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Providing a safe haven for student activists

- a midway evaluation of the
Students at Risk programme

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Preface

Students at Risk (StAR) is a pilot programme established in 2014 with the aim to identify students, who, due to their human rights activism, are at risk of being formally or de facto denied educational or other rights in their home country, and to provide them with an opportunity to complete their education in Norway. It is a highly complex programme that involves some 70 different institutions, including different ministries and government services, student organisations and other NGOs, as well as a number of Norwegian HEIs and embassies.

This is a midway evaluation of the StAR programme. The main purpose is to instruct the further operation of the programme and to serve as a basis for the MFA's decision on its further existence and form. It is based on interviews with the students and representatives of many of the institutions involved, and a desk study of relevant documentation. SIU conducted the evaluation in cooperation with Ideas2evidence.

SIU is Norway's official agency for international programmes and initiatives related to education at all levels. SIU is a government agency reporting to the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. As a centre of expertise, one of SIU's most important tasks is to broaden and strengthen the knowledge base for further internationalisation of Norwegian education through reporting and analysis.

Table of contents

1. Executive summary	5
2. Introduction	6
2.1. Approach and method	6
2.2. Programme mandate and design	7
Establishment of the programme	7
Programme administration	10
Programme organisation	10
2.3. Basic figures	11
3. Interview report I: Stakeholders and students	13
3.1. Programme design	13
Interaction and dialogue	13
Mandate and target group	14
Return requirement	14
3.2. Recruitment process	15
Nomination	15
Admission	17
Immigration	17
Arrival in Norway	18
3.3. The stay in Norway	19
Support and security	19
Academic life	20
Social life	21
3.4. Outcome of the StAR programme	21
An academic degree	22
Intercultural skills	22
An international network of activists	22
Enhanced belief in their cause	22
A strengthened position as change agents	23
International attention	23
Encouragement for fellow activists	23
Personal safety	23
Benefits for study environment and civil society in Norway	24
4. Interview report II: SIU staff	25
4.1. SIU as secretariat	25
5. Concluding remarks and recommendations	27
Mandate	28
Nominations	28
Gender equality	29
Choice of study programme	29
Life after graduation	30
6. References	31

1. Executive summary

This is a midway evaluation of the Students at Risk programme. The main purpose is to instruct the further operation of the programme and to serve as a basis for the MFA's decision on its further existence and form.

The evaluation shows that the programme functions well. Most importantly, most of the students are happy with the academic degree they obtain during their stay in Norway, and feel that it will be relevant for their future careers. There is an overall satisfaction with the programme among the different participants, both the students themselves and the representatives of the different state and non-state institutions and organisations involved in the programme's operation. Importantly, there is a high level of support for the programme's continuation. Good dialogue between SIU as administrator and the other involved institutions appears as a crucial factor for the success.

There is also a common understanding of a steady improvement of the programme since its establishment, and of a well-functioning cooperation between the involved parties. Over the three years the programme has been operating, there has been a clear increase in the number of students nominated and accepted to the programme.

At the same time, there are some challenges. Some of the challenges mentioned in this evaluation report appear to have been dealt with in an adequate manner already, such as attracting a sufficient number of nominations and installing mechanisms to obtain crucial information for the validation process. Some issues are related to external circumstances that it would be impossible to solve within the framework of the programme, such as the time frame for the recruitment process, and the lack of available English language courses for bachelor level students.

Fundamental issues that need to be addressed in the near future are related to SIU's control of the nomination process and the students' situation after graduation, but also to the programme's mandate, gender equality in the nomination process, and the students' influence on the choice of study programme.

SIU needs to establish a more vigilant control of the nomination process to ensure that false nominations are avoided and to secure that the nomination criteria are understood similarly by the different nominators. A starting point could be to follow up the call from several of the stakeholders for an evaluation meeting after the third recruitment cycle has been completed by the summer 2017.

While this is a midway evaluation and the students' situation after graduation has not been a prioritised topic, the evaluation has revealed a tangible level of uncertainty among stakeholders and students about the situation for the students after graduation. This is a question both of how to build on the network of talented students that has been established through the programme, and about how to deal with the fact that some students may not be able to return to their home country. It is clear that SIU has not yet established procedures for how to deal with this situation. Such procedures need to be put in place as soon as possible.

2. Introduction

This report was written on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the MFA) by the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU) with the assistance of Ideas2evidence, and presents the results of a midway evaluation of the Students at Risk (StAR) programme.¹ StAR is a pilot programme established in 2014 on the basis of an initiative by the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH) and the National Union of Students in Norway (NSO). The programme is funded by the MFA, which delegated the administration role to SIU. The overall objective of the programme is to identify students, who, due to their human rights activism, are at risk of being formally or de facto denied educational or other rights in their home country, and to provide them with an opportunity to complete their education in Norway.

The scope of the evaluation has been limited. The programme was originally established with a time frame of two years of admissions (with start up in autumn 2015 and 2016 respectively). This time frame was later expanded by an additional year (start up autumn 2017). The successful candidates have been offered an educational pathway at the BA or MA level. Given normal study progression, this means that the first candidates from the first group of students are expected to graduate in the summer of 2017, and that the final candidates will be active until summer 2020. The evaluation has thus been conducted before the first students have graduated, and should be read as a midway evaluation of an ongoing programme.

2.1. Approach and method

The evaluation is conducted on the basis of a mandate and terms of reference established by SIU and agreed upon by the MFA. The report is written by a representative of SIU's department of development and analysis, who is responsible for the evaluation as a whole. Ideas2evidence was invited to conduct some of the interviews within the framework of an existing agreement between SIU and Ideas2evidence. The result of Ideas2evidence's contribution is found in "Interview report I". The main purpose of the evaluation is to instruct the further operation of the programme and to serve as a basis for the MFA's decision on its further existence and form.

The evaluation is based on data from interviews with students and representatives from the institutions involved, including SIU, and from different programme documents (guidelines, annual reports, information letters, etc.). The evaluation mandate clearly emphasised that priority should be given to the students and their experiences from the programme. For this reason, students constitute the largest group of interviewees. All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, and conducted either face-by-face (students and SIU staff) or by telephone. The evaluation was conducted in the middle of the third recruitment round. This means that the interview data are mainly based on the two first recruitment rounds, while the statistical data includes figures from the third round.

¹ Martin Paulsen (SIU) is the editor of the report, while Malin Dahle has been the responsible partner at Ideas2evidence. SIU would like to thank all the interviewees and others who have taken of their valuable time to contribute to the evaluation process.

In one exceptional case, due to family reasons, a student was given permission to follow a study programme in Norway while remaining in the home country. The merits of this special case have not been subjected to assessment as a part of this evaluation.

The author of the report conducted the desk analysis and the interviews with four SIU representatives who either contributed to the establishment of the programme, or worked on the programme after it was established.

Ideas2evidence was commissioned by SIU to conduct interviews with external stakeholders and with students. Representatives from all kinds of external stakeholders who are involved in the implementation of the programme have been interviewed: the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), The University of Bergen, The University of Stavanger, NLA University College, the Norwegian Embassy in Ankara, the Norwegian Embassy in Nairobi, the Norwegian Embassy in Maputo and SAIH. The person responsible for the StAR programme was interviewed at each of these entities.

Furthermore, eight out of a total of 15 students on the programme were selected for interviews. The selection was made by SIU, who sought a balanced representation of students in the group, based on country of origin, receiving higher education institution (HEI), gender, university level and year of admission.

