

More than Knowledge Transfer? The wider benefits of postgraduate taught programmes for international development

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Introduction

UCL Institute of Education offers a cluster of postgraduate taught programmes on education and international development (EID), including specialist fields of study in educational planning and economics, gender, and health promotion. Currently more than 350 students are studying on one of the four EID cluster MA programmes, and over the last four years, students from more than 70 different countries including 40 low or middle-income countries have completed an MA programme.

The Sustainable Development Goals emphasise the potential value of international participation in higher education noting that by 2020, there should be a substantial global expansion in the number of scholarship programmes available to students from low income countries (Target 4b). There is also a growing literature evidencing the benefits to individual students of taking part in postgraduate education.¹² However, much less is known about whether and in what ways students make use of their learning and whether or how they go on to support the wellbeing of others once they complete their studies. This small-scale exploratory study was carried out to enhance institutional understanding about the influence or impact of UCL IOE alumni on international development, particularly with regard to promoting sustainable lifestyles, gender equity, quality education, and health and wellbeing.

The research sought to answer the following questions:

- What do former students value about their experience of studying an MA programme in education and international development in London?
- How (if at all) do they consider their experiences to have affected their own personal and professional development?
- How do they feel that their experiences on the MA have influenced the extent to which they have been able to support the wellbeing of others?
- What factors affect the extent to which former students are able to draw on their experiences of the MA in order to bring about positive change to the lives of others?

¹Oketch M, McCowan T, Schendel R (2014) *The Impact of Tertiary Education on Development: A Rigorous Literature Review*. London: Department for International Development. BIS (2013) *The Wider Benefits of International Higher Education in the UK*. London: BIS

² See for example Webb, S. (2009) *Australian Scholarships in Cambodia. Tracer Study and Evaluation*. Canberra: AusAID. World Bank Institute (2010) *Joint Japan/World Bank Graduate Scholarship Program Tracer Study VIII*. Washington: World Bank Institute. Centre for Higher Education Studies (2012) *Evaluation of UK Scholarship Program: The Western Balkans*. London: Centre for Higher Education Studies

In this Research Brief we present a preliminary analysis of findings from the study.

Methodology

The primary data collection was divided into three phases: (i) a mapping exercise to identify potential networks of former students from the programme who might participate in the research; (ii) An online survey using SurveyMonkey which was administered between mid-June and mid July 2017 an which generated 127 responses; and (iii) In-depth semi-structured interviews with former students purposefully selected (from those who completed the survey and volunteered to take part in a subsequent interview) to represent diversity in terms of country of origin, age, gender, mode of study and their broad views on their experience of the programme as indicated via the survey. All interviews were conducted via telephone, skype or face-to-face, were audio recorded (subject to prior consent), transcribed and then analysed thematically.

Findings

Online survey

About the sample: Of the 127 responses to the online survey 34% were male and 66% female; 29% were from the UK; 21 % from Africa; 19 % from Asia; 12% USA and Canada; 10% from Europe; 6% from Central and South America with others from the Caribbean (n=3) and Australia and New Zealand (n=1). Forty-eight per cent had studied the core EID programme; with others (52%) being enrolled on one of the specialist programmes. Sixty per cent had completed the MA on a one-year full-time basis, while others had used a range of combination and modes of study (on-line; face to face; part-time and full-time).

What former students are doing now: At the time of the survey, 85% of research participants were working either full or part-time; 7% were engaged in further study and the remainder (8%) were either volunteering or in an internship; looking for work; retired or disabled and unable to work; or were no longer seeking work. The majority (54%) were working in education; 20% in a development related field; 5% in health; 6% in the area of refugees and displacement; 2% in the area of gender and 12% in a field described as 'other'. Participants reported working in a range of institutional structures including government departments, local, national and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), multi/bi-lateral agencies, schools and colleges, academic research and the private sector.

How the MA had influenced professional and personal lives: About 75% of respondents believed that the programme had prepared them either extremely well or well for their professional lives; 18% felt the programme had prepared them to some extent; and only 5% felt that the programme had not prepared them well (with just one person stating that the programme had not prepared them at all for work). When asked which aspects of the programme they had found most useful the most frequently selected options were obtaining a professional qualification (70%); developing critical thinking (68%); exposure to new ideas and skills (60%); developing theoretical and conceptual thinking (54%); and academic writing skills (52%). Developing professional networks also was also important for 34% of participants, and respondents indicated a high level of networking as a result of being on the programme, with 79% stating that they were still in contact with former students on the same course; 38 % remained in contact with students on other courses; 43% with academic staff at UCL IOE and 16% with administrative staff.

Eighty-two per cent of respondents felt that they had contributed to some change to the lives of others since completing the MA programme and of these 30% thought they had brought about change to a large extent. In terms of the different spheres/levels of influence within which they had facilitated change, these ranged from the international and national level, through to the individual, family and community.

