

Perceptions and Experiences of State Scholarship Program Abroad

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Abstract: This study focuses on State Scholarship Program on Study Abroad 2007-2015. The main research question is to understand the ways State Scholarship Program on Study Abroad 2007-2015 contributed to development and internationalization of human capital in Azerbaijan. In connection to this main departure point, some of the relevant sub-questions to be answered are the following: What is the perception of study abroad program implementers? How do the implementers evaluate the effects of study abroad program in terms of globalization and internationalization? What is the perception of participants who went abroad via the mentioned program? How did the program shape program participants' professional life? In what ways did study abroad program participants contribute to the society through their profession? To address these questions, the author starts with historical context of the Azerbaijani Higher Education and give information about the Scholarship program. The following second chapter will focus on the theory. In this study the author has interviewed scholarship program participants and administrators who worked in the program. Interview as a method and analysis of the interviews are placed in chapter three. Finally, based on the interview results in the final section recommendations for similar future programs are made.

Keywords: education, globalization, internationalization, study abroad, state scholarship program

1. The State Program on Azerbaijanis' Study Abroad Scholarship Program (2007-2015).

The State Program on Azerbaijanis' Study abroad (2007-2015) was accepted in October 2006 and approved in April 2007 by Presidential Executive order. It was very important to find an agreement between the urgent need for qualified experts supported by international education programs and efforts of nation- and state- building. The program planned to finance 5,000 Azerbaijani students abroad between 2007-2015 with future recruitment of those students by public or private sectors in Azerbaijan. It was financed by the State Oil Fund, managed by the Minister of Education, and overseen by the specially established Commission under the President of Azerbaijan. The scholarship presented by the government conditioned the candidate to work for five years in the public or private sector in Azerbaijan upon the completion of studies. This was both a social contract and legal document between student and the state. Azerbaijan created the scholarship program both for increasing the human capital within the society and become competitive in international arena.

The main goal of the State Program was to provide the necessary conditions in the country to meet modern requirements in terms of forming a competitive economic system and ensuring sustainable development of the country, creating all necessary conditions for education of Azerbaijani youth on the basis of universal values, also expanding opportunities for talented youth to study in the world's leading countries.

The State Scholarship Program offered the first and the second priority specialties in 33 countries. The first priority specialties for 2015/2016 academic year were agriculture, anthropology, ancient languages, biology, chemistry, engineering, industry, mathematics, medicine, physics, technology, veterinary science, and the second priority specialties which were ecology, economy, education organization and management, human resource management, culture and art, and tourism.

As seen here, the areas are vast. In my study, I will focus on fields that have the highest number of students who were granted scholarships. These areas are medicine, economics, and infor-

mation technology.

According to the latest updated statistics in year 2017, general number of individuals achieved a right to study abroad on state scholarship program 2007-2015 is 3558. 1770 of them are studying and 1589 are graduate students. Below, I am showing number of students who got accepted into universities from 2007 till 2015 year. Total number of countries and universities are respectively 32 and 379 [1].

Table 1.
2007-2015 - number of students admitted

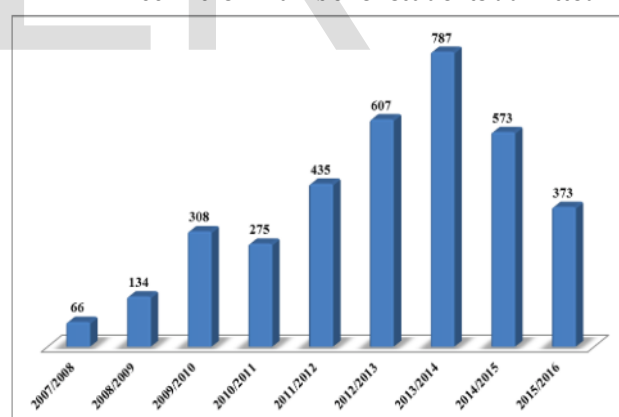


Table 1 demonstrates total number of students accepted into universities with state scholarship program on study abroad between 2007-2015. During the first years of state scholarship program, the number of students were constantly increasing from 66 in 2007/2008 to 308 students in 2009/2010. In 2010/2011, the number of students admitted were 275. Starting from 2011/2012, the quantity of students dramatically increased and the highest number of students (787) accepted into universities in the history of state scholarship program was in 2013/2014. Afterwards, there is observed recession in the quantity of students admitted with state scholarship program.

Table 2.

Statistics on the five most selected countries to study abroad with state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015:

	Country	Total
1.	The United Kingdom	1032
2.	Turkey	769
3.	Germany	441
4.	Canada	241
5.	The Kingdom of Netherlands	181

Table 2 demonstrates statistics on the five most selected countries to study abroad with state scholarship program 2007-2015. The program provided a wide range of university and country choices for students. There were 379 available universities in 32 countries. Considering the Table 2 the United Kingdom was the most selected country by 1032 students. Next country is Turkey where 769 students got admitted. Following, 441 students selected Germany and 241 students' choice was Canada. The Kingdom of Netherlands is considered as the least selected one with 181 students among the five most selected countries.

Table 3.

