

## Mobile Students from Kazakhstan: Migration for Education or Education for Emigration?

Gulnar Nassimova\*, Marem Buzurtanova, Kadyrzhan Smagulov & Kirill Kartashov

### Abstract

The article discusses the results of an empirical sociological study on the migratory trajectories of mobile students from Kazakhstan. The study included a series of in-depth interviews and a survey aimed at establishing why they decided to study abroad, how they chose the country to study, and what they were planning to do upon graduation. The 'push-pull plus' model was applied to bridge economic and sociological aspects of educational migration from Kazakhstan and to overcome structure-agency dichotomy. Profiles of mobile students across three types of migratory trajectories were developed: Immediate Returnees migrating for educational purposes, i.e. maximisation of utility; Deferred Returnees, whose rational choice is combined with desire and aspiration; and Definite Non-returnees, for whom education is a means of emigration prompted by deprivation due to the situation in the home country, which creates predisposing and proximate drivers.

**Keywords:** educational migration, migratory trajectory, mobile students, education for emigrational purposes, migration for educational purposes.

### Introduction

Educational migration is an increasingly exigent phenomenon. Its scale and goals, the profile of a typical mobile student, popular areas of study and, most importantly, its social, political, economic and cultural implications are not merely academic questions. Kazakhstan has not been insulated from the global trend; each year the number of students deciding to study abroad has been growing (UNESCO, 2006; Bocharova, 2020; Edaily, 2019). Being associated with 'brain drain' by the mass media and experts, large-scale educational migration is commonly regarded as potentially hampering the economic and development perspectives of Kazakhstan (Finprom, 2017; Kazpravda.kz, 2018; Kapital.kz, 2014; Forbes.kz, 2019).

This article discusses the results of an empirical study conducted within the research project AP 05134108 'Educational Migration: Trends, Factors, Societal and Political Implications for Kazakhstan', funded by the Ministry of Education and Science. The study included an examination of the recent macro-level developments and international experience as well as statistics and the legal framework. The objective was to identify the factors and trends of outward educational migration and the possible risks for Kazakhstan and to develop policy recommendations for respective government agencies.

The study was conducted with the following preliminary hypotheses: first, we assumed that push factors in Kazakhstan would prevail; second, that education would be a means for permanent emigration in the majority of cases; and third, that migratory trajectories would be chosen rationally with utility maximisation in mind.

\* E-mail address of the corresponding author: [gulnar.nassimova@gmail.com](mailto:gulnar.nassimova@gmail.com)

## Literature review

Since Ravenstein's (1885) rules and principles and Lee's (1966) factors and intervening obstacles, migration has been studied excessively (Brettell & Hollifield, 2014). The neo-classical and dual labour schools dealt with macro-level structural factors (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Pula, 2017; Arango, 2017), and the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) added micro and meso factors (de Haas, 2010; Hagen-Zanker, 2008). Sociology went from the conceptualisation of assimilation (Duncan, 1929; Park, 1950) to its critique (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970), and to the introduction of integration, incorporation and multiculturalism (Jensen, 2001) before adopting transnational network and commutative theories (Garip, 2008). The recent push-pull plus model (Van Hear et al., 2018) strove to overcome the structure-agency opposition, while meso and micro factors were supplemented by drivers (Carling & Collins, 2018). Emotions, desires, cultures, power relations and societal roles were introduced into analysis, as well as new types of migrants, namely refugees, women, and the young. The relative deprivation, feminist and transnationalist approaches were added (Stark & Taylor, 1991a; 1991b; Harzig, 2002; Dunn, 2005), and migration was now regarded as a non-linear, temporary or circular movement of individuals with motivations far beyond mere economics, such as lifestyle and self-actualisation (Cohen et al., 2015; Saar, 2016), even 'mobility fetishism' (Bauder et al., 2017).

As for educational migration, mobile students were categorised as mobile people, highly-skilled, professional personnel, temporary migrants, circular migrants, migrants in a knowledge economy, or pseudo-migrants (Dustmann & Glitz, 2011). 'Brain drain', the more neutral 'brain circulation' and the more positive 'brain gain' (Maurseth, 2019; Stolz, & Baten, 2012; Gibson & McKenzie, 2011; Teferra, 2005; Saxenian, 2002) were instrumental at the macro level. Meso-level studies introduced the concepts of international education, transnational education and internationalisation of education (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Knight, 2016; De Wit, 2020), as well as academic mobility in higher education, student mobility and the internationally mobile student (Richters & Teichler, 2006; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Beine et al., 2014). While the push-pull model remained (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), studies of student cross-border mobility underwent a sociological turn and were increasingly interested in identities, desires, intentions and motivations (Bradle et al., 2008).

