VLIR-UOS' scholarship strategy – conceptual framework

Background

The Bureau UOS decided to use 'Agenda 2030' as the overall framework for the new Five Year Programme (2022 – 2026) of VLIR-UOS. A new VLIR-UOS vision, describing what contribution we want to make to Agenda 2030 through Higher Education Partnerships for Sustainable Development, was developed and further translated into a Theory of Change (ToC) with clear objectives and impact areas. The ToC clarifies what impact we want to contribute to and how and why VLIR-UOS and its portfolio is expected to achieve this intended impact. The underlying principles of Agenda 2030 ('Leaving no one behind & inclusiveness', 'Interconnectedness & indivisibility' and 'Multi-stakeholder partnerships') are used to render the VLIR-UOS portfolio and all activities, results and impact 'SDG proof'. This means that VLIR-UOS also looks at its scholarship programme for recipients from partner or scholarship countries[1] using a 'SDG principles angle'.

Given their potential to help realize societal impact in contribution to Agenda 2030, scholarships will remain an essential part of the VLIR-UOS portfolio in the next Five-Year Programme (2022-2026). It is, however, important to have a coherent and transparent scholarships' strategy with a clear narrative on what exactly is aimed for and how this can be achieved, also allowing to define which scholarship types should be part of the VLIR-UOS portfolio. We therefore propose a framework where **the scholarship programme is linked to the two strategic axes of the overall Theory of Change and that integrates the three SDG principles.**

Scholarships (programme) contributing to social change

Change agents

VLIR-UOS invests in a scholarship programme that can play a direct or indirect role in **realizing the transformative shifts of the agenda 2030,** by ensuring a link between the outputs and outcomes of scholarships and **positive systemic institutional and societal change**.

Although receiving a scholarship to study (abroad) generates access to potential personal benefits to a scholar (e.g. broadened academic and personal horizons, gaining new perspectives and insights, allowing mobility within or between jobs or generating a higher income) and can support the integration of an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education

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[1] This document focuses on scholarships provided to beneficiaries of the partner- and scholarship countries but does not include scholarship and grants that are provided to EEA students (travel grants and PhD scholarships) as a different rationale applies there.

programmes (Knight, 2003), VLIR-UOS ambition for its scholarship programme goes **beyond this level of personal outcomes and internationalisation** of education.

To make this ambition more explicit we found inspiration in a study that analysed the **role of scholarships in broadening access to international education and in contributing to social change** (Dassin et al., 2018)[2]. Based on an extensive literature review, the authors differentiated five different ways through which scholarship programmes and beneficiaries can contribute to change beyond individual achievement:

1. Support individuals to become change agents
2. Create social networks
3. Widen access to (higher) education
4. Stimulate diversity
5. Realise international understanding

The first one, **support individuals to become change agents is the core** of the VLIR-UOS approach. This is in line with the VLIR-UOS ToC and the two strategic axes of agents and drivers of change (see further). Complementary to this, we aim to link both individual scholars and scholars embedded in projects and programmes to broad networks. **Social network creation** is thus a second essential role of our scholarship programme.

Widening access, stimulating diversity and realising international understanding are considered throughout the different phases of a scholarship trajectory. These phases consist of a **design phase** in which consideration is given to, amongst others, the type of programmes in which scholars can participate; a **selection phase** in which potential scholars can apply for a scholarship, taking into account certain criteria and procedures, an **on-award phase** referring to the period during which the scholar is studying / attending a training / doing PhD research and in which scholars are embedded in networks and receive different kinds of support and finally a **post-award phase** after the scholarship experience has finished but during which former scholars remain in contact with each other, programmes and institutions as alumni.

Widening access and stimulating diversity will help to translate the SDG-principle of 'Leaving No-one Behind' into our scholarship programme. Realising international understanding is especially important related to 'Interconnectedness'. Realising social networks is pivotal with respect to bringing 'multi-stakeholder partnerships' into practice.