Statistics on the five most selected specialties to study abroad abroad with state scholarship program 2007-2015:

	Specialty Direction	Total
1.	Medicine	923
2.	Economy	849
3.	Information Technologies	347
4.	Engineering	338
5.	Social and Humanitarian Sciences	234

Table 3 demonstrates the five most selected specialties to study abroad with state scholarship program 2007-2015. The highest number of students (923) studied medicine with state scholarship program. 849 students studied in the field of Economy, 347 students in the field of Information Technologies, and 338 students studied in Engineering. Social and Humanitarian Sciences are considered as the least selected specialty with 234 students among the most five

selected specialties.

Table 4.

Statistics on Education Level:

		Total
1.	Master's Degree	1526
2.	Bachelor's Degree	1257
3.	Residency	547
4.	PhD/Doctorate	168

Table 4 demonstrates statistics on Education Level of students studying with state scholarship program 2007-2015. The highest quantity of students (1526) studied Master's Degree with state scholarship program. Next, 1257 students studied Bachelor's Degree with the mentioned program. There were 547 students studied abroad for Residency. And, the least number of students (168) studied a Doctor of Philosophy - the highest academic degree with the state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015.

The purpose of this study is to understand and discuss how the State Scholarship Program on Study Abroad 2007-2015 contributed to increasing human capital and internationalization of Azerbaijan. In this study, my aim is not to prove or test anything. In fact, I am trying to capture and explore state scholarship program implementers' and participants' experience regarding the program. Interview as a method has been used to understand both program implementers' and participants' perceptions and experiences about the Scholarship Program.

2. Human Capital and Internationalization

In today's information age we live in complex organic societies that require more and more knowledge accumulation. In order to countries to have a place in the global market economy and competition, investment on humans is becoming more crucial. Actually, some micro studies demonstrate that educational achievement contributes to the output in the economy. Consequently, there is a positive relationship between the education of the labor force and their productivity also earnings [2]. The relationship between education and economic development is implemented through the labor market. Skills acquired by individuals in the education system should be used by companies in the production of goods and services. Consequently, employees will be paid wages accordant with their productivity. However, without this link even educated employees will not find the returns from their education reflected in their salary, and the economy will not observe investments in education through higher productivity. The human capital concentrates on two main elements – individuals and organizations. Becker [3] differentiated specific and general human capital. Specific capital is when employees receive knowledge directly related to their firms as how to utilize proprietary software. Companies are willing to pay for this kind of training as it is not transferable. Becker [3] noted that it would be difficult to calculate how much to invest in their own human capital. The reason is that they would compare anticipated earnings from various careers and take into consideration the cost of obtaining the education to follow these careers, including time spent in classrooms. In numerous articles and books in the early 1960s, he streamlined assumptions about human being rational and goal-oriented in the process of their decision-making as a foundation for an elegant theory of human capital.

Amartya Sen [4] shows how human capital and human capability are interrelated. He argues:

“If education makes a person more efficient in commodity production, then this is clearly an enhancement of human capital. This can add to the value of production in the economy and also to the income of the person who has been educated. But even with the same level of income, a person may benefit from education, in reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others, and so on. The benefits of education, thus, exceeds its role as human capital in commodity production. The broader human-capability perspective would record - and value - these additional roles. The two perspectives are, thus, closely related but distinct...If a person can become more productive in making commodities through better education, better health, and so on, it is not unnatural to expect that she can also directly achieve more - and have the freedom to achieve more - in leading her life. Both perspectives put humanity at the center of attention. Following, Amartya Sen [4], taking from Adam Smith, mentions an integrated method to economic and social development:

“To develop human capability and being more productive is very close and central to Smith’s analysis of “the wealth of nations”. By taking into consideration numerous debates about the roles of “nature” and “nurture”, Smith was a persistent “nurturist”, and this was suitable for him to be confident in the improvability of human capabilities...The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of division of labour. The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter. for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education. When they come into the world, and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they were, perhaps, very much alike, and neither their parents nor play-fellows could perceive any remarkable difference”. As the author mentions, it is very crucial to notice the tie between the productive abilities and the ability to lead various types of lives. The main point is to see human capital in the extended context of the human capability view. “There is a note that the confession of the role of human qualities in contributing to economic growth is very significant, but it does not explain the reason why economic growth is sought in the first place. In case, the main focus is on the expansion of human freedom in order to live the life that humans have reason to value, then the role of economic growth in working on expansion of these opportunities has to be integrated into that more foundational comprehension of the process of development as the extension of human capability to direct freely” [4]. This aspect is important as it is linked to internationalization. Being able to connect with other individuals, for others to take one seriously and approach them respectfully is essential for the internationalization of a community in the long run.

From medicine to media to building of infrastructures to technological innovation, in every field imaginable – it is imperative to learn and keep up with the advancement of knowledge. Hence, how societies approach to the development of human capital in their coun-

try, in what ways investments are made to increase skills of people are important to investigate and develop further.

Internationalization

Rationales for Internationalization:

As there are numerous ways to define the term internationalization, there are numerous rationales as well for integrating an international dimension into the higher education. I am going to explain these rationales in such terms as ‘globalization’, ‘internationalization’, ‘integration’ which have been used on the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan No 2090 Of April 16, 2007 for numerous times in the explanation of the reasons and aims to establish the state Program. So, I want to find out according to which rationales program implementers aimed to integrate an international dimension into the higher education.