In Kazakhstan, educational migration, particularly that to China, attracted some scholarly attention. Quite frequently, the phenomenon was studied on the macro level (Serikkaliyeva et al., 2019), with the emphasis on the political factors (Shibutov, 2020; Shibutov, 2017) or through the lens of Kazakhstan's competitiveness in a globalised 'knowledge economy' (Bokaev & Zholdybalina, 2019; Bokaev et al., 2019) or securitised (Koshanova et al., 2016; Sadovskaya, 2014). There were also micro-level studies of educational migration as a part of the life strategies of the youth of Central Asia (Umbetalieva, et al., 2016), some enabling to identify the trends throughout the region (UN IOM, 2019). The Russian authors tend to focus on institutional factors on macro and meso levels (Sadyrin & Nam, 2019; Michurina & Fokina, 2019; Melikyan, 2017), as do some authors from Kazakhstan (Poletayev, 2010). The abovementioned literature examined the issues within the inter-state strategic cooperation of Kazakhstan with China and Russia through the lens of student migration and discussed the rationale behind individual decisions. Our study, however, is an attempt to bridge the sociological and economic fields.

When applied to student mobility from Kazakhstan, a number of frameworks enhanced the analysis, for example, a neoclassical view of a qualification received in a host country as a step towards permanent emigration, given the deficit of quality jobs in a home country. On the micro level, those factors would push to make a 'rational choice' to 'maximize utility' (Beech, 2019) of a household as the NELM stated. Transnational network and social capital theories explained how the relations with the relatives and fellow countrymen influenced trajectories during education and after graduation (Arango, 2000; Goulbourne et al., 2010), while the institutionalist approach (Massey et al., 1993) was applicable to such factors as activities of private associations, universities and government-affiliated institutions. The theory of relative deprivation (Stark & Taylor, 1991a; 1991b) helped to identify a combined influence macro, meso and micro factors beyond economics. All these informed considerably the interview guides and questionnaire for our sociological study, while the push-pull plus model (Van Hear, et al. 2018) was instrumental while discussing its results.

## Methods

The migratory trajectories of the study population, namely mobile students from Kazakhstan, were investigated from the three angles: why and how students decided to go abroad to study; why and how they chose the country where to study; and what they intended to do after graduation. In order to achieve the goal, we chose a combined application of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data helped to identify general in-group trends, whereas the qualitative data were indispensable to analyse individual variations. The study - registered IRB-A 085 - was authorised by the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University Ethics Committee.

In-depth interviews and mini focus groups with 70 students – 25 of whom were in Russia, 15 in China, 13 in Europe, 10 in the USA and the rest in other countries – were conducted from December 2018 to December 2019. The choice of the snowball sampling method was not arbitrary. We wanted the interviewees to be better barred from external influences, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, i.e. going to study abroad for the purpose of permanent emigration. Thus, a conciliatory character of communication was of crucial importance. Those in-depth interviews proved productive, and the data we were able to collect met our expectations. In the end, we reached more reliable results.

The interview guide was synchronised with the survey questionnaire, and both were to identify the main reasons and factors influencing educational migration from Kazakhstan from the individual perspective. We used the computer-assisted web interviewing technique (CAWI). The total number of respondents who had studied at universities in Russia, China, Europe, the United States and other countries was 212. The Likert Scaled questionnaire covered the following: rationale behind the decision to study abroad; considerations when choosing a country where to study (relatives and other ties, interest in the country, availability of information, etc.); criteria for choosing a university and an area of study; respondents' expectations; attitude towards particular features of education in the country of choice; respondents' projects for life; intentions of permanent emigration, if any; and the respondents' socio-demographic profiles. The data were processed via the SPSS 21.0 programme.

Snowball sampling, otherwise known as chain-referral sampling, was chosen as a recruitment method because of two considerations: first, we regarded mobile students from Kazakhstan the *rare population*; second, information on possible intentions to emigrate permanently was regarded as *hidden* due to its sensitive nature. Thus, finding the first subjects (key insiders) who would provide further referrals in each country was crucially important. As the method did not guarantee compliance with the sampling quotas applicable to the general population, it was subjected to the weighing procedure. Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of respondents by host countries and target groups with weighted coefficients. The survey was conducted via e-mail, social media and instant messengers from April 2020 to June 2020.

