# Academic Fellowship Program

# Portfolio Review Document prepared by the Higher Education Support Program

# Executive Summary

HESP is in the process of winding down its Academic Fellowship Program (AFP). Throughout its nearly decade of service to Southern Europe and Eurasia, AFP has assisted 95 university departments to launch and improve academic disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. The result has been the establishment of critical thinking hubs with Western-educated faculty that have taught generations of students in such academic disciplines as human rights, political science, gender studies for the first time—or for the first time in a professional manner. Having been largely sustained, these university departments from Kosovo to Mongolia are poised to benefit their respective societies for many years to come. The pool of well-educated people that AFP has shaped will also help ensure the presence of talented individuals (and networks) for OSF and other institutions to work with on a range of social questions.

AFP’s achievements notwithstanding, if we—AFP’s acting management and remaining staff—could turn back the clock we would have done many things differently to position the program to achieve even bigger successes. There is a wealth to be learned, both good and bad, from AFP’s assumptions, approach and results. This Portfolio Review gives us the chance to expose such thinking.

For instance, AFP required a more nuanced country context approach. Eschewing a one-size-fits-all method of operation could have led to significantly different interventions in certain locations and perhaps more profound results. A different way of conceptualizing progress and measuring impact was also needed—the results of which could have better informed and guided AFP programming throughout. In short, AFP measured outputs, not outcomes. It also should have more effectively balanced individual approaches with institutional support for departments. It should have allowed the participation of private universities in countries where they merited support, as opposed to being inherently disqualified based on ownership grounds. And it could have done all of this with a leaner administrative structure.

Many key lessons were learned throughout the past decade. These relate mainly to AFP’s instruments and cover such issues as the formation of critical numbers of AFP scholars in single departments, the long-term integration of scholars in their departments, the need to engage with non-AFP faculty, the heightened use of AFP alumni, and ways to maximize the potential of the International Scholars.

These lessons are analyzed and explored in some detail in this paper following a short descriptive overview of AFP and its instruments. To be sure, HESP’s new and related activities in Palestine[[1]](#footnote-1) have already incorporated much of this thinking into their design.

# AFP Context and Structure

Since the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, higher education systems have undergone vast transformation—albeit with significant variance between countries and academic disciplines. Unlike the hard sciences, which were prioritized by the former socialist states for national security reasons, the social sciences and humanities remained distinctly underdeveloped prior to 1989. Indeed, they were often regarded as a threat to the absolute truths professed by Marxism-Leninism rather than as learning opportunities to address social concerns.

The inheritance of the Old System and the turbulent societal transformation of the early 1990s contributed to structural problems within the region’s universities that continue to afflict higher education systems to this day. These include a paucity of funding, outdated education and management policies, reliance on passive learning, isolation from the international academic mainstream, decrepit academic infrastructure, and systemic corruption.

In the early 2000s HESP was providing start-up grants and institutional support to a host of liberal arts colleges and universities across the region. Recognizing, however, that private institutions only partially addressed the above-listed challenges, in 2004 it also took on portions of the Civic Education Project agenda to assist reform-minded social sciences and humanities departments at public universities to become models of innovation. To do so, it spearheaded the strategic involvement of Western-educated scholars within these departments, and made mentorship and supplementary resources available to them to aid their professional development and transformation. By facilitating the return, retention, and development of Western-educated academics—so-called ‘Returning Scholars’—to their home countries, AFP has aspired to bring about systemic, lasting changes within targeted university departments. Moreover, through this bottom-up approach AFP has sought to position the Returning Scholars to act as broader change agents within their university systems by turning their departments into models for others to emulate.