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[2] Dassin, J.R., Marsh R. and Mawer, M. (2018). *International scholarships in higher education. Pathways to social change*. London: Palgrave McMillan.
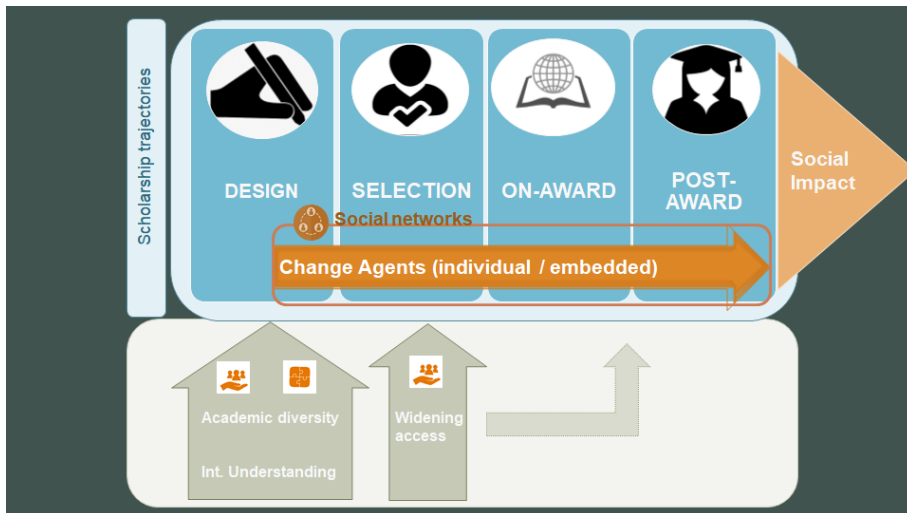
Figure 1: VLIR-UOS Scholarship Framework

Individual and embedded scholarships

VLIR-UOS thus provides scholarships in line with the **two strategic axes of its new Theory of Change**:

(A)   Enabling individuals to become Agents of Change

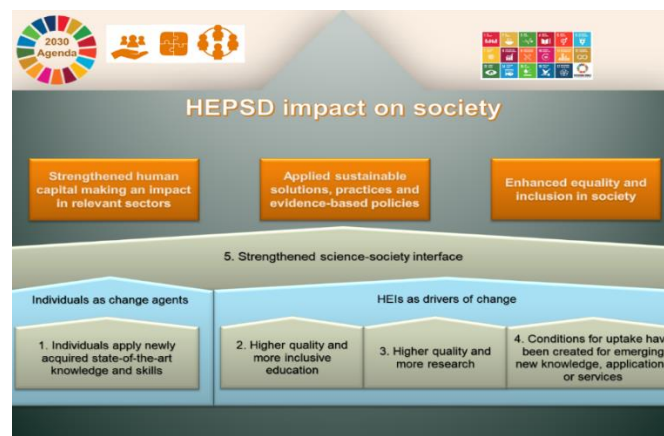(B)   Enabling HEIs to strengthen their role as Drivers of Change

Figure 2: VLIR-UOS Theory of Change

Both individual and embedded scholarships are provided to an individual who will follow a training, master or do research and while doing so will acquire knowledge, skills and expertise that can later on be applied in a professional context. **In essence, both can be considered as potential 'agents of change'**. However the context is different for individual and embedded scholarship holders – since the latter are embedded in a broader capacity strengthening trajectory- and this is reflected throughout the different stages of a scholarship trajectory (from selection till post-award, see below – e.g. who is responsible for selection, support, follow-up etc.).

In first instance, VLIR-UOS offers scholarships to high potential **individuals** (first axe - A) from a number of scholarship countries. They are **not part of a collaborative project or programme** but are employed in academic institutions, research institutes, governments, social economy, private sector or NGOs, or

aim at a career in one of these sectors. The individual scholarship holders get the opportunity to follow a relevant educational programme of high quality that focuses on transfer and exchange of state-of-the-art knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be applied in a professional context and society after graduation. The underlying rationale suggests that:

- individual scholarship holders get the chance to develop new knowledge and a broad range of skills and attitudes, to exchange experiences and insight while studying at one of the higher education institutions in Flanders;
- former individual scholarship holders act as committed world-citizens and apply the acquired knowledge, skills and experiences in a professional context after graduation;
- this allows individuals to positively impact their organisations, networks and broader environment, strengthening human capital making an impact in relevant sectors;
- which helps to positively shape communities and societies in the longer term.

