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Evaluation

Midterm Performance Evaluation of the Leadership Opportunity Transforming University Student Scholarship Program in Egypt

Expanded Executive Summary

September 2016

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MIDTERM PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF THE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITY STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM IN EGYPT

EXPANDED EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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DISCLAIMER

The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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EXPANDED EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Egyptian higher education system is challenged by inequitable access, poor quality, inefficiency, and a reputation for producing graduates lacking in critical thinking and complex communication skills. In support of the Egyptian Government's efforts to reform this system to be able to compete more effectively in the global economy, USAID/Egypt has provided significant support for institutional strengthening and higher education scholarship initiatives.

The USAID/Egypt Leadership Opportunity Transforming University Students (LOTUS) Scholarship Program¹ provides full scholarships to 250 high school graduates with considerable financial need to attend one of six partnering private universities.² On May 4, 2010, LOTUS began implementing a cooperative agreement³ with the Institute of International Education (IIE) in Egypt. Following a series of eleven contract modifications, the project end date was extended from 2016 to September 30, 2019, with a total funding level of US\$23,735,013. The LOTUS program has several key characteristics: it is a national program, provides full scholarships, is gender balanced, partners with private universities, and uses merit⁴ and family financial need as selection criteria. The evaluation was conducted by a team of three independent evaluators between April 17 and May 31, 2016, under the direction of USAID/Egypt Services to Improve Performance Management, Enhance Learning, and Evaluation (SIMPLE) activity.

BACKGROUND

In collaboration with the Egyptian Society for Intercultural Exchange (AFS Egypt) and the Egyptian Association for Educational Resources (E-ERA), IIE recruited and enrolled an equal number of highly qualified but financially disadvantaged male and female students from all 27 governorates. Students enrolled in fields of study that are in high demand and critical for building an internationally competitive workforce and sustained economic growth. Additionally, IIE and Nahdet el Mahrousa, a partnering non-governmental organization (NGO), delivered activities to enhance scholarship recipients' leadership skills and commitment to development in Egypt and their home governorates.⁵

The purpose of this midterm evaluation of LOTUS is to provide USAID/Egypt with information to help improve the program's performance and its contribution to the Agency's development objectives (i.e., Workforce response to labor market demands improved and falls under the Intermediate Result 3.1: Access to Quality Tertiary Education Increased). The results will provide the information needed to understand the program's efficacy and relative importance to the higher education portfolio, as well as help make programmatic decisions over the remaining period of implementation.

¹ Within USAID, LOTUS is technically an activity but, throughout the evaluation and in general conversations, LOTUS is referred to as a program.

² Participating partner universities include the Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport (AASTMT), Ahran Canadian University (ACU), British University in Egypt (BUE), Future University of Egypt (FUE), Modern Sciences and Arts University (MSA), and Pharos University in Alexandria (PUA).

³ No. 263-A-00-10-00026-00.

⁴ Strong academic performance, leadership potential, and a commitment to community service.

⁵ About 40 percent of students with sufficient English proficiency will also study in a US university for one semester.

LOTUS' development hypothesis is that increased scholarship opportunities for targeted youths will contribute to a better-educated workforce to meet Egypt's labor market needs. LOTUS objectives to achieve this goal include:

1. Identifying and empowering young women and men who have demonstrated academic excellence, leadership, and involvement in their communities;
2. Giving Egyptian students an opportunity to attend private universities that would normally be beyond their families' financial means;
3. Developing and nurturing recipients' leadership potential, skill sets, and commitment to community and country so they are prepared and equipped to become future leaders and advocates for development in their communities;
4. Enhancing recipients' employability and career options; and
5. Creating a nationwide network of youths who are well educated and passionate about Egypt.

The midterm evaluation sought to answer questions regarding achievement to date in relation to both short- and long-term objectives, as well as successes and challenges in implementation. A key focus is students' satisfaction and perception of the potential benefits of the program for future employment and leadership opportunities. The four main evaluation questions (EQ) were:

1. To what extent does available evidence suggest that the project is on track to achieve its objectives?
2. To what extent has the LOTUS Program enabled recipients to contribute to development, community service, and leadership activities?
3. To what extent are scholarship recipients satisfied with the academic-related and all the other program components like study abroad, English language training, leadership in action activities, career counseling, housing, university coordinators, etc.?
4. To what extent do scholarship recipients graduate with the academic and soft skills (workforce preparedness) needed to work in jobs suited to their academic preparation?