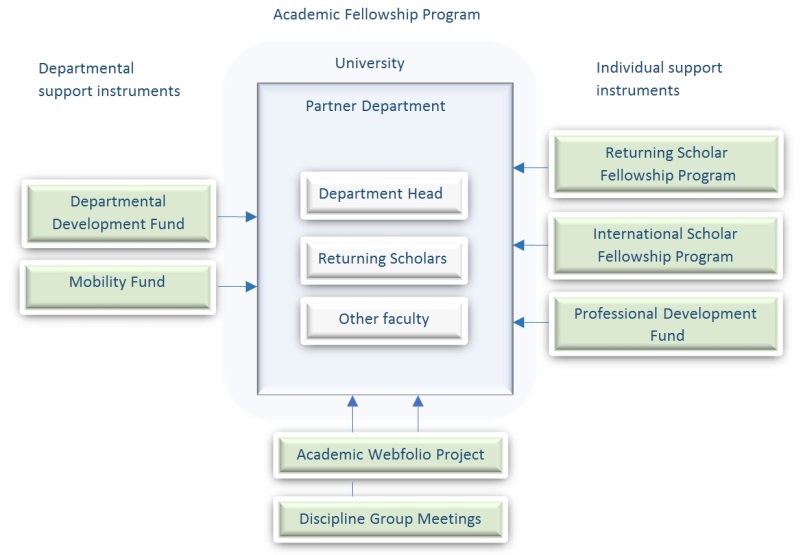
Through enhancing the quality of teaching and research specifically in the social sciences and humanities, AFP has directly contributed to educating a new generation of critical and informed citizens. Academic and outreach activities of AFP Returning Scholars have focused on issues of immediate relevance to the broader OSF mission and values, such as critical thinking, democratic citizenship, pluralism, civil society, inclusion, respect for human rights, accountable government, and freedom of speech. In its holistic approach to encompass all OSF values, AFP has not prioritized some social science disciplines over others. The program has based its selection decisions on the quality and development potential of aspiring departments.

Since its inception, AFP has supported 496 Returning Scholars in 95 departments across 17 countries. Returning Scholars have introduced new courses, revised existing ones and initiated comprehensive transformations of traditional curricula and methodological approaches. For example, AFP Scholars have been instrumental in establishing a new LLM in Human Rights and an MA in European Law at Baku State University, four new MA programs and one PhD program in Political Science at the University of Skopje, and BA and MA programs in International Economic Relations at Odessa National University. In Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan (Anthropology), and Georgia (Gender Studies), AFP has indirectly contributed to the introduction of new academic disciplines altogether.

AFP has also enhanced regional networking and academic collaboration among AFP scholars via regular gatherings, an online communication platform and individual mobility funds. Although not deliberately planned, some AFP-supported scholarship found its way outside of academia and has helped inform and shape public policies. This was the case, for instance, in Kosovo regarding education, training and employment policies for minorities, and in Serbia concerning higher education reforms. A partner rector from Ukraine’s Kyiv-Mohyla Academy has recently been appointed Minister of Education and has retained AFP Returning Scholar Alumni as advisors, where they have already begun to reform the higher education sector.

### AFP Instruments and Administrative Structure

As depicted below, AFP deploys a set of interconnected tools designed to ensure departmental development through individual faculty development. AFP’s main instruments—the Returning and International Scholar schemes—are buttressed by a set of (sometimes underutilized) funds that enable meetings, conference participation, research visits, departmental development and a ‘Webfolio’ online communication and research materials platform. It all starts with a 3-year development plan that departments submit to AFP as part of their application process. If selected, they become eligible for the following forms of support:



**Returning Scholars Fellowship Program:** AFP’s pre-eminent tooltargets talented scholars who, after obtaining an MA or PhD from an internationally recognized university, are supported to return to (or remain with) university positions in their home countries.[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition to a fellowship stipend, AFP furnishes Returning Scholars with teaching materials and internet allowances.

**International Scholars** **support scheme:** In addition to its work with Returning Scholars, AFP has also supported a total of 213 ‘International Scholars’—i.e. highly qualified international academics who serve as mentors to Returning Scholars and their departments. International Scholars make 2-3 intensive visits to the university during the academic year and remain in contact with colleagues in between. Their role has been to facilitate the professional development of Returning Scholars and non-fellow faculty members as well as to advise them on academic reform processes and the overall development of the host departments.

