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Appreciating international scholarships' potential impact in Palestine's extreme context

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ABSTRACT

The article presents original findings of career gains perceived by 32 Palestinian alumnae and alumni of 12 master's scholarship programs. I draw on these original findings in responding to one key research question: How do scholarships work, or not, as a pathway of development in Palestine? I argue that scholarships evidently work well as such because of key mechanisms underlying their perceived career impact: Expanded access to career resources, experiential (global) learning, key skills cultivation, specialized knowledge advancement, and enhanced employers' appreciation. However, I outline limits of this argument by reflecting on the difficulty of recreating the efficacy of these mechanisms and scaling up their perceived impact in Palestine's currently extreme context. I finally extend a call for increased, serious reflection on ways to defy this difficulty.

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, international education scholarships were awarded to high-calibre students to deepen and expand but also to escape and challenge frontiers of empire (Al-Rashoud, 2019; Pietsch, 2011). Under Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, Mandatory powers had to administer scholarships to prepare local people for meeting the demands of independence and modern life (Kalisman, 2015). This practice of capacity-building rapidly increased and expanded following the end of World War II and especially during and after the Cold War (Tournès & Scott-Smith, 2018). For Western liberal democracies, this offer and expansion of in- and out-bound scholarships was an act of 'policy entrepreneurship', sometimes to promote mutual understanding and foreign development but often to achieve diplomatic, ideological, or political influence (Nye, 2008; Peachey, 2017; Wilson, 2010). For states recently gaining independence, outbound scholarships were a means of importing capacities and driving national development, e.g., in Kazakhstan (Jonbekova et al., 2023), Libya (Shtewi, 2019), and several other countries across the Global South (Abimbola et al., 2016; Endberg et al., 2014). Demonstrably, scholarships also served other purposes, e.g., to channel authoritarian rule (Del Sordi, 2018), to legitimize government elites (Ye, 2021), and to drive political reconciliation abroad and (gendered) social and economic change at home (Hilal et al., 2015; Pavan, 2020).

This 'drifting of goals' (Wilson, 2015; also see Mawer, 2018; Ye, 2021) has since persisted, even after the promotion of scholarships as a means of achieving the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (UN, 2015). In their systematic review, Campbell and Neff (2020) identify six rationales of international higher education scholarships for students from the Global South: "to develop skills development and human capital, to enhance diplomatic relations, to promote social change, to spur sustainable development, to internationalize universities, and to increase students' access to higher education." Although these rationales are "distinguishable", competition and conflict, more than complementarity, amongst them seems to characterize their relationship (Campbell and Neff, 2020). This competition and conflict can lead to confusion or obfuscation in professional evaluation and academic research of the impact and success of scholarships; moreover, they can lead to choices by scholarship recipients that are dissonant with the program objectives (Campbell and Neff, 2020; Campbell and Mawer, 2019; see Novotný et al., 2021, for illustration).

Amidst this rich global context of scholarly and policy debate, international scholarships remain a burgeoning area of research (Mawer, 2018). And, while this area's geographic and interdisciplinary scope is expanding (Campbell and Neff, 2020), the absence therein of Palestine remains stark. Relevant scholarship program evaluations offer very little, if any, insight specific to Palestine or the scholarship experiences of Palestinians (e.g., Chevening, 2019; DAAD, 2022; ECA, 2017; KPMG,

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2016). A similar severity of absence of Palestine is easily noted in academic research. Academic work identified as relevant is limited to a doctoral study of the sociolinguistic journeys of nine master's Palestinian students in England (Elhour, 2022), a conference paper on the academic, financial, and social challenges faced by graduate Palestinian students in Turkey (Akbaşlı and Albanna, 2019), a journal article based on a master's thesis on US-based Palestinian students' testimonials of destruction in Gaza (Nijim, 2020, 2023), and a documentary review of the policy challenges and donor roles in offering and managing scholarships to Palestinian students (Harrow and Sola, 2022). In none of the first three is the focus on scholarships—though all are useful to establish some baseline understanding of Palestinian students' experiences of/during education abroad. Kalisman's (2015) study, while focused on scholarships, is limited in its sample and temporal scope, focusing on the transnational trajectories of students from Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine altogether during the Mandate period between the 1920s and 1930s. Though not focused on scholarships, Al-Hout's (1979) study of the backgrounds of Mandatory Palestine's political elites shows that between 1918 and 1948 access to education abroad was exclusive to the wealthy and stratified along multiple social categories like gender, religious affiliation, and professional class (also see Hilal, 2009; Shiblak, 2005). Jawdat's (2009) though more thorough and recent study of the backgrounds of Palestinian political leaders between 1991 and 2006 does not explore beyond statistical description the profiles of those of them who obtained their education abroad.

Against the preceding background, this article contributes an attempt at bridging this severe population gap in the research while also extending the base of empirical evidence of scholarships' positive contribution to recipients' career development. It contributes the first account of 32 Palestinian scholarship alumni and alumnae's perceived experiences of career gains of their funded graduate education abroad. The critical significance of these findings lies in their illumination of some of the key mechanisms underpinning scholarships impact in Palestine's extreme context, characterized by protracted occupation and chronic, aggravating de-development (Amir, 2021; Roy, 1999, 2016). I draw on these original findings in trying to respond to one key research question: How do scholarships work, or not, as a pathway of development in Palestine? I argue that scholarships evidently work well as such at the individual level yet barely to any systemic change due to the extreme context of Palestine. I hold this argument while maintaining that the immediate and strategic significance of scholarships as a pathway of development in Palestine should not be overlooked on account of their impact limitation to individual-level effects. Instead, the mechanisms that generate scholarships' impact should receive increased, serious reflection, with the short-term objective of aiding alums in recreating them locally to the extent possible and the long-term goal of scaling up their scholarships impact to take sustainable structural forms. This argument and call for serious reflection may be particularly compelling now given the unprecedented scale of recovery, reconstruction, and development needs in the Gaza Strip (UNCTAD, 2024).