2.2. Programme mandate and design

The StAR programme is a highly complex programme that involves some 70 different institutions, including different ministries and government services, student organisations and other NGOs, as well as a number of Norwegian HEIs and embassies.

Establishment of the programme

The establishment of the StAR programme was announced by the Norwegian ministers of foreign affairs and development at a press conference organised by the MFA in cooperation with SAIH and NSO at the University of Oslo on 3 September 2013.²

At that time, the student organisations SAIH and NSO had promoted a programme for expelled students for more than a year. Thus, they issued a declaration in September 2012, which stated that 'We want the MFA to establish a four year trial programme for students that have been expelled as a result of their political activities.'³ Questions about the possibility of establishing such a programme were also raised in the Norwegian parliament by opposition MPs Dagrun Eriksen (KrF) and Trine Skei Grande (V) in interpellations to the government in September 2012.⁴

SAIH and NSO continued their work on the programme throughout the following year, and in April 2013, SIU received a draft of a programme for expelled students from SAIH. The student organisation emphasised that they had prepared the document in cooperation with the University of Oslo, having consulted their fellow students in NSO, as well as the MFA, the Ministry of Education and Research (MER), and the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (MJPS). In the draft, SIU is assigned a central position as administrator of the programme. SIU reacted positively to the proposal, but underlined

² NSO 2013 and Norwegian Government 2013.

³ SAIH 2012.

⁴ Norwegian Parliament 2012a and Norwegian Parliament 2012b.

that they would need a formal request from the Ministry of Education in order to proceed with preparations for the programme. After this, SIU was not further consulted about the matter until the programme was announced on 3 September.

This implies that the programme proposal had not been subjected to a prior consequence assessment and that, except for the work carried out by SAIH and NSO, the preparation for the programme was started from scratch in September 2013.

The necessary agreement between SIU and the MFA was established throughout the autumn of 2013, and funding was allocated in the 2014 State budget, which was passed in December 2013.⁵ The programme was to be administered by SIU on behalf of the MFA. An agreement to this effect was signed by both parties in December 2013.⁶ The agreement implies that NOK 23,5 million would be allocated over the four-year period from 2013 to 2016. The agreement was extended by one year through a renewed agreement in December 2016, but no extra funding was added at this point.

The agreement between SIU and the MFA was not based on any fixed design of the programme, and the work on this followed throughout the course of 2014. Throughout the year, SIU's team focused on preparing the relevant institutions in Norway through developing guidelines, agreements and procedures to be ready for the first round of recruitments to the programme. This first cycle started with the opening for nominations in November 2014.

It soon became clear that successful operation of the programme would require the inclusion of competence from entities outside SIU. Thus, SIU took upon itself the role of secretariat for the programme, and the role of coordinating the functions and decisions made by others.

One important decision made early on was to recruit students through a process of nomination, rather than by applications. As a result, several things were achieved: to draw on the expertise of organisations and institutions with networks in the relevant countries, to keep the number of students involved in the selection process at a manageable level, and to avoid giving interested students false expectations. The programme guidelines specify which entities are entitled to nominate:

- Norwegian embassies in developing countries;⁷
- Norwegian HEIs partaking in the programme;
- SAIH;
- NSO;
- Scholars at Risk Network (SAR);
- Amnesty International;
- The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN).

The relationship with the nominating parties has not been further formalised, but SIU has annually provided the nominators with information about requirements, well ahead of the nomination deadline. It should be noted, that while this list is rather short, the two first entries include 44 embassies and 16 Norwegian HEIs respectively. This brings the total number of nominating entities up to 65.

⁵ Norwegian Parliament 2013.

⁶ SIU 2014.

⁷ The programme is financed as a part of the Norwegian government's development aid budget, which means that the country the students come from must be included in the Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) list of countries eligible for Official Development Assistance. See OECD 2017.

The selection criteria are identified in the programme guidelines, and defined with regard to the categories 'age', 'student status', 'activism and risk', 'residence' and 'travel documents'. The most crucial of these is the activism criterion:⁸

The candidates must be actively involved in activism aimed at improving the conditions for one or more human rights in a country on the DAC List of ODA Recipients, at a level deemed to entail personal risk (e.g. of physical violence, arrest, denial of civil rights, etc.).

While this is a criterion that would in any case be difficult to pinpoint precisely, it should be noted that the definition is wide open to interpretation. What does 'actively involved' mean? And, except for the listed situations, what constitutes a personal risk?

SIU realised that NOKUT would have to play a key role through validation of the students' documents and identification of the relevant study programme at Norwegian HEIs. The two parties discussed the nature of NOKUT's contribution and reached an agreement on cooperation related to the StAR programme, which was later revised and re-signed for the subsequent academic years. The agreement outlines the responsibilities of both parties and specifies an amount to be paid to NOKUT based on the number of applications assessed.

SIU also prepared and signed framework agreements with all 16 Norwegian HEIs that expressed a desire to contribute to the programme. Their contribution would be to provide study places for candidates on the programme, following a swift application process, and to administer the payment of scholarships on SIU's behalf.

The students targeted for the programme require study permits to attend Norwegian HEIs, and as a result, a key role is played by UDI. As the responsible ministry, the MJPS was consulted at an early stage, and SIU consulted UDI in preparations for the programme. These consultations did not lead to any written agreement, since the work related to the programme already falls within the framework of UDI's mandate.

The preparatory work with different stakeholders resulted in the Programme guidelines, formulated by SIU. This document was written in autumn 2014, and gives a detailed description of the programme. The guidelines give the parties involved a general understanding of their responsibilities and deadlines, and are intended to be a common framework for the programme's implementation. The guidelines have undergone minor revisions in the years following 2014. This is where the programme's mandate is formulated most explicitly:

The overall objective of the programme is to identify [...] students, who, due to their human rights' activism, are 'at risk' of being formally or de facto denied educational or other rights in their home country, and to provide these students with an opportunity to complete their education in Norway.

The responsibilities outlined in the programme guidelines have been further specified in the various agreements and instructions for institutions involved.

⁸ SIU 2016.

Programme administration

After the programme's establishment, the communication between SIU and the MFA has been conducted on the basis of annual reports and regular consultation meetings. In addition to an account of the different activities conducted during the programme period, the annual reports identify the programme's key challenges.

In addition, much of the communication between SIU and the different institutions involved is streamlined and organised in information packages distributed at fixed points of the annual cycle. Information is sent to nominators about upcoming nomination processes in June, information to students is distributed on five different dates during the recruitment process, and so on.

In addition to being a nominating party, SAIH also involves the students in the organisation's activities at the campuses in Norway. In this way, they contribute to the student's social life during their studies.

Programme organisation

The programme may be described at different levels. From an overall perspective, the life cycle of the StAR programme may be seen as spanning from the period in which the decision was made to establish the programme until the last student on the programme has graduated. Important milestones in this perspective are agreements between the MFA and SIU, subsequent communication based on annual reports and contact meetings, as well as measures such as this evaluation. At the present, this perspective implies a time frame from 2013 until 2020, when the last student of those admitted in 2017 is expected to graduate.

At the year-to-year operational level, the programme is organised in annual cycles related to the recruitment of new students, where different actors are involved at different stages. As the programme administrator, SIU is involved throughout, but SIU's involvement also greatly varies during the different phases of the programme's operation. This cycle starts with the nominations in November–December, and ends with the reception of the students at the HEIs some nine months later, in August the following year.