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The evaluation team used a mixed methods approach to analyze the evaluation questions. The IIE monitoring and evaluation (M&E) matrix of indicators, which track progress in implementation for each objective, is used to evaluate program achievements in EQ1. A desk review of project documents preceded design of the quantitative and qualitative tools for primary data collection.

A paper-and-pencil survey of current LOTUS students⁶ and an online survey of LOTUS graduates⁷ were the primary sources of quantitative data. The surveys were administered to the entire population of scholarship recipients. The response rate among currently enrolled students was 97.5 percent and 54 percent among graduated students. IIE provided several student databases containing demographic information, grade point averages, English proficiency scores, and employment status of graduates. The databases for current students were merged with the survey responses for a statistical analysis of students' perceptions.

The team further utilized several qualitative data collection tools. A subset of 82 students⁸ participated in one of eleven group discussions. A twelfth group discussion was held with four female LOTUS graduates. Individual and group key informant interviews at each university included university

⁶ n=159

⁷ n=74

⁸ 44 females, 38 males

presidents, LOTUS coordinators, and faculty and staff who received LOTUS training. A final set of key informant interviews were conducted with the implementing organizations⁹ and with USAID activity managers. Approximately 72 individuals participated in 25 interviews. Notes from the interviews were coded and entered into Excel tally sheets of key evaluation themes. These themes served as the basis for the combined analysis of the qualitative and quantitative evidence for each evaluation question.

The principal limitation of this approach was time. The start of the university final exam period pushed the student survey and group discussions to an early point in the evaluation process. Consequently, the design of the instruments was based on the document review rather than key informant interviews. Several limitations also exist in the scope of the data. First, resources did not allow for the use of a comparison group to isolate findings attributable to the LOTUS program. Second, the graduate online survey, administered using Survey Monkey, did not record individual demographic characteristics, precluding disaggregation of responses. Finally, the analysis for EQ4 regarding employability was limited by the lack of information on the skills and aptitudes required for workforce preparedness in LOTUS fields of study. In lieu of direct measures of employability, EQ4 reports on the *perceptions* of employability held by current students and alumni.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report uses evidence gathered from data collection to analyze the four evaluation questions. As requested by USAID/Egypt and the implementing partner (IIE), actionable recommendations based on the findings and conclusions of this evaluation are broken down according to (1) recommendations to USAID/Egypt for future programming in higher education, and (2) recommendations to IIE for actions to be taken in the near future. The evaluation also addressed the broader audience of practitioners and policymakers concerned with strengthening higher education in Egypt and elsewhere, both for youths and as a critical input to economic growth and development.

Evaluation Question 1: *To what extent does available evidence suggest that the project is on track to achieve its objectives?* There are two levels of analysis as to whether the five LOTUS objectives are being achieved. First, achievement refers to meeting the program targets for each objective, as stated in the work plan and M&E matrix.

The following evidence shows that the project has had mixed results:

1. Between 2010 and 2013, IIE and its partners identified 250 students who match the selection criteria of high financial need, academic excellence, demonstrated leadership, and commitment to community service. The students come from all governorates and the group is gender balanced.
2. Stakeholders and participants laud the program as a valuable resource for marginalized young men and women to expand their career and personal growth options.
3. Recruitment was comprehensive and on-the-ground. Selection procedures and criteria were clearly defined and applied uniformly across the governorates and applicants.
4. The indicators show that LOTUS struggles to meet the targets for English language proficiency.

The second level of analysis examines the extent to which these actions are producing the results specified in the goals and purpose of LOTUS (i.e., strengthening higher education and the Egyptian workforce, program objectives linked to leadership and advocacy for development in local communities, and creating a national network of well-educated youth who are passionate about Egypt). As the LOTUS

⁹ IIE Egypt, AFS Egypt, E-ERA, Nahdet el Mahrousa

M&E matrix fails to include or measure indicators for these results, the evaluation team drew upon findings from group discussions and interviews to determine whether the program is on track in terms of expected results and impacts.

