

Promoting Access and Equity in Post-Graduate Education: The Ford Foundation
International Fellowships Program

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Introduction

The Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP) is the Foundation's most significant recent investment in higher education and advanced training. The program was specifically conceived to identify and provide educational opportunities for highly talented, socially committed individuals from groups and communities with limited access to higher education, so that they, in turn, would be better equipped to promote social justice in their home countries and communities. This examination of the program's underlying vision, specific goals and structure, and results obtained thus far, illuminates the Foundation's core values and the important strategic choices it has made about what constitutes effective support to tertiary education and research in, and for people from, developing countries.

The Ford Foundation, one of the major private foundations in the United States, has long believed that higher education and research can be powerful engines for global development. Since the late 1950s, Ford Foundation support has enabled universities and research centers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to strengthen their institutional capacity in disciplines and fields considered critical for development, such as agriculture, economics, education and the social sciences. Funding has most often been provided for policy-oriented research projects on urgent social, economic, and political issues, to help create new interdisciplinary fields such as women's and environmental studies, and to help stimulate vibrant intellectual and scholarly communities through associations and international exchange. And because highly qualified personnel are needed to carry out such activities, support for advanced training at the postgraduate level—both in developing countries and regions as well as abroad—has long been a major component of the Foundation's work.

A complete review of the Ford Foundation's support for higher education and research in developing countries is beyond the scope of this paper. At present, the Foundation maintains a total of 12 overseas offices in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Russia, each with its own combination of support to universities, independent research centers, and scholarly associations in their respective regions. In addition, the Foundation's central office in New York provides support for a number of international or regional projects that may involve universities and research centers in developing countries as well as faculty and staff from those institutions.

This paper will primarily discuss the International Fellowships Program (IFP). IFP is administered by the International Fellowships Fund (IFF), an independently incorporated supporting organization of the Institute of International Education (IIE) that was established by Ford to operate the IFP. Launched in November 2000 with an allocation of \$US280 million,¹ the program expects to award a total of 3,325 fellowships for post-graduate study to students from Russia and 21 other countries and territories in Africa, Asia, and Latin America over the life of the program, to extend through 2012.² 1,544 IFP Fellows have already been selected in 74 competitions held since 2001. 256 IFP Fellows have successfully completed their fellowships, and 840 Fellows are currently enrolled at 327 universities in 40 host countries.³

Under the IFP awards, Fellows may pursue up to three years of study for masters, doctoral, or professional post-graduate degrees in a broad range of academic disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. They elect to study anywhere in the world, including their home countries. After concluding their academic programs, IFP Fellows are expected to return and contribute to development processes in their home communities and countries. To help ensure that this expectation is met, Fellows are selected on the basis of their social commitment and leadership potential in addition to their academic achievement.

¹ The Ford Foundation grant to the International Fellowships Fund was made in September 2001.

² Fellows are selected from the following countries and territories: in Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania; in Asia, China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam; in Latin America, Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru; in the Middle East, Egypt and Gaza/West Bank; and Russia.

³ Figures as of March 10, 2005

Selections are carried out in the Fellows' home countries by independent committees convened by IFP's "international partners"—a decentralized network of locally-based organizations supported by the program that are responsible for administering recruitment, selection and post-selection activities in their respective countries and regions.

The Vision and Goals of IFP

While earlier fellowship programs sponsored by the Ford Foundation stressed the need for educated elites from developing countries to address problems in their own countries, the IFP takes that vision a step further. Directed toward talented individuals from marginalized groups and communities lacking systematic access to higher education, IFP is explicitly concerned with **broadening access to and increasing equity within the higher education sector**—an important principle underlying Ford's higher education funding in the United States, and, more recently, in the developing world as well.

