Three Levels of Scholarships Impact Evaluation

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Current State of Practice

International education researchers and evaluation practitioners have advanced our understanding of the impact of international higher education scholarships. Existing research and evaluation studies inform our appreciation of the range of outcomes that Global South students may gain from scholarships, e.g., developing their academic and professional careers, growing their civic engagement and societal contributions, and enriching their global, intercultural, and personal lives. *How* these outcomes emerge through and after funded education abroad remains less clear. So too does the contextual significance of these outcomes, or "impact", in the home countries of scholarship alumni. New research and evaluation practices are needed to move from describing to contextualizing, explaining, and potentially optimizing scholarships impact.

Three Levels of Impact Analysis

In my doctoral research, I have been studying the potential impact of graduate scholarships to Palestinians. I used a research philosophy called critical realism to describe this impact and explain its emergence. This philosophy guided me through three levels of analysis to (i) describe perceived scholarship outcomes, (ii) theorize their relevance to peace in Palestine, and (iii) infer the potential factors giving rise thereto:

Describing Impact → 32 Palestinian scholarship alumni reported achieving significant outcomes in their academic, career, and multidimensional identity development.

Contextualizing Impact → These outcomes theoretically represent an increase in *everyday peace capability*, i.e., the alumni's effective ability to follow (re)constructive courses of action that, in thought and action, counteract oppressive effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Explaining Impact → This capability increase could arise from the replacement of oppressive material, structural, and epistemic conditions with ones conducive to counteracting conflict logics and extending socio-national attitudes toward education (abroad).

Implications for Optimizing Scholarships Impact

Scholarships may often be critiqued for their individually manifested and/or contextually incoherent impact. The three-level analysis illustrated above has a series of key implications to help address this good critique:

We are challenged to collect perceptions descriptive of scholarship outcomes but also reflexive commentaries on the contextual significance of these observable outcomes.

→ This reflexivity, of individuals-in-context, can prompt alumni's increased sense of agency in *co*-constituting their scholarships impact. To researchers and evaluation practitioners, this reflexivity can be a valuable alternative to blueprint categories of impact analysis.

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We are also challenged to interpret scholarships impact beyond their technical outcomes, e.g., skills gained, careers advanced, connections made, etc.

→ Such interpretation can broaden knowledge of scholarships' contextual significance, e.g., for peace in Palestine, for gendered sociopolitical change in Saudi Arabia, or for post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq and Libya.

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Having broadened appreciation of scholarships impact, we are further challenged to think creatively about steering it.

→ This further-informed creative thinking can involve, inter alia, clarifying (i) ways for alumni to practice and disseminate a greater segment of their scholarships impact and (ii) areas of post-completion programming to support alumni in that endeavor.

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