



FINAL REPORT

An evaluation of GRÓ's master's and doctoral
scholarship programme

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Contents

List of Acronyms	2
Executive Summary	3
1. Background and purpose of the evaluation	14
1.1 Focus areas	15
2. Methodology	16
2.1 Desk review	17
2.3 Individual interviews	17
2.4 Student survey	18
2.5. Study challenges and mitigation	19
2.6. Research protocols	19
2.7 Evaluation phases, timeframe and deliverables	19
3. Main findings	20
3.1 Relevance	21
3.1.1 Academic-based capacity building	21
3.1.2 The relationship between GRÓ and its partner countries	23
3.2 Coordination	25
3.2.1 The role of GRÓ, MFA and UNESCO	25
3.3 Effectiveness	28
3.3.1 Personal and professional benefits	28
3.3.2 Application of knowledge and skills	29
3.3.3 Challenges to application of knowledge and skills	31
3.3.4 Post-study networking	32
3.4 Efficiency	34
3.4.1 Supporting student mobility	34
3.4.2 Advertising and selection of students	34
3.4.3 Academic coordination	36
3.4.4 Financial coordination of scholarships	37
3.4.5 Experience of studying in Iceland	38
4. Conclusions and Recommendations	41
5. References	52
6. Annexes	54

List of Acronyms

AAC	Academic Advisory Committee
ERG	Evaluation Reference Group
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FTP	Fisheries Training Programme
GEST	Gender Equality Studies and Training Programme
GRÓ ¹	The GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Societal Change
GTP	Geothermal Training Programme
ÍSOR	Iceland GeoSurvey
LRT	Land Restoration Training Programme
MFA	Ministry for Foreign Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
RANNÍS	The Icelandic Centre for Research
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SP	GRÓ's Scholarship Programme ²
ToC	Theory of Change
TOR	Terms of Reference
TP	GRÓ Training Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNU	United Nations University

¹ GRÓ refers to the four training programmes under the coordination of the MFA-based centre.

² In the inception report, the term Grant Programme (GP) was used. In this report, we use the term Scholarship Programme (SP).

Executive Summary

GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Societal Change (GRÓ) is a ministerial institution that is a legal entity under the guidance and supervision of a board appointed by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA). Established in 2020, GRÓ operates as a UNESCO category 2 centre and is funded by the MFA. Four Training Programmes (TPs) fall under the umbrella of GRÓ. These TPs deliver effective and targeted capacity strengthening in selected partner countries as part of GRÓ's overall vision to ensure achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The four TPs under GRÓ are:

A. The Geothermal Training Programme (GRÓ GTP) launched in 1979 and hosted by the Iceland GeoSurvey (ÍSOR). The programme promotes the utilisation and sustainable management of reliable, economically viable, and environmentally sound geothermal energy resources.

B. The Fisheries Training Programme (GRÓ FTP) launched in 1997 and hosted by the Marine and Freshwater Research Centre. The programme promotes sustainable use and management of living aquatic resources.

C. The Land Restoration Training Programme (GRÓ LRT) piloted in 2007, launched in 2010 and hosted by the Agricultural University of Iceland. The programme promotes restoration of degraded land and sustainable land management.

D. The Gender Equality Studies and Training Programme (GRÓ GEST) piloted in 2009, launched in 2013 and hosted by the University of Iceland. The programme promotes gender equality, women's empowerment and social justice.

Individual capacity building in Iceland to enhance institutional strengthening in partner countries is achieved through GRÓ's capacity building approach, which includes a postgraduate diploma offered by each of the four TPs, and a master's and doctoral Scholarship Programme (SP) in partnership with five Icelandic universities³. In addition, GEST is currently supporting a doctoral student to complete a joint degree from the University of Iceland and the Institute of Social Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. The first doctoral scholarship was awarded in 2005 by FTP, and to date, 154 scholarships have been awarded across the four TPs (115 at the master's level and 39 at the doctoral level).⁴ Just over 30% of total scholarship recipients are female. Scholarship support at the master's and doctoral level is a core component of GRÓ's capacity building approach and is the focus of this evaluation.

The evaluation was conducted with the intention to assess the relevance, coordination, effectiveness and efficiency of the SP; and to provide learning and recommendations to enhance the valuable contribution of the SP as part of GRÓ's mission and Iceland's development cooperation. A mixed methods approach was applied, employing a desk review, focus group discussions with GRÓ staff and individual interviews with key stakeholders from academic and research-based institutions, as well as UNESCO and

³ The partner universities in Iceland are University of Iceland; University of Akureyri; Agricultural University of Iceland; Hólar University; and Reykjavík University.

⁴ Figures from excel data of students and scholarships awarded provided by the TPs.

MFA representatives. Focus group discussions were also held with scholarship students, both in person and online. In addition, an online survey was conducted, with an overall response rate of 87% for current students (26 out of 30 students) and a 60% response rate for graduated students (68 out of 113). The mixed methods approach and the involvement of the different stakeholders in the study enabled triangulation and cross-checking of the findings offering a broad overview as well as rich in-depth analysis, increasing the reliability of the evaluation and its recommendations.

Main findings and recommendations

Relevance: Are grants in accordance with Iceland's development cooperation policy and the needs of recipient countries/collaborating institutions/grantees?

Academic-based capacity building

GRÓ provides a cross-sectoral approach to individual, institutional and organisational capacity building. GRÓ has made service agreements with the four TPs to host and run their training programmes with the objective of contributing to the overall goal and strategic objectives of the GRÓ Theory of Change (ToC). It is important to recognise the historical role of the four programmes in contributing to Iceland's international development cooperation prior to being united under GRÓ. In multiple documents, including previous evaluations, the work of the four TPs is frequently referred to as a flagship initiative, with proven success as regards effective and targeted capacity building, contributing to sustainable development. The provision of scholarships for master's and doctoral students is one of GRÓ's capacity building activities.

The scholarship programme (SP) clearly falls within the scope and aims of the current policy for International Development Cooperation 2019-2023 and UNESCO's Medium Term Strategy 2022-2029. Furthermore, it supports the strategic direction outlined in the draft parliamentary resolution on the government's policy on Iceland's international development cooperation for 2024-2028, recently submitted by the MFA.⁵ In this draft policy, increased attention has been placed on cooperation with the academic community given its experience as regards innovation, education and research. GRÓ is explicitly mentioned as a key development partner, which is evidence that its work, including the SP, is considered a valuable component of Iceland's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). The SP responds to Sustainable Development Goal 4, target 4.b, which focuses on offering increased ODA in the form of higher education scholarships specifically to least developed countries. There is no doubt that GRÓ offers valuable lessons for Iceland's proposed 2024-2028 international development policy in that it provides an opportunity to explore cross-sectoral approaches to capacity building informed by research and in collaboration with academic and country partners.

Concerns that flying students around the world to study in high-income countries is expensive raise questions about the cost effectiveness of a SP in cases where students do not return to their country of origin after graduation. Brain drain is often raised as a critique of scholarship programmes that take place largely within the donor country.⁶ The four GRÓ TPs show a high return rate, with a minimal number of

⁵ Draft parliamentary resolution on Iceland's international development cooperation 2024-2028, [resuhttps://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/\\$Cases/Details/?id=3507](https://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/$Cases/Details/?id=3507)

⁶ UNESCO, 2022.

students not returning to their country of origin. For the few remaining students, reasons for non-return were varied, including conflict within their country of origin, a lack of opportunity to apply their skills on return, or gaining employment in a second country or at an international level. The evaluators suggest the need for a pragmatic approach that recognises the contribution of knowledge creation per se and its potential impact on institutional capacity building. Research suggests that not only return migration, but also remains and circular migration can create beneficial circumstances that provide opportunities for former students to practice diverse development-related functions that contribute to development in a country of origin in specific ways.⁷ Given that human rights, gender equality and sustainable development guide Iceland's development cooperation⁸, decisions about how best to maximise institutional capacity building within partner countries should be guided by these principles.

The high number of students who return to their country of origin and partner institution indicates that the educational approach applied to capacity building in each of the TPs plays a significant role towards realising Iceland's development cooperation goals. The extent to which scholarships are in accordance with the needs of recipient countries, collaborating institutions and grantees is greatly enhanced by the strategic role that the postgraduate diploma plays in the preparation and identification of students for advanced research-based studies. In addition, it allows TPs to identify supervisors and study committees who will provide the appropriate academic support to ensure successful completion of the studies. The postgraduate diploma facilitates the identification of innovative research topics and strengthens the application of knowledge and skills in countries of origin post-scholarship, as is discussed in the sections on Effectiveness and Efficiency.

Recommendation 1: GRÓ central should promote the SP as a strategic continuation of the postgraduate diploma, offering a pioneering example of how sound educational inputs can maximise the impact of ODA funds towards realising international development cooperation goals and the SDGs.

The relationships between GRÓ and its partner countries

Scholarship recipients come from countries reflecting the country-specific focus of the diploma programmes offered by the four TPs. Each of the TPs has historically selected their own partner countries depending on their thematic subject areas and guided by Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation, including its bilateral agreements. This approach of offering scholarships based on a strategic geographical focus underpinned by specific sector related needs of the partnering countries is in line with DAC recommendations⁹ which highlight that scholarship programmes are linked to broader programmatic priorities. It also partially fulfils SDG 4.b which aims to ensure an increased volume of ODA in the form of higher education scholarships specifically to least developed countries, small island states and African nations.¹⁰ GRÓ's policy framework states that country selection is informed by ODA in

⁷ Krannich, S., Hunger, U. Should they stay or should they go? A case study on international students in Germany. *CMS*, 10(39) (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00313-0>.

⁸ See Iceland's policy for international development cooperation for 2019-2023, <https://www.government.is/topics/foreign-affairs/international-development-cooperation/>

⁹ OECD, 2012 Supporting Partners to Develop their Capacity: Twelve Lessons from DAC Peer Reviews.

¹⁰ UNESCO, 2022 Exploring international aid for tertiary education.

accordance with the OECD-DAC classifications.¹¹ These also reflect UNESCO's¹² global priorities. Additionally, selection criteria include countries in need of increased capacity to address specific challenges related to the focus areas of the TPs, and with governance and institutional structures in place receptive to the capacity building opportunities offered by GRÓ.

The GRÓ Theory of Change (ToC) 2022-2027¹³ suggests targeted selection of partner countries while allowing a certain degree of autonomy for individual TPs to identify and create new country and institutional partnerships. While it is important to respect the strategic decision making of each TP as regards potential partners, it is also important to recognise that GRÓ acts as central body supporting a cross-sectoral approach to capacity building in key areas and regions of UNESCO's mandate and strategy. Strategic and collective decision making regarding geographic focus and partner countries will ensure that GRÓ's ability to contribute to SDG 4.b is maximised. Master's and doctoral graduates from the scholarship programme have referred to the need for increased opportunities for networking when they return home, both nationally and regionally. This suggests that selection of scholarship recipients may benefit from responding to the need to build up a critical mass in partner countries and creating a regional focus to support post-graduation alumni networks. This will require buy-in from partner institutions and countries and financial support to strengthen ongoing professional development.

All TPs have established professional partnerships with partner government institutions based on their history with selected countries. However, these are not always based on formal agreements. This creates the risk that these partnerships will not persist over time, particularly if they are dependent on individual relationships, reducing institutional memory and long-term institutional and organisational capacity building efforts. In some cases, TPs have established formal agreements with partner institutions and countries which can help to increase buy-in and representation and participation of partners in the capacity building that the SP generates.

Recommendation 2: The four TPs in collaboration with GRÓ central are encouraged to explore different options to develop a coordinated and clustered approach to post scholarship support to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the SP.

Recommendation 3: The four TPs should explore and share ways to strengthen representation and participation of diverse partner institutions in the SP as a means to strengthen buy-in and enhance individual, organisational, and institutional capacity building.

Coordination: How well does the GRÓ SP complement/coordinate with other GRÓ activities and work? How can synergies be maximised?

The establishment of GRÓ as a UNESCO Category 2 centre in 2020 illustrates recognition of the success of the TPs as regards their contribution to Iceland's development cooperation policy. This union provides a unique opportunity to strengthen a cross-sectoral capacity building approach in key areas and regions of

¹¹ OECD, 2012.

¹² UNESCO, 2022.

¹³ See p. 4 GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

UNESCO's mandate and strategy towards the SDGs, with a focus on SDG 5 (GEST), 7 (GTP), 14 (FTP) and 15 (LRT). In addition, GRÓ responds to the focus on capacity building and multi-stakeholder partnerships in SDG 17. To maintain the internationally recognised high-quality work of the four TPs, it is important that the three core partners (MFA, GRÓ and UNESCO) play mutually supportive academic, financial, strategic and coordinating roles to sustain the impact of the SP.

The TPs deliver a quality education approach in the form of the postgraduate diploma that has resulted in the selection of high calibre students to continue their studies at the master's and doctoral level. The SP is designed to be responsive to the academic and pastoral needs of students, a design which is not necessarily in harmony with government financing mechanisms. The 2017 evaluation of the four TPs found that the degree of financial dependency varies between programmes. It further found that the size of the annual grants from the MFA was unpredictable and decisions on funds allocations were sometimes unpunctual. This resulted in uncertainty that impeded long-term planning. The current yearly funding cycle means that programmes cannot necessarily anticipate and manage potential budgetary fluctuations. Dependence on MFA funding for the SP makes TPs extremely vulnerable to any cut or change in budget allocations. Budget projections in the draft parliamentary resolution on Iceland's international development cooperation for 2024-2028¹⁴ indicate an increase in funds over the next five years. There is a need to earmark funds to sustain the quality of the SP and its contributions to Iceland's development cooperation. It will be important for GRÓ central to strongly advocate for core MFA funds to specifically support the long-term costs of the SP. This will require buy-in and collaboration from the four TPs in terms of identifying the financial needs to cover the full period needed to complete a master's or doctoral programme.

Recommendation 4: GRÓ central is advised to establish a master's and doctoral scholarship budget line based on TP projections for a five-year period and informed by current postgraduate student needs and estimates to facilitate long-term quality planning across all programmes.

Lessons from other scholarship programmes suggest diversification and efficient management of funds can strengthen the SP.¹⁵ The four TPs have all secured financial and in-kind support to varying degrees. There are a number of feasible options for additional funding and in-kind contributions to supplement/complement core MFA funding of the GRÓ SP. The support of embassies in partner countries with bilateral agreements offers possibilities to secure additional resources. Funding and in-kind contributions also lie in GRÓ's relationship with UNESCO, including through UNESCO national committees in partner countries to support local initiatives, such as alumni networks. There is potential for UNESCO to play a more strategic role in financing regional alumni clusters, to promote in-country expertise and cross-sectoral initiatives.

Recommendation 5: GRÓ central and the four TPs should develop a comprehensive funding and promotion strategy to supplement/complement core MFA funding.

¹⁴ Draft parliamentary resolution on Iceland's international development cooperation 2024-2028, [resuhttps://samradsgatt.island.is/oil-mal/\\$Cases/Details/?id=3507](https://samradsgatt.island.is/oil-mal/$Cases/Details/?id=3507)

¹⁵ IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, <https://www.un-ihe.org/> - see p. 26 of this report.

Given the short period of time since the four TPs have been brought together under the umbrella of GRÓ, it is understandable that organised and strategic collaboration remains to be strengthened. Responsibility for developing and monitoring stronger cross-sectoral opportunities, which could feed into research ideas and projects, falls both with GRÓ central and each of the four TPs. The 2022-2027 GRÓ ToC and the ongoing work of a joint results matrix present an important opportunity to develop a strategic approach to cross-sectoral responses to the SDGs. This includes strengthening the gender dimension of the SP informed by the expertise of GEST, which could include developing an overarching gender policy or strategy for the SP.

Recommendation 6: GRÓ central and the four TPs are encouraged to actively seek opportunities to develop as a cross-sectoral community of practice through implementation and monitoring of the 2022-2027 Theory of Change, and to ensure cross-cutting themes such as gender are better addressed.

One of the concerns raised during interviews with TP staff was the high turnover of the GRÓ Director General position. In any context of organisational change and strategic planning, it is essential to ensure a long-term leadership role to establish mutual trust and productive collaboration. There are encouraging signs of work currently being carried out to develop stronger synergies across the four programmes facilitated by the MFA and GRÓ central. GRÓ central can play a key role as regards organising opportunities for the TPs to strategically identify best practices to strengthen the financial and administrative set up of a common and comprehensive SP and to establish clear management and monitoring roles and responsibilities. However, it is equally important that the academic freedom of the TPs is respected given that the success of the SP and its impact on individual and institutional capacity building is due to the unique educational approach within each of the TPs.

Recommendation 7: The MFA should ensure the position of GRÓ director general is for at least a three-year period to ensure long-term management and institutional memory.

Recommendation 8: The TPs should continue to take the lead in education and research decision making given that the academic freedom of the TPs has proven to yield positive results.

Effectiveness: To what extent have the grants achieved their goals?

Studying overseas can be a challenging endeavour, taking students away from their home environment, friends, and families, and demanding a leave of absence from their place of work. It places demands on students above the rigours of academic studies, as they adapt to a new culture and society, language, and climate. However, despite these challenges, students of the four TPs of GRÓ are overwhelmingly positive about the benefits that studying in Iceland has brought them, which is a testament to the efforts of the TPs to support students during their studies and time in Iceland.

