

STUDENT MIGRATION AS A THREAT OF BRAIN DRAIN IN KAZAKHSTAN*

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Brain drain is a global tendency that affects almost all the states in the world. However, the scope of the problem is far more intense in particular countries. For instance, the Republic of Kazakhstan has been facing the issue of brain drain for over the last decade. The number of emigrants is increasing significantly year by year. Thus, according to the data provided by the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics 2021), the number of people leaving the Republic of Kazakhstan amounted to 45,225 in the year 2019. The proportion of the highly skilled and educated amongst emigrants is very high. What is more, a large number of young people emigrate with the purpose of studying abroad. Based on these statistics, the study set out to achieve the following aims: primarily, it argues that student migration might be considered to be a risk factor of brain drain. Secondly, it intends to present the situation of the students who have emigrated from Kazakhstan. Moreover, it covers the steps made by the government to improve the situation.

Introduction

It is widely known that qualified and talented individuals are the most valuable assets of a state. The loss of knowledgeable people causes damage to the economy, culture, and even politics. Currently, many countries around the world are facing the issue of brain drain. In other words, they are experiencing the loss of the high-skilled workforce.

Brain drain is a complex issue that is the result of various factors. It is stated that instability (political and economic), poor quality of life (including the issues of access to education and health-care services), and the lack of job opportunities are the leading causes that encourage people to emigrate.

The Republic of Kazakhstan has had several large waves of emigration since gaining its independence from the Soviet Union in December 1991. Multiple waves took place during the 1990s and 2000s, with the year 2008 being particularly affected. Each of them was the consequence of economic recessions (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting 2021). The newest wave of emigration from Kazakhstan started in 2014. Since that time, the tendency of emigration remains, and the number of emigrants from the Republic of Kazakhstan increases every year. According to the data of the Eurasian Economic Commission, Kazakhstan has the largest negative net migration rate, which signifies that many more people leave the country than arrive.

What is remarkable is the fact that, predominantly, people with higher education or secondary professional education² migrate from Kazakhstan. Thus, most Kazakhstani

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citizens with higher education who left the country in 2019 were specialists of technical professions (more than 7.1 thousand), or had an economic (3.7 thousand) or pedagogical (2.3 thousand) qualification. There were many lawyers, health-care workers, architects, civil engineers (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting).

A tremendously significant issue which is of particular interest within the context of this paper is student migration. The trend of student migration carries the risk of brain drain from the state. As globalization increases, the tendency of students to study at foreign universities intensifies. Kazakhstani citizens have more and more opportunities to obtain degrees at foreign educational institutions under various international scholarship programs or on a fee-paying basis. However, after receiving a degree, many students do not return home. As a result, student migration seriously hampers the strategic task of building a knowledge-intensive and innovative economy, developing science and education, and increasing the well-being of its citizens. Hence, the government and the official bodies have to adopt effective mechanisms to prevent the massive outflow of students, since it might turn into brain drain.

1. Methods

The study intends to take a look at the issue of student migration in the case of the Republic of Kazakhstan. As students are currently emigrating in high numbers, the paper focuses on the data regarding the most attractive destinations among students from Kazakhstan to get education abroad, the agreements and programs within which they are studying, and the reasons why they have chosen to study abroad.

The research is designed as a case study that is mainly focused on student migration. The approach used in this study relies on the analysis of the secondary data, including various articles, reports, and statistical data.

2. Student migration from Kazakhstan: the current situation

One of the characteristic trends of today's education system is the rapid increase in student migration (Tsapenko 2008, 60). Many scholars argue that the current high rate of student migration is the result of the internationalization of higher education and globalization. Globalization, a commonly used term in the 21st century, has played a crucial role. It is undeniable that globalization has contributed to many spheres in beneficial ways. Thus, the world has become economically, socially, politically and culturally integrated through the advances in technology, transportation and communication. Owing to globalization, many new opportunities have opened up for everyone. Specifically, it has spread knowledge and technology and increased cross-cultural exchange. Moreover, globalization is being praised, and at the same time blamed for opening borders. It has generated an active process of migration including economic, social, political, environmental, and educational migration.