Aigner et al (1992) [5] propose the three core reasons for the internationalization of higher education. These reasons are interested in international society, maintenance of economic competitiveness, and fostering of human understanding across nations. According to Aigner et al, the reasons of internationalization differ a lot regarding content .

There are identified seven imperatives for global education. They comprise economic competitiveness, environmental interdependence, rising ethnic and religious diversity of local communities. In fact, in future, the college graduates will supervise or be supervised by individuals of various racial and ethnic groups.

3. Methods:

In my study, I have interviewed two groups of people: 1 – Program implementers of State Scholarship program on study abroad, and 2 – Participants of state scholarship program on study abroad.

1 – SAP implementers –I use questions related to the implementation process, e.g. what was the driving force of this program to start, program aims, and how program implementers define the purposes of this program. I also observed whether they used the terms internationalization and globalization before I introduced the terms to the interviewees. 2 – SAP Participants who went abroad to study via state scholarship program 2007-2015 and who returned and currently work in Azerbaijan were my study participants. The aim for targeting the study abroad participants is to see them as individuals, to figure out the contribution of people who come from abroad to their country and if they see themselves as the agents of internationalization. I focused on 3 professional fields (medicine, economics, and information technology) that have the highest number of students who were granted scholarship.

Becoming Part of the scholarship program

I asked participants how they became part of the scholarship program. All program participants first mentioned that it was their big dream from school years to study abroad. Consequently, they were searching for all possible ways to study abroad. Students studying both their Bachelor’s and Master’s degree with the state scholarship program learned about the existence of this program from the website of Ministry of Education. Other program participants studied master’s degree with the mentioned program. And, as they explained to that period this program was popular enough in the country and during the period of studying their bachelor’s

degree, they always discussed with their classmates opportunities to be one of those students studying abroad with the state scholarship program. When I asked my participants to remember who first informed them about the program, they explained that it was their own initiative to look for different opportunities to study abroad and the resources that helped them were social media, website of Ministry of Education, friends and relatives surrounding them.

Program Purpose and Participant Perceptions

How the participants articulated the program purposes is important as to see how much the official goals of the program aligned with the participant perspectives of the program. Officially stated goal in legal documents was

"To provide the necessary conditions in the country to meet modern requirements in terms of forming a competitive economic system and ensuring sustainable development of the country, creating all necessary conditions for education of Azerbaijani youth on the basis of universal values, also expanding opportunities for talented youth to study in the world's leading countries" (2007).¹

All seven participants mentioned that before applying to state scholarship program on study abroad they got familiarized with all online documents presented in website of the program. So, they knew about the goal beforehand and even most of the participants mentioned that there was not any strong need to present its goals to students. All participants hence mentioned that the main goal was to increase human capital in Azerbaijan and about the importance of these students' contribution to Azerbaijan's education.

The important note here is that students studying abroad with state scholarship program after 2013 mentioned that students who were accepted to study with the state scholarship program had constant meetings and presentations where they were told about state's goals and expectations about this program. Also, they had constant meeting with the Minister of Education. Following, participants applying after 2013 claimed that with coming of the new minister of education (Mikayil Jabbarov in March 2013) many new improvements and positive changes happened in program structure, strategy, and implementation. So, these students had nice talks and discussions with the minister and were highly motivated.

Changed specializations were: 1) from dentistry to public health and 2) from international relations to economics. Two of the participants selected very specific and new areas for Azerbaijan as public health and international development. While all participants stated that the area chosen by them was their passion and desire. The main reason of change in two of them to public health and to economics was because those specializations were priority ones that demanded by the country. This decision shows that scholarship participants were well informed and conscious about the needs of Azerbaijan and was willing to respond to the need.

When asked about their personal goals of studying abroad, one of the male participants, from economics field said: "My goal was to achieve deep knowledge, to enlarge my professional networking, and change my outlook". Another participant from In-

formation and Technology said: "The future is the age of technology, in order to keep up with the advances in the technology, I thought it would make sense to study IT". According to all participants' explanations, the main aim they had was to respond to the demand that the country had based on needs of the society as well as to acquire different education, develop deep knowledge and improve humans' lives through education.

Globalization, technical, economic and social development happening in recent years compel governments to think about the strategy of achieving skills and knowledge leading to economic competitiveness and growth. Particularly, in developing countries like in Azerbaijan, policymakers consider the strategies for developing skills affecting social and economic development in the country. And, international programs like "state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015" play a key role for citizens to achieve knowledge, "soft" and "hard" skills that will let citizens contribute positively to labor market and the economy of Azerbaijan.

