

Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 1 (2026), pp. 75-90
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/nh4wx56>



International Students’ Views on Development, Equity, and Access in Saudi Scholarships under Sustainable Development Goals 4

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ABSTRACT: *This study evaluated the alignment of Saudi Arabia’s international scholarship programs with Sustainable Development Goal 4, with particular attention to the perspectives of international students. It examined students’ views on how scholarships contribute to their personal growth and to the development of their home countries. A mixed-methods design combined qualitative data from 60 semistructured interviews, focus groups, and digital ethnographic observations, with quantitative data on regional allocations from official government sources. The findings indicate that students acquired valuable knowledge and skills, but their conceptions of “development” varied by socioeconomic background. Some envisioned returning home to teach, research, or address national challenges, whereas others saw remittances as indirect contributions. Regionally, scholarships are intensely concentrated in Asia and Africa, consistent with SDG 4 equity goals; however, scholarships for Latin America and the Pacific remain limited. Although students described opportunities as broadly inclusive, structural challenges remain. Expanding outreach, including in the medical field, and establishing alumni pathways are recommended to increase its impact.*

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; study in Saudi Arabia; international students; equity and access; developmental impact; SDG 4

Received: September 30, 2025 | **Revised:** December 9, 2025 | **Accepted:** December 20, 2025 | **Published:** January 10, 2026

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute one of the most ambitious global agendas for progress in the 21st century. Within this framework, Target 4.b of SDG 4 explicitly calls for increasing the number of scholarships offered to students from developing countries, thus recognizing programs as strategic instruments for advancing educational access and sustainable development (Campbell & Mawer, 2019). Therefore, international scholarships are increasingly framed not only as individual opportunities but also as tools for promoting global equity, building human capital, and strengthening national development.

In line with a recent literature review, this study defines an international student as “a person who has moved across an international border away from his or her habitual place of residence for the purpose of undertaking a program of study” (Ivanova et al., 2025). This definition emphasizes both the cross-border and educational dimensions of international student mobility, situating Saudi Arabia's scholarship programs within the broader context of global movement and development.

Despite this recognition, the extent to which international scholarship programs align with the developmental objectives of SDG 4 remains underexplored in Saudi Arabia. Existing studies on international students in Saudi Arabia have focused largely on themes such as student satisfaction with services, cultural and social adaptation, and psychological and social adjustment (Alasmari, 2023; Almutairi, 2020; Al-Shawawra, 2020; Al-Suhaibani, 2021; Al-Qarni, 2021). More recently, Muthuswamy (2023) examined the role of self-determined motivation, psychological needs satisfaction, and sociocultural adjustment in shaping the subjective well-being of international students at Saudi universities, highlighting the importance of nonacademic factors in shaping student experiences. Similarly, in a narrative study of Indonesian students in Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic, Puspitasari et al. (2020) revealed that students often experienced dissatisfaction and insecurity but also displayed resilience and coping strategies in navigating their educational experiences. While valuable, this body of work does not address the critical question of how international students perceive these scholarships in terms of their contribution to development and the extent to which they see them as aligned with the equity and capacity-building goals of SDG 4.

To address this gap, this study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: human capital theory and the rights-based approach to education. Human capital theory frames scholarships as strategic investments that build skills and knowledge, enabling graduates to contribute to the development of their home countries. The rights-based approach emphasizes that higher education is a fundamental human right, highlighting the importance of equitable access, inclusion, and meaningful participation for all students. These frameworks directly informed the research questions, the development of interview and focus group protocols, and the thematic analysis of student experiences, ensuring that

both the developmental impact and equity dimensions of Saudi Arabia's scholarship programs were critically examined in relation to SDG 4.b.