²The structure of the education system in Kazakhstan consists of the following levels: pre-primary education, school education (including primary, lower secondary, and upper-general or vocational secondary education), post-secondary and tertiary education. Secondary professional education (technical and vocational secondary education) is provided in colleges (previously called professional lyceums), schools, and higher technical schools.

Migration has always been a transformative force of human civilization. Nevertheless, in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 21st century, international educational migration acquired new features. The massive influx of internal and external migrants challenges the existing cultural, social, and economic models of both host and donor countries (Afanasyeva & Ushakov 2019, 37).

Certainly, the high rate of student migration possesses a serious challenge for the Republic of Kazakhstan (Osipova 2021). The statistics on the volume of student migration from Kazakhstan vary. Accurate and systematized data on student migration from Kazakhstan is not available: as a rule, only those who study abroad at the expense of the national budget are recorded. The official body³ does not keep a record of citizens studying abroad as, for example, self-financed students. However, some international organizations collect data on student migration. As reported by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UNESCO 2021), the estimated number of students from Kazakhstan who studied abroad was 84,681 in the year 2017. Another international agency, the International Organization for Migration in Kazakhstan (International Organization for Migration, 2020), notes that to comprehend the current situation regarding student migration from Kazakhstan, it would be crucial to use aggregated data from ministries and agencies, as well as from those countries in which the volumes of educational migration from Kazakhstan are the most significant, since a large proportion of youth emigrates abroad primarily with the intention of receiving education with their personal funds or within different international programs and scholarships.

The high rate of student migration in Kazakhstan is also accompanied by international outbound student mobility. Kazakhstan is among the top 15 states sending students abroad despite its small population (Rustemova et al. 2020, 2).⁴ For example, based on the analytical report that has been published by the Ministry of Education and Science, the outbound academic mobility of students saw the participation of 2694 people in the year 2019 (Analytical report “Implementation of the principles of the Bologna Process in the Republic of Kazakhstan”). Hence, the student migration from the Republic of Kazakhstan is considerable; furthermore, it is increasing.

3. The most attractive destinations among students from Kazakhstan to get an education abroad

With reference to the above-mentioned arguments, the trend of student migration from the Republic of Kazakhstan is very relevant. Many youngsters in the country show a preference for international education- either in neighboring or more distant states over the local one. Geographically, this flow of students is mainly directed towards around 50 countries (Nasimova et al. 2020, 107).

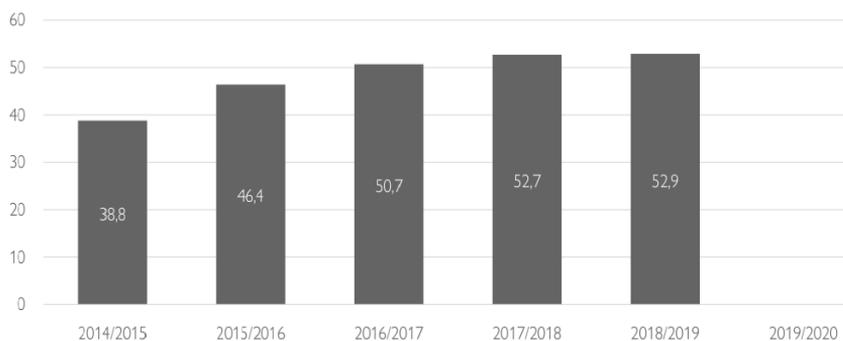
Many students from Kazakhstan mostly choose the two neighboring countries: the Russian Federation and China. Consequently, these two states have the highest proportion of students from the Republic of Kazakhstan. The number of students from the Republic of Kazakhstan studying in different degree programs (Bachelor, Master,

³ The official body that coordinates education, science, and technology is the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

⁴ The Republic of Kazakhstan has a population of 18.94 million people, according to the Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics).

and PhD) in the state and municipal higher education institutions of the Russian Federation between the years 2014 and 2019 is illustrated below.

