

# **External Evaluation of GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainability and Societal Change**

**Programme Evaluation Report - GEST**  
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### TRAINING PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND CONTEXT

#### Programme description, intervention strategies and approach (overview)

The University of Iceland hosts the **Gender Equality Studies and Training (GEST) programme** within the School of Humanities. The University established the programme in 2009 through an agreement between the University and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Iceland. The GEST programme ran as a pilot from 2009 to 2013 before becoming a part of the United Nations University (UNU) network based in Iceland in 2013. Since 2020, the GEST programme now operates as part of the GRÓ Centre with the three other Icelandic training programme for development cooperation that were formerly part of the UNU network. The GRÓ Centre is an independent agency of the MFA, operating under its own legal identity and functioning under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a Category 2 Centre (C2C) based in Iceland.

The **mission of the GEST programme is to use a multidisciplinary approach to promote gender equality and social justice in low/middle income countries and post-conflict countries** by:

- Advancing **expertise** through studies and training for professionals, scholars and organizations,
- Supporting the production of high-quality, collaborative, and policy-relevant **research**,
- Providing a platform for transnational **dialogue, knowledge dissemination** and **exchange**.

**The core training offer of the GEST programme is an intensive 5-months (20 weeks) postgraduate level training and research programme (fellowship) in Iceland**, like the other three Icelandic development cooperation training programmes. From 2009 to 2024, 241 individuals from 38 countries have graduated as GEST fellows on the annual 5-months fellowship programme. About half of the GEST fellows are from the four countries of Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda, and Palestine. In addition to the 5-month fellowship, the GEST programme offers **tailored short training courses delivered in partner countries**. The two-core short training courses are principally delivered with partner organizations in Malawi and in Uganda. GEST has also delivered an online course for participants in St. Lucia as well as a specific course in Kyrgyzstan in cooperation with the GRÓ Centre's LRT programme. Since 2012 through to 2023, 564 individuals have benefited from the programme's short training courses. Since 2018, the GEST programme has offered its alumni **scholarships for doctoral (PhD) degree studies**. These scholarships have developed from initially being a partial grant to support fieldwork research of one scholar to being offered as full grants for research with the University of Iceland in 2021. Since 2020, the programme has also offered creative online learning content in the form of **Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)**. The GEST programme currently offers four MOOCs on issues of gender equality and development studies. A fifth MOOC is currently being prepared, which will complete the package of GEST MOOCs. As of the first quarter of 2024, more than 17,000 individuals have enrolled in one of the GEST MOOCs.

Beside the four fundamental training programme interventions noted above, **the GEST programme promotes the empowerment of its alumni via a range of endeavours**. The GEST programme maintains a strong network for its alumni locally and globally by holding periodic online and in-country alumni meetings. It also has its **Alumni Fund**, a small-scale seed money financing mechanism to co-finance local development initiatives (projects) led by GEST alumni. To a limited extent, the programme has also supported alumni to participate in international conferences such as the meetings of the United

Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women to promote dialogue and knowledge dissemination on advancing gender equality in different contexts.

The GEST programme also **engages with partner organizations (primarily universities) in core partner countries. These partnerships provide a platform** to exchange knowledge on gender equality issues in the context of international development and design and implement training offer in their own context to develop local capacities to address these issues. This includes partnerships linked to the development and delivery of tailored short courses, as well as the integration of selected GEST training components in local university curricula. The partnerships are also important for raising awareness about the GEST programme and for identifying prospective candidates for the 5-month fellowship training.

Beyond the core training, research, and capacity development interventions, the GEST programme also promotes **transnational dialogue and knowledge exchange** on issues of gender equality via its participation in and/or the hosting of **workshops, specific training events, and/or discussion fora** in both Iceland and internationally. The programme staffs also support the undertaking of **knowledge production and exchange** through the periodic engagement in specific policy-relevant **research projects** and provision of **advisory services** for specific projects.

### Main stakeholders and target groups of beneficiaries in partner countries

The **principal target group of beneficiaries** for the GEST programme are junior professionals from low-income countries and conflict/post-conflict societies in partner countries working for government ministries and agencies, civil society organisations, and educational institutes, including post-graduate students. The overall goal of the programme is to educate and train young professionals from partner countries in gender equality issues, methods, and theories to strengthen their professional capacities for advancing and implementing gender-sensitive projects in their home countries.

**Other stakeholders and beneficiaries** of the programme are its **university and training organization partners in a diverse range of partner countries**. During the period 2018 to 2023, the programme, through the University of Iceland, has operated institutional agreements with fourteen universities with Erasmus+, the EU funding programme to support education and training exchange and cooperation both in the EU and internationally. With Erasmus+, the GEST programme and university partners can secure external co-financing to assist specific collaborations. This includes co-financing for staff and co-funding for students at partner universities accepted on the fellowship (student exchange). Beyond Erasmus+ collaboration, the GEST programme closely works with a core set of partner organizations to promote collaboration on the development of local training capacity and training offer.

**Other stakeholders** for the GEST programme as partners and periodically as providers of financial contribution to the programme include the Red Cross of Iceland, RANNÍS (Icelandic Research Fund), EDDA Center of Excellence at the University of Iceland, and NIKK (Nordic Information on Gender under the Nordic Council of Ministers). The GEST programme also collaborated with the UNESCO Division for Gender Equality and other UN-organizations (like UN Women) in partner countries.

### Institutional and organizational arrangements for programme management

The **main stakeholders and key primary actors** for the GEST programme are the GRÓ Centre, the MFA, and the University of Iceland. The **GRÓ Centre** is the commissioning agency for the core services of the programme and establishes the annual financial contribution to the programme via the GRÓ Centre. The **University of Iceland** has been the initiator and Host Institution for the GEST programme since its inception in 2009. The GRÓ Centre and the University agree to the division of the provision of services through a signed Service Agreement. In addition to its employment of the staffs that manage and implement the programme, the University also facilitates access to its staff, such as lecturers and supervisors that contribute to programme implementation. GEST also receives full access to facilities for its activities and standard logistical operational support from the University that is available to all Schools and Faculties. In this way, the University provides direct and indirect financial contribution to the programme. The **MFA** is the principal financier of the Icelandic training programmes for development cooperation. Since 2020, the annual contribution of the MFA is allocated to the GRÓ Centre for its onward allocation to the programmes. Additionally, the MFA periodically commissions the GEST

programme to undertake ad hoc events and to provide support within the wider context of the work agenda and policy priorities of the Ministry.

**In 2023, the programme had a core staff of six people** (five female, one male), to manage and implement the GEST. This includes the Programme Director, a research specialist, operations specialists, and project managers. In 2023, the GRÓ Centre financial contribution to the programme covered four Full-Time Equivalent staff positions. The University of Iceland supplements financial contribution to cover costs not covered by the GRÓ. The programme is guided by its **medium-term strategic plan and annual action plan**, developed by the programme staff in collaboration with partners and stakeholders at the University of Iceland. Specific actions, such as short courses in partner countries, are undertaken based on specific project agreements.

## EVALUATION FINDINGS

### 1. PROGRAMME GOALS, STRATEGY AND APPROACH (RELEVANCE)

#### 1.1. ALIGNMENT OF THE PROGRAMME WITH ICELAND'S INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION POLICIES AND WITH ICELAND'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT VISION AND STRATEGIES

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme offer is closely aligned with and clearly relevant to the priorities of Icelandic development cooperation policy**. There is a strong focus of the GEST programme on supporting beneficiary partners and individuals in low or middle-income countries, specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa, both priority focus issues for Icelandic development policy. Gender equality is an objective prioritized across Iceland's development cooperation efforts.

The programme goal is to use a multidisciplinary approach to promote gender equality and social justice in low/middle income and post-conflict countries through knowledge transmission and capacity development.

**Advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is a long-standing policy priority of the Icelandic Parliament and Government.** Iceland places human rights at the heart of its policy, puts gender equality and the rights of children at the forefront of its mission, and strives to support vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQI+ persons and people with disabilities. The empowerment of women and girls applies to both Iceland's national and international development vision, policies, and strategies. Iceland's development cooperation thus aims to reflect the values of Icelandic society: respect for democracy, human rights, diversity, tolerance, justice, and solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

**Promoting gender equality is explicitly identified as one of the main objectives of Iceland's international development cooperation in the 2008 Act of Parliament establishing Iceland's development cooperation programme.**<sup>2</sup> Subsequent Parliamentary Resolutions on Iceland's policy for international development cooperation have noted that gender equality is both **a specific and a cross-cutting objective** to be prioritized across Iceland's international development cooperation efforts.<sup>3 4</sup>

Iceland's **gender equality strategy** for international development cooperation highlights **five focus areas for policy linked to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls**: (i) combatting gender-based violence (GBV), (ii) promoting the health of women and girls, (iii)

<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's policy for International Development Cooperation 2024–2028.

<sup>2</sup> Act on Iceland's International Development Cooperation (Act No. 121/2008), Article 1 (General Provisions).

<sup>3</sup> Such as the Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's policy for International Development Cooperation 2019-2023. It noted that gender equality, which is based on human rights principles, shall continue to be a priority in Iceland's development cooperation as well as a special objective/goal based on the view that gender equality and empowerment of women is the prerequisite for improvements and development, including economic advancement. It is important to duly consider gender perspectives as well as the position and rights of women in view of the national strategy on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 1325 on women, peace and security. Additionally, measures shall be taken to combat gender-based and sexual violence and shall strongly emphasise women's participation and gender equality in climate related projects.

<sup>4</sup> The other specific and cross-cutting policy objectives/priorities of Iceland's policy are human rights, climate, and the environment.

empowering women, (iv) providing education with an emphasis on girls, and (v) engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality.<sup>5</sup> GEST programme training and learning content address all of the gender equality strategy's focus areas.

**Icelandic policy also notes that authorities shall support capacity building, vocational training, and work carried out to enhance the capabilities and strengths of institutions, CSOs, and professionals in partner countries to promote gender equality.<sup>6</sup>**

The Icelandic training programmes for development cooperation, including GEST, are named in the development cooperation policy resolutions as key tools for training individuals and strengthening institutional capacity in partner countries in their respective fields of expertise.<sup>7</sup> The programmes are also clearly identified as key tools of international cooperation policy in Iceland's Voluntary National Review on its progress on the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**.<sup>8</sup>

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme is clearly aligned with the vision, policies, and strategies of Icelandic international development**. Advancing gender equality is a key priority for international and for Icelandic national development progress towards the 2030 Agenda.<sup>9</sup> The GEST programme training and research actions are directly aimed at supporting development of the skills, knowledge, and understanding of young professionals on gender equality in the international development context. The actions support the development of capabilities and strengths of institutions, CSOs, and professionals in partner countries to promote gender equality in their own context. The target group of beneficiaries for the programme are primarily located in low/middle income countries.

### ***Overview of the GEST programme training delivered for benefit of partner countries, 2018-2023***

Between 2018-2023, GEST supported 133 fellows on the postgraduate level training programme in Iceland, with **81% of the fellows coming from LDCs or LMICs**.<sup>10</sup> This is entirely consistent with the goals of Icelandic development cooperation policy and its stated focus of directing Icelandic support towards LDCs and LMICs.

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<sup>5</sup> GOI, MFA, Iceland's International Development Cooperation, Gender Equality Strategy.

<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's policy for International Development Cooperation 2019-2023.

<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Resolutions on Iceland's policy for International Development Cooperation 2013-2016, 2019-2023, and 2024-2028.

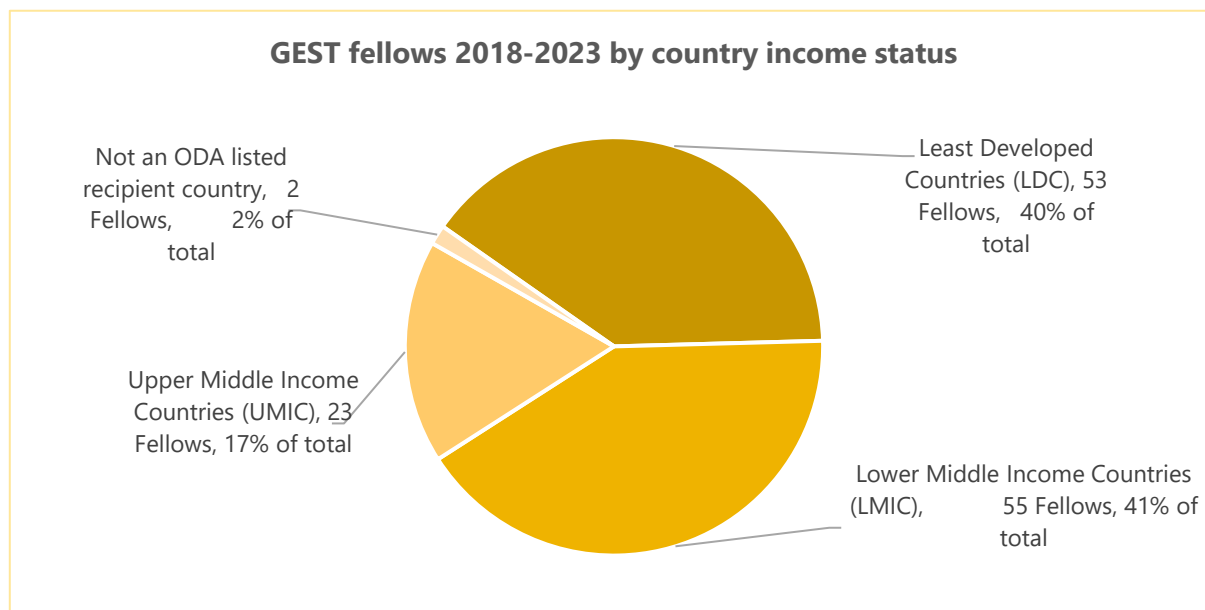
<sup>8</sup> GOI, Prime Minister's Office, VNR Iceland 2023. It notes that GEST programme supports gender equality and social justice in low-income countries and post-conflict societies through research, training, and education.

<sup>9</sup> The VNR also highlights specific areas where Iceland can advance gender equality issues domestically.

<sup>10</sup> As defined by the OECD on the DAC List of ODA Recipients effective for reporting on aid flows.

There were two fellows indicated as from non-ODA listed countries: one fellow from Russia in 2020 and one in 2021. The fellows were funded by the Arctic Affairs Division of the MFA, with a special allocation intended only for the benefit of fellows from the Arctic regions doing research relevant to the Arctic. Both Russian fellows were indigenous Yakuts, from the Republic of Sakha in Northern Siberia in the Russian Federation. While the World Bank has classified Russia as either upper middle income or as high income during the period 2004-2023, since 2004, the OECD has not listed Russia on the DAC list for official aid recipients.

Figure 1: Overview of GEST fellows on 6-months training in Iceland by income status of home country



Data source: statistics provided by GRÓ GEST

The 2018-2023 GEST fellows came from 34 countries. **Seventy-one (71) of the 2018-2023 cohort of fellows (53%)** came from **fourteen countries in Sub-Saharan Africa**, which is a priority region for Icelandic development cooperation policy. The two key partner countries from which 2018-2023 GEST fellows came are **Malawi (11%)** and **Uganda (12%)**. Both are partner countries for Icelandic bilateral development cooperation policy and its specific support. Other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa from which the fellows came include **Mozambique** (another priority country for Iceland), Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria. **Fifteen (15) of the cohort of fellows (11%)** came from **North Africa and the Middle East**, primarily from **Palestine (7%)**, which was a priority country for Iceland. **Twenty-five (25) of the fellows (19%)** came from **South Asian countries** such as India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been a priority country for Iceland. **Seventeen (17) fellows (13%)** came from the **Western Balkans and Eastern Europe**, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, or Serbia.<sup>11</sup> Two fellows came from Mexico and one from Jamaica. The 2018-2023 cohort of GEST fellows consisted of **102 females (77%)** and **31 males (23%)**.