**Table 1:** Surveyed population per country

	Students from Kazakhstan in each country (%) according to the survey	Students from Kazakhstan in each country (%) according to the official statistics	Weighted coefficients
Russia	37,7%	70%	2,04
China	24,1%	13,2%	0,61
Western Europe	19,3%	3%	0,18
Eastern Europe	5,2%	3,2%	0,63
USA	12,7%	1,6%	0,14
Other	0,9%	9%	n/a

Source: Today.kz (2018), Wfin.kz (2019)

**Table 2:** Respondent distribution by target group

Target Groups		Percentage (%)
Area of study	Social Sciences and Humanities	57,9%
	Sciences and Engineering	42,1%
Degree to be obtained	Undergraduate: Bachelor's, Specialist Diploma	61%
	Postgraduate: Master's, Candidate of Science, PhD	39%
Gender	Male	51,7%
	Female	48,3%
Ethnicity	Kazakh	56%
	Russian	32,3%
	Other	11,7%

## Results and discussion

Primarily, on the choice of snowball sampling despite the reservations in terms of its meeting random-sampling criteria in the statistical sense, it may prove useful, as it was numerously pointed out, (Audemard, 2020, Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019; Woodley & Lockard, 2016; Noy, 2008; Ghaljaie, Naderifar & Goli, 2017) when reaching a rare population is given priority over generalisation. Although mobile students from Kazakhstan may not appear 'rare', we were well aware that we were after the information that could be regarded as 'hidden' due to its sensitive nature. For example, the expected answers would touch on critical attitudes towards the political situation in the home country and divulge possible intentions to emigrate permanently. We also addressed the issue by applying the weighing procedure, as discussed in the Methods section above.

### *Educational migration from Kazakhstan; push-pull plus model*

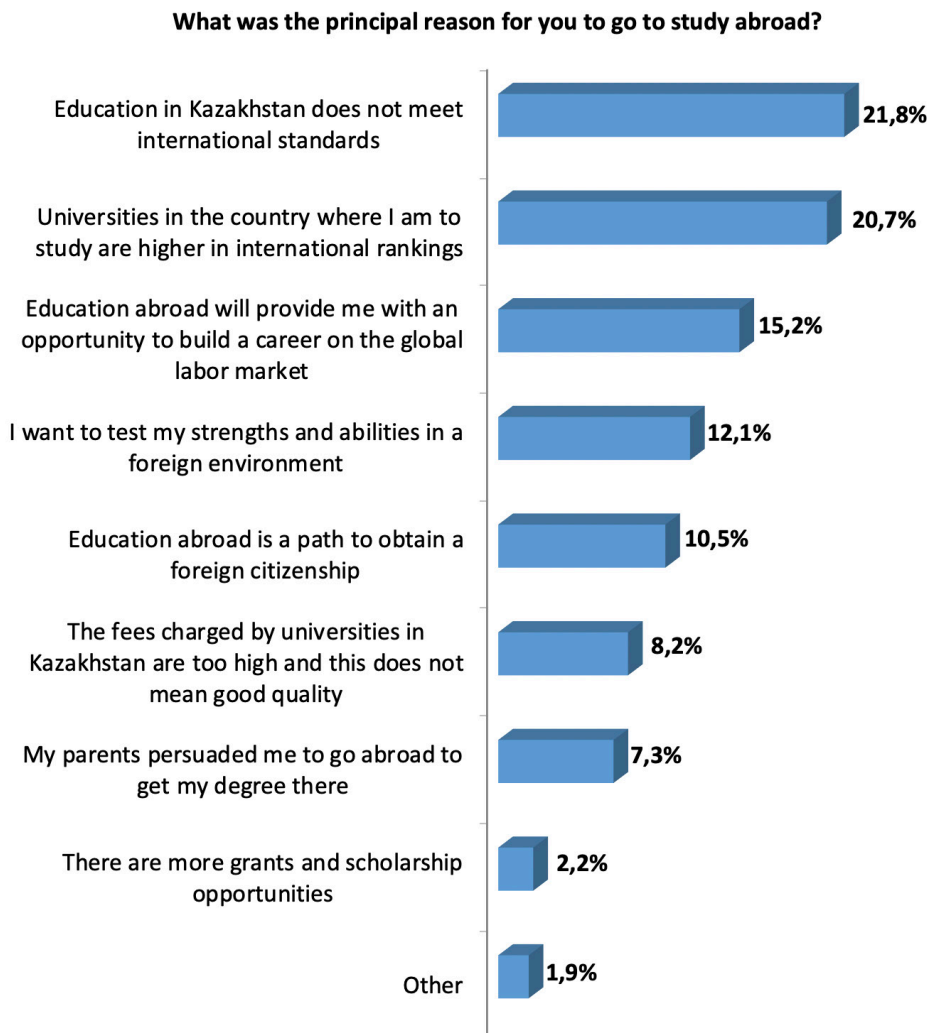
The push-pull plus model (Van Hear, et al., 2018) is used for sociological-economic interconnection and to overcome structure-agency dichotomy. The utility maximisation component is combined with aspiration and desire (Caring & Collins, 2018) and relative deprivation (Stark & Taylor, 1991a; 1991b) as migration drivers.