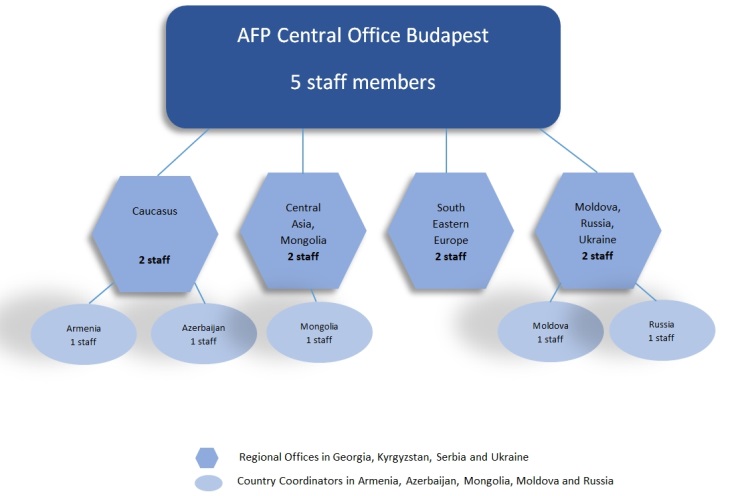
**Professional Development Fund:** In addition to the fellowship package, AFP also provides funds to enable participation of Returning Scholars in scholarly conferences and study visits to international academic centers. The Fund has been used by approximately one-fourth of Returning Scholars per academic year.

**Departmental Development and Mobility Funds**: The ‘Departmental Development Fund’ was used for institutional strengthening. The ‘Mobility Fund’ was designed to foster cross-fertilization between the various AFP partner departments. Both funds, awarded on a competitive basis, bolster the teaching and research capacities of AFP partner faculty.

**Discipline Group Meetings:** Annual/semi-annual gatherings of fellows across all disciplines, meant to enhance the professional development of Returning Scholars through peer feedback on teaching and research.

**Academic Webfolio Project** **(**[**www.academicwebfolio.org**](http://www.academicwebfolio.org)**):** Introduced in 2007, the Webfolio aimed to provide an interactive platform for pooling the collective academic expertise of AFP participants. It is also an electronic repository for academic materials produced by the fellows and a portal through which to access a selection of EBSCO academic resources.

The Administrative structure through which AFP has operated is depicted in the below chart and critiqued in the Lessons Learned chapter.



# Portfolio Analysis

As noted, by supporting individual academics and specific university departments, AFP has employed a *bottom-up* approach to change vis-à-vis higher education systems. In designing this Portfolio Review it would have been our preference to critically assess program outcomes using a *top-down* approach, whereby we would have started with the country-level context and then narrowed down to the university, department, and individual levels. This, alas, was not eminently feasible. Because baseline assessments, country-by-country context, or progress reports were not commissioned, AFP sometimes missed the forest for the trees. At present, while we can offer anecdotal feedback about systemic transformation in some countries, no evaluation has ever been carried out to discern our broader impact on higher education in the region. Nevertheless, viewing the program through the lens of its instruments offers a fairly good sense of the types of impact that AFP has brought about.

### Portfolio scope

For this review, we selected 14 (of 95) AFP-supported departments to analyze. We discuss both successes and failures and, most critically, spotlight key lessons learned. In determining which departments to assess, we asked each of the four AFP Regional Offices to select two departments that exceeded expectations, two that met expectations and two that needed improvement or were unsatisfactory.[[3]](#footnote-3) In short, well performing ones exhibited a major introduction or upscaling of reform-minded faculty and curricula; those meeting expectations imply courses up and running as per agreed-upon targets and workplans; and those in need of improvement reflect the failure to realize potentials and promises, the co-optation of plans, or the withdrawing of the partnership.[[4]](#footnote-4) We used academic year 2007-08 as the starting point for analysis. This is a logical dividing point for AFP, as prior to then the program was underwriting the individual support scheme inherited from Civic Education Project, whereas from 2007 Returning Scholars were supported only at selected partner departments.

### Returning Scholars – A Tale of Two Country Sets

AFP’s chief instrument is its Returning Scholars fellowship scheme. As such, the availability of candidate scholars is a key factor for its success. Availability has varied considerably from country to country. In Georgia, Mongolia, Serbia, Macedonia, and Kosovo, we experienced no difficulty in recruitment. The conditions at public universities in these countries improved significantly after the transition from socialism, and many Western-educated scholars were interested in pursuing an academic career in their home countries.