From the perspective of the students involved, the StAR programme is best understood as a process starting with the nomination and, for the successful students, ending with their graduation three or four years later, depending on whether they follow a BA or MA programme, and on their individual progression in the study programme. In addition, there are also some activities available or organised especially for the StAR students, such as a welcome gathering for the students organised by SAIH in the autumn and an annual seminar organised by SIU in cooperation with SAIH in spring. All students also have the opportunity to participate in the University of Oslo International Summer School (ISS) free of charge.

As indicated in this description, the programme has different implications for the different actors involved in the programme. For many of them (i.e. the embassies, the UDI and NOKUT), the perspective of annual cycles is the predominant one, while for the students and the HEIs, the dominant perspective would be that of the study programme.

The programme can be broken down into the following phases, which is useful as a basis for understanding the evaluation:

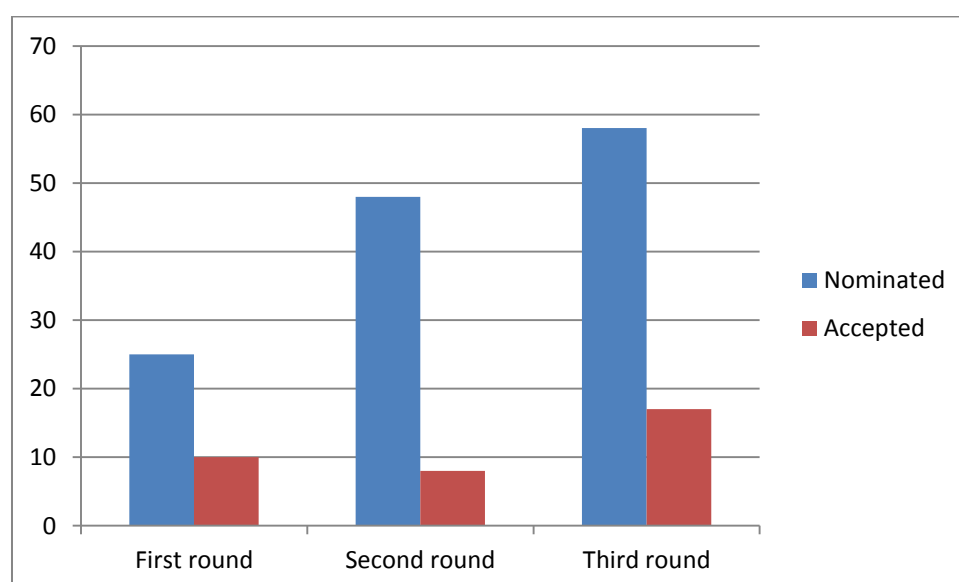
1. Nomination phase – the candidates are nominated for the programme;

2. Validation phase – their academic background is certified;
3. Admission phase – the candidates are evaluated for admission to Norwegian HEIs;
4. Immigration phase – the candidates are evaluated for issue of study permits to Norway;
5. Relocation phase – the candidates are received at the various campuses in Norway;
6. Study phase – the students conduct their studies;
7. Return phase – the students graduate and return to their home country.

2.3. Basic figures

At the time of this evaluation, the programme is in the middle of its third recruitment cycle. Over the course of the three years, 131 students have been nominated to the programme and 35 students accepted.⁹ This gives an overall success ratio of 27% for the nominated students. There has been a solid increase in the number of nominated students from year to year. While 25 students were nominated in 2015, this figure increased to 48 in 2016 and 58 in 2017. The number of students accepted to the programme, however, dropped from 10 in 2015 to 8 in 2016, but has since more than doubled to 17 in 2017. The latter figure corresponds with the maximum number of study places available for the third cycle.

Figure 1: Number of students nominated and accepted to the programme.¹⁰



All of the students accepted come from Africa or Asia, and while the geographical distribution of students across the two continents from year to year is uneven, the total for the three years is strikingly even, with 16 students from Africa and 18 students from Asia. The same goes for the number of nominations from these two continents, with 66 from Africa and 64 from Asia.¹¹ If we look closer at the geographical distribution, we see that the accepted Asian students are concentrated in Western

⁹ This includes the students from the third cycle. At the time of writing, we know how many students have been offered a place at a Norwegian HEI (17 students), but we do not yet know whether all of them will be granted a study permit to Norway.

¹⁰ Figures from the third round show the number of students offered a study place by Norwegian HEIs, but the final figures for how many students have been granted a study permit are not yet available.

¹¹ In 2017, one student was nominated from Latin America, the only person from outside Africa and Asia during the three years.

Asia (17 of 18 Asian students), while one student is from Central Asia.¹² There is a wider distribution across the African continent: Southern Africa (nine students), Eastern Africa (four students), Northern Africa (two students) and Western Africa (one student) are all represented. Turkey is the most represented country, with eight students accepted in 2017 who will, if they are granted study permit, bring the total of Turkish students on the programme up to 10. In Africa, Zimbabwe stands out with six students accepted over the three-year period.

The number of male students (25 students) is considerably higher than female students (10 students), but the female-to-male ratio has increased over the three-year period from 20% female students in the 2015 cohort to 35% in the 2017 cohort. This imbalance originates in the nomination phase – 28% of the nominated students have been women. The success rate for both sexes is equal – over the three years, 27% of both male and female students nominated to the programme have been accepted.

Over the three years, the students accepted have been distributed across 10 Norwegian HEIs. The University of Bergen (nine students), University of Oslo (eight students) and NLA, campus Kristiansand (five students) are the HEIs that are most frequently assigned to the students.

The students are nominated without reference being made to the BA or MA levels, and are placed into these categories by NOKUT following their assessment of the students' documentation of education. An analysis of these figures shows that while a majority (65) of the nominated students have been placed at the BA level, only four of the 35 students accepted to the programme fall under this category. This leaves us with a success rate of 6% for the BA level, as compared to 57% for the students deemed qualified for MA studies. These figures should be seen in connection with the availability of English language study programmes at the BA and MA levels at the Norwegian HEIs involved in the programme. Only six of the 151 study programmes available through the programme are at the BA level.

¹² UN 2017.

3. Interview report I: Stakeholders and students

3.1. Programme design

This chapter is based on interviews with external stakeholders involved in the programme's implementation.

By crossing several policy areas, the programme combines different, and potentially conflicting, interests and mandates. Nevertheless, the stakeholders' overall assessment of the programme and the programme's design is positive. The programme is deemed to be an important and relevant initiative in supporting and promoting the work of human rights activists in developing countries. As one informant says, the fact that the programme is funded by national authorities brings legitimacy to the programme and sends a signal that the Norwegian government does not tolerate human rights violations committed against activists. We also find support among most informants for the continuation of programme.

Interaction and dialogue

The overall impression gained from the interviews is that the programme, despite differences in mandate between the stakeholders involved, has worked well, that there has been an open dialogue between stakeholders and that challenges that have arisen have been solved along the way. The informants feel that their opinions are heard by SIU, and that their mandate is respected and recognised by SIU and other stakeholders. *'Everyone was clear on their mandate and respected the mandate of the others'*, as one informant says.

Several stakeholders were also heard during the process of designing the programme. One exception is the UDI. Despite the potential immigration challenges that arise from the programme, these were not discussed with the UDI prior to start-up, and the UDI had no influence on the design of the programme. The informant from the UDI questions whether the programme was properly grounded at the policy level in the MJPS and argues that the MJPS should have been more involved in the programme's development. She states the following: *'What we can learn from this is that all relevant parties need to be involved at an early stage'*. One of the HEI informants wishes that there had been closer dialogue between programme owners and immigration authorities before start-up in order to better handle the immigration challenges and avoid rejections and subsequent resource-consuming appeals.