I offer this argument in the following order. After outlining my methods, I present elaborate descriptive findings of the 32 research participants' perceived career gains of their international graduate scholarships, where 'gains' is used in its generic meaning and refers to increase in knowledge, skills, and/or experience. Next, I discuss how these findings add to our understanding of specific potential mechanisms underlying scholarships' impact. I also show the positive and critical contributions these findings make to current global empirical evidence of scholarships impact on alums' career development. Finally, I offer a critical interpretation of the limitation of this impact to the individual level in Palestine, which I hope may be useful to colleagues researching scholarships impact in similar country contexts. Throughout the article, I use "scholarships" to refer to "financial grants that cover the majority of costs associated with higher education study outside of the recipient's home country" (Campbell, 2017, p. 56).

2. Methods

32 Palestinian participants took part in the parent research project of this article, 19 alumnae and 13 alumni (alums) of 12 different master's scholarship programs. The participants were selected following a purposeful sampling protocol where they had to be Palestinian citizens, to have resided and completed undergraduate education in Gaza or the West Bank, to have received a master's scholarship and undertaken with it in-person study at a higher education institution abroad, and to have graduated 1–6 years before the time of their research participation. In the absence of any tracking data or previous research on the population of Palestinian scholarship recipients (like in other places, e.g., Campbell, 2017), I assumed this population to be relatively homogenous in terms of the academic records, career experiences, and personal and leadership qualities that they had to have in order to qualify for the range of graduate scholarships to which Palestinian students are eligible. Following this assumption, and considering varying recommendations on sample size vis-à-vis methods of data collection in qualitative social research (Sim et al., 2018), I deemed the number of research participants to be suitable for this study.

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, pre-existing documents, and a background questionnaire. Through the interviews, the 32 participants were prompted to share their experiences of their academic and broader experiences during their scholarships as well as their perceptions of the career benefits thereof. The interviews were held between January and March 2023, and they lasted on average for 65 minutes. Sixteen of the participants completed a background questionnaire where they shared more information about their demographic, academic, and career backgrounds, and 11 shared one or more relevant pre-existing documents, e.g., scholarship and study application forms and CVs/resumes. Four experiential themes emerged from critical realist thematic analysis of this data, where experiential themes refer to findings generated through data-driven, descriptive analysis of collected data (Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021). This article reports one of those experiential themes, which shows the participants perceived a strong contribution of their scholarships to their career advancement (the three other experiential themes can be found in Almassri, 2024a, 2024b).

A brief note on the methods used is worth sharing here. Data collection and analysis were not focused on evaluating any certain scholarship program(s). This is an approach common in empirical research of scholarships (e.g., Campbell and Baxter, 2019; Perna et al., 2015). Instead, data collection and analysis were focused, inter alia, on demonstrating participants' agency. This prioritization of agency was informed by critical research calling for illuminating the role of agency in shaping (career) outcomes of education abroad (Marginson, 2014; for illustration, see Baxter, 2019; King et al., 2023). Prioritizing demonstration of agency over specific scholarship program success was also made to avoid the risk presented earlier of often competing or sometimes conflicting objectives of scholarship programs. In practice, this prioritization first justified including research participants from different scholarship programs, disciplines, countries of study, and sectors of work. During interviews, participants were given free prompts rather than ones tied to certain scholarship program objectives; for example, they were prompted to describe their career and other activities and, later, to reflect on whether and how they thought what they had described about their scholarship experiences relate—or do not—to the career and other activities they mentioned. This sampling and data collection approach meant that collected data was fit for analytical purpose; it availed a base of empirical data whose exploration revealed cross-program, -discipline, -country, and -industry patterns in the participants' reported appreciation and delineation (and potentially construction) of career gains made through their scholarship experiences. In critical realist research strategy, agency as evidenced in these empirical patterns is investigated in later stages of analysis and is therefore not covered in this article.

Two notes about narrative practice (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) are worth noting before presenting the findings. First, guided by Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) example, I used the following quantified expressions in the thematic findings, among other language markers, to indicate levels of prevalence of an empirical pattern among the 32 participants, e.g., nearly all (29–31), many (18–22), several (12–14), some (6–11), and a few (3–5). Second, before and throughout their participation, the participants were assured of their rights to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Given the very small research population and the close-knit communities from which Palestinian scholarship recipients tend to come, it was agreed with them that their information would not be shared in such a way that their identity may be identified. I constantly monitored my narrative practice to ensure these rights of theirs are fulfilled.

3. Findings

This section presents results of descriptive analysis of the substantive and contextual data contributed by the participants. Profile findings relevant to this article are reported in the first section. These are of the participants' return and (sector of) employment status at the time of interviews. The second section presents thematic findings of the participants' perceived career gains of their scholarships.

3.1. Return and employment status

In terms of return and employment status at the time of interviews, 15 of the 32 participants had or have just returned to Palestine (see Table 1). Of the 17 participants remaining abroad, six were completing PhD programs—one in the US, one in France, and four in the UK. While two of these said they plan to return to Palestine immediately or shortly after completing their doctoral programs, four said they may or will do so later in the future, depending on conditions in Palestine. The remaining 11 participants were working abroad; eight of them, including one who had just finished their PhD in the UK, were working in their countries of graduate study (Australia, France, Qatar, and the UK), and three in other countries (Canada, Tunisia, and Switzerland). The participants working in Palestine were serving in various roles in the fields of human rights, health, and education and youth empowerment—as program coordinators or officers (5), advocacy or communication officers (2), monitoring and evaluation officers (3), in addition to being schoolteacher or lecturer (3).