Those findings revealed that:

1. LOTUS students do not seek employment options in their fields of study nor in their local governorates and many want to go abroad to work or study. Most affirm ties to their home governorates in terms of community service, however.
2. With the exception of Pharos University in Alexandria and Ahram Canadian University, the LOTUS Leadership Capacity Building component for university faculty has been sporadic, incomplete, and largely ineffective. Still, the universities have benefitted directly from LOTUS. An unanticipated outcome is that, by enrolling high quality students who challenge the quality of education provided and contribute to building future capacity as teaching assistants after graduation, LOTUS has strengthened its partner universities.
3. LOTUS students have established close friendships and networks within and across universities and these ties continue to exist even after graduation.

Recommendation for IIE Action/To be taken in the near future:

Build on and formalize the incipient network of LOTUS graduates and students to move toward the objective of establishing a nationwide network of young professionals. The following steps could be taken under the current program:

1. Broaden the core network by encouraging interested LOTUS graduates to connect with graduates of similar USAID programs;¹⁰
2. Set up and/or formalize a virtual communication infrastructure;
3. Use the network to communicate employment and volunteer opportunities, presentations, and conferences of interest to LOTUS students; and
4. Encourage other partner institutions to contribute.

Evaluation Question 2: To what extent has LOTUS enabled recipients to contribute to development, community service, and leadership activities? LOTUS does not track a direct measure of leadership empowerment skills or of leadership positions or actions.

Findings based on the student survey and group discussions show the following:

1. Students and LOTUS university coordinators identify Leadership in Action (LIA) as a positive component of students' experience.
2. Students generally feel that LIA activities have deepened their understanding of volunteering and community service.
3. Students report that parents and community members see them as more mature and experienced as a result of LIA. However, they also report weaknesses in the operational planning and coordination among LIA providers as shortcomings of the component. Scheduling issues and duplication of subject matter across sessions place time management burdens on students and prevents them from making the best use of the sessions.

Recommendations for IIE Action/To be taken in the near future:

1. Establish a coordination committee among participating organizations to meet on a quarterly

¹⁰ For example, Local Scholarship Program (LSP) and Leadership for Education and Development Scholarship Program (LEAD).

basis for information exchange about schedules, student obligations, and potential points of coordination among the parties.

2. List sessions and times in each university for the year or semester so students can plan around the schedule and follow the required procedures for approved absences when necessary.
3. Monitor the quality and utility of the sessions in terms of student skills and feedback on presentation.
4. Develop a rubric to measure the relative value and priority of the sessions and topics.

Evaluation Question 3: To what extent are scholarship recipients satisfied with the academics related and all the other program components like Study Abroad, English language training, leadership in action activities, career counseling, housing, university coordinators, etc.)? This question is concerned with student perceptions about the various aspects of the program and whether they are satisfied with the experience. Evidence for this question is drawn from the student and graduate surveys and group discussions. Student conclusions about individual aspects of the program are presented below and recommendations are made for addressing shortcomings.

English Language Training: Scholarship recipients welcome the opportunity to learn English, recognize the importance of English language proficiency, but are not satisfied with the training modalities introduced to date.

Recommendation for Future Design: If the bridge year concept is repeated, it should include a variety of activities in addition to English language instruction, with more time given to soft skills training and career counseling.

Recommendation for IIE Action/To be taken in the near future: Students believe the provider and methods of instruction are key considerations. They recommend instruction through an interactive learning environment, the presence of native speakers, variations in tasks, and activities to break the tedium.

US Study Abroad: Students who traveled abroad are enthusiastic about the experience. From a personal standpoint, they see it as an immeasurable enrichment experience; from a practical standpoint, they see potential benefits in terms of improved employability and greater job prospects. The principal sources of dissatisfaction are a perceived lack of transparency about selection criteria and the perceived creation of two tiers in the LOTUS community.

Recommendation for Future Design: Given strong satisfaction with the personal and practical benefits of the Study Abroad opportunity, as well as the negative effects of the competitive process on unsuccessful students and the overall LOTUS community, future study abroad opportunities should be expanded to include all scholarship beneficiaries for a full year, rather than a semester or summer session.