Accordingly, the present study places the voices of international students at the center of the analysis, examining how they interpret the developmental impact of Saudi scholarships and whether they perceive these programs to be aligned with the principles of equity, inclusivity, and sustainable development outlined in SDG 4.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a mixed-methods design to assess Saudi Arabia's international scholarship programs for non-Saudi students who completed their secondary education in their home countries in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4.b (SDG 4.b). Qualitative methods were used to capture students' voices and explore how they interpreted the developmental impact of scholarships, as well as the extent to which they perceived them as aligned with equity, inclusivity, and sustainable development. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, focus groups, and digital ethnographic observations of online student communities. In addition, quantitative descriptive data from the Saudi aid platform were analyzed to map the geographic distribution of scholarships and identify allocation patterns across regions. Integrating these approaches enabled linking lived experiences with structural allocation trends, thereby evaluating both the perceived and systemic dimensions of equity and their developmental impact. All participants were informed of the purpose of the purpose and provided written informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board in Saudi Arabia (IRB No. IRB-2025-E-0081) and conducted in accordance with national ethical research guidelines.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through 60 semi-structured interviews with international students who were currently or had recently been enrolled at Saudi universities. The participants were of diverse nationalities, disciplines, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Focus groups were also conducted with students to explore collective experiences, and 4 weeks of digital ethnographic observation of Telegram groups yielded insights into real-time challenges, peer-to-peer support, and the scholarship application process.

The quantitative data were drawn from official government sources, particularly the Saudi Aid Platform, to analyze regional allocation patterns, including recipient countries and geographic distributions over recent years.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and digital ethnography were analyzed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. The analysis proceeded as follows.

1. Familiarization: All the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and read multiple times to gain a deeper understanding of the content.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Transcripts were coded line-by-line via deductive codes based on predefined concepts such as "developmental aspiration," "access barrier," "equity," "policy obstacle" and inductive codes that emerged organically from the data.
3. Theme development: Coded segments were reviewed and grouped into broader themes and subthemes that reflected both the research questions and the most salient patterns in the student experience.
4. Review and Refinement: Themes were compared across data sources (interviews, focus groups, and online observations) and checked for internal coherence and distinction.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named to represent its core concept, with illustrative data excerpts selected for clarity.
6. Producing the Report: The final themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and guiding theoretical frameworks and reported with supporting quotations to provide evidence for each finding.

Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Data

This study employed a concurrent triangulation approach to integrate the qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data (from interviews, focus groups, and digital ethnography) and quantitative/descriptive data (on the geographic and demographic distributions of scholarship recipients) were collected and analyzed during the same research phase. The results from both strands were compared and integrated during the interpretation stage. The quantitative findings provide a broad context regarding the allocation and reach of Saudi scholarship programs. In contrast, the qualitative themes offer in-depth insights into student experiences, perceptions, and developmental aspirations. This approach enabled the study to corroborate findings across data sources, enhance the validity of the results, and provide a comprehensive understanding of how Saudi scholarship aligns with the aims of SDG 4.b.

Participant Overview

The 60 student participants came from various backgrounds, including representatives from Yemen, Syria, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Venezuela, and several other countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Approximately 27 participants were female, which highlights the growing participation of women in Saudi scholarship programs. The participants ranged from undergraduates to postgraduates and from families of farmers and merchants to professionals and academics, illustrating broad socioeconomic diversity.

This multimethod, multisite approach captured both students' lived experiences and the structural allocation of scholarships, providing a robust foundation for evaluating the alignment of Saudi programs with the principles of equity, inclusion, and development under SDG 4.

Saudi Scholarship Programs: Historical Background and Recent Shifts

Saudi Arabia's role in hosting international students began in the 1950s, long before internationalization became a global priority. The College of Sharia in Riyadh (now part of Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University) was one of the first institutions to admit foreign students, with Muhammad Sharif from Pakistan graduating in 1958 as one of the earliest recorded international alumni (Al-Bishr et al., 2024). Three international students were admitted to King Saud University in 1957, and the first cohort of graduates, including two students from Malawi, completed their studies in 1961 (Risalat Al-Jameah, 2025). These early examples highlight the Kingdom's long-standing role in expanding access to higher education, particularly for African and Asian students. However, Saudi Arabia's educational aid model has remained relatively stable for decades, with priorities largely shaped by religious solidarity and pan-Arabism. Most initiatives during this period focused on Islamic institutions, Arabic language programs, and scholarships for religious studies, with limited structural reform.

