

Increasing impact of international development study experiences

Key messages and recommendations

- **Key message:** International master's programmes continue to be effective tools contributing to development impact around the world.
- **Recommendation 1:** The change agent pathway was the most frequent pathway of change observed, yet reality shows a combination of different and hybrid pathways, which suggests a need for further research and reconceptualization.
- **Recommendation 2:** Learning gains on knowledge, skills and attitudes were highly prominent among graduates of the international master's programmes. There is a need to understand the role of networks better in facilitating professional development to help host institutions design targeted interventions. Results emphasise the importance of exchange of ideas, perspectives and the profound effect on attitudes of an international study experience, which is too often seen as a positive externality, rather than a key outcome of the programme.
- **Recommendation 3:** Graduates strengthen the organisations where they work, building on all learning gains, mostly through new ideas, perspectives, deepened knowledge and skills, increasing the organisational performance. Investing in methods to stimulate more active sharing of the learning gains throughout the organisation could increase the impact.
- **Recommendation 4:** The majority of graduates contributed to the Sustainable Development Goals and engaged in several impact arenas. Particularly, contributions to development

outside the professional arena (e.g. role model or voluntary contributions in one's community) are too often overlooked.

- **Recommendation 5:** Engaging in a collaborative process with a multi-perspective international alumni team throughout the entire research process increased the quality of the study and thus facilitates uptake and dissemination of the findings.

Executive statement

The University of Antwerp's Institute of Development Policy (IOB) in collaboration with VLIR-UOS impacts the lives of many through its international master's programmes. Over a period of 20 years, around 1,300 women and men from more than 100 different countries have studied at IOB and now comprise a lively alumni community and ecosystem of intercultural interaction. An assessment was conducted from 2018 to 2021 to determine the impact of the IOB study experience on the individual graduates, the organizations they work for, and the broader society. The findings presented in this policy brief provide the basis for recommendations to: a) improve the quality, relevance, and impact of international study programmes; and b) increase the development impact of scholarship programmes.

Introduction

Due to recent global developments and increasing focus on aid effectiveness, there is a growing concern of identifying means to increase the impact of international scholarships in Development Studies. The VLIR-UOS, a scholarship funding institution in Flanders, Belgium, sought to assess the impact of their scholarship schemes to recipients from developing countries. The IOB, a VLIR-UOS partner and host learning institution, was eager to determine the effectiveness of its academic programmes as well as the entire international study experience itself in equipping students with relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, and networks, to work in the development sector. A research study conducted by the IOB entitled [Alumni Impact Barometer](#) investigated the short, medium, and long-term impact of IOB's three advanced master's programmes in development studies (i.e., Globalisation and Development, Development Evaluation and Management, and Governance and Development), centering on the research question:

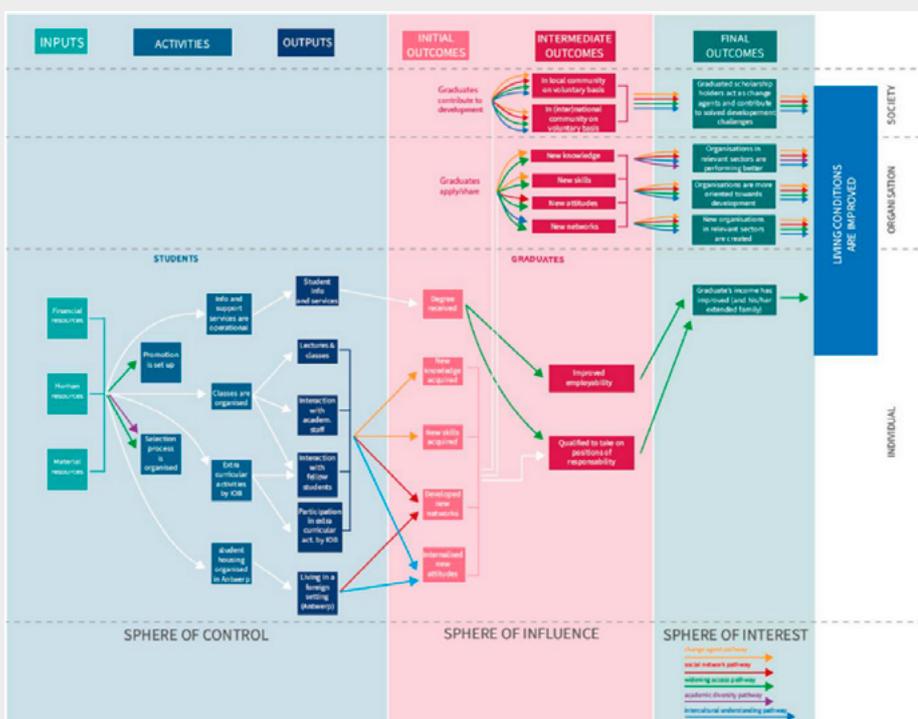
“What is the impact of studying an international master’s programme on the graduate, the organization they work for, and on societal ‘development’?”