Internships: Implementers and students agree that internships are important to employability and career development, but issues of coordination inhibit the full realization of these benefits. The original intent to use internships to link students to their home governorates has not been achieved.

Recommendations for IIE Action/To be taken in the near future: Systematize the identification, reporting, and follow-up of internships. Compile and send a routine list of internship opportunities to all students, and seek to build a clientele through follow-up with companies to assess their interest in additional internships with LOTUS students in specific fields of study.

Career Counseling and Mentoring: Students report little knowledge of or benefit from the career counseling and mentoring component. In part, this reflects the concentration on students in their final year and the fact that much contact is done via e-mail and telephone.

Recommendation for Future Design: Students recommend that career counseling begin in the bridge year to support the selection of fields of study.

Recommendations for IIE Action/To be taken in the near future: Students recommend that career counseling continue across the four years to address topics pertinent to seeking an internship. Face-to-face counseling and small group mentoring is preferred. Career/life balance and gender roles relative to career/job choice should be addressed.

Student Life: Current students are dissatisfied with three aspects of student life. First, 44 report challenges in interacting with or being accepted by non-LOTUS students at the universities. Second, housing arrangements prevent integration of students into university life. Third, communication between LOTUS students and coordinators is tense; there is lack of trust and dissatisfaction. Communication among students, IIE, and the universities are centralized in IIE and managed through a single channel between the university and IIE. This pattern makes students feel isolated and disregarded.

Recommendations for IIE Action/To be taken in the near future: Open new channels of communication for students to discuss their challenges. Engage students (as young adults and emerging leaders) more in setting LOTUS policies. Eliminate threats and punishments that students consider humiliating and inappropriate for adults. In particular, strengthen the links between Cohorts 1 and 2 and Cohorts 3 and 4, and consider engaging graduates to meet with students socially on a regular basis to discuss their challenges and serve as mentors.

Evaluation Question 4: To what extent do scholarship recipients graduate with the academic and soft skills (workforce preparedness) needed to work in jobs suited to their academic preparation? In the absence of objective criteria for workforce preparedness and employability in LOTUS fields of study, the analysis draws from the student and graduate surveys, in particular, perceptions as to whether LOTUS enhances employment options.

There are two main findings. First, students join LOTUS to enhance their future employment. Current students are confident that they will find good jobs soon after graduation. They also attribute their anticipated success to academic achievement, soft skills training, and internships. Second, a majority of LOTUS graduates are employed. One-fourth of recent graduates are unemployed and looking for work. Almost all who work found their first job within six months of graduation and now work in Cairo or Alexandria, rather than outside Egypt or in their home governorates. Most work in their fields of study and are relatively satisfied. They affirm that LOTUS and its components improved their employability. Several graduates have continued in academia as teaching assistants and in post-graduate studies.

Recommendation for Future Design: In collaboration with the private sector and/or partnering universities, the Implementing Partner should consider establishing a loan or grant mechanism to support students' job searches, start-up businesses, or professional practices, and seed money for community service projects in home governorates.

Recommendation for IIE Action/To be taken in the near future: Participating universities should consider providing support services to recent graduates to assist in their early job search and career development.

Other Salient Observations

Employability and Fields of Study: Students note a scarcity of employment opportunities in Egypt generally and in their home governorates in such fields as biotechnology, logistics, and nursing, despite being in high-demand growth industries. Available data on employment of recent graduates show differences in employability by field of study.¹¹

Gender: Gender parity has been achieved for the LOTUS program as a whole, within each cohort, and in the various program components. These results were attained without specific actions to ensure equity. In a traditional society like Egypt's, both males and females see LOTUS as an opportunity to control their own lives. Women, in particular, describe how the LOTUS scholarship provided an alternative to what would have been a very predictable and conforming lifestyle.

Conclusion

Overall, LOTUS has had an impressive achievement record to date in identifying and guiding highly capable students through quality higher education, skills development, and new opportunities to improve their lives and community. The gender parity requirement is also an effective method to ensure equal opportunities. IIE recognizes and has taken constructive steps to meet emerging challenges. This evaluation provides actionable recommendations to IIE to further enhance program effectiveness for the remaining period of implementation and to USAID/Egypt to improve design of future higher education scholarship programs.

¹¹ For example, biotechnology graduates have a lower rate of employment than others.