Major benefits of postgraduate study in Iceland as stated by survey and focus group respondents include access to individuals and institutions with significant expertise in their subject area; the high standards of the master's and doctoral programmes, including supervision; an increased sense of academic freedom; and the experience of studying in a multi-cultural environment. The impact of these benefits on individual and institutional capacity building were stated as increased expertise and reputation

in their relevant academic field and profession; an improvement in opportunities for career advancement and promotion; and opportunity for further academic study.

The diploma training courses contribute to the quality of the research conducted as part of students' master's and doctoral studies and ensure that scholarship recipients have the academic capacity and motivation to complete rigorous studies and are in a position to apply skills on return. The topics and research undertaken during postgraduate study were reported to be extremely relevant to the development challenges within home countries, a pre-requisite to ensuring that skills and expertise gained can be put to good use. Survey results indicate that the majority of students have been able to apply their new skills and knowledge within a professional environment in multiple ways, including training or mentoring others, presenting research at conferences, or introducing new initiatives or approaches within their profession. **See Recommendation 1.**

Challenges to application of knowledge and skills included leaving from their studies with great ideas and expectations but with few resources to implement them in their local and national contexts. Survey respondents also mentioned other barriers, including power dynamics or different management styles within institutions which presented challenges when students tried to implement their ideas. It is an important assumption within the GRÓ ToC (see p.8 under 2.2.3 Scholarships and p.12 of the ToC) that partner organisations will encourage returning staff members to practise and spread what they have learnt, but one that needs more direct attention to unpick some of the challenges faced by the master's and doctoral graduates. Applying a stronger gender lens to analyse these challenges is also an important consideration.

While some clear examples of support between the TPs and the graduated students and their institutions were given, for example through training collaboration, conferences, advisory support and technical and financial support for specific projects, several graduated students felt the need for more strategic and systematic support when in their home countries. These included having a more strategic partnership with the institutions in the home context and more consistent follow-up with graduated students to understand what progression had been made and the barriers faced. It was suggested that the application of research and knowledge could be planned together with the home institutions in advance of the student commencing their postgraduate studies, a discussion that could be part of the selection process and formalised through MoUs with partner institutions. The provision of small grants for training, workshops and conferences was also mentioned. **See Recommendation 3.**

The master's and doctoral scholarship recipients noted the importance of continuing to build networks to support access to opportunities to further apply their knowledge and skills post-study. Survey respondents reported that it was often easier to share knowledge and experiences when in Iceland, and that the intensity and frequency of communication lessened when they returned to their country of origin. This suggests the need to find ways to strengthen post-study support, both financially and strategically. Providing more systematic and funded post-study networking opportunities not only strengthens output three in the GRÓ results framework (professionally empower training participants, students and scholarship recipients through community building and networking), but also output two, the production and dissemination of new knowledge by GRÓ training participants and scholarship recipients. **See Recommendation 2.**

Efficiency: How well are human and financial resources being used?

Student survey and stakeholder focus group responses provide strong justification for the human and financial resources required to support studying in Iceland rather than in institutions in students' countries of origin. In addition to access to quality teaching, experts in the field, and possibilities to network, an important consideration was the ability to focus on the studies without work and family distractions. This was particularly relevant for female scholarship recipients. The importance of flexibility in terms of the planning of tasks and time periods spent by students in Iceland and in their country of origin, or in other institutions, was identified as an integral component of the SP by former and current students, supervisors, TP staff and academic experts, particularly for doctoral students.

A key strength of the four TPs as regards how human and financial resources are being used is the process of selecting scholarship recipients based on existing academic and personal relationships and professional partnerships, ensuring candidates with known potential are selected. Offering grants to former diploma fellows is a unique and strategic way to enhance academic and research capacity in addition to using the professional knowledge and skills the students possess and have developed as part of the diploma programme. Several former scholarship recipients indicated that partnering institutions in their home countries were aware of the SP, enabling targeting of specific challenges in their home-countries relating to the specialisation of each of the TP. **See Recommendations 1 and 8.**

Scholarship recipients studying at master's level follow a clearly outlined programme offered at one of the partnering universities in Iceland.¹⁶ However, the PhD programmes at Icelandic universities tend to be more flexible in coursework and deliverables, and less structured than a regular master's programme. This requires a high level of TP dedication and commitment to scholarship recipients and their research projects. The main supervisors of GRÓ doctoral scholarship recipients are from one of the five Icelandic partner universities. Other experts and members of doctoral committees are derived from the same universities or Icelandic institutions. In some cases, the doctoral committees include academic or professional specialists from outside of the Icelandic context, including from the partner organisation in the student's country of origin. Ensuring and maintaining global partnerships by including a wider range of stakeholders from the recipient countries is a crucial feature of enhancing quality and equity of scholarship programmes engaged in development cooperation.¹⁷ **See Recommendation 3.**

While all TPs undergo the same process when requesting a budget for scholarships from GRÓ central, the total amount TPs receive and allocate to their scholarship programmes varies. These variations reflect the challenges involved in supporting scholarship recipients at master's and in particular doctoral levels for different specialisations. TP staff mentioned that all funds are prioritised for the diploma programme first leaving other activities, including grants for scholarships, to be determined later in the year or on an ad hoc basis. All the TPs expressed a will to be

¹⁶ The programmes include for example the Sustainable Energy Engineering programme at Reykjavík University (GTP), the Geochemistry programme at the University of Iceland (GTP), The newly founded International Restoration Ecology programme at the Agricultural University of Iceland (LRT), as well as the International and interdisciplinary programme on Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Iceland (FTP, GTP).

¹⁷ UNESCO, 2022.

able to plan and advertise with more consistency how many master's and doctoral scholarships they can offer and for how long. **See Recommendation 4.**

The outline of contracts or agreements made with scholarship recipients also varies. GEST stands out in terms of its doctoral contracts, which ensure a monthly salary reflecting public salary and grant guidelines (i.e., from RANNÍS or the University of Iceland) for a period of 36 months while the students reside in Iceland. When students are conducting fieldwork, the salary amount is adjusted to the cost of living in the specific country where data is being collected. The GEST contract also ensures students' rights, including the right to seek support from the doctoral student ombudsperson, the international office and union services. There are substantial in-kind contributions in the form of expert knowledge as a result of the partnership each of the TPs has managed to develop around the SP, with partner universities and other institutions, both in Iceland and internationally, directly contributing to relevance, coordination and effectiveness, as well as efficiency.

Levels of satisfaction with the financial and material support differed between current and former scholarship recipients. The higher level of dissatisfaction amongst current fellows seems to be linked to rising costs, as suggested in the focus group interviews and perceptions of differing degrees of support officially offered and given, for example, for equipment or conferences. Both graduated and current scholarship recipients suggested that more detail should be provided about the financial and material package, including the need to review market costs, support for field work and home travel, and costs for accessing publications. Several focus group respondents suggested or implied that all GRÓ TP students should receive the same financial and material support.

Scholarship recipients discussed the importance of having a space where they feel welcome and part of the learning community. The overall sense of belonging because of the relationships built up with the individual TPs appears to be strong among both former and current students. However, in the focus group discussions, current students noted some instances where they felt isolated or separate within the university where they were studying. Students conducting research work at a company felt they were treated differently to other PhD students working at the same company in terms of social events but also health and safety, which suggests that more formal working contracts need to be in place. Evaluations of other SP have raised concerns over students from developing countries being isolated from the overall university body of the donor country, i.e., in terms of rights, services and social life.¹⁸ Given that not all students are aware of their rights as university students, it is important that this information is made accessible.

Analysis of the use of human and financial resources to support the SP needs to consider student wellbeing. Responses from the student survey indicate building confidence and self-efficacy can be influenced by surroundings, opportunities to meet other students and having a sense of belonging, despite studying within a foreign context. The current cohort of students appears to have had a mixed experience compared with graduated students. Some students felt that the scholarship support was varied between the TPs. This seems to be the result of each programme operating differently as regards preparatory arrangements, financial assistance and in-country

¹⁸ Nemecková & Krylova 2014, The Czech government scholarship programme for students from developing countries – Evaluation findings and policy reflections.

support on arrival. These perceptions may also be due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also points to the need for a more consistent approach to preparatory administrative support across the TPs. It is important that human and financial resources are mobilised in ways that ensure the wellbeing of scholarship recipients. In the absence of finding an inclusive community within the university setting, it is important that students are able to maintain contact with TP sites, which are familiar and welcoming. However, it is also necessary for TPs to ensure that students are aware that academic and pastoral support (for example, writing centres, counselling services, international offices) is available within the universities where they study.

Recommendation 9: GRÓ central and the four TPs should develop a common scholarship package informed by best practices and create a link on the GRÓ webpage for all information related to the scholarship programme.

While LTP and GEST are hosted by universities, where their scholarship recipients may choose to study, GTP and FTP are not. GTP has made formal agreements with the universities where their scholarship recipients are enrolled. The agreement with Reykjavík University includes waivers for tuition costs for a maximum of three master's students per year, which is explicitly stated in the written contract between GTP and Reykjavík University. An interesting finding related to academic coordination is that despite agreements with partner universities that master's students can use their TP diploma as equivalent to 30 ECTS of the 120 ECTS master's programme, not all students take up this option. The students that used the credits from the post-graduate diploma course stated three main reasons: to fast-track the completion of the master's to shorten the stay in Iceland; to enable more time to be dedicated to other courses in the master's; and to avoid repetition of content covered during the diploma programme. TP staff responses to questions about the use of diploma credits supported student responses, indicating that student academic choice is an important part of the SP. GEST is supporting a doctoral student to complete a joint degree at the University of Iceland and the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Important lessons can be learned as regards shared academic roles and financial responsibilities. This type of collaboration provides a valuable opportunity to develop new ways of working internationally that can enrich the quality of the research project in question.

Recommendation 10: GRÓ central in collaboration with the TPs is encouraged to explore the feasibility of establishing formal agreements with partner universities in Iceland and internationally to increase academic and social wellbeing of scholarship recipients and strengthen the relationship between academia and development cooperation.

Advertisement of the SP is done primarily through the GRÓ webpage, where each TP has a specific page with a description of their SP.¹⁹ These individual pages state that applicants must be former GRÓ fellows and meet the minimum requirements of GRÓ partner universities. However, the information under each TP varies. The GTP, having offered the highest number of scholarship grants over the longest period of time, is the only TP which states on their web page during which period students can apply and in which way applications will be judged. All four TPs include their study committees in the selection process of scholarship recipients. The study committees are made up of specialists within the relevant fields and include representatives from each of the

¹⁹ <https://www.grocentre.is/>

Icelandic universities the TPs work with. In most cases, these specialists have been actively involved in teaching or mentoring in the diploma programme which gives them familiarity with the work and research ideas of the prospective master's and doctoral students. The GEST programme has started to develop a specific Academic Advisory Committee (AAC) for the PhD scholarship selection process. The AAC will include five specialists in gender equality including representatives from the institutions of GEST's partnering countries. Key to this approach is the effort made to ensure more equal north-south participation and global partnership at all stages of the programme, which has been noted to be a critical feature of scholarship programmes in terms of ensuring development impact and sustainability.²⁰ However, this may not be applicable to all TPs given the variations in partner countries. **See Recommendation 9.**

Conclusions

GRÓ's objective is to strengthen individual and institutional capacities in low and middle income countries (LMICs) to deliver development results in line with the SDGs. The SP, as an extension of the diploma training programme, is a core activity that contributes to capacity development in partner countries as outlined in GRÓ's Theory of Change and Strategy 2022–2027. The findings from this evaluation support the findings from previous evaluations,²¹ which report that fellows who have been granted scholarships have been particularly proficient as change agents by contributing to important results at the home country level, even beyond the academic sphere. Although it was not in the scope of this evaluation to assess the impact on partner institutions, survey results provide good evidence of the positive impact of investing in research and academic skills in terms of the real and potential contribution of knowledge creation to individual and institutional capacity building.

The firsthand experiences of current and former students gathered through the survey and focus groups suggest the financial and academic support provided at the doctoral and master's level has contributed to personal and professional growth, with positive impacts that support Iceland's international development cooperation goals articulated in both the current and draft international development cooperation policies. However, findings also raise questions about the need to ensure greater financial security and wellbeing of students while engaged in academic studies, in particular for doctoral students. The findings also reveal opportunities to maximise the educational and development impact of GRÓ through strengthened strategic collaboration between the four TPs and GRÓ central. As such, the recommendations are aimed at addressing these concerns and opportunities in the context of the 2022-2027 GRÓ ToC. They seek to build on and sustain the success of the individual TPs and create opportunities to strengthen the SP as a core component of GRÓ's capacity building approach.

²⁰ Evaluation of the NUFU Programme, 2000; UNESCO, 2022.

²¹ NIRAS Evaluation 2017.

1. Background and purpose of the evaluation

The GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Societal Change (GRÓ) is a UNESCO Category 2 Centre located in Iceland. GRÓ established in 2020, facilitates sustainable development by bringing together under one umbrella four already existing Training Programmes (TPs) that deliver effective and targeted capacity strengthening in selected partner countries. The TPs with expertise in respective focus areas are hosted within Icelandic institutions. They provide capacity development to individuals and institutions in low- and middle-income countries as part of GRÓ's overall vision to ensure achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the sustainable use of the world's resources; resilient natural and human systems; and ensuring equality, human rights, and human wellbeing are promoted as the pillars on which societies are built.²² The collaboration between UNESCO and the Icelandic government provides an opportunity to develop an innovative cross-sectoral approach to the development of capacity building in key areas and regions of UNESCO's mandate and strategy. GRÓ is funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA). The four TPs under GRÓ are:

A. The Geothermal Training Programme (GRÓ GTP) launched in 1979 and hosted by the Iceland GeoSurvey (ÍSOR). The programme promotes the utilisation and sustainable management of reliable, economically viable, and environmentally sound geothermal energy resources.

B. The Fisheries Training Programme (GRÓ FTP) launched in 1997 and hosted by the Marine and Freshwater Research Centre. The programme promotes sustainable use and management of living aquatic resources.

C. The Land Restoration Training Programme (GRÓ LRT) piloted in 2007, launched in 2010 and hosted by the Agricultural University of Iceland. The programme promotes restoration of degraded land and sustainable land management.

D. The Gender Equality Studies and Training Programme (GRÓ GEST) piloted in 2009, launched in 2013 and hosted by the University of Iceland. The programme promotes gender equality, women's empowerment and social justice.

GRÓ's objective is to strengthen individual and institutional capacities to deliver development results in line with the SDGs in particular, gender equality (5), affordable and clean energy (7), life below water (14), life on land (15), while underpinned by implementation and promotion of global partnerships for sustainable development (17).²³

GRÓ's policy environment consists of three overlapping and interrelated policies: The framework set out by Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015; Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation 2019-2023, whose main principles are human rights, gender equality and sustainable development; and UNESCO's multi-year Medium Term Strategy (C4), which sets out UNESCO's strategic vision and programmatic framework. GRÓ's Theory of Change and Strategy for 2022–2027, the result of a strategic planning

²² GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

²³ GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

process involving all four TP, presents the strategies and activities required to achieve intended outcomes, objectives and goals.

Individual capacity building in Iceland to enhance institutional strengthening in partner countries is achieved through GRO's capacity building approach, which includes a postgraduate diploma offered by each of the four TPs, and a master's and doctoral scholarship programme at five Icelandic partner universities.²⁴ In addition, GEST is supporting a doctoral student to complete a joint degree from the University of Iceland and the Institute of Social Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. The scholarship support at the master's and doctoral level is a core component of the four TPs. Based on the results of recent financial audits, the Office of Internal Affairs within the MFA, responsible for evaluations of development cooperation programmes, received a request from the director of GRÓ to conduct an evaluation of GRÓ's master's and doctoral scholarship programme (SP). The aim was to better understand variations in the management of the grants across the four training programmes, to gather best practices and provide recommendations on how the SP should be organised to strengthen its education and development impact.

The Terms of Reference (TOR) set out in the document *Verklýsing úttektar: Styrkveitingar fyrir meistara- og doktorsnema í gegnum þjálfunaráætlanir GRÓ/ Grants for master's and doctoral students through GRÓ's training programmes*²⁵ provided the framework for this evaluation of GRÓ's SP. Emphasis was placed on examining the general functioning of the grant system, while taking into consideration the different traditions in each of the respective academic fields and the unique approach of each of the four TP.

The evaluation was conducted with the intention to provide learning and recommendations to enhance the valuable contribution of the SP as part of GRÓ's mission and Iceland's development cooperation. The findings provide insights into the current variations in the management of the grants across the four training programmes. The recommendations based on these findings focus on how the SP could be organised in the future to strengthen individual and institutional capacities to help advance the SDGs in areas where Iceland has expertise.

1.1 Focus areas

Three focus areas to frame the evaluation were identified and discussed in a meeting with the Evaluation Reference Group (ERG) on April 18th, 2023, as follows:

Focus area one: A review of the nature and scope of grant allocation and administrative arrangements as regards financial and academic support within each of the four TP, with the aim of identifying what works well and what could be improved.

Focus area two: A review of postgraduate financial and academic support in Iceland (i.e., Rannís) and of other donor countries (i.e., IHE Delfi Institute for Water Education), including previous evaluations of the GRÓ programme and other scholarship

²⁴ These are University of Iceland; University of Akureyri; Agricultural University of Iceland; Hólar University; and Reykjavík University. In addition, Erasmus University Rottardam and the University of Iceland jointly supervise one GRÓ doctoral scholarship recipient.