Scholarships can also be **part of higher education partnerships for sustainable development** (B). The above-mentioned rationale for individual scholars also applies to each recipient of so-called **embedded scholarship**: an individual (future) staff member gets selected for a scholarship, is supposed to gain knowledge, insights and skills during studies, training, research or exposure and will then apply these skills and knowledge in the professional context. **The individual development trajectories of a (future) staff member are however embedded in the broader capacity strengthening trajectory of the research group, department or institution**. It is this **broader trajectory of the HEI as Driver of Change** that defines what skills are needed, what field of expertise is required, what teaching, research and other capacities of staff members are to be strengthened and which individual is best positioned to receive a scholarship. **The embedded scholarship is instrumental for project/programme outcomes and not an aim in itself** (contrary to individual scholarships).
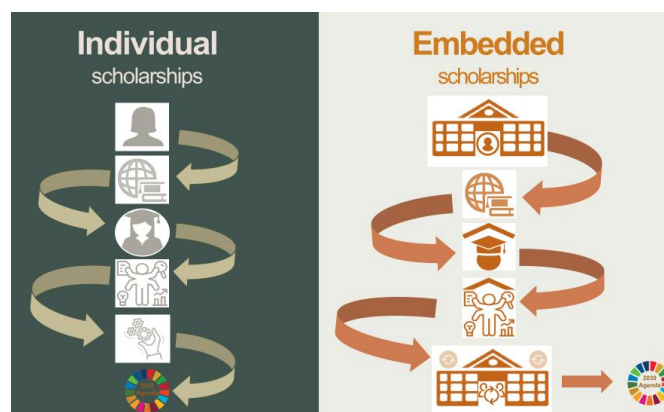

Figure 1: Individual and embedded scholarships

Evidence from a recent impact evaluation of the Belgian university development cooperation (SEO, 2018) and from other studies (e.g. Dassin et al., 2018) suggests that **recipients of embedded scholar-**

ships are more likely to stay with the same organisation or institution post-scholarship compared to individual scholarship holders. Since individuals who stay with the same employer outperform their peers in terms of influence within their organisation in the long run, embedded scholarships can achieve more **impact at the institutional level.** However, individual scholarships are more prone to achieve impact outside academia than embedded scholarships and are thus considered complementary in contributing to our different impact areas. VLIR-UOS therefore explicitly defines 'Enabling individuals to become Agents of Change' as a separate strategic axe with potential societal impact.

Although we differentiate between two 'separate axes', emphasizing the importance of both individual and embedded scholarships in realising change, VLIR-UOS recognises that in practice both axes are strongly interconnected with more hybrid scholarship types and multiple linkages and interaction between both, for example through alumni networks, involvement of individual scholars in projects and programmes or support of embedded PhD scholars to individual scholars.

Creating social networks

A second way to contribute to change beyond individual achievement, identified by Dassin et al. (2018), is by creating social networks. The focus is on **combining forces by** creating **networks of scholarship holders and alumni**. The idea behind this approach is that a substantial number of individuals from a single institution, sector, discipline, region or country receive a scholarship to undertake trainings or studies in order to create a **critical mass of networked scholarship recipients that can help influence positive change**. The basis for the network can be diverse: institution, sector, discipline, training programme, research topic, region, country, scholarship awarding agency, …

VLIR-UOS aims at creating social networks in two ways:

− **Embedded scholarships in** the framework of long-term collaborative programmes (like IUC) whereby VLIR-UOS targets higher education institutions in a number of partner countries that

  are not in the top of the webometrics ranking. As part of these long-term partnerships a substantial number of scholarship recipients can build and apply new knowledge, skills and attitudes, thereby supporting a changing culture and improved performance in the field of education, research and uptake. For PhD scholarships this can for example mean contribute to creating a research culture and supporting research-based education in the HE sector, or setting up doctoral schools This focus on combining forces of (former) scholars to influence institutional change needs to be integrated in the design phase of partnership programmes, and will impact the selection of candidates (see further).