Both the UDI and other stakeholders emphasise that SIU has been very responsive to their input and concerns throughout the programme period. All stakeholders describe SIU as both responsive and solution-oriented. SIU is praised for being pragmatic in their interpretation and application of the programme guidelines, in particular during the first round. Some informants describe examples of students who fail to fully meet all the requirements, but who have still been accepted to the programme due to the severity of their case.

However, many stakeholders found the lack of clear guidelines and procedures to be challenging, particularly during the initial round. One of the embassies involved pointed to the lack of a common standard for the vetting of nominees, and saw a need for clearer instructions on what information about the nominees they needed to collect or verify. Some HEIs asked for more guidelines on practical issues concerning arrival.

Several informants also request more systematic and formalised dialogue and knowledge sharing, by introducing an arena for meeting with other institutions. Many stakeholders considered the evaluation meeting that was held after the first round to be useful, and some informants call for a similar evaluation after the third round. This was particularly requested by the HEIs interviewed, but some embassies also call for an opportunity to share best practices.

One of the embassy informants also requested regular updates during the process, on important milestones and deadlines, and suggested that a simple reminder via telephone could be useful, since emails tend to accumulate and important information may be overlooked.

Mandate and target group

So far, the stakeholders feel that the programme mandate is being fulfilled. All informants agree that the students that have been recruited to the programme are genuine activists and resource persons who can play a role as future change agents in the human rights field. Several informants point to the fact that many of the students have suffered serious violations and persecution because of their activism, some of them to the extent of imprisonment, before arriving in Norway. Many also continue to pursue their activism whilst in Norway.

However, the evaluation highlights certain conflicts inherent in the programme mandate. Firstly, some of the informants argue that supporting students who are at risk can sometimes conflict with immigration concerns. The challenge from an immigration regulatory perspective is that the conditions for being admitted to the programme may also entitle the student to protection on the grounds of political persecution, and therefore result in an application for asylum at a later stage. This is a particular concern for students from so called 'red group countries', where the Norwegian immigration authorities apply a strict visa policy.¹³ Challenges in balancing the programme mandate with immigration concerns lead some informants to question whether the target group should be narrowed e.g. by excluding certain countries.

One of the embassy representatives that were interviewed was concerned that the interests of nominating bodies in supporting those activists who are most exposed may sometimes conflict with the HEIs' interest in receiving academically qualified students. The informant was concerned that the activists who are most in need of protection, are rejected for not meeting HEI's academic requirements, and called for a clarification as to how these two requirements should be balanced in order to ensure that the programme reaches those students it actually targets.

Return requirement

Several informants ask for more guidance and a defined plan for the return of students. Despite the programme's strict return requirement, there are no specific plans or guidelines concerning this part of the programme. As of today, there are several students on the programme who are not in a position to return to their home countries. Coordinators at the relevant HEIs therefore find themselves in a challenging position. As one of them said: *'This is an ethical dilemma that needs to be solved (...) We are at a loss. Do we advise them to seek asylum? Or do we just ask them to return? It shouldn't be like this.'*

¹³ UDI 2017.

If students do not return after finishing their degree, this will not only be in breach of the programme's mandate, but also entails a risk of causing a 'brain drain' in the respective countries, as one informant pointed out. Offering the students doctoral positions is mentioned as one possibility, but this is difficult as long as the students lack the necessary funding. The informant therefore suggests prolonging the programme period, so that master's degree students can continue on the Ph.D. level.

3.2. Recruitment process

Assessing the process that takes place from nomination to arrival is an important part of the evaluation, and we will draw on interviews with both students and stakeholders to identify possible deficiencies and areas for improvement. In general, from a student point of view, the period from nomination in October/November until the study permit is granted in July is perceived as a slow and drawn-out process. The long period of uncertainty can be a burden to some of the students, as they are often in precarious situations.

The evaluation has uncovered several challenges in the process, in particular in the first round. Most of the students, however, recognise that start-up problems may occur in any programme and consider themselves to be 'the guinea pigs of the StAR-programme'. Several stakeholder informants feel that the process improved from the first to the second round.

Nomination

There is general agreement that the programme has succeeded in recruiting resource persons who can serve as change agents in their home countries in the future. Many of the students that were interviewed were members of human rights organisations at the time of their nomination. They either learned about the programme from their own organisation, or via friends and acquaintances who were members of an organisation.

Some of the stakeholder informants express concern about whether the programme was sufficiently marketed towards relevant stakeholders and organisations in the first two rounds, since the number of qualified nominees was lower than the number of places on the programme for both these years. One informant believes this may have been connected with lack of knowledge of the programme among institutions that are entitled to nominate candidates, and lack of ownership of the programme among some embassies. The informants therefore request more informational work both towards nominating bodies and towards stakeholders that can help to identify candidates, e.g. local student organisations.

One of the embassies that was interviewed expressed uncertainty about its role in the nominating process, and sought clarification of responsibility vis-à-vis other nominating bodies. While in the first two rounds, all nominations had to be submitted to the embassies, nominations can now be directly submitted to SIU. For some embassies, this has resulted in the need for more coordination with other nominating institutions, in order to avoid duplicate nominations.

A recurring question in interviews with both students and some of the stakeholders is whether the current nomination procedures are adequately tailored to reach the target group. In principle, a nomination process, as opposed to an open application procedure, can be a good way of ensuring that the 'right' students are recruited, since the candidates are endorsed and approved by the nominating bodies. However, this argument relies on the premise that nominating bodies can be trusted not to nominate candidates on false grounds (bribery etc.). Several informants, students in particular,

were concerned about the risk of false nominations, especially considering the level of corruption in some of the countries the students come from. They therefore consider the verification of the candidates' background as a crucial factor in the nomination process. In interviews, several students highlighted what they perceived as an inadequate screening process, and questioned whether enough is being done to verify the candidates' information and thereby prevent acceptance on false premises. The students claimed that they had neither been interviewed nor asked to verify in any way the information they had submitted during the application process.

'Nobody has asked for documents about court or the university or anything. The biggest human rights organisation in [...] is corrupt, so they should be looking into verifying more. The level of corruption in [...] is very high, and many organisations are corrupt'. Student.

'The nomination process relies too heavily on the nominating body. I could have lied, they could have lied. There was not enough verification about myself and what I have done'. Student.

These concerns particularly pertain to the information about the candidates' activism. Several students therefore call for a more thorough screening process, e.g. by the use of independent committees of experts in each country.

The embassies emphasised the importance of a thorough vetting process, and some described the process as potentially time-consuming and challenging, in particular in the first round. Some embassy informants also mentioned that they contact candidates to verify their status as activists. These somewhat conflicting descriptions made by embassies and students of the vetting process are perhaps an indication of varying procedures among the embassies, which may have resulted from the lack of a common standard, particularly in the first round.

The students receive five emails from SIU at various stages of the recruitment process, containing relevant information. The students are generally satisfied with this information. However, the information flow in the nomination phase frustrates some of the students. They ask for more information on the progress and time frame of the process.