The GEST programme's offer of **scholarships for doctoral degree research studies**, initially launched in 2018, has supported one scholar from **Malawi** with a partial grant, one scholar from **Uganda**, and one scholar from **Ethiopia**. During 2018-2023, the programme supported **twelve short training course events** in partner countries, ten of which were conducted in **Malawi** and **Uganda**. These are both partner countries for Icelandic bilateral development cooperation policy, and both LDCs in Sub-Saharan Africa. In total, 370 individuals were reached via these ten training events (137 female, 233 male). Since their initial launch in 2020, **over 17,000 people** from one hundred and seventy (170) countries **have enrolled in a GEST MOOC**.<sup>12</sup> Approximately 75% of those enrolling are female, 21% male, and 4% other gender identity. 58% of learners were from OECD DAC listed developing countries during 2020-2021.

<sup>11</sup> Individuals from the Western Balkans are accepted on the fellowship due to co-financing provided via the Erasmus+ programme.

<sup>12</sup> Data on MOOC enrolment provided to the evaluator by the GEST programme.

## 1.2. ALIGNMENT OF THE PROGRAMME WITH THE PARTNER COUNTRIES' AND TARGET GROUPS' NEEDS AND PRIORITIES, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme is clearly aligned with and relevant to partner countries' and target groups' needs, priorities, and strategies**. The level of demand for the fellowship training programme is strong clearly demonstrating it aligns with needs and local priorities. GEST also has many partnerships for collaborative engagement with local universities. The short training courses in partner countries are delivered with the local district authorities and partners.

In terms of key **partner countries for the GEST programme**, notably for its postgraduate level training and research programme (fellowship) in Iceland, the need to advance gender equality in the countries' development context is evidenced by **the current medium level to low level of gender equality** parity of female to male human development outcomes. Most of these countries also rank **high in the prevalence of gender inequality** that exists across three socio-economic dimensions.

Table 1: Gender development indices, UNDP 2021/2022 Human Development Report

Selected GEST focus countries Country	Gender Development Index		Gender Inequality Index	
	Value (2021) *	Group **	Value (2021) ***	Rank (of 170)
<b>Ghana</b>	0.946	3	0.529	130
<b>Kenya</b>	0.941	3	0.506	128
<b>Malawi</b>	0.968	2	0.554	142
<b>Mozambique</b>	0.922	4	0.537	136
<b>Uganda</b>	0.927	3	0.530	131
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	<b>0.907</b>	-	<b>0.569</b>	-
<b>India</b>	0.849	5	0.490	122
<b>Nepal</b>	0.942	3	0.452	113
<b>Pakistan</b>	0.810	5	0.534	135
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	0.949	3	0.383	92
<b>South Asia</b>	<b>0.852</b>	-	<b>0.508</b>	-
<b>Palestine</b>	0.891	5	-	-
<b>Least Developed Countries</b>	<b>0.894</b>	-	<b>0.562</b>	-
<b>World</b>	<b>0.958</b>	-	<b>0.465</b>	-

\* Where 1 = parity of female to male human development index values/outcomes

\*\* Group 1 = high equality, Group 2 = medium to high equality, Group 3 = medium equality, Group 4 = medium to low equality, Group 5 = low equality

\*\*\* On a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 = no inequality in achievement between women and men in reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market, and 1 = maximum inequality in achievement between women and men

**The programme responds to the needs and priorities of its partner countries and individuals seeking to extend their knowledge and practical skills linked to advancing gender equality** in their countries. The fellows are young professionals who already graduated from local universities and seek to deepen their understanding of gender equality issues and applying insights on gender as a tool for advancing local change and development. The **GEST programme fellows work at a diverse range of institutions** that sponsor their application. Approximately 35-40% of the GEST fellows work in local or international civil society organizations, 25-30% work in local government or public services, 15-20% work in academia, 10% work in international organizations in their country, and 5% work in the private sector or are self-employed.

**The GEST programme commonly receives minimally 170 applications per year via its open call from people nominated by their organization** to participate in the annual postgraduate level training and research programme. The individuals and their organizations clearly consider the GEST programme curriculum as relevant to their needs and priorities. Periodically, the programme has been requested by



other development actors to select fellows from within their local network of experts in partner countries to participate on the fellowship, such as with UN Women in Mozambique. In these cases, the development actor provided financial contributions to GEST, which further confirms the relevance of the programme to local needs in partner countries.

The GEST programme, via the University of Iceland, also operates cooperation **agreements with a range of universities in partner countries**, such as Makerere University in Uganda, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUNAR) in Malawi, Birzeit University in Palestine, the University of Ghana, the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the University of the West Indies. The partner universities voluntarily undertake these endeavours in individual agreements. The intensity of the extent of cooperation between GEST and its individual partners varies, partially driven by the extent of co-funding the partners may obtain (for instance via Erasmus+) to undertake staff and/or student exchange or short courses. The long-standing partnership between GEST and Makerere University began in 2010.

The beneficiaries of the GEST programme's support for **short courses** delivered in partner countries, such as in Malawi or Uganda, have commonly been local professionals and experts working in the **district-level of government and/or local civil society** organizations. These trainee beneficiaries include health, social welfare, education, and environmental experts and workers. The GEST short courses were delivered in several districts with a particular attention to the full consent of the targeted district-level authority and its participation in planning and organization of training events.

### 1.3. ALIGNMENT OF THE PROGRAMME WITH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY FRAMEWORKS, GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme closely aligns with and is relevant to promoting an understanding of the international development policy frameworks, goals, and strategies for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment**. The programme has promoted its close association with the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The work of the programme aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 5 Gender Equality.

**A core objective of the GEST programme is to advance knowledge** transmission and exchange for the understanding **of the international normative and policy frameworks**, instruments, agreements, and institutions dealing with gender equality and women's rights. This is strongly embedded within the GEST training offer across its different intervention tools and approaches as well as GEST networking efforts. Developing an understanding of the fundamental international normative and policy frameworks and their application in an international and national context is a vital component of the learning process. With an understanding of the international norms complemented by an analysis of the core theories and topics on gender equality, learners obtain skills to support the norms' application and analysis in their home countries/region.

The GEST programme closely relates to key UN instruments relevant to gender equality and the protection of women's rights and fundamental freedoms, most notably the **UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women** (CEDAW, 1979) and the **UN Security Council Resolution no. 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security** (2000). The programme also closely relates to the work of key UN organizations and commissions linked to advancing gender equality such as the **UN Commission on the Status of Women** (CSW), and **UN Women**. The programme directly works towards the goal of **SDG 5 Gender Equality of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, in addition to aspects of SDG 4 Quality Education, SDG 8 Decent Work, SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities, SDG 13 Climate Action, SDG 16 Peace, Justice, Strong Institutions, and SDG 17 Partnership.



#### 1.4. QUALITY OF THE PROGRAMME DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT APPROACH

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme is well designed, and targeted to deliver its intended benefits to the direct beneficiaries of the programme.** The programme offers a coherent mix of training interventions targeting young professionals with tailored training offer of different levels of intensity. There is good level of synergy and focus across the training offer mix.

The programme is designed to serve as a knowledge sharing force towards a world where young gender equality scholars and professionals set the agenda for change.<sup>13</sup> The programme is designed to support **young professionals and scholars in low and middle-income countries working in gender equality** as the **primary direct beneficiaries of the programme.** The individual beneficiaries can be empowered to utilize their acquired expertise to act as change agents in their respective professional fields through the exchange of knowledge and skills facilitated by GEST. This may be achieved in the context of their professional work, as well as community engagement and advocacy.

Programme Fellows' **home institutions or organizations** also benefit from the programme through the training provided to the primary direct beneficiaries. However, it is beyond the control or the realm of potential intervention of GEST to ensure that the acquired knowledge and skills are directly shared or utilized in the home institution or organization's framework, operations, or agenda.

**The programme provides a cohesive mix of training interventions.** The core postgraduate level training programme (fellowship) in Iceland and graduate studies scholarships provide the direct beneficiaries in-depth knowledge transmission and understanding on gender equality issues and supports them to undertake specific research and to produce new knowledge. The offer of short training courses in partner countries is designed to provide tailored training, traditionally of one-week duration, to benefit local communities, professionals, and experts working in the local district-level of government and/or from local civil society organizations. The training focuses on specific issues at the nexus of gender and development. In these trainings, target groups are clearly defined as audiences and potential beneficiaries. While the trainings cover theory, they are primarily oriented to the practical acquisition and application of skills and tools. GEST MOOCs aims to reach a significantly larger audience of learners than can be achieved with the other training interventions. Each MOOC is a substantive training and learning course, indicatively requiring 30-40 hours of engagement.

**The GEST programme has specifically sought to develop synergies across its training intervention offer** building on the existing framework of the programme's expertise and areas of focus. For instance, specific module topics and content of the fellowship training have been tailored for utilization in the context of the MOOCs or short training courses in partner countries.<sup>14</sup> There is also promising potential for synergy between the GEST MOOC offer and the GEST short course training offer.

The core programme staff manages the GEST programme in close collaboration with the University of Iceland, its host Institution and original initiator of the programme. The programme is guided by a medium-term strategic plan, as well as a series of strategies or action plans and working papers on the evolution of its core training and capacity development interventions. Management of the specific programme interventions with the key partners in partner countries (mainly universities and training or research institutes) is developed from agreed institutional arrangements for the collaboration as well as project agreements for specific intervention activities.

The management arrangements and overall approach in terms of programme design is appropriate.

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<sup>13</sup> Vision statement of the GRÓ GEST programme, GRÓ GEST Strategy 2023-2027.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, linkage between the MOOC on Gender Violence with the fellowship module, and between the MOOC Gender and Climate Change and the Short Course Gender and Climate Change, delivered in Malawi and in Uganda, with the fellowship module.

## 2. PROMOTION OF SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE PROGRAMME AND OTHER LOCAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS (COHERENCE)

### 2.1. COHERENCE AND SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE WORK OF THE PROGRAMME AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS BY ICELAND IN PARTNER COUNTRIES OR REGIONS

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme complements the wider development efforts of Iceland linked to advancing gender equality undertaken at the international level and in partner countries**. However, there is only partial direct evidence of coordination or actual synergy created between the different efforts supported by the MFA with the efforts of the GEST programme.

The GEST programme is consistent with and **complements the wider development efforts of Iceland linked to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls** in partner countries, regions, and internationally. The GEST programme's training and learning content offer addresses all the focus areas of the Icelandic gender equality strategy for international development cooperation.

At the global level, Iceland is strongly committed to advancing the **Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda** outlined in UN Security Council Resolution no. 1325. At partner country level, in partnership with UN Women, Iceland has supported Malawi and Mozambique to create and implement National Action Plans on WPS. Iceland is also engaged in UN Women's Generation Equality Forum under **CEDAW** as the co-leader in the Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence (GBV).<sup>15</sup> Iceland also actively engages in the **UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**. The work of GEST addresses these issues through its training provision and its networking activities. The GEST programme organized a side-event to the annual session of the CSW in 2018, 2019, and 2024. GEST programme is also a key partner for the MFA of Iceland for the work and events of the Nordic Women Mediators Network.

In the **partner countries for Icelandic bilateral development cooperation policy**, particularly Malawi, Uganda, and more recently Sierra Leone, the work of the GEST programme complements the focus of the MFA's Country Strategy Papers on promoting gender equality within the framework of Icelandic support. Malawi and Uganda are both long-standing partners for GEST in terms of fellows on the postgraduate training in Iceland, while GEST accepted its first fellow from Sierra Leone in 2018 (with another in 2023). In Malawi and Uganda, GEST's tailored short course training targeted at the district-level of government and/or local civil society creates good synergy with the wider efforts of the MFA to support the district-level authorities promoting local development and basic service provision, as well as the advancement of gender equality. Local examples of this are short courses delivered in Mangochi and in Nkhatakota districts.

### 2.2. COHERENCE AND SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE WORK OF THE PROGRAMME AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS BY THE KEY PARTNERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS OR BY OTHER DONORS IN PARTNER COUNTRIES OR REGIONS

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme complements the wider development efforts of the programme's key partner organizations in partner countries**. The majority of these are local universities providing academic training and knowledge exchange on gender equality. The programme complements wider training efforts of other donors to promote capacity development.

The **key partnership organizations for the GEST programme in partner countries are universities and training organizations**. GEST operates an institutional agreement with most university partners for potential collaboration initiatives for co-financing under the Erasmus+ programme. As the partners drive the collaboration, the initiatives complement their wider efforts to promote capacity development, knowledge transmission, and exchange on gender equality and women's rights.

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<sup>15</sup> GOI, MFA, Iceland's International Development Cooperation, Gender Equality Strategy.

With a limited number of universities, the GEST programme, via the University of Iceland, also operates specific **Memorandum of Understanding** to promote closer and more specific partnership collaboration. These address collaboration on the development of short training courses and/or other training tools, and/or the development of local university course curricula on topics of gender equality. The collaboration complements the wider efforts of the partners to extend their training and learning offerings. Equally so, the collaboration with specific training organizations in partner countries complements their efforts to provide a quality training offer and to extend the range of courses within their offer package.

**Other donors** active in the provision of capacity development training for young professionals for benefit of partner countries with which Iceland maintains strong ties of cooperation, include Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. They provide tailored training of different durations on various topics including gender equality. The GEST programme offer complements these wider development efforts to provide training. Since the training offers of these donors and those of the GEST are of different levels of intensity and organization and the partner or strategic countries for these donors' capacity development efforts only partially match with those of the GEST programme, it is not feasible to create synergy of the efforts.

GEST programme activities are also consistent with those of the **UN organizations** working in partner countries to advance gender equality. The GEST programme interventions complement the focus of **UN Women** on issues of governance, women's economic empowerment, ending violence against women and girls, and peace and security. GEST has collaborated closely with UN Women in Mozambique. Gender equality is a global priority for UNESCO. Since 2019, GEST also has been collaborating with **UNESCO's** Division for Gender Equality and the Social and Human Sciences Sector. GEST interventions primarily align with strategic objectives two and three of UNESCO's gender equality framework, empowering women for environmental action, promoting inclusion, and combatting GBV. The focus of GEST also closely aligns with UNESCO's cross-cutting focus on women, peace, and security.

### 2.3. Duplication or overlap of the programme with other efforts by Iceland or other donors

The evaluator judges that **there is no duplication or overlap of the GEST programme activities with the other development efforts of Iceland or other donors.** There is limited clear risk.

There is **no evidence of duplication or overlap** of the GEST programme activities with other development efforts undertaken by Iceland or by other donors.

The GEST programme provides training on gender issues for young professionals from a diversity of low and middle-income countries. The bulk of Iceland's bilateral development cooperation support targets district-level programmes and community initiatives to enhance local social infrastructure and the sustainable use of natural resources as a means to promote socio-economic development. The bulk of Iceland's multilateral development cooperation support seeks to assist Iceland's multilateral partners respond to local development needs, including humanitarian needs. There is no clear risk of duplication.

The capacity development training offer of other donors and that of the GEST programme are complementary, but the training offers are substantially variable in terms of their design and intensity as well as principal priority partner countries. There is no clear risk of duplication or overlap of efforts.