On the other hand, in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Moldova, and Russia, public universities are far less keen to hire scholars with Western graduate degrees. Both AFP Returning Scholars and International Scholars reported being judged unfairly against local academic competition. Moreover, these countries’ largely unreformed higher education systems, with high teaching loads, low remuneration, poor work conditions, minimal funding, and endemic corruption, make them unattractive employers for graduates of Western universities. This is further compounded by the fact that some of these countries still refuse to recognize Western graduate degrees. The academics that do return home are often forced to toil in entry-level positions and undergo a complicated and time-consuming degree-verification procedure. The lack of eligible candidates willing to return to such academic spheres is the main reason why AFP has supported comparatively few departments in Armenia (3), Azerbaijan (2), Tajikistan (1), Russia (4), and Moldova (3) on a long-term basis. In Russia, AFP originally worked with seven additional departments but for the reasons indicated above many of these partnerships were short lived.

In Russia, our efforts were further hindered by the reluctance of Returning Scholar candidates to receive funding from or to be associated with OSF. This trend increased from the 2008/09 academic year onwards. That year, for example, three Returning Scholar candidates for the Department of International Relations at Nizhniy Novgorod State University refused association with AFP, noting that OSF fellowship recipients would jeopardize their chances of securing federal funding from the Russian government. Russia’s crackdown on foreign funding sources has only aggravated the situation by virtually blocking all activities funded by Western donors. Despite AFP attempts to engage with Russian universities, academic centers from Kaliningrad to Kazan and from Samara to Omsk have remained closed to cooperation.

At the same time, we managed to identify several intellectual hubs in Russia where our engagement did produce meaningful outcomes. For example, AFP has built a team of four Returning Scholars at the Institute of Political and Social Sciences at Ural Federal University. Together with an International Scholar, the Returning Scholar cluster has been instrumental in designing and launching a new MA program in Political Philosophy. The discipline and the program are innovative in the Russian higher education context. Another example is that of a team of five Returning Scholars at the Smolny College of St. Petersburg State University, which AFP has supported since 2004. The team has launched new political science, international relations, and human rights courses. Finally, a team of three Returning Scholars at the Faculty of Law, Mari State University (a small regional university) for the first time introduced a cluster of human rights courses to the faculty’s curriculum. The Returning Scholars team also initiated the development and introduction of a brand new specialization in International Law at the undergraduate level.

### Universities as Engines of Reforms

AFP’s support has been channeled exclusively to public universities[[5]](#footnote-5). There are two reasons for this: 1) HESP was already awarding large institutional grants to private universities in the region, and 2) the internal working assumption that higher education systems are best influenced through major public universities.

AFP collaborates with university departments. As the smallest academic units, they are least affected by centralized bureaucracy and are most likely to be open to progressive reform. Nevertheless, the overall university environment has a major impact on the success of AFP interventions within individual departments. AFP has been most successful at universities—such as Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Ukraine), Tbilisi State University and the University of Skopje—where senior management has made a concerted effort to improve the academic standards and competitiveness of university programs. Such universities tend to oppose ministries of education that impose uniform standards across all educational programs; they also tend to lead the charge for university autonomy. Unlike most universities in the region, they allow their departments considerable academic freedom.

A healthy university environment also creates favorable conditions for replicating successful AFP models within the same university, thus increasing the systemic impact of the program. Often it was only possible to determine which universities offered such prospects once a partnership was tried and tested. AFP partnerships that resulted in such spillover effects occurred, for instance, at Tbilisi State University, the University of Pristina (Kosovo), and the National University of Mongolia. In each of these institutions, AFP’s partnership with a single department inspired other departments to reach out to AFP to advance their curricula reform and quality of instruction.

