

# Evidence for soft power created via scholarship schemes

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## Question

*What assessments have been made of impact from offering scholarships (to persons from less developed countries to study in another country):*

- *What evidence do these provide of the soft power (political influence) generated?*
- *When is this benefit felt; where possible distinguish between short term and longer-term impact?*

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## 1. Summary

“Soft power-oriented scholarship programmes frequently claim significant impact from shaping well-disposed future leaders, given the potential for those individuals to influence diplomatic, trade, and military agenda. Beyond citing lists of famous alumni, scholarship research has done little to evidence this link” (Mawer, 2018).

Many international aid programmes use scholarship programmes to fund inward scholarship through attendance at an institution of the donor country. These programmes commonly have two objectives: to support the development of the recipient country assuming scholars will return better qualified, more capable and potentially able to contribute to a process of social change in their home country. Also, to foster understanding of the people and values in the host country, building lifelong relationships that will allow the donor country to strengthen public diplomacy and build its own soft power. Soft power is defined by its originator (Nye, 2008) as “... the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.” Education is a commonly used tool to achieve soft power, and influence. Scholarship programmes are thus designed to serve (amongst other interests) the national interest as broadly defined in the interest of the host country winning long-term friends for public diplomacy or enhancing the reputation of national higher education systems (Kirkland, 2018). They form a substantial and often long-term part of overall development aid strategy and are frequently retained while other aid mechanisms are cut or curtailed.

While there is widespread endorsement of a view that **scholarships are effective tools in promoting and enhancing a country's soft power**, investing in future leaders, providing access and equity, and increasing research excellence in a nation's academic institutions it is at least possible that in part this derives in part from positive reinforcing trends amongst those delivering and receiving scholarships (for example Wilton Park conference attendees, 2016). Published, stand-alone evaluations of specific country scholarship programmes were not easily located, although there are references in the academic literature to several such studies. The most comprehensive commentary on evaluation research published between 2006 and 2016 (Mawer, 2018) is therefore an important summative document. **This notes that the quality of evidence and the methods used to assess scholarship programmes vary enormously and that there is lack of evidence to substantiate the link that is claimed for such programmes and any soft power created.**

The evidence for alumni forming lasting ties to their host country is mixed. Some evaluation studies routinely generate high responses in terms of positive attitudes towards host countries (Chinese Government Scholarship Programme (90%), German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) scholarships (96%), UK Chevening Scholarships Programme (88%). Other assessments more analytically note that whilst an individual is likely to have a positive attitude towards the host nation following a good educational outcome it is vital that the host nation maintains and fosters ties with alumni if diplomatic influence is to be sustained among those in a position to take on leadership roles (Abimbola et al, 2015). Individual benefit from scholarships is well evidenced (in terms of career progression, alumni occupying positions of responsibility) (Mawer, 2018:262). The impact upon their host institution and more widely at societal level is more difficult to conceptualise and objectively verify. In part this is because expectations of the outcomes of scholarship schemes are varied; a concrete theory of change is lacking and there are many methodological challenges in tracing alumni who may have been students several years before.

Challenges of attribution and contribution (from the learning as an international scholar) to the subsequent career, role and influence of the (potential) leader are substantial.

## 2. Scholarship Schemes and ‘Soft Power’

The concept of soft power emerged during the Cold War era when public diplomacy showed itself to be an essential component of a ‘smart power’ arsenal combining hard power (military strength and threat) with soft power (persuasion and influence). To quote Nye (2008), the originator of the concept, “Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country’s soft power rests on its resources of **culture, values, and policies**.” Spacey (2017) provides eight common examples of soft power among which education is one<sup>1</sup> – “when the elite of other nations attend your schools.”

Donaldson & MacDonald (2018) quote the annual soft power index produced by Portland Communications citing the **UK as the leading soft power nation (July 2018)** and write that “it should be no surprise that the country, with its huge strengths in independent cultural and educational institutions, should continue to rank so highly on soft power, in spite of any uncertainty as a result of Brexit.” The domestic policies and positions of a given country have international implications for soft power especially as instant global communications and social media channels rapidly communicate these. As power dissipates from being concentrated in the hands of government the strength of many non-government organisations that contribute to a nation’s soft power become even more important. The UK result tells a lot about soft power and the approach to soft power, manifested by the relative independence from government of the UK’s most important soft power institutions. “The Portland report picks out the British Council and the BBC World Service for particular praise, as well as independent British art, music, film, fashion, and sport” (Donaldson & MacDonald, 2018). These authors note that “A state’s soft power comes from a myriad of very different sources. It is often the case that **soft power is generated at the micro-level, through the interactions of individuals and small groups, and the networks they form**.”