## 3. PROGRESS TOWARDS RESULTS (EFFECTIVENESS)

### 3.1. EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAMME OVERALL IN REGARD TO THE DELIVERY AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE INTENDED RESULTS

The evaluator judges that the **GEST programme is highly effective in achieving training provision outreach, with approximately 16,800 individuals (learners) directly reached through its training offer during the period 2018-2023.** In total 132 fellows have graduated with a diploma degree confirming their completion of the fellowship training programme in Iceland, three alumni have been supported to undertake their doctoral research studies, 436 people were trained via short courses in partner countries, and 16,238 learners were reached via the GEST programme MOOCs offer. **The beneficiaries positively rate the quality and relevance of the training and the knowledge transmission.**

A summary of the principal programme **outputs** delivered during the period 2018 to 2023 is below.

Table 2: *GEST programme, principal output results achieved via the programme 2018-2023*

INTERVENTION	PRINCIPAL OUTPUTS DELIVERED/ACHIEVED 2018-2023 - GEST PROGRAMME
<b>Postgraduate training in Iceland (Fellowship)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>133 fellows</b> enrolled from <b>34 countries</b>, 53% from Sub-Saharan Africa, 102 female (77%), 31 male (23%), 40% from LDCs, 41% from LMICs, and 17% from UMICs, listed for ODA</li> <li>• 132 fellows graduated (99.25% graduation rate), obtaining a diploma degree with their finalized research/project papers on gender equality confirmed on GEST's webpage</li> <li>• The quality of the training programme modules, in terms of knowledge obtained and its value to the fellows, is overall highly rated by fellows with <b>90% satisfied or highly satisfied</b></li> <li>• On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), 54% of the fellows rated the individual programme module learning as 5/5, with 36% as 4/5, and 6% as 3/5, and 3% as 2/5, and 1% as 1/5</li> <li>• 16% of fellows' papers relate to issues of health rights including sexual and reproductive health, 27% relate to issues of GBV and security, 8% relate to issues of environment and climate change, agriculture, and fisheries, 39% issues of community cultural understanding and awareness on issues of gender equality and local challenges, and 11% relate to issues of empowerment, business, entrepreneurship, and migration</li> </ul>
<b>Doctoral scholarships (PhD research)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three doctoral scholars supported, all from LDCs</li> <li>• One received a partial grant to support field work research, the other two received full grants for study</li> <li>• One scholar from Malawi, one from Uganda, and one from Ethiopia, two females (67%) and one male (33%)</li> <li>• One scholar has graduated, the other two are expected to defend their theses in 2025</li> <li>• <b>Four research papers</b> have been published, and two submitted to journals for publication</li> <li>• One scholar participated at an <b>international conference</b> to present her research outputs</li> </ul>
<b>Short courses in partner countries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Three short training courses</b> have been delivered in <b>four partner countries</b>, with a total of <b>twelve specific training events delivered</b> (one online due to the COVID pandemic)</li> <li>• <b>The Gender and Climate Change</b> course has been delivered twice in Uganda and three times in Malawi at district and community level with 145 beneficiaries reached</li> <li>• <b>The Teaching Gender to Youth</b> course has been delivered at district and community level once in Malawi, four times in Uganda, and once in St. Lucia, with 275 beneficiaries reached</li> <li>• <b>The Gender, Environment and Sustainable Land Management</b> course has been delivered in cooperation with LRT and its partners once in Kyrgyzstan, with 16 beneficiaries reached</li> <li>• The quality of the training courses in regards to relevancy and helpfulness to the trainees and in their job, is overall highly rated by trainees with <b>97% satisfied or highly satisfied</b></li> <li>• On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), 72% of the trainees rated the short course as 5/5, with 25% as 4/5, and 3% as 3/5, zero trainees rated the benefit of the course as 2/5 or 1/5</li> </ul>

INTERVENTION	PRINCIPAL OUTPUTS DELIVERED/ACHIEVED 2018-2023 - GEST PROGRAMME
<b>MOOCs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three MOOCs were progressively launched during 2020-2023, a fourth in early 2024</li> <li>• A total of <b>16,238 learners enrolled on one of the GEST MOOCs</b> during 2020-2023, of whom approximately 75% were female, 21% male, and 4% of other non-binary gender identity</li> <li>• Learners originate from <b>170 countries</b>, 58% of learners from developing countries</li> <li>• During 2020-2023, a total of 1,088 learners enrolled on the edX verification track, with 689 (63%) successfully completing the course final exam and receiving a certification of passing</li> </ul>
<b>Alumni empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19 events have been organized by GEST aimed at the professional empowerment of its alumni through <b>community building</b> and <b>networking</b> with and for its alumni</li> <li>• Eleven meetings were held with GEST alumni country chapters in seven countries</li> <li>• <b>Two online Alumni Seminars</b> were held, during which fourteen alumni presented research</li> <li>• Eleven alumni participated at the GEST 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event held in Kenya, of whom six alumni presented their research at the seminar undertaken in collaboration with UNESCO</li> <li>• Three alumni have received grants via the GEST March 8 Alumni Fund for their implementation of specific local development initiatives to promote gender equality and change in their home countries. 160 women entrepreneurs were direct beneficiaries of two of the projects, and victims and survivors of violence were beneficiaries of the other project</li> <li>• The GEST programme has also undertaken two <b>surveys of its alumni</b> in 2019 and 2023, to obtain feedback on post-fellowship outcomes of alumni</li> <li>• The programme has also sought to <b>involve its alumni in the organization and delivery of GEST's short courses in partner countries</b>, as realized at seven of the twelve events</li> <li>• Since 2020, the programme also runs a GEST Podcast which features alumni</li> </ul>
<b>Capacity development partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During 2018-2023, the GEST programme had cooperation agreements with fourteen universities under the <b>Erasmus+</b> programme. 46 postgraduate students from thirteen universities were co-financed with Erasmus+ as GEST fellows</li> <li>• Staff mobility for <b>training exchange cooperation</b> with twelve universities were co-financed via Erasmus+</li> <li>• The programme also operates close partnerships with Makerere University in Uganda, and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUNAR) in Malawi, and with Pangea, a non-government organization in Uganda, to build <b>local training provision</b></li> </ul>
<b>Other actions (incl. research and advisory services, and workshops)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The GEST programme has organized <b>side events</b> at annual meetings of the UN CSW, undertaken by GEST in partnership with Icelandic MFA, and other partners (like UN Women)</li> <li>• The programme supported or staff participated at approximately <b>35 public lectures</b> or seminars on issues of gender equality undertaken in Iceland primarily for local audiences</li> <li>• Core programme staff have also been involved in <b>research projects</b> and awarded <b>grants for research</b></li> </ul>

The GEST programme has **very successfully engaged with a diverse range of learners from partner countries as direct beneficiaries** through a mix of training interventions of different levels of depth and duration. The programme has ensured strong engagement with direct beneficiaries in LDCs or



LMICs. It is evident, based on direct beneficiaries' and partner stakeholders' feedback as to the quality and relevance of the training provided indicate that the GEST training **interventions have enhanced individual competences, knowledge, skills, and attitudes linked to advancing gender equality in the context of local development**. The training interventions are well targeted in terms of the audiences to be reached. Young professionals from partner countries are targeted via the fellowship, district-level and local community experts as well as public services are reached via the short courses, while the MOOCs offer an open learning resource without time constraint for a broad audience of learners to investigate gender issues.

The **fellows return to their home countries and organizations** upon completing the training in Iceland **empowered** to share and apply the insights and skills they obtained. The district-level **beneficiaries of the short courses are empowered to undertake change at the local level** aligned with the series of local strategic action plans related to gender issues and development prepared within the training process. During the period 2018-2023, the four **short courses in Malawi have benefited three districts** Mangochi, Mchinji, and Nkhotakota districts, with nine local actions plans adopted. The six **courses in Uganda have benefited more than fifteen districts**, each supported to develop and implement local action plans. It is not credible to assess the extent that **MOOCs** have directly empowered the individual learners. By design, they focus on reaching as many people as possible, and are not comparable to many standard training approaches. Learners may use parts of each individual course that they need or interest them. However, it is evident that **more than 1,000 people (7% of learners) enrolled in the verification track** and thereby most likely were motivated to advance their knowledge and skills for their benefit.

The **GEST alumni community building and networking** actions ensure periodic connection with and between its alumni as well as empowers them via opportunities to present their latest research, be involved in local short courses, or undertake local development projects to promote gender equality.

The evaluator judges that **the direct results of the GEST programme establish a strong basis to promote behavioural change of the individuals** (direct beneficiaries) **and at their home organizations** to utilize and apply the learning, skills, and tools obtained via the training. This will result in a diverse range of local initiatives **to advance gender equality and local development change**.

Linked to the programme's intended outcomes, a summary of the direct **outcomes** is below.

*Table 3: GEST programme, direct outcomes achieved via the programme 2018-2023*

- **88%** of GEST's cohort of 2018-2023 fellows responding to the external evaluation team's online questionnaire survey agreed or strongly agreed that they were **able to advance their contribution in their technical field of work** thanks to the postgraduate training programme in Iceland.
- **84%** of the 2018-2023 GEST respondents indicated **contribution** to their technical field of work **by way of training or mentoring of others**. **69% were directly involved in the implementation of projects or reform initiatives** (in 90% of cases, respondents led the project or initiative). **58% were involved in further research**. **49% had advised local communities in the field of gender equality**. **40% were involved in advising national or local policy makers**. **24% were involved in advising private sector partners**.
- **73%** of respondents indicated they had **shared their knowledge** with colleagues and networks.
- **74%** of respondents mentioned they had substantially or extremely **advanced professionally** in their career due to their enhanced skills, **74%** indicated they had more responsibility, **53%** mentioned moving to a new job position and professional level, **43%** mentioned a salary increase, **38%** indicated promotion, **17%** had secured a scholarship, and **6%** indicated starting their own business.
- **75%** agreed or strongly agreed that the **management of their organization appreciates and values the knowledge and skills** that the fellow gained from the post-graduate training programme.
- **77%** of the 2018-2023 GEST respondents indicated that they had contributed to achieving progress on the SDGs.



- From the **short courses**, approximately twenty districts in Uganda and in Malawi adopted and now implement local action plans to advance gender equality within their local development. This has resulted, for instance, in several gender equality initiatives within supported schools.
- From the **GEST March 8 Alumni Fund**, tangible benefits and outcomes are realized by the direct beneficiaries of the supported projects linked to the economic empowerment of women and combatting violence against women, as well as at local community level via the range of community awareness/sensitization campaigns undertaken on gender equality issues.

Responses to the external evaluation team's online questionnaire survey indicate that 78% of all GEST alumni respondents have achieved **substantial or extreme career advancement**, and a further 11% have achieved moderate advancement. Responses to the GEST Alumni Survey conducted in 2023 indicate that 87% of the alumni credit the programme benefits to help advance their career.

### 3.2. EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DIFFERENT PROGRAMME INTERVENTION STRATEGIES AND OF LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS IN REGARD TO THE DELIVERY AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS

The following specific issues per intervention are concerned with the effectiveness of the different programme intervention strategies and local partnerships in the delivery and achievement of the results.

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#### Postgraduate level training and research programme (fellowship) in Iceland

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Prior to 2020, the GEST programme adapted the programme's fellowship curricula structure and content offer annually with the trial of elective course modules occurring in 2017 and in 2019. In 2019, "Gender, Labour and Migration", and "Gender, Health and Education" were the elective options. The feedback provided by the fellows on the latter elective module indicated **significant disparity** as to how the fellows judged it in terms of the learning outcomes as compared to all other modules during the period 2018-2023.<sup>16</sup>

The **GEST fellowship curriculum consists of six standard modules** of study. These are fine-tuned by the GEST programme after each year's training, but the core offer is largely consistent.

- Module 1: Theories and Concepts of Gender
- Module 2: Project Development Tools (previously called Gender and Development: Tools and Strategies 2018-2022))
- Module 3: Gender, Violence and Security
- Module 4: Gender, Labour and Migration (first offered in 2019 as an elective course module)
- Module 5: Gender, Environment and Climate Change
- Module 6: Final assignment research/project paper prepared by the fellows

While year 2020 was notably challenging for training delivery due to the COVID pandemic, the fellows still judged the relevance and quality of the learning outcomes highly with 93.5% giving a 4/5 or 5/5 rating. The fellows' rating of the learning outcomes obtained has improved since then with the exception of 2023.<sup>17</sup>

**Overall, the quality of the training modules is highly rated by the fellows** in terms of knowledge obtained and its value with **90% satisfied or highly satisfied**, as shown below for years **2018-2023**.

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<sup>16</sup> 33% of fellows on the course rated it as 1/5 or 2/5 (based on the average across three questions on learning outcomes).

<sup>17</sup> Data on fellows' rating of individual training modules provided to the evaluator by GEST programme for years 2017-2024.

Table 4: GEST fellowship training, fellows' feedback on the overall learning outcomes obtained

YEAR	1/5 (LOW)	2/5	3/5 (NEUTRAL)	4/5	5/5 (HIGH)
2018	2.7%	2.7%	9.8%	18.6%	66.3%
2019	2.2%	8.3%	8.2%	22.1%	59.1%
2020	0%	1.0%	5.5%	51.4%	42.1%
2021	0%	1.7%	1.7%	35.0%	61.6%
2022	0%	0%	1.4%	49.6%	49.0%
2023	2.2%	3.5%	10.7%	36.8%	46.8%
<b>Average</b>	<b>1.19%</b>	<b>2.85%</b>	<b>6.20%</b>	<b>35.60%</b>	<b>54.16%</b>

Data source: Data on fellows' feedback on learning outcomes and its relevance provided by the GEST programme

The higher level of low rating (1/5) in 2018 is primarily, but not exclusively, linked to the module **Gender, Environment and Climate Change** (5.8% rated it 1/5). It was **also the only course in 2023 rated as 1/5** by 11.1% of respondents (while a further 11.1% rated it 2/5). **The higher level of low rating (1/5 or 2/5) in 2019** is primarily linked to the course on **Gender, Health and Education**. It was the only course with a fellows' response rating at 1/5, while a further 22.2% rated it at 2/5. Also in 2019, 8.3% of respondents rated **Gender and Development** a 2/5 and 11.1% rated the newly offered elective course **Gender, Labour and Migration** a 2/5. This module also contributed to the lower assessment in 2023 as 6.3% rated it as 2/5. Comparison of the overall rating of the individual training modules during the period is below.

Table 5: GEST fellowship training, fellows' feedback on individual modules (2018-2023 average)

MODULE	1/5 (LOW)	2/5	3/5 (NEUTRAL)	4/5	5/5 (HIGH)
<b>Theories</b>	0.5%	3.0%	5.3%	38.7%	52.5%
<b>Development</b>	0%	1.4%	7.3%	36.6%	54.7%
<b>Violence</b>	0.4%	0.4%	4.8%	28.7%	65.8%
<b>Labour</b>	0%	3.5%	6.5%	38.3%	51.7%
<b>Environment</b>	3.4%	3.1%	7.2%	40.6%	45.7%

Data source: Data on fellows' feedback on learning outcomes and its relevance provided by the GEST programme

The feedback from the GEST programme and its alumni indicate that the **course content is fine-tuned and adapted by the programme academic staff based on fellows' feedback about the effectiveness of the courses** to ensure suitable and appropriate knowledge and skills transfer. This supports the progressive refocusing and improvement of the training content offer for future fellows. Changes made in the **Gender, Environment and Climate Change** module have resulted in a 100% rating as 4/5 or 5/5 in 2024 up from only 61% in 2023. Similarly, 100% of the fellows rated the **Gender, Labour and Migration** module in 2024 as 4/5 or 5/5. The overall level of fellows' rating of the 2024 programme learning outcomes was 97.0% as 4/5 or 5/5.

