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Fellowship evaluation—by whom?

The author argues that evaluation of the effectiveness of fellowships awarded by outside donors to nationals of developing countries for study abroad should, wherever possible, be undertaken by the recipient governments.

The award of fellowships to nationals from developing countries for study abroad is an important component of technical cooperation. Among the major donors are the United Nations agencies, which, in 1981, were responsible for 18% of such fellowships. In 1973–74, these agencies administered some 21,500 fellowships worth in excess of US$ 90 million. By far the most important donor was the World Health Organization, with 7360 awards costing $30 million. In 1984–85, WHO awarded almost 6600 fellowships at a cost of $51.4 million. Bilateral development agencies also provide numerous fellowships. In the fiscal year 1980–81, the Australian Government awarded some 3300 fellowships to nationals from developing countries for study in Australia. The United Kingdom annually sponsors some 4000 fellows from developing countries, while about 1700 are financed by the Netherlands.

Clearly, it is important for the parties involved to know whether the money spent on fellowships is effectively used. Many donor agencies have therefore conducted evaluations. According to these studies, a large number of fellows have reported that they have not had the opportunity to put their training to good use. In a study of Latin American fellows, 32% reported a lack of financial resources and 16% a lack of human resources; 24% also mentioned opposition from their supervisors (1). Among Asian fellows, 70% reported a lack of support staff and 54% a lack of technical equipment; 33% encountered other difficulties, including poor libraries and no supervision (2). Among fellows from Ghana, 28% found that there was no money to buy materials and equipment (3). In a study of postgraduate fellows from various countries, about half reported a lack of funds in the home institutions for both applied and basic research; moreover, a third seldom or never had access to laboratory equipment, and a quarter rarely or never had access to foreign journals and books (4).

Difficulties may arise because of the nature of the training itself. Government officials in one recipient country hinted that it was somewhat irresponsible to raise fellows' expectations by providing training that could not be used because of a lack of equipment.

The numbers of fellows returning to their home countries often seem to be overestimated because of low response rates to questionnaires. Fellows who remain abroad are likely to be comparatively

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difficult to locate and disinclined to respond to enquiries. Consequently, it is to be expected that there will be a larger proportion of non-returnees among non-respondents than among respondents. Information from responding fellows is therefore unreliable for estimating the extent of the “brain drain”. Low response rates are, in fact, a problem in many studies. Few of the evaluations undertaken included more than two-thirds of the fellows in the original sample, and in several studies the response rates have been only 25-30%.

Decision-making

There is a clear need for recipient governments themselves to evaluate the impact of the fellowships. The international character of fellowship activity should not be neglected, affecting as it does decisions on the operation of the activity and the use of evaluation findings generated by donor agencies. Donors can make decisions about policy issues and administrative matters but have no power to impose regulations concerning the operation of fellowship programmes on recipient governments. Whether to conform to outside directives is a matter for the sovereign states themselves.

Donor agencies, through their studies, can obtain useful information with which to guide policy-making. However, if these investigations were essentially a matter of checking up on governments their value would be questionable. Countries do not always use recommended selection procedures or criteria; fellows may not be employed in their fields of study, or in the public sector, or in positions where they can make proper use of their training.

Political factors

The selection process may be quite politicized: thus there may be a lack of information about available fellowships; selection committees may be abolished without evident reasons; and fellowships may not be awarded to the most suitable applicants. A WHO study of 128 fellows from four countries suggests that many fellowships are never officially advertised; only 2.4% of the fellows had learned about the awards from publications or public notices. Some governments appear to distribute fellowships in order of seniority or rotation rather than by merit. At times, fellowships appear to be used as rewards or as a means of removing unwanted people. In such circumstances it is legitimate to speculate over the role, or even existence, of selection committees.

There may also be irregularities in the employment of returned fellows. If political factors are involved, no pressure from donor agencies, based on their evaluation findings, is likely to affect the recipient governments’ way of acting. Of course, it may not be possible to employ returned fellows as initially intended. Because of the general shortage of senior staff in many countries, people trained for particular jobs may have to do others that are not directly related to their training. Changes of government and senior officials may also influence the employment of returned fellows. Personal preferences or political obligations contracted by new leaders may close the door to certain fellows who have had overseas training. On returning, some may
find that their actual or intended positions have been filled. Cuts in spending associated with economic stagnation or depression put some fellows out of work.

Thus it is not always possible or desirable for recipient countries strictly to follow rules or recommendations on the use of fellowships — there may be more pressing needs than that of adhering to programme directives. Only the recipient governments can make adequate judgements in this regard. Failure to observe a donor’s regulations does not necessarily mean misuse of awards. Recipient governments have their own opinions about training needs and how the fellowships can best be used. Although these views may differ from those of the donors, they may not be less rational.

Even if a country clearly misuses fellowships, it is difficult to see what changes could be achieved as a result of a donor’s evaluation that hinted at this. And it is scarcely conceivable that an international organization could deny a Member State training assistance because its government did not follow the rules of a particular programme. Even under bilateral arrangements, non-compliance with a donor’s directives is hardly likely to have any serious effect. Fellowships are often awarded in a comprehensive political context where more important issues determine the fate of assistance or cooperation. Furthermore, it is difficult for a donor country to advance accusations about the misuse of development assistance without being accused of paternalism and interference in the internal affairs of other nations.