²⁵ GRÓ Verklýsing úttektar Styrkveitingar fyrir meistara- og doktorsnema í gegnum þjálfunaráætlanir GRÓ/Terms of reference of GRÓ scholarships for master's and doctoral students, February 2023.

programmes to determine future possibilities for different or adapted approaches to strengthen the GRÓ SP.

Focus area three: A review of the perspectives of GRÓ stakeholders on the value and impact of the SP in terms of increasing capacity in their field of study, professional opportunities, and benefits to the relevant sector in countries of origin. This component aims to better understand the relation between personal and professional development on one hand as a core component of Iceland's international cooperation, and the reality of socio-economic and political contexts in students' countries of origin.

These three focus areas informed the design of the evaluation matrix (see annex 1 and 2), which further took into consideration:

- The framework set out by Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.
- Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation 2019-2023.
- UNESCO's multi-year Medium Term Strategy (41/C4) 2022-2029.
- GRÓ's Theory of Change and Strategy for 2022–2027.
- The questions under the four categories of *Relevance*; *Coordination*; *Economics*; and *Efficiency* set out in Table 4, Section 3.1 of the TOR.

Findings based on the data collected around these focus areas inform the final recommendations, which are organised into a) Management and monitoring of the scholarship programme, and b) Implementation of the scholarship programme. The 2017 final evaluation of the UNU programmes²⁶ and the 2019 feasibility study on the four programmes forming UNESCO Category 2 centres²⁷ were also used to inform the recommendations. The main findings and examples of good practice and recommendations presented in this final report are strictly related to this evaluation of the scholarship programme but may also be useful to inform the full performance evaluation of each of the four training programmes, planned for late 2023.²⁸

2. Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, employing a desk review, focus group discussions with GRÓ staff and individual interviews with key stakeholders from academic and research-based institutions offering post-graduate scholarships. Focus group discussions were also held with some of the students currently based in Iceland, both in person and online. In addition, an online survey with current and former students was conducted. The mixed methods approach and the involvement of the different stakeholders in the study enabled triangulation and cross-checking of the findings offering a broad overview as well as rich in-depth analysis, increasing the reliability of the evaluation and its recommendations.

Quality was also ensured through the participation of the Evaluation Reference Group (ERG) which played a role in reviewing the tools and question areas at the inception phase to ensure their relevance and consistency with the objectives and scope of the evaluation. This involvement of the ERG, students, and key stakeholders within the programmes and associated institutions has been essential to the evaluation process,

²⁶ Evaluation of the UNU Programmes in Iceland, 2017.

²⁷ UNESCO Feasibility Study, 2019.

²⁸ See <https://www.stjornarradid.is/verkefni/utanrikismal/throunarsamvinna/uttekjur>

particularly in ensuring that the evaluation report is relevant to the needs of the intended users.

2.1 Desk review

The desk review focused on examining available data related to the three focus areas of the evaluation, namely 1) the nature and scope of grant allocations and administration arrangements for each of the schools; 2) information on postgraduate financial and academic support in Iceland and scholarship programmes in other countries; and 3) perspectives of GRÓ stakeholders on the value and impact of the postgraduate financial and academic support programme from previous studies, audits and evaluations. The desk review, which included the references listed in this report as well as those recommended by the ERG, informed the development of the research tools and the overall findings, analysis and recommendations.

2.2 Focus group discussions

Four focus group discussions were held with the staff of the four GRÓ TP. The aim was to explore the overall perspectives on the grant allocation and administration arrangements, the coordination with other GRÓ activities and work, and the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the grant programme. Two focus group discussions were also held with students recently or currently based in Iceland. One of the focus group discussions with students helped to inform the design of the survey, and one helped to cross-check and clarify information collected through the survey (see section 2.4).

Focus group discussions provide a means of verifying and analysing information as the discussion progresses, with the intention that the participants can shape the discussion and highlight issues they feel are important. The focus group discussions were held in person and were facilitated by two of the evaluators. Supplementary and follow-up questions were used to probe and deepen conversations. The discussions ran for an average of one hour to a maximum of 90 minutes. The focus group discussions were recorded with the permission of the participants to support note taking. See annex 3 for the list of focus groups. Follow up questions were sent to TP directors and relevant staff members during the data analysis process.

2.3 Individual interviews

Individual interviews were held with representatives of the GRÓ TP host institutions and higher education institutions, postgraduate studies contact persons, a UNESCO representative and representatives from other scholarship programmes such as other C2 centres.

Question guides for the individual interviews were developed by the evaluators to ensure that the interviews remained focused on the key topics, while allowing scope to probe and to follow leads raised during the interview.

The interviews were held in person or online, based on the preference and available time of the interviewee. The interviews ran for an average of one hour to a maximum of 90 minutes and were recorded with permission to support note taking (see annex 3 for list of interviewees).

2.4 Student survey

An online survey was developed for the doctoral and master's students to gather their perspectives on the value and impact of GRÓ's SP. The survey was developed and disseminated using SurveyMonkey and was sent to 30 current students and 113 students who had completed their studies. The survey ran for two-weeks, from 8-22 May 2023. Question areas covered their experience of preparatory support, support received once in Iceland, the experience of studying in Iceland, support or outreach provided post-study, and any benefits accrued personally or professionally. The survey sent to graduated students contained additional questions about their experience on completion of the postgraduate studies. The survey contained mainly closed questions for quantitative data, although comment boxes were included with several of the questions to encourage respondents to expand on their answers.

The overall response rate to the surveys was good with an 87% response rate for current students (26 out of 30 students) and a 60% response rate for graduated students (68 out of 113).²⁹

Survey responses included in the analysis:

Current students				
Training Programme	Master's	Master's & PhD³⁰	PhD	TOTAL
FTP	2	2	5	9
GEST			1	1
GTP	10	1	3	14
LRT	2			2
Total	14	3	9	26
Graduated students				
Training Programme	Master's	Master's & PhD³¹	PhD	TOTAL
FTP	7	1	8	16
GEST				
GTP	45	3	2	50
LRT	1		1	2
Total	53	4	11	68

The survey data was input and analysed in Excel. A separate full report on the survey is attached as a supplement to this report and findings from the survey are included within the main body of this report. The focus group discussions with students outlined in 2.2 helped to inform the survey design and supplement and cross-check the survey responses.

²⁹ A total of 154 students have been awarded scholarships, of which 122 are former students and 32 students are currently studying (or finished in 2023). It was not possible to contact 11 students (2 current students and 9 graduated students) due to emails being returned or emails being unavailable, or due to the students being ill or deceased.

³⁰ This refers to students who were currently studying for their PhD but had also completed a masters with the TP.

³¹ This refers to students who had completed both a PhD and masters with the TP.

2.5. Study challenges and mitigation

It was anticipated that allocating time to conduct the focus group discussions with the GRÓ staff may be challenging due to conflicting and busy schedules. To mitigate this, the evaluators scheduled meetings early in the evaluation process to ensure that these meetings could be set up and enough time was allocated for productive discussion.

Interviewing representatives from other grant-making institutions was organised as planned. Two interviews were conducted, one online and one in person, according to the availability and preference of the interviewees.

It was anticipated that the response rate to the student survey might be low if students were not informed of the evaluation in advance. To mitigate this, the evaluators requested a letter of introduction from the TP Directors to inform the students of the evaluation and its purpose before being approached by the evaluation team. The survey was sent out via a link and using emails provided by the TPs. In some cases, emails were returned as the addresses were no longer valid or inboxes were full. The GTP also re-sent the email and link to their students to help ensure that as many as possible received the survey. Two reminders were sent out by the evaluator responsible for the survey before the survey closing date. All these actions helped to contribute to the good response rate. During data cleaning, a total of six incomplete responses were removed.

2.6. Research protocols

Focus group discussions and interviews only proceeded if the participants agreed to take part. Permission to record the focus group discussions and interviews were also obtained prior to commencing the discussions.

Confidentiality has been protected when requested by respondents.

Data from survey respondents was analysed and has been presented anonymously. Names were recorded by the evaluation team in case follow-up was required, and this also helped with cross-checking responses against the list of students provided by the TPs.

2.7 Evaluation phases, timeframe and deliverables

The evaluation was conducted in four phases:

- Phase I: Preparation: 3 days
- Phase II: Data collection and analysis: 20 days
- Phases III and IV: Report writing and presentation: 7 days

The main activities and time frame are presented in the table on the next page.

Main activities:

Activity/Deliverable	April	May	June	July	August
Inception report	by 14 th				
Inception report feedback and revisions	by 18 th				
Data collection		by mid-June			
First draft of final report			by 30 th		
Comments on first draft				by 15 th	
Final report submission				by 30 th	
Presentation of findings					by 15 th

3. Main findings

Offering higher education scholarships is a clearly outlined element of the GRÓ Theory of Change (ToC) 2022-2027.³² The four programmes vary in terms of how long TPs have been offering scholarships and subsequently the number of grants delivered varies, as shown in the table below.³³ Just over 30% of total scholarship recipients are female.

Training Programme Scholarships	Master's	PhD	Total
FTP since 2005	20	23 ³⁴	43
GTP since 2008	91 ³⁵	13	104
LRT since 2015	4	1	5
GEST since 2021	0	2	2
GRÓ Total	115	39	154

The findings presented in this section are intended to provide insights into the current variations in the management and coordination of the grants across the four training programmes (TPs). They are presented under the overarching questions in the evaluation matrix (see annex 1 and 2), which were used to guide data collection. We first address the relevance of the SP, specifically asking: Are grants in accordance

³² GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

³³ Figures from excel data of students and scholarships awarded provided by the TPs.

³⁴ 23 have been awarded, although one stopped studying due to long COVID.

³⁵ 91 awarded although one past student did not complete (so 90 completed or currently studying).

with Iceland's policy and the needs of recipient countries/collaborating institutions/grantees? This is followed by findings related to the coordination of the SP, where we answer the questions: How well does the GRÓ SP complement/coordinate with other GRÓ activities and work? How can synergies be maximised? The focus on the effectiveness of the SP and the extent to which the grants have achieved their goals follows. We then conclude the findings section by discussing the efficiency of the SP in terms of how well human and financial resources are being utilised.

3.1 Relevance

Are grants in accordance with Iceland's development cooperation policy and the needs of recipient countries/collaborating institutions/grantees?

3.1.1 Academic-based capacity building

It is important to recognise the historical role of the four programmes in contributing to Iceland's international development cooperation prior to becoming united under GRÓ, which is a ministerial institution under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA). As United Nations University (UNU) programmes and as part of Iceland's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget, the four programmes aimed to strengthen individual, organisational, and institutional capacities in developing and conflict/post-conflict countries.³⁶ They responded in unique ways to these aims, reflecting the nature of the four thematic areas and institutional context that each work in. This uniqueness continues today now that the four programmes are united under GRÓ as a UNESCO Category 2 centre.

GRÓ is under the guidance and supervision of a board appointed by the MFA. Although GRÓ falls under the ministry, it operates under the auspices of UNESCO. GRÓ has made service agreements with four host institutions that operate the four TPs, with the objective of contributing to the overall goal and strategic objectives of GRÓ. These are in line with Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation 2019-2023 and UNESCO's Medium Term Strategy 2022-2029.

A draft parliamentary resolution on the government's policy on Iceland's international development cooperation for 2024-2028 has recently been submitted by the MFA.³⁷ Informed by the SDGs, the Paris Agreement on measures to deal with and respond to climate change and other international agreements to which Iceland is a party, the draft policy emphasises the role that international development cooperation plays in solving the multifaceted challenges facing the world. The main goals are elimination of poverty, respect for human rights and improved living conditions, and include emphasis on gender equality and human and natural resources. Increased attention has been placed on cooperation with the academic community given its experience as regards innovation, education and research. GRÓ is explicitly mentioned in the draft policy document as a key development partner working towards the set goals, which include capacity building in partner countries. The provision of scholarships for master's and doctoral programmes is one of GRÓ's capacity building activities. Scholarship recipients are selected from the postgraduate diploma programme, which

³⁶ GRÓ Verklýsing úttektar Styrkveitingar fyrir meistara- og doktorsnema í gegnum þjálfunaráætlanir GRÓ/Terms of reference of GRÓ scholarships for master's and doctoral students, February 2023.

³⁷ Draft parliamentary resolution on Iceland's international development cooperation 2024-2028, [resuhttps://samradsgatt.island.is/oil-mal/\\$Cases/Details/?id=3507](https://samradsgatt.island.is/oil-mal/$Cases/Details/?id=3507)

helps strengthen GRÓ aims to increase academic and research capacity and outputs in partner countries. As such, GRÓ offers a valuable opportunity to examine how an innovative cross-sectoral approach to capacity building informed by research, and in collaboration with academic partners, can contribute to the goal and overarching objectives of Iceland's development cooperation.

As stated in previous evaluations,³⁸ there are often concerns that flying students around the world to study in high-income countries, such as Iceland, can be expensive, therefore requiring strong justification. These concerns have included questioning the cost effectiveness of a SP that fails to ensure students will return to their country of origin after graduation. Brain drain is also often raised as a critique of scholarship programmes that take place largely within the donor country.³⁹ The survey results indicate that 92% of graduated students said that they returned to their country of origin, with 85% of these returning to the same institution and 7% to a different institution. For the remaining students who reported they did not return, reasons were varied including due to conflict within their country of origin. One respondent said that although they had not returned due to conflict, they still acted as a focal point for their institution in their country, while another referred to the lack of opportunity to apply their skills on return to their country of origin.

As the figures reflect, the number of students who return to their country of origin is high, a finding echoed in the New Zealand Aid Scholarship Programme evaluation.⁴⁰ Research suggests that not only return migration, but also remains and circular migration can create beneficial circumstances that provide opportunities for former students to practice diverse development-related functions that contribute to development in a country of origin in specific ways.⁴¹ A good example of such benefits include a student who returned to Iceland after not being able to apply their skills in their country of origin. This student is currently employed by one of the TPs and is in a position to act as a specialist in their field as part of the diploma programme, short courses and other training aspects, and is also able to influence how the SP can be better organised to ensure individual and institutional impact based on their experience of being a scholarship recipient. A GEST doctoral student from Ethiopia is currently studying women peacekeepers' experiences of operating in a gender and masculine culture in peacekeeping missions. Despite the unrest in Ethiopia, the student has been able to return to collect data because of the strong connections that they have in the country, resulting in valuable data that offer unique perspectives. This student plans to return to take up work in their home institution on completion of their studies. In the case that this does not happen, the innovative research that they are conducting will generate knowledge that is applicable in multiple country contexts and as such contribute to academia, policy and practice on an international scale. Both these examples illustrate the need for attention to be placed on knowledge creation that is taking place because of the SP, and the potential impact on individual and institutional capacity building and its contribution to development challenges, even in the rare cases when a student remains or engages in circular migration.

³⁸ Evaluation of UNU training programmes, 2017, p.10.

³⁹ UNESCO, 2022.

⁴⁰ Strategic Evaluation of New Zealand Aid Scholarship, 2019.

⁴¹ Krannich, S., Hunger, U. Should they stay or should they go? A case study on international students in Germany. *CMS*, 10(39) (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00313-0>.

The IHE DELFT⁴² scholarship programme in the Netherlands places emphasis on students returning to their home countries to ensure that the partner institution capacity building component of overseas development cooperation is met. Between 10 to 20% of IHE DELFT scholarship recipients do not return and seek asylum or refugee status.⁴³ There is a need for a certain degree of pragmatism in the light of potentially changing realities as a result of war and instability in scholarship recipients' home countries. A 2019 evaluation of a New Zealand scholarship programme viewed measures to restrict student mobility negatively and not in line with increased development impact.⁴⁴ UNESCO⁴⁵, GRÓ's partner, emphasises the need to consider tertiary education within the context of development cooperation as support to fundamental human rights and a common good, crucial to unleash individual capacities to lead dignified lives.

Human rights, together with gender equality and sustainable development, guide Iceland's development cooperation as stated in the Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's policy for international development cooperation for 2019-2023⁴⁶ and the recent draft policy for 2024-2028. As such, decisions about how best to maximise institutional capacity building within partner countries should ensure they are underpinned by these principles.

Given the high number of students who return, the educational approach applied to capacity building in each of the TPs plays a significant role in realising development cooperation goals. The focus on the extent to which grants are in accordance with Iceland's development cooperation policy and the needs of recipient countries, collaborating institutions and grantees should therefore be on understanding the strategic role that the postgraduate diploma plays in the preparation of students for advanced research-based studies and in identifying ways to strengthen the application of knowledge and skills post-studies in partner countries.

3.1.2 The relationship between GRÓ and its partner countries

Each of the TPs has historically selected their own partner countries depending on the thematic areas that they work with and guided by Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation, including its bilateral agreements. GRÓ's policy framework states that country selection is informed by ODA in accordance with the OECD⁴⁷ DAC classifications. These also reflect UNESCO's⁴⁸ global priorities. Additionally, selection criteria include countries faced with challenges targeted by a GRÓ TP in need of increased capacity to address these and with governance and institutional structures in place receptive to the capacity building opportunities offered by GRÓ. FTP and GTP both work closely with institutions in the partnering countries (i.e., FTP along Lake Victoria and GTP in Kenya) based on a long-standing and trustworthy relationship

⁴² IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, <https://www.un-ihe.org/>

⁴³ An estimate provided by the rector of IHE Delft.