3.2. Individual careers in advancement, fulfilment in negotiation

Data-driven, descriptive analysis of interview and documentary data shows the participants perceived a strong contribution of their funded graduate education abroad to their career advancement. This perception was shared by nearly all participants, whether they remained in or left academia and whether they returned to Palestine or remained abroad. This experiential theme demonstrates that this perceived contribution took two major forms: enhancing employers' impression of the participants' career readiness and extending the participants' awareness of and access to development opportunities whose professional remit lends itself to their current work. However, the participants' self-reports of this contribution were permeated by reflections on larger forces that shaped their post-scholarship career achievements in their respective countries and industries. These findings are elaborated in this experiential theme, starting with enhanced employers' impression and professional exposure and development before turning to the disjuncture between post-completion intentions and achievements.

Table 1
Participants' Return and Employment Status at the Time of Interviews.

Return Status	Number of Participants	Employer/Sector (depending on available data)
Returned to Palestine	15 (47 %)	6 at international NGOs or UN bodies 3 at local NGOs 3 at schools or higher education institutions 2 looking for work (recently returned) 1 at a development consulting firm
Remaining abroad	17 (53 %)	6 in full-time doctoral study 3 in research (scientific, legal, or social) 2 in charity and philanthropy 2 in diplomacy 2 in hospitality and tourism 1 in language services 1 in social work

3.2.1. Enhanced employers' impression

Many participants thought their education abroad boosted their prospective employers' impression of their profiles, which in turn helped them advance or shift their careers. This was especially the case of participants who had won better-known scholarships, e.g., Fulbright and Chevening. This case was of dual perceived prestige in Palestine, one of the renowned scholarship and another, more general one associated with foreign—Western, more accurately—education. Interview and documentary data strongly suggest the positive career effect of this enhanced employer impression materialized well and often for the participants. One participant said her British graduate degree was like a ticket to facilitate her entry to the field of international business, a small and competitive field, in Palestine:

> My masters gave me a huge opportunity to work in an important sector in Palestine, where you get paid really well and have good benefits. It's though a competitive sector. Not everyone can enter it. So, my masters facilitated the road for me to work in this sector, not only facilitated the road but gave me also the skills and the confidence and, you know, the reputation. Like, being a graduate from the UK and being a graduate from Durham University, you know, it's things they look for in Palestine.

Another participant, an engineer by undergraduate and graduate training, was selected for a monitoring, evaluation, learning, and accountability (MEAL) officer position at a local NGO within two weeks after her return to Palestine and, 18 months later, for a similar position at an international NGO. She believed the perception of her British education and her Chevening Award bridged the suboptimal match between her academic training in engineering and her MEAL role, which involved work on various projects in the youth empowerment sector. Another participant's case is even more demonstrative. Following an undergraduate degree in English Literature, a few years of various work experiences in Palestine, and an American master's in social work, this participant secured a social worker position at a Canadian hospital. In explaining this career achievement, they reflected that the perceived prestige of their Fulbright Foreign Student scholarship and rigor of their American degree helped them secure the interest of such an unusual employer up to and even more through the interview stage.

According to the interview and documentary records of several participants, such positive perception by employers facilitated significant career advancement. One participant, with an undergraduate degree in English, completed her master's in international relations at a non-Russell Group university in the UK. Shortly after graduation, she was selected for an adjunct lecturer job in a nascent English department at a Palestinian university and was soon invited to take up departmental leadership roles, e.g., proposing curriculum plans, building and delivering new courses, and contributing to review and update of syllabi. In her excited reflection on this career achievement, she attributed it to the department's positive perception of her profile as a Chevening awardee and a UK graduate:

> [The department] then asked me if I want to be part of the development actually of this department as they, to be honest, believed in me because I graduated from the UK and also because I'm a Chevening scholar. They believed in scholars because they knew that it's so hard to get such a scholarship. But yeah, so currently it's really good to just feel as a leader in the university—and with only a masters degree and just because you're a UK graduate. It definitely defines your position in this community.

Another participant, who completed his master's in the UK in a field unavailable in Palestine, shared the same belief. Reflecting on the competitive hiring process, which ultimately led to his selection, he said:

> Having such a master's made it really possible for me to even pass the first screening. So, when they got to see that this guy has this master's from the UK on this topic, and it was highly related to the job, I think it was a main reason [for advancing my application]. And, again, this is a high position that I was competing for with really experienced people, even [with] 10 years [of experience], in international nongovernmental organizations. Maybe they have better skills, but this type of master's made the panel think this guy might be a good candidate, so let's get him to the exam stage.

These accounts of enhanced employer impression begin to demonstrate its significance in facilitating participants' progress to new or advanced areas of work. However, the participants' accounts also show that this enhanced employer impression of their distinguished qualifications was not always followed by satisfying levels of (possible) utilization of their competencies. The following part of this experiential theme illustrates that the participants thought highly of the contribution of their funded graduate education abroad to their technical and general professional competencies, before the subsequent part shows their assessment of suboptimal use of their competencies.