Validation After nomination, the candidates' academic qualifications are considered through a thorough validation process. NOKUT carries out a general assessment of the candidates' academic qualifications and language skills, identifies potential study programmes and sends a recommendation to the relevant HEIs, which then make individual assessments of the recommended candidate. NOKUT applies an established methodology for validating the academic qualifications of refugees. The validation is based on relevant documentation of academic achievements and a form submitted by the candidates. If necessary NOKUT contacts candidates for supplementary documentation, or if the HEIs request more information about the candidates (e.g. motivational letters or interviews). The communication between NOKUT and the candidates usually needs to be mediated by the relevant embassy, and is sometimes complicated by poor internet connection. Direct contact with candidates, therefore, can sometimes prove challenging.

NOKUT has sought to improve the validation process by requesting more detailed information from the candidates in the application form, which may make it easier for the HEIs to assess whether they meet the necessary criteria. The application form has been developed and expanded to include more specific questions about the candidates' education, such as the nominal length of the study, name of

the former institution, courses etc., as well as questions about the candidates' personal motivation and academic interests.

According to NOKUT, these amendments have facilitated the validation process and made it easier for NOKUT and the HEIs to find relevant study programmes for the candidates. However, they see room for further improvements, e.g. by including more country-specific questions in the application form, and by including more precise information from NOKUT, such as required documentation, in the information package that is sent to the candidates when they are invited to submit their documentation of earlier studies to NOKUT.

Admission

After NOKUT and the HEIs have validated the candidates' qualifications, the eligible candidates are offered admission to a study programme. Most of the students that were interviewed are content with the study programmes they have been admitted to.

However, some of the students have been admitted to study programmes that they consider to be of little relevance or that fail to meet their academic interests. All eight students that were interviewed were only offered one option and some of them experienced this as a 'take it or leave it' offer, especially since there was no information about what would happen if they declined the offer.

'I was desperate to take a study programme. I wasn't informed about what would happen if I said no to this programme – would I get another opportunity?' Student.

There is a general request among the students for more student involvement in the admission process, e.g. by having the opportunity to look for relevant and interesting study programmes, and by being offered more than one option.

One of the challenges in the admission phase is that most StAR students come from countries with an educational system that is very different to the Norwegian one. The academic content of a given degree, i.e. a bachelor's degree in sociology, may therefore be very different from the corresponding degree in Norway. Hence, NOKUT (in consultation with the relevant HEIs) may find the candidate to be better qualified for a master's degree in a different field.

Furthermore, there are a limited number of study programmes offered in English at Norwegian HEIs, particular at the bachelor's level. This is pointed out by several stakeholder informants as one of the programme's major challenges, especially considering that many of the nominees are bachelor students. One of the students had to complete a years' worth of bachelor level classes taught in Norwegian before being admitted to a master's programme. Due to language barriers, the student has not been able to follow lectures, and has had difficulties being included in group work with Norwegian students.

We also find examples of shortcomings in the information flow during the admission phase, with essential information failing to reach students, such as information about the location of campus and the structure of the study programme. One student had not been informed that the study programme he had been admitted to was organised as an online programme.

Immigration

After the candidates have been accepted to a study programme, they must apply for a study permit from the UDI. Each application is processed individually, based on an assessment of individual and

country-specific factors. In order to grant a study permit, the UDI requires a substantiated assertion that the students will return to their home countries. The students are therefore required to document strong ties to their home countries i.e. in the form of employment, extracurricular activity etc. If the UDI finds it highly unlikely that the applicant will return after having finished his/her studies, the application is rejected.

According to the UDI, five applications have been rejected, all of which have been appealed and then accepted. Three of the students we interviewed were only granted a study permit following an appeal. One student was rejected even though all the required information had been submitted in the first round. The students express frustration with this and felt that they were put under suspicion and that their motives were discredited. The appeals also resulted in delayed arrivals.

'I was upset about it. Of course I want to go back home afterwards. That part of the process was challenging.' Student.

According to the UDI, the study permit application process ran smoother in the second round, due to fewer applications from countries in the so-called 'red group' and better information available to candidates about documentation requirements.

Aside from the time and resources spent on appeals, many students describe the immigration process as quite cumbersome, riddled with delays, miscommunication between the candidates and embassy, and little information along the way. However, these are challenges that do not necessarily relate to the programme as such. As an example, the situation for some candidates is encumbered by the fact that there is no Norwegian embassy in their home country, and they therefore need to travel to a neighbouring country to apply for, and receive, a study permit.

The students also question the time frame of the process, with study permits being granted only a short time before the start of the semester. This protracted process leads to increased travel costs for students, since they have to buy flight tickets close to departure. Flight tickets to Norway are generally expensive for these students, and many students have struggled to raise money for their journey.

Arrival in Norway

Most StAR students receive the same introduction and forms of assistance as other international students when arriving in Norway. However, arrangements vary among the HEIs. While some HEIs arrange transport from the airport and assist the students with practicalities such as opening a bank account and registering with the police, others provide only minimum assistance in the introductory phase. Most HEIs organise an introduction week for all international students, including StAR students. However, some of the students were delayed due to problems with study permits and missed the introduction week. One student argues for better assistance on arrival for security reasons:

'There was no support when I arrived; I didn't know where to go. I think someone should come and pick you up at the airport, in regards to security. If they are realistic about security, maybe they should organise something for the students, so they can meet someone and get information when they arrive.'

One practical challenge that came up in most of the interviews with both students and HEI coordinators, relates to grant payment in the initial phase. As the students did not have a Norwegian bank account at arrival, the HEIs had to make cash payments to students. For many students, opening a

bank account proved more difficult than expected, and some students had to wait several weeks before they could get one. Some of the HEI coordinators are frustrated with the lack of procedures or guidelines regarding practical arrangements on the students' arrival. One HEI informant holds that shared programme procedures should have been established initially, rather than each institution spending resources on developing separate routines and procedures. Considering the low number of students at each institution this is seen as an inefficient use of resources. The HEI in question has also had to guide other HEIs during the arrival phase.

3.3. The stay in Norway

Overall, the stay in Norway has been a positive experience for the students. However, moving in order to study in another country can be a challenging experience for many. The students describe challenges that are typical for many international students when adjusting to a different culture, language and climate. To an activist facing persecution and imprisonment at home, the transition to leading a normal student life in Norway can be particularly challenging, and the students may have different needs to other international students in terms of support and networks.

Support and security

We are under the impression that the students are generally content with the support they have received during their stay. SIU is described as both responsive and supportive by several students.

'The team that has been working on the programme seems very open and flexible. Every time a challenge came up, they seemed open to look at it – both financially and at an administrative level.' Student.

Some of the students, however, report a particularly challenging start in relation to dealing with a culture shock, the lack of a social network and uncertainty about the future. Some also describe feelings of isolation and depression during their first months in Norway. Some students therefore call for closer follow-up from the universities.

'There are a lot of internal issues going on (...) The universities need to understand who these people are that are coming. For me, in my case, they didn't know. StAR students need something more than other international students. These are people that are escaping something and trying to be safe.' Student.

Interviews with students indicate that the support the students receive throughout their stay varies among the HEIs. Some coordinators have close contact with the students, while others are more detached and less available. In addition to SIU and HEI coordinators, SAIH has offered valuable support to StAR students who have sought information or faced difficulties. SAIH believes it may be easier for the students to turn to SAIH for assistance, considering that many of these students come from countries with low levels of trust in government and public authorities. SAIH sees this as an argument for holding meetings between SIU and the students early on the programme, in order to build trust.