About the study

The study utilized a mixed method approach and employed several research instruments such as online alumni survey, employer survey, alumni impact stories and social network mapping. The *online alumni survey* engaged 291 alumni who provided information about their current profile, learning/study experiences at the IOB, application of their skills, knowledge and experiences to their organizations and their broader contribution to development. Additionally, a *survey with graduate employers* was conducted to obtain the perspectives of the organizations where the graduates were employed after completing their respective programmes. The study also collected contextualized information *using country case studies*. A total of 131 *alumni impact stories* were collected from six countries to examine alumni contributions to development impact. For these stories, *text analysis tools* (Nvivo 12) were used for categorization, using pre-set evaluation schemes. The stories were then used for identifying the *most significant changes* induced by the study experiences. A team of 17 alumni researchers from Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Philippines, Tanzania, Uganda, and Vietnam and two IOB staff members from Belgium were engaged to enable robust data collection through participatory action research.

A 3-4-5 *Theory of Change (ToC)* model was developed to capture the multiple dimensions of an international study experience. Through this structure, it is hypothesized that changes in *three levels* (individual, organizational and societal) could be triggered by gains in *four learning aspects* (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and networks).

Such changes could follow *five different pathways* based on higher international education models: change agent, social network, widening access, academic diversity, and international/ intercultural understanding (Dassin et al., 2018¹).



1 Dassin, J., Marsh, R., and Mawer, M. (2018). International Scholarships to Higher Education Pathways to Social Change. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

More information

<https://www.uantwerpen.be/alumni-impact-barometer>

Have a look at the [alumni impact stories](#) or [summary video](#)



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Study results

The following provided a summary of the findings obtained by the research study:

Result 1: Overall high learning gains observed among graduates

A large majority of graduates indicated that they learned a lot from the study experience, reporting gains in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes & ideas, and networks. Around 95% of alumni respondents indicated that the IOB programmes increased their knowledge on development, while over 85% have gained transferable skills such as critical thinking, analytical and research skills. More unexpectedly 93% of graduates highlighted that the study experience impacted their attitudes, ideas and perspectives, most prominently their (self-) confidence, global perspectives and interest, openness to new ideas, and commitment to development.

Result 2: Graduates strengthened the organizations that they work for

Findings confirmed that graduates contributed to the strengthening of their organizations. Almost 90% have been able to apply new ideas. Between 72% and 84% of them have used (very) much their new knowledge and skills. In addition, 60% of the alumni have valorised the social and professional networks that they gained from studying at IOB. Even though the use of networks in the organizations is the lowest among the four learning gains, the level of application is still too high to overlook in the graduate's contribution.

Result 3: Positive development impact generated by graduates

While the graduates' impact on development at societal level was more difficult to measure, the study mapped the extent at which the graduates contributed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). About 96% of graduates reported to have at least somewhat contributed to the SDGs (71% yes, 25% somewhat contributed), most prominently to SDG5 (gender), SDG1 (poverty), SDG4 (education), SDG10 (inequality), and SDG8 (decent work) – topics clearly linked to the content of the master's. Furthermore, alumni were also asked to indicate in which impact arena they contributed more. The graduates have contributed to several impact arenas quite intensely, such as implementation, research, teaching and policy making

graduate contribution to SDGs



graduate contribution to impact arenas