⁴⁴ Strategic Evaluation of New Zealand Aid Scholarship, 2019.

⁴⁵ UNESCO, 2022.

⁴⁶ Iceland's policy for international development cooperation for 2019-2023, <https://www.government.is/topics/foreign-affairs/international-development-cooperation/>

⁴⁷ OECD, 2012.

⁴⁸ UNESCO, 2022.

where most of the leading individuals and managers in the two distinct sectors in the partnering countries have received their education through the two TPs⁴⁹.

Countries supported by more than one TP	FTP	GTP	GEST	LRT
Uganda	5	2	1	1
Ethiopia		8	1	2
Vietnam	6	1		
Indonesia	1	7		
Kenya	4	34		
Tanzania	2	7		
Iran	1	3		
China	1	3		
Mongolia		2		1
Malawi	1	2		

In terms of geographical distribution patterns, scholarship recipients come from different countries reflecting the country-specific focus of the diploma programmes offered at the four TPs. As noted in the 2019 feasibility report⁵⁰, most of the diploma programme fellows arrive from Kenya, China, and the Philippines for the GTP, Vietnam, Uganda and Tanzania for the FTP, Mongolia, Uganda and Ghana for the LRT and Palestine, Uganda, and Malawi for the GEST programme. The table above shows the countries where more than one TP has drawn scholarship recipients (both master's and doctoral). Offering scholarships based on a strategic geographical approach underpinned by specific and sector related needs of the partnering countries is in line with DAC recommendations⁵¹ which highlight that scholarship programmes are linked to broader programmatic priorities. It also partially fulfils SDG 4.b which focuses on offering increased volume of ODA in the form of higher education scholarships specifically to least developed countries, small island states and African nations.⁵²

The GRÓ Theory of Change (ToC) 2022-2027⁵³ suggests targeted selection of partner countries while allowing a certain degree of autonomy for individual TPs to identify and create new countries and institutional partnerships. While it is important to respect the strategic decision making of each TP as regards potential partners, it is also important to recognise that GRÓ acts as central body that supports a cross-sectoral approach to the development of capacity building in key areas and regions of UNESCO's mandate and strategy. During the feasibility study phase of the establishment of GRÓ as a category 2 centre, UNESCO raised the concern that the newly established centre be mindful of how it incorporates geographical criteria in its formal selection processes of the different programmes, ensuring full alignment with UNESCO priorities as well as an adequate justification of cases where support is provided to regions which are not part of the Organisation's priorities (p. 3).⁵⁴

⁴⁹ See i.e., testimonies from the GRÓ alumni event with UNESCO's regional office in Kenya 2023.

⁵⁰ UNESCO Feasibility Study, 2019.

⁵¹ OECD, 2012 Supporting Partners to Develop their Capacity: Twelve Lessons from DAC Peer Reviews.

⁵² UNESCO, 2022 Exploring international aid for tertiary education.

⁵³ See p. 4 GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

⁵⁴ UNESCO Feasibility Study, 2019.

As such, strategic and collective decision making is needed to ensure the impact of GRÓ to contribute to the realisation of the SDG framework, and in particular to maximise the resources available. These resources include the graduated GRÓ scholarship recipients who return to their home countries or regions to apply their skills. Master's and doctoral graduates from the scholarship programme have referred to the need for increased opportunities for networking when they return, both nationally and regionally. This suggests that selection of scholarship recipients may benefit from responding to the need to build up a critical mass in partner countries and creating a regional focus to support post-graduation alumni networks.

Another point raised by scholarship recipients is the importance of buy-in from partner institutions and countries to provide opportunities for application of skills and knowledge and ongoing professional development when graduates return to home institutions. Given that SDG 17 is a key goal of the GRÓ ToC, strengthening global partnerships through participation of key stakeholders in partner countries seems an important part of the GRÓ activities. The establishment of formal Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) with partner institutions is one key step towards ensuring stronger collaboration and buy-in from partners in selected countries to support various stages of the scholarship programme. For example, all TPs have established professional partnerships with partner government institutions based on their history with selected countries. However, these are not always based on formal agreements. This creates the risk that these partnerships will not persist over time, in particular if they are dependent on individual relationships, reducing institutional memory and long-term institutional and organisational capacity building efforts.

Despite the relatively recent establishment of GEST, it has managed to secure MoUs with partnering institutions rather than countries. In discussions with RANNÍS it was pointed out that having a formal agreement with the institutions in the partner countries provides greater access to mobility grants such as through the ERASMUS+ scheme. It is important for GRÓ and the four TPs to identify how an MOU can develop partner institution/country buy-in that would strengthen opportunities for post-study application of skills and knowledge.

3.2 Coordination

How well does the GRÓ SP complement/coordinate with other GRÓ activities and work? How can synergies be maximised?

3.2.1 The role of GRÓ, MFA and UNESCO

The establishment of GRÓ as a UNESCO Category 2 centre in 2020 illustrates recognition of the success of the TPs as regards their contribution to Iceland's development cooperation policy. This union provides a unique opportunity to develop a cross-sectoral approach to the development of capacity building in key areas and regions of UNESCO's mandate and strategy towards the SDGs, with a focus on SDG 5 (GEST), 7 (GTP), 14 (FTP) and 15 (LRT). However, in order for this to happen, and to maintain the internationally recognised high-quality work of the four TPs, it is important that the three core partners (MFA, GRÓ and UNESCO) play mutually supportive academic, financial, strategic and coordinating roles.

Concerns raised in the 2019 feasibility study⁵⁵ included the financial sustainability of the centre and the four TPs due to dependence on funding from the MFA. The SP is designed to be responsive to the academic and pastoral needs of students, a design which is not necessarily always in harmony with government financing mechanisms. The 2017 external evaluation of the TPs found that the degree of financial dependency varies between programmes. It further found that the size of the annual grants from the MFA were unpredictable, and decisions on fund allocations sometimes unpunctual, resulting in uncertainty that impeded long-term planning. Now under GRÓ, the main concern raised by the TP staff as regards financing of the SP, is the need for donors to understand the academic and financial needs associated with conducting quality research projects.

Historically, funding has been provided on a yearly basis. This provides short-term visibility over sources of income at the programme level. Despite written agreements that state that a student will receive a scholarship for the duration of their studies both at the master's and doctoral level, there is no budgeting mechanism in place that earmarks the full scholarship amount for each master's and doctoral student for the duration of their studies. As such, dependence on MFA funding for the SP leaves TPs vulnerable to any cut or change in budget allocations. The current yearly funding cycle means that programmes cannot necessarily anticipate and manage potential budgetary fluctuations.

The 2022-2027 GRÓ ToC presents outputs, assumptions and activities that suggest strategic intentions to strengthen the master's and doctoral programmes informed by recommendations from previous evaluations. There is strong support amongst GRÓ board members, including MFA representatives, to secure adequate funding to support the SP, and to ensure its quality and impact. Budget projections in the draft parliamentary resolution on Iceland's international development cooperation for 2024-2028⁵⁶ indicate an increase in funds over the next five years. However, there is a need to ensure these funds are used to sustain the quality of the SP and its contributions to Iceland's development cooperation. Given that Icelandic ODA is small and spread across a number of different projects and programmes, it is important for GRÓ central to strongly advocate for core MFA funds to specifically support the costs of the SP. This will require buy-in from the four TPs in terms of creating long-term programme and financial plans that cover the full period needed to complete a master's or doctoral programme.

Based on lessons learned from other scholarship programmes, there are a number of feasible options for additional funding to supplement/complement core MFA funding of the SP. IHE DELFT⁵⁷ is a foundation which operates under the auspices of UNESCO as a category 2 centre. It is financed by MFA funds, as well as a base funding from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (MoECS). It furthermore receives funds through revenue from tuition fees, research, and institutional strengthening projects. Although a private foundation, IHE DELFT shares with GRÓ the role of institutional capacity building of individuals aimed at making a tangible contribution to achieving the SDGs. The institute's core activities include education, research, and institutional strengthening, including a postgraduate

⁵⁵ UNESCO Feasibility Study, 2019.

⁵⁶ Draft parliamentary resolution on Iceland's international development cooperation 2024-2028, [resuhttps://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/\\$Cases/Details/?id=3507](https://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/$Cases/Details/?id=3507)

⁵⁷ IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, <https://www.un-ihe.org/>

scholarship scheme. One of the strengths of the scholarship approach is the diversification and management of funds. Scholarship support for master's and doctoral students include embassy-supported scholarships, which target early and mid-career professionals, and rotary club-support in both the host and partner countries. This diversification of funds allows for the necessary amount of autonomy required to ensure educational decision making is not affected by stringent and restrictive financial requirements. Given the substantial number of international students who are IHE DELFT scholarship recipients, the administrative and financial coordination of the scholarships is carried out by a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) called NUFFIC, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in higher education, which supports the work of the MFA around capacity building and fellowships. This allows IHE DELFT to focus on academic aspects of the SP.

The support of embassies in partner countries, as in the case of IHE DELFT, offers a source of additional funding. This would be possible for GRÓ in partner countries with bilateral agreements. In addition, possibilities for funding and in-kind contributions lie in GRÓ's relationship with UNESCO. These include putting in requests for UNESCO national committee funds in partner countries to support local initiatives, such as alumni networks around the globe. There is potential for UNESCO to play a more strategic role in financing regional alumni clusters, to promote not only the in-country expertise as regards the four specialised areas but also cross-sectoral initiatives. Individual TPs and GRÓ central are already collaborating with UNESCO. For example, LRT and the Man and the Biosphere Programme, and the visit of the Director General of GRÓ to the UNESCO Nairobi Regional Office for Eastern Africa. Another opportunity may lie in collaboration with other Nordic countries, which make larger financial contributions to UNESCO. There may be possibilities for joint-Nordic funding for post-study activities which use GRÓ graduates as local experts.

The likelihood of accessing UNESCO funds, and indeed other sources of funding earmarked for SDG initiatives, would be enhanced by GRÓ central and its four TPs strategically exploring funding and cross-sectoral collaboration opportunities. Given the short period of time since the four TPs have been brought together under the umbrella of GRÓ, it is understandable that organised and strategic collaboration remains to be strengthened. The 2022-2027 GRÓ ToC and the ongoing work of a joint results matrix present an important opportunity to develop a strategic approach to cross-sectoral responses to the SDGs. Some scholarship recipients referred to wanting to learn more about the work of fellows from other TPs, and to explore cross-sectoral research opportunities, in particular in terms of gender. According to the 2017 evaluation,⁵⁸ GTP, FTP, and LRT have made significant efforts to improve gender parity and introduce gender perspectives into the programmes. In the ToC,⁵⁹ there is a reference to gender sensitive and equality promoting approaches in all GRÓ activities, including maintaining gender balance in the admission of fellows and other trainees. The ToC and results framework present an important opportunity to develop a stronger cross-sectoral approach to management and monitoring of the SP informed by the expertise of GEST, which could include the development of an overarching gender policy or strategy for the SP.

Responsibility for developing and monitoring stronger cross-sectoral opportunities, which could feed into research ideas and projects, falls both with GRÓ central and

⁵⁸ Evaluation of UNU training programmes, 2017.

⁵⁹ See p. 10 GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

each of the four TPs. One of the concerns raised during interviews with TP staff was the high turnover of the GRÓ Director General position. Since 2020, there have been three Director Generals, with the current Director holding the position since May 2021. In any context of organisational change and strategic planning, it is essential to ensure a long-term leadership role to establish mutual trust and productive collaboration. There are encouraging signs of work currently being carried out to develop stronger synergies across the four programmes facilitated by the MFA and GRÓ. As such, GRÓ central plays a key role as regards organising opportunities for the TPs to strategically identify best practices to strengthen the financial and administrative set up of a common and comprehensive GRÓ SP and to establish clear roles and responsibilities associated with management and monitoring of the SP.

3.3 Effectiveness

To what extent have the grants achieved their goals?

3.3.1 Personal and professional benefits

Studying overseas can be a challenging endeavour, taking students away from their home environment, friends, and families, and demanding a leave of absence from their place of work. It places demands on students above the rigours of academic studies, as they adapt to a new culture and society, language, and climate. However, despite these challenges, students of the four TPs of GRÓ are overwhelmingly positive about the benefits that studying in Iceland has brought them, which is a testament to the efforts of the TPs to support students during their studies and time in Iceland. This is in line with the GRÓ ToC output to increase the capability of individuals within their respective professional fields.

A major benefit cited by the current and former students of the GRÓ programme is that postgraduate study in Iceland provides them with access to individuals and institutions with significant expertise in their subject area. This was a benefit mentioned by 93% of former students

“The benefits of this programme cannot be overstated especially when it comes to the kind of focus applied to the professional field. I feel like I am amongst the best of the best in the world, and this is invaluable in terms of being able to network and gain a better position within your sector.”

and 88% of current students in response to the survey and also by students in the focus group interviews. This underlines the contribution of the GRÓ TPs to the aims of Icelandic ODA in the specific areas of geothermal energy, fisheries, land reclamation ecology and gender equality. Within the geothermal sector, survey respondents noted that supervisors had also provided expertise within their home countries in geothermal energy development.

The quality of the master's and doctoral programme was also reported to be a significant reason for studying in Iceland, with students mentioning the high standards of the programmes and a sense of academic freedom. The high quality of supervision provided under the TP has been appreciated by both current and graduated students. Survey respondents noted that course supervisors in Iceland demonstrated a high-level of interest in supporting them and progressing their studies. The expertise of the supervisors, both academically and in terms of subject matter was noted by the students, with supervisors drawn from both academia and industry where applicable. Supervisors were noted to be approachable and willing to give suggestions and advice, which in some cases contrasted to experience of supervisors within their home countries. This highlights the strength of the pedagogical approach the students experience as part of the SP.

Supervision in Iceland “was an interactive communication between the supervisors and students that I feel is rare in my home country.”

Students appreciated the experience of studying in a multi-cultural environment and having access to more materials and resources than in their country of origin. Students also reported that studying in Iceland helped to increase their intercultural skills, their social and leadership skills and confidence, and opened a wider network of contacts than if they had studied within their own country context. These included contacts related to their field of expertise and social contacts.

A substantial proportion of the graduated students responding to the survey (94%) said that completing their postgraduate study in Iceland had increased their expertise and reputation in their relevant academic field and profession.

“Personally, the scholarship programme raised my profile; it gave me international exposure which several employers appreciated.”

An improvement in opportunities for career advancement and promotion was noted by 73% of the graduated students and 62% said that it had improved their opportunity for further academic study. This reflects findings of other evaluations of grant/scholarship programmes in other country contexts, where scholars reported acquiring important skills which increased their competitiveness in the job market.⁶⁰ The 2017 evaluation of the UNU programmes in Iceland also found that GRÓ students had increased opportunities for career advancement and academic pursuits.⁶¹

3.3.2 Application of knowledge and skills

By offering master's and doctoral scholarships to alumni from the 5/6-month training courses in their respective fields of study, the GRÓ programme can select students who they feel have strong research projects, are motivated, and have good potential to promote and implement changes in their specific field of work post-study.

The topics and research undertaken during postgraduate study in Iceland were reported by 94% of graduated students and 85% of current students, to be extremely relevant to the development challenges within their home countries. This is due to the

⁶⁰ See for example, Strategic Evaluation of New Zealand Aid Scholarships, 2019.

⁶¹ Evaluation of the UNU Programmes in Iceland, 2017.

selection process of the TPs, which has enabled students to be selected from countries where the development challenges relate well to the subject areas of the TPs. The participation of students in the diploma post-graduate training creates the unique opportunity for both supervisors and students to investigate and discuss research topics for further post-graduate studies. Respondents to the survey provided explanations as to how they felt their study and research were helping to explore issues that were directly relevant to challenges within their country context, particularly within the geothermal and fisheries sectors.

A selection of survey respondent quotes on the relevance of their research

“In Tanzania we rely on hydropower as the only source of renewable energy which conflicts with other sectors such as irrigation and agriculture. We have the potential for geothermal energy...and therefore my research looks at the potential of hydro and geothermal energy and to provide recommendations that can assist in optimising geothermal for energy production and reduce [reliance] on hydropower.”

“My research addresses some of the key questions we have in the aquaculture sector in my country.”

“My research focus was reservoir engineering, which is required at almost any point during the development of new geothermal fields.”

“I studied environment and natural resources, majoring in fisheries resources, which is extremely relevant to my country given the global fisheries issues we face, such as overfishing.”

“Currently African countries are looking to increase the deployment of geothermal energy for direct use applications including in the agri-food sector. Geothermal resources could be used to directly meet the energy needs of local farmers for food processing and drying to reduce post-harvest food loss.”

“Mongolia is a cold country that requires almost seven months heating. Geothermal energy is one of the best solutions for heating and we believe that it will reduce air pollution dramatically.”

The results from the survey indicate that graduated students from the postgraduate programme, the majority currently being from the GTP and FTP, have been able to apply their new skills and knowledge within their professional environment. On completion of their studies, 72% of graduated students who responded to the survey said that they had been able to provide training or mentoring to others based on the skills and knowledge they had gained. Sixty-two percent had presented research at conferences, and 59% had been able to introduce new initiatives or approaches within their profession. Respondents also reported that they had been promoted to positions with more responsibility or leadership (57%); that they were able to conduct further research in their area of expertise (54%); that they had advised policymakers or high-level decision-makers based on their research (47%) or were able to publish academic papers in peer-reviewed journals (37%). Some were able to introduce new policies and procedures at their institution (22%).