On questions of security, the students' opinions vary. All students appreciate the programme administrators' efforts to maintain students' anonymity, e.g. by not publishing their names. All the students we talked to feel safe in Norway and, for most of them, security is therefore of little concern while they are here. Some consider it to be a matter of personal responsibility, others consider the mere geographical distance to provide security in itself. As some of the students explain:

'My personal safety has been taken care of by just from moving from (...) to Norway. But it depends on what I do while I am here. Anything can happen when I go [home] because of what I write on social media. The StAR-programme can't do anything about that.'

'I have never cared about what SIU does or does not do for my safety. I was facing death every day I got up [at home]'.

Some of the students ask stakeholders to be more mindful about the language used in texts about the programme and its students. One student specifically mentioned the word 'exile', which was used in a brochure along with photos of StAR students, as misleading and implying that the students had fled their country or would not return, while they are actually here to get an education. Another student was worried that the programme's name and the term 'risk' would create a stigma that could cause problems when applying for work etc. in the future.

Although most students are content with the programme's security precautions, one HEI informant questions the lack of programme security guidelines and a system to deal with potential emergencies.

Academic life

Most of the students are satisfied with their studies and feel that the study programme is relevant for their future career plans, as well as for their role as HR activists. Most students are also content with the quality of their study programmes, although some find the academic level to be less challenging than expected.

The students highlight the non-hierarchical culture, the responsiveness and openness of their faculty and the availability of resources and infrastructure at their institutions as positively contributing to their academic experience. Many students also report that they have profited from being introduced to both new teaching and evaluation methods.

'I am used to written exams, midterms and finals. And you study for these. While here you are engaged through the whole process, assignments, readings, group assignments'. Student.

Several students also emphasise the opportunity to attend the summer school at the University of Oslo as a positive part of the programme. The summer school provides an additional academic opportunity as well as an arena for connecting with other StAR students.

One concern that several students put forward is the lack of interaction with Norwegian students, which some students see as both an academic and a social loss. This is a particular challenge when international students and Norwegian students are following separate study programmes. The opportunity to discuss academic issues and share opinions with students across countries and cultural backgrounds is something these students value highly.

There are examples of students who have been less fortunate with the study programmes they have been assigned to. Some have been assigned to programmes that correspond poorly with their background or academic interests, or that they consider to be of poor quality. Two students have experienced that their study programme was cancelled, and they were transferred to a programme that bears little resemblance to their interests and backgrounds, and has very limited applicability in their home countries. One of these students was able to transfer to a different HEI and a different study programme, while the other remains on the study programme.

Although some students have managed to change study programmes after having started, the process is described as somewhat challenging, due to lack of information or slow response from the HEIs or those responsible for the StAR-programme. One student, who was not aware of the possibility of changing programmes, only managed to do so after first having decided to withdraw from the StAR programme.

The students therefore call for more student involvement when being assigned to a study programme and seek more information about the possibilities of changing study programmes during the course of the programme, in order to avoid such situations. Further, we see a need for following up students when major problems with a study programmes arise, such as in the example mentioned above.

Social life

Most of the students have succeeded in creating a social network in their respective environments. Many students have joined local student groups or human rights organisations such as SAIH or Amnesty, which have been important arenas for social interaction and integration.

Both SIU and SAIH offer arenas for social interaction. SIU organises a two-day seminar for all StAR students in the spring semester, while SAIH has organised a separate gathering in September. Both SAIH and the students argue that it is important to bring the StAR students together at an early stage of their stay, in order to help them build social relationships, introduce them to Norway, and offer them a chance to discuss any challenges that may arise during their stay. Unfortunately, not all students received information about SAIH's event the first year.

When inviting students to the gathering, SAIH also informs StAR students about their local groups. The meeting, therefore, also paves the way for StAR students to engage in SAIH's work locally and nationally. Most students embrace the opportunity to get involved with SAIH and have become members of local SAIH groups, participated in informational campaigns, given presentations and assisted SAIH with various tasks. The students view the contact with SAIH as crucial, since they are fighting for similar causes.

Despite these efforts, several students have found it challenging to integrate socially, in particular during the early days of their stay, and consider it difficult to interact with Norwegians, both in the student environment and in society at large. Many therefore depend on a network of other international students for their social life.

Creating a social network is a particular challenge at smaller HEIs, or in smaller cities, with few student activities and few international students. Several students emphasise the importance of being active in civil society and suggest that the programme initially exerts an extra effort to put new students in touch with student groups or other civil society organisations.

3.4. Outcome of the StAR programme

Both students and stakeholders see many positive outcomes of the StAR programme, not only for the individual StAR students, but also for other activists and the wider society. In this chapter, we describe the most important both actual and potential outcomes, based primarily on interviews with students, but also with some of the stakeholders.

An academic degree

All students agree that they have benefited academically from participating in the StAR programme, and most of them consider their academic degree to be the most important outcome of the programme. Some of the students also hold that they have acquired academic qualifications that they could not have acquired at home.

'What is taught here – I wouldn't get that in my country. This kind of [study] programme doesn't exist [there].' Student.

The academic stability and security that the programme offers – *'knowing that the exam is going to happen'* as one student put it – is something the students value highly.

Intercultural skills

Several students underscore the added learning outcomes that come from an international experience. By studying in another country, they acquire extracurricular knowledge and skills such as cultural and societal knowledge and intercultural communication skills that are valuable for their future careers and that may enhance their ability to push for change in their respective societies. As the students form part of an international student environment, this includes knowledge about cultures and social and political systems from other countries than Norway. As one student said: *'Now I have some understanding of Rwanda, Nepal etc. It gives me an impulse to be stronger as an activist in the future'*.

An international network of activists

Several students mention that acquiring a widened international network is an important outcome of their stay in Norway. The students who believe that the programme has contributed to strengthening their positions as activists all underline the importance of engaging with other activists and with civil society in Norway, and of getting an opportunity to see how they operate and mobilise. Students, as well as informants from the HEIs and embassies, therefore argue that the programme should accentuate the StAR students' opportunity to connect with each other and with other activists, and facilitate a network for graduated StAR students.

Enhanced belief in their cause

Many of the students also believe that the programme has strengthened their views on human rights issues and encouraged them to continue their fight for change at home. The following quotes illustrate this:

'Until I came here, I wasn't sure how I felt about some human rights issues, like the death penalty. It has changed how I think about a lot of things. Democracy can work, it doesn't have to be violence'.

'After I became part of StAR, my feelings about human rights and activism have become enhanced'.

Many continue to pursue their activism at home whilst in Norway. Although the form of advocacy has changed while staying abroad, they keep on pushing for change through social media and other platforms. As one student said, joining the programme gives access not only to education, but also to free speech. The security of being in Norway allows the students to amplify their voice and be more outspoken. Some also still attend meetings in their organisations at home. However, one student

saw little potential for mobilising in Norway and felt that his activism had slowed down during his stay in Norway.

A strengthened position as change agents

Most of the students emphasise the impact that the programme may have on their position as activists and change agents in their home countries. Some of the students have political aspirations and believe that the programme will benefit them in their pursuit of political change as future politicians. With an academic degree, the students consider themselves better equipped to pursue their activism or political aspirations when they return. These students argue that the programme produces potential leaders, and therefore may have a major impact in the future of their respective countries.

In this context, several students emphasise the value of being introduced to the Norwegian system of government and the welfare state, both at a theoretical and practical level. This first-hand experience can prove useful and inspire their future work as leading change agents and/or politicians.