A major shift occurred after 2015, when King Salman's ascension and the launch of Vision 2030 reoriented Saudi Arabia's international education strategy toward measurable developmental outcomes. The focus expanded to include skill development, gender inclusion, and the promotion of STEM disciplines, positioning the kingdom as a modern development partner rather than a primarily religious benefactor. A key initiative in this transition was the creation of the *study-in-Saudi-Arabia* platform, designed to attract international students from diverse regions.

Currently, Saudi Arabia's educational aid is provided through three main institutions: the Ministry of Education, the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief; Albylwi, 2025). Together, these bodies reflect the Kingdom's efforts to align with the global development agenda, particularly SDG 4. However, this study focuses on the Ministry of Education, as it is the primary entity responsible for administering scholarships to international students. In contrast, the SFD and KSRelief play different roles in educational aid, concentrating on development projects and humanitarian assistance rather than direct scholarship provisions.

With this historical and policy context in place, the following section presents the results of this study, which focuses on international students' perspectives on how Saudi scholarships are experienced in practice and the extent to which they align with the developmental goals of SDG 4.

THEMATIC FINDINGS

Theme 1: Perceptions of Developmental Impact

This theme was guided by two core questions. (1) How do international students perceive the contribution of Saudi scholarships to their personal and professional development? (2) To what extent do students believe that their education in Saudi Arabia will enable them to contribute to the development of their home countries? These questions shaped the conversations and encouraged the students to reflect on their personal aspirations and broader developmental goals.

Numerous participants described their studies in Saudi Arabia as opportunities to build capacity in their home country. Some aspire to enter academia, motivated by a shortage of qualified faculty in their nations. A Gambian student explained, “With this experience, I can help students in my country with better education and research opportunities.” Similarly, a Sudanese master’s student shared, “My goal is to become a university professor and pass on what I have learned. There is a real need for qualified faculty back home.”

Other students directly tied their career plans to urgent national challenges. A Bangladeshi student expressed her intent to “improve the quality of education and morality in my country,” while another emphasized environmental priorities: “I want to use what I’ve learned to strengthen sustainability initiatives back home.” A Colombian student highlighted the importance of water desalination research to address water scarcity in Latin America, and a Nigerian student in materials science remarked, “Materials science and engineering are essential to the development of science and technology in any country.” Another Nigerian MSc student described how his program in water and environmental engineering directly supported Nigeria’s development plans and global commitments under SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and SDG 13 (climate action). Likewise, students in life sciences connect their work to mitigate disease outbreaks, seeing their training as preparation for tackling pressing health concerns.

Despite these ambitions, not all the students felt confident about their ability to reintegrate into the local job market. Several, particularly those from Africa and South Asia, pointed to low salaries and limited professional opportunities at home. One student noted, “The scholarship educated us, but the salaries back home are very low. My plan is to return first, then apply for a job here in the Gulf—but through a proper work visa.” Participants also highlighted the absence of institutional mechanisms linking Saudi-trained graduates to Saudi-funded development projects abroad. In contrast, they observed that European scholarship programs often integrate alumni into development roles in their home countries, thereby extending the impact of those programs. As one African student reflected, “European graduates are prioritized in everything—and this is the secret behind their success in influencing developing nations.”

Finally, differences in socioeconomic background shaped students’ views on development. When asked about family and financial circumstances, responses ranged from those of students whose parents were farmers to those from families of university professors. For students living in poorer conditions, there was a

strong emphasis on returning to their communities. One said, “I will be back to support my community as a teacher,” whereas another noted that I plan “to improve the water in my country.” Several students from diverse economic backgrounds explained that their conception of development was to earn higher salaries abroad, remit funds to support their families, and eventually start businesses. From their perspective, this pathway allows them to contribute to national development by creating jobs and stimulating local economies. In a comparison of ten students (five from each economic group), three from lower-income families expressed clear development-focused aspirations, whereas students from wealthier families were more likely to emphasize personal career mobility, although some also framed remittances and business creation as indirect contributions to development.

