



# How international scholarship recipients perceive their contributions to the development of their home countries: Findings from a comparative study of Georgia and Moldova

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## ABSTRACT

International scholarships support higher education abroad, often with the expectation that recipients will ultimately “give back” to their home countries. Little is known about how scholarship alumni from low- and middle-income countries view their contributions and whether activities differ between countries. By comparing Georgia and Moldova, this research indicates that employment is the central way that alumni perceive that they “give back,” with government positions deemed most influential. In Georgia, alumni assumed federal posts, whereas in Moldova, alumni sought positions in international organizations and businesses, resulting in differing contributions to national development. Findings aim to inform sponsored student mobility programs promoting socioeconomic development in participants’ countries.

## 1. Introduction

In an effort to build capacity and provide opportunities to students in low- and middle-income countries, international scholarship programs offer talented students quality higher education abroad, often in high-income countries.<sup>1</sup> International scholarships are defined as financial grants that cover the majority of costs associated with higher education study outside of the recipient’s home country; finalists must be competitively selected and must be working towards a degree at an accredited institution. The theory of change embedded in many programs is that the expertise found in leading universities permits students to develop their skills and transfer this newfound knowledge back home—with the end goal of having a positive impact on their home countries. In other words, international scholarships will provide opportunities for graduate to “give back” to their countries of origin through social or economic development activities.

The number of available international scholarships appears to increase each year in the United States and around the world (Institute for International Education, 2016), with the United Nations (UN) (2015) recently recommending in number four of its Sustainable Development Goals to “substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries...for enrolment in higher education”. Despite this recognition of higher education scholarships as tools for development, little scholarly research exists about what happens to

scholarship program participants following their overseas studies. Some studies have focused on brain drain or brain circulation of those educated overseas (Beine et al., 2008; Di Maria and Lazarova, 2012; Kuptsch and Pang, 2006), while others have examined the role of foreign-educated leaders in influencing social justice, democracy, and nation-building (Dassin, 2009; Puryear, 1994; Shachtman, 2009; Spilimbergo, 2009). Scholarship program evaluations can also provide insight into alumni activities, yet they typically examine alumni trajectories only in the context of the program goals and can be difficult to access by the public. Notably, available research often highlights the contributions of the “crème de la crème,” instead of the larger perceptions of groups of sponsored students, and very few studies focus on the former Soviet republics. This research aims to address these gaps by providing a comparative, nuanced understanding of how scholarship graduates apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained on scholarship and “give back” to their home countries, especially within the context of the increasing global interest in scholarships as a tool for national development.

In addition to understanding the ways in which scholarship alumni contribute to national development, there is also a question of what factors in the home country may support or hinder an individual’s plan to enact change. For example, a specific industry may be growing rapidly in one country. Thus, students with relevant degrees may be more likely to be employed upon returning home, whereas students returning

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of low-, middle-, and high-income countries used in this paper are the same as the World Bank’s definitions of lower-, middle-, and high-income economies (World Bank, 2016).

to a different country, without the same economic growth, may remain unemployed despite a similar educational profile. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and address the interplay of how scholarship alumni desire to “give back” and the structural supports that shape or negate their attempts to change their social and economic environments.

Specifically, this paper addresses the questions of (1) How do international scholarship alumni perceive their contributions to national social and economic development following their international scholarship? And (2) How do their activities and choices differ based on their country of origin? To best answer these questions, a qualitative study was conducted to compare the experiences of scholarship program alumni from the Republics of Georgia and Moldova—across a variety of scholarship programs, fields of study, and years of participation—in how they perceive of their contributions to their nation’s development. Comparing these findings provides greater understanding of how scholarship alumni contribute to their nation’s development, with the ultimate goal to aid program administrators to design better programs and to help scholarship participants to have richer experiences, especially after completing their academic programs.

### 1.1. Context

The former soviet republics of Georgia and Moldova are compatible cases for comparing the perceptions and experiences of scholarship program alumni for two main reasons: Firstly, the two countries have somewhat similar geopolitical profiles. Both countries declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991; both have struggled with the transition from communism to democracy, with citizens organizing national revolutions in favor of more progressive policies; both have so-called “frozen conflicts” within their borders, with autonomous groups seeking independence; and both have made resolute actions towards European Union integration and away from further political and economic alliances with Russia.