Participant experiences of being part of the program

While answering this question participants asked me to give them a few minutes to think about. Afterwards, all of them discussed that it was one of the greatest opportunities that state provided to all young people regardless their family status, financial position, gender, and initial specialization. Two of the participants mentioned that they got to know how to live on their own at very young age. All participants of state scholarship program discussed the ways how program changed their worldview, improved English language skills and developed their network. The opinions discussed in this part show that program also benefited participants by expanding their worldview, providing a chance to study foreign languages, live together with various cultures and have international friends from around the world. At this point, I want to specify that according to published data in 2017, the general number of students studying abroad with state scholarship program was 3558 students. That means many individuals had a chance to have access to intercultural practices. This means scholarship program provided an opportunity for increasing human capital in Azerbaijan who had diverse cultural awareness. Such intercultural experience has direct links to make scholarship participants who have returned to work in Azerbaijan as agents of internationalization. In addition to this, more direct benefits they gained related to their professions are skills that they gained through the education they acquired. Most of the participants said that they could improve their team working skills, time-management, managing their budget. From this perspective, this program played a very important role in building students' personality. Another fact mentioned by participants was that this program influenced their trajectory and purpose in a way that they decided to teach at universities after they came back. Overall, participants discussed that the program gave them feeling of social responsibility and passion to teaching. Their choice of profession showed connection to their sense of social responsibility.

In a deeper analysis of how studying abroad through the scholarship program shaped their career, most of the participants answered that acquired knowledge, international experience, and practice helped them to find high-demanded job positions according to their area of specialization in Azerbaijan labor market. They

¹<http://xaricdetehsil.edu.gov.az/uploads/files/xariciolkeler.pdf>

could also get better and different ideas how to build their career. The important point here is that only last few years there was a change in policy so that state scholarship program participants on study abroad 2007-2015 were free of job admission exam for working in state medical institutions. They had a chance to directly apply for announced vacancies in medical institutions. Another point is that the department of state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 helped students to find a job. According to the official statistics published on June 13th, 2017, the highest number of students studying with the state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 was from medical field². They were 923 people as this specialization was considered the first priority field for the country. The program was aimed to invest in students and provide cadre potential in labor market. That means students were supposed to come back and work for five years in the country. By this way, graduate students could contribute to society and benefit human capital.

Cultural Perceptions of Participants

As mentioned above, the goal of the program in the official document included an aim of "creating all necessary conditions for education of Azerbaijani youth on the basis of universal values". I asked participants a question about how studying abroad influenced and shaped their culture. I aimed to see if their perceptions and interpretation of their experiences included aspects that were connected to "universal values" that were mentioned in the program goals. All of the participants made similar comments that it shaped their view of other cultures and their view of their own culture in a very positive way. Studying abroad gave a chance to program participants to live together with different nationalities and experience new habits, activities which were extraordinary for them. On the one hand, participants identified themselves as Azerbaijanis and realized how much their country is valuable for them. On the other hand, they learned how to live and behave when a person is surrounded by individuals from diverse countries and cultures that are also very advantageable for future in case to work in this kind of environment. From my perspective, study abroad program let students compare countries and evaluate positive and negative features. Another thing that attracted my attention during the interview was that participants mentioned that they would like to see more females having the same opportunity to study abroad. Only 10% among Azerbaijani students at Sheffield University were females. Actually, this point is very important one as a few number of females studying abroad indicates on gender inequality in our society that starts from schools. To some extent, this program had a role in initiating more women to go and study abroad both because the cost of the study was covered and state as a policy encouraged females' studying in different countries.

Participant contribution to Azerbaijani Society

One of the expected goals by state was that program participants will come back to Azerbaijan and start working here for 5 years. That will be their direct contribution to society. However, there did not exist a strict mechanism to control this process. As a result, not all students returned back or immediately after coming

back started working. Moreover, working for state is not the only way how to contribute to society. Contribution can be also by being a volunteer, running startup programs, or by organizing particular social events and etc. The goals that are defined official for creating the scholarship program stated:

"To provide the necessary conditions in the country to meet modern requirements in terms of forming a competitive economic system and ensuring sustainable development of the country".

This means the program saw a direct link between investing on individuals and creating a competitive economic system and sustainable development of Azerbaijan. By asking this question, I wanted to see how the participants assessed their part in becoming agents that contributed to Azerbaijan. When I asked this question I observed that actually, this question made all participants thinking deeply about their contribution to society. After coming back from abroad, most of the participants (two males and two females) preferred both teaching at different universities/schools and at the same time make their own business or work in any other governmental/non-governmental organization as a full-time employee. Participant Esra's words summarize the opinions of other participants: "I think the best contribution happens through teaching... the only way how we can completely contribute and implement any change or innovation. Most probably, I would not teach at the university if not this program, as before I did not think or wish about teaching". They explained that most probably they would not teach at universities if not for this program. The program made them think about social responsibility and contribution to society. Some of the participants organized trainings for young people and helped them in their recruitment process through their own experience and knowledge. Another fact is that one of the male participants decided to work at school and contribute to young learners' education. He uses international standards in the process of his teaching and teaches not only academic knowledge but also skills and abilities that are not yet taught in all schools. Also, there were students studying a very specific area in medicine, and it was directly related to decreasing thalassemia disease. And, these alumni continuously mentioned that "I can confidently work in this area due to my knowledge and international experience". A very positive point here is that participants developed an idea about what contribution means and all of them in their field tried to act responsibly in ways that they create contribution. Furthermore, having new generation of teachers with international experience directly affects increasing human capital and contribution to youth. The state invests in its citizens and expects from them to give back this investment to the society. That requests from people the sense of commitment and deeper devotion. Therefore, from my participants' responses, it becomes obvious that Azerbaijan state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 could successfully give the sense of responsibility and commitment to program participants to give back this investment to their society.