The following quotes illustrate this:

'Every time we work on health policy or educational policy, [looking at] what are the best practices around the world... The opportunity to come here and study it, seeing it and how it works – this is the best gain on a personal level'. Student.

'Learning from the other students and getting to know other people and their belief systems...If you want to be in politics, understanding other people is important.' Student.

Furthermore, many StAR students follow study programmes that focus on public administration, democratisation and human rights, which are seen as enhancing their skills and resources as change agents.

International attention

Some students have been given a mandate by their organisations at home to continue their activism by spreading information about the political situation in their home countries. The StAR-programme gives these students an important platform to speak out about their cause and to bring attention to the political situation and human rights violations in their home countries. Several students have told their stories in local or national media. Some of the students have also been able to travel to other countries whilst in Norway, something that has allowed them to promote their cause to a wider international audience.

Encouragement for fellow activists

Several students also believe that their participation in the programme encourages other activists in the students' home countries, and that the programme gives them a boost by recognising their situation and the cause they are fighting for. *'This is giving strength to the students at home (...) They now have hope (...) It makes them realize that they have supporters outside'.*

Personal safety

For the most students most exposed to risk, the programme provides a temporary escape from a reality marked by fear of persecution, abduction and imprisonment. StAR offers them an opportunity to study in a safe environment where they can fully focus on their studies without worrying about their safety and living conditions. By leaving their home country, the students may also be protecting their families, since their activism sometimes leads to the persecution of family members.

'I needed this break, and so did my family. If you are at risk, they go to people close to you, and [this] gives my family safety. Some of the people I have been working with have been abducted. If I was going to continue [at home], some of the same things would happen to me'. Student.

Some students point to the fact that the network they have had access to through the StAR programme also provides a safety net for their future activism. The students feel that the programme has brought international attention to their cause and believe that they will now have international support in case of future violations at home.

'There is going to be more of a head ache if I get imprisoned or killed on the street. (...) They consider this stuff when they arrest people. Having been a part of the programme, I know for sure that there are people outside of [home country] who are going to care if I get arrested, and write about it'.

Benefits for study environment and civil society in Norway

As some stakeholder informants point out, the StAR students are also an asset for Norwegian HEIs and students as well as Norwegian embassies and civil society. Some HEIs believe that the students bring new perspectives to the academic discussions in the classroom, which is particularly relevant for study programmes that focus on human rights and democratisation. They are also seen as adding value by being involved in student activities and speaking in public, and for presenting their countries and backgrounds to other students. Many StAR students are also engaged in human rights organisations in Norway. SAIH find great value in including these students in their activities and learning from their experiences.

One embassy informant considered StAR students to be local human rights 'assets' that should be involved in the embassies' network in the future. She therefore saw the need for some sort of follow-up of these students when they return to their home countries.

4. Interview report II: SIU staff

This chapter is based on interviews with the SIU administrative staff responsible for establishing and running the StAR programme. All the interviewed staff expressed their satisfaction with the programme and are impressed by the students involved. These are described as strong, both intellectually and mentally, and as future leaders. In addition, the SIU staff described a positive attitude and a large degree of commitment towards the programme among the parties involved.

4.1. SIU as secretariat

The SIU staff stressed that the establishment of the StAR programme represented additional challenges compared to other programmes operated by SIU. It is more politically sensitive and directed towards a more specific target group than other programmes.

The SIU staff reported taking an analytical approach to the programme's establishment, and that they had wanted to establish an understanding of the entire process from nomination to graduation and identify how to best set up the different phases that now define the programme's administration. Different actors were consulted, as described in both interviews and in SIU's 2014 annual report to the MFA. Programme guidelines were discussed with the initiating student organisations (SAIH and NSO), interested HEIs and NOKUT.

Importantly, in the same annual report, as well as in interviews, SIU underlines that UDI was also consulted during the process of designing the programme. This information about UDI's involvement deviates from the description given by the UDI representative in Interview report I above.

The SIU staff have assessed different models for the programme. One of them was to spend the same funding on measures outside of Norway, either in the students' home countries or in neighbouring countries. However, this idea has been discarded, with one of the main reasons given being the added value related to studying in Norway: the students are given an opportunity to study in a safe haven where they can focus on their studies. In addition, they get a chance to see how democracy works. At the same time, one of the SIU staff interviewed acknowledged that the fact that the students do not get the opportunity to learn Norwegian while they are in Norway is a weakness, since it restricts their access to Norwegian society.

SIU's role is that of a secretariat for coordinating the activities and decisions made by other competent institutions. SIU's role is to maintain communication with these institutions, to facilitate the communication between these institutions and the students, and to assist the students if problems arise. The interviewed SIU staff agree that this communication works well, even if they also admit that the sheer number of involved parties is so high that it is sometimes necessary to economise on the communication to those not directly involved in the different decisions.

Based on this model, SIU's final decision to grant the StAR scholarship is the result of decisions made by other entities. The nominators make the decision on whether or not the students are activists. The same goes for further decisions related to the validation of the students' documentation of academic background (decision made by NOKUT), the admission to study programmes (decision made by the HEIs) or the question of study permit (decision made by the UDI).

While this distribution of responsibility comes as a natural result of the authority and competence vested in these institutions, it also implies that SIU lacks insight into the decisions and their foundation. This is satisfactory for decisions on validation, admission and immigration – these are decisions made within well-established frameworks of administrative procedures – but the nomination process is new and untested, and takes place in a diverse and challenging international setting. When the students are nominated, SIU does not question or attempt to verify this any further. In the interviews, the SIU staff underline that this is so because the nominators are the ones possessing the information and competence necessary to make such decisions.

The vulnerability of the nomination process to corruption is raised as an issue by several students, and some of the SIU staff agree that the lack of insight into this process represents a potential problem. On the other hand, others among the interviewed SIU staff point out that SIU does not necessarily possess neither the relevant competence nor the necessary information to assess the candidates' activism, and that obtaining the necessary information could touch upon questions of privacy protection.

Gender issues are given priority by the MFA in the agreement with SIU that forms the foundation of the programme. The statistics show that there is a clear imbalance between the number of male and female students nominated to the programme. The question, however, what is reasonable to expect. One of the SIU staff points out that the figures are better than could be expected, and this is a view that finds support with some of the other stakeholders in a follow up round that addressed this question. Both point out that the number of female students in many of the relevant countries is below 50%, or that due to local gender role patterns, male students are more likely to take on leading roles in the human rights movement.

Among the stakeholders involved in the programme, SAIH is the most important NGO. It plays different roles, and several of the SIU representatives expressed their satisfaction with these roles, especially when it comes to involving the StAR students in student life in Norway.

A key concern for the SIU staff is related to the question of the students' situation after graduation. There are two sides to this matter, one concerning those who cannot travel back home after graduation and another concerning those who can. The SIU staff who were interviewed acknowledged that the first issue needs to be tackled in the immediate future, and one of them admitted that this issue had not yet been sufficiently discussed. This is also true for the second point, regarding those students who return home after graduation. On the one hand, they may still risk persecution due to their activism, while on the other hand, there is a potential, both for the students and for Norway, to build on the established connection in some kind of alumni network. However, this has not yet been established.

5. Concluding remarks and recommendations

The StAR programme appears to function well. Most of the students are happy with the academic degree they obtain during their stay in Norway, and feel that it will be relevant for their future careers. To students that have been subjected to persecution at home, merely being able to study for an exam that will take place as scheduled is perceived as a luxury. It is worth noting that, in addition to positive feedback on the programme from the students and SIU staff, most of the stakeholders support its continuation.

