and serve as role models. At an organizational level, alumni contributed mainly through increasing effectiveness and productivity and bringing innovation to their workplaces. Interestingly, the participants working for private companies and international organizations reported implementing more remarkable changes at the workplace level than those employed in civil service or public sector institutions

At the societal level, alumni contributed to social development through volunteering, charity, and mentorship. Some alumni reported that they were improving the domestic education system, implementing projects on inclusivity, promoting tolerance towards LGBTQ community, and bringing attention to diverse social issues, such as domestic violence, extremism, feminism, to name a few.

Although alumni attempted to bring changes and contributions to their home country, our findings show that various factors impede their contribution. These include:

- Workplace-related factors such as poor work environment and facilities, limited authority, and local managerial practices;
- Economic factors - low pay, skills mismatch, underdeveloped industries, and lack of jobs;
- Cultural factors - resistance to change, bureaucratic practices, and local cultural norms;
- Bolashak scholarship regulations tie alumni to a specific workplace or sector. As a result, some Bolashak graduates work for companies where they cannot apply their knowledge and

skills fully and effectively.

We argue that although alumni foster many positive changes at personal, organizational, and societal levels, their pathways for social change are impeded by a range of workplace-related, economic and cultural factors, as well as scholarship regulations.

The findings provide insights into how to more effectively implement these programmes to ensure that they achieve their goals. Considering the scarcity of scholarly research on scholarship programs contribution to countries' development in the post-Soviet space, and most importantly a dearth of literature on outcomes from government scholarship programs, this study will contribute to global research on scholarship programs from within a non-western context.

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