Due to the short timeframe of the evaluation, it was impossible to provide a more comprehensive picture of how students have been able to apply their learning and to act as “change agents” within their professional environment. It is likely that the TPs

have a much clearer understanding of the contribution made by students to their specific sectors within the different country contexts, and the 2017 evaluation of the UNU programmes also reported in detail on how GRÓ students and master's and doctoral students had progressed in terms of their individual development and professional contribution.⁶²

3.3.3 Challenges to application of knowledge and skills

Current students were asked how they felt studies in Iceland would benefit them professionally once they returned home. What is interesting about the responses of the current students is that they indicate high expectations. For example, 88% of students expect that they will be able to provide mentoring or training to others, or to present research at conferences, and 81% indicated that they felt they would be able to introduce new initiatives or approaches within their professions. This contrasts with the slightly lower percentages of graduated students reporting that they had been able to achieve these goals and indicates the existence of some barriers to students being able to fully apply their enhanced skills and knowledge. This was acknowledged by some of the current students in the focus group discussions, who noted that students often leave from their studies with great ideas and expectations but have few resources to implement them in their local and national contexts.

In addition to a lack of resources, survey respondents mentioned other barriers, including power dynamics or different management styles within institutions which presented challenges when students tried to implement their ideas.

“In the light of the substantial investment made and the anticipation that students will utilise their acquired skills and knowledge in their home country, the GRÓ TPs should establish communication with these institutions to ensure accountability.”

One student noted that, compared to Iceland where there was good collaboration between industry and scientists, in their country of origin it was much more challenging to forge a relationship with industry. An evaluation of the New Zealand scholarship programme also noted that barriers to the application of skills and knowledge existed in the form of institutional unreadiness, lack of resources, cultural resistance, or mismatched planning skills.⁶³ It is an important assumption within the GRÓ ToC (see p.8 under 2.2.3 Scholarships and p.12) that partner organisations will encourage returning staff members to practise and spread what they have learnt, but one that perhaps needs more direct attention to unpick some of the challenges faced by the master's and doctoral graduates.

While some clear examples of support between the TPs and the graduated students and their institutions were given, for example through training collaboration, conferences, advisory support and technical and financial support for specific projects, several graduated students felt the need for more strategic and systematic support when in their home countries. Ideas from students about how the TPs could better support the transition from study to application of skills and knowledge within an institutional context included having a more strategic partnership with the institutions in the home context and more consistent follow-up with graduated students to

⁶² Evaluation of the UNU Programmes in Iceland, 2017.

⁶³ Strategic Evaluation of New Zealand Aid Scholarships, 2019.

understand what progression had been made and the barriers faced. The current survey being conducted by GRÓ as part of the Results Framework 2022-2027 is a step in the right direction.⁶⁴ The survey is collecting data on the value of the knowledge and skills acquired for the partner organisation; whether the training has advanced their contribution in their field/sector; whether they have used the training to share with colleagues and other experts; and if they have advanced professionally.

Some students suggested that the application of research and knowledge could be planned together with the home institutions in advance of the student commencing their postgraduate studies, a discussion that could be part of the selection process and formalised through MoUs with partner institutions. The provision of small grants for training, workshops and conferences were also mentioned as useful contributions. Students felt that this could reduce the pressure that they feel on their return “to deliver” in exchange for being granted work leave to study overseas.

3.3.4 Post-study networking

The rector of the IHE DELFT⁶⁵ scholarship programme in the Netherlands suggested that the alumni network played an important part in creating professional opportunities for their master’s and doctoral graduates, enhancing the effectiveness of the impact at the institutional and organisational level. It is evident from previous evaluation reports⁶⁶ that financial investments are important not only to support students during their studies but also post-studies.

Evaluations of other scholarship programmes also suggest that sustainability could potentially be further enhanced through alumni networks allowing students to seek synergies to further improve their capacity and that of their organisations.⁶⁷ One of the three outputs of the GRÓ ToC is to professionally empower training participants, students and scholarship recipients through community building and networking. One indicator under this output includes the involvement of alumni in teaching and organisation of short courses in partner countries, which are generally run by Icelandic experts.

“I believe networking is one of the major benefits. It enhanced opportunities and research collaborations.”

The master’s and doctoral scholarship recipients noted the importance of continuing to build networks in supporting access to opportunities to further apply their knowledge and skills. Graduated scholarship recipients were asked in the survey if they had had opportunities for networking and building relationships and expertise with other students since completing their studies. Seventy-nine percent said that they had, with the remainder saying there had been no opportunities or they did not know if there were. When asked about the

“It benefited me in advancing professionally and in promoting intercultural skills. It builds confidence.”

⁶⁴ GRÓ Results Framework 2023-2027 – see p. 1 Outcome: GRÓ fellows, trainees and respective organisations promote and implement changes needed to achieve SDGs relevant to their field of work.

⁶⁵ IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, <https://www.un-ihe.org/>

⁶⁶ Evaluation of the UNU Programmes in Iceland, 2017; NUFU, 2000; Impact Evaluation Report on MFA-NCA Scholarships Programme NORAD, 2020; Strategic Evaluation of New Zealand Aid Scholarship, 2019.

⁶⁷ See, for example, The evaluation of the Icelandic UNU programmes, 2017; Nemecková & Krylova, 2014; Impact Evaluation Report on MFA-NCA Scholarship Programme, 2020.

benefits of networking, many gave both personal and professional benefits. These included building networks for continued professional development and advancement, being able to exchange insights and experiences, and drawing on the knowledge of those who had graduated previously. Respondents said networking with others could help to build motivation and confidence. Several respondents noted that having contacts with people working in the same sector in other companies or countries enabled them to exchange experience and best practices, and to consider how problems could be looked at from different angles. It enabled them to learn of new technologies, approaches and procedures applied in different companies or countries. Practically, respondents said that it gave the opportunity to work on joint research and implementation projects which could benefit them, their institutions, and their countries. The contacts and network also opened new job opportunities for some.

Despite the enthusiasm for networking with other students and grant recipients and the benefits it could bring, respondents reported that it was often easier to share knowledge and experiences when in Iceland, and that the intensity and frequency of communication lessened when they returned to their country of origin.

There appears to be a lot of enthusiasm among the scholarship recipients for an online platform or community of practice for research and collaboration that could help students and alumni from across the GRÓ TPs to share information, work questions, job opportunities, research project announcements, small grants opportunities, mentoring support, and invitations to guest lecture or give online presentations. Such a platform could also give access to online resources, workshops, seminars, or online courses that could help them to continue to build their skills.

There is also potential for Icelandic embassies to engage more with GRÓ alumni in the countries where they are present, a recommendation made by several scholarship recipients. This could benefit in-country embassy projects in addition to recognising and promoting the role that the grant recipients have in advancing their sectors.

“It can promote exchange of ideas, creating synergies for action, fund-raising opportunities, sharing information about training opportunities, as well as experience after the training programme.”

Providing more systematic and funded post-study networking opportunities not only strengthens output three (professionally empower training participants, students and scholarship recipients through community building and networking) but also output two in the GRÓ results framework, which is the production and dissemination of new knowledge by GRÓ training participants and scholarship recipients. Currently, the indicators related to this output are limited to the number of master’s thesis published annually by GRÓ scholarship recipients and the number of PhD papers published annually by GRÓ scholarship recipients.

“It would benefit us in handling challenges encountered in routine assignments [in that we can] tap into an international group of professionals that have already built a platform of friendship.”

3.4 Efficiency

How well are human and financial resources being used?

3.4.1 Supporting student mobility

Research points out that to enhance development contributions, scholarship programmes should not only be viewed in terms of providing opportunities to study abroad and serving the individual, but also in terms of what this individual's capacity building will lead to.⁶⁸ It is therefore essential that the design of a SP takes into consideration the needs of recipients before, during and after their studies.

The student survey conducted as part of the 2017 evaluation supports the need for students to be able to study away from home where there are fewer distractions, increasing the likelihood that students will complete their studies. The benefits of studying in Iceland were also reflected in the students' survey and focus group responses for this evaluation with references in particular to female scholarship recipients who felt they were better able to study away from work and family obligations.

Former and current students, supervisors, TP staff and academic experts all indicated the importance of flexibility in terms of the planning of tasks and time periods spent by students in Iceland and in their country of origin, or in other institutions, as an integral component of an effective doctoral research process. Every PhD journey is individual and contextual with varying factors impacting upon the decision making process. These include personal issues such as family responsibilities, socio-cultural and political factors in country of origin, and macro level factors, such as the COVID19 pandemic which disrupted study and travel between 2020-2022. Such disruptions have financial and human resource implications in terms of the need to support student mobility in a way that minimises the stress related to doctoral studies. This stress can be increased by being away from home and experiencing the associated challenges of living in different cultural contexts.

3.4.2 Advertising and selection of students

A key strength of the four TPs is that the selection of scholarship recipients is based on existing academic and personal relationships and professional partnerships, ensuring candidates with known potential are selected. As previously mentioned, in all four TPs, master's and doctoral scholarships are directed at students who have graduated from the short-term diploma programmes which lie at the heart of each TP and form the foundational base of the capacity building work offered by GRÓ. Offering grants to former fellows is a unique and strategic way to enhance academic and research capacity in addition to utilising the professional knowledge and skills the students possess and have developed as part of the diploma programme. Scholarship programmes based on professional partnership approaches have been

“The training is targeted and well matched to the country's needs through the key players in the geothermal sector”.

⁶⁸ Krannich, S., Hunger, U. Should they stay or should they go? A case study on international students in Germany. *CMS*, 10(39) (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00313-0>.

highlighted in other scholarship evaluations for their potential in delivering equality in cooperation and mutual benefits for the partners involved.⁶⁹

Most students who participated in the student survey stated that they had heard about the master's and doctoral grant programme while attending the diploma training programme (97% of graduated students and 96% of current students). Responses to open-ended survey questions suggest the students are well informed about the SP, suggesting again that the approach whereby scholarship recipients are selected from diploma graduates works well. The professional relationships between teachers, students and GRÓ TP staff also seemed to play a key role in identifying outstanding research projects and ideas. Former scholarship recipients further indicated that partnering institutions in their home countries were aware of the SP, enabling targeting of specific challenges in their home countries relating to the specialisation of each of the TP.

Advertisement of the SP is done primarily through the GRÓ webpage, where each TP has a specific page with a description of their SP.⁷⁰ Under each TP's page it states that applicants must be former GRÓ fellows and meet the minimum requirements of GRÓ partner universities. The GTP, having offered the highest number of scholarship grants over the longest period of time, is the only TP which states on their web page during which period students can apply and in which way applications will be judged. This includes criteria based on academic merit and overall performance during the diploma programme period (i.e., progress and final reports, supervisor's recommendations). The final selection of scholarship recipients also includes the need for higher education training within the respective sector in the partnering countries and is dependent on the availability and acceptance at relevant higher education institutions in Iceland.

All four TPs include their study committees in the selection process of scholarship recipients. The study committees are made up of specialists within the relevant fields and include representatives from each of the Icelandic universities the TPs work with. In most cases, these specialists have been actively involved in teaching or mentoring in the diploma programme which gives them familiarity with the work and research ideas of the prospective master's and doctoral students.

The GEST programme has started to develop a specific Academic Advisory Committee (AAC) for the PhD scholarship selection process. While not yet operational, the role of the AAC will be to identify specific focus areas within the field of international gender equality studies in line with GEST's strategic goals, GRÓ's ToC 2022–2027, and Iceland's International Development Cooperation policy. The AAC will include five specialists in gender equality including representatives from the institutions of GEST's partnering countries. The AAC will undertake the final selection of grant recipients based on a short-list provided by a specific selection committee (which includes one GEST staff member and two external specialists). The conventional study committee will continue to be involved in the diploma and master's programme. The AAC will have a specific role concerning transnational dialogue, knowledge production and exchange in relation to the PhD scholarship programme. Key to this approach is the effort made to ensure more equal north-south participation and global partnership at

⁶⁹ Evaluation of the NUFU Programme - Norwegian Council of Universities' Programme for Development Research and Education, 2000.

⁷⁰ <https://www.grocentre.is/>

all stages of the programme, which has been noted to be a critical feature of scholarship programmes in terms of ensuring development impact and sustainability.⁷¹

3.4.3 Academic coordination

Findings from the TP focus group discussions revealed that managing the master's scholarship was found to be relatively straightforward. Scholarship recipients studying at master's level follow a clearly outlined programme offered at one of the partnering universities in Iceland.⁷² These programmes offer a specific time frame, including what kind of courses students need to take and when. It is worth noting that until now GEST has not offered scholarships at the master's level. It is currently developing a master's programme in intercultural communication with a specialisation in Gender and Development. The four-module programme will be offered to former GEST fellows at the University of Iceland. Students from the LTP are able to take the International Restoration Ecology Master programme at the Agricultural University of Iceland, which is a two-year interdisciplinary science education and practical experience programme.⁷³

While many of the doctoral scholarship recipients are enrolled into the same or similar academic tracks outlined in the footnote below, one doctoral student from GEST is completing a doctoral study in History at the University of Iceland and in collaboration with the Institute of Social Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. This joint initiative offers an interesting academic partnership, described by interview informants as an opportunity to develop much needed cross-national collaboration that benefits all involved from an academic perspective. In addition, it offers an opportunity to explore financial arrangements such as the feasibility of cost sharing given that the student spends time in both Iceland and Holland.

The nature of PhD programmes at Icelandic universities tends to be more flexible in terms of coursework and deliverables, and less structured than a regular master's programme. This requires students and supervisors, including members of the doctoral committees, to work closely together on research plans, deliverables, and outputs. Individual interviews with current and previous supervisors as well as stakeholders from partner countries pointed to a high level of TP dedication and commitment to scholarship recipients and their research projects in the TPs. As also referenced by several students, interviewees spoke about the unique opportunity to fill particular skills gaps, enhance students' academic and professional development and foster innovation with regards to local and national challenges in their home countries and regions.

Main supervisors of all GRÓ doctoral scholarship recipients are from one of the five Icelandic partner universities. Other experts and members of doctoral committees are derived from the same universities or Icelandic institutions. In some cases, the doctoral committees include academic or professional specialists from outside of the Icelandic context, including from the partner organisation in the student's country of origin. As noted, ensuring and maintaining global partnerships by including a wider range of

⁷¹ Evaluation of the NUFU Programme, 2000; UNESCO, 2022.

⁷² The programmes include for example the Sustainable Energy Engineering programme at Reykjavík University (GTP), the Geochemistry programme at the University of Iceland (GTP), The newly founded International Restoration Ecology programme at the Agricultural University of Iceland (LRT), as well as the International and interdisciplinary programme on Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Iceland (FTP, GTP).

⁷³ see <https://www.lbhi.is/study-programmes/graduate-studies/restoration-ecology-msalso>.

stakeholders from the recipient countries is a crucial feature of enhancing quality and equity of scholarship programmes engaged in development cooperation.⁷⁴

An interesting finding related to academic coordination is that despite agreements with partner universities that master's students can use their TP diploma as equivalent to 30 ECTS of the 120 ECTS master's programme, not all students take up this option. Results from the student survey indicate that 49% of the graduated master's scholarship recipients had used the credits while 44% did not. Of the current students, only 27% reported using the credits while 50% did not. The students that used the credits from the post-graduate diploma course stated three main reasons:

1. To fast-track the completion of the masters and shorten the stay in Iceland. In some cases, the use of the credits reduced the total study period by one semester.
2. To enable more time to be dedicated to other courses in the master's, for example, courses that had more demanding schedules, or to enable more time to be dedicated to writing their thesis. One student noted, "despite using the credits, I still took additional classes and have now exceeded the required number of credits for my master's degree".
3. The credits from the postgraduate diploma were seen to be highly relevant to the master's or it was felt that a course run as part of the master's programme had the same content, which they did not want to repeat. Using credits allowed them to skip this course or focus on a different course.

Students' responses are supported by those of TP staff who also suggest that a two-year master's programme offers interesting and important courses that many students are reluctant to skip while credits can be used to avoid repetition or invest time to their research project which tends to be extensive, including data collection from their home countries. Moreover, an important consideration raised in one of the TP focus groups was that for students to be valid for student housing they must fulfil the full number of credits per semester. This was also noted by one student in the survey. As such, student academic choice is an important part of the scholarship programme.

3.4.4 Financial coordination of scholarships

While all TPs undergo the same process when requesting a budget for scholarships from GRÓ central, the total amount TPs receive and allocate to their scholarship programmes varies. These variations reflect the challenges involved in supporting scholarship recipients at master's and in particular doctoral levels. In some cases, funding requests are for unforeseen needs, often critical to ensure successful completion.

TP staff mentioned that all funds are prioritised for the diploma programme first leaving other activities, including grants for scholarships, to be determined later in the year or on an ad hoc basis. Both LRT and GEST mentioned that their first PhD students were funded either due to a surplus of funding from the core activities or as a result of other institutions external to GRÓ being able to co-fund the student's research project. All the TPs expressed a will to be able to plan and advertise with more consistency how many master's and doctoral scholarships they can offer and for how long. UNESCO

⁷⁴ UNESCO, 2022.

has emphasised the critical need for donor countries involved in offering scholarship programmes to approach it from a long-term perspective to enable focus on building system-wide capacities on research and education in the recipients' countries.⁷⁵

The outline of contracts or agreements made with scholarship recipients varies. Contracts are managed through application forms students sign (GTP) or as a letter of acceptance (FTP, LRT) or more formally through a salary-based agreement where students are contracted as full time PhD students with the higher education institution (GEST). While these different agreements cover the same basic elements, including air tickets to and from Iceland, immigration fees, living allowances, tuition (when applicable) or registration fees and medical insurance for the first six months, the rights and responsibilities of students are addressed in different ways.