3.2.2. Expanded professional exposure and development

Many participants believed their education abroad enhanced their professional exposure, their career-relevant skills and qualities, and access to development opportunities that overall were relevant to their work today. First, over half of the participants described their time abroad as an opportunity to expand their career horizons. By these participants' accounts, just their enrolment at their respective institutions allowed them access to key career resources like job fairs, career advising events, and skills development workshops—opportunities, they said, were not as quantitatively or qualitatively available in Palestine. In assigned readings, especially those involving country case studies, the participants said they gained an international knowledge background that now informed their approach to professional practice in their fields. In classes, they said they found in their interactions with global peers new perspectives on critical or innovative practices in their work fields, whether healthcare and global health, business, development, or human rights. One participant said of this global dimension of her learning:

> Second, there was a lot of opportunity to learn how to do in our field [Water, Sanitation and Health Engineering]. My international knowledge on the field was highly enhanced, especially when I listened to international students—from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—speak about their own prior experiences in the field. This very much helped me understand how things work in our field across the world. (translated)

Furthermore, a key driver of this perceived career contribution was completing a range of practical learning activities that many participants cited in interviews and/or highlighted in their pre-existing documents. These activities included but were not limited to workshops and project assignments completed in class and on campus. All the participants who studied in Australia, France, Qatar, Switzerland, and the US, along with a few of those who studied in the UK, had to complete an internship or work placement—occasionally two—as part of their graduate degrees. Their appreciation of the career benefits of such degree components was unanimous. In describing their internship or placement experiences, different participants mentioned working on highly (global) career-relevant tasks, e.g., "delivering with an international team a comprehensive evaluation of healthcare facilities in different countries", "covering [for a media organization] cultural issues beyond those happening only in Palestine", and "becoming aware and connecting with key organizations working in the field". Equally importantly, some of the participants emphasized the added value of career exposure that such practical learning allowed them since similar opportunities tend to be missing in Palestine. For example, during his graduate education abroad, one participant completed clinical training in child psychiatry with a focus on intellectual disability, a field that despite its significance in Palestine remains critically under-resourced (Dabbagh et al., 2023). And, even when such professional exposure was not required, some participants proactively pursued it. For example, one participant completed two internships as a political risk analyst, a title nowhere to be found when looked up in key job search websites in Palestine like Jobs.ps or GazaRecruiters.com. Another participant seized her time during her study and, again, between her graduation and her visa expiry to intern in her field of data science, another field of study and work barely found in Palestine (Zakaria, 2023).

Second, interview data of many participants indicate perception of strong and broad relevance of skills and qualities gained through their education abroad to their work activities today. This perceived relevance spanned industry-specific and transferable skills as well as contextual knowledge of Palestine that the participants reported applying in their current work. Expectedly, this relevance is strongest among the seven participants who proceeded to doctoral study. At the time of interviews, one participant had just finished their PhD and secured four offers of fellowships. In their elaborate reflection, they enumerated multiple gains during their master's at a Russell Group university in the UK that enabled them to achieve so highly of their doctoral trajectory: enhancement in their personal resilience, intercultural proficiency, collaborative lab skills, multidisciplinary research teamwork experiences, and sense of purpose and self-direction. Another participant, who has been pursuing their PhD and working as a research assistant at an American university, highlighted two factors that enabled them to achieve this milestone. They said these were quality academic training they received during their master's in Jordan and constant encouragement and thorough support and guidance from their university professors there. Both of these factors, the participant volunteered, would not have existed or been of the same contribution to their success had they pursued their STEM master's in Palestine. The five other participants completing their PhD cited the significance of their academic training during their master's for their current academic work. All five described following a critical approach to the study of Palestine in their respective fields, in/across social science and humanities. They explained this critical perspective flowed from reflections on their earlier academic work and intellectual engagement with Palestine during their master's. For example, one participant realized that the inclusion frameworks she had studied during her master's in the UK could not sufficiently account for the reality of disability issues in Palestine, not least because of the social climate and political context surrounding these issues. Motivated by this realization, she has been following a grounded theory approach that, she hopes, will make her doctoral research deliver a context-sensitive understanding of disability and inclusive education in Palestine.

Among the 15 participants who went to the job market in Palestine, most shared such perception of strong and broad relevance to their work today of the skills and qualities gained through their education abroad. One participant who had frequented writing development workshops at her British university said she relies on her now advanced writing skills in completing her day-to-day tasks at a Palestinian human rights organization, e.g., "drafting updates, reports, and other submissions to UN

bodies, and contributing to the organization's international communications". Two other participants said their education abroad, one in engineering and the other in health, equipped them with the advanced analytical skills on which they now rely in leading technical strategies at work. Serving at an international healthcare NGO in Palestine, one of them described using their "newly-gained", "up-to-date knowledge of plastic surgery and research synthesis skills" in performing day-to-day tasks of their job. These tasks include "setting eligibility criteria for receiving the organization's support [for patients needing plastic surgery]" and "building action plans for mitigating health challenges". The participant further highlighted their continuous dependence on key intercultural communication skills they had developed abroad in managing communication with their international colleagues. During her study of Global Development, a fourth participant said she became aware and supportive of a decolonial approach to foreign aid to Palestinians, a knowledge position she said was further advanced by her conversations with international peers engaged in development work in their similarly conflict-affected countries. In her work now with a development consulting firm in Palestine, she said, she has been reflecting on difficulties associated with such an approach but also analyzing possibilities for a degree of decolonization, even if "as small as ensuring project planning is more informed by local data". A fifth participant, who had just returned to Palestine, reported working on a social enterprise to help more Palestinian students access education abroad. He cited two factors that he felt were helpful to him in this endeavor: the substantive knowledge of business he gained during his master's, and, in course, his reflections on accessing and experiencing British education as a Palestinian student.