Thus, when applying the push-pull plus model to analysing the findings of the survey and the in-depth interviews, we concluded that the migratory trajectories of mobile students from Kazakhstan were influenced by the following drivers:

- predisposing structural drivers within a broader macro-political economy creating brain drain from the periphery to the centre as a permanent characteristic of the world-system (Wallerstein, 2004); brain circulation amidst and because of globalisation from a more functionalist neo-classical perspective; a political environment of nation-building and the likelihood of conflict;
- proximate drivers more directly influencing migration are corruption, the underdevelopment of democratic institutions, the inability of Kazakhstan's economy to create jobs for professionals with certain qualifications, low salaries, the poor reputation of Kazakhstan's higher education, the language of instruction, the prestige of foreign degrees;
- precipitating drivers include the drastic increase in demand for fluency in the Kazakh language and its transition to the Latin script, the opportunity to obtain foreign citizenship while studying or upon graduation, family/parental pressure, grants and scholarship opportunities;
- mediating drivers from the institutionalist perspective are recruitment and other activates of universities, private and government agencies. It is also a certain culture of migration prevalent among 1) ethnic Kazakhs from bigger cities dissatisfied with

structural conditions of political and economic nature in Kazakhstan and aspiring to study in the West not only due to better opportunities of self-realisation but because of good governance and liberties or 2) ethnic Russians aspiring to return to the 'historic homeland', pining for a sense of belonging. As discussed further, all the drivers mentioned above may operate on macro, meso and micro levels in the home and host countries.

Figure 1 shows variations in the rationale for studying abroad: proximate and precipitating push drivers of structural nature at macro and meso levels were 'poor quality' of and 'high fees' for education in Kazakhstan, while 'parental influence' was a precipitating micro-level driver. A proximate pull factor at the macro level was 'quality of education in the host country' accompanied by a precipitating 'more scholarship opportunities' at the meso level together with an 'aspiration' that education abroad would be an 'international career booster' and a 'desire' to 'to test one's abilities and knowledge'. Thus, there was only one strong macro-level pull factor of 'quality of education in the host country' (21%), while almost 30% of responses were various meso and micro drivers of precipitating character or 'desires' and 'aspirations'. The pressures of proximate nature were stronger in the home country when the decision to study abroad was being made.



**Figure 1:** Rationale behind the decision to study abroad

Source: own calculations, based on AP 05134108

**Factors in the host country**

The survey showed why a particular country had been chosen. The nine reasons were rated within a five-point scale from ‘not important at all’ to ‘very important’. Table 3 shows ‘security’ (4,04) followed by ‘civil rights and liberties’, ‘development of digital technologies’ and ‘lower costs of living’ with the scale of 3,78, 3,75 and 3,74, respectively, and ‘familiar culture and language’ (3,58) as important, while ‘absence of corruption’ and ‘personal connection’ as less important (3,17 and 2,5). However, Table 4 shows the results of the Kruskal-Wallis h-test, where only ‘respect for civil rights and liberties’, ‘absence of corruption’, ‘lower cost of living’, ‘familiar culture and linguistic environment’, and ‘development of digital technologies’ had a p value of no more than 0.05.

**Table 3:** Reasons for choosing a country to study; mean and standard deviation values

	Mean Deviation	Standard Deviation
Secure environment and personal security	4,04	1,19
Respect for civil rights and liberties	3,78	1,3
Development of digital technologies	3,75	1,2
Lower cost of living	3,74	1,22
Familiar culture and language	3,58	1,41
Good environment	3,17	1,32
Absence of corruption in the host country	3,17	1,56
I could combine my studies with work	2,86	1,35
Personal connections acquaintances, friends, relatives	2,5	1,43

Source: own calculations, based on AP 05134108

**Table 4:** Hierarchy of reasons for choosing a country to study after Kruskal-Wallis h-test

Pull Factors in the Host Country	P value	Error probability with differences in mean values in groups
Respect for civil rights and liberties	0,004	0,4%
Absence of corruption in the host country	0,003	0,3%
Secure environment and personal security	0,099	9,9%
Familiar culture and linguistic environment	0	0%
Lower cost of living	0,049	4,9%
Development of digital technologies	0	0%
Opportunity to combine studies and work	0,061	6,1%
Personal connections; acquaintances, friends, relatives	0,129	12,9%
Environmental considerations; clean air, water, etc.	0,131	13,1%