Participant Contribution to the Profession

To answer how program participants contributed to their workplace through their study abroad experience all participants mainly discussed governmental/non-governmental projects in which they were involved and talked about their contribution by

² http://xaricdetehsil.edu.gov.az/uploads/Statistika_13.06.2017.pdf

teaching at universities. One of the male participants from the field of economics explained how he built cost control system and budget system in big companies. Another participant, a woman studying medicine abroad, explained very extensively and in details her contribution. "What I am doing is about international diagnosing. In layman's language, it means that, when two people with thalassemia get married, I can inspect before the birth whether their future kid will be ill or not. If the results say that a kid is ill, mother will be obliged to stop the pregnancy and not give birth as people suffering from thalassemia depend on continuous blood transfusion. It is very severe illness. Even if it does not sound good, for the government also..., mmm.... It is also a big expense to cure them. So, this is a prevention program." Alumni graduating from the area of medicine explained their contribution in using their international experience and knowledge in building laboratories. Overall, all participants mentioned how their knowledge, skills, international experience helped them to spread all mentioned features to their workplace and bring new methods and techniques. Also, they contributed to making policy, reforms, and changes in their workplaces.

Scholarship Program and Internationalization of Azerbaijan

When I started this research, I was mainly interested to internationalization of Azerbaijan and how much the scholarship program contributed this process. I define internationalization as, a "process of integrating an international or intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution" [6]. When I asked participants if they see themselves as a contributor to Azerbaijan's internationalization process, participants asked me to elaborate on "what internationalization means". I explained that the word "internationalization" can be related to the heterogeneity of cultures in countries, institutions, and community. Furthermore, I mentioned that through the process of internationalization they can also consider and discuss the effect of cultural diversity to the country. Most of the participants explained that after this program, new different projects arrived in Azerbaijan. In terms of internationalization, yes, of course, state program helped. Alumni helped to improve, bring international standards to our country. So, most of the answers in terms of the important role of program participants in establishing new projects and businesses were positive, endorsing that they made important contribution. They claimed that some of the new projects and business showed considerable similarity to the ones which they had observed in foreign countries. In addition, they argued that people who acquired these skills abroad introduce international standards to their workplace. One of these standards is in teaching methodology. Instructors started to use international techniques and methods like to explain the lesson by showing presentations to students, using different types of assignments where students can show their creativity, creating online platforms for downloading homework, assignments, and control students' grades. Another point was that people studying abroad, upon their coming back to Azerbaijan worked in different types of organizations and they contribute by bringing new ideas, international standards, international practice, and certainly developing international relations between one or another country. Following, I asked them how they perceive their personal role in

the internationalization of Azerbaijan. From my observation, I think that this question was the most challenging one as participants could not precisely answer. Most of the program participants mentioned that they did not think that they had played an important role in the process of internationalization personally. And they did not consider themselves as the agents of internationalization. They only mentioned that they were using the international experience and knowledge in their workplaces, this process was happening through their profession. However, only two participants talked about that they were active members of AUKAA (Azerbaijan-UK Alumni Association), and they constantly organized events where both foreign and local alumni came together. This association also organizes informative presentations for different local universities about their international experiences and motivates them to study abroad, to be one of those achieving this international experience. Moreover, both British Embassy and Council are actively involved in organizing events together with alumni. Scholarship participant, bring knowledge and skill and such individual level contribution should be considered being an agent of internationalization based on the definition used in this study.

It is important to note that almost all respondents find connections of program's influence on skill and knowledge development, in other words, contribution to development of human capital. Internationalization came only after I asked the question about the internationalization and talked about the meaning of the concept.

4. Analysis of the Interviews with the Implementers:

The second part of research plan was to interview implementers of state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015. There were three individuals working in the state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 which was under the Ministry of Education.

Becoming involved in the implementation of state scholarship program of 2007-2015:

Before telling about how program implementers got involved in the process of implementation, my first interviewee said: "Please, take into consideration that staff has been changed for approximately 6-7 times, including the head of the department. And, most of us are involved from last few years". This factor was as an obstacle to find out how the program started and was being implemented by specialists. These interview participants started working in the department of state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 from 2015. One of the program implementers was a student who studied abroad through this program. After graduation, this program participant was invited to work in the Ministry of Education, and the participant agreed to work there.

Responsibilities and tasks of implementers in the implementation process:

I asked participant what their responsibilities and tasks were during the implementation process. This question was very crucial to understand the role of implementers, their contribution to the program, and program participants' career. During the inter-

view, Aylin³ described her job and responsibilities. First, she mentioned: "Our department consisted of few employees, and it was very difficult, very challenging to overcome a huge amount of work. There was so much administrative work". Here, I want to mention that there was a limited number of employees were obliged to work with all documents and students' application forms within a very short timeframe. This led all the program implementers to do multitasking all the time. Students' registration for universities, preparing their documents, controlling the process of applying to universities, participation in the interviews conducted with students, aid to students to build network with public/private sectors in Azerbaijan, and work on career opportunities for graduate students were main responsibilities of Aylin. The second program implementer mostly agreed with the point about limited number of employees and repeated the sentence said by Aylin: "Being multitasking, a few employees and a huge amount of work did not hamper us to be effective, and perform well. We could organize everything properly and on time". Nazrin was another program implementer of state scholarship program on study abroad. Her responsibilities were working with different types of problems that students met such as financial problems. Later, she was directly in charge of students' problems such as their failures at university and she had to clarify the reasons. The last implementer's responsibilities were organizing and preparing the budget to fund students studying abroad, preparing their scholarships, and solve all financial problems concerning students and program financiers.