This logic is at least one of the reasons for Government financing of inward scholarship programmes. In offering students from a second country the chance to live and study in a host country (commonly for a minimum of one year) it is expected that the scholar will form positive impressions of the host nation, its people and by maintaining links after their return home, will generate pathways of influence and opportunity for government, academic or private sector actors from the host nation.

Kirkland (2018) notes there are several ways of categorising the objectives of international scholarships but suggests the following (2018:159):

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<sup>1</sup> Others are Economics (trade, economic structures and markets); Leadership (credibility in the eyes of other nations); Diplomacy (skills and relationships); Institutions (influence over organisations that orchestrate international cooperation); Culture (cultural influence through entertainment and media); Foreign Assistance (helping developing countries build institutions and infrastructure); and Reputation (the reputation of a nation in the eyes of the world).

- **National Interest (Narrowly Defined):** Scholarships are driven by the desire of the host country to fill particular skills or other labour market shortages. Recipients are encouraged (or even obliged) to remain upon completion of award.
- **National Interest (Broadly Defined):** Scholarships are intended to benefit the host country in less direct or measurable ways, for example, winning long-term friends for public diplomacy purposes or enhancing the reputation of national higher education systems.
- **Merit Based:** Scholarships are awarded to the most able candidates, regardless of their personal background or likely impact on national or development objectives.
- **Development Based (Individually Focused):** Scholarships seek to address disadvantage, prioritising candidates who are underrepresented in some way. The main aim is to help the individual, although by doing so there may be wider development benefits, for example, the emergence of role models.
- **Development Based (Society Focused):** Scholarships prioritise candidates who appear most likely to address development problems in their respective countries, regardless of personal background. Recipients may be encouraged or required to return home (or work on relevant projects) following completion.

In the UK, Commonwealth Scholarships emphasise development (since 2001) while the longer running Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Chevening Scholarships emphasise public diplomacy (Kirkland, 2018:159). A difference of emphasis and perceptions of the balance between developing leaders, public diplomacy, international development and pure academics was evident from an early stage of scholarships offered and funded by Commonwealth countries<sup>2</sup>. These partly reflected political differences – “Conservative governments have tended to tie international development objectives more closely to foreign affairs objectives, while Labour ones have given development objectives more independence” (Kirkland, 2018:150). More recently this emphasis has crystallised “For Britain, the desire to link development, foreign affairs and trade functions has taken a new shape in recent months, as the government has sought to link foreign assistance policy to the development of new trading relationships in response to the referendum vote for Britain to leave the European Union” (Kirkland, 2018:150).

### 3. Methodological challenges in evaluating scholarship schemes

Mawer (2018) offers a commentary on evaluation research published between 2006 and 2016 noting that the quality of evidence and the methods used to assess scholarship programmes varies enormously. In general attempts are made to track results or impact at three levels:

- Micro: individual outcomes for scholarship recipients
- Meso: organisational and institutional effects
- Macro: societal impacts

Although evaluation research has shown that alumni believe they have **benefitted greatly from overseas study**, it is difficult to assess whether these self-reported assessments are shared by

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<sup>2</sup> By 1967 as many as 14 different countries including some newly independent nations (Ghana, Sri Lanka, Nigeria) were hosting and funding international scholars

peers at home. Poor response rates from employing institutions and staff turnover in these weaken holistic assessments of performance on return. In limited instances where this has been possible employers tend to reinforce views that employees have broadened their knowledge, gained more understanding of methodology and were able to work autonomously (for example employers of German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) scholarship recipients) (Mawer, 2018: 260)

Evaluation studies have **routinely generated evidence of positive attitudes** toward host countries and, to a lesser extent, intercultural gains. As for example:

- 90% of research participants on the Chinese Government Scholarship Programme, were positive about the likely promotion of long-term friendship between China and their home country (Dong and Chapman 2008, cited in Mawer, 2018).
- 96% of respondents on development related German scholarships funded by DAAD were positively disposed toward future cooperation with German organisations, and 83% reported that they would work for a German organisation that had an office in their country (DAAD 2013, cited in Mawer, 2018).

Despite this, it is difficult to interpret these outcomes in attitude without comparative data. A lack of baseline data on the disposition of scholarship recipients can create ambiguities about whether positive dispositional outcomes—such as large proportions of respondents well-disposed to future collaboration with the host country—are best described as ‘gains’ from scholarships or simply a description of those who were selected to receive funding (Mawer, 2018: 261).