Source: own calculations, based on AP 05134108

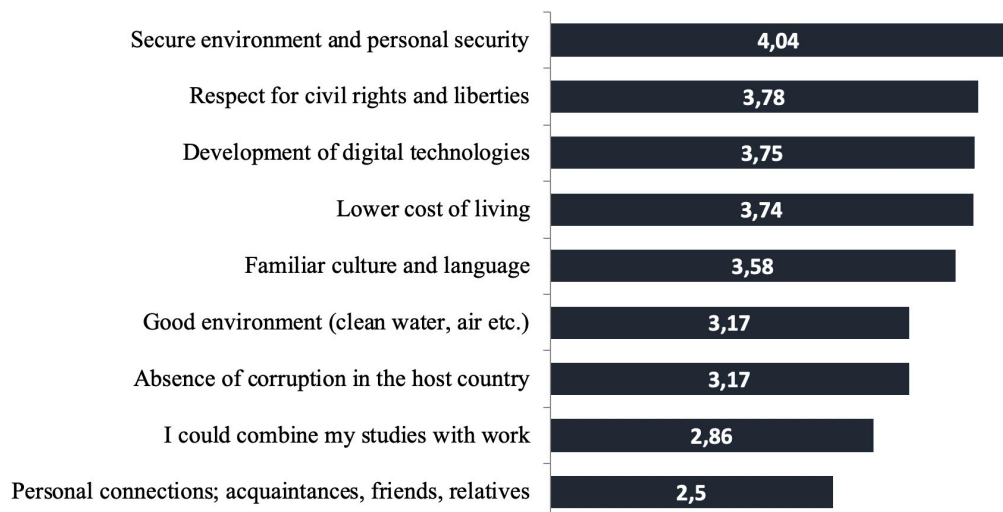
Table 5 shows that ‘civil rights and liberties’ was the most important driver of the proximate nature pulling students to Western Europe (4,34) and the USA (4,3), while in China and Russia

it was less important, being scaled at 3,59 and 3,75 respectively. Also, students at American and Western European universities were distinguishably more influenced by a proximate ‘absence of corruption’ (3,93), whereas it was the least important for those in Russia (2,99). Consideration of ‘corruption’ in a particular host country directly correlated with its respective Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2019). In other words, those who valued absence of corruption were more likely to choose to study in countries with higher CPIs (see Figure 2 and Table 6).

**Table 5:** Relative importance of pull factors for each host country/region

Pull factors	Importance of pull factors in each host country			
	Russia	China	Western Europe	USA
Respect for civil rights and liberties	3,75	3,59	4,34	4,3
Absence of corruption	2,99	3,63	3,93	3,93
Lower cost of living	3,67	4,16	3,41	3,26
Familiar culture and linguistic environment	3,85	2,61	2,68	2,67
Development of digital technologies	3,63	4,31	3,85	4,33

Source: own calculations, based on AP 05134108



**Figure 2.** Correlation of ‘absence of corruption’ pull factor with CPI of the host country

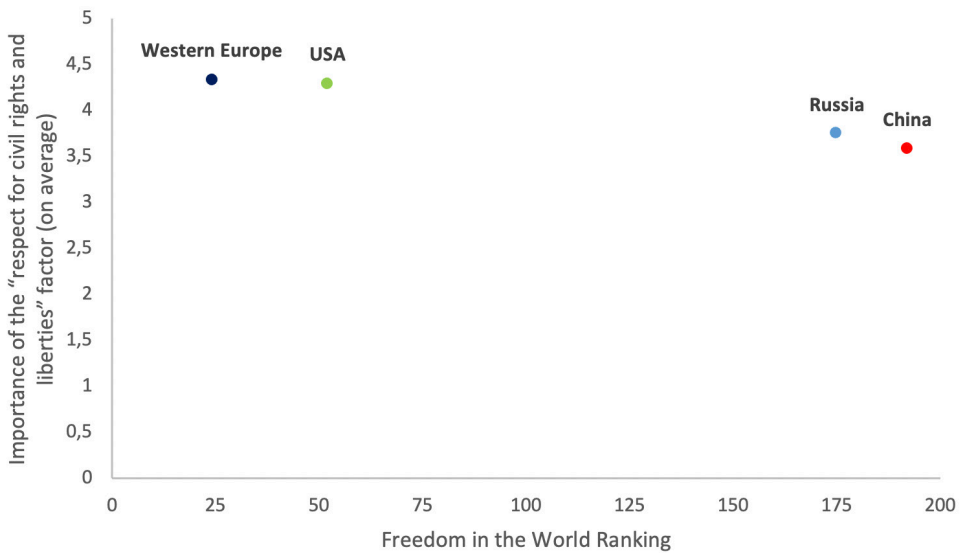
Source: Transparency International. *Corruption Perception Index 2019*: [https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/2019\\_CPI\\_Report\\_EN.pdf](https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/2019_CPI_Report_EN.pdf)

Similarly, a correlation is evident when ‘civil rights and liberties’ as a proximate driver is considered together with the ranking of the host countries in the Freedom in the World report (Freedom House, 2020) (see Figure 3); for those studying in the USA and Western Europe this was important, no so much for those in Russia and China.