Perception of such positive career effects of education abroad was also reported by several participants whose fields of subsequent work differed (significantly) from the field of their education abroad. One participant said she was now well served in her MEAL role by the writing, research, interpersonal, and global thinking skills which she cultivated while studying and living abroad—and which her employer (like others in Palestine) presume of foreign-educated individuals. Another participant, who studied international relations, now works as an English teacher at a UN refugee school in Palestine. Capitalizing on the leadership skills and substantive knowledge she had gained abroad, she now steers the work of the school's human rights committee by "supervising the students' parliament… promoting human rights, focusing on rights of children and women… campaigning against gender-based violence… and reflecting on educational policies and practices of human rights and conflict resolution at UN refugee schools in Gaza".

These perceptions of strong and relevant career contribution are further coherent with the finding of increased engagement in (paid and unpaid) knowledge work. Review of several participants' interview and documentary data shows that following, and in a few instances, during their education abroad, they started or scaled up their production and publishing of knowledge in scholarly, educational, and professional settings in their respective fields. Following his master's, one participant co-authored two articles that were published in key peer-reviewed journals in their field of graduate study, including *The Lancet*. Another participant, by the end of her second PhD year, had published three peer-reviewed articles. With the interdisciplinary learning and networking gains she made during her master's, a third participant said she was co-authoring two research articles on sustainable public services development in Palestine. In educational settings, a fourth participant's documentary data reveals she has made several contributions—through conferences, symposia, and magazines—to local and regional debates on effective pedagogy and curriculum development, including in the wake of transitioning to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Documentary data of a fifth participant shows his post-graduation, pre-visa expiry work in the UK involved contributing to evaluation research which was closely related to both his master's in global and public health and his research consulting work subsequently in Palestine. Other participants were engaged in knowledge work in similar professional settings. One used her advanced legal analysis skills in co-authoring different publications as part of her post-completion job. Another, following work mostly in language teaching before studying abroad, has now been leading or contributing to key knowledge-building activities at work, e.g., planning and implementing needs assessments, baseline and endline studies, and project impact evaluations. A third participant said "only now with this competence gained during [her] master's" she feels confident in agreeing to consult on research and strategy work in her field and has already accepted an offer to do such work for an international agency.

Finally, available documentary data seem to further confirm the participants' confidence in the career value of undertaking funded graduate education abroad. Seven of the 11 participants who shared their CVs/resumes listed there courses of their graduate education that coherently link with their professional specialty. In his CV, for example, one participant highlighted under their graduate degree from the UK taking courses like *Management of Healthcare Organisations* and *Health Policy*. He then listed these work responsibilities, among others: "developing guidelines and policies to ensure standardization of medical management across the organization", "conducting quality and compliance assurance visits", and "leading teams" through risk assessments and field operations. Showcasing her relevant academic training and her research focus on Palestine, another participant topped her CV with the education section and included under her graduate degree from the UK the title of her master's thesis. Another dedicated a whole section of her CV to showing the industry-specific technical and research skills she applied through her thesis research in the UK. Equally importantly, six of those 11 participants highlighted in their CVs and/or job cover letters certain extracurricular engagements that showcase broader experiences they had abroad and that may signify their interpersonal and technical competencies. These engagements include leading and organizing a conference, serving in the student representative council, and winning an institutional award for global leadership. They also include further global engagements, for example, two participants who studied in Switzerland and in the US joined specialized training workshops abroad, respectively in Albania and in the Netherlands.

This part of the theme has demonstrated the participants' positive perception of their funded graduate education abroad to their now advanced or new sectors of work, whether in academia or beyond. Employers' perception of their foreign degrees (and prestigious scholarships) seems to facilitate their competitive access to their current work. Subsequently, a broad set of experiences and skills they cultivated while studying and living abroad served them well in delivering on their roles, which sometimes involved knowledge work. This positive perception notwithstanding, the participants' accounts, in interview and documentary data, show these career achievements are not free from substantial external influence. The last part of this experiential theme below presents descriptive patterns in the participants' perception of contextual forces shaping these career achievements.

3.2.3. Negotiating career outcomes

Many participants reflected that their post-completion career experiences and achievements followed a process of constantly negotiating their individual circumstances and preferences vis-à-vis realities of work in Palestine and/or their host countries. This is evident in data from participants working in academia and other sectors, whether in Palestine or abroad.

During what was their brief return to Palestine, two participants worked as adjunct lecturers in different STEM departments at two different Palestinian universities. Both reported perceiving their working conditions to be impossible, with low workload, delayed pay, intermittent contracting (to avoid labor obligations for permanent employment), little appreciation, and near-absence of investment in teaching, equipment, or student experience. Both left Palestine within a few months after quitting their part-time roles, one to pursue her PhD in

her field of graduate study and the other to pursue another master's in a completely different field (and in which she went on to work in her country of study). A similar account was shared by a third woman participant, working as an adjunct lecturer in an arts department at a third Palestinian university. In the course of her gendered account, she said she has to tolerate too much in order to keep her source of income:

> I lecture at [name of university redacted], and it's not the best thing that I'm doing right now. I feel like this is the worst phase of my life. I work for the sake of just making money. I don't feel the passion. I don't feel like I am making any change… because I am being "spoken to", being controlled. I am being, you know, I don't feel like I'm free enough to do anything at the university right now. It's not my safest space to kind of get creative with my students… walking into [name of university redacted] feels like you're walking into a big men's club, like I'm of the very few females there and it's really hard for them to take me seriously. It's either sexist or ageist, or both of them…

These three accounts are contrasted with the previously outlined case of a fourth woman participant, who said she was happy about her adjunct lecturer job in an arts department at a fourth Palestinian university. She added she remained excited about her job even though it required her to move to another city and to teach more in her undergraduate field of study, English, than in her graduate field, international relations. In explaining her choice, she said "the opportunity presented itself and [she] was happy to seize it", a decision she has come to further appreciate when the department asked her to assume more leadership responsibilities (see subsection 3.2.1).