GEST fellows responding to the external evaluation's questionnaire survey indicated the leading areas in which **the training programme supported their skills improvement** was in gender awareness, followed by personal development, LGBTQI+ awareness, intercultural skills, interpersonal skills, human rights awareness, leadership skills, climate change awareness, and policy analytical skills.

### Scholarships for postgraduate studies

The GEST programme has only provided limited support to its alumni by means of scholarships for postgraduate studies, with only three GEST alumni supported to date for doctoral degree studies. It was the last of the four Icelandic training programmes for development cooperation to offer scholarships.

Their production of new knowledge relates to issues of (i) women's participation in the fish value chain and value chain governance in Malawi, (ii) gender and climate change in Sub-Saharan Africa, gender transformative climate proofing in agriculture and natural resources in Uganda, and (iii) the role of the state, gender and politics in Ethiopian international peacekeeping. The **effectiveness of the interventions is broadly fully in-line with standard expectation of such scholarship grants**. Research has progressed and the scholars have accordingly produced specific research outputs.

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### Short training courses delivered in partner countries (including online)

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The **effectiveness of the GEST short training course offer** to ensure knowledge transmission and to offer practical tools to the direct beneficiaries to utilize and apply the obtained expertise **is strongly evident**. While standard statistical data on the assessed quality of courses is not available from each of the short training course events, those where such data is provided approximately showed **97% of the direct beneficiaries were either satisfied or highly satisfied** with the relevance and usefulness of the training.

The **short courses are evidently oriented to the practical application of new understanding and skills by the direct beneficiaries** – local experts working in district-level public services and civil society groups. The development of local action plans to advance gender equality issues in specific areas (such as agriculture, environment, and education) at the district and community level are valuable outputs. They form a basis for a more strategic approach to promote gender equality across district offices and services. Reports of the training provider partner for the Teaching Gender to Youth courses in Uganda indicate solid progress achieved by the schools to implement local change through follow-up visits that they have undertaken to the primary schools of which staff were trained a few months prior. The toolbox of measures introduced from the course to support the integration of gender is positively received.

While the GEST programme offers two generic short training courses on gender equality issues, Teaching Gender to Youth, and Gender and Climate Change, the generic **courses are fully tailored to the specific needs and country context of the partner organizations and request its collaboration** to organize the delivery of local training course offer. This is directed by the training partners in close collaboration with GEST. In Malawi and Uganda, the training partners ensure the engagement of relevant national government authorities, such as the ministries responsible for gender and social policy or environment, water, and natural resources. GEST programme reports on the short courses and those of partner organizations attest to an effective partnership established to promote quality training.

In addition to short courses delivered in partner countries, the GEST programme is periodically requested to provide short courses on gender equality issues for the fellows of the other GRÓ training programmes.

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### Creative online training content, MOOCs

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*Specific and detailed assessment of the GEST MOOC offer is provided in the case study report on GEST.*

Since their launch, over 17,000 people have enrolled on one of the GEST MOOCs of which 75% are female. More than 3,000 learners enrolled in 2023 alone when GEST only offered three MOOCs. Most learners are from partner countries on the DAC list of ODA recipients. 7% of learners took the verification track between 2020-2023 and successfully passed the final exam at a stellar rate of 63%.

The evaluator judges that provision of **the MOOCs is an effective intervention modality for the programme to increase its learning outreach and direct audience** of people interested to know more about gender equality issues. The MOOCs provide perspectives on the role for gender equality and challenges for its realization in the context of achieving global and sustainable, equitable, and just development. **The MOOC offer is substantive** as each provides a detailed theoretical overview, analytical skills and tools, and practical case examples linked to the subject area, rather than short, summary overviews of issues. Development of the GEST MOOC offer is still on-going: the fifth and final stand-alone MOOC will be developed in 2024-2025 and the full **Online Programme in International Gender Studies** will follow in 2026. The latter will significantly enhance the GEST offer and its potential to reach gender equality practitioners and professionals that seek to undertake a detailed learning course dedicated to gender equality. The potential for this programme to become an **edX MicroMasters**

programme will further enhance the effectiveness of the MOOCs as a learning package and the value to learners of their formally enrolling on the verification track. GEST also has a clear strategy to utilize its MOOC content as a bridge to its other offerings, such as short training courses in partner countries or in working in partnership with other universities, which will in-turn enhance the effective use of its MOOCs.

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### Research and knowledge creation (by the GEST fellows and scholars)

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During the period 2018-2023, **132 fellows finalized projects or research papers**. Of these, approximately 63% are academic and/or practical research papers on issues of gender and 37% are development project initiative proposals linked to advancing gender equality in specific areas at the local level. The research papers and development project initiatives form a basis for further immediate action and/or knowledge sharing and exchange by the alumni on their return to their home country and organization upon completion of the fellowship. The fellows' research outputs are also accessible via the GEST website, as a means for knowledge sharing. However, as the project/research papers are not demarcated by gender issue topic area, or key subject matters addressed, this may not be easily realized.

GEST fellows responding to the external evaluation's questionnaire survey indicated **the means by which they had disseminated their research post-fellowship**. The main channels were presentations for colleagues (57%), for local communities (33%), at policy meetings or professional networks (32%), presentations at local conferences/congress (21%), or publication in conference proceedings (8%).

**Scholars on doctoral degrees have effectively progressed with their studies and fieldwork research** including the pre-drafting and final production of research papers, journal articles, and chapters for their final theses. Four research papers by scholars were published in journals. Two papers have been submitted to journals for publication. Scholars are currently drafting additional papers.

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### Workshops and conferences / Platforms for knowledge exchange and dialogue

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GEST's attendance at the **annual meeting of the UN CSW** in New York and the organization of side events to discuss specific topics in gender equality are effective means for the GEST programme to collaborate with partners on the international level. GEST undertakes its side events at the CSW in partnership with UN Women and/or national government partners such as that of Iceland, Malawi, and Zambia. The annual meeting of the CSW is a key forum for international partners, national governments, and civil society organizations to explore and advance the application of gender equality and international norms.

The programme or staff have also supported and participated in a range of **public lectures, seminars, and workshops in Iceland** to promote dialogue and knowledge exchange on gender equality issues. These endeavours are commonly undertaken with key partners based at the University of Iceland, such as the EDDA Research Center and the Institute for Gender, Equality, and Difference (RIKK), as well as other institutions such as the Icelandic Red Cross, the MFA, the Nordic Women's Mediator Network, or local research institutes. These represent an effective means to provide development education and awareness raising (DEAR).

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### Alumni empowerment, community building and networking

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GEST's periodic **online alumni seminar** provide the opportunity for its alumni to present their latest research in accordance with specific, pre-defined topics in order to guide online dialogue and knowledge exchange. GEST announces the topic areas well in advance, and alumni are asked to indicate their interest to prepare and present original research. In 2020, the topic for discussion was the impact on gender of the COVID pandemic and responses, and in 2023 topics included ensuring gender sensitive financing for climate change measures.

GEST fellows responding to the external evaluation's questionnaire survey indicated a strong level of participation and interest in alumni networking, as 70% of the 2018-2023 GEST fellows have participated in networking activities (formal and informal) since their graduation. 64% indicated that networking with

the alumni was a key benefit to boost their individual motivation to overcome challenges to promoting gender equality and 46% reported that networking was beneficial for finding job opportunities.

**Effectiveness of the Alumni Fund is strongly evident** as results were achieved both in the professional empowerment of alumni as leaders of change as well as the results of the individual supported projects to advance gender equality and social justice and achieve real change in their local communities. The Fund is a clear **statement and symbol of the trust GEST has in its alumni** and their capacity to lead on delivering solutions to advance gender equality and local development benefits. Supported projects are all relevant to advancing gender equality and promoting gender transformative approaches to achieve meaningful social and economic change in partner countries and communities. The direct effect of two of the supported projects is the economic empowerment of the women (the direct beneficiaries of the projects), which most closely aligns with SDG 5.5.<sup>18</sup> One of these projects also aligns with SDG 5.b,<sup>19</sup> while another also aligns with SDG 7.1.<sup>20</sup> The direct effect of the third project, a community-based response to address issues of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), most closely aligns with SDG 5.2 and SDG 16.1.<sup>21</sup>

*Specific and detailed assessment of the GEST Alumni Fund is provided in the case study report on GEST.*

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### Advisory services and knowledge sharing (including capacity development partnerships)

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During the period 2018-2023, the core programme staffs have been involved in ad hoc externally funded research projects or services. This has included work such as that with UN Women in Mozambique on peace, security, and recovery, or with UN agencies on gender and environmental outlook.

GEST operates a number of partnerships with local universities in partner countries under the Erasmus+ programme to promote staff and knowledge exchange and capacity development of partners. However, the actual extent of the success of these partnerships is reliant on the provision of co-financing from Erasmus+. GEST has established close bonds of partnership with Makerere University in Uganda and LUNAR in Malawi. The long-standing partnership with Makerere University<sup>22</sup> since 2010 covers academic cooperation and the development of tailored short courses. Makerere University has also provided a co-supervisor to support the doctoral research studies of one of the GEST PhD scholars since 2022. The partnership with LUNAR principally focuses on short courses. Yet even with these partners, the intensity of the cooperation realized is still largely driven by the availability of funding rather than steered by a medium-term plan for collaboration.

### 3.3 Overall factors influencing the achievement or non-achievement of the expected results

The evaluator highlights the following key factors influencing the achievement of the programme results:

- The programme promotes the careful targeting of its interventions, especially for the selection of fellows for the postgraduate diploma programme in Iceland. The selection of fellows follows a rigorous application, review, and interview process. The first step in the process is the nomination of the candidate by their home organization after which candidates are then invited to submit a comprehensive application. The application process requires the applicants to propose an idea for a final assignment with the support of their nominating organisation. With an increased number of

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<sup>18</sup> SDG target 5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life (including women's economic empowerment / business management).

<sup>19</sup> SDG target 5.b: Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

<sup>20</sup> SDG target 7.1: Ensure universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services.

<sup>21</sup> SDG target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, and sexual and other types of exploitation.

SDG target 16.1: Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.

<sup>22</sup> The School of Women and Gender Studies, in Makerere University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, currently offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses and programmes linked to issues of gender equality. Including a postgraduate diploma (1-year duration) in gender and local economic development, a master of arts (2-years duration) in gender studies, and a doctoral degree (3-years duration) in women and gender studies. It also offers a diverse range of e-learning resources, including MOOCs.

nominations and applications in the last five years, the GEST programme has advanced the application process further, by requiring the applicants to present an outline of their intended research paper/project since 2019. Since 2022, applicants were required to explain in detail the commitment and support of their organization to the research and its future dissemination. Since 2023 (for the 2024 cohort), the detailed Topic Selection Form is now fully integrated directly into the basic application form for the programme. This ensures all fellows arrive in Iceland with a clear focus and outline of their intended research.

- Since 2020, the GEST fellowship curriculum consists of six standard modules of study. In previous years, the offer partially changed on an annual basis as to the modules provided. The fellows' rating of the learning outcomes obtained has improved since 2020, bar a blip in 2023.
- GEST has clearly established processes to obtain feedback from the fellows on the programme modules (e.g. on learning outcomes and the organization/delivery of the modules). These responses provide insights for GEST's annual review of the programme and the improvement of modules for the next programme.
- The careful targeting of the short courses and the provision of practical tools in partner countries to benefit district-level public service staff and community groups has ensured that knowledge and skills, and gender action plans can be immediately applied at local level.
- There is strong potential to promote synergies between GEST's MOOC content and its other training offer.

The evaluator highlights the following factors influencing non-achievement of the programme results:

- Because GEST fellows come from a diverse range of organizations, civil society groups, universities, research institutes and government, there are difficulties for GEST to follow-up at the institutional level to monitor the effectiveness of the training or how it was utilized internally from the home organization's perspective. The principal feedback mechanism on follow up is the fellows contacted by GEST post-fellowship.
- GEST fellows responding to the external evaluation's questionnaire survey indicated the principal challenges they face in utilizing and applying their knowledge are insufficient resources, reluctance to change in their institution or home country, or unfavourable power dynamics.
- While the MOOCs provide a larger audience of learners, MOOCs are not comparable to in-person training with clear time-bounds. The benefit is that the learner proceeds at self-pace or can focus on specific interests within the online learning resource. However, MOOCs, by their nature, are not designed to obtain detailed feedback from learners as to the benefits obtained. As such, the principal means to assess effectiveness of the MOOCs is through the verification track.

## 4. PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (EFFICIENCY)

### 4.1. PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS, PLANNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION, OVERSIGHT, STEERING, AND RISK MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND THE EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF RESULTS

The evaluator judges that the **operational efficiency of the programme is good (satisfactory)**. Delivery of the intended programme results is in a timely manner in terms of quantity and quality. Financial management of the programme is in accordance with Icelandic requirements for a public service institution. Programme monitoring, reporting, and steering mechanisms are generally good. However, the evaluator judges there is some room for improvement linked to the short courses. The principal risk to the programme's implementation, effectiveness, and efficiency during 2018-2023 was the impact of the COVID pandemic. GEST demonstrated adaptive management in its response.

#### Programme management, planning, and implementation systems

**In 2023, the programme had a core staff of six people** (five female, one male) to manage and implement the GEST including the Programme Director, a research specialist, operations, and project managers. They are employees of the University of Iceland, the Host Institution for the GEST programme.



GRÓ Centre financial contribution to the programme covered **four Full-Time Equivalent staff positions**. In addition to its employment of the staff that manage and implement the programme, the University also facilitates access to its staff other lecturers and supervisors that contribute to the programme implementation and delivery. The University also provides the programme with full access to facilities for its activities as well as standard logistical operational supports available to all Schools and Faculty of the University. The **University provides direct and indirect financial contribution to the programme**.

In accordance with the goals set in its medium-term **strategic plan and action plan**, the programme prepares detailed **annual action plans** documenting its proposed different interventions, in accordance with standard process and practice across all Schools and Faculty of the University. As the MFA is the principal financier of the programme, now channelled via the GRÓ Centre, the annual action plan is also subject to final consultation with the GRÓ Centre as to the extent of its financial contribution to the proposed actions.

**Most of the different programme interventions operate based on clearly defined processes and timelines**. For instance, the application for the fellowship opens in March for the subsequent year's intake, with the interview process, and final selection of candidates lasts until October. The fellowship runs in Iceland from January to May following a clearly defined schedule and process for delivery of the programme modules. In addition to the training, support, and supervision of fellows' research papers, GEST offers fellows field study visits within Iceland to introduce them to the gender scene and stakeholders in Iceland. The GEST MOOCs offer principally open in March and run through to late year. The GEST Alumni Fund opens applications from March 8 until April for grant awards in summer. The clearly defined timelines and programme decision-making steps **promotes operational efficiency**. The only programme intervention for which a clearly defined annual process is not established is the short courses in partner countries. The short courses are delivered by demand from GEST's partner organizations. These courses rely on the availability of local funding which is not predictable. Nevertheless, GEST's collaboration with interested partners follows a clearly defined process for the detailed scoping of courses, the development of course content, and the final delivery of short courses.

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### Programme financial management and oversight systems (including audit)

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The **University of Iceland is a public education institution** and thereby must ensure it operates in conformity with the requirements of the **Public Finance Act** No. 123/2015 of Iceland. GEST's management of the programme, including its financial management and accountability, is in accordance with the requirements of the University's internal management processes and systems. The GEST programme is subject to the University's internal financial management control systems and audit. The programme is also subject to periodic external audit directed by the University and/or the GRÓ.