**Table 6:** Correlation of ‘absence of corruption’ as pull factor with the country’s CPI

	Corruption Perception Index	Importance of the ‘absence of corruption in the host country’ factor
Russia	28	2,99
China	41	3,63
Western Europe	78	3,93
USA	69	3,93

Source: own calculations, based on AP 05134108



**Figure 3:** Correlation of ‘civil liberties’ pull factor with ranking of the host country in the Freedom of the World report

Source: Freedom House. Freedom in the World: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>

Furthermore, the analysis confirmed that familiarity of culture and linguistic environment was of greater importance for those studying in Russia (3,85). As for China, with its distinctive culture it was less important (2,61). ‘Development of digital technologies’ was a considerable pull factor in the USA (4,33) and in China (4,31). Also, students in China, in contrast to the others, demonstrated greater pragmatism in relation to ‘living costs’ (4.16) while for those in the USA that was the least important factor (3.26).

***Migratory trajectories of mobile students from Kazakhstan upon graduation***

The next task was to learn about respondents’ plans upon graduation. We were most interested to know how many were not planning to return to Kazakhstan and why. Thus, we established that 40,2% of respondents were not planning to return to Kazakhstan, while 33,5% were planning to return after a temporary stay. Those who were returning to Kazakhstan immediately comprised 12,7%. Evidently, the actual numbers might change considerably if 13,6% of ‘don’t knows’ would have been taken into account.



Once the migratory trajectories of mobile students from Kazakhstan were identified, we set out to better understand their reasons and the factors influencing them. Table 7 shows the relationship between various rationales behind the initial 'go study abroad' strategy and the migratory trajectory after graduation.

**Table 7:** Why study abroad and what to do after graduation

		Articulated migratory strategies			
		I am returning home immediately	I am planning to return after a while	I am not returning to the home country	I don't know
What was the principal reason for you to go study abroad?	I wanted to test my strengths and abilities in a foreign environment	22,2%	10,8%	8,5%	12,9%
	My parents persuaded me to go abroad to get my degree there	16,7%	8,1%	5,6%	9,7%
	Universities in the country where I will study are highly ranked internationally	22,2%	23,0%	14,1%	29,0%
	Education abroad will provide me with the opportunity to build a career on the global labour market	19,4%	23,0%	23,9%	22,6%
	Education abroad is a path to obtaining foreign citizenship	0,0%	0,0%	18,3%	3,2%
	The fees charged by universities in Kazakhstan are too high and this does not mean good quality	8,3%	8,1%	4,2%	19,4%
	Education in Kazakhstan does not meet international standards	5,6%	25,7%	22,5%	3,2%
	There are more grants and scholarship opportunities	2,8%	1,4%	1,4%	0,0%
	Other	2,8%	0,0%	1,4%	0,0%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Source: own calculations, based on AP 05134108

As we were able to distinguish three migratory trajectories, we were to build a profile for each of them and this is when the data collected during the in-depth interviews added considerably to

those of the survey. Thus, we identified the three profiles or trajectory types as follows.

### **Trajectory one: immediate returnees**

The first migratory trajectory of mobile students from Kazakhstan (12,7%) was to return to their home country or ‘migration for educational purposes’. The influence of micro-level pull factors was evident, reaffirming the relevance of the aspiration-desire model (Carling & Collins, 2018). These individuals – in a majority of cases, master’s and PhD students of humanities and social sciences – saw education abroad as an opportunity to test their knowledge and skills in a new, more challenging environment (22,2%). A considerably smaller number of ‘Immediate Returnees’ were preoccupied with such proximate drivers as ‘high university fees’ (8,3%) and ‘lower standards of education’ (5,6%) in Kazakhstan, yet there were macro-level push factors in some host countries. Thus, the majority of students from Kazakhstan in China were planning to return; 25% of them indicated that the chosen university had fallen short of their expectations.