This dimension of educational inequality is often missing in the discussion about expansion of tertiary education in the developing world. Development professionals agree that in today's knowledge-based economy, there is an increased need for highly educated people with specialized skills to help address poverty, endemic and epidemic disease, environmental devastation and other critical problems (Ramphela 2003). It seems self-evident that many of these highly educated people should come from, live, and work in the poor communities where these problems are most severe. Yet despite the expansion of tertiary enrollments throughout the developing world, access to higher education, especially at the post-graduate level, is still largely restricted to wealthy urban elites, and—in some but not all countries—to male students.

For example, according to a 2000 World Bank report, *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, from 1975 to 1990 the number of adults in developing countries with at least some higher education increased by 250 percent. By 1995, more than 47 million students were enrolled, and by 2000 more than half of all higher education students were based in the developing world. Yet urban areas, rich households,

men, and dominant ethnic and racial groups are over-represented in tertiary education, while rural areas, poor households, women, and minority ethnic and racial groups are under-represented. Women are making gains, increasing to nearly one-half of all tertiary education students in developing countries, from 32 to 45 percent, over the 30-year period from 1965-1995 (World Bank 2000). Nonetheless, gender differences are still marked in the Arab world, in some countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, and in South Asia. In India, for example, tertiary gross enrollment rates were eight percent in 1998, with men at ten per cent and women at only six per cent (Dassin 2004).

IFP aims to extend opportunities in higher education for qualified people from underrepresented groups, but no single definition of appropriate “target groups” for the fellowship can apply to the broad range of countries and cultural contexts in which the program operates. Instead, as part of the program, IFP stimulates debate about public policy questions surrounding access to higher education by convening prominent government officials and civil society actors and asking them to identify which groups are most likely to be excluded. Factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, race, caste, religion, language, geographic isolation, political instability, and physical disability are considered. Across the program, a broad range of “target groups” has been identified, including indigenous peoples in Mexico, women in Muslim areas of West Africa, and people from minority ethnic groups living in remote areas in Vietnam. Despite considerable variation, poverty, gender and coming from or living in a remote or rural area are important selection criteria throughout the program.

The program’s success in recruiting and placing Fellows from marginalized or discriminated groups—and the Fellows’ success in their academic courses—is being widely noted, and in some cases emulated, by national governments. For example, in Brazil the IFP has become an important example of a successful “affirmative action” program. This is especially relevant because the federal government in Brazil has recently adopted “affirmative action” policies that seek to increase the number of African-Brazilian and indigenous students in Brazilian universities. In Mexico, new opportunities for government support for further study and political participation at the

national and international level are opening up for indigenous Fellows who have successfully completed their academic programs under the IFP Fellowship. And in Vietnam, thanks in part to presentations made by IFP graduates to senior policymakers, the national government has explicitly recognized that students from designated “national minorities” can excel in internationally funded programs, thereby enhancing their prestige within Vietnamese society.

Another important principle promoted by the Foundation and embodied by IFP is that effective tertiary education for people from developing countries—whether pursued in their home country or region or abroad—**should be clearly linked to their country’s development needs**. Hence opportunities for advanced training should require a reciprocal obligation among recipients to contribute to their own societies. However, funding agencies and national governments should not predetermine what constitutes “practical” or “useful” knowledge. In fact, the IFP experience demonstrates that when **socially committed individuals with leadership potential and experience in development-related work** are provided with the opportunity to select the set of analytic skills and empirical knowledge that they consider most relevant to their goals for social transformation, they select a **broad range** of disciplines and fields. These include traditional development-oriented fields like community economic development, health policy and education, but also anthropology, history, and the arts. **All of these areas** are important for creating meaningful development that builds on, rather than destroys, traditional and local knowledge systems.

A third principle of the Foundation exemplified by IFP is closely related to this point. In supporting higher education and research or any set of activities in developing countries, staff in the Ford overseas offices work closely with indigenous organizations, **developing local capacity to direct and administer projects**. (In the overseas offices, many Ford staff members are themselves nationals of the countries or regions where the offices are located.) Although dependency on external funding is a continuing reality for most universities, non-governmental organizations and government agencies in the world’s

poorest countries, this emphasis on “capacity building” fosters a countervailing autonomy among grantee organizations.