In terms of achieving a critical mass or a meso effect across society from international education, the effect of diffusion and concentration of scholarship recipients across organisations, sectors, and countries is a systemic issue (Mawer, 2018: 268). Some funders (for example the Joint Japan/World Bank Scholarship Programme) have tried to create clusters of alumni who will return home to work in the same institutions and so help to create a critical mass of staff and managers who can contribute to institutional reform.

The greatest difficulty lies in attributing impact within societies or upon international relations – the macro level. Much has been written about the different theoretical and practical complexities of social impact and the difficulty of ‘aggregating up’ from the level of individuals to much broader social levels. There is ample evidence that alumni routinely hold leadership positions (Mawer, 2018: 271) and the pathways towards influence have been described (by Wilson 2015, cited in Mawer, 2018) as:

- Either the individual recipient goes on to be disproportionately powerful in a personal capacity (e.g. as an elected official or senior administrator),
- Or they otherwise exert a disproportionate influence on public opinion and the actions of others (e.g. as a teacher, journalist, or through public advocacy).

The transfer of individual benefits to the broader levels of institutions and societies is **widely hinted at, but rigorous evidence is scarce** (Mawer, 2018: 275). The evidence about outcomes achieved by scholarship recipients is often much clearer than how they are achieved. Pathways from funding to outcomes at individual level are clearer and the evidence-base stronger.

“Alongside these pathways are greater ambiguities, such as how individual capacity and career progression is embedded in systemic institutional impacts, and how individuals with a positive disposition generate soft power outcomes and stronger bilateral relations” (Mawer, 2018: 273).

Signalling goodwill and fostering international relationships is effective, if at all, only at the launch of international scholarship programmes. Further investment is unlikely to increase political impact (Wilson, 2015). Conversely the winding up or reduction of schemes is likely to signal negative goodwill though the impact on international relations is understudied (Mawer, 2018). The activity of alumni after scholarship programmes is a second major pathway to influencing international relations. Individual alumni readily report forming and maintaining persistent ties with their host country and counterfactual evidence suggests they are more likely to maintain international contacts than non-recipients (Mawer, 2018).

Soft power-oriented scholarship programmes frequently claim significant impact from shaping well-disposed future leaders, given the potential for those individuals to influence diplomatic, trade, and military agenda. Beyond citing lists of famous alumni, **scholarship research has done little to evidence this link**, and nor does the relationship appear to be straightforward (Mawer, 2018:273). For example, Dreher and Yu (2016) have investigated the dual influences of affinity with former host countries and the need to demonstrate political allegiance to home countries, among internationally educated leaders of non-industrialised countries. Examining voting patterns at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) between 1975 and 2011, they show that the leaders were less likely to vote in line with their former host country, but more likely to vote in line with other industrialised countries generally. Forthcoming elections at home also influenced leaders toward voting less concordantly with their former host country (Dreher and Yu 2016), suggesting that, at least in this highly public arena, concerns about demonstrating political allegiance can trump feelings of affinity.

## 4. Assessments of Impact: limited evidence for soft power

The **UK Chevening Scholarships Programme** commenced in 1983 as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Awards Scheme (FCOAS) and provides scholarships for full-time study that lead to a master's degree qualification and fellowships for shorter courses. Its purpose has always been to promote influence and standing for the UK although hard evidence for this is low (FCO Chevening review, 2006). A Chevening Impact Report (undated)<sup>3</sup> makes no reference to soft power or influence exerted by Chevening alumni. A first formal evaluation of the Chevening Programme (KPMG, 2016) was specifically tasked to identify and measure the return on influence, defined as "the declared change in attitudes towards the UK among Chevening Alumni and their networks in their home countries. It also includes how FCO posts leverage Chevening Alumni to achieve their foreign policy objectives." (KPMG, 2016:6)

Until this evaluation Chevening had not had a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation programme, identified as a critical area to address. The 2016 evaluation was a formative part of identifying and measuring the baseline impact and influence of the Chevening programme and found from qualitative data gathered from survey questionnaires sent to alumni<sup>4</sup> and FCO posts<sup>5</sup> the following: (KPMG, 2016:14-17)

- The most significant positive change for alumni at a personal level, was of UK as a place to live – its people and culture (88% of respondents recorded positive change)

<sup>3</sup> Though from timeline in the report and FCO Ministerial foreword this seems to be 2018

<sup>4</sup> Sent to 40% of all alumni (18,726 persons) and yielding a response from 15% of those surveyed (2,680)