Challenges during the program implementation process:

Two of the program implementers, Aylin and Nazrin, elaborated on the challenges in detail. Aylin explained the challenges: "One of the selection rules, was a condition that students needed to have 600 score out of 700 from Student Admission State Commission exam and only 600 and above score earners could apply for state scholarship program on study abroad. It was very problematic... as there were many students who had better potential to study abroad but had a bit lower score like 550. Another challenge was that there was age limit to apply for PhD. Only students under 35 could apply for PhD". These two mentioned problems were related to decided rules of the program. As staff was continuously changing, program implementers whom I met could not explain the reasons of these rules. Here, I would like to note on possibility to change admission rules. Having more consistent policy implementation would benefit the program. Nazrin pointed out another challenge: "A very low interest from students to specific specialties such as anthropology, ancient history, science, veterinary science... Imagine, there was only one student studying anthropology..." There is a need to discuss low interest to particular specialties. One of the reasons may be low career opportunities with lower rates of demand for particular spheres in Azerbaijan in comparison with others that were made available for scholarship. "A big challenge in this program was funding" – said Aylin. She described the scheme of this process: "First, we prepared all reports in Study Abroad Program Department in the Ministry of Education, then we sent all info to the Department of Finance in the Ministry of

Education, next step was Oil Fund, and lastly to Treasury in the Ministry of Finance. It was pretty long way and very time-consuming". Obviously, in order to realize each step, it demanded enough time to apply for these organizations, prepare official letters, build communication, and receive agreement. This process took approximately 30-35 days. And, due to delays in the payment, students could attend classes minimum a month later from the start date of the classes and tried to catch up with their program of study which could affect their studies negatively. At the beginning, when students went abroad they could not get their monthly scholarship on time immediately from the first month. That led to numerous complaints by students as some hostels demanded payment for 3-6 months before. I would like to relate last mentioned problem to the fact that there were only several specialists and it appears that there were challenges to complete the whole work.

The purpose of the program

How the program implementers expressed the purpose of the program is important as to see how much the official goals of the program were formed with the implementer's perspectives and views. Officially stated goal was:

"To provide the necessary conditions in the country to meet modern requirements in terms of forming a competitive economic system and ensuring sustainable development of the country, creating all necessary conditions for education of Azerbaijani youth on the basis of universal values, also expanding opportunities for talented youth to study in the world's leading countries".

Implementers used similar definitions with the original one stated in the legal documentation. Aylin's definition summarized all participants' views: "Program aimed to provide competitive specializations and cadre potential in labor market, to prepare specialists for the competitive economy environment and to provide state cadre demand. Overall, we expected these students to bring international experience achieved by them abroad and spread it in our country". Program implementers were knowledgeable enough about the program and the legal documents introducing the program. Afterwards, two of the participants continued to discuss to what extent they achieved the purpose of the program.

Program's contribution to the intended outcomes in the short/long term:

This question was important to see how program implementers consider in what ways the program could contribute to the intended outcomes and it happened for whom, in what circumstances. Here, I want to mention that before starting interviews with the implementers, they asked me to see questions first. And, they had some notes about this question, so they were looking at them and continued answering. As intended outcomes for short term, Aylin said: "There was a list of new programs for Azerbaijan, e.g. Robotics, NANO Technologies, Anthropology and etc. These programs were not popular in our universities. Students studying abroad, they achieved experience, knowledge, and we call this process as a cadre preparation for the country" (kadr ehtiyacının ödənilməsi, kadr hazırlığı). That means outcomes for short-term were to increase human capital by preparing new specialists and

³ All names are pseudonyms for keeping the participants' confidentiality.

having new outlook, and foreign experience. Consequently, it can be claimed that the program contributed to increasing human capital for the country. The evidence is that approximately 60% of graduate students are working in non-governmental organizations, and 40% in governmental organizations and this is a direct contribution to Azerbaijan's technical growth. Another point mentioned was: "Number of students studying medicine was higher than others, and we intended them to come and contribute to our society". According to official statistics published in 2017, the total number of students studying in the field of medicine was 923⁴. And, if to consider that at least half of them are working in Azerbaijan, this fact will lead to their contribution to Azerbaijani society and the advancement of the country.