As recipient countries have the right to run their own affairs and have no obligation to act on the findings of studies conducted by donors, it would seem more logical that evaluations be undertaken essentially by the recipient governments. However, it is important that they understand the advantages and responsibilities which they have in this connection. The ineffective use of training awards, which is clearly a waste of resources, may take various forms. For example, an inadequate selection of fellows is likely to have a negative influence on the return on the educational investment; unless fellows have the right background and a sufficient knowledge of the language of instruction, they will not be able to profit maximally from training programmes. If awards are used for purposes other than manpower development, training opportunities are lost. Failure to profit from returned fellows’ experiences also usually means a loss of educational investment. Evaluation must therefore be based on a sincere wish to identify problems in fellowship programmes and to use the findings to improve implementation of the activity.

Other considerations

Another reason why recipient governments should themselves evaluate is that many evaluations by donors are of limited worth to recipient countries. Studies often cover donors have no power to impose regulations concerning the operation of fellowship programmes on recipient governments.

c fellows from various countries, without analysis by country, and focus on questions of a general nature. This makes it difficult for the recipient governments to know to what extent they are affected by the problems identified, a precondition for
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reducing deficiencies at country level. Many problems are country-specific and can only be properly investigated locally. For example, the relevance of a field of study and of the particular content of training depends on national manpower needs, the economic situation, and the social and cultural background; and many problems encountered by fellows in host countries, such as language difficulties, are related to the country of origin.

Some criteria used by donor agencies to evaluate fellowships are not meaningful for the recipient countries. For example, promotion may not be a good indicator of success; many competent fellows cannot be promoted because there are no appropriate vacancies. Promotion may even have a negative effect: thus in one country 20% of the fellows were promoted to jobs unrelated to their training.

Even if studies undertaken by donor agencies are country-specific and efforts are made to evaluate fellowships against national needs and conditions, there may be conflicting opinions between donors and recipients about needs and appropriate technologies. African officials often complain that donors disregard national assessments of development needs and the most efficient ways of meeting them. Moreover, only recipient governments are able to evaluate specific donor interests that may have negative effects on the countries concerned. It has been suggested that complementary benefits to host countries be evaluated, e.g., commercial, cultural and political benefits and the training of local personnel (5).

For developing countries, the purchase of equipment is not merely a question of the relevance of the goods. People trained abroad tend to increase the balance of payments problem because their purchasing decisions are likely to be influenced by the equipment and techniques with which they are most familiar and by the personal contacts they have made.

Certain institutions endeavour to enrol large numbers of students in order to win government grants. Attempts may be made to attract fellows from developing countries even if the courses on offer are not very suitable.

The educational interests of donor countries include the unpaid research contribution made by foreign students. If fellows undertake research that is orientated towards needs and problems in their own countries, there is no reason for the recipient governments to worry if it also benefits the host country. There is clearly cause for concern, however, if students focus on topics that are essentially related to the needs of the host country.

From the standpoint of recipient governments, the influences that fellows may be exposed to in the country of study are of considerable importance, irrespective of who pays for the training. In particular, these governments have an interest in evaluating the extent to which there are potential negative side-effects.

Many governments themselves provide awards to their nationals for training overseas. It would therefore be more useful for countries to evaluate total fellowship activity than for separate assessments to be
made by various agencies, host countries or financing bodies. This could provide information about possible overlapping. In Lesotho, for example, one donor agency decided to award fellowships for studies likely to contribute to rural development. However, as the government had already attended to the requirements in this area, the consequence was that too much emphasis was put on rural development (6).

Evaluations conducted by recipient countries could also help to identify the most suitable countries of study for particular training needs, fields or specialties, the countries in which fellows are likely to have the fewest problems of adaptation, and the countries that represent a relatively high risk with regard to the brain drain. Recipient governments also appear to be in a much better position than donors to locate former fellows and thus to obtain satisfactory rates of response to questionnaires.

It is worth observing that studies undertaken by donors tend to become very bureaucratized; programmes may be evaluated as a matter of habit rather than because of specific need.

On occasion it has been found that reports from fellows, evaluations undertaken by experts, and other studies have been shelved instead of being brought to the attention of the people concerned. This suggests that there is no clear idea about the purposes of certain studies. Obviously, studies carried out by donor agencies which do not reach recipient governments cannot be of much value to them.

There is also a risk that the flexibility required for proper examination of problems may be sacrificed in favour of oversimplified approaches of a quantitative nature. Research may be adapted to standard methods instead of dictating approaches capable of yielding information that will help to identify and solve problems. It should be remembered, however, that quantitative methods do not always give the answers required.

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Evaluations aimed at improving the effectiveness of fellowships ought, as far as possible, to be carried out by recipient governments. Well-conducted evaluations can help governments to increase the effectiveness of training. However, the decision to undertake an evaluation should be based on a clear understanding of what is required from it and of the use to which the findings are to be put. Otherwise the exercise is likely to be more costly and time-consuming than rewarding.

If countries do not have the expertise required, evaluations could, initially, be undertaken jointly by donor agencies and recipient governments, with the participation of one or two nationals possessing a basic knowledge of research. Such an arrangement would provide an excellent learning opportunity. Where there is a serious lack of research competence,

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fellowships could be extended for training in research methodology.

If countries have neither the expertise nor the finance required, it is obviously not possible for them to initiate evaluations on
their own, since they would have to depend, for both funds and technical assistance, on the donor or some other agency. It is to be hoped that countries' evaluation criteria or values would not have to be sacrificed. Donor agencies may well understand the interest they themselves have in conducting joint studies that would allow investigation of the awards in the country-specific context.

References


WHO fellowships

WHO fellowships are awarded at the request of governments only. People who wish to be nominated as candidates for fellowships should write to the Ministry of Health in their country.