



INVESTING IN EDUCATION AND BUILDING THE FUTURE LEADERS' SKILLS

A deep dive into the Scholarship Programme in Mongolia

Financial assistance or scholarships can play a crucial role in enabling students to access and pursue higher education, sometimes not affordable for those students who face financial challenges. In countries like Mongolia, where the rural and urban divide is significant, there can be financial barriers to access higher education for disadvantaged young people from rural areas. Lifting these barriers can bring transformational change to young people, their families, and communities.

In addition, the general education system does not focus on developing students' soft skills, which are needed in the workplace.



Zayasaikhan Dugeree,
Senior National Programme
Officer, SDC Mongolia

"University tuition fees in Mongolia make it difficult for parents with several children to afford higher education for all of them, resulting in many families choosing to prioritise their daughters over sons to obtain a higher education degree.

Additionally, there are limited opportunities for students to earn money while studying, and the financial burden often falls on parents or grandparents. Any contribution to tuition fees, such as through scholarships, minimises the pressure and the financial difficulties for students and their parents."



Buyanjargal Natsagdorj,
Programme Coordinator,
Zorig Foundation

"95% of all universities in Mongolia are concentrated in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, which severely limits access to higher education for students from rural areas or remote districts of Ulaanbaatar. Our aim is to provide equal opportunities to these students by focusing our efforts on this target group."



A comprehensive programme for skills development

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Mongolia partnered with the Zorig Foundation, a non-profit and non-governmental Mongolian organisation. The foundation, which already ran a Scholarship programme, was tasked to manage the provision of SDC-funded scholarships to university students from low-income families on a merit-based approach, and to promote their soft skills through the implementation of small-scaled projects.

The selection process considers the socio-economic background of the applicants, their school performance and their engagement in volunteering activities.

The programme consists of two parts: students receive scholarships that cover about 30-50% of their tuition fees; and they are required to develop and take part in a small-scale community development project, for which they receive additional financial support.

The requirement to engage in a community development project provides scholarship recipients with the opportunity to develop their soft skills and their leadership skills. Working in teams of five or six people, they are asked to create and implement a project that will benefit their communities.

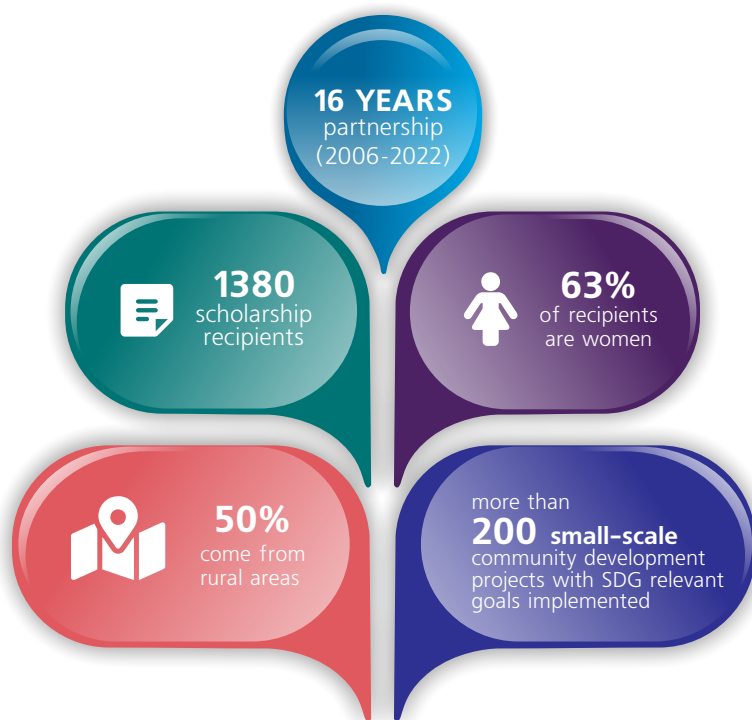
The scholarship recipients also get access to seminars on job search, CV writing, business correspondence, job interview preparation and job fairs.

Essential results and figures

Thanks to the SDC - Zorig Foundation partnership, 1380 students were awarded a SDC funded scholarship. Testimonies from the programme managers and scholarship recipients highlight that participation in the programme improved their leadership skills, awareness of and agency to address challenges and needs in Mongolian communities.

Anecdotal evidence of the Zorig Foundation suggests that most scholarship recipients from rural areas have stayed in Ulaanbaatar since. The scale of such rural outmigration and the associated effects are unknown (see box: Unintended consequences).

Key figures



Unintended consequences?

There is evidence that scholarship programmes can lead to the migration of the brightest young people out of their home states, towns, countries, contributing to a brain drain effect.^{1,2} This could turn detrimental to the local and rural economies, as many scholarship recipients will not return home and stay where they studied. The Zorig Foundation monitoring and evaluation system does not collect data on this or other potential unintended consequences of the scholarship programme. It is recommended for future scholarship programmes to monitor the occurrence of this issue and to consider mitigation strategies to this unintended effect.