As was found during the in-depth interviews, the government policy was a strong mediating driver creating additional pull factors. A number of ‘Immediate Returnees’ had been granted a scholarship under Kazakhstan’s government sponsored Bolashak Programme; out of 70 interviewees, 25 were Bolashak grant recipients, four were in Russia and the rest in Western European or American universities. The Bolashak scholarship, established in 1993 by President Nazarbayev, aims to provide talented youth with opportunities to receive an education in the world’s best universities. It was awarded to 13,244 people with the main destinations being in the UK and Ireland (48,8%); the USA and Canada (37,1%); Europe (4,7%) Asia and Oceania (4,8%) and Russia (4,6%). 99,1% of the Bolashak graduates were employed in Kazakhstan’s quasi-public sector (47,2%), private sector (32%), government agencies (12%), foreign companies (6,9%), public associations (0,9%), diplomatic missions and international organisations (0,1%). The ‘Bolashakers’ earned more and often occupied top positions: 503 (4.3%) out of 11,727 grant recipients (Bolashak, 2020).

The Bolashak graduates are under contractual obligation to return to Kazakhstan and stay from two to five years.

*I would rather stay in America for at least five years, as I would like to work here and gain some experience. During my studies, I worked for a company for almost a year. After graduation, I was offered a permanent job. But under the Bolashak contract I must return. If I had paid my own money, I would have stayed here, looked for opportunities to live in Washington, New York, in other larger cities where people with foreign experience are in demand, - master’s student in the USA.*

Those who planned to return were confident that their education met the highest international standards (22,2%) and would boost their global career (19,4%). Thus, their migratory strategy appears to fall into the rational choice and utility maximization paradigm (De Haas, 2010; De Jong & Gardner, 2013) but supplemented by aspirations and desires (Carling & Collins, 2018).

However, interviews revealed the micro-level factors of a different precipitating nature. Notably, it was parental guidance about where to go study and whether to return at all (16,7%). Parental financial support for children abroad was a factor of influence: “My parents are paying for my education, so I feel that I am much obliged,” said a student in China. Here a rational choice within the household appeared to be made by parents and implemented by children as NELM suggested (De Haas, 2010; Hagen-Zanker, 2008).

Additionally, there were reasons that went beyond mere utility maximization or self-actualization, as the in-depth interviews showed. The majority of those planning to return were ethnic Kazakhs. The interviewees pointed at patriotism and a sense of civic responsibility. “Why would you even ask such a question?” replied an interviewed female master’s student in China, “I am coming back to Kazakhstan. It is my motherland. I’ve got my degree and now I must do well for my country. That’s the whole point.” Family ties and commitments as well as attachment to the culture and

traditional lifestyle were common reasons for returning after graduation. A female bachelor's student in China said, "I am not keen to go back. If I do return it is only because of my parents. They invested in me a lot and I am the eldest of my siblings, I must help them now.", while a master's student in the USA explained, "I am definitely not staying here. I am coming home. We, the Kazakhs, have very strict norms and customs. One must rerun home and this is the right thing to do because these are my parents who raised me, cared for me, gave me this chance."

### **Trajectory two: deferred returnees**

The next group (33,5%) was those who despite articulating their intention to return were planning to delay returning. Their migratory strategy was 'educational migration for self-actualization'. Here the relevance of aspiration-desire (Carling & Collins, 2018) was the most evident. The structural macro-level drivers of proximate nature were 'education in Kazakhstan not meeting international standards' (25,7%) and 'the higher ratings of host country's education' (23%). They also had aspirations for international careers abroad (23%). They saw themselves as highly-skilled professionals employable anywhere within a globalised knowledge economy (Faist, 2000). Individualisation of migration as well as lifestyle and self-actualisation as motivation for cross-border mobility are those conceptual frameworks that appear to be the most appropriate to describe and explain these kinds of migratory trajectories (Cohen et al., 2015; Saar, 2016) together with the Carling and Collins (2018) aspiration-desire model. Notably, the number of 'Deferred Returnees' did not differ much from country to country or between undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students. As for ethnicity and area of studies, the biggest share were students of humanities and social sciences (38,1%) and those of ethnic Kazakh origin (47,3%). The in-depth interviews did not bring any additional factors of such a migratory trajectory and reaffirmed the survey findings.

### **Trajectory three: definite non-returnees**

42,2% of respondents were not planning to come back to Kazakhstan. Their migratory strategy was 'education for the purposes of emigration'. They shared with the others the desire to build a career on the international labour market and saw a foreign degree as a means to achieve that (23,9%). They were clearly dissatisfied with the quality of education in Kazakhstan (22,5%) as is shown in Table 7.