The **GRÓ Centre and the University signed a Service Agreement** outlining the provision of the GEST programme as an Icelandic training programme for development cooperation. The first Service Agreement was for four years from 2020-2023, and the second is for the two years 2024-2025.<sup>23</sup> **GRÓ Centre's makes its financial contribution to the programme on an annual basis**. Negotiations between the GRÓ Centre and the University/GEST on the annual budget for the subsequent year traditionally start in the third quarter of the year. GRÓ Centre is formally responsible to start the process of negotiation, and a final budget decision is reached late in the year. Sometimes confirmation of the budget contribution is not released until the year of programme implementation. This creates uncertainties about funding for the subsequent year and thereby challenges for efficient financial and operational planning by the programme.

**Specific agreements** outline the **financial aspects of the programme's actions**, including: (a) agreements with the individual fellows selected for the training programme in Iceland, (b) agreements with scholars on doctoral degree studies, (c) agreements with partner organizations for the delivery of

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<sup>23</sup> Prior to 2020, the MFA had specific cooperation agreements, and annual budgets, with each of the four training programmes.

short courses, and (d) agreements with alumni granted funding for local development initiatives under the GEST Alumni Fund. These agreements establish clear process about the extent of and the specific provision of the GEST grant, as well as the obligations of the partners involved.

There is **no evidence**, to the knowledge of the evaluator, of **operational inefficiency** in the system in terms of financial management by the GEST programme or its oversight by the University or auditors.

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### Programme monitoring, reporting, oversight, and steering systems

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The University, as Host Institution, is responsible to submit **quarterly financial information to the GRÓ Centre** on the programme. The University/GEST also provides an **annual progress report**. The GRÓ Centre convenes quarterly meetings with the Programme Directors of the four training programmes to address implementation issues and plan upcoming actions. Additionally, the programme responds to ad hoc requests for information from the GRÓ Centre. The GEST programme noted that, although the operational efficiency of their reporting system to the GRÓ Centre is generally good, it has encountered challenges at times due to the variability of the reporting formats.

The **GEST programme has a well-established internal monitoring system to support programme steering**. These systems include various methods for gathering feedback linked to the training provided. GEST requests its **fellows** to complete a survey for each training module of the programme covering both learning outcomes, the organization and delivery of the training. This feedback from fellows on the individual training modules strongly supports programme steering. Since 2019, the programme also holds end-of-programme focus group discussions (FGDs) with its fellows to gather feedback as to what has worked positively, operational aspects to be improved, and discuss the immediate goals for the fellows on their return to the home country. Since 2023, the programme also follows up with a final programme survey two to three months after returning. The programme follows up with individual fellows 12-16 months after returning, and in 2019 and in 2023 the programme conducted a questionnaire survey of all its alumni.

The **MOOCs** programme does have a system to obtain formal learner feedback at the completion of the course, but the extent of feedback received is minimal (1% or less). This is inherent across almost all MOOCs, possibly due to their open-access nature.

The partner organization delivering **short courses in partner countries** with the support of GEST conduct an end-of-training survey of the beneficiaries. The short course training reports provided to the evaluator (by the GEST programme) indicate that trainings conclude with an exchange of feedback on the course, for which a narrative text is provided to summarize the feedback and lessons learned. Unfortunately, standard statistical data on the trainees' assessed quality of the short courses is not reported for each of the short course events delivered.

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### Programme risk management and mitigation systems

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The GEST program **carefully targets its interventions to minimize risks** and ensure the successful, effective, and efficient delivery of intended programme results. The selection process for fellows is rigorous, including the strengthened systems for definition of the final assignment research or project paper. GEST collaborates with a limited number of trusted partner organizations in partner countries, particularly for the short courses. Most programme interventions follow clearly defined process and timelines. The evaluator finds no evidence for operational inefficiency in the system in terms of GEST's risk management and mitigation systems.

The principal risk to the programme's implementation, effectiveness, and efficiency during 2018-2023, was the impact of the **COVID pandemic**. This caused disruption for the programme during 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, the GEST programme demonstrated adaptive management in its response. The 2020 cohort of fellows began training in Iceland in January 2020 before being converted to online training and support systems in March 2020. It was feasible to conduct the end of the training programme delivery and the final graduation ceremony in-person. GEST also postponed the start of the 2021 training programme in Iceland to August. Yet, the fellows' feedback on the quality of the knowledge and learning outcomes obtained during the time indicates successful delivery of the programme despite the

pandemic's disruption. The programme also adapted its Teaching Gender to Youth short course for online provision in St. Lucia.

#### 4.2. THE USE OF PROGRAMME FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES AND THE EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF RESULTS (INCLUDING ANALYSIS OF UNIT COSTS AND VALUE FOR MONEY)

The evaluator judges that the **programme deploys financial and human resources efficiently and economically cost effective** in terms of the interventions and the results delivered. The varied daily cost per beneficiary across the interventions is due to the different intensity of the training and amount of direct support provided by GEST. The unit costs per intervention are value for money. The daily cost per beneficiary of the fellowship has increased by 11% from 2016 to 2023. This is significantly less than Iceland's rate of inflation over the same period.

During the period **2018-2023**, the actual **total cost expenditure incurred by the GEST programme** was **approximately ISK 975,000,000 (approximately EUR 6,500,000)**. The **MFA of Iceland**, since 2020 via the GRÓ Centre, has **contributed approximately 78%** of the programme costs incurred in 2018-2023. In addition to the direct financial support of the University of Iceland, the programme has also secured external co-financing to support its actions from the Erasmus+ programme for fellows and staff exchange and different UN partner organizations for the development and provision of the MOOCs, as well as other financing from Nordic and Icelandic partners. GEST short courses in partner countries receive co-funding from local training organizations and partners.

An overview of the **GEST programme annual budget expenditure and MFA contribution** is below.

*Table 6: GEST programme budget 2018-2023, actual annual costs, and MFA contribution*

BUDGET LINE	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>GEST actual costs (ISK)</b>	144,009,726	133,428,951	185,357,768	171,969,362	158,774,411	179,748,815
<b>-MFA/GRÓ actual (ISK)</b>	109,600,000	117,249,999	137,993,563	123,600,000	129,500,000	143,734,579
<b>-MFA (% of actual)</b>	76%	88%	74%	72%	82%	80%

*Data source: Financial data on annual actual costs provided by the GEST programme*

Overall, the GEST programme **annual budget costs have increased by 24.8% from 2018 to 2023**. This is largely **consistent with the Icelandic rate of inflation over the period**.

The variability in the GEST programme annual budget costs is primarily a reflection of the extent to which GEST accesses external funding to conduct specific training, research, or advisory service projects. For instance, during 2020-2022, GEST utilized an Erasmus+ co-funding grant to develop two MOOCs. The increased programme costs in 2020, is also a reflection of costs incurred due to the COVID pandemic.

The **principal training outputs delivered** by the programme during the period **2018-2023** include:

- 133 fellows on the 5-months postgraduate training programme in Iceland with 132 graduating.
- Three scholars supported for doctoral degree research studies.
- 436 direct beneficiaries trained in short courses working at district-level in partner countries, trained via short courses.
- 16,238 learners enrolled on the GEST programme MOOCs offer.

**Programme costs** (including staff, administrative and overhead costs) **in 2023 per output** are listed below.

Table 7: GEST programme costs 2023 by main programme training interventions

INTERVENTION	ACTUAL COST (ISK)	OUTPUTS DELIVERED	COST ESTIMATE PER OUTPUT
<b>Fellowship training in Iceland</b> (5-months duration)	107,411,365	23 fellows trained/graduating 23 research or project papers completed	Approx. 4,670,060 ISK per fellow (approx. EUR 31,134) Approx. 32,207 ISK per fellow/day (approx. EUR 215)
<b>Scholarships (PhD)</b> (1-year study costs / 12-months duration)	13,667,485	2 scholars supported	Approx. 6,833,740 ISK per scholar (approx. EUR 45,558) Approx. 18,723 ISK per scholar/day (approx. EUR 125)
<b>Short courses</b> (5 days duration)	18,671,272	244 people trained	Approx. 76,522 ISK per person (approx. EUR 510) Approx. 15,304 ISK per person/day (approx. EUR 102)
<b>MOOCs</b> (annual operational costs)	1,000,000	3,074 learners enrolled	Approx. 325 ISK per person (approx. EUR 2)

*Financial data on actual costs by interventions in 2023 provided by the GEST programme*

The evaluator judges that **the unit costs per intervention represent value for money**. The variability in terms of the daily cost per beneficiary between the fellowship, scholarship, and short courses is a logical reflection of the different intensity of the training and the level of direct support provided by GEST across interventions. The **daily cost per beneficiary of the fellowship in 2023 has increased by 11% when compared to the costs from 2013-2016 data<sup>24</sup>, significantly less than the Icelandic rate of inflation** over the same period.

#### 4.3. EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PARTNERSHIP WITH UNESCO TO SUPPORT THE ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS

The evaluator judges that **GEST's partnership with UNESCO generally works well**. However, the partnership is **still in the earlier phase of development**. The COVID pandemic hindered the initial development of a partnership. GEST has collaborated with UNESCO country offices and national commissions and developed MOOCs with UNESCO headquarters. However, there is limited coordination of activities between the GEST and those of UNESCO under its programmes/priorities.

In the 2019 feasibility assessment the preliminary links between the Icelandic training programs and UNESCO's work were identified. After discussions between the partners the GRÓ Centre was established as a C2C under the auspices of UNESCO.

The UNESCO proposal to its Executive Board on the establishment of the GRÓ Centre as a C2C noted that the content of GEST closely linked to UNESCO's global priority on gender equality and the work of the Education Sector and the Social and Human Sciences Sector. The evaluator also highlights the programme's connection to UNESCO's cross-cutting focus on women, peace, and security, UNESCO's global priority on Africa, and the work of UNESCO's Division for Gender Equality.

Since establishing affiliation with UNESCO, GRÓ GEST has sought collaboration with UNESCO headquarters, programmes, country offices, and national commissions in partner states. **GEST has collaborated with UNESCO offices and partners in Kenya** and held **formal meetings with UNESCO representatives in Malawi, Uganda, Ghana, Palestine**, and UNESCO headquarters. The UNESCO country office and the national commission representatives expressed interest to assist the programme in identifying local partners and prospective junior professionals in gender equality as well as apply the

<sup>24</sup> NIRAS, Evaluation of the UNU Programmes in Iceland, 2017.

expertise of local GEST alumni fellows in the future activities of UNESCO. GEST has also collaborated with UNESCO headquarters, the Division for Gender Equality, and the Social and Human Sciences Sector in GEST's initial development of the **MOOC on Men, Boys, and Masculinities**. In 2023, GRÓ and United Nations Volunteer Programme signed an agreement for funding **GRÓ GEST – UNESCO Gender Equality Specialist** with the **UNESCO Office in New Delhi, India**. This will be a 12-month position for a specialist to work on the inclusion of gender equality considerations into social inclusion and transformation policies across South Asian countries.

GEST's interaction with UNESCO generally works well. However, there is limited direct coordination of activities between those of GEST and those of UNESCO under its programmes and priorities.

## 5. PROSPECTS FOR THE MAINTENANCE AND CONTINUATION OF THE PROGRAMME BENEFITS (SUSTAINABILITY)

### 5.1. PROSPECTS FOR THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROGRAMME RESULTS AND BENEFITS

The evaluator judges that the **prospects for the sustainability of the programme results and benefits delivered are good**. GEST alumni demonstrate a strong sense of ownership of the programme results and the benefits they obtained. They are adaptable to find alternative options available to support utilization of their skills in their home organization or at other organizations. The development of local action plans to advance gender equality issues at district and community level as part of the short training courses in partner countries are key products to ensure sustainability.

#### **Prospects for the sustainability of the programme results and benefits delivered are good.**

The **direct beneficiaries of the training benefitted immediate from the knowledge transmission and exchange on gender issues**. They have obtained new insights and understanding of the interplay between gender and other socio-economic issues and international and local development challenges. The **fellows** return to their home organization/institution with their final research paper/project prepared to share their new knowledge, as well as their research paper/project prepared as the final assignment of the programme with both their home organization and local networks of gender experts and practitioners, and development workers. The direct beneficiaries of the **short courses** return to their institution, primarily district-level public services, also prepared to share their new knowledge and practical tools. The development of local action plans to advance gender equality issues at district and community level in specific areas (such as agriculture, environment, and education) are key products to ensure sustainability.

Linked to the **fellows' home organization**, and their ownership of the benefits obtained by the fellows, 75% of GEST alumni (2018-2023 cohort) indicated that **the management of their organization appreciates and values the knowledge and skills the fellow gained** from the postgraduate training programme based on the evaluator's survey. A further 15% indicated they thought their organization was somewhat neutral on the subject. An astounding 84% of the GEST alumni have advanced their contribution in their technical field of work, mainly through mentoring of others (84%) and implementing projects related to gender equality (69%). Half (50%) of GEST alumni responding to the survey also indicated the importance of networking within their technical field as the key means to support the sharing and the application of their knowledge. Only 35% of respondents indicated strong support from their home organization to utilize and apply their knowledge by implementation of subsequent initiatives, while 17% of respondents indicated that they had insufficient support of their institution. GEST alumni indicated the principal challenges they face in utilizing and applying their knowledge are linked to insufficient resources of their institution (44%), reluctance to change in their institution or home country (28%), or unfavourable power dynamics in their institution (24%). Among the 2018-2023 GEST survey respondents, 53% of GEST alumni ultimately seek new jobs to utilize their skills due to these barriers.

GEST alumni demonstrate a strong sense of ownership of the programme results and the benefits they obtained. They often find alternative options available to support utilization of their skills. The GEST programme **alumni networking** and community building actions are also important means to empower alumni and sustain their sense of community as practitioners in promoting gender equality.



Approximately 70% of the 2018-2023 GEST alumni responding to the evaluator's survey indicated their participation in networking (formal and informal) since their graduation. Alumni responding to the survey indicated a key benefit of the networking is to connect with fellows for personal matters, to boost motivation to act in new initiatives and to identify new job opportunities.

The GEST programme's core **university and training organization partners** feel a high level of ownership of the benefits obtained in the development of local training content and short courses. The partners have incorporated the training content and courses into their training offer programme, and they can be further utilized (replicated or scaled up) by the organization as funding allows.

Finally, the **GEST programme** ensures sustainability of the programme benefits, in terms of the provision of a package of training interventions on issues of gender equality, by the continuation and further development of the GEST programme. GEST has a clear medium-term strategy for the further development of the programme offerings. This includes creating a holistic package of measures to maximize synergies, and a strategy for the further development of its alumni networking and empowerment support actions. Its strategic plan aims to complete the final MOOC in late 2025 and preparation and marketing of the full Online Programme in International Gender Studies by early 2026. The strategic action plan also foresees cooperation over the period with alumni, university, and training organization partners to develop local training course curriculum based on the online courses, suitably tailored to local need. These actions shall ensure the benefits of the MOOCs are delivered in various means including as stand-alone courses, a comprehensive Online Programme, and in courses in partner countries. The University of Iceland is responsible to ensure sustainable institutional capacity and viability of the programme. The MFA, via the GRÓ Centre, is the primary financial resource to ensure sustainability.