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| **Spill-Over Case –** In 2005, AFP began supporting the Tbilisi State University’s Gender Studies, International Relations, Social Work, Sociology, and Psychology Departments. Inspired by changes in those disciplines the Journalism, Law, and Public Health Departments all subsequently solicited AFP assistance in the form of Returning and International Scholars. This intervention also had a spill-over effect outside of the university. Tbilisi’s other significant higher education institution, Ilia State University, recognized that AFP was a serious tool for internal development and also applied for AFP support, which was granted for its Medieval Studies Department (other departments applied but were turned down). AFP’s support in Tbilisi led to the formation of a critical mass of reformist scholars and departments across the two major universities in Georgia. |

At the same time, AFP has also partnered with departments at universities managed by conservative administrations, with the hope of them serving as a bridgehead of reform to inspire other departments within those institutions. The universities selected for such experimentation—including Baku State University (Azerbaijan), Tajik National University, Azerbaijan State Economics University and Russia’s Perm State University—were those that expressed interest in working with AFP. AFP took a trial and error approach and although its efforts seldom led to the broader creation of conditions amenable for general academic reform, there are some isolated notable success stories, such as at Baku State University:

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| **Success Story –** At Baku State University a team of 10 dedicated Returning Scholars—seven of whom are still in place—managed to launch an LLM in Human Rights in the 2009/10 academic year. Leonard Hammer from the University of Arizona skillfully mentored the process and led the charge to get the LLM accredited while serving as an AFP International Scholar. The fully functional department of International Public Law graduates some 10 students per year and has produced a cadre of knowledgeable and skilled young human rights lawyers in a country that previously had very few. Although the department contends with constant political meddling, its survival to date is both a substantive and symbolic victory for the human rights movement in Azerbaijan. To date, however, there has been no spill-over effect with other Baku State departments. |

There were other attempts where the quality of leadership was not the undermining factor. In these instances lessons were learned, as in the case of the University of Sarajevo.

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| **Failure Case –** In 2011 University of Sarajevo reached out to AFP to improve its Gender Studies department managed by its affiliate, the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies (CIPS). AFP responded by supporting two Returning Scholars. Things soured quickly, however. The financial sustainability of CIPS was soon called into question and by 2013 a lack of funds prohibited the admission of new students. Only one Returning Scholar stayed on in a tenuous arrangement as AFP learned its lesson to better invest in institutional due diligence, including a better reading of the management capacities and financial sustainability of its partner institutions. |

With the exception of Russia and Ukraine, most countries where AFP has operated feature a limited number of prominent public universities—almost all of which are located in capital cities. For this reason, as well as the more promising ability to recruit talented Returning Scholars to intellectual and cultural hubs, AFP has largely focused its attention on universities in capital cities. Nevertheless, financial and human resources at such universities remain scarce, and as a result departments remain positively interested in the support mechanisms offered by AFP.

One notable exception to this trend is Moscow. Despite entreaties to several universities AFP was turned down for the following reasons: 1) AFP stipends had to compete with already-competitive local sources of remuneration, and 2) university administration was interested in large institutional grants that would fund, for example, research and conferencing. AFP was viewed as a minor donor unable to bring about large-scale institutional development. Reluctance to be associated with OSF also played a role. Noteworthy is that a number of universities in Moscow (such as Moscow State University, which we considered for cooperation) are already fairly developed and are starting to attract and employ scholars with international MA and PhD degrees from reputable institutions.

# Lessons Learned

AFP staff has identified a raft of lessons learned and programmatic recommendations based on its operational experience. These would be of particular importance in informing any similar work HESP might engage with. Indeed, much of the below thinking has already started to be infused into HESP’s work in Palestine[[6]](#footnote-6). The analysis and recommendations are broken down into two ‘chapters’. The first looks at AFP more broadly; the second drills deeper into AFP’s two main instruments: Returning and International Scholars.

### Lessons learned regarding AFP’s overall approach

**Flexible country strategies and out-of-the box thinking were needed when determining if or how to work in various country contexts.** For instance, a thorough country assessment of Russia may have yielded a suggestion to avoid working with traditional Returning Scholars who, because of their Western exposure, may have been stymied by the Russian authorities from this type of engagement. Instead, perhaps, it could have made sense to identify locally educated and talented scholars who share OSF’s values and engage with them. Likewise, in countries like Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Ukraine and Moldova a serious assessment of the pros and cons of partnering with private universities would have been merited. Instead, AFP’s toolkit was deployed too rigidly, resulting in one set of approaches for fairly different contexts. More recently, in Palestine both the Returning and International Scholar schemes were highly valued by our interlocutors, however they expressed a need (underscored by local context) for a component within the Returning Scholars scheme to target more focused research in a way that the Professional Development Fund has not been able to accommodate.