<sup>5</sup> 145 responses from 160 FCO posts surveyed

- The importance of diversity in society (85%) and tolerance in society (80%) were also important positive personal changes
- A lower but positive shift was found in understanding the importance of democracy (67%) and the rule of law (79%)
- The most significant area **of alumni influencing others in their network was in encouraging others to visit the UK or to study there (94%+)**
- 83% positively influence their network's views about the UK as a place to do business
- Alumni were least likely to influence their network in terms of their views of the UK's Government policy (76%)  
74% of participating Foreign and Commonwealth Office Posts have used the Chevening alumni network for work on governance, democracy and human rights issues; almost 85% of responding alumni have remained in contact with the FCO or embassy/ high commission in their home country; 20% of these said they maintained a significant (regular) level of contact and this has lead for example to alumni encouraging UK firms to bid on local government contracts.

There is also anecdotal evidence from a summary report on proceedings of a short conference (Wilton Park 1469, March 2016) to discuss how to maximise the impact from international scholarships. This records that "International scholarships are evidently beneficial; scholars are an important source of talent, skills, and diverse thought to countries providing scholarships.

**Scholarships are also effective tools in promoting and enhancing a country's soft power,** investing in future leaders, providing access and equity, and increasing research excellence in a nation's academic institutions."

And notes:

- Positive impact for academic institutions in the home country as returning scholars apply the transformative academic experience they have had; this may help attract more talented people to conduct research in these institutions (WP, 2016: 2)
- International scholars are exposed to the efficiency of British higher education institutions and infrastructure, they build friendships, create good memories from their time in UK and develop positive views of the country, **contributing to the soft power of the UK.** (WP1469; 2016:3)
- Alumni are inspired with a sense of giving back from the scholarships and help many others via social entrepreneurship. Alumni can achieve this much more easily with a strong global network in politics, business and academia. Alumni from developing countries that returned to their home countries can tap on their networks in developed countries to help in their social entrepreneurship causes at home. (WP1469; 2016:4)

These statements are not supported by specific examples or numerical data in the conference report. However, those participating included policymakers, international scholarship providers and leaders within Higher Education (HE), academia and business, predominantly from the UK, with experts from a range of other international scholarship schemes.

It is interesting to note that a joint review (British Council and the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD, 2014) of publicly supported outward international scholarship schemes from

eleven case study countries<sup>6</sup> makes no mention of any soft power return or relationship of influence to either the sending or host country. International scholarships rather, share a common interest which is to improve human resource capacity among citizens. Scholars participating in the national schemes reviewed were for the most part from the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and maths) although business, management, economics and agriculture were well represented. There is shared understanding across all countries of a positive correlation between education and prosperity. The development of relationships between returning academics and tertiary institutes in the country of study does help to ‘internationalise’ these institutions. Collaborations between home and host institutions creates teamwork, long term inputs to research programmes, and raises the standard of academic excellence through professional development and networking opportunities (Engberg et al, 2014: 53).

## 5. Demonstrating Influence gained via scholarship schemes

Although funding for scholarships has been a major part of foreign aid programmes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and in some cases is expected to contribute to international relations or public diplomacy (Dassin et al, 2018). Few specific examples of assessments of impact or outcomes from influence could be identified. Many evaluations of scholarship schemes are tracer studies that track the career progression of alumni. These commonly refer to the challenges of keeping in contact with alumni as they change job or email address. This is especially the case where ex-post evaluations have tried to revive links with former students.

Nonetheless Kent (2018) argues that Australia’s national interests are well served by having a large cohort of Australian-educated professionals, academics and government operatives in its region. This statement derives from a Senate review into public diplomacy in 2007 which asserted that “the network of current and former students provides an enormous pool of people. . . whom. . . can and do assist in promoting Australia’s reputation” (Payne 2007, p. 83 cited in Kent 2018, p28). Australia’s temporary seat at the United Nations Security Council was in part secured by a rapid and short-lived expansion of the Australia Awards into Latin America and Africa. This illustrates that the award of scholarships themselves can form the basis of diplomatic bargaining, long before a returning scholar is able to influence home country policy or business practice.