## 5.2. FACTORS SUPPORTING OR HINDERING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROGRAMME RESULTS AND BENEFITS

The evaluator highlights the following key factors supporting sustainability of the programme results:

- **GEST alumni have a strong sense of ownership of the benefits** from the programme and actively seek to share their knowledge and skills within their home countries and communities to promote change.
- GEST's core **partner organizations** engage with the programme with the goal to improve the quality of and range of their **local training offer**. All are committed to **further utilizing the courses**.
- GEST's **short courses provide valuable practical tools** and local development plans as key products.

The evaluator highlights the following key factors hindering sustainability of the programme results:

- The principal challenges GEST alumni face in utilizing and applying their knowledge are insufficient resources of their institution, reluctance to change in their institution or home country, or unfavourable power dynamics in their institution. A substantial minority of GEST alumni ultimately seek new jobs to utilize their knowledge and skills as future change agents due to these issues.

## 6. PROSPECTS FOR LONGER-TERM DEVELOPMENT EFFECTS (IMPACT)

### 6.1. THE DIRECT EFFECTS AND LONGER-TERM PROSPECTS FOR IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME ON THE MICRO-, MESO-, AND MACRO-LEVEL

The evaluator judges that the **prospects for longer-term development effects of the programme are good**. GEST alumni indicate that projects or reform initiatives have contributed to progress advancement on the SDGs. **Alumni indicate projects and initiatives linked to all SDGs, with 93% of the 2018-2023 GEST fellows indicating projects and initiatives specifically linked to advancing SDG 5 Gender Equality**. The GEST Alumni Fund mechanism empowers alumni as change agents and delivers real local impact.

**Prospects for longer-term development effects of the programme are good.** Prospects are strongest on the micro-level (including the individual beneficiary or community) and the meso-level (such as within a partner organizations), but also good on the macro-level (including national policy level or process).



77% of the 2018-2023 GEST alumni responding to the evaluator's survey reported conducting projects or initiatives to progress the SDGs. This directly aligns with the **GRÓ training programmes intended impact of facilitating fellows, trainees, and organizations to promote progress towards achieving the SDGs**. This includes local initiatives that alumni supported in addition to projects implemented with their organisations. The survey asked alumni that had implemented projects or initiatives to select maximum five SDGs related to the actions. The GEST alumni had collectively contributed to all SDGs, with 93% indicating that projects linked to progress on SDG 5 Gender Equality. **The top 5 SDGs that the alumni respondents indicate their contribution toward are as follows:**

*Table 8: SDGs that the 2018-2023 GEST programme alumni have contributed to advance progress on*

SDG 5	SDG 4	SDG 10	SDG 13	SDG 3
93%	43%	34%	25%	21%

*GOPA external evaluation GRÓ alumni online questionnaire survey (2024)*

Additional specific direct evidence of the immediate and longer-term prospects for development effects and impact of the programme comes from the GEST alumni initiatives supported by the **GEST Alumni March 8 Fund**. Supported projects are all relevant to advancing gender equality and promoting gender transformative approaches to achieve meaningful social and economic change in partner countries and communities. **Gender equality and development results achieved by the individual projects are strongly evident**. Two of the projects have contributed to advance women's economic empowerment and one has contributed to address issues of sexual and GBV through community-based responses and support networks. Projects directly supported 160 women entrepreneurs, as well as victims and survivors of GBV. Sensitization and promotion campaigns, projects have also collectively reached significant numbers of local community with gender-inclusive and gender equality advocacy. The development effects of the projects align with a range of SDGs, namely 5, 7 and 16, and specific targets.

An overview of the main GEST programme impacts on the micro-, meso- and macro-level is below.

On the **micro-level**, the **direct beneficiaries of the different GEST training interventions** have acquired knowledge and understanding on gender issues and the interplay of gender equality and development. This has the potential to inform their own decision-making and engagement on advancing gender equality at the household, community, national, or international level. **GEST's alumni** have undertaken **further local research initiatives** to advance the **production of new knowledge** on gender equality issues. The alumni have also implemented local projects or reform initiatives to advance progress on the SDGs, especially SDG 5 Gender Equality. These deliver development effects and socio-economic benefits at the community level in their home countries. For example, alumni have contributed to capacity building of district-level staff and local community organizations to mainstream gender equality assessment and gender responsive budgeting in their operations. **GEST alumni are empowered to act as change agents delivering real development effects**. Two **GEST Alumni Fund** projects specifically focused on women's economic empowerment have successfully promoted community acceptance of women pursuing entrepreneurial goals. They have also ensured that women and girls receive the necessary education and training to support these goals. The women entrepreneurs, who are the direct beneficiaries, serve as social role models for other women and girls. Additionally, the Solar Sister project has had a long-term impact by encouraging the use of clean energy sources, thereby reducing carbon emissions at both the household and community levels. This community adoption of clean energy options has resulted in the mitigation of several tons of CO<sub>2</sub>.

On the **meso-level**, different actors such as home or partner organizations of the direct beneficiaries have utilized the benefits of the programme to guide their operations. As noted above, 77% of **GEST alumni** responding to the evaluator's survey indicated undertaking projects or initiatives within their country to achieve the SDGs. The organizations with which they work have incorporated the results of the project initiatives either through internal organizational reforms or the adoption of local development models and approaches, such as, the Association of Fishers and Lake Users in Uganda adopting a gender strategy. The home or partner organizations of the alumni have all incorporated the project results from **GEST Alumni Fund projects** as development models. Approximately twenty districts in Uganda and in Malawi have adopted and implemented local action plans to advance gender

equality within their specific local development actions and efforts using insights from the **short courses**. This has resulted, for instance, in several gender equality initiatives taken within supported primary schools and other development efforts to deliver socio-economic benefits at local community level. GEST programme's core **university and training organization partners** have incorporated GEST's training content and short courses into their training offer programme. They can be further utilized (replicated or scaled up) by the organization as future funding allows. GEST plans to cooperate further with partners in key countries to develop local training course curriculum and specific offerings based on the GEST MOOCs. These actions will ensure wider application of the GEST content in the delivery of local training actions in key partner countries and increase the number of people that benefit from training and knowledge on gender equality issues.

On the **macro-level**, 40% of GEST alumni responding to the evaluator's survey indicated their contribution to the development of policies at the national level through advising policy makers, drafting of policy papers and guidance notes. 13% contributed to changes at the international policy level, and 28% contributed to the development of policies at sub-regional (meso) level. One example of this is the development of a gender and equity handbook for the human capital development programme by an alumna for the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development in Uganda.

## 6.2. FACTORS SUPPORTING OR HINDERING PROGRESS IN LONGER-TERM ACHIEVEMENT OF DIRECT EFFECTS AND IMPACT

The evaluator highlights the following key factors supporting the impact of the programme results:

- **GEST alumni are empowered to act as change agents** delivering real, local development effects to advance gender equality. Most alumni have achieved significant professional career advancements in their field of work and are now leaders in promoting change. Through their local networking efforts, alumni have established connections within communities and at various levels of government (micro, meso, and macro) in their countries and strong relationships with donor partners.
- The **GEST short courses** in Malawi and in Uganda are **well established** and offered by reliable training partner organizations. As demanded by other districts, the training is easy to replicate across districts and there is **potential to extend** the range of partner countries targeted for GEST short courses.

The evaluator highlights the following key factors hindering the impact of the programme results:

- The main challenges to achieving development impact are political or civil instability in the countries and unfavourable political or power dynamics that hinder the mainstreaming of gender issues and the consideration of gender aspects in public policy formulation and implementation.
- The lack of available funding in partner countries to promote reform initiatives and development projects with a significant gender perspective is another challenge.
- Socio-cultural factors can hinder the initial acceptance of gender-inclusive approaches.

## 7. CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES OF ICELANDIC INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

### 7.1. CONTRIBUTION TO GENDER EQUALITY

Iceland's **gender equality strategy** for international development cooperation highlights **five focus areas for policy linked to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls**: (i) combatting GBV, (ii) health of women and girls, (iii) empowerment of women, (iv) education with an emphasis on girls, and (v) engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality.

GEST programme training/learning content addresses all of the gender equality strategy's focus areas.

The programme promotes understanding and knowledge exchange on the interplay of gender across development policy and the role of women in the promotion of sustainable and just development. The programme also ensures understanding of the **Women, Peace, and Security** agenda. The GEST programme was involved in supporting the work of UN Women in Mozambique in the area.

## 7.2. CONTRIBUTION TO HUMAN RIGHTS

Linked to the cross-cutting priority of **human rights**, the programme provides an understanding of gender equality issues and perspectives on gendered inequalities in society in its trainings. The training programme thereby contributes to the focus of Icelandic policy on the promotion and protection of the rights of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations and the focus on democracy building and governance through a strong civil society.

## 7.3. CONTRIBUTION TO CLIMATE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Linked to the cross-cutting priority of **climate and environment**, the training programme provides a strong focus on Gender and Climate Change aspects. This includes a specific module under the fellowship training in Iceland, one of the core GEST short courses, and a major component of the fifth GEST MOOC all devoted to the nexus of gender and climate change. The training programme thereby contributes to the focus of Icelandic policy on climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience measures, and the focus on sustainable use of natural resources.

## 7.4. MANAGING AND COUNTERING THE EFFECTS OF EXTERNAL SHOCKS AND RISKS TO THE PROGRAMME

The principal external shock to the programme's implementation during 2018-2023 was the **COVID pandemic** which caused significant disruptions for the programme during 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, the GEST programme demonstrated adaptive management in its response and successfully delivered the fellowship programme in 2020 and in 2021, with fellows rating the learning outcomes positively. The delivery of short courses in Malawi on Gender and Climate Change were postponed from 2020 to 2021.

Another significant external shock was the change of regime in Afghanistan. GRÓ GEST had an active/valid institutional agreement through the ERASMUS+ scheme with the University of Kabul, and ten Afghan fellows had completed the postgraduate program since 2009. The Icelandic Government agreed to provide the GEST Afghan alumni protection in Iceland upon GEST's request, which three families accepted and thus relocated to Iceland in autumn 2021 thanks to relentless support from GEST staff in Iceland. An eleventh Afghan had been accepted by GEST to attend the postgraduate fellowship training in autumn 2021, prior to the change of regime. They chose to resettle in Europe instead of joining the programme. The GEST programme has responded to provide support to the Afghan fellows' individual situations and needs to the extent it could do so. GEST removed reference to them on its webpage to protect their identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

### The extent the training programme interventions have met their intended results

The evaluator assesses that **the GEST programme has successfully delivered the intended capacity development results**. During the period 2018-2023, the principal training outputs delivered by the programme include 132 fellows graduated from the 5-month fellowship programme in Iceland, three GEST alumni supported for doctoral degree research studies, 436 direct beneficiaries, working at district-level in partner countries, trained via short courses, and 16,238 learners enrolled on the GEST MOOCs offer.

GEST's core training intervention, **the fellowship programme in Iceland**, has graduated 132 fellows with a diploma degree from the University of Iceland between 2018 and 2023, averaging 22 graduates per year. These fellows came from 34 countries, with **81% originating from LDCs or LMICs**. The majority (53%) were from fourteen countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The two primary partner countries for the 2018-2023 GEST fellows were **Malawi** (11%) and **Uganda** (12%), both of which are key partners in Iceland's bilateral development cooperation policy. The 2018-2023 cohort included 102 females (77%) and 31 males (23%). **Overall, the quality of the training modules is highly rated by the fellows with 90% satisfied or highly satisfied** (rating the learning outcomes as 4/5 or 5/5) with the knowledge obtained and its value to them. Each graduating fellow completed a project/research paper, of which approximately 63% are academic research papers on issues of gender and 37% are development project initiative proposals for advancing gender equality in specific areas at the local level. The research

papers/projects form a basis for further immediate action and/or knowledge sharing exchange by the alumni on return to their home country.

In response to the external evaluation team's online questionnaire survey of GRÓ alumni, **84% of GEST's cohort of 2018-2023 fellows responding indicated that they were able to advance their contribution in their technical field of work** thanks to the postgraduate training programme. In addition, **74% of respondents indicated they had advanced professionally in their career** due to their enhanced skills, while **77% indicated they had contributed to achieving progress on the SDGs**.

Through the provision of **scholarships for doctoral degree research studies**, the programme has supported three doctoral scholars, one of whom received a partial grant to support fieldwork research. Two scholars are female (67%) and one male (33%), and all three are from LDCs of **Malawi, Uganda, and Ethiopia**, respectively. One scholar has graduated and the other two scholars are to defend their theses in 2025. The **effectiveness of the interventions is fully in-line with standard expectation of such scholarship grants**. Scholars' research has progressed and scholars have produced specific outputs in the form of research papers published in journals and presentations of their progress on research projects.

The programme delivered training through **short courses** to 436 local experts working in district-level public services (including primary schools) and civil society groups on specific gender issues. Ten of the twelve short courses during 2018-2023 were in either **Malawi or Uganda**. The short courses are evidently oriented to the practical application of new understanding and skills by the direct beneficiaries and providing access to practical tools to support the integration of gender considerations and responses into the planning and local delivery of public services and community engagement. Approximately **97% of the direct beneficiaries were either satisfied or highly satisfied** with the relevance and usefulness of the training.

The **MOOCs** have achieved **significant outreach**. MOOCs offer unlimited participation and open access to education for dispersed audiences worldwide over the internet, allowing learners to do the courses on their time. In 2023 more than 3,000 learners enrolled in the three MOOCs GEST offered at the time. Most learners are from partner countries on the DAC list of ODA recipients, and approximately 75% of the enrolled learners are female. The programme launched a fourth MOOC in early 2024 and plans to complete a fifth MOOC in 2025. **The percentage of learners on the MOOC verification/certification track passing the academically graded final exam (63.3%) is reasonable**. Reflecting that the final exam follows an academic grading policy, 63.3% is a low grade B pass rate.

For the **development of the capacity of local partner organizations** to design and implement capacity development training and knowledge transmission on gender equality, the GEST programme, through the University of Iceland, operates close partnership with Makerere University in **Uganda**. This covers academic cooperation and the development of tailored short courses. The programme collaborates on short courses with Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUNAR) in Malawi. The collaborations function well. During 2018-2023, GEST also had partnerships with fourteen universities under the Erasmus+ programme, co-financing 46 postgraduate students as GEST fellows with Erasmus+ as well as co-financed staff mobility for training exchange with twelve universities.

The GEST programme **alumni networking** and community building actions are also important means to empower alumni and sustain their sense of community as gender practitioners. Approximately 70% of GEST alumni responding to the evaluator's survey indicated their participation in formal and informal networking activities.

### The primary successes of the training programme and the benefits generated

The **primary successes** of the GEST programme are the local development results generated by the success of the fellowship programme, the short courses, and the GEST Alumni March 8 Fund.

The **fellowship programme** is strongly in demand. GEST commonly receives at least 170 applications from the open call to participate in the annual postgraduate level training and research programme. The selection of fellows follows a rigorous application, review, and interview process. There is considerable attention to applicants' intended research paper and the commitment and support of their organization

to the research and its future dissemination. The fellows strongly rate the relevance and the quality of the learning outcomes obtained and have shown improved ratings since 2020, barring a blip in 2023. The overall level of fellows' rating of the 2024 programme learning outcomes was 97.0% satisfied or highly satisfied (rating as 4/5 or 5/5). Responses also show fellows return to their home countries empowered to act as change agents: feedback from the evaluator's survey indicates that 77% of GEST alumni respondents undertook projects or initiatives to progress the SDGs, of which 93% were actions contributing to SDG 5 Gender Equality.