Secondly, in both Georgia and Moldova, international higher education mobility has been utilized as a strategy for national human capital development in the transition from a communist to a market-based economy. Perna et al. (2015) provide support to this point, stating “Participating in tertiary education abroad may be particularly beneficial for nations that are undergoing economic and political reforms, including the former states of the Soviet Union” (p. 174). Examples of scholarship programs offered in both countries include the Edmund S. Muskie Graduate Fellowship Program and the Fulbright Program (sponsored in part by the U.S. Government) and the Soros Supplementary Grant Program and Civil Servant Scholarships (sponsored in part by the Open Society Foundations), typically in conjunction with financial support from the host universities.

### 1.2. Theoretical and research frameworks

#### 1.2.1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for many scholarship programs is human capital theory, whose proponents (Becker, 1975; Schultz, 1963; Smith, 1952) argue that the money invested in an individual’s education has a positive economic return for the individual. Most often, human capital theory is limited to measuring the impact of education in economic gain (Sweetland, 1996), yet Walter McMahon (1999, 2009) expanded the theory to argue that investment in education can also lead benefits for the individual’s community. Categorizing these benefits as *endogenous development*, he included economic growth, population and health, democratization and human rights, reduction of poverty and inequality, improvements in the environment, and reduction of crime and drug use among them (2009). Principally, human capital theory suggests this kind of economic and social development is focused locally, within the families, firms, and communities where the educated individual resides. In the case of international scholarship programs, a financial

investment is made in the form of tertiary education to build a selected scholar’s capabilities, with the aim of improving the economic and social qualities in a local community, often expected to be in the country of origin.

#### 1.2.2. Research design

The framework for this qualitative comparative study relied on a phenomenological approach inspired by Schutz’s (1967) theory of social phenomenology, wherein the subjective experiences of individuals are used to make meaning, and individuals can make judgments from their own and others’ experiences. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 Georgian and 20 Moldovan scholarship program alumni, the researcher asked for their perceptions of their contributions to social and economic change, as well as those contributions of their scholarship peers. Following these interviews and identification of the main themes in each country, a comparative analysis was conducted in line with Ragin’s (2013) case-oriented approach to comparative study. This analysis exposed the categorical similarities and differences in the two sets of data summarized in the findings below.

All interview participants met the following selection criteria: (1) identified their country of origin as Georgia or Moldova, (2) participated in a scholarship program to study at the Master’s level in the United States, (3) started the scholarship program in 1996 or later,<sup>2</sup> and (4) completed the program. The exact population size of those who meet these criteria is not known, as no comprehensive list of participants across programs exists. Through email lists, social media, and formal presentations, an estimated 700 scholarship program alumni were invited to be part of this study. Ultimately, 26 Georgian and 25 Moldovan alumni responded, with 20 alumni selected for participation from each country. Interviewees were chosen to achieve “maximum variation” (Miles and Huberman, 1994) among alumni profiles, with the intention of gathering an extensive range in terms of perspective and experiences.

Among the 40 interviewees, women were the majority in both groups (15 Georgian and 11 Moldovan). Eight different scholarship programs were represented in the sample, including programs sponsored by the U.S. government, the governments of Georgia and Moldova, host universities, and private foundations; the U.S. Government was the primary scholarship funder (12 Georgian and 16 Moldovan). Interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 120 min. Interview transcripts were coded using a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) using MAXQDA12 software. The author conducted, transcribed, coded, and analyzed all interviews.

## 2. Results

When asked how scholarship alumni contribute their country of origin’s economic and social development, alumni from both countries stated that their contributions were primarily through their employment. A majority of the alumni (39 of the 40 interviewees) either currently work, or have formerly worked, in positions that directly link with the academic expertise acquired in this U.S. Master’s degree program. Alumni from both countries reported that in most cases, their U.S. degree positively influenced their career trajectories; responses did not vary considerably by U.S. host university, field of study, or location of institution. Alumni described their American Master’s degree as a type of credential that certified their knowledge and skills in the eyes of home country employers, especially as the American education was deemed better quality than similar degrees offered in the home country.

<sup>2</sup> The starting date of 1996 is appropriate for this study due to the fact that many scholarship programs offered in Georgia and Moldova had the explicit aim to assist the development of the newly independent states following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992, yet it was several years before these programs ramped up to achieve a significant number of participants.

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