1. See for example: Estes, H. et al. ; *The Rural Brain Drain and Choice of Major: Evidence from One Land Grant University* NACTA Journal; Twin Falls Vol. 60, Iss. 1, (Mar 2016): 9-13 or Zhang, L. and Ness, E. C.; *Does State Merit-Based Aid Stem Brain Drain?*; *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*; Volume 32, Issue 2, 2010

2. UNESCO. 2018. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, Displacement and Education – Building Bridges, not Walls*. Paris, UNESCO

Stories of change: the voices of scholarship recipients



Mr. Munkh-Erdene Lkhagvabaatar,
Scholarship recipient 2018

I graduated from high school in Rashaant in Bulgan province in 2015 and then entered, then entered the Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences. In 2018, I heard about the Zorig Foundation scholarship programme and sent my application, which resulted in receiving two scholarships. One was for a community project during the academic year of 2020-2021, while the other was a two-semester stipend during the academic year of 2018-2019.

For the community development project, my team and I developed an online project called "Bye Depress" to help solve psychological problems affecting children and young people. The project aimed to connect depressed individuals with psychologists since people had a prejudice around mental health issues. Our team consisted of six members. We ran a chatbot on Facebook, which received requests from about 1,000 people to connect with psychologists. The Facebook page for our project is still active, and we plan to expand it in the future.

The scholarship programme had a significant impact on my attitude and communication skills. I learned the importance of cooperation, which changed my attitude from "I" to "we." Additionally, I improved my communication skills by meeting with citizens, representatives of public and private sector organisations. Finally, my appreciation for others increased, and I gained self-confidence. I made many acquaintances through the programme. And I met my wife!

Currently, I am pursuing a Master's degree in medical science and working as a doctor/health officer at a mining company in Gurvantes sub-province, Umnugovi province. My wife and I plan to continue our career at hospitals in a secondary city, not going back to the capital.

The impact of the scholarship on my personal and professional life has been significant, and I encourage others to participate. The programme has a team of excellent lecturers, mentors, and facilitators. All activities are challenging and competitive, which has made us grow even more.



Ms. Temuulen Enkhbat,
Scholarship recipient 2020

I was a third-year student at the National University of Mongolia studying regional development and planning when I received my scholarship in 2020. I learned about the scholarship programme through the Zorig Foundation's Facebook page.

The community development project I designed and engaged in was to place first aid kits in secondary schools. The project was developed online with a team of six individuals whom I met for the first time, and it lasted for six months. We conducted the project in three district schools. We prepared the first aid kits with brochures and placed them in the school building. We also created a Facebook page to disseminate emergency information to the public. Despite being completed in a short time, I learned that the school management and students were happy with the kits and used them during emergencies.

At present, I work as a researcher and project leader at GerHub NGO. It aims to build an affordable accommodation and ecosystem for Ger (traditional houses) district communities in cities. My passion is to develop the ger neighbourhood.

The three main learnings that I have taken away from participating in the scholarship programme were building a good network, improving my confidence, and understanding the importance of continuous learning. Implementing a community project helped me discover my passion for developing city outskirts.

The scholarship made me understand my career responsibilities and pushed me out of my comfort zone. The programme helped me overcome my uncertainty and gain direction during the Covid pandemic. Without it, I would have had a smaller personal and professional network and limited problem-solving resources.



Mr. Yuljinsengee Tsegmid,
Scholarship recipient 2022

I heard about the Zorig Foundation scholarship programme for the first time in 2022. I was in my second year at university. I applied and was accepted on my first attempt.

For the community development project, my team and I decided to modernise the IT classroom at a school for disabled children. This project was important because the school had very old equipment and students with disabilities had poor IT skills, which hindered their opportunities to enter university or secure a job after graduation. We raised a total of 27 million MNT and received non-financial support from companies and individuals. In our team, we had 5 students with backgrounds in engineering. We successfully planned, pitched, raised capital, networked, implemented and reported on the project. We even painted the classroom and organised four training workshops on coding, computer use, and IT knowledge. All the computers and tools are still used in the school.

The scholarship was not just a financial benefit, but also an important experience in developing my work skills. I improved my soft skills, including self-confidence, socialisation, and pitching skills. Through this experience, I learned the importance of teamwork, commitment, and accepting mistakes. Now, in my third year at university, I work as an intern at the company "Huawei" in Mongolia. I plan to complete my degree and pursue a career in communication engineering.

Achieving results and sustainability: Lessons learned for impactful scholarship programmes

- One of the most important learnings from implementing this Scholarship programme is the value of having two complementary parts: an opportunity to implement community development projects and a financial support for tuition fees. This approach supports students in developing their soft skills, raises awareness of societal issues and motivates students to actively contribute to their communities.
- "Those small projects contributed to solving some of the social issues identified by the students. Ultimately, the project affected more beneficiaries than just the scholarship recipients." Zayasaikhan Dugeree – Senior National Programme Officer, SDC Mongolia.
- Continued and long-term engagement with SDC constituted an opportunity for its partner, the Zorig Foundation, to gain experience of working with an international development organisation and position itself as a trustful partner to other funders: "The staff of the SDC office in Mongolia advised and cooperated on all aspects of programme management, implementation, monitoring, etc." Buyanjargal Natsagdorj – project officer, Zorig Foundation.



Recommendations for similar programmes include:

- Dedicating financial resources to the systematic monitoring of activities, to assess the long-term positive changes resulting from the community development projects, or unintended consequences of the scholarship scheme. Such monitoring could be done through participatory processes or regular specific surveys.
- Implementing a scholarship programme within a larger systemic approach, including advocacy towards policy makers on aligning the higher education to labour market needs and local economic investment opportunities, could contribute to achieving higher, sector level results.

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Scholarship Programme
Project video

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