GEST stands out in terms of its doctoral contracts, which ensure a monthly salary reflecting public salary and grant guidelines (i.e., from RANNÍS or the University of Iceland) for a period of 36 months while the students reside in Iceland. When students are conducting fieldwork, the salary amount is adjusted to correspond to the cost of living in the specific country where data is being collected. The contract offered by GEST is by far the most detailed and comprehensive, while also ensuring the students full rights, including the right to seek support from the doctoral student ombudsperson, the international office and union services. While all students should have access to university services where they are studying, GEST and LRT have stronger connections within the University of Iceland and the Agricultural University of Iceland respectively, given that they are hosted by these universities.

In the case of the GEST doctoral student who is doing a joint degree at the University of Iceland and the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the monthly salary is similarly adjusted when they are based in Holland. This joint initiative is an interesting example of financial as well as academic cross-national collaboration in that it allows GRÓ to explore how best to pursue these types of academic partnerships as part of contributing to its strategic capacity building and international development cooperation. It is important to remember that there are substantial in-kind contributions in the form of expert knowledge as a result of the partnership each of the TPs has managed to develop around the scholarship programme, with partner universities and other institutions, both in Iceland and internationally, directly contributing to the quality and effectiveness of the SP.

3.4.5 Experience of studying in Iceland

Building confidence and self-efficacy can be influenced by surroundings, opportunities to meet other students and to have a sense of belonging, despite studying within a foreign context. Overall, students felt that the support they received in preparing to come to study for their postgraduate study was excellent (84% of graduated students and 69% of current students). Former students reported that the preparatory support went smoothly, that communication was prompt, and they received the assistance they needed to organise travel and accommodation and to negotiate university application procedures.

⁷⁵ UNESCO, 2022.

The current cohort of students appears to have had a more mixed experience, with some students feeling that the support was varied between the TPs, and that not everybody received the same level of assistance. This seems to be the result of each programme operating differently as regards preparatory arrangements, financial assistance (as previously discussed the amount allocated to the scholarship recipients differs from TP to TP, even though there is not a significant disparity as regards the final amount – see table below) and in-country support on arrival. Several respondents to the survey noted that previous support had been outstanding, but in recent years it had been less consistent. This is in reference to preparatory support to attend the diploma course compared to support for master’s and doctoral study. However, differences between preparation for the master’s compared to the doctoral also seem to differ in some instances. As one respondent explained, “the preparatory support I received in 2015, just before beginning my master’s course, was amazing! I’m sorry to say that the support I received in 2022 for my PhD was poor.” Another suggested the preparatory support “could be improved by putting an experienced person in charge of helping future students come to Iceland.” These perceptions may be due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also points to the need for a more consistent approach to preparatory administrative support across the TPs.

“I had a great welcome the first time I arrived in Iceland, and it was always like that every time I arrived in Iceland”.

Overview of scholarship programme⁷⁶				
	GTP	FTP	LRT	GEST
Master’s graduates	81	19	2	0
Master’s students still enrolled	9	1	2	0
Doctoral graduates	5	15	1	0
Doctoral students still enrolled	8	7	0	2
Doctoral students who have left the programme	0	1	0	0
Total number of doctoral grants	13	23	1	2
Percentage of graduated students who have returned to their home country	100%	87%	100%	N/A
Formal contract made	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Length of the doctoral grants	36-48 months	24 months	30 months	36-48 months
Financial support in Iceland per month, ISK	260.000	260.000	260.000	425.000
Daily allowance + accommodation	X	X	X	
Salary				X
Direct participation of GRÓ staff in the progress of doctoral studies	Little	A lot	Little	A lot
Is the student in Iceland for the entire study period?	No	No	No	No

Levels of satisfaction with the financial and material support differed between current and former scholarship recipients: 77% of current students said they were satisfied with the support, 8% were very satisfied and 15% were dissatisfied. Fifty-four percent of former students said they were satisfied, 44% very satisfied and 1% dissatisfied.

⁷⁶ GRÓ Verklýsing úttektar Styrkveitingar fyrir meistara- og doktorsnema í gegnum þjálfunaráætlanir GRÓ/Terms of reference of GRÓ scholarships for master's and doctoral students, February 2023.

The higher level of dissatisfaction amongst current fellows seems to be linked to rising costs, as suggested in the focus group interviews. However, students participating in the survey also referred to different degrees of support officially offered and given. This included references to some students receiving money for laptops even if this was not stated in their agreements.

Students also reported on varying difficulties in seeking support to attend conferences as a vital part of the doctoral process. Both graduated and current scholarship recipients suggested that more detail should be provided about the financial and material package, including the need to review market costs, support for field work and home travel, and costs for accessing publications. Focus group respondents referred to GEST students on monthly salaries being able to apply for union funds, with several respondents suggesting or implying that all GRÓ TP students should receive the same financial and material support.

During their postgraduate support, both current and past students noted that there had been opportunities to network with other master's and doctoral students during their studies, with 97% of former students and 100% of current students reporting there were opportunities to network. This was explained to be not only good for talking about their work, but it also helped with providing a support network for each other as foreign students away from home. Several students from the GTP noted with appreciation that study areas designated for master's and doctoral students within the GTP provided quiet study spaces where students could meet, interact, and network. This is in fact true for all TPs, which offer facilities that create good learning environments. Scholarship recipients discussed the importance of having a space where they feel welcome and part of the learning community. It is not always the case that higher education institutions offer this to their international students. The overall sense of belonging because of the relationships built up with the individual TPs during the diploma programme appears to be strong among both former and current students. Students in the focus group discussions noted how there were organised social events and referred to a sense of wellbeing that being part of an academic community provided.

However, students noted that while there were opportunities to network and meet other postgraduate students, these were sometimes quite limited, and were often among students within their own TP rather than with students from other TPs. In the focus group discussions, current students also noted some instances where they felt isolated or separate within the university where they were studying. Students conducting research work at a company said that they felt they were treated differently to other PhD students working at the same company and were not included in company social events. Importantly, the students were uncertain about who would be responsible for them if there was an accident or emergency at work, which suggests that more formal working contracts need to be in place.

Some students participating in the focus group discussions noted that they felt outside of the University of Iceland and were unclear about their status with the University and whether they could take part to a greater extent in the university life, activities, and opportunities. Currently for those GRÓ-supported students, there appears to be no formal process to ensure that they are able to access university services that other PhD students are able to take advantage of (for example, access to writing centres and academic support, student counselling and the international office). Evaluations of other scholarship programmes have raised concerns over students from developing

countries being isolated from the overall university body of the donor country, i.e., in terms of rights, services and social life.⁷⁷ As such, it becomes important that human and financial resources are mobilised in ways that ensure the wellbeing of scholarship recipients. This will in turn support sustained short-term and long-term impact of the SP on individual and institutional capacity building as a core and strategic component of Iceland's development cooperation policy.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

GRÓ's objective is to strengthen individual and institutional capacities in low- and middle-income countries to deliver development results in line with the SDGs. The scholarship programme (SP), as an extension of the diploma training programme, is a core activity that contributes to capacity development in partner countries as outlined in GRÓ's Theory of Change (ToC) and Strategy 2022–2027.

The provision of scholarships to support master's and PhD studies in Iceland specifically increases academic and research capacity as part of the GRÓ capacity development goals, and in line with the draft parliamentary resolution proposal on Iceland's international development cooperation policy 2024–2028. Previous evaluations⁷⁸ state that scholarship recipients have been particularly proficient as change agents by contributing to important results at the home country level, even beyond the academic sphere. Although it was not in the scope of this evaluation to assess the impact on partner institutions, survey results provide good evidence of the positive impact of investing in research and academic skills in terms of the contribution of knowledge creation to institutional capacity building. These findings are supported by GRÓ documentation (i.e., the alumni event held in Kenya in 2023 and the success stories from the GRÓ annual report 2020-2021 and 2022). Research⁷⁹ supports these findings as regards the short and long-term impacts of scholarships, including high return-home rates post-scholarship, the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are subsequently deployed to build institutional capacity and fostering community involvement or generational legacies of higher education involvement. In particular, research suggests that clarity between aims and outcomes of scholarship programmes can ensure quality.

It is important to acknowledge that the success of the GRÓ SP has much to do with the responsive and flexible way in which each of the TPs organised the scholarships prior to the establishment of GRÓ. The personal experiences of current and former students gathered through the survey and focus groups suggest the financial and academic support provided at the doctoral and master's level has contributed to personal and professional growth, with positive impacts on institutional capacity development. However, findings also raise questions about the need to ensure greater financial security and wellbeing of students while engaged in academic studies, in particular for doctoral students. The findings are supported by existing documentation (i.e., the 2017 final evaluation of the UNU programmes⁸⁰ and the 2019 feasibility study on the four programmes forming UNESCO Category 2 centres⁸¹). The findings further

⁷⁷ Nemecková & Krylova 2014, The Czech government scholarship programme for students from developing countries – Evaluation findings and policy reflections.

⁷⁸ NIRAS Evaluation 2017.

⁷⁹ Mansukhani & Handa, 2013; SIU, 2015 in Mawer, 2017, p.233-234.

⁸⁰ Evaluation of the UNU Programmes in Iceland, 2017.

⁸¹ UNESCO Feasibility Study, 2019.

reveal opportunities to maximise the educational and development impact of GRÓ scholarships through strengthened strategic collaboration between the four TPs and GRÓ central.

The following recommendations are aimed at addressing these concerns and opening up opportunities in the context of the 2022-2027 GRÓ ToC and the draft 2024-2028 Icelandic development cooperation policy that includes a focus on academic collaboration. The recommendations seek to build on and sustain the success of the individual TPs and create opportunities to strengthen the SP as a core component of GRÓ's mission and Iceland's development cooperation.

Recommendation 1: GRÓ central should promote the SP as a strategic continuation of the postgraduate diploma, offering a pioneering example of how sound educational inputs can maximise the impact of ODA funds towards realising international development cooperation goals and the SDGs.

The SP provides a pioneering example of how a small-scale approach to individual, institutional and organisational capacity building at a relatively low cost can yield high impact results. The preparedness of the SP recipient for postgraduate university studies is to a great extent the result of the intensity of the education approach of the diploma programme and the nature of the pastoral and academic support provided by the four TPs. The quality of the four diploma programmes contributes to the success of the SP by ensuring the selection of the best candidates for scholarships.

As a core component of the work of the TPs, the diploma programme provides an opportunity for leverage in terms of identifying relevant and innovative research ideas and strong master's and doctoral candidates who can complete rigorous academic tasks in a timely fashion. In the same respect, the diploma programme provides the TPs an opportunity to identify supervisors and potential doctoral committee members who will provide the necessary academic support. It is common that supervisors have worked with the respective programmes in some capacity or other, and as such already know the scholarship recipients, the country context and their work. This is an important dimension of the doctoral candidate/supervisor relationship that mitigates the risks of doctoral candidates failing to complete their studies. Statistics show that the average length of studies for PhD students who graduated in 2021 from the University of Iceland was 5,7 years (between 4,4 and 6,8 years).⁸² Given the successful track record of completion of GRÓ supported doctoral studies within a four-to-five-year period (which includes publication of at least three articles in some cases), the selection process is evidently working.

While university supervisors play a strong role in academic decision making, students continue to seek academic and pastoral support from the TPs to varying degrees. Findings from this evaluation suggest that this is especially important for the doctoral candidates, given the nature of doctoral studies. While the master's degree is comprised of an organised programme the doctoral studies require more strategic decision making. The level of academic and pastoral support provided by partner universities may differ and it cannot be taken for granted that students will feel prepared to navigate institutional systems and access support services and information sources. The survey results indicate the need for students to feel part of a community for both social and academic purposes to ensure successful completion of

⁸² Statistics for doctoral studies at the University of Iceland: https://english.hi.is/sites/default/files/eyrunloa/skyrsla_-_tolfraedi_2021.pdf

their studies. Postgraduate studies, and in particular doctoral studies, can be a lonely endeavour. In the absence of finding an inclusive community within the university setting, it is important that students are able to maintain contact with TP sites where they studied the diploma. However, it is also important that students are aware that academic and pastoral support (for example, writing centres, counselling services, international offices) is available within the universities where they study (see recommendation 9).

Situating the SP as a strategic continuation of the diploma programme justifies the educational choices being made by TPs, students and supervisors. The relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of these choices are illustrated by the high completion rate, the relevant and innovative research being produced, and the professional development of individuals, as illustrated by the survey results and the GRÓ annual report for 2020 and 2021.⁸³ Individual capacity building through the SP strengthens the GRÓ aim to foster change agents who have the potential to contribute to long term development impacts in terms of institutional capacity building. As such, it can be argued that ODA funds are being wisely spent, justifying continued financial input to support and sustain a quality SP.

Recommendation 2: The four TPs in collaboration with GRÓ central are encouraged to explore different options to develop a coordinated and clustered approach to post scholarship support to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the SP.

The importance of an active alumni network has been raised as a critical component to any scholarship in previous evaluation reports. The quest for and interest in coordinated and clustered alumni networks were clearly expressed by different GRÓ stakeholders including students and staff. A range of ideas were proposed:

- Support former students to coordinate regional alumni networks across all the GRÓ programmes. Such initiatives would enhance cross-country collaboration, in particular in specific areas where there is a critical mass of students (i.e., sub-Saharan Africa, East Africa – Lake Victoria). The value of having a critical mass of GRÓ graduates within country or regional contexts, facilitates the establishment of cross-disciplinary networks, and provides opportunities for cost-effective initiatives.
- Implement a post research fund open to graduate students from all the GRÓ programmes. Such funding could be imperative to kick start and pilot students ideas and small-scale innovations within their local context.
- Offer GRÓ graduates to run some of the TP short-term trainings offered in the partner countries as a way of supporting them to apply their knowledge and expert skills in local contexts with which they are familiar. This is an excellent example of how institutional capacity building can be applied within regional/national/international contexts and is an activity included in the GRÓ Results Framework 2023-2027.⁸⁴

⁸³ GRÓ Annual Report 2020 and 2021 (June 2022).

⁸⁴ See output 3: Professional empowerment of GRÓ training participants and scholarship recipients is increased through GRÓ community building and networking.

- Establish an online platform or community of practice for research and collaboration. This would help students and alumni from across the GRÓ TP to share information, work questions, job opportunities, research project announcements, small grants opportunities, mentoring support, and invitations to guest lecture or give online presentations.⁸⁵

An indirect benefit of establishing a coordinated and clustered alumni network is that it not only serves the purpose of providing increased and sustained opportunities for graduates to apply their knowledge and skills, but it also promotes the work of GRÓ in terms of supporting academic research and cross-sectoral collaboration as part of Iceland's development cooperation and aimed at responding to the SDGs.

Recommendation 3: The four TPs should explore and share ways to strengthen representation and participation of diverse partner institutions in the SP as a means to strengthen buy-in and enhance individual, organisational and institutional capacity building.

The UNESCO feasibility study⁸⁶ encourages GRÓ to strengthen the infrastructure of organisations and universities in the global south through the development of joint plans for capacity development and research. GEST established a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Makerere University in Uganda in February 2020 to explore ways to create global partnerships that draw on the gender expertise in the African context. The MoU covers activities such as exchange of students and faculty, research and publishing collaboration, organising of symposiums, short courses, and conferences. This initiative provides important opportunities for a collaborative approach to individual, organisational and institutional capacity building. A GEST doctoral scholarship recipient is currently supervised by a professor at the University of Iceland but is working in collaboration with the School of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University. One of the committee members includes an associate professor at Makerere University. This collaboration strengthens agency based on equal partnership as well as the possibilities for the doctoral candidate to apply her knowledge and skills when she returns to her institution. GEST is currently establishing an Academic Advisory Committee (AAC) for the PhD scholarship process. This initiative aims to strengthen involvement of representatives from the partnering countries in decision making about research topics.

These approaches are excellent examples of how individual, organisational and institutional capacity building through the SP mutually support each other. However, it is important to recognise that each TP operates in distinct ways as regards partner institution collaboration. As such, while lessons can be learned across TPs, diverse country contexts and the uniqueness of each sector will provide different opportunities and models of representation and participation of partner institutions in the SP.

All TPs have strong connections in their partner countries, which can be used to create strategic forms of representation and participation as part of the SP. Joint collaboration between GRÓ, scholarship recipients and partner organisations and institutions can be established and/or operationalised at various stages of the SP, depending on the country and partner institution context. In some instances, it may make sense for TPs

⁸⁵ Existing platforms that could be tapped into to provide ongoing academic support include AuthorAid platform (<https://www.authoraid.info/en/>).

⁸⁶ UNESCO Feasibility Study, 2019.

to establish MoUs that focus on involving partner institutions and experts from students' home countries or regions more specifically in the research planning processes and outputs, for example, through participation as a doctoral committee member. In other cases, an MoU may include providing in-kind support while scholarship recipients engage in data collection within their home-countries, for example, through access to facilities or specialists. Post-scholarship collaboration may include supporting small-scale research activities related to scholarship recipients' research findings.