Local capacity is also critical to ensure that IFP programs reflect the particular realities and needs of each participating country or region. Using the Ford Foundation funds granted to the International Fellowships Fund, IFP finances a network of 16 “international partner” organizations around the world to carry out recruitment, selection, orientation and other post-selection activities for IFP Fellows. In some countries, such as Chile, new organizations have been formed that are the first in their regions with the necessary expertise to administer international fellowship programs. This highly decentralized structure has led to a **“bottom up” approach** in which the program’s international partners have contributed to its design, policies and procedures. A New York-based “IFP Secretariat” conducts continuous monitoring and regular networking activities that join the partner organizations into a single learning system. This helps to maintain programmatic consistency at the regional and global level, but the decentralized structure helps to ensure that **the program is responsive to local needs and conditions**, especially for recruitment and selection of candidates. The work of IFP’s international partners is supplemented by some half dozen additional organizations based in the United States and Europe that are funded by the International Fellowships Fund to provide educational services such as placement and leadership training for the program as a whole.

Yet just as the Foundation promotes exchanges between staff and grantees based in developing countries and their counterparts in the global “North,” IFP uses **electronic communications to build a global network** of partner organizations and Fellows. Indeed, without electronic communications, the rapid information exchange necessary for program administration would be virtually impossible. On the program side, IFP has experimented with **internet-based pre-enrollment training** to minimize the need for Fellows’ to leave their homes and families during preparation for post-graduate work. IFP Fellows are not permitted to complete degrees through distance learning programs. However, they are encouraged to enroll in the post-graduate programs that are best suited

to their interests, regardless of their location. In this sense, IFP is more open to possibilities of today's global "education market" than many bilateral programs, which typically require scholarship recipients to study in the country that provides the funds (e.g. Fulbright scholars usually study in the United States).

Evaluation Strategies and Outcomes

The Ford Foundation uses many different evaluation strategies to gauge the effectiveness of its support for higher education and research projects in developing countries. In many cases external consultants from the countries in question prepare extensive qualitative analyses of higher education institutions (or programs within them) that have received Foundation funding. The major criteria for success are usually to what degree the funding has contributed to institutional consolidation, improvement of staff capacity, diversity of funding sources, the ability to carry out the institution's mission and other similar measures.

Reviews of research projects tend to focus on the policy impact of the research and how the findings were (or were not) applied in a given setting. Typically, evaluations are conducted by the Foundation to determine whether future funding of a specific project is warranted, and if so, how the learning from previous projects can be factored into follow-on proposals. Similarly, the Foundation often sponsors evaluations of groups of related projects to determine whether or not a particular line of funding is having the desired impact on a given field and should be continued.

In the case of IFP, the program itself developed a formative evaluation with an outside group, the Center for Higher Education Policy Research (CHEPS), based at the University of Twente in the Netherlands. In 2003 CHEPS developed a number of questionnaire instruments and interview protocols for primary data collection and analysis. In 2004, the instruments were applied to the multiple actors in the program, including Fellows and alumni, international partner organizations charged with carrying out the program in different countries, educational organizations providing services such

as university placement, student monitoring and financial administration, and Fellows' supervisors and representatives of host universities.

The surveys and interviews were designed to answer major questions raised by the program. These included: (a) the degree to which IFP is able to define, reach and select its target group(s); (b) the effectiveness of the program's pre-academic training and placement services; (c) the success of the Fellows' post-graduate experience and outcomes; and (d) whether or not the program enables alumni to use their education and career for the betterment of their communities and countries (CHEPS 2005).