**A different approach was needed to conceptualize progress and measure impact** — **the results of which could have better informed and guided AFP programming throughout.** This takes us back to AFP’s theory of change, i.e. that exposure to Western academia would translate into more and better critical thinking in transition countries – which would be accomplished through the deployment of Returning and International Scholars who would directly influence university departments and inspire a spillover effect in other departments.

While measuring the level of critical thinking in a country may prove too abstract, there were intermediate metrics that should have been assessed but were not. AFP measured outputs, not outcomes. Meaning, it primarily measured the number of Returning and International Scholars deployed and the numbers of courses started or reformed. There were instances, as highlighted in this paper, where the spillover effect to other departments took place, and those were also noted.

To be sure, in many places AFP established a cadre of excellent Returning and International Scholars who brought new forms of academic intrepidness and rigor to institutions of higher learning across the region.

Missing, however, was a concerted effort to examine certain end results. For instance, AFP did not systematically and independently check the numbers of students benefiting from the courses. It did not solicit qualitative feedback from students – ultimate beneficiaries of our support, nor did it explore the causality links between its efforts and the ultimate changes at departmental/university or societal levels. Put bluntly, the theory of change was never sufficiently verified, since only a portion of it (deploying scholars to universities and periodic quality checks by International Scholars) was measured.

Having end-users in mind at every step of the game is also vital for making strategic and tactical course corrections throughout the lifecycle of a project. Baseline assessments at inception in each country and with each department should have been carried out to do this effectively.

**AFP should have selected partner university departments based solely on merit, and not nature of ownership.** The 2004 decision to engage solely with public universities made sense at the time. But as certain private universities became credible and influential actors in their countries’ higher education systems, AFP should have brought its operations in line with the new realities. This was particularly relevant for the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine (e.g. Polis University in Albania, the Independent University of Moldova and Ukrainian Catholic University). In spite of repeated requests by AFP field staff, HESP management never re-examined the original decision. Even when isolated support did go to a private university (AUCA), such decisions were made based largely on personal relationships between certain HESP board members and university personnel.

**Engaging in semi-closed societies can prove worthwhile – especially when backed by a tailored country strategy. The same holds true for partnering with conservative universities.** AFP’s experiences described herein with certain university departments in Azerbaijan and Russia, for instance, proved that there are still islands of hope within the higher education landscape that, over time, could help keep afloat critical liberal thinking. While success stories in such countries have tended to be the exception rather than the rule, these pockets of achievement were accomplished without the types of nuanced country-strategy approaches being suggested in this paper. Even more can be achieved if done differently. The same holds true for partnerships with conservative universities.

**AFP’s outreach to partners has been partially supply-driven — an approach that continues to make sense.** Although in some countries this is slowly changing, public universities have had little experience, and minimal incentive, to apply for non-state funds. Because they remain patently non-entrepreneurial, AFP’s outreach role includes breaking this psychological barrier and then empowering department ‘champions’ with the requisite skills to effectively partner with Returning and International Scholars. This notion was reinforced by HESP’s recent engagement in Palestine, where an Open Call for departmental partners went unanswered, but where solid partners were identified through direct outreach.

**AFP could have operated with a leaner administrative structure.** AFP operated through a Central Office (Budapest), Regional Offices (Belgrade, Tbilisi, Kiev and Bishkek) and National Offices in five countries. Given the limited numbers of institutions AFP partnered with, however, this could have been reduced to solely Central and Regional Office personnel. This being particularly so because National Office staff ended up conducting mainly administrative tasks which could have been handled centrally or regionally with less overall human resources.

**AFP should have more effectively balanced its support to individual academics with development grants to departments**. The Departmental Development Fund, AFP’s only instrument to complement individual support mechanisms with direct financial assistance to university departments, should have been rethought and improved. The Fund lacked clarity of purpose which led to vague terms of reference. The result was few applications coupled with a high rejection rate. For instance, alongside the individual fellowships to the LLM at Baku State University, AFP’s support for a library with critical titles on human rights could have been decidedly useful. We believe that departments would have been better invested in the outcomes of the AFP interventions had we extended our grants a) to induct non-AFP faculty in the newly designed curricula and teaching methodology; b) to support professional development of the entire department and not only those of the returning scholars, or c) to improve departments’ management.