As long-term intended outcomes, one of the implementers said: "We would like to build partnership with foreign professors, invite them to Azerbaijan. It would be better if they come here and teach in our universities. Also, to focus on dual programs". In fact, currently, there are several dual programs in some of the state universities in Azerbaijan, like at University of Economics, ADA University, Azerbaijan State Oil Academy, and etc. And, after graduating from the university you have a chance to get two diplomas. The program implementers wished to spread this idea to most of state universities. This intended outcome indicates that there were plans for internationalization of Azerbaijan and creating links with other countries and international arena through the exchange of ideas and professionals. Another intended outcome is: "Teaching Azeri language in foreign countries and make Azerbaijan famous in those countries". This idea can contribute to internationalization of Azerbaijan as well. As a result, foreign students will be familiar with our culture, history, and language. The crucial point is that while interviewing program implementers, none of them mentioned the concept "internationalization" for above mentioned ideas. It shows that even if there is no manifest declaration, internationalization is part of the latent functions of the program. Following these comments, I asked directly to the interviewees: "In the global era, how do you see this program in relation to internationalization of Azerbaijan?" The question was received with hesitation and participants took several minutes to articulate their thoughts. After requesting a few minutes to think about it, Aylin said: "See, nearly nine years, we are sending students to different countries, to the countries of Europe, the US, Asia... some of them studied their Bachelor's degree others their Master's degree. And, most of them started working there". Mainly, my interviewee discussed that by living in that environment among people from all over the world, they experienced interaction with other cultures and nations. Obviously, they shared and exchanged information about their country with other international people. Many individuals who did not know the word "Azerbaijan" discovered this country through our students. Later, she mentioned: "Our students continuously organized presentations and events about Azerbaijan. During holidays, they demonstrated our national holidays, talked about folklore, cuisine, and traditions". As we see, there happened cultural diversity through program participants in the foreign countries that can be considered as a contribution to internationalization of Azerbaijan. Another

program implementer, Nazrin summarized the views of two implementers when talked about projects leading to internationalizations: "Probably, you have heard about "Startup projects", students studying abroad played a very important role in attracting this project to Azerbaijan, also they observed many other projects which they developed in Azerbaijan after coming back". In fact, students share in Azerbaijan their international experience. On the one hand, they spread international standard in the organizations in which they work and in their society. On the other hand, graduate students who are working at local universities involve local students to international projects. Here, we can observe the process of internationalization that we live today. Additionally, the implementers mentioned that the department of state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 organizes meetings where graduate students have a chance to meet with different organizations and share their experience and knowledge; also they can find career opportunities in these meetings.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, I will elaborate on advantages and disadvantages based on the reflection and perceptions of program implementers and scholarship participants. The program was between 2007-2015 and I intend to write this as a descriptive study for analyzing that period. Additionally, this part is intended to certain recommendations for future scholarship programs. A new scholarship program is under way in Azerbaijan. Even after its implementation, there can always be adjustments and improvements to programs. This study aims to show the challenges as well as successful parts of the previous program through the experiences of both implementers and participants in the program. These findings may be a contribution to future policy creations or adjustments.

Almost all participants studied Master's degree in their related program. Two of the participants studied both their Bachelor's and Master's degree with state scholarship program. Hence, opportunities have been created for students to further continue their education with state program. State provided this opportunity to all students who wished to continue their Master's degree and Ph.D. with state scholarship program. Enhancing student education and degree earning is an important advantage as this would help students to be motivated to successfully finish one degree in order to become eligible to continue the next phase of their education. As advantages, one of the program implementers said: "Obviously, we see all advantages, no reason to discuss them. State covered all expenses. The program was available for all degrees. University choice and the list of specialties were very wide". Covering all expenses, from tuition fees to living expenses was indeed a big advantage that existed from 2007 till 2015. All individuals regardless of their economic class, who wished to study abroad and met all requirements could apply. Another advantage of the program is related to job opportunities. Civil service admission⁵ was much easier for graduates studying with state scholarship program on study abroad (<http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/4481>., Art. 28.13) They

⁵ Civil service admission examinations are organized for Azerbaijani citizens who have a wish to work in public sector, for state organizations. People are required to pass exams from subjects directly related to their professional field and further they have an interview step.

⁴ http://xaricdetehsil.edu.gov.az/uploads/Statistika_13.06.2017.pdf

did not have to pass exams for civil service, the just had to go through an interview.

When it comes to disadvantages, one of the implementers said: "Certainly, I am not going to tell that there was not any disadvantage or everything was ideal. We have had problems in the implementation process. One of them is related to lack of specialists in our team..." The department of state scholarship program on study abroad in the Ministry of Education consisted of few specialists. Overall, they consisted of 5-6 individuals, whereas the general number of students have received a right to study abroad with state scholarship program was 3558 students according to 32 countries. The number of applicants differed from year to year. So, in 2007-2008 there were 66 applicants. Later this number was increasing and the highest number – 787 students were in 2013-2014. Afterwards, the number of students was consistently decreasing, from 573 students in 2014-2015 to 373 in 2015-2016. I have described this scheme to show that it is impossible for 5-6 people to work with this number of students among 32 countries and 379 universities from all over the world, who are studying in very different fields. Moreover, countries were socially and economically very different from one another. Hence, one of the first recommendations is to have systemically categorized specialists related to subject areas of study and also people who have vast amount of information about the needs students would have in different counties. As an example, a group of specialists working only with applicants for undergraduate/graduate programs according to particular countries and specialties.