Theme 2: Equity and Access

Three key questions guided this theme. How do students describe their access to Saudi scholarship opportunities? What barriers or facilitators do they identify in the application and admission process? Do students perceive the scholarship program as equitable and inclusive across gender, religion, nationality, and socioeconomic background?

Most participants (approximately 80%) reported learning about scholarships through informal networks, such as word of mouth or social media, rather than through official government platforms. Arab students mentioned hearing from friends or seeing posts on Facebook and YouTube. In contrast, African students, particularly non-Arab speakers, relied almost entirely on peers who were already studying in Saudi Arabia. As one African student explained, “We just tell each other. My friend was here before me, and he helped me apply. That is how it works.” Latin American students also cited social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, as their primary sources of information. A minority of Asian students reported using mixed sources, sometimes corroborating information from university websites with input from teachers, friends, or community members after their initial exposure to the program. One student recalled, “My high school teacher told me about it, and later, I checked the official university page to confirm.”

When asked about inclusivity, students generally perceived the scholarship as open to people of all religions and genders, although official policies were not always clear. A Gambian student noted that although most applicants from his country were Muslims, he had non-Muslim friends from other African countries who had successfully received engineering scholarships. The non-Muslim students I interviewed also confirmed that the opportunity felt fair, with one African student explaining: “I learned about the scholarship from my Muslim friend, but I got accepted because my grades were higher than his. That proves to me the opportunity is for everyone.” In a Telegram group discussion, when I asked whether religion was ever raised in the application process, the unanimous answer was “no.” Female students also reported that opportunities for women were expanding, although men still outnumbered women. One female participant noted, “At my university, the percentage of female students is almost the same as

that of males, although males constitute the majority. Recently, more females are being accepted.” However, participants also noted that there are no publicly available data on gender distribution or quotas, which creates uncertainty about equity in practice.

Access to academic fields differs from one university to another, and students’ awareness of these opportunities often depends on how much information about the available majors reaches them. At KFUPM, most international students concentrated on petroleum engineering, business, and related disciplines, whereas at KSU, the range of majors was broader. Several students explained that before arriving, they believed that only Islamic studies were available to international students but later discovered that they could pursue a wider set of subjects. A student from Gambia recalled, “I told my friend I was going to Saudi. They congratulated me to study Sharia law, but I told them that I am studying finance. They were confused, as they did not know this was even possible.” Similarly, another student reported shifting to different curricula and teaching methods after realizing that broader options were available. Recent improvements to the *study platform in Saudi Arabia* have helped clarify program offerings, and telephone group discussions have indicated that at least 30 new students have been admitted to undergraduate programs in engineering, IT, and social sciences.

Despite this progress, the participants repeatedly highlighted the exclusion of medical and health sciences. Students expressed frustration that medical programs at Saudi public universities were not available through government scholarships, although they could apply technically on a self-funded basis. Many felt that including medical fields in the scholarship scheme would have a significant developmental impact, especially for students from countries with weak healthcare systems. As one student explained, “The scholarship covers nearly every college—except the medical school. However, we need doctors trained in Saudi Arabia. We trust the quality of education here.”

Another challenge raised by students was the inconsistency across universities and national platforms. Several studies have reported confusion about whether to apply a centralized *study in the Saudi Arabia* portal or directly via individual universities. For example, six applicants missed the 2025 King Saud University intake because they assumed that applications would still be processed through the KSU website, only to discover later that a national platform was needed. Similar confusion occurred at KFUPM, which was not listed on the national platform. A Latin American student initially assumed that KFUPM was close to international applicants until he later learned from peers that the university would continue to accept applications independently. These inconsistencies limit students’ access to scholarship opportunities. As one student noted, “There should be one clear system for everyone. If universities change how they accept applications, they need to say it clearly and early.”