### Lessons learned regarding AFP’s catalysts of reform — Returning and International Scholars

Overall, the Returning and International Scholar schemes worked well and achieved what they set out to achieve. Through trial and error over the years AFP discerned what the main factors of success were and what needed to be amended. This section summarizes the most important revelations from that learning process.

**The number of Returning Scholars working together matters — as does their long-term departmental integration.** As a rule, AFP has seen the most success with departments that have strategically used AFP to create a sizeable team of Western-educated faculty over the duration of multiple years. At these departments, Returning Scholars teach many newly-introduced or revised courses.[[7]](#footnote-7) In some exceptional cases, such as the Department of Political Science at Skopje University, AFP has supported as many as 9 Returning Scholars (almost the entire departmental faculty), which together with a supportive head of the department led to the development of political science as a discipline in Macedonia. In hindsight, those interventions considered to be failures supported Returning Scholars that are no longer at the departments. AFP’s policy of supporting those departments with at least two Returning Scholars and a clear plan for attracting further Returning Scholars in subsequent academic years should have been more consistently implemented.

In order for AFP support to be successful, Returning Scholars need to transition into full-time positions during their AFP-supported tenure and integrate further with the core faculty of the department. Returning Scholars who remain in part-time positions are less likely to become influential within their departments and exert a positive impact on administrative and academic processes. For example, a major reason for our success at the Faculty of Law at Baku State University was that four out of seven Returning Scholars had segued into full-time positions and had become core faculty. Conversely, a lack of Returning Scholar integration with the departmental faculty was at the core of our failure with the Department of Social Work at Azerbaijan State Economics University. Here Returning Scholars were indifferent to their full integration and commitment to the department and thus ended up having limited or no influence on departmental processes as outlined by the department in its initial plan. As a rule, engaging Returning Scholars as full-time faculty should have been a condition for renewing departmental partnerships after the third or fourth consecutive academic year.

**Serious engagement with non-AFP faculty pays dividends — and departmental leadership is vital.** By dint of its approach and design, non-AFP faculty members often feel like they have a limited stake in the outcomes of their department. To create an environment more conducive to reform processes, AFP should pay increased attention to the professional development of non-fellow faculty as well. AFP’s most successful partners—such as the Department of World Economy and International Economic Relations at Odessa National University, the Gender Studies Program at Tbilisi State University, and the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the National University of Mongolia—featured teams of non-fellow faculty members that were mobilized and actively participated in AFP-led curriculum development projects—on their own accord without financial support from AFP. A critical mass of such scholars—defined as enough people to significantly steer a department—is particularly important, especially since older faculty tend to perceive qualified junior academics as a threat to their authority, and getting them better invested in the process helps attenuate such potential causes of friction. A divide between the conservative and progressive faculty was behind the failure story at the Department of Political Science at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, for instance. The conservative faculty opposed the idea of electing a progressive head of the department with a Western education, choosing instead a senior conservative faculty member who blocked any changes. The lesson learned was that AFP should have withheld support until after the election.

Departmental leadership’s interest in building a strong, competitive department based on international standards is integral. AFP has had its most significant impact working with departments whose heads have had a strategic vision of departmental development, who recognize AFP as a tool for continuous institutional strengthening, who are proactive in curriculum reform endeavors, and who personally engage with AFP programmatic efforts. AFP has been particularly successful where its Returning Scholars have been promoted to department heads or higher, as was the case at Odessa National University, the National University of Mongolia and Tbilisi State University. Fellows and alumni bring to the department head posts the academic qualifications, skills, and values they cultivated with AFP support, and they pursue reform-driven approaches while strategically deploying AFP to achieve departmental development goals. Despite their extensive academic experience, Returning Scholars and AFP alumni have repeatedly stressed that it is important to offer them management and education administration trainings should they rise through the ranks to become department heads, faculty deans, and vice-rector. Offering relevant trainings to interested heads of partner departments (and not just fellows) should have been considered.