Figure 1: The number of students from Kazakhstan studying in the Russian Federation in the period between the years 2014 and 2019



Source: Taken from the report Kazakhstan Advanced Migration Profile. International Organization for Migration 2020 (64)

According to the data of the embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, approximately 74,000 Kazakh students studied at various higher education institutions in Russia in the 2019/2020 academic year. It should be noted that Kazakhs rank first among international students studying in Russia (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, 2021). As a matter of fact, the popularity of Russian education among Kazakhstanis can easily be explained by the following reasons: firstly, the geographical proximity of these countries.

Figure 2: The map of the Republic of Kazakhstan



Source: <https://www.worldatlas.com/>

Another reason that the students from Kazakhstan select the Russian Federation is that of language skills. The linguistic, socio-economic, cultural and mental proximity of Russia and Kazakhstan makes it possible to get degrees in public administration, law, pedagogy and economics without having to retrain. Moreover, the quality of education is another significant reason that encourages students from Kazakhstan to choose Russia. Many people in Kazakhstan are convinced that Russia has a high-quality education system, which is the result of the fact that the education system under the USSR was indeed world-class.

As mentioned above, the quality of education is one of the crucial factors choosing a country of study. For instance, the high quality of education in China, together with the accessibility of Chinese universities, comfortable learning and living conditions, and the possibility to learn a foreign language have been identified as the main reasons for the dynamic growth of educational migration from Kazakhstan to China (Serikkaliyeva et al. 2019, 504–517).

What is more, socio-political factors (unemployment, poverty, lack of social lifts), economic factors (unstable economic situation, lack of business competition, low salaries) and personal financial opportunities were marked as the ‘push’ factors of the student migration (Nasimova et al. 2020, 107–137). In addition, various scholarships and grants also influence the flow of student migration.

A massive number of students from Kazakhstan are now studying in more distant countries under various scholarship schemes. The essential ones that are available for the citizens of Kazakhstan will be presented in the next part of the paper.

4. Scholarships and grants

The citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan have many opportunities to study abroad within government-funded programs, intergovernmental exchange programs, and grants from other governments and international organizations. Several important programs which can help students from Kazakhstan receive an education abroad through a fund are summarized and illustrated below (Jumakulov & Ashirbekov 2016, 39).

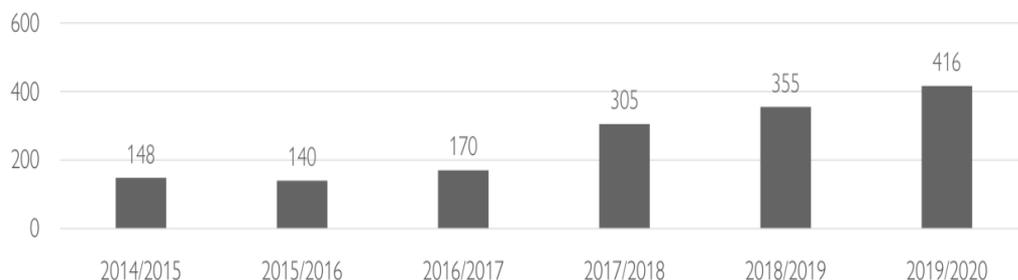
Figure 3: Funded programs for the citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstani government-funded programs	Bolashak Program (degree programs and internships); Academic mobility program (non-degree programs). Intergovernmental grant exchange Intergovernmental agreements with equivalent levels of academic exchange: Ukraine, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, China, Egypt, Romania. Grants from other governments and international organizations Russian Federation (300 grants in 2016) European Union (Erasmus Plus), USA (Fulbright), Germany (DAAD), India (ITEC). University level student exchange <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (USCO); 2. Network of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); 3. Inter-university agreements.
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Source: Jumakulov & Ashirbekov 2016, 39

The list of programs expands significantly year by year. One reason for this is that the Ministry of Education and Science has undertaken to create all necessary conditions to educate the country's citizens abroad. For this purpose, the Ministry has been signing agreements and memorandums in the field of education and science with different countries. Among them are European countries, Asian countries, and the US.⁵ The increase in the number of Kazakh citizens proposed to study abroad under international treaties and agreements is shown below.