Semi-structured interviews

Of the 22 former students who participated in in-depth interviews, eight were originally from the UK, two were from Pakistan, two from Canada and the one from each of Australia, Mexico, Denmark, South Sudan, US, Kenya, South Africa, Japan, Costa Rica and China. However, several were living outside of their country of origin at the time of the interview. Thirteen participants were female and nine were male. Fourteen of the participants had studied MA EID, four EPEID, two EGID and two EHPID.

Reasons for studying within the EID programme cluster

I basically sat down and said, "Okay, I've come out of the country I've been in for the last number of years. It's an opportunity to simply sit down and explore the world I've been living in," really... Then maybe try and answer a few questions about what might that world look like in a few years' time, and, therefore, in what way the Master's would contribute towards developing that as a sort of professional narrative, without sounding... if we say, "It was a sort of professional development," it sounds rather cold. I think it sort of fits more into that idea of personal transitions (Participant 16)

Participants came to the MA programmes with a range of different experiences. Some had extensive experience of working in education as teachers or in development projects. Others were much newer to the field. The reasons that participants had decided to study an EID programme at IOE also varied from looking for a career change, wanting to progress in their careers, viewing the MA as a pathway to further doctoral studies or an opportunity to take time out to reflect on work they had been doing, sometimes across many years. The Institute of Education was often chosen on the basis of reputation, due to experiences of colleagues or friends who had studied there, and in two cases as the result of direct contact with IOE staff.

Expectations of the course

I guess, for the core courses there, my expectations were pretty much what we got... [the] concepts, theories, and issues course, I found probably the most rewarding. It really expanded what I had already been trying pre-read and get into (Participant 18)

For those that had expectations prior to starting the MA programme, these were often informed by previous education-related experiences and included what they were looking for in terms of learning content and the opportunity to study with people from across the globe. For most participants expectations were met or exceeded and they valued the depth and breadth of topics and the criticality that the programme helped them bring to their own thinking and practice. But there were also somewhat mixed messages, for example some students suggested they found the course too theory heavy, while others were looking for greater theoretical depth. A small number of students felt their expectations had not been fully met: one student, for example, was disappointed at the amount of contact time with academic staff. A number of students expressed concerns about where the MA would take them in terms of their career trajectories and some felt more could have been done to address this during the programme.

What former students value: Academic, social and personal gains

I think, academically, I gained a lot in terms of being able to analyse, particularly, those skills, academic skills you need to write your dissertation and things like that on the academic side. So, yes, analysing your sources, developing arguments, structuring essays, absolutely fantastic, and that's been quite useful for me a little bit later on as well. (Participant 1)

What else that I took from the programme? If I can [answer] in one single word it would be awakening, intellectual awakening. (Participant 6)

Participants identified a range of experiences they valued from the MA programme. These included the development of academic skills, especially in relation to critical thinking, academic writing, understanding of the field and related theories, and how to assess evidence and work with data. They also highlighted the enhancement of their own reflexivity and criticality in relation to policy, research and practice in their respective fields, to the point that several participants said that they began to question the value of 'development' and their own potential to do more harm than good. For many participants the opportunity to work, learn from and build networks with students and academics from around across the world was also an important gain. Other, perhaps more personal gains were spoken about as being especially valued by a number of participants, such as feeling they achieved greater choice and agency in their own lives through their participation in the programme.

Wider benefits? From theory to practice

I go there and give points that I can actually cite authorities in that field, so find myself to be more convincing, because when you tell people that this issue should be tackled in this way, and you give examples maybe from other countries or suggestions that have been given by well-known scholars, you find that your point is received better as compared to just talking or just giving your own opinions (Participant 15)

Career trajectories since completing the course were highly varied, with some participants citing a high degree of career success and satisfaction while others struggled to find their niche in the field. Personal factors such as limited mobility, family commitments, health (or rather ill-health), or making transitions late on in careers were all mentioned as important challenges to establishing clear career pathways. However, many participants reflected on how they have continued to draw directly on learning from their programme of study and apply this in their professional lives. For example, some participants described how they have been able to apply a deeper conceptual and practical understanding of particular issues gained from the course to their current work and practice; how they have used skills in academic writing when developing reports; or drawn on learning from the programme in thinking more critically about the use of data or the gender dimensions of their work.

Participants' experiences suggest that this has contributed to enabling them to positively influence or impact the lives of others at different levels, from the immediate family level to working with communities, within particular settings and organisations, and through to national, transnational or global levels. For participants who were teaching or working at local levels this impact on the lives of others was often very direct. For those working at international or global levels the link to the wellbeing of others was more indirect, and participants were often reticent about claiming individual impact. However, it was clear that in some cases they had made significant contributions to policy with wide reaching implications. Participants also acknowledged that applying new ideas and theories within the contexts in which they were working sometimes met with challenges, which included resistance from others, a lack of funding, or a lack of available evidence to support changes in practice.

Conclusion

The survey and interview data suggests that former students who studied on an EID-cluster programme benefitted from the programmes in a number of ways. Knowledge gained about content and topics related to education and international development was of clear value to most former students. As important, however, were other elements of the programmes such as the values which informed teaching; a critical awareness of development issues; learning alongside co-students (from a range of country contexts); and the networking and career development opportunities offered.