The socioeconomic background further illustrates the inclusivity of the scholarship program. The participants came from a wide range of family and work situations, indicating that access was not restricted to any single social class. Approximately 60% of postgraduate students reported prior work experience in

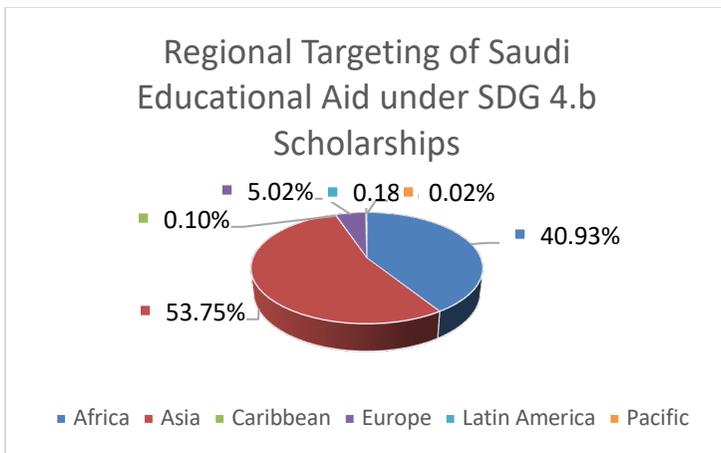
Saudi Arabia, ranging from manual labor (e.g., builders and electricians) to professional roles (e.g., lecturers and teachers). Some undergraduate students also described working in manual labor prior to their studies. One student reflected, “I finished high school and worked as a builder, but this was not my dream. I was one of the top students in my high school in China, so I had greater goals. When I learned about the scholarship, I applied—and now I am here.” Students’ family backgrounds also varied widely, from farmers to merchants. As one explained, “My father is a farmer,” while another noted, “My father is a merchant.” Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that the Saudi scholarship program attracts students across the socioeconomic spectrum, reinforcing its claim to provide equitable access to higher education.

Saudi Educational Aid in Data

To further assess the alignment of Saudi Arabia’s scholarship program with SDG 4, this section analyzes the regional targeting of international scholarship recipients. As shown in Figure 1, most Saudi educational aid was directed toward students from Asia (53.75%) and Africa (40.93%), reflecting the program’s focus on supporting developing countries with limited access to education. Together, these regions accounted for more than 94% of awarded scholarships.

Figure 1

Regional Targeting of Saudi Educational Aid under SDG 4.b Scholarships



Note. Figure created by the author using data from the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (n.d.), KSR Relief Project Database. <https://data.ksrelief.org/Projects/Search>

Other regions, such as Latin America (5.02%), the Caribbean (0.18%), and the Pacific (0.10%), have received considerably fewer scholarships. Scholarships awarded to students from Europe (0.02%) were negligible, which is consistent with SDG 4.b’s focus on prioritizing lower-income and underrepresented

countries. This regional breakdown shows that Saudi Arabia's scholarship aligns with the equity goals of SDG 4.b by concentrating resources in regions with the greatest educational and developmental needs. However, low representation in Latin America and the Pacific suggests gaps in outreach or accessibility, which can be addressed through more diversified promotion and targeted recruitment strategies.

DISCUSSION

This study evaluated the extent to which Saudi Arabia's international scholarship programs align with the objectives of SDG 4, drawing on the perspectives of international students to examine their backgrounds, experiences, and perceived opportunities for development. The findings indicate that while Saudi Arabia has made significant progress in expanding access to higher education for students from developing countries, several challenges remain in achieving the aims of SDG 4.