The principal findings, based on response rates of 60-70 percent for the Fellows' questionnaires and up to 100 percent for IFP's international partner organizations and educational service providers, confirmed that the program is fact meeting its major goals, concluding that:

“IFP has proved to be successful in breaking the traditional mode of selection for post-graduate studies and in providing unique opportunities for further education to groups that lack access to higher education. The IFP has set up infrastructures and networks that reflect program goals and allow for local variety within global coherence”(Enders, Theisens, and Westerheijden 2005).

For example, 73 percent of Fellows were born in rural areas or small cities; 86 percent have fathers with no higher education degree; and 93 percent (of the 2004 cohort) report that their family income is equal to or below the national average for their country. The surveys also show that 88 percent of the Fellows have a history of volunteer work, and well over 50 percent have earned formal recognition or awards for their leadership activities. In a key operational area, the surveys shows that the IFP placement process—supplemented by up to one year of pre-enrollment training in language, computer and research skills—was highly successful because **all of the selected Fellows** (excluding the few who withdrew or were deferred for various reasons) **were able to enroll in a post-graduate study program**, and eight out of ten would definitively recommend their academic programs to other Fellows.

The CHEPS surveys also provide initial data about the IFP alumni—critical for assessing the program’s impact. Although the program is still relatively young, available data about roughly 50 of the first alumni⁴ indicate that **they had all successfully completed their studies by the time their fellowships concluded.** Moreover, 78 percent of alumni had returned to or stayed in their home country, while 22 percent were still living outside their home country. A majority of alumni who were not in their home country were pursuing further studies or receiving advanced professional training. The fact that almost all of the first generation of alumni—regardless of where they are based—were engaged in social justice related work suggests that if these trends continue, the program will contribute to a healthy “brain gain” or a dynamic “brain circulation” for the sending countries, rather than a negative “brain drain.”

In accordance with the purpose of formative evaluations, the CHEPS study makes several recommendations that would strengthen the program. For example, while most Fellows found the program well-administered and were in general satisfied with its policies, a number expressed a need for better information regarding practical matters such as housing at their host universities. Many Fellows were concerned about supporting their families while studying (IFP does not provide dependent support). Fellows reported needing more preparation in foreign language skills, research methods, and academic writing skills. And finally, Fellows and alumni reported that they would benefit from more extensive leadership training and alumni activities. In most of these operational areas, IFP will be able to implement improvements for current and future cohorts of Fellows.

The CHEPS “formative” evaluation of IFP demonstrates the **desirability of standardized data collection and analysis while a program is still in operation**, provided it is of sufficient duration to benefit from “mid-course” corrections. Moreover, the evaluation has been useful to ensure that longitudinal data, particularly about the socio-economic profile of the Fellows, their postgraduate experiences, and the post-fellowship careers of alumni, will be available when a “summative” evaluation is done by

⁴ There were 256 IFP alumni as of March 10, 2005.

the Foundation after the program (or its active selection phase) has concluded. In short, **formative evaluation is a powerful tool** not only to rate the effectiveness of Foundation programs but also to ensure that they achieve their maximum impact while the funding is still in place.

Incorporating Evaluation Outcomes

IFP is so far a unique program for the Ford Foundation and has not led to new, similar initiatives. However, the early outcomes of the formative evaluation and a wealth of experience gained during nearly five years of program operations in 22 countries have provided a deep understanding of **how to structure international projects so that they are responsive to local conditions within a global framework**. IFP has convincingly demonstrated the effectiveness of **decentralized implementation** in which **locally based organizations not only operate the program but also play a key role in the design of policies and procedures**. This is essential to avoid a “top-down” structure that reinforces, rather than inverts, the conventional hierarchies of power. At the same time, local experience is clearly enriched by the **regional and global exchanges** made possible through **electronic communications** (as well as face-to-face meetings). Intra-regional information exchange—for example, between the international partners in Chile and Peru in the Andean region or among the partners in Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam in Southeast Asia—has been particularly useful in enhancing local capacity to carry out the program in individual countries.