Tailored partnerships would address concerns raised by some GRÓ stakeholders about the need for increased buy-in of partner institutions to ensure that scholarship recipients' knowledge and skills will be put to effective use when they return to their country of origin. Involving diverse partner institutions more strategically during multiple phases of the research process provides more opportunities for scholarship recipients to be recognised as local global experts on their return. As noted by UNESCO⁸⁷, there is evidence of added developmental benefits when inclusive and participatory principles are applied to granting of scholarships as part of development cooperation.

Recommendation 4: GRÓ central is advised to establish a master's and doctoral scholarship budget line based on TP projections for a five-year period and informed by current postgraduate student needs and estimates to facilitate long-term quality planning across all programmes.

A steady increase in scholarship funding between 2022 and 2027 has been projected in the GRÓ Theory of Change (ToC), which is dependent on both MFA and additional sources of funding sought by GRÓ and the individual TPs (see recommendation 5).⁸⁸ However, external funding should be understood as in addition to core MFA funding for the SP. The draft parliamentary resolution proposal on Iceland's international development cooperation policy 2024–2028 projects an increase from 0.35% of GDP in 2024 to 0.46% in 2028. GRÓ is specifically mentioned in this draft document as a core component of Iceland's development cooperation. Establishing a specific budget line for the GRÓ SP would not only address concerns raised by the TPs about long-term planning, ensuring greater equity and transparency and facilitating the overall financial management of the SP budget, but would also illustrate MFA commitment to education and research as part of Iceland's overseas development assistance (ODA). The aforementioned draft policy includes cooperation with the academic community as an area to strengthen, including possibilities to encourage increased participation in development cooperation and collaboration between universities in Iceland and in bilateral partner countries in Iceland's focus areas. This presents an important financial opportunity for GRÓ and its pioneering cross-sectoral and multiple stakeholder approach to support education and research as part of its mandate.

The five-year budget projections of each TP should be based on current costs and estimates. The aim should be to identify the higher end rate of current scholarship recipients because these provide greater financial and social security, which are needed to successfully complete a quality research project. One way to estimate the annual funds needed for master's and doctoral students is to be guided by salary guidelines for master's and doctoral students who are funded through research project

⁸⁷ UNESCO, 2022.

⁸⁸ GRÓ 2022-2027 Theory of Change p. 15.

funds, as for example those supported by RANNÍS⁸⁹. They typically receive a monthly salary, as is the case with the GEST doctoral scholarship recipients. Although the current amount provided to doctoral students within each of the TPs is relatively equal, monthly salary contracts for scholarly recipients provide greater financial security, as well as possibilities for additional benefits and security, including funds in the form of mobility grants and union membership.

Given the specific circumstances of the GRÓ scholarship recipients, the scholarship package should also include the cost of additional items that are not covered by the monthly salary. These include a startup allowance; health insurance; dentist; clothing allowance; trips back and forth to students' home countries; equipment; incidentals, etc. It is also worth considering the RANNÍS model⁹⁰ of inclusive top up grants in relation to the amount allocated to individual students (i.e., in cases where students have a disability).

Budget projections should assume the length of grants to be at least two years for master's students and four years for doctoral students, providing increased financial security. TPs should be able to apply for funds annually without being restricted to take on a fixed number of scholarship recipients every year, allowing TPs autonomy as regards being responsive to contextual needs.

The number of scholarships offered each year varies, as does the number of recipients in Iceland at any given moment. This is particularly true for doctoral candidates, who spend some of their study time in their home countries conducting research in their home country. When students are in their home countries for data collection purposes, the financial support is adjusted to the cost of living in the respective country. Budgeting full scholarship costs for two and four years for master's and doctoral students respectively, provides a degree of budgetary flexibility required to accommodate academic and research needs. Creating a SP budget line based on five year projections gives GRÓ central and each of the TPs long-term budgetary information, which can be used to advocate for and leverage additional funds to support supplementary activities related to studies, such as attendance at conferences or to support field work.

It is important that TPs are not put in a position where they feel that they are competing for funds. Creating a GRÓ SP budget line based on five-year projections creates an opportunity for stronger TP collaboration and dissemination of information as regards the type of research projects each TP wants to fund. This also provides greater potential for cross-sectoral planning at various stages of the scholarship programme. Long term budgetary planning facilitates monitoring the GRÓ projected number of new postgraduates per year, currently stated as 20 in the GRÓ strategic priorities.⁹¹

An important feature of the GRÓ SP budget line should be to include the substantial in-kind contribution in the form of reduced or negotiated university fees/registration costs, supervision, and access to resources and expert knowledge as a result of the partnerships each of the TPs has developed around the SP, with partner universities and other institutions, both in Iceland and internationally. In light of the emphasis on increased collaboration with academic institutions in the draft parliamentary resolution,

⁸⁹ See University of Iceland salary guidelines.

⁹⁰ RANNÍS: <https://www.erasmusplus.is/taekifaeri/haskolastig/inngilding-a-haskolastigi>.

⁹¹ GRÓ Strategic Priorities 2022-2027, p.2.

this provides a good example of the type of collaboration needed to support a successful SP.

Recommendation 5: GRÓ central and the four TPs should develop a comprehensive funding and promotion strategy to supplement/complement core MFA funding.

Icelandic ODA has been moving towards more systematic cooperation in terms of working with civil society organisations as well as the private sector. A critical component of Iceland's development cooperation policy has been research, higher education, and innovation.⁹² The current draft policy for 2024-2028 reinforces these commitments and further aims to strengthen academic cooperation.

The GRÓ ToC states that a core role of GRÓ is to seek additional sources of funding. Developing a comprehensive funding and promotion strategy that highlights how a small scale, cost-effective and high-quality university scholarship programme contributes to the research and innovation component of Iceland's development cooperation policy would facilitate this activity. Promotion should aim at developing strategic partnerships between different ministries, public and private institutions, civil society, and industry in the spirit of SDG 17. This may require tapping into existing MFA resources and consulting with the sector within the ministry responsible for marketing, communication, and promotion. Promotion within Iceland and internationally is important to ensure sustained internal and external funding. In Iceland alone multiple funding opportunities in relation to research, innovation and sustainability exist.⁹³ GRÓ should actively seek out strategic engagement with other ministries, such as the Ministry of Higher Education, to search for opportunities to strengthen the sustainability of its innovative education, research and multisectoral approach.

Internationally and in partner countries, there are also several opportunities for promotion and funding. In Iceland's bilateral partner countries, creating strategic relations with embassies to support the work of GRÓ, and promote scholarship recipients as local experts is one possibility. Creating links with other Nordic development agencies and embassies is another. There are examples within the TPs of collaboration with industry and government institutions, providing important lessons as regards how to strategically engage with the public and private sector to provide post-scholarship support. This will require collaboration between TPs and GRÓ central to identify best practices and lessons learned.

As part of this promotion and funding strategy, it would be important to develop a clearer role for UNESCO given GRÓ's status as a category 2 centre. This strategy can build on the existing collaboration between UNESCO and the TPs (for example, LRT and the Man and the Biosphere Programme), and the visit of the Director General of GRÓ to the UNESCO Nairobi Regional Office for Eastern Africa to explore possible cooperation). There are several options as regards the role UNESCO can play both in terms of funds through national committees and in-kind contributions to facilitate and support post-scholarship activities in partner countries.

⁹² International Development Cooperation <https://www.government.is/topics/foreign-affairs/international-development-cooperation/>

⁹³ See for example, Rannís national funds <https://en.rannis.is/funding/national-funds/Funds> including the Rannís grants for innovators as part of the Technology Development Fund <https://www.government.is/topics/foreign-affairs/international-development-cooperation/private-sector-collaboration/grants-for-innovators/>

Recommendation 6: GRÓ central and the four TPs are encouraged to actively seek opportunities to develop as a cross-sectoral community of practice through implementation and monitoring of the 2022-2027 Theory of Change and to ensure cross-cutting themes such as gender are better addressed.

Given the short history of GRÓ it is inevitable that there are not yet clearly defined cross-sectoral approaches to working, as recommended in the 2019 UNESCO feasibility study. It is important to recognise the opportunities provided by the 2022-2027 Theory of Change (ToC), which represents a strategic path towards a stronger cross-sectoral approach. The ToC is a valuable document that represents the work of the four TPs as a holistic initiative towards realisation of the SDGs.

Working with the GRÓ 2022-2027 ToC to inform programmatic planning will provide opportunities for the TPs to identify ways to strengthen cross-cutting themes such as gender, including in the GRÓ Results Framework 2022-2027. The framework only mentions a gender ratio once in reference to short courses in partner countries, stating the number of participants trained by year (by gender) with a target gender ratio of 40/60.⁹⁴ The gender dimension in the results framework should be strengthened to allow for gender analysis of the impact of GRÓ outcomes, in particular in the context of application of knowledge and skills.

For example, the survey currently underway as part of the Results Framework 2022-2027 provides an opportunity for the four TPs to reflect on how the SP can better contribute to realisation of the SDGs through cross-sectoral work with partner countries and institutions. Including an explicit gender dimension in the results framework would allow the TPs to consider the extent to which gender is an influencing factor in the application of knowledge and skills of scholarship recipients. This information allows the TPs to identify appropriate strategies to address any gender concerns.

The alumni network through post-scholarship support has great cross-sectoral potential. Engaging with specialists from other sectors encourages thinking outside of your own sector by, for example, identifying how to respond to gender considerations in the context of the work that graduates are doing in their host institutions. This may lead to TPs considering ways to support GRÓ scholarship recipients to form a cross-sectoral community of practice when in Iceland that provides opportunities to share research ideas and findings.

Part of the strategic process of developing cross-sectoral communities of practice should include clarification of roles and responsibilities to ensure successful implementation and monitoring of GRÓ activities, and in particular the SP. There may be a role for GRÓ central to play in administration aspects of the scholarships, as for example, dealing with visa and immigration requirements, and management and coordination of regional alumni networks and events. Other considerations include who is best placed to establish formal agreements with partner universities, or to explore collaboration with other ministries, such as the Ministry of Higher Education, to foster support for the SP.

⁹⁴ GRÓ Results Framework 2023-2027, p. 3.

https://www.grocentre.is/static/gro/publication/895/document/GR%C3%93_Results%20framework.pdf

Currently each TP is responsible for administration of certain aspects of the scholarship programme such as visa, immigration requirements, and accommodation. There are advantages to this set up in that scholarship recipients are more likely to receive a personal and individualised welcome if this falls under the responsibility of each TP. This could be lost if outsourced to an external organisation as in the case of IHE DELFT. However, the joint monitoring matrix provides an important opportunity for GRÓ to seek out ways to strengthen implementation of the SP while holding on to best practices that have proved effective.

Recommendation 7: The MFA should ensure the position of GRÓ director general is for at least a three-year period to ensure long-term management and institutional memory.

Key to ensuring successful implementation and monitoring of the 2022-2027 Theory of Change (ToC) is the director general of GRÓ. As such, it is recommended that this position be filled by the same person for at least a period of three years, and preferably five, to match the ToC five-year cycle. There is a danger that the high turnover of management positions typical within ministries will weaken the development impact of the work of GRÓ, and in particular its academic and research component.

The creation of GRÓ to house four education and capacity building programmes under the MFA is an interesting development model and one that supports the focus on academic cooperation in the draft parliamentary resolution on international development cooperation. As such, it is important that the GRÓ director general plays an advocacy role in terms of strategically promoting GRÓ's contribution to international development cooperation; in particular, the role of research and academic collaboration as a core strategy. Ensuring the position is for at least three-years should foster greater mutual trust between GRÓ central, the TPs and other GRÓ stakeholders.

Recommendation 8: The TPs should continue to take the lead in education and research decision making given that the academic freedom of the TPs has proven to yield positive results.

Key to ensuring mutual trust between GRÓ central and the TPs is the level of academic freedom that the TPs feel they have. As has been stated multiple times in this report, the unique educational approach applied in each of the TPs, and in particular the role that the diploma programmes play in identifying strong candidates for the SP, is a key to effectiveness, efficiency and short- and long-term impact. As such, The TPs should continue to take the lead in education and research decision making given that their academic freedom has proven to yield positive results.

Recommendation 9: GRÓ central and the four TPs should develop a common scholarship package informed by best practices and create a link on the GRÓ webpage for all information related to the scholarship programme.

Currently each TP has a different description of its scholarship programme on the GRÓ webpage, with varying amounts of information.⁹⁵ Differences in the SP package have raised questions amongst students and concern in previous valuations and financial audits. As such, it is important that the four TPs identify the best practices and create a common and streamlined GRÓ scholarship programme package. As

⁹⁵ <https://www.grocentre.is/>

mentioned under recommendation 4, the aim should be to identify a package that provides the financial and social security needed to successfully complete a quality research project.

This package, together with additional relevant information on the GRÓ scholarship programme, should be made accessible using a link on the GRÓ webpage to ensure greater transparency for students across all four programmes. This will require the four TPs to collaborate and identify best practices and to adopt these across all four programmes, where applicable.⁹⁶ Creating a common and comprehensive GRÓ scholarship framework on the GRÓ webpage should aim to first, promote the SP as a core activity related to GRÓ's objectives and goals; and second, facilitate student access to relevant financial, administrative, academic, and pastoral/social information, including roles and responsibilities related to the SP.

There is a wealth of information needed by master's and doctoral students who are not from Iceland, such as visa requirements and processes; housing; access to health facilities; living in Iceland information and knowledge of shops selling products from their home countries. Although some information may be readily available on partner university websites, these are not always user-friendly. Information could include:

1. Scholarship package (what the scholarship includes and does not include for master's and doctoral studies);
2. The partner institutions (the names of and links to the different partner institutions and possible master's and doctoral programmes);
3. The admissions process (links to admission information for each of the partner institutions);
4. Academic and pastoral services available at the partner institutions (for example, writing centres, counselling services, international offices);
4. Living in Iceland information (links to transportation, shops, health and recreation services);
5. Information on scholarship recipients (past and current);
6. Research funding opportunities;
7. Testimonies from scholarship recipients;
8. GRÓ and TP staff roles and responsibilities as related to the SP.

Recommendation 10: GRÓ central in collaboration with the TPs is encouraged to explore the feasibility of establishing formal agreements with partner universities in Iceland and internationally to increase academic and social wellbeing of scholarship recipients and strengthen the relationship between academia and development cooperation.

Currently there are variations in the type of agreements being made between individual TPs and academic institutions. GTP, for example, has an agreement with Reykjavík University to waive tuition costs for a maximum of three master's students per year. This is explicitly stated in the written contract between GTP and Reykjavík University. In addition, GTP has agreements with Reykjavík University and the

⁹⁶ We recognise that TP may have specific budgetary and contractual requirements that cannot be streamlined.

University of Iceland to recognise the GTP diploma programme as equivalent to 30 ECTS coursework of a master's programme. This allows students to reduce their studies by one semester if they choose to do so. In some cases, it is in the interest of the student to do the full 120 ECTS master's programme for a number of valid reasons (see page 37).

Formal partnerships with academic institutions can be useful to address rights and responsibilities of doctoral students and increase a sense of wellbeing. For example, two FTP doctoral students working as part of a larger research project in Iceland reported feeling unsure whether they were covered for health insurance in the case of work-related accidents and were unable to receive clear information. GEST's formalised agreements between the TP and the University of Iceland ensure not only greater financial security because GEST doctoral students receive a monthly salary based on university salary rates but also greater access to civic and social services (i.e., union support and doctoral ombudsperson where students can seek advice). In addition, formal agreements raise recognition of what GRÓ offers to the partner institution in terms of raising its international status by being associated with innovative and cross-cutting research in different country contexts and associated publications.

Given that strengthening academic collaboration is included in the draft parliamentary resolution for international development cooperation 2024-2028, GRÓ central should explore the feasibility of creating formal agreements with partner universities and the Ministry of Higher Education to determine what type of agreements are possible to support the academic and social wellbeing of the GRÓ master's and doctoral scholarship recipients. It would be interesting to discuss the GRÓ scholarship as equivalent to being awarded a RANNÍS grant, for example, and to establish the same conditions and rights for GRÓ students as for RANNÍS grant recipients. It cannot be assumed that master's and doctoral students will be allocated working spaces and have access to facilities. Based on the experience of two of the evaluators, this is not always the case in Icelandic university contexts. Students' conditions and rights will inevitably differ depending on the rules and regulations in each of the partner institutions. However, there are important lessons to be learned from GEST and LRT who are both hosted by universities, as well as the experiences of GRÓ scholarship recipients. GEST is also supporting a doctoral student to complete a joint degree at the University of Iceland and the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Important lessons can be learned as regards shared academic and financial roles and responsibilities between the two institutions. This is the first GRÓ joint degree and so it is important to explore possibilities for cost sharing to inform this kind of academic partnership in the future.