To assess the achievement of this goal, particular attention was given to SDG 4.b's emphasis on expanding opportunities for students from developing countries, especially least developed countries (LDCs), small island developing states (SIDS), and African countries. At the regional level, the quantitative data show that Saudi scholarships are broadly aligned with the equity goals of SDG 4.b. As illustrated in Figure 1, most scholarships went to students from Asia (53.75%) and Africa (40.93%), accounting for more than 94% of all scholarships. In contrast, Latin America (5.02%), the Caribbean (0.18%), and the Pacific (0.10%) were much less represented, whereas scholarships in Europe were negligible (0.02%). This distribution reflects the SDGs' emphasis on prioritizing lower-income and underrepresented countries and reveals regional gaps.

Students' accounts help explain these regional disparities. Many reported learning about scholarships through word of mouth, social media, or peers already studying in Saudi Arabia, rather than through official campaigns or institutional channels. For example, several African students initially believed that Saudi scholarships were limited to Sharia or Islamic studies, which discouraged applications in technical or scientific fields and, in some cases, prevented students interested in these majors from applying for and benefiting from the program. A Latin American student also noted that he discovered the program only through social media, highlighting the weak institutional outreach in that region. These differences can be attributed to two main factors. First, Saudi Arabia hosts large migrant worker communities from Africa and Asia, which increases awareness of scholarship opportunities through personal networks. For example, Argaam (2023) reported that in 2022, the Kingdom hosted more than 2.1 million Bangladeshis, 1.8 million Pakistanis, 1.8 million Indians, 1.4 million Egyptians, 820,000 Sudanese, and nearly 300,000 Nepalese. Large expatriate communities create strong word-of-mouth channels. However, relying on peers as the main source of information can also limit the depth and accuracy of knowledge, as seen in the African context, where misconceptions about available majors discourage application. In contrast, in countries such as those in Latin America, where there

are few migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, peer-to-peer information channels are weak or absent. This further limits awareness of scholarship opportunities. Second, outreach and advertising efforts remain insufficiently targeted at underrepresented regions. Several students reported that they learned about scholarships primarily from friends or social media rather than from official sources, underscoring the need for more proactive, region-specific promotion.

With respect to socioeconomic background, the 60 students interviewed reflected a wide spectrum of social and economic conditions. The participants included children of farmers, traders, and other working-class families, as well as individuals with prior professional experience, ranging from manual laborers to university lecturers. This diversity highlights the inclusivity of student selection and aligns with the emphasis of SDG 4 on widening access to disadvantaged groups. In addition, it reflects a rights-based approach to education that stresses that equitable access to higher education is a fundamental human right.

This study also explored whether Saudi scholarships are limited to specific groups on the basis of religion or ideology. The interviews suggest that Saudi scholarships are not restricted by religion or ideology; rather, they appear to be open to applicants of all genders, regions, and faith backgrounds, including Christians and Muslims of different denominations. The majority of participants were Muslim, which is unsurprising given Saudi Arabia's location in the Muslim world and its geographic proximity to Muslim-majority countries in Asia and Africa. Additionally, the regions most targeted by SGD 4.b also had a high proportion of Muslim populations, which further explains its distribution. However, the students emphasized that religion was not a factor in the application process. The application forms contained no questions about religion, suggesting that access is formally open to applicants regardless of their faith. This inclusivity aligns with the emphasis of SDG 4 on equitable access to higher education, although contextual factors indicate that Muslim students are more represented.

Among the 60 interviewed students, 27 were female, reflecting a noticeable increase in women's participation. Female students also noted that the number of female recipients had been growing, although men outnumbered them. Socioeconomic diversity is also evident, with students ranging from wealthy families to those affected by poverty and conflict. For some, particularly those from countries experiencing war, such as Yemen and Syria, scholarship represented a rare opportunity to pursue higher education and reclaim a right that had previously been denied due to instability in their home countries. In this sense, the programme contributes directly to the vision of SDG 4 by promoting equitable access to education and supporting human development in recipient countries.