− Apart from strengthening individual recipients' capacities so they can become change agents in relevant sectors, **VLIR-UOS supports the creation of (alumni) networks as part of its programme funding** (like ICP incremental funding and Global Minds) but also aims at establishing a complementary platform that links (former) scholarship holders to each other and the VLIR-UOS network, regardless of where they studied, their discipline and country, as an additional

support system to the former scholars in their role as change agents and link between projects and programmes. This is also in line with recommendations of the ICP IF mid-term evaluation (2020) and the impact evaluation (2018) and will allow linkages between projects and programmes both in Flanders and in the partner countries, as well as with other actors in society thus contributing to the VLIR-UOS outcome 5 (Strengthened Science-Policy interface-see ToC).

SDG-proof scholarship programme

VLIR-UOS aims at a scholarship programme that **contributes to social change and that is SDG-proof**, using the underlying principles of Agenda 2030 ('Leaving no one behind & inclusiveness', 'Inter-connectedness & indivisibility' and 'Multi-stakeholder partnerships') as guidelines. We use some aspects of the three remaining ways to contribute to social change as defined by Dassin et al. (2018) to make this more concrete. 'Widen access to education' and 'Stimulate academic diversity' are important to translate the principle of 'Leaving no-one behind and inclusiveness' into the scholarship programme. 'Realise international understanding' will be used to apply the principle of 'Interconnectedness'.

Widen access to education

Scholarships can be provided to individuals (from communities) who are typically overlooked by, or unprepared to participate in traditional educational and scholarship selection processes. VLIR-UOS uses a **mainstreaming approach** in order to allow certain groups, that are underrepresented in higher education, to find their way into our scholarship and educational programmes. This approach is operationalised mostly into the design and selection phase of a scholarship trajectory (see further). Moreover, VLIR-UOS will also direct part of its resources via a **targeted approach** of launching specific calls for specific (training) programmes, focusing on relevant topics (e.g. gender, human rights).

Stimulate academic diversity

VLIR-UOS stimulates all HEIs in Flanders and in its partner countries to **take further steps in relation to diversity**: to re-think access and participation, to further develop academic and personal support services and structures, to transform curricula and design admission policies in a more inclusive way.

Realise international understanding

VLIR-UOS scholarship recipients are supported to become **world citizens**. Potential change agents acquire knowledge and skills that are **broadly conceptualized (and assume gaining attitudes),** including critical and ethical thinking, world-citizenship attitudes, leadership capacities etc. **Non-academic scholarship goals** are built into the international study / training / research / exposure experience, such as leadership development, intercultural competency and exposure to civic participation etc. Moreover, the international study, research of training experience as such, where scholarship beneficiaries are part of a diverse group of students from all over the world, or a multidisciplinary research team, where they get introduced to new approaches and different norms and standards, get the chance to exchange, explore joint learning opportunities and have to deal with unforeseen circumstances, also allows scholarship beneficiaries to **develop certain world citizens skills and attitudes and gain global understanding.**

Conclusion

This document aims at providing an overall framework for the VLIR-UOS scholarship programme, clarifying how both individual and embedded scholarships can contribute to societal impact. The framework integrates the three SDG principles, a reflection that was largely missing in the scholarship programme so far. Scholars are supported throughout different trajectories to take up roles **as change agents** and we aim at aligning with the SDG-principles throughout the different phases of a scholarship trajectory.

	Design	Selection	On-award	Post-award
Widen access to education		Leave No one Behind	Leave No one Behind	Leave No one Behind
Stimulate academic diversity	Leave No one Behind			
Realise international understanding	Interconnectedness		Interconnectedness	Interconnectedness

This framework will be further translated into call documents, selection criteria, M&E systems, scholarship guidelines, etc. that make all aspects from design to follow-up concrete for the different scholarship types in the scholarship programme.