The careful targeting of the **short courses in partner countries** to benefit district-level public service staff and community groups, including the provision of practical tools, has ensured that knowledge, skills, and gender action plans can be immediately applied by the beneficiaries at the local level. Approximately twenty districts in Uganda and in Malawi adopted and now implement local action plans to promote gender equality within their local development planning. This has resulted in several gender equality initiatives undertaken in areas such as agriculture, environment, and education.

Effectiveness of the **Alumni Fund** is strongly evident in its results achieved both in the professional empowerment of alumni as leaders of change and the results of the individual supported projects to advance gender equality and social justice to achieve real change in their local communities.

Furthermore, the **MOOCs** are highly relevant to enhance the programme offer and outreach. MOOCs generate a lot of value due to their modest operational costs. GEST has specifically sought to develop a comprehensive package of MOOCs, each of which is a substantive training and learning course. GEST will package the final set of five individual MOOCs into a collective Online Programme in International Gender Studies. This could be eligible for possibly becoming an **edX MicroMasters programme**, an online graduate level course offered by the University of Iceland/GEST. GEST has also sought to develop synergies from its MOOCs to its other intervention offers to enhance the overall coherence of the GEST programme offer, its outreach, and value-for-money.

Finally, the GEST programme strongly aligns with the priorities of Icelandic international development cooperation policy and goals, linked to gender equality, climate change and environment, human rights, and the focus on LDCs, LMICs, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The programme also strongly aligns with international policy frameworks/norms for gender equality, including on Women, Peace, and Security.

### The primary constraints for results achievement by the training programme

The **primary constraints** for results achievement of the programme's capacity development efforts **are all external risks**, largely beyond the direct or even intermediate control of the programme.

GEST alumni respondents to the evaluation team's questionnaire survey indicate the principal challenges they face in utilizing and applying their knowledge are linked to **insufficient resources** of their institution, **reluctance to change** in their institution or home country, or **unfavourable power dynamics** in their institution. More broadly, principal challenges to achieving development impact relate to political or civil instability in the countries or unfavourable political or power dynamics to the mainstreaming of gender issues and consideration of gender aspects in the formulation and implementation of public policy.

The programme seeks to mitigate the risks with the precise targeting of its short courses and the rigorous review of applicants for the fellowship, including their prior detailed outline of the intended research paper and of their home organization's support for the research. However, the risks remain out of the influence of the programme. Nevertheless, the alumni remain empowered as change agents, and they adapt to find alternative options available to support utilization of their skills. A significant minority of GEST alumni ultimately seek new jobs to utilize their skills. This accounts for the overall success rate of GEST alumni involved in the implementation of local projects or reform initiatives.

### The suitability of the programme management arrangements to efficiently and effectively generate the programme results

The management arrangements and overall approach in the programme design is generally appropriate. **In 2023, GEST had a core staff of six people** (five female, one male) to manage and implement the GEST. GRÓ Centre's contribution to the programme covered four Full-Time Equivalent staff positions.



The programme prepares detailed **annual action plans** outlining its proposed interventions in accordance with the goals set in its **medium-term strategic plan**. The majority of the different programme **interventions operate based on clearly defined process and timelines**. The clearly defined timelines and decision-making steps **promote operational efficiency**. The GEST programme's internal monitoring systems are well established and support programme steering. However, the evaluator notes that the **short course training reports** do not always provide specific statistical data on the beneficiaries' feedback as to the relevance and helpfulness of the training to their job.

**GRÓ Centre's contribution to the programme is on an annual basis.** Negotiations between the GRÓ Centre and the University/GEST on the annual budget for the subsequent year traditionally start in the third quarter of the year. The GRÓ Centre traditionally confirms final decision on the contribution late in the year, although on occasion confirmation it is confirmed in the annual year for implementation. The GEST programme noted that the operational efficiency of the reporting system to the GRÓ Centre, while broadly good, has been challenging at times due to the variability of the reporting formats provided by the GRÓ Centre.

The **MFA of Iceland**, since 2020 via GRÓ Centre, **contributed approximately 78% of the programme costs incurred 2018-2023**. In addition to the direct financing of the University of Iceland, the GEST programme has secured external co-financing via the Erasmus+ programme and from Icelandic partners.

The evaluator judges that **the unit costs per intervention represent value for money**. The variability in terms of the daily cost per beneficiary between the fellowship, scholarship, and short courses is a logical reflection of the different intensity of the training and the amount of the direct support provided by GEST. **The daily cost per beneficiary of the fellowship in 2023 has increased by 10.5% since 2013-2016. This is significantly less than Iceland's rate of inflation over the period (25.2%).**

### Overall evaluation conclusion on the performance of the GEST programme

The evaluator judges that **the overall performance of the GEST programme is satisfactory** (good).

EVALUATION CRITERION	PERFORMANCE RATING
Relevance	Satisfactory
Coherence	Satisfactory
Effectiveness	Satisfactory
Efficiency	Satisfactory
Sustainability	Satisfactory
Impact	Satisfactory

### LESSONS LEARNED

Based on the evaluation findings, the evaluator highlights the following key lessons learned as to the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, its management, implementation, and delivery of results.

Table 9: GEST programme - lessons learned

CRITERION	LESSONS LEARNED
Relevance, Coherence	The GEST programme is clearly aligned with and <b>relevant to partner countries' and target groups' needs and priorities</b> . The level of demand for the 5-months fellowship programme is strong (commonly well in excess of 170 applicants annually), clearly demonstrating it aligns with needs and priorities. The GEST programme <b>complements the wider development efforts of the programme's key partner organizations in partner countries</b> . The majority of these are local universities or training organizations providing training and knowledge exchange on gender equality issues.



CRITERION	LESSONS LEARNED
Relevance, Effectiveness	<p>The GEST programme offer is <b>closely aligned with and clearly relevant to the priorities of Icelandic development cooperation policy</b>. The programme has a strong focus on supporting beneficiary partners and individuals in low or middle-income countries particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, aligning with priority focus issues for Icelandic international development policy.</p> <p>The GEST programme <b>closely aligns with and is relevant to promoting an understanding of the international development policy frameworks, goals, and strategies</b> for advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment, such as on Women, Peace, and Security.</p>
Effectiveness	<p>The GEST programme is well designed and targeted to deliver its intended benefits to the direct beneficiaries of the programme. The programme offers <b>a coherent mix of training interventions, targeting young professionals with tailored training offer of different levels of intensity</b>. There is good level of synergy and focus across the training offer mix.</p> <p>The programme is highly effective in achieving training provision outreach, with approximately 16,800 individuals (learners) directly reached through its training offer during the period 2018-2023.</p>
Effectiveness, Sustainability, Impact	<p>The careful targeting of the <b>short courses in partner countries</b> to benefit district-level public service staff and community groups, including via the provision of practical tools, has ensured that the knowledge, skills, and gender action plans can be immediately applied at the local level. The quality of the short training courses is highly rated by trainees with 97% satisfied or highly satisfied with courses being relevant and helpful for the trainees and in their job.</p>
Effectiveness, Impact	<p>The <b>MOOCs</b> are substantive as a training/learning resource. They provide learners a detailed theoretical overview, analytical skills, tools, and practical case examples in the subject area. They are not short, summary overviews of issues completed in one-day. After completing the fifth MOOC in 2025, GEST intends to package the MOOCs into a full <b>Online Programme in International Gender Studies</b> to launch in 2026. This will significantly enhance the GEST offer and its potential to reach gender equality practitioners and professionals that seek to access a detailed learning course dedicated to gender equality. The potential for the programme to be an edX MicroMasters will further enhance the effectiveness of the MOOCs as a learning package and the incentive for learners of to formally enrol in the verification track.</p>
Effectiveness, Impact	<p>The GEST <b>Alumni Fund</b> is a very effective modality to support the professional empowerment of its alumni as leaders of change. The individual supported projects have each delivered results to advance gender equality and social justice and achieved change in their local communities.</p>
Effectiveness, Impact	<p>The GEST programme only rarely supports alumni to participate in <b>international conferences</b>. This would be an effective means to empower alumni as emerging leaders, as funding streams allow. The annual meeting of partners at UN CSW in New York is a key forum on gender issues that presents apt opportunity for GEST.</p>
Efficiency	<p>While generally appropriate, the <b>programme management arrangements</b> need strengthening to consistently obtain and report trainees’ feedback on the quality of short courses.</p>
Efficiency	<p>Operational efficiency of the <b>reporting system to GRÓ Centre</b>, while broadly good, has been challenging at times due to the variability of the reporting formats provided by the GRÓ Centre.</p>
Efficiency	<p>The <b>unit costs per intervention represent value for money</b>. The cost per beneficiary of the fellowship has increased since 2016, but it was significantly less than Iceland’s rate of inflation.</p>

CRITERION	LESSONS LEARNED
Efficiency, Effectiveness	The partnership with <b>UNESCO</b> is still in the earlier phases of development. GEST has collaborated with UNESCO country offices and national commissions (e.g. Kenya). However, there is limited coordination of activities between the partners under UNESCO's programmes and priorities.
Sustainability, Impact	<b>GEST alumni have a strong sense of ownership</b> of the benefits they obtained, and actively seek to promote change by sharing their knowledge and skills within their home countries and communities. <b>GEST alumni are empowered to act as change agents</b> delivering real, local development effects to advance gender equality. The majority of alumni have achieved significant professional career advancement in their field of work and now lead on promoting change.
Sustainability, Impact	The <b>principal challenges GEST alumni face</b> in utilizing and applying their knowledge are insufficient resources of their institution, reluctance to change in their institution or home country, or unfavourable political or power dynamics. Due to this, a significant minority of alumni ultimately seek new jobs to utilize their knowledge and skills as future change agents.

## GEST PROGRAMME – SWOT ANALYSIS

Table 10: GEST programme – SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GEST offers a coherent mix of training interventions of different levels of intensity, with a good level of synergy and focus across the training offer mix</li> <li>• The high quality of the fellowship programme and the learning results achieved is confirmed by the strong level of positive feedback from the fellows</li> <li>• Demand to attend the fellowship is very strong</li> <li>• Short courses in partner countries provide essential practical tools to ensure that knowledge and skills can be applied at the district and community level</li> <li>• The GEST Alumni Fund is an innovative modality to empower alumni as change agents in their country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GEST programme has not provided support to its alumni to attend leading international conferences (less than five in total), such as the UN CSW</li> <li>• Standard statistical data on the feedback from the beneficiaries of the short courses is not collected</li> <li>• The programme falls marginally short of the GRÓ Centre target of 25 fellows enrolled annually</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative outputs can be increased through expansion of the delivery of short courses</li> <li>• Short courses with trusted organizations in partner countries Malawi and Uganda can be scaled-up</li> <li>• Short courses can be replicated in other focus partner countries for the programme</li> <li>• Alumni empowerment via networking can be boosted by GEST's provision of support for alumni to attend the annual meeting of the UN CSW</li> <li>• Online Programme in International Gender Studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lack of a clear financial perspective to support planning medium-term collaboration with partner organizations in focus partner countries</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings, the following programme level recommendations are made:

1. Further effort is needed by the GEST programme in order for it to consistently meet the GRÓ Centre target of 25 fellows annually enrolled on the programme in Iceland. The demand for the fellowship programme is very strong, and the programme has the capacity to train minimally 25 per year. While recognizing that 25 fellows annually is considered an ideal number in terms of programme manageability, learning outcomes, and pastoral care, this is an indicative number. The evaluator assesses that the GEST programme has the capacity to train slightly more than 25 fellows annually.
2. GEST programme fellows have produced a sizeable body of diverse new knowledge products via their final assignment production of a research or project paper. The vast majority of these are available on the GEST programme website. They represent a valuable source for the purpose of knowledge sharing and learning. Currently these are accessible via the GEST programme website on the basis of the country of focus of the research or project paper. It is not possible to search the collection of papers on the basis of their theme(s), which limits the potential for researchers to utilize the knowledge products for comparative research across a range of countries. It is recommended that GEST programme consider the introduction also of a thematic search function.
3. To date, the GEST programme has not provided meaningful support to its alumni to attend international conferences. This is primarily due to limited financing for such actions. In this, the GEST programme stands out in comparison to the other GRÓ programmes (237 of their alumni attended leading international conferences in their field during the period 2018-2023). The most significant international conference for the GEST programme is the annual meeting of global partners, including civil society, at the UN CSW. It is recommended that the GEST programme provide support to its alumni to attend the event. This would significantly complement the valuable support to alumni empowerment provided via the GEST Alumni Fund. As practical, a fixed number of alumni that are supported annually should be agreed with GRÓ Centre, rather than constantly fluctuating.
4. The GEST programme also has a significant under-representation compared to other programmes in terms of the number of grants for postgraduate scholarships. This is not due to a lack of demand, but the lack of available funding. Expanding the number of scholars should be a priority.
5. GEST programme systems for gathering feedback from the direct beneficiaries of the fellowship are commendably strong. The system for gathering standard statistical data from direct beneficiaries of short courses in partner countries is not yet as commendably strong. While the reports prepared linked to the delivery of the short courses provide feedback from the beneficiaries on the course, this is sometimes in narrative format as to lessons learned, rather than standard statistical data also.
6. The short courses delivered in partner countries have proven very successful. It is recommended that GEST programme seek to scale-up its two core short courses in the key partner countries for its short course offer, namely Malawi and Uganda. Both are partner countries for Icelandic bilateral development cooperation support. The country strategy papers of the MFA for both countries have medium-term indicative financial frameworks. Thereby, it may be possible to develop a medium-term plan for roll out of courses delivered across a different range of districts within the countries. The ultimate goal is for the partner organizations to take over full leadership for course delivery.
7. Beyond delivering short courses in Malawi and Uganda, it is recommended that the GEST programme replicate the courses in other key focus partner countries. This is dependent on the demand of partner organizations, and the development of a solid partnership for collaboration. The programme has started the process to identify potential partners, and is encouraged to continue.

## POTENTIAL OPTIONS TO GUIDE FUTURE ENDEAVOURS OF THE PROGRAMME

Specifically in Malawi and Uganda, for short course delivery, the GEST programme should develop an initial exit strategy in collaboration with partner organizations, including the Embassy of Iceland in the countries. The relevance and high quality of the short courses for the direct beneficiaries in the two countries is already strongly evident. The GEST programme's level of support to further scale-up the

courses in-country should naturally decrease over the medium-term, as local partner organizations enhance their capacity. In addition, partner organizations are able to access longer-term financiers to undertake country specific training initiatives, as compared to the GEST programme's annual budget. The Embassy of Iceland, and MFA, as long-term bilateral partner for the countries, is a reliable partner.

There is clear potential to replicate the GEST programme short courses in other focus partner countries. While this is demand driven, it is clear that the delivery of short courses in partner countries should be undertaken over several years, as a viable way to concentrate the focus of effort, and ensure that a critical mass of capacitated individuals is trained. The selection of potential countries should be undertaken with consideration as to how such short courses can complement the focus of the GEST fellowship alumni.

There is clear potential to further strengthen GEST programme collaboration with Makerere University, in Uganda, linked to the development of high quality course content and modules. Makerere University offers a range of courses and modules, and a range of gender-oriented related university programmes. It is also active in utilizing online learning/educational tools such as MOOCs within its educational approach. There is good potential for the development of specific further course content, utilizing GEST expertise and course content, suitably tailored to local needs. Such collaboration would complement the activities of the LRT programme in its partnership endeavours with Makerere University.

