

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

# The Long Horizon: Why International Education Matters for Poverty Reduction

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Amid rising restrictions on international student mobility, it is crucial to revisit what global education makes possible. Drawing on new research, this article examines how student mobility contributes to poverty reduction by shaping action on poverty through four interconnected mechanisms: reflexive agency, knowledge translation, transnational social relations, and civic understanding. The findings highlight the structural conditions that influence what returnees can do and call for mobility to be integrated more seriously into global development thinking.

As governments impose tighter restrictions on international students and cross-border exchange becomes a site of political tension, global education is at risk of being reduced to a revenue line. Yet the consequences of curbing mobility reach far beyond the university sector. New evidence suggests that, when internationally educated students return to their home countries, their contributions reverberate across economic, institutional, and civic domains—especially, though not exclusively, in low- and middle-income settings.

In an era of rising insularity, understanding this phenomenon is not a theoretical luxury. It is a matter of global urgency.

### From Individual Gain to Systemic Change

Until recently, most research on international student mobility focused on what students acquire: new competencies, enhanced employability, broader cultural awareness. These outcomes matter, but they miss the wider picture. What happens after the return? Can the experience of studying abroad ripple outward, beyond the individual, into systems?

Two studies—one examining broad quantitative trends, the other zooming in on individual life stories—help address this question. The first [study](#), covering 43 low- and middle-income countries over two decades, finds that outbound student mobility is significantly associated with poverty reduction—but *only over the long term*. Short-term effects are negligible. But when the lag is extended to 15 years, countries with higher rates of outbound mobility see significantly lower levels of extreme poverty. This association is based on dynamic panel regression using System GMM, which accounts for endogeneity and historical persistence in poverty trends. The 15-year lag of outbound mobility shows a statistically significant negative correlation with extreme poverty. The modeling controls for secondary education attainment, economic growth, industrial employment, electoral democracy, emigration, trade, and aid.

The second [study](#), based on 143 interviews with mobile and nonmobile changemakers in 57 countries, including a wider range of national contexts than the first, explores how long-term impact unfolds in practice. Returnees engage not only in technical reform but in what might be called the politics of possibility, as they adapt international insights, develop inclusive approaches to poverty, and work through civic and institutional structures to shift outcomes. Their impact is not automatic or uniform, but when structural conditions are enabling, it can be substantial.

### Mechanisms Linking Mobility to Action on Poverty

The interview data show that international student mobility shapes action on poverty through four interconnected mechanisms.

*Reflexive agency.* Studying abroad often prompts deep reflection, not only about one's career but about the kinds of problems worth solving. For many returnees, the experience marked a shift in stance from individual ambition to system-conscious engagement. One Indonesian participant, for instance, studied sustainable development in Sweden and returned to launch a rural initiative that linked cocoa farmers to global markets and helped women see themselves as income-generating actors. Agency, in this case, emerged not from credentials but from reflection, adaptation, and a new sense of responsibility shaped by exposure to more inclusive and enabling institutional environments abroad.

*Knowledge translation.* International mobility broadens how individuals understand, share, and apply knowledge to reduce disadvantage at home. Returnees bring exposure to diverse systems of governance, finance, and public policy, which they adapt through local engagement and iterative refinement. One Bangladeshi participant, for example, used insights from

international education to help reframe national poverty discourse, introducing categories such as the extreme poor and tomorrow's poor to bring previously excluded groups into welfare planning. The value of international education lay not in replication but in the grounded reworking of global ideas to fit domestic needs.

*Transnational social relations.* International student mobility develops social relations, and many returnees report turning these global ties into sources of support, strategy, and collaboration. One participant from El Salvador built lasting ties during his master's in the United States, which he later drew on to shape a technology company focused on digital inclusion. Relationships formed through shared international study provided early guidance, referrals, and trust that supported his work developing platforms for youth employment, informal workers, and LGBTQ+ communities. These connections helped move ideas into practice through socially oriented entrepreneurship.

*Civic understanding.* International mobility broadens how returnees interpret public service and the obligation to address structural inequities. Rather than treat civic responsibility as abstract, they draw on comparative experiences to question exclusionary practices and improve public delivery. One participant from Colombia, who had studied in the United Kingdom, led a data-driven reform of social programs that improved how resources were allocated to low-income families. By combining evidence with negotiation across ministries, she helped shape a more responsive system of social support, ensuring that interventions like literacy and housing programs reached the communities that needed them most.

## Structural Constraints

Returnees often enter institutional systems with limited capacity to absorb new ideas. Fragmented responsibilities, weak coordination, and procedural complexity slowed reform efforts, even when there was political will. Some struggled to align ministries around shared goals or to move evidence-based proposals through bureaucratic channels. Others found that ideas developed abroad were viewed with skepticism, requiring

careful translation to gain acceptance. Across the interviews, returnees described adjusting their strategies, reframing their proposals, and building coalitions as they responded to institutional constraints and navigated the realities of contested policy environments.

## Implications

These findings carry several implications. First, international education is not merely an export industry. It is a contributor to development. When students return and are able to act, they can contribute to society in profound ways. But that potential is neither automatic nor frictionless. If governments and funders wish to harness mobility for social good, they must do more to support returnees in reentry by providing funding pathways, creating meaningful roles within institutions, and strengthening their legitimacy as actors of change.

Second, the timeline for impact is long. Expecting immediate returns misses the point. Mobility matters most when its effects are cumulative, relational, and sustained.

Finally, this evidence calls for moving beyond simplistic accounts of brain drain. The movement of students across borders is often cast as loss, but this view neglects the diverse trajectories, indirect contributions, and long-term ripple effects that mobility can generate. Some return and act directly; others contribute through diaspora networks, knowledge exchange, or transnational collaboration. What matters is not only where alumni reside, but how they remain engaged. When international education is seen not just as credential acquisition but as civic formation, its developmental role becomes clearer. What it offers is not only skill, but stance, and a comparative lens for imagining alternative futures.

## Conclusion

As global education faces new barriers—visa restrictions, nationalist backlash, budget cuts—it is worth asking what we risk losing. We risk losing not only revenue or rankings, but one of the few remaining means by which societies exchange knowledge, question inherited assumptions, and equip people to imagine the world otherwise.

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