5. References

International development cooperation

- Drög að þingsályktunartillögu um stefnu um alþjóðlega þróunarsamvinnu Íslands 2024–2028. [https://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/\\$Cases/Details/?id=3507](https://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/$Cases/Details/?id=3507)
- OECD. Determining how Iceland's scholarship and training programmes contribute to development. <https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning/practices/dynamic/dcd-best-practices/a695529b/pdf/determining-how-iceland-s-scholarship-and-training-programmes-contribute-to-development.pdf>
- Skilgreiningar OECD DAC um hvað telst vera þróunarsamvinnukostnaður: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/>
- Stefna um alþjóðlega þróunarsamvinnu Íslands 2019-2023: <https://www.althingi.is/altext/149/s/1424.html>
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GRÓ related reports

- Breytingakenning GRÓ 2022-2027: [gro-theory-of-change-2022-2027.pdf](https://www.grocentre.is/gro-theory-of-change-2022-2027.pdf) (grocentre.is)
- Heimasiða GRÓ: <https://www.grocentre.is/>
- Úttekt á starfi skóla GRÓ/UNU frá 2017: [https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/03-Verkefni/Utanrikismal/Throunarsamvinna/Evaluation-of-the-UNU-Programmes-in-Iceland%20-%20Copy%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/03-Verkefni/Utanrikismal/Throunarsamvinna/Evaluation-of-the-UNU-Programmes-in-Iceland%20-%20Copy%20(1).pdf)
- FTP documentation including excel sheet of scholarship recipients and concept paper on the scholarship programme.
- GEST documentation including contracts and agreements with scholarship recipients, partner institutions and PPP slides on the work of GEST.
- GRT documentation including excel sheet of scholarship recipients and formal agreements with scholarship recipients and partner institutions.
- LRT documentation including excel sheet of scholarship recipients and invitations letters to scholarship recipients.

Scholarship support for postgraduate programmes

- Ábending nr. 5 í skýrslu OECD, [Supporting Partners to Develop their Capacity \(2012\)](#) um áhersluna á að hámarka þróunaráhrif af styrkveitingum á háskólastigi.
- Evaluation of the NORAD fellowship programme. <https://www.norad.no/en/toolspublications/publications/2009/evaluation-of-the-norad-fellowship-programme/>
- Evaluation of the NUFU Programme [Evaluation of the NUFU Programme - Norwegian Council of Universities' Programme for Development Research and Education \(norad.no\)](#)
- Evaluation of the MFA-NCA scholarship programme [Impact Evaluation Report on MFA-NCA Scholarships Programme \(norad.no\)](#)
- Jafningjarýni DAC á Nýja-Sjálandi sem nú er í vinnslu en í henni er m.a. mat á styrkjafyrirkomulagi þeirra.
- Samsafn greina um alþjóðlega styrki sem leiða til samfélagsbreytinga ([International Scholarships and Social Change: Elements for a New Approach. Joan R. Dassin & David Navarrete, 2017](#)).

- Samantekt um úttekt Tékka á styrkjafyrirkomulagi (External evaluation of the Government Scholarship Programme of the Czech Republic for students from developing countries provided in 2013-2017).
- Skýrsla um nýjustu áherslur í þróunarsamvinnu hvað varðar háskólamenntun (Exploring international aid for tertiary education: recent developments and trends. UNESCO, 2022).
- Úttekt Nýja-Sjálands á styrkjafyrirkomulagi (Strategic Evaluation of New Zealand Aid Scholarships. Coffey og New Zealand Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2019).
- Úttekt Grikkja á styrkjafyrirkomulagi (Ex-post evaluation of the Greek scholarships' programme, 2019).
- Úttekt Tékka á styrkjafyrirkomulagi (The Czech government scholarship programme for students from developing countries – Evaluation findings and policy reflections, 2013).
- Upplýsingar um veitingu styrkja undir merkjum þróunarsamvinnu (Our World in Data).

UNESCO reports

- Feasibility study by UNESCO, June 2019 : Establishment of a Category 2 Centre in Reykjavik under the auspices of UNESCO: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/207ex-15-vii_c2c_iceland_feasibility_study.pdf
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- UNESCO. Category 2 Institutes and Centres under the auspices of UNESCO. <https://en.unesco.org/international-networks/category-2-institutes>

Other

- AuthorAid: <https://www.authoraid.info/en/>
- Europe Now. IHE DELFT Institute for Water Education: Intergating International graduate education as a legacy of the North Sea floods of 1952. <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/04/ihe-delft-institute-for-water-education-integrating-international-graduate-education-as-a-legacy-of-the-north-sea-flood-of-1953/>
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- Krannich, S., Hunger, U. (2022). Should they stay or should they go? A case study on international students in Germany. *CMS*, 10(39). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00313-0>.
- Mawer, M. (2017). Approaches to Analyzing the Outcomes of International Scholarship Programs for Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 21(3), pp. 230–245. DOI: 10.1177/1028315316687009
- NUFFIC: The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education. <https://www.nuffic.nl/en>
- RANNÍS: <https://www.erasmusplus.is/taekifaeri/haskolastig/innqilding-a-haskolastigi>.
- Statistics for doctoral studies at the University of Iceland: https://english.hi.is/sites/default/files/eyrunloa/skyrsla_-_tolfraedi_2021.pdf

6. Annexes

6.1: Evaluation Matrix Summary

FOCUS AREA	DATA SOURCE		
	Desk Study	Interviews	Survey
<p>Focus area one: A review of the nature and scope of GRÓ grant allocation and administrative arrangements at the doctoral and master's level.</p> <p>Purpose: To identify what works well and what could be improved.</p>	X	X	X
<p>Focus area two: A review of postgraduate financial and academic support in Iceland and other donor countries and fellow's home countries.</p> <p>Purpose: To determine future possibilities for different approaches to strengthen the GRÓ grant programme at the doctoral and master's level.</p>	X	X	
<p>Focus area three: A review of the perspectives of GRÓ stakeholders on the value and impact of the postgraduate financial and academic support programme at the doctoral and master's level.</p> <p>Purpose: To better understand the relation between personal and professional development on one hand as a core component of Iceland's international cooperation, and the reality of socio-economic and political contexts in students' countries of origin.</p>		X	X

6.2: Detailed Evaluation Matrix

Focus area one: A review of the nature and scope of GRÓ grant allocation and administrative arrangements at the doctoral and master's level.

Purpose: To identify what works well and what could be improved with emphasis on providing recommendations related to:

- How GRÓ's SP can be better aligned with development cooperation policy and the needs of recipient countries/collaborating institutions/grantees;
- How GRÓ's SP could better meet the development needs of partners and stakeholders;
- How GRÓ's SP could be better aligned with other GRÓ activities;
- How GRÓ's SP could improve allocation of human and financial resources and coordination between the training programmes, taking into consideration the distinct professional fields.

Main Q.	Sub Qs.	Data collection methods	Data sources	Person responsible
1. RELEVANCE: Are grants in accordance with Iceland's policy and the needs of recipient countries/collaborating institutions/grantees?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the goals of the GRÓ SP? - Are these goals in accordance with Iceland's international development cooperation policies? - Is the GRÓ SP in accordance with GRÓ's policy and operational focus? - What does the GRÓ SP contribute to GRÓ and its four TP? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Desk review 1.2 Individual interviews (in person/online) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 GRÓ documentation 1.1 MFA documentation 1.2 Nína Björk Jónsdóttir (GRÓ Director) 1.2 MoFA/GRÓ? 1.2 Jón Karl Ólafsson (GRÓ board chair) 1.2 Sæunn Stefánsdóttir (GRÓ board – UNESCO National Committee representative) 1.2 Guðrún Margrét Guðmundsdóttir (GRÓ board – Development Cooperation Committee representative) 1.2 Ásta Magnúsdóttir (GRÓ board - UNESCO representative) 1.2 Ragnar Þorgeirsson (GRÓ board - Ministry of Culture and Trade representative) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Sue Gollifer 1.2 Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir

<p>2. COORDINATION: How well does the GRÓ SP complement/coordinate with other GRÓ activities and work? How can synergies be maximised?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How well does the SP fit into the other activities carried out by the four TP? - Are there opportunities to increase synergy between these to strengthen and develop the SP and/or other aspects of GRÓ's work? - How does the GRÓ TP support institutions in the students' countries of origin? 	<p>2.1 Desk review 2.2 Focus group interviews (in person/online) 2.3 Individual follow up interviews (in person/online) 2.4 Student survey</p>	<p>2.1 GRÓ documentation 2.2 GTP: Guðni Axelsson (Director), Ingimar Haraldsson (Deputy Director), Málfríður Ómarsdóttir (Project Manager) 2.2 GEST: Irma Erlingsdóttir (Director), Thomas Smidt (Project Manager), Giti Chandra (Research Specialist) 2.2 LRT: Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir (Director), Berglind Orradóttir (Deputy Director), Brita Berglund (Project Manager) 2.2 FTP: Julie Ingham (Director), Mary Frances (Director), Tumi Tómasson (Consultant) 2.3 TBD after the focus group interviews 2.4 Current and graduate students</p>	<p>2.1 Sue Gollifer 2.2 Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir 2.3. Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir 2.4 Ruth Bottomley</p>
<p>3. EFFICIENCY: How well are human and financial resources being used?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the scope of the financial support provided (quota, timeframe, fees, travel support, materials, data collection, etc.)? - How do each of the TP select students? Is this based on a standardised criteria and how is criteria comparable across the TP? - Through what channels do students hear of the courses? - Could more be done to strengthen outreach in partner countries? 	<p>3.1 Desk review 3.2 Focus group interviews 3.3 Individual interviews 3.4 Student survey</p>	<p>3.1 GRÓ documentation 3.2 Same as 2.2 above 3.3 TBD after the focus group interviews 3.4 Current and graduate students</p>	<p>3.1 Sue Gollifer 3.2 Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir 3.3 Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir 3.4 Ruth Bottomley</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What kind of personal/academic support is provided to students during and after postgraduate studies? - Is there consistency between GRÓ TP in terms of selection process, procedures, costs, and extent of support? 			
<p>Focus area two: A review of postgraduate financial and academic support in Iceland and other donor countries.</p> <p>Purpose: To determine future possibilities for different approaches to strengthen the GRÓ grant programme at the doctoral and master's level.</p> <p>with emphasis on providing recommendations related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How GRÓ's SP could increase coordination and efficiency of the administration of grants; • Examples drawn from other donor countries, partner countries and within Iceland. 				
Main Q.	Sub Qs.	Data collection methods	Data sources	Person responsible
<p>2. COORDINATION: How well does the GRÓ SP complement/coordinate with other GRÓ activities and work in the area, how can synergies be maximised?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which postgraduate programmes are GRÓ students currently attending as part of HE institutions? - How are these selected? - What procedures and processes are followed to secure a place in these institutions? - How do these differ between TP? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Desk review 2.2 Focus group interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 GRÓ documentation 2.1 Literature on other postgraduate scholarship programmes (see reference list) 2.2 Relevant faculty staff responsible for GRÓ student enrolment and pastoral care. 2.2 GEST: Irma Erlingsdóttir (Director), Thomas Smidt (Project Manager), Giti Chandra (Research Specialist) 2.2 LRT: Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir (Director), Berglind Orradóttir (Deputy Director), Brita Berglund (Project Manager) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Eva Harðardóttir 2.2 Eva Harðardóttir 2.3 Eva Harðardóttir and Sue Gollifer

			2.2 FTP: Julie Ingham (Director), Mary Frances (Director), Tumi Tómasson (Consultant)	
3. EFFICIENCY: How well are human and financial resources being used?	<p>- How do postgraduate support programmes in other donor countries operate? For example, selection processes? How are they administered? How are they budgeted? Through central administration, through research clusters?</p> <p>- What is the scope of the financial support provided (fees, travel support, data collection, etc.)?</p> <p>- Where are students following their postgraduate studies? In host countries or country of origin?</p>	<p>3.1 Desk review</p> <p>3.2 Individual interviews</p>	<p>3.1 GRÓ documentation</p> <p>3.1 Literature on other postgraduate scholarship programmes (see reference list)</p> <p>3.2 RANNÍS contact person</p> <p>3.2 Halla Hólmarsdóttir (NORAD OsloMet cooperation)</p>	<p>3.1 Eva Harðardóttir and Ruth Bottomley</p> <p>3.2 Eva Harðardóttir</p>
4. EFFECTIVENESS: To what extent have the grants achieved their goals?	<p>- What lessons can be learned about grant allocations from the experience of other donor countries?</p>	<p>4.1 Desk review</p> <p>4.2 Individual interviews</p>	<p>4.1 GRÓ documentation</p> <p>4.1 Literature on other postgraduate scholarship programmes (see reference list)</p> <p>4.2 RANNÍS contact person</p> <p>4.2 Halla (NORAD OsloMet cooperation)</p>	<p>4.1 Eva Harðardóttir and Ruth Bottomley</p> <p>4.2 Eva Harðardóttir</p>

Focus area three: A review of the perspectives of GRÓ stakeholders on the value and impact of the postgraduate financial and academic support programme at the doctoral and master's level.

Purpose: To better understand the relation between personal and professional development on one hand as a core component of Iceland's international cooperation, and the reality of socio-economic and political contexts in students' countries of origin, with emphasis on providing recommendations related to:

- How the selection of beneficiaries and the availability of grants and studies can better meet the social and academic needs of students and other stakeholders across the TP;

- How to improve the personal and professional experience of grant recipients across the TP;
- How to improve the development impact of the GRÓ SP, while taking into consideration the unique culture/approach in each of the TPs and how the developmental effects of individual degrees differ within the individual fields of study.

Main Q.	Sub Qs.	Data collection methods	Data sources	Person responsible
4. EFFECTIVENESS: To what extent have grants achieved their goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What value has the GRÓ SP provided to the institutions hosting GRÓ, including HE institutions where they are doing their postgraduate studies? - What value has the GRÓ SP provided to each of the four TP? - How satisfied have the scholarship recipients been with selection processes, support, and availability of grants? - How has the programme and university degree benefitted the scholarship recipients? And their institutions? - Have grant recipients returned to their home country after the end of their studies and if not, why not? - How have grant recipients used/shared the experiences, knowledge and skills acquired? - To what extent have grant recipients been provided with personal/academic support and/or follow-up support? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1 Desk review 4.2 Student survey 4.3 Individual interviews 4.4 Focus group interviews 4.5 Focus Group follow up interviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1 GRÓ evaluation reports 4.2 Current and past GRÓ postgraduate students 4.3 Current and past GRÓ students 4.3 Jón Atli Benediktsson (Rector HÍ) 4.3 Árni Magnússon (ÍSOR) 4.3 Ragnheiður Þórarinsdóttir (Rector LBHÍ) 4.3 Þorsteinn Sigurðsson (Director of Hafró) 4.4 GTP: Guðni Axelsson (Director), Ingimar Haraldsson (Deputy Director), Málfríður Ómarsdóttir (Project Manager) 4.4 GEST: Irma Erlingsdóttir (Director), Thomas Smidt (Project Manager), Giti Chandra (Research Specialist) 4.4 LRP: Sjófn Vilhelmsdóttir (Director), Berglind Orradóttir (Deputy Director), Brita Berglund (Project Manager) 4.4 FTP: Julie Ingham (Director), Mary Frances (Director), Tumi Tómasson (Consultant) 4.5 TBD after the focus group interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1 Ruth Bottomley 4.2 Ruth Bottomley 4.3 Ruth Bottomley, Eva Harðardóttir and Sue Gollifer 4.4 Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir 4.5 Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir

Annex 6.3: Interview sheet

Type of interview	Date/Time/Place	Interviewee(s)	Interviewer
Focus Group	24.04.23 09.00-10.30 Landbúnaðarháskólinn	LRT: Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir (Director) Berglind Orradóttir (Deputy Director)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	24.04.23 13.00-14.30 Urðarhvarfi 8	GTP: Guðni Axelsson (Director), Ingimar G. Haraldsson (Deputy Director), Málfríður Ómarsdóttir (Project Manager)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	26.04.23 15.30-17.00 HAFRÓ	Pre-survey meeting with master's and doctoral students	Sue Gollifer
	27.04.23 9.30-11.15 HAFRÓ	FTP: Julie Ingham (Acting Director), Mary Francis Davidson (Director), Tumi Tómasson (Consultant), Warsha Singh (Project Manager)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	27.04.23 14.00-15.00 Veröld	GEST: Irma Erlingsdóttir (Director), Guðrún Eysteinsdóttir (Operations Manager), Tomas Smidt (Project Manager)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	27.04.23 15.00-17.00 Veröld	Jón Geir Pétursson (University of Iceland) and Valur Ingimundarson (University of Iceland)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	26.06.23 Online meeting	Post-survey meeting with master's and doctoral students	Eva Harðardóttir
Individual interviews			
	17.04.23 16.00-17.00 Gimli	Dr. Sarah Ssali (University of Makerere) Josephine Ahikire (University of Makerere)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	05.06.23 14.30-15.30 Online meeting	IHE DELFT - Dr Eddy J. Moors (Rector)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	07.06.23 12.10-13.50 MFA	Nína Björk Jónsdóttir (GRÓ Director General)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	21.06.23 11.00-12.30 Borgartún	Rúna Vigdís Guðmarsdóttir and Hulda Hrafnkelsdóttir	Eva Harðardóttir
	27.06.23 14.00-15.30 Skiopholt	Daði Már Kristófersson (University of Iceland)	Sue Gollifer
	29.06.23 Online	Ásta Magnúsdóttir (UNESCO Representative)	Sue Gollifer and Eva Harðardóttir
	20.07.23 10.00-13.00 MFA/Online	Erla Hlín Hjálmarsdóttir (Director of Internal Affairs, MFA)	Sue Gollifer, Eva Harðardóttir and Ruth Bottomley