

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT REGULATIONS AND OUTCOMES

How Do International Student Returnees Contribute to Home Country Development?

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This review explores the substantial impact of international student returnees on their home countries' development, analyzing over 1,500 articles to distill insights from 53 studies. It investigates how returnees contribute to firm growth and innovation, enhancing higher education and research capacity, advancing democratic values, and fostering social transformations. Despite the significant potential, the contributions are impacted by local institutional barriers, highlighting the need for tailored policies.

In recent decades, the number of students pursuing higher education abroad has soared. Back in 1997, around two million students were enrolled in universities outside their home countries. Fast forward to 2021, and that number increased to 6.4 million according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. This dramatic increase highlights just how popular studying abroad has become. Our paper summarizes a comprehensive [review](#) of over 1,500 articles to distill insights from 53 studies to address the following question: How do students who study abroad and then return home contribute to the development of their home countries? This review is the first detailed examination of its kind, mapping out expanding literature on the links between international student mobility and societal development.

Firm Growth and Innovation

Returnees boost local industries by bringing in new technologies and business strategies that improve productivity and competitiveness, especially in emerging markets. They help spark new industries and revitalize existing ones, although the economic impact can be localized and varies by region. In China, for instance, returnees have increased innovation in Beijing's high-tech firms and improved technology absorption in Shanghai's ICT sector. They also attract international investments, helping firms secure significant foreign capital and achieve a global market presence. However, the success of these contributions often depends on the specific industrial and geographic contexts.

Enhancing Higher Education and Research Capacity

Returnees improve local education by integrating international practices and promoting research-focused cultures. Their efforts to establish research centers, promote academic freedom, and advocate for fair research funding contribute to academic and

research capabilities in their home countries. They also update curricula by introducing new subjects and degree programs, helping students tackle relevant contemporary issues. However, the success of these initiatives often depends on how receptive local institutions are and how well returnees' experiences align with societal needs at home. Challenges like institutional resistance, limited resources, and cultural barriers can hinder the implementation of new practices. These obstacles require returnees to navigate complex environments to effectively contribute to educational transformations.

Advancing Democratic Values

The promotion of democratic values and civic engagement by returnees is one of the more clear-cut areas of their influence, especially in countries moving toward open and democratic societies. Educated in democratic countries, they come back with liberal values and promote them through various civic activities. They use their international experiences to push for transparency, accountability, and participatory governance. Our study shows how crucial they are in starting political conversations, influencing policies, and embedding democratic norms in local political cultures. By advocating for reforms, returnees help to embed these democratic practices. However, their influence is often limited by local political conditions and may not always lead to sustained democratic development without broader systemic support. Despite challenges like rigid local cultures that demand conformity, some returnees manage to introduce and nurture liberal norms, particularly within large organizations and the education sector, playing a key role in their countries' democratic transformation.

Fostering Social Transformations

Returnees often advance inclusion and equity by addressing the needs of marginalized groups in various ways. For instance,

returnees have set up nongovernmental organizations for women's rights in Ghana, advocated for disability rights through different channels, and supported children with disabilities worldwide. Their efforts go beyond advocacy; they also improve healthcare, promote peacebuilding, and aid rural development. In Uganda, a returnee led a major public health project to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and in Mozambique, returnees have made significant strides in environmental health and tuberculosis care. However, these initiatives often face challenges due to entrenched societal norms and institutional resistance. Despite their skills and perspectives, returnees' effectiveness can be limited by local conditions that resist change, affecting the scope and sustainability of their contributions to social development.

Barriers to Returnee Impact

While returnees bring valuable skills and perspectives, reintegration into home countries presents challenges. Key issues include the nonrecognition of foreign qualifications, cultural reintegration difficulties, and mismatches between their skills and local job demands. Institutional barriers like bureaucratic inertia and resistance to change also complicate their contributions. Political culture, governance quality, and local industry contexts significantly impact their effectiveness. In places where corruption and nepotism are common, returnees struggle to make changes and are often sidelined in political processes and policy making.

Gaps in the Literature

The literature review highlights gaps in the research. Many studies focus on specific countries and lack broad international analysis. They also often overlook important areas like poverty alleviation, sustainable growth, healthcare improvements, and gender equality. These limitations show the need for more comprehensive and global research to fully understand the diverse impacts of international student returnees on their home countries' development.

Policy Recommendations for Maximizing Impact

Successfully integrating international student returnees needs strategic policies. Simplifying credential recognition is key to easing their professional entry. Support networks can help returnees navigate local job markets and use their global experiences. Encouraging entrepreneurship with financial and advisory support can also spur innovation.

Policies should allow local adjustments to better use returnees' skills. For example, Taiwan's decentralized approach lets local governments tailor policies to fit the unique skills and experiences of returnees. This flexibility helps regions create strategies that suit their specific economic and cultural contexts, enhancing the impact of returnees on local development. Additionally, promoting a culture that values diversity and innovation is essential. Such a culture not only welcomes but actively seeks the unique perspectives returnees bring, helping them integrate and maximize their contributions to national development. These measures can ensure that returnees' global experiences benefit their home countries, and thus amplify the impact of international higher education.

Conclusion

Our review shows that international student returnees play a complex but significant role in the development of their home countries. They drive technological and industrial innovation and promote societal changes by supporting democratic values, improving higher education, and advocating for inclusive social practices. While their potential to foster sustainable development is considerable, it often depends on local conditions and institutional factors. This highlights the need for thoughtful policy interventions and more research to fully understand and support their contributions.

To build on these findings, our team is currently conducting a major [global study](#). We are using secondary quantitative data and interviews across 70 countries to offer new insights into the societal impact of international higher education. ■

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