The experience of building IFP “from scratch” has also demonstrated the importance of **innovation** and an **experimental methodology** for programs that are attempting to benefit non-traditional grantees. For example, each of the IFP’s international partners has had to devise new recruitment strategies to reach candidate target groups in remote or rural areas, just as the program itself had to develop a set of differentiated strategies to meet Fellows’ diverse needs for pre-enrollment academic training. Similarly, the program had to create a unique network of educational service providers—traditionally competitors and each with expertise in different educational systems—to offer placement assistance for admissions to universities based in dozens of countries. While the program

adapted as many “best practices” as possible from conventional fellowship programs, especially in regard to fairness and transparency, it also had to create **new structures** to implement its vision of a truly global program serving non-traditional students.

Lessons Learned

IFP has begun to distill some important lessons about what is actually involved in **broadening access to and increasing equity in higher education** and in **linking higher education to development goals**. First, while decades of effort to increase primary and secondary school enrollment and completion rates have greatly expanded the applicant pool for tertiary-level enrollments, tertiary capacity has not kept pace, and many obstacles remain for students from disadvantaged sectors. **Post-graduate education, especially, is still largely beyond their grasp**. Yet the demand for advanced training is intense. In its first four years of competitions (2001-2004), IFP received more than **60,000** applications.

Second, we have learned that it is possible to **build up human resources to create development “on the ground,”** one graduate at a time. Providing educational opportunities to members of the same elites who have benefited from the status quo in developing countries is unlikely to lead to positive social change. Deliberate outreach to talented leaders with “direct knowledge of their societies’ worst problems and inequities, and a sense of moral urgency about them” (Berresford 2001) may prove to be a more productive approach. By recruiting talented individuals from marginalized and excluded social groups, and requiring that successful candidates demonstrate not only academic achievement but also strong social commitment and leadership potential, IFP has been able to identify literally thousands of extraordinary individuals who are **strongly motivated to use their education for the betterment of their communities and societies**. To reinforce the Fellows’ capacity in this regard, the program invites them to participate in a series of cohort building and leadership activities that strengthen their collective identity as scholars and activists committed to social change.

Finally, IFP is countering the oft-made charge that **implementing more equitable opportunity in higher education compromises academic quality**. Although they are generally older than typical graduate students and may have attended less selective undergraduate institutions than their elite counterparts, IFP Fellows can, and do, excel, in comparison with more traditionally selected post-graduate students. Fellows have been admitted to masters, doctoral and professional programs in many of the world's best-regarded universities. Several dozen Fellows have earned top honors and awards; a significant number of IFP master's degree Fellows have progressed to doctoral programs; and fewer than a half dozen Fellows—from among more than 1,100 who have accepted places in wide array of high quality post-graduate programs—have withdrawn for academic reasons.

It is crucial to note that IFP's positive outcomes are not left to chance. The program takes great care to provide Fellows with pre-enrollment training (both in country and at their host universities, if necessary) and an array of counseling and placement services. Moreover, IFP has developed partnerships with more than 50 universities worldwide that share the program's vision and are therefore willing to create flexible admissions criteria, provide academic mentoring and student support services, and vary the pace and structure of academic programs, especially during the first term when IFP Fellows may need to attain significant new language and academic skills (Dassin and Zurbuchen 2005).

Conclusion

“Northern” donor support for tertiary education programs, including support for advanced training in developing countries or abroad, can be more effective if **equity** and **access** are systematically prioritized as primary program goals. That focus in itself constitutes an important strategy to foster more **equitable development** in the countries' educational sector. Moreover, donor support can effectively **link educational opportunities to a country's broader development needs**, but only if beneficiaries themselves (whether individuals or institutions) determine those needs, and play a significant role in program design and implementation. Finally, **formative evaluations** are a useful tool to organize

standardized data collection and increase the effectiveness of programs by allowing them to incorporate “mid-course” policy corrections.

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