Another important recommendation could be related to job divisions among the stuff to create an efficient division of labor in order to prepare the documents on time and finish both the application process and preparation of students for their departure and settling to their universes. Here, I want to mention that most of the program participants discussed delays to their admission to university, not being able to be part of the university orientation which helps students to adjust to the new setting and form new contacts, networks, and friendships. Moreover, they were late for starting the classes. The main reason for all these delays was related to processing of their application and procedures of the department focusing on scholarship program. Participants mentioned that the department of state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 tried to help and support with documents preparations to all students. And, one of my participants discussed that when he applied with some uncompleted documents he was not immediately rejected. Coordinators directed him to renew some of the documents and apply again. After that process, he got accepted. The problem mentioned by all participants during application process was that they got results from the Ministry of Education very late. The time when participants were informed about their results happened when academic year had already started.

This information is very important for several reasons. First, it indicates that there were administrative issues in working process of coordinators. The evidence is that there were only 3-4 workers in the department and a huge amount of work that can be realistic to have some delays and gaps in the implementation process. The whole preparations of official letters, applications, documents for applying to one or another university and organizing

reports for getting financial support took a long time. So, it seems that it was challenging for a few workers to overcome the whole process. From another point, it was very problematic for students as they were obliged to lose a very important period of their study, first months. So, they had to catch up all covered materials and also get prepared for exam sessions. This issue could influence their academic achievement.

State scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015 had a transparent admission process. Taking into consideration previous experience, an important way that the program can be improved is increasing the number of people working for different tasks after students are selected. The reason is that after the selection process is done, there is a lot of paper and administrative work needed to get students ready for their travel and placement to study abroad. Consequently, the admission process will be more efficient. Another area that the scholarship program had as a disadvantage was mentioned as: "... lack of strict mechanism to control students". According to program regulations (Art. 2.3.11), graduate students after graduating had to come back to Azerbaijan within two months of their graduation and work unceasingly for five years in the specialty area that they earned their degrees. However, this condition was not met by all program participants. As program implementer mentioned, lack of strict mechanism let some students stay there and not come back to Azerbaijan without any negative consequence. In some cases, when the participant came back and started working in Azerbaijan, they did not fulfill the five-year time period as mentioned in the regulations. Some, while they preferred to come back and had the will to work in Azerbaijan, they faced a challenge of finding a suitable job. From my interviews with program participants, six out of seven were complaining that when they came back they could not find an appropriate job relevant to their education. Here is my suggestion that creating good job opportunities and networks for encouraging students to come back will help increasing human capital in Azerbaijan. However, if students prefer to stay abroad after graduation, it can be still helpful for Azerbaijan, particularly in the process of internationalization.

The following examples demonstrate how investing on state scholarship on study abroad program would be benefit for Azerbaijan in the long run even if students do not return back to home country:

- keeping scholarship awardees joined to Azerbaijan through involving them in international events to represent Azerbaijan in their own professional fields and cultural events; benefiting from them as lobbyist;
- keeping them as network agents to create communication and interaction with professionals between host country and Azerbaijan, also encouraging those who are in medical and academic fields to come as trainers or visiting scholars.

The latter point will not only help internationalization but also increase human capital of Azerbaijan in a direct way. Furthermore, if state expects from students come back and work for five years, at that time they should be provided with appropriate job related to their education and professional area. A program implementer said: "We had some website like career portal for graduate stu-

dents, but it is not active anymore". My recommendation to this question is that there should be created career online portal functioning exclusively for students studying with state scholarship program on study abroad 2007-2015, where both employers from governmental/non-governmental organizations and students will be able to see each other. Students will share their CVs, background information, social activities, participated trainings, seminars and employers sharing with vacancies, and job requirements. So, both sides will be able to observe each other. Alternatively, the scholarships could be made available for certain institutions and certain positions from the beginning of the scholarship appointment so that students would know where they will come back and serve.

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In the global era how do you see this program in relation to internationalization of Azerbaijan?
In what ways do you consider yourself an agent of internationalization?
What were the advantages and disadvantages of this program?
What kind of different approaches or changes would be needed in future scholarship programs?

Appendix I

Questions to ask from program implementers:

What is your name and occupation?
Please tell me about how you got involved in implementation of the scholarship program of 2007-15
What was your responsibility/your task in the implementation process?
What kind of challenges did you face during the program implementation process?
As one of implementers how do you define the purpose of this program?
In what ways the program contributed to the intended outcomes in the short, medium and long term? (For whom, in what ways and in what circumstances)
In the global era how do you see this program in relation to internationalization of Azerbaijan?
In what ways participants contribute to society?
What were the advantages and disadvantages of this program?
What kind of different approaches or changes would be needed in future scholarship programs?

Questions to ask from participants:

What is your name and occupation?
Tell me how you became a participant to the scholarship program?
How was the purpose of the program introduced to you when you became a participant?
Which country did you go to?
How many years have you stayed abroad?
What did you study?
What were your reasons/aim in choosing your area of specialization? (economics/medicine/information technology)?
What were your experiences being part of this program?
In what ways this program contributed to you personally?
How did this program help you to shape your career?
In what ways this program shaped your view of your own culture?
In what ways this program shaped your contribution to the Azerbaijani society?
How did you contribute to your workplace/profession through your study abroad experience?