GEST programme has a clear and logical plan for wider utilization of its MOOC offer, including to build learning synergies with its other programme interventions. The development of a full Online Programme in International Gender Studies, indicatively requiring 6-9 months duration for online learning, which could be offered as an edX MicroMasters, is a key step to strengthen the quality assurance of the MOOC offer, and also to increase the number of learners enrolling for the verification of their learning outcomes.

**OVERVIEW OF THE GEST PROGRAMME FELLOWS 2018-2023**

Figure 2: Overview of GEST Fellows on 6-months training in Iceland by gender

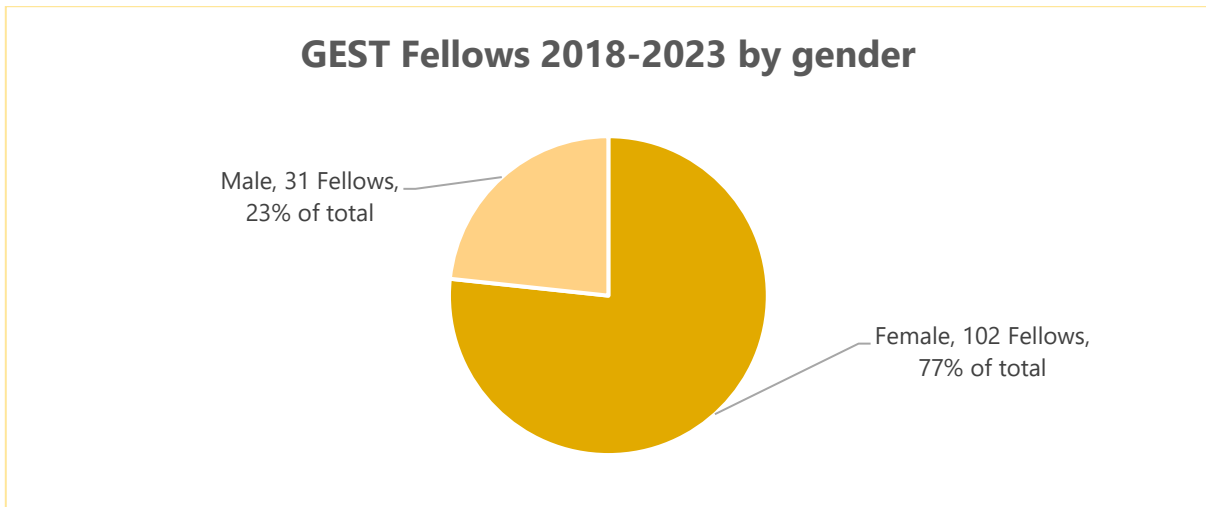


Figure 3: Overview of GEST Fellows on 6-months training in Iceland by geographic region of origin

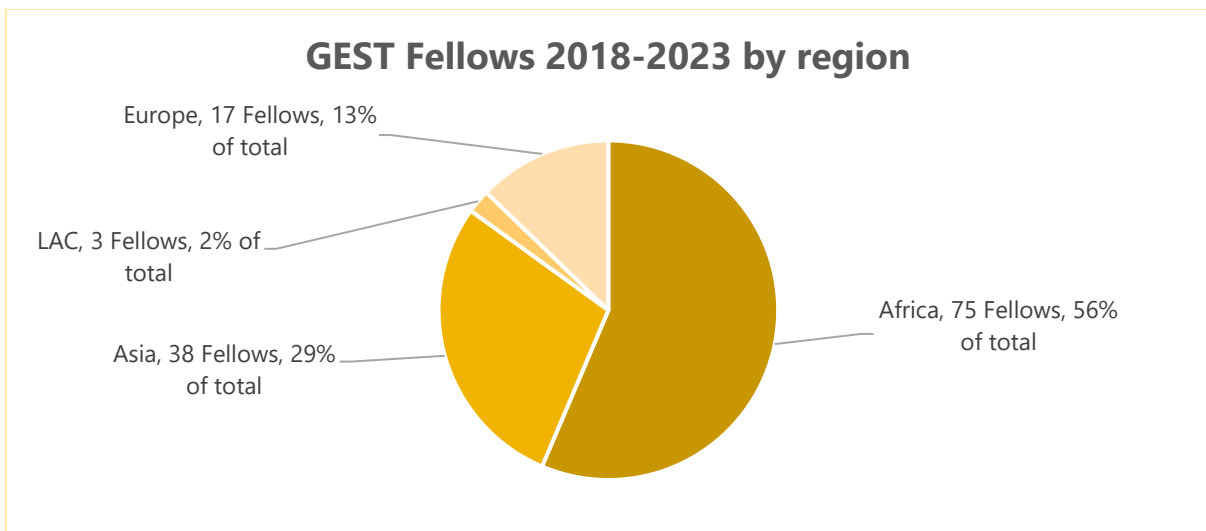
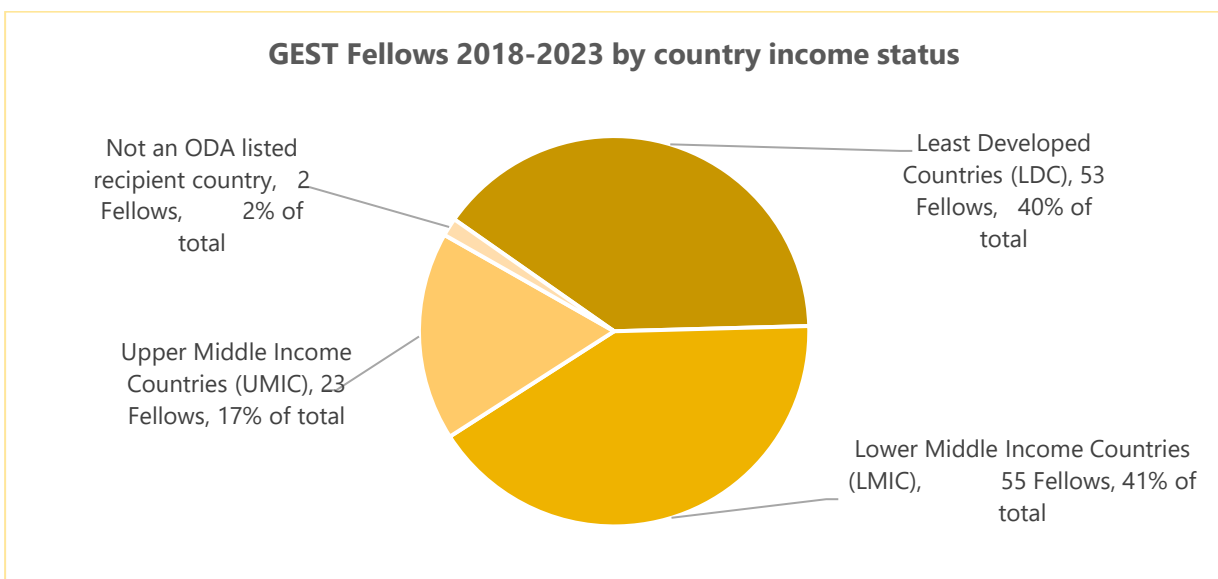


Figure 4: Overview of GEST Fellows on 6-months training in Iceland by income status of home country



## GRÓ TRAINING PROGRAMME RESULTS DELIVERY &amp; ACHIEVEMENT – GRÓ GEST

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
<b>Outcome: GRÓ fellows, trainees and respective organisations promote and implement changes needed to achieve SDGs relevant to their field of work</b>									
P1. Management in partner organisations assess the training to be valuable for the organisation	% of alumni survey respondents who agree (4 out of 5 on the scale) or strongly agree (5 out of 5 on the scale) that their organisation's management values and appreciates their skills from the postgraduate training (3 years after graduation)	87.5%	64.3%	73.3%	N/A	75.0%	91.7%*	80.0%*	75.0% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)
P2. Graduates have used the training to advance their contribution in their field/sector of work	% of alumni survey respondents (fellows) who agree (4 out of 5 on the scale) or strongly agree (5 out of 5 on the scale) that they advanced their contribution in their field/sector due to the postgraduate programme (3 years after graduation)	100%	85.7%	80.0%	N/A	93.8%	91.7%*	80.0%*	87.5% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)
P3. Graduates have used their training to share with colleagues and other experts in their respective field of expertise	% of alumni survey respondents (fellows) who report sharing their training knowledge with supervisors, colleagues and/or expert networks (3 years after graduation)	87.5%	73.3%	68.8%	N/A	83.3%	60.0%*	73.7%*	72.7% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)



PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
P4. Graduates have advanced professionally (e.g. promotion or received scholarship for further studies)	% of alumni survey respondents (fellows) who report substantial (4 out of 5 on the scale) or extreme (5 out of 5 on the scale) career advancement due to the training (3 years after graduation)	87.5%	64.3%	73.3%	N/A	81.3%	83.3%*	73.3%*	73.9% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)
<p><i>*The GRÓ Results Framework suggest measuring outcome level results 3 years after programme graduation. Therefore, the indicator value for the graduation year 2022 and 2023 should be interpreted with caution. Generally, the survey findings suggest that it might take some time for outcome level results to materialise after programme completion. Therefore, the measurement 3 years after programme completion seems reasonable.</i></p>									
<p><b>Output N°1: Increased capability of individuals and expertise of GRÓ partner organisations to design and implement programme activities in respective professional fields</b></p>									
P1. Number of experts trained in the GRÓ 5-6-month training programmes	Annual # of fellows	18	24	23	20	20	23	23	151
	Gender ratio M/F (%)	12 F (67%)	19 F (79%)	16 F (70%)	14 F (70%)	19 F (95%)	18 F (78%)	16 F (70%)	114 F (75%)
		6 M (33%)	5 M (21%)	7 M (30%)	6 M (30%)	1 M (5%)	5 M (22%)	7 M (30%)	37 M (25%)
	Country Income level LDC and LMI (%)	50% LDC 33% LMIC	50% LDC 25% LMIC	43% LDC 43% LMIC	55% LDC 35% LMIC	30% LDC 40% LMIC	13% LDC 61% LMIC	48% LDC 43% LMIC	62 LDC (41%) 61 LMIC (40%)
P2. Quality of the 5-6 month training (average response to questions per module, e.g., on increased understanding, increased interest, applicability of the learning obtained)	Self-assessment survey of fellows at the start and end of training on knowledge, skills and mindset (on a scale from 1 low – 5 high)	74% = 5/5	66% = 5/5		42% = 5/5	62% = 5/5	49% = 5/5	47% = 5/5	
		18% = 4/5	19% = 4/5	59% = 5/5	51% = 4/5	35% = 4/5	50% = 4/5	37% = 4/5	57% = 5/5
		4/5	4/5	22% = 4/5	4/5	4/5	4/5	4/5	33% = 4/5
		5% = 3/5	10% = 3/5	8% = 3/5	5% = 3/5	2% = 3/5	1% = 3/5	11% = 3/5	6% = 3/5
		2% = 2/5	3% = 2/5	8% = 2/5	5% = 2/5	2% = 2/5	0% = 2/5	3% = 2/5	3% = 2/5
		1% = 1/5	3% = 1/5	2% = 1/5	1% = 1/5	2% = 1/5	0% = 1/5	3% = 2/5	1% = 1/5
			3% = 1/5		0% = 1/5	0% = 1/5	0% = 1/5	2% = 1/5	

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
P3. Number of graduates eligible for 30 ECTS credits/ Diploma degree at completion of 5-6 month training (ratio from enrolled fellows). Only applicable GEST & LRT fellows	Annual # of diploma certificates issued	18	23	23	20	20	23	23	150
	Graduation ratio (% of total cohort of fellows eligible)	100%	96%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%
P4. Number of short courses (5-7 days) in partner countries	Annual # of weeks of on-site training # of participants in short courses Gender ratio M/F (%)	0	0	3 weeks 115 people 36 F (31%), 79 M (69%)	0	1 week 27 people 8 F (30%), 19 M (70%)	0	7 weeks 244 people 98 F (40%), 146 M (60%)	11 weeks 386 people 142 F (37%) 244 M (63%)
P5. Quality of short course training	% of participants assess the course to be useful for enhancing skills & knowledge (relevant and helpful for my job) (on scale from 1 – 5)	No courses	No courses	64% = 5/5 36% = 4/5	No courses	75% = 5/5 16% = 4/5 9% = 3/5	No courses	75% = 5/5 20% = 4/5 5% = 3/5	72% = 5/5 25% = 4/5 4% = 3/5
P6. Number of live streaming training courses	Annual # of participants	0	0	0	0	1 course 50 people	0	0	1 course 50 people
P7. Quality live streaming training courses	% of participants assess the course to be useful for enhancing skills & knowledge (relevant and helpful for my job) (on scale from 1 – 5)	No courses	No courses	No courses	No courses	73% = 5/5 24% = 4/5 3% = 3/5	No courses	No courses	73% = 5/5 24% = 4/5 3% = 3/5

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
P8. Number of online courses and number of participants in the online courses	Annual # # of participants newly enrolled	0	0	0	1 MOOC 6,942 learners	1 MOOC 1,955 learners	2 MOOCs 4,267 learners	3 MOOCs 3,074 learners	3 MOOCs 16,238 learners
P9. Quality of online training	Annual # enrolled on verification track % verified/certified as passing	No courses	No courses	No courses	No data	No data	No data	No data	1,088 enrolled for verification 63% passed
P10. Number of GRÓ graduate studies scholarships provided annually	Annual # Master's and PhD (by gender) Gender ratio M/F (%)	0	1 PhD (not in Iceland) (partial grant) 1 Female	1 PhD (not in Iceland) (partial grant) 1 Female	1 PhD (not in Iceland) (partial grant) 1 Female	2 PhD (at UI, Iceland, Year 1) 1 F, 1 M	2 PhD (at UI, Iceland, Year 2) 1 F, 1 M	2 PhD (at UI, Iceland, Year 3) 1 F, 1 M	3 PhD 2 Female, 1 Male 100% LDC
<b>Output N°2: Production and dissemination of new knowledge by GRÓ training participants and scholarship recipient</b>									
P1. Number of research outputs (research project reports) annually by GRÓ fellows	Annual # of research project papers confirmed on GRÓ website	18	23	23	20	20	23	23	150 fellows completed a paper, which were published on GEST website (150/151 = 99% of fellows)
P2. Number of master's thesis published annually by GRÓ scholarship recipients (research output)	Annual # of published master's thesis at universities' websites	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
P3. Number of PhD papers published annually by GRÓ scholarship recipients (research outputs)	Annual # of publications in research journals	1 published	1 published	0	1 published	0	1 published 1 submitted to journal	1 submitted to journal	4 published 2 submitted to journals
<b>Output N°3: Professional empowerment of GRÓ training participants and scholarship recipients is increased through GRÓ community building and networking</b>									
P1. Number of alumni events organised by GRÓ annually	Annual #	2 -2 country meetings	1 -1 country meeting	6 -4 country meetings -10 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event -Alumni Survey	2 -Online Alumni Seminar -Alumni Fund award	0	5 -4 country meetings -Alumni Fund award	5 -2 country meetings -Online Alumni Seminar -Alumni Fund award -Alumni Survey	21 events -13 country meetings -2 Online Alumni Seminars -3 Alumni Fund awards -2 Alumni Surveys -1 Anniversary Event
P2. Number of GRÓ funded alumni participating in regional and international conferences	Annual #	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	4 alumni
P3. % of GRÓ short courses involving alumni in teaching/ organisation of short courses	Annual # (% of GRÓ short courses)	No courses delivered	No courses delivered	0% (0 of 3 events)	No courses delivered	50% (1 of 2 events)	No courses delivered	86% (6 of 7 events)	58% (7 of 12 events)