Figure 4: The number of Kazakh citizens proposed to study abroad under international treaties and agreements



Source: Taken from the report Kazakhstan Advanced Migration Profile. International Organization for Migration 2020, 65

In addition to agreements in the education field, Kazakhstan has agreements in the field of science and youth policy. All the agreements and memorandums have been signed in order to develop international cooperation, exchange students and professors, share ideas and technologies; and the number of agreements is increasing each year.

Besides, many youngsters from Kazakhstan are self-financed students. It is important to note that self-financed students do not have contractual obligations that would require them to go back to their home country. Previously those students who get degrees under governmental agreements and grants from other governments did not have it. However, the responsible body adjusted some rules for some programs from 2020. For instance, those students who get degrees under the agreement between Kazakhstan and Hungary are obliged to go back home and work for three years in the country.

5. The government's response

The government of the Republic of Kazakhstan has taken several measures and is working on the prevention of massive student migration. For instance, one of the steps in this direction is the improvement of the quality of education at local universities. In addition to this, efforts are being made to improve the human resource capacity and

⁵ Hungary, China, Poland, Ukraine, Vietnam, Belarus, and Tajikistan are the countries that have signed agreements with the Republic of Kazakhstan in the field of education.

material and technical facilities of higher education institutions. Another crucial measure that has been implemented by the government is the provision of scholarships for different categories of students including disabled students and those from rural areas. There is an annual increase in the state budget for higher education and training, which means that more Kazakhstani citizens receive educational grants and study at the expense of the budget within the country and abroad.

The Republic of Kazakhstan has a special state program called Bolashak (meaning Future in the Kazakh language; Bolashak 2021). The Bolashak International Scholarship was established on November 5, 1993, by the first President N. A. Nazarbayev (Nessipbayeva 2014, 2275–2279).

It was a step towards giving a chance to talented young people to get a quality education abroad and to use their knowledge in the country to fulfill the imbalance caused by the lack of professionals left behind in the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From its launch until now, the Bolashak scholarship has been a guarantee of the successful career growth and self-realization of each graduate. The Bolashak program is still-ongoing, although its nature has changed. Changes in the characteristics of the program are related to the government's efforts to align personal choice, industrial needs, and the country's strategic development. Until 2011, the Bolashak program was aimed at preparing specialists for the general labor market. Since then, the program is focused on training specialists in national priority areas at selected universities' postgraduate programs. In the framework of the scholarship, students are obliged to return to the country after graduation.⁶

Concluding remarks

The problem of the annual outflow of thousands of Kazakhstani students to foreign universities represents a serious issue. The reason for this is the fact that some students might not return to the country afterwards. Hence, it could turn into serious economic problems in the foreseeable future, together with the issue of brain drain. Brain drain is the process by which qualified and skilled people leave a country in search of a better future.

This study has shown that student migration is sharply increasing year by year. Kazakhstani students prefer to study overseas rather than in local universities within the country. Various factors such as socio-political and, economic factors, as well as personal financial opportunities prompt them to choose education abroad. Particular reasons are enclosed in the following:

⁶ Bolashak alumni have to return to Kazakhstan to work in different Kazakhstani companies, government structures, and international organizations for a period of five years, or three and two years after a research internship. According to point 27 of Rules of the selection of applicants for awarding the international scholarship "Bolashak", approved by the governmental order of the Republic of Kazakhstan on June 11, 2008, № 573, the following terms of working off by graduates are established:

- 5 years - in the cities that have the status of national importance: Astana, Almaty and Shymkent (for graduates who signed a contract from June 19, 2018);
- 3 years - in the regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan;
- 2 years - in cities of oblast (except for cities - oblast centers), region significance and other regions of the oblast.

- Dissatisfaction of the political situation in the country, namely corruption, bureaucracy, and ineffective public administration);
- Unemployment and lack of prospects for self-fulfillment and a career;
- Low level of country's development;
- Uncertainty about future;
- Low salary and lack of social guarantees.

In addition to this, low levels of education and medicine and the violation of some human rights have been indicated as the principal motives that lead to high rate of emigration from Kazakhstan.⁷

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