The same predominant effect of contextual forces was also evident in reports of lacking fulfilment in the post-completion career experiences of participants not working in academia, whether in Palestine or abroad. One participant said that although her British degree secured her a positive job application outcome, it has also brought her unfavorable office politics and unreasonable expectations at her work at a local human rights NGO:

> At work, there are people with long years of service before me, and they are divided into two groups. The first is of those who look at me as this new girl with a UK master's who is here to enjoy a good position so we'll try to criticize her work. The second group is of those who consult me on things of which I have no knowledge, their belief being that I am a UK graduate and so I know everything and should understand anything. (translated)

After completing an international relations degree, another participant resumed working as an English schoolteacher, knowing any plans for working in the Palestinian government would not be possible:

> When I was at university [abroad], I enjoyed engaging in the classroom and beyond, and my professors were always supportive. The amount of access to knowledge I had was phenomenal. However, I trusted that these engagements and ideas, though fun and significant, would not make any benefits to my career because I knew I would never be employed in the Ministry of Interior or of Foreign Affairs, or be able to apply the security or neoliberal approaches of international relations in Palestinian politics. Our politics don't work that way but through nepotism and political affiliation. I was just satisfied with the friends and connections I made and the freedom I enjoyed. (translated)

A third participant graduated with distinction from a Data Science program in the UK. She enhanced her specialization by interning and later working, until the expiry of her student visa, in the field in the UK. Committed to returning to Palestine, "even if temporarily", she returned there knowing the local Palestinian market remains unprepared for this field and therefore prioritized applying for remote jobs with companies and research institutes abroad. A fourth participant, a medical doctor, finished his master's and was preparing to complete his medical licensing exams when a family event back home—along with the social and economic repercussions of COVID—made him reassess his life priorities and finally decide to accept a job offer at a healthcare charity in Palestine. For a fifth participant, who had studied in Qatar and wished to work there, "Qatarization", or the policy of prioritizing Qatari citizens for employment, meant that her immediate employers of interest, Qatari global charities, were less accessible to her. This context, she said, made her accept a job offer in a different sector, tourism, while retaining interest in her field of graduate study. A sixth participant, following a career mostly in teaching, a master's in education, and a wish to reunite with family, decided to go back to Palestine and accepted a job offer at a health INGO. A seventh participant accepted a post-graduation job in a field different from that of their graduate study because they needed a source of income to fund their extended stay abroad. Clarifying the significant influence of legal stay and visa issues on career choices, an eighth participant said:

> … maybe I already mentioned that at the beginning of the interview, but I never imagined myself working in Tunisia or in another Arab country, but mostly, you know, because of this big question of like, okay, you leave—especially you leave Gaza—and like, now you're studying in this country within the EU. What's next? And there was always this question in the back of my mind, like, in terms of security, you know, in terms of retaining some legal papers and legal status that would give me that sense of security.

The previous cases show many participants' perception of social, economic, and legal forces, in Palestine and abroad, shaping their post-completion achievements. These forces were demonstrably larger in their often negative or limiting influence than the participants' own intensions of post-completion endeavors. Such influence, while prevalent among many participants' reports, was not experienced to be as negative by all participants. For a few, negative contextual forces of limited opportunities for making an impact seemed to be less detrimental to their sector choices or professional interest and determination. One participant of a track record of professionally progressive work in the human rights advocacy sector in Palestine reflected being conscious of but not demoralized by the paradox of her work at a time of worsening violations of Palestinians' rights. She expressed standing fast to the view that documenting, exposing, and advocating for the end of human rights violations are necessary to inform accountability efforts in the future. Another participant, in a junior position at a private development consulting firm in Palestine, reflected hope and interest in face of what she described as great challenges of decolonizing foreign aid to Palestinians. After expressing recognition of difficult conditions of life and work in Palestine, two of the six participants currently in PhD programs said their planned return immediately or shortly after graduation follows their commitment to the "national cause", to improving those conditions, and to serving specifically fellow Palestinian women and students.

This theme has presented the participants' self-reported contribution of their education abroad to their careers. Many participants' descriptions of their post-scholarship career achievements seem to reflect advanced knowledge and/or leadership work. This advanced work ranged from constructing and operating data collection and analysis frameworks for academic research and development aid projects, to overseeing team members and corporate activities, and to producing knowledge in academic and professional settings. Other participants' descriptions of their post-completion jobs did not reflect such advancement but instead involved significant career shifts, e.g., from language training to tourism and the development NGO world and from human rights advocacy to diplomacy. Finally, the theme demonstrated that these post-completion career achievements were influenced by various factors, from employment conditions in Palestine and visa issues abroad to family circumstances and return/stay abroad calculations.

4. Discussion

Profile and thematic findings reported in the previous section describe some of the return/stay decisions and post-completion career developments of Palestinian scholarship alums. I focus my discussion here on how these findings may inform a response to the research question of how scholarships work, or not, as a pathway of development in Palestine. My goal is to highlight some of the ways that scholarships may prove impactful at the individual level and some of the critical issues that constrain possibilities of scaling up this impact.