**International Scholar contributions have been indispensible**. A major condition for success has been how effectively partner departments have been in recruiting and utilizing International Scholars. As recruitment is driven by departmental needs, it is critical that departments assess their academic development needs first, and then attempt to match those needs with appropriate candidates. Skilled International Scholars have effectively contributed to in-depth reviews of departmental curricula, course offerings, and research projects, and have advised on raising academic standards across all these components. International Scholars have also initiated, designed, and helped implement new degree programs at their host departments, as exemplified by the Department of Political Science at the University of Skopje, the Department of International Law at Baku State University, and the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the National University of Mongolia. Conversely, where International Scholars have been underutilized, such as at the Department of International Economic Relations at Tajik National University, the Gender Studies Program at the University of Sarajevo, and the Department of Social Work at Azerbaijan State Economics University, AFP has tended to fail.

As a consequence of a 2008 AFP staff decision, in addition to mentoring their own assigned department, International Scholars provide comments on proposals submitted to the Professional Development Fund and the Departmental Development Fund schemes from other departments. International Scholar feedback then serves as a basis for staff to make well-informed decisions on application submissions. This modification was a significant shift from earlier practice when HESP staff had made such decisions without expert guidance. This practice should be augmented. International Scholars (other than those hosted by the departments) could be deployed to undertake state-of-the-art baseline and benchmarking assessments and performance evaluations.

Another lesson learned is that it is vital to elaborate a detailed work plan for each International Scholar before the start of the academic year, outlining specific tasks to be accomplished.

**Requiring Returning Scholars to hold or obtain PhDs was crucial.** In order to better integrate and strengthen junior Returning Scholar positions, AFP made it compulsory in 2007 for all Returning Scholars with MA degrees to enroll in a PhD program during their first fellowship year. In 2008, AFP also instituted the differentiation of stipends for MA (EUR 4,000 per year) and PhD holders (EUR 5,000 per year). Enrollment and eventual completion of a good PhD program leads to improved academic skills, increased competence in a discipline and better ability to design and teach courses. Moreover, in this region where universities are rigid hierarchies, it also serves for better integration with the core faculty of the department and leads to academic promotions to the associate and full professor ranks. This furthermore allows Returning Scholars to design and offer new courses at the MA and PhD levels, thus strengthening AFP-supported programs.

**The Program should have involved its alumni more actively**. Returning Scholars have not only remained in academia after their AFP tenure has concluded, but have often been instrumental in furthering reform processes in their departments. Roughly 50 percent of Returning Scholar alumni at the 14 selected departments remained at their departments after the completion of the program. Almost all have solidified their positions by defending their PhDs. Many have become employed full-time or achieved status of a core faculty member. Some were promoted to higher academic and administrative positions. As alumni are key players in departmental reforms, their continuous engagement with program activities (even after their financial relationship with AFP ceases) is of great importance. That said, AFP failed to design concrete tools to foster systematic alumni involvement in its work, as was envisaged in the program’s initial strategy. In addition to using some of them as co-facilitators of discipline groups, the program could have continuously used them as mentors to active junior Returning Scholars.

In sum, through AFP’s successes and failures it has internalized a tremendous amount of insights that should benefit HESP, the broader OSF network and other partners working in the field of higher education reform. The HESP team aspires to make the most of this compendium of knowledge to ensure it helps inform and inspire those committed to its mission.

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1. Support to departments at Palestinian universities is not part of this portfolio review. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 2009 the program limited the maximum period for Returning Scholar fellowship support to a cumulative 6 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To ensure geographic balance and the most representative examples the Central Office filtered this number down from 24 to 14. In total this covers the work of some 82 Returning and 32 International Scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For the final ranking of departments see Annex 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The one exception is the American University of Central Asia. Between 2005 and 2009, at a request of the HESP Board, AFP briefly supported departments at other three private universities – all recipients of HESP institutional support. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As support to departments at Palestinian universities was not part of the original AFP mandate, they are not included in this portfolio review. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The program requires Returning Scholars to teach a minimum of four semester-long courses each academic year. Many of these courses undergo continuous revision. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)