With respect to development, all students recognized that pursuing higher education in Saudi Arabia represents an investment in their future, consistent with human capital theory, which argues that educational investment generates both individual and societal benefits. However, the students differed in how they envisioned contributing to development in their home countries, and these differences often reflected their economic backgrounds. Students from lower-income families tended to describe development as returning home to teach or work locally, thereby directly building their national capacity. In contrast,

students from more privileged backgrounds or those discouraged by low salaries in their countries often view development as working abroad and sending remittances home, with the long-term goal of starting businesses that could create jobs. Development was observed in both cases; however, the pathways differed. Simultaneously, these patterns raise the possibility of a new wave of brain drain, as scholarship programs may inadvertently prepare students for opportunities abroad rather than ensure that their skills are reinvested in their home countries. This risk warrants further research on whether international scholarship ultimately strengthens local development or contributes to talent loss in developing countries. This challenge is not unique to Saudi Arabia. Across international scholarship programs, graduates often face tensions between personal mobility and national capacity building.

With respect to academic coverage, Saudi scholars have expanded into many disciplines but continue to exclude medicine and health sciences. Many students acknowledged that the *study platform in Saudi Arabia* improved transparency by listing all available majors in one place, which helped them discover opportunities in fields such as ICT, engineering, and applied sciences. One African student noted that he belonged to a WhatsApp group with more than 50 new arrivals enrolled in engineering programs across multiple Saudi universities, which is evidence of broader access to and diversification of fields. Nevertheless, students consistently emphasized that including medical programs significantly strengthened the developmental impact of scholarships, particularly for countries facing shortages of doctors and nurses. Expanding access to medicine and health sciences would not only benefit these regions but also contribute to global development more broadly.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Saudi Arabia's scholarship programs contribute meaningfully to the development of students and indirectly to their home countries. However, several improvements are required to maximize their full potential.

First, it is necessary to expand awareness and outreach to underserved regions. Many students in this study reported learning about scholarships informally through word of mouth, social media, or peers already studying in Saudi Arabia rather than through official channels. To address this gap, the Ministry of Education and Saudi universities should develop targeted outreach strategies, including national awareness campaigns and partnerships with schools, embassies, and ministries of education in underrepresented regions, such as Latin America and the Pacific. Initiatives, such as student ambassador programs, virtual information sessions, and localized advertising in relevant languages, can improve visibility. An annual *study of Saudi Arabia* campaigns tailored to these regions will further enhance equitable access.

Second, it is necessary to expand scholarship eligibility to include medical and health sciences. Allowing a limited number of seats in Saudi public medical schools—particularly for students from countries facing healthcare crises—could significantly strengthen the developmental impact of the program. These students

could later participate in Saudi-funded health projects abroad in partnership with the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), thereby contributing to healthcare capacity building in their home countries. Offering structured opportunities for medical graduates to work on such projects would ensure that their training directly addresses developmental needs.

Third, structured postgraduation pathways should be created. Saudi Arabia should establish developmental roles, internships, and alumni placement programs linked to Saudi-backed overseas initiatives. This would ensure that the knowledge and skills students gain are applied effectively in their home countries rather than being lost due to limited local job opportunities.

Future Research

Future research should move beyond a single-country focus to examine scholarship programs worldwide. Comparative studies can explore how international scholarship functions as a tool for development and, in some cases, as a driver of brain drain. A key question is whether these programs genuinely build capacity in recipients' home countries or whether they primarily prepare students for careers abroad, limiting the direct benefits to national development. Large-scale quantitative studies of scholarship recipients across multiple countries and regions would be especially valuable, providing systematic evidence on whether international scholarships strengthen local capacity or inadvertently channel skilled labor into other economies.

Acknowledgment

During the preparation of this paper, the author used ChatGPT EdU (OpenAI) to assist with language refinement, citation formatting, and clarity improvement. After using this tool, the author thoroughly reviewed and edited all the content and takes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript. All the data used in this study are publicly available from the Saudi aid platform and can be accessed at <https://data.ksrelief.org/>.

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