The perceived experiences of career gains described in this article point to five mechanisms underlying scholarships impact at the micro, individual level. The first and second mechanisms, working in tandem, are of significantly expanded access to career resources and of experiential (global) learning. Job fairs, career advising events, soft skills development workshops, university alumni networking platforms, and studying in places of open professional possibilities were all new and/or of an unprecedented scale to the participants. Also, workshops and projects to apply newfound knowledge to real-world problems, internships and placements to professionalize such problem-solving practice, and opportunities to gain experience in specific professional roles were all valued by the participants as key not only to achieve but also to deliver well on their current career roles. The third and four mechanisms, also working in tandem, are of key skills and qualities cultivation and of subject-specific knowledge advancement. The participants reportedly experienced an increased sense of confidence in their qualification and of clarity of their goals; moreover, they demonstrated enhanced attainment in analytical, research, writing, and global awareness skills. Simultaneously, the participants' self-reports evidence their appreciation of expanding not only their thematic expertise but also the interdisciplinary, global, and critical dimensions of this expertise. In Palestine's (higher) education, these mechanisms, whenever existing, are of much less potential to generate such impact (Almassri, 2023a, 2024a, 2024b; Isaac et al., 2019; Sultana, 2008; Karpefors and van Riemsdijk, 2020). Their unavailability or limited efficacy may be explained by a dual set of oppressive contextual factors, e.g., systemic mobility restrictions and repeated material and human destruction within the context of protracted occupation (Milton et al., 2023; Nijim, 2020; Roy, 2016), as well as underfunding and fragmentation within a currently dysfunctional—to put it mildly—political system (Alfoqahaa, 2015; Alijla, 2019; Isaac et al., 2019).

Discussion of these four mechanisms leads now to the fifth, of enhanced employers' appreciation, in and far beyond Palestine, of international qualifications. Although employers may not be always aware of the four mechanisms discussed above, their tacit acknowledgement of them is expressed in their perception of foreign-educated students as possessing a level of multifold job readiness superior to that of graduates of local institutions (see Jonbekova, 2023; Perna et al., 2015). In light of findings here, the efficacy of this mechanism may be particularly strong under two conditions: When scholarship alums are reflexive and conscious of this perceived superiority, and when they actively project the "signalling" power (Spence, 1973) of their selective and prestigious scholarships undertaken at foreign universities, themselves, too, often selective and prestigious. Both conditions seem to be met here. First, prevalent perception of career gains among the participants may suggest a shared focus on what they knew they had lacked in their prior academic and career training in Palestine. This suggestion is plausible considering differences in the participants' scholarship programs and rationales, in their programs and foreign countries of study, and relatively, in their fields and extents of pre-scholarship career experiences (see Almassri, 2024b, for more on the research participants' reflexivity). The suggestion is also directly supported by Akbaşlı and Albanna's (2019) report of Palestinian graduate students' dissatisfaction with limited practical learning through their education in Turkey. Demonstrably conscious of this, second, the research participants visibly celebrated the quality of their funded graduate education abroad in their CVs/resumes.

Demonstration of these mechanisms here adds positively but also critically to current empirical evidence of their efficacy in realizing the impact of scholarships and, more broadly, education abroad on alums' careers (Mawer, 2018; Waibel et al., 2017). On the one hand, the findings refresh historical evidence of scholarships' contribution to Palestinians' career advancement (Al-Hout, 1979; Kalisman, 2015), and they clarify and expand contemporary evidence of the career impact of Palestinians' experiences of funded graduate education abroad (Akbaşlı and Albanna, 2019; Elhour, 2022). These findings help establish a benchmark for understanding the career gains but also challenges that characterize Palestinian scholarship recipients' career experiences after their graduate education abroad. Globally, these findings further illuminate the efficacy of scholarships in enhancing male *and* female recipients' intellectual, personal, and global capacities for careers in academia and (education) advocacy (Campbell et al., 2021; Campbell and Lavallee, 2020; Demir et al., 2000; ECA, 2017; Pikos-Sallie, 2018; Shtewi, 2019). The findings also extend from a new context evidence of scholarships bridging Global South recipients' access to academic experiences yielding advanced subject knowledge, transferable practical experiences, and/or personal effectiveness (Jonbekova, 2023; Perna et al., 2015; Mawer, 2014; Raetzell et al., 2013). They also lend further evidence of the contingent signalling advantage that scholarship alums enjoy, or do not, when returning to their home job market (Jonbekova et al., 2021; Pham and Saito, 2020).

On the other hand, the findings underscore the absence of key conditions conducive to making scholarships impact work at levels beyond that of individuals. The participants' accounts demonstrate there was no role by official Palestinian institutions to incubate or even attract their newly developed global talent. Government employment in other contexts can be "particularly powerful in terms of [facilitating the impact of scholarships in] influencing social and economic change" (Campbell, 2017; also see Ye, 2021). In Palestine, with the exception of two participants, none of the participants mentioned any effort by the government to recruit them for civil service in Palestine. While deeply regrettable, this should be hardly surprising in light of recent technical issues, e.g., ongoing public sector hiring freeze, but also persisting and sanctioned political failure at delivering unity and fairness of national institutions (Dana, 2020; Tartir, 2018). Additionally, the participants' accounts of negotiating career outcomes seem to suggest similar, though in less stark terms, lack of organizational initiatives to attract or invest in the specialized, global talent that the participants who returned home imported with them. This was suggested by the case of participants whose fields of graduate study (and prior work) had to be shifted, whether for lack of opportunities or fulfilment, and by the case of participants who left or did not (try to) return to Palestine. This is even more deeply regrettable as the smaller size of their (potential) employing organizations suggests less inabilityor, at least, more, active interest to induce their stay and fulfilment. But again, this should not be surprising in the local context of such organizations, whether NGOs being strayed by donor conditions into reauthoring pathways of national emancipation (Arda and Banerjee, 2021) or universities of resources too depleted (and male-dominated) to incubate on an inclusive basis new talent (see Isaac et al., 2019). The remaining window for scholarships impact in Palestine seems then to be only that which is captured in the findings: the individual impact. Except, it does not have to be, nor should it continue to be. I turn in the section below to discussing the limitations of the work leading to this view of scholarships impact, before sharing further thought on a path forward.