While advertising a scholarship programme to a population highlights the contribution that the donor country is making, it is less easy to demonstrate how soft power or influence over these scholars is created, or later exercised by alumni. The proportion of alumni holding influential positions is often relied upon for assessing the outcomes of international scholarships, particularly those funded by governments (Kent,2018). The number of government ministers who were educated in the donor country is a matter of pride. Research by the British Council in 2014, for example, claimed “analysis suggests that the UK is ten times more likely to produce a world leader than the USA – UK universities produces one world leader per fifty thousand graduates, whereas the US produces one per five hundred thousand” (Sowula 2014, cited in Kent, 2018). If these published stories foster some sense of pride in the tertiary education system and justify

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<sup>6</sup> These are Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam

scholarship schemes to taxpaying citizens, they do not measure the impact that period of study had on the life of the subject (world leader or not), nor the impact on the subject's family or future colleagues (Kent, 2018).

Several of the authors contributing to the volume *International Scholarships in Higher Education* (Dassin et al. 2018) demonstrate that scholarship programmes sit in an undefined academic space, somewhere between development, education and public diplomacy (Kent, 2018: 38). Aside from the measurement of development objectives of many scholarship programmes, "there is at least a greater need to understand and quantify the soft power outcomes that scholarships can bring" (Guang 2016, cited in Kent, 2018:39).

International scholarships form a substantial proportion of Australian development aid, have been retained within the aid programme (when other elements such as the volunteer programme was cut) and serve as a means of international influence and diplomacy (Abimbola et al, 2015). The rapid expansion of Australian scholarships for Africa between 2005 and 2012<sup>7</sup> was used to achieve development in Africa and advance the influence of Australia. Despite the considerable spend via this aid mechanism over the years, Mawer (2014) writes that they have not received much independent scrutiny and evaluation. "This may be due to the lack of clearly articulated theories of change which highlight how and under what circumstances scholarship programmes are expected to achieve their outcomes. On the other hand, the reason may be the diversity of potential developmental, diplomatic and economic outcomes that may result from scholarships to study in high-income countries" (Abimbola et al, 2015:106)

An evaluation of the Australian scholarship programme in Africa from 2004 to 2011 showed improved career prospects for scholars upon return and favourable views of Australia (Bysouth and Allaburton 2012, cited in Abimbola et al, 2015), but the study did not explore how these outcomes were achieved. Assessing the impact of scholarship programmes over time is challenging. Direct causality between the private benefits of higher education scholarships and the public good of development in benefiting countries is hard to track. Any assumption of a 'trickle-down' impact of scholarships on development and diplomacy is therefore difficult to substantiate (Abimbola et al, 2015:107).

Abimbola et al (2015) test the goals of the scholarship programme (that are diplomatic 'promoting Australia as an active partner in African development' and developmental 'contributing to the long term development needs of Australia's partner countries') by measuring the perceptions of alumni<sup>8</sup> of how implementation factors influence the achievement of these goals. Key findings are:

- Selection processes are generally fair (merit based) fast (scholarships are taken up over other English-speaking countries when awards are announced earlier)

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<sup>7</sup> From 80 candidates from 10 countries to more than 1000 candidates from 50 countries DFAT 2014, cited in Abimbola et al, 2015

<sup>8</sup> This study again illustrates the challenges of conducting robust retrospective evaluations of scholarship schemes. From a potential sample of 493 alumni from 3 high volume target countries, Kenya, Uganda and Mozambique, only 261 valid emails were sent. Only 102 (of 111) respondents completed the whole survey – just 20% of the sample

- Employers were generally supportive; government employees were able to take leave of absences and private sector employees obliged to leave their job
- On return the benefits to the scholar are promotion (82%) increase in salary (83%) supervise more staff (76%) hold greater financial responsibility (74%) and **hold a greater role in policy making (77%)**
- Alumni note that the ability of individuals to effect change is difficult; they are largely responsible for maintaining their own networks after study and ongoing links to the Australian government are lacking.

The authors note “ongoing relations between Australia and the alumni is perhaps necessary to foster diplomatic influence, especially as alumni are in a position to take on leadership roles within the government” (Abimbola et al, 2015:114). Although these findings suggest that the scholarships achieve the aim of spreading Australian influence through returnee scholars, who have the capacity to become agents for development in their country, the investment needs to be nurtured. Providing ongoing support to develop skills in leadership in order to prepare returnee scholars for governance reforms in their country is a suggested strategy. Training teams instead of individuals may be a strategy to achieve quicker results. One critique of Australian scholarships is that they are ‘at the expense of more cost-effective in-country and in-region training...which yield much higher development returns’ (ANAO 2011, cited in Abimbola et al, 2015: 115) and giving examples of direct collaborations between universities in the North and the South or the provision of training to all the key staff of a target department (as for example in the capacity building programme for the Zimbabwe Revenue Agency where Australian Government provides a mix of technical training in situ and scholarships in African or Australian institutes).

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