In addition to meeting this main objective of the programme related to providing the students an academic degree, the programme is also seen to contribute towards several other outcomes: to varying degrees students point to the intercultural skills they acquire, the network they establish, an enhanced belief in human rights and democracy, a strengthened position as change agents, the opportunity to spread information about the situation in their home countries, and the personal safety they feel. In addition, some outcomes are understood to benefit others: the programme is seen to represent an encouragement for other activists in the students' home countries, and the students are seen as an asset to the study environment on Norwegian campuses, and Norwegian civil society.

There is an overall satisfaction with the programme among the different participants, both the students themselves and representatives of the different state and non-state entities involved in the operation of the programme. In addition, there is a common understanding of a steady improvement of the programme since its establishment, and of a well-functioning cooperation between the institutions involved. Good dialogue stands out as a key success factor. There has been a clear increase in the number of students nominated and accepted to the programme over the three years it has been operating.

At the same time there are challenges, some of which are due to the way the programme was launched. No administrative preparations for the programme were made before it was announced. SIU was given a year to establish the programme before the first round of recruitment started, but the character of the programme was unknown to the institutions involved and the sheer number of involved institutions added to the difficulties. The retrospective regard that this evaluation allows shows that important aspects of the programme had to be established along the way and improvements made as its weaknesses became obvious.

Some of the challenges mentioned in this evaluation report have been dealt with in an adequate manner already, such as attracting a sufficient number of nominations, and requesting the necessary information for the validation process.

Some challenges are related to external circumstances that are impossible to solve within the framework of the programme. One example of this is the time frame for the recruitment process. While it is easy to understand that the students may get frustrated with the waiting time, the time span for the process from nomination to arrival in Norway is dependent on the executive work of the government entities involved. In fact, the procedure for the StAR students is faster than for international students that apply for full degree studies in Norway outside the StAR programme.

Other challenges depend on the way in which the programme is operated, and should be easier to solve. For instance, it should be possible to establish a set of common procedures for reception of the students at Norwegian HEIs and a way to take better care of the students while they are at Nor-

wegian campuses. At the same time, it is important that measures are taken to secure a good academic and social environment for the students. SIU should enter into a dialogue with the students, HEIs and SAIH to identify the main challenges and find ways they can be solved.

In the following, we will look at the most pressing issues to be dealt with in the continued operation of the StAR programme.

Mandate

The objectives of the programme are quite broad and non-specific. At the same time, a set of unspoken objectives or goals appear to inform the design of the programme. Among several factors, the programme works to:

- empower the students professionally through providing them with an academic degree;
- strengthen the students as human rights activists through accompanying activities such as the seminar organised by SIU in spring and the UiO International Summer School;
- strengthen the students as democratic citizens through involving them in NGOs on campus;
- provide the students with a network as a result of their studies and NGO activities;
- strengthen the Norwegian government's work on human rights globally through establishing a connection with a group of young human rights activists.

The relationship between the objectives and programme design could be strengthened if such objectives and goals were more specifically expressed, and the responsibilities of the different involved entities involved would be clearer.

For instance, if providing the students with a network was established as an objective – the responsibility to follow them up while they stay at Norwegian campuses would become more evident. Since this objective is related to both studies and extra-curricular activities, HEIs and SAIH appear as relevant actors. The evaluation shows that they already do a good job, but that some of the students appear to miss out on what is offered to the majority.

Nominations

While there is a common agreement that relevant students have been recruited to the programme, the nomination phase is raised as a concern by some of the students, as well as by one of the SIU staff interviewed. There are several possible challenges:

1. Vulnerability to corruption

The lack of control mechanisms makes the programme vulnerable to individuals who want to exploit it towards their own personal gains. Students in the programme come from some of the most corrupt countries in the world, which implies that extra caution should be taken.

2. Vulnerability to different interpretations of selection criteria

The sheer number of institutions involved in the nomination process (65) and the fact that many of these (i.e. the HEIs) are very large and complex organisations, indicate that there is an imminent risk of different interpretations of the selection criteria. This risk is increased by the fact that the selection criterion for activism and risk is vaguely formulated in the programme guidelines, through the use of an incomplete list of examples.

3. Lack of opportunity to prioritise

Until now the capacity of the programme has been larger than the number of eligible candidates, but this may change. In such a case, the question will be how to prioritise between the candidates. At present, SIU does not possess the necessary information to use the activism and risk criterion as a basis for prioritising between the available candidates. This may lead to a situation where the candidates picked are not the most worthy among the ones available.

These factors indicate a need to establish control mechanisms and mechanisms that would ensure a common understanding of the selection criteria among the nominators. A starting point in the work to improve the nomination procedure could be to follow up the call from several of the stakeholders for an evaluation meeting. Another relevant measure could be to introduce to the nomination form a question about why the given candidate has been nominated to the programme. This would provide SIU with a basic understanding of the background for the nomination.

Gender equality

The evaluation shows that while the success rate for female students when nominated is the same as for male students, there is a huge difference in the number of female students nominated as compared to male students. Both SIU staff and stakeholders agree that this is as could be expected, given gender role pattern in many of the relevant countries. At the same time, the SIU staff underline that this has not been raised as a topic with the nominators. Since gender issues is a topic stressed by the MFA in the agreement between the MFA and SIU, more should be done to see whether it is possible to achieve a higher rate of female nominees. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) operating in comparable cultural setting, reports to have achieved great success in promoting scholarships for female students.¹⁴ In cooperation with the nominators, SIU should do more to investigate why there is such a discrepancy, and see if it is possible to increase the numbers of female students nominated.

Choice of study programme

In general, the students express a wish to be more involved in the choice of study programme. In a couple of cases, the students have requested to change study programme (and place of study) during their stay in Norway. While it is clear that the range of study programmes is limited, the students' wish to be more involved in such an important life decision is warranted, and more should be done to either provide choices, or to explain what the alternatives are/why there is a lack of alternatives.

There is a clear lack of study programmes for BA students on the programme, due to the limited availability of such programmes at Norwegian HEIs in general. For the StAR programme, this means that nominated students have a much higher chance of being offered a place on the programme if they are eligible for MA studies. Since the number of available study places at the BA level depends on factors outside the programme, that are not likely to considerably change in the foreseeable future, this is something that needs to be addressed. Possible solutions are:

- to discourage nominations for students that are not eligible for MA studies
- if it is important to keep the programme open for BA students: to consider being more specific to the nominators about which study programmes at bachelor's level are available.

¹⁴ DAAD 2013.

Life after graduation

This evaluation has been conducted before the first candidates have graduated from the programme and questions related to the students' lives after graduation have therefore not been a prioritised topic. However, the challenges related to this part of the programme are now starting to become more topical, and need to be addressed.

This is both a question of opportunities and challenges. The students themselves point to the network of activists as one of the important outcomes of the programme. Some of the stakeholders even talk of the students as possible human rights' assets to Norwegian embassies.

On the other hand, some students talk of the trouble they risk experiencing when they return to their home countries after having graduated, and that being known abroad might give them some level of added security. All these points serve as reasons to consider using resources to establish some kind of alumni network for the StAR graduates, which might secure that such imagined effects are indeed achieved.

The main challenge, however, is related to those students who will not be able to return to their home country. Stakeholders ask for an understanding of how to behave. SIU has not established a procedure on how to deal with this, and such a procedure clearly needs to be established as soon as possible.

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