5. Limitations

The study is limited in three respects. First, while the research participants were relatively diverse in terms of their academic trajectories, countries of study, and fields of work, neither the sample size nor the sampling protocol was not intended to ensure the findings can be

generalizable to the population of Palestinian scholarship recipients. I see this study as a contribution to building a background of empirical evidence against which future research should aim to produce such findings. Second, the study drew on the participants' self-reported perceptions of their career gains, leaving room for social desirability, confirmation, and other potential biases to influence the data—especially given the participants' likely perception of me as an in-group member. I sought to mitigate this limitation by deliberately using the semi-structured format of interviews to elicit extended discussion and/or illustrative examples of specific points. Third, views from scholarship providers, employers, and other stakeholders from Palestine's government agencies and civil society were not sought in the research, whose scope and focus are on scholarship recipients. Although I sought to mitigate this limitation by drawing extensively on research on Palestine, often by Palestinian authors, I acknowledge the inclusion of those views may be key to fuller understanding of how scholarships work, or not, as a pathway of development in Palestine. This acknowledgement is extended into a call for action as presented in the final section below.

6. Conclusion

This article has described experiences of career gains self-reported by Palestinian recipients of international scholarships. While these career gains are of significance worldwide, they are particularly crucial in Palestine's and other contexts where academic, professional, and global capacity-building opportunities may be (structurally) limited or of limited quality. The article has also described some of the individual circumstances, employment conditions, and larger contextual forces shaping the post-completion trajectories of Palestinian scholarship alums. In this context, I have also discussed five mechanisms demonstrated in the research participants' data that show how scholarships work as a pathway of development at the individual level in Palestine, and I also outlined some of the reasons why these mechanisms may not be available or as efficacious in the current context, especially in the demonstrable absence of major initiatives to attract, retain, and invest in foreign-trained local talent. I now find it pertinent to conclude with stating my interpretation of this *micro-level* impact as significant on its own in Palestine's context as potentially in other contexts of conflict, crisis, and/or de-development (e.g., Abimbola et al., 2016; Jafar and Sabzalieva, 2022).

My take is that the significance of this individual academic and career advancement, in and of itself, stands on at least three accounts. Morally, it is a form of praxis of hope and resilience in a context otherwise of protracted destruction and despair (Jebril, 2020). It is so because the ethos of progress it represents can be antithetical to those of destruction and despair espoused during conflicts and normalized under belligerent occupation. Socially, following Arab/Palestinian history and culture, this individual advancement contributes to the alum's family's status, respect, and sense of pride, i.e., social capital (Palestine Chronicle Staff, 2023; Stephan, 2019). More widely socially, it lends further legitimacy to the sense of national solace Palestinians—everyday people and leaders alike—take in their reality and reputation as an educated people (see Barker, 2022, ch. 5). Even in a neoliberal sense, this individual advancement may represent a process of national development on hold; investment in human agents of national development is being made, with the maturing of this investment on hold until national conditions allow for it, as was the case following the Oslo peace accords (Sayre and Olmsted, 1999; Shiblak, 2005). While on hold in its systemic promise, it may not be in its micro-socioeconomic effects as when, for instance, scholarship recipients aid their families with remittances (Nijim, 2020). But even within this neoliberal outlook, the room for critical appreciation of scholarships' impact remains great, in size and significance. If anything, the look *forward* and the individual preparation *for* "when conditions allow for the maturing of investment" itself is a valuable exercise of freedom against the restriction, policing, and denial of Palestinians' future(s) (see Joronen et al., 2021).

Being a Palestinian alumnus of multiple scholarships myself (Almassri, 2023b), I embrace this belief just as strongly as the two following realist claims: Palestinians want to build a free and prosperous Palestine, and scholarship donors want to see sustainable "actual" impact. Satisfaction of both legitimate claims goes hand in and hand and requires existence of certain contingencies to enable the scale-up of micro-level impact to take institutional and systemic forms, i.e., to materialize at the meso- and macro-levels (Mawer, 2018). These contingencies may well be very diverse and complex, certainly going beyond the mere requirement for physical return (see Campbell, 2018; Tessema et al., 2012). They may range from an alum's active commitment to serve, to a group of alums' resolve to and success in creating conducive institutional structures, to an organizational or governmental policy of attracting scholarship alums to strategic positions of service and influence. As Mawer (2018) reflects, specifying such contingencies of individual agency and conducive structures is no simple task. He further reflects on the increased difficulty of doing so when planning for institutionalizing or systemizing technical *and* social impact. It certainly is more difficult in Palestine amidst a perpetual cycle of (re)construction and destruction (Euro-Med Monitor, 2016; Milton et al., 2023), ongoing occupation (Roy, 2016; Snounu et al., 2019), deepening national division (Dana, 2020), and (thus) institutional underutilizability of human capacities (Alzubaidi, 2016; for illustration, see Abou-Al-Ross and AlWaheidi, 2021). I therefore find it sufficient to extend a call here for more conversation and serious reflection on scholarships impact in Palestine and in similar country contexts. This can be commenced with researchers, practitioners, and policymakers exploring *with* alums creative avenues to create systems to connect, coordinate, disseminate, institutionalize, strategize, and localize or even transnationalize the impact of the latter's funded graduate education abroad.

Ethical approval

The parent project of this article received ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee at Durham University. All participants shared their voluntary and informed consent to participating in the research and to the use of their data in publications associated with it.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anas N. Almassri: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Data Availability

The data leading to the findings reported in this article are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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