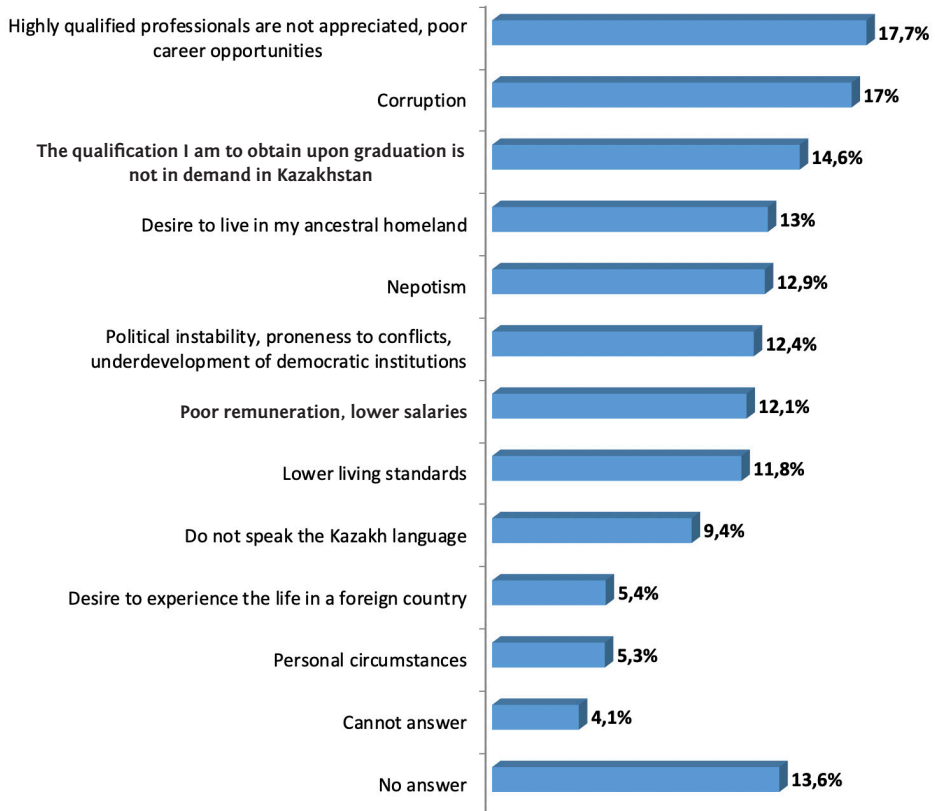
Notably, 18,3% of those not returning to Kazakhstan were aiming at permanent emigration and/or a foreign citizenship (see Table 7). The interviews showed that these were ethnic Russians studying in universities in Russia and mostly ethnic Kazakhs studying in the USA and Western Europe, originating from larger cities (34,2%) rather than smaller towns or villages (29,6%), majoring in science and engineering (43%) rather than in humanities or social sciences (27%) and enrolled in undergraduate (41,7%) instead of master's or PhD programmes (27,2%).

The survey data shown in Figure 5 was reaffirmed during the interviews and gave us a deeper understanding of the 'non-return' trajectory. At first glance, this was conventional 'utility maximisation' due to predisposing and proximate drivers. The interviews provided additional data and demonstrated a particular combination of predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating factors, all present in the push-pull plus model of Van Hear et al. (2018).

17,7% of 'Non-Returnees' pointed at poor career prospects and 14,6% stated that 'low demand for a particular qualification in Kazakhstan' reinforced their non-return decision. For example, a student in the USA said, "My country does not need me, my experience, knowledge and skills. The available jobs are paid ridiculously low, although this is an extremely demanding job with highest professional requirements. I may easily have a secure life in a Western country earning a handsome salary." A student in Germany said, "I am not at all confident in my future, there is only negligence and irresponsibility, poor management and poor governance." There were also justifications such as 'there are not enough jobs for the professionals with my qualification in Kazakhstan' and the 'labour market in Kazakhstan is not a place where my qualification is needed'.

However, when asked why they had chosen the programme that would give a qualification that was not in demand in Kazakhstan, the majority of respondents stated that they were oriented to the international labour market. Therefore, it would be sensible to assume that returning to Kazakhstan was not a priority.

**Provided you are not planning to return to Kazakhstan, would mind telling us why? Please, give the fullest answer possible**



**Figure 5:** Rational behind non-return migratory trajectory of mobile students from Kazakhstan  
 Source: own calculations, based on AP 05134108

Further, 17% pointed at corruption as the main reason for not returning to Kazakhstan. Notably, the interviews demonstrated that those studying in the USA and Western Europe were more concerned about corruption, as demonstrated by statements such as, “All the difficulties the nation is facing are there because of corruption”, “It is corruption that pushes decent people out of the country.”, “All those counter-corruption measures are just a sham serving some political interests, there is no fair competition when you have corruption. So I have no desire to come back.” As for personal experience of corruption, the interviewed were rather replicating what they had heard from the media, family or peers. “I have never faced corruption myself but heard a lot about it from my classmates,” said a bachelor’s student in Russia. “We have corruption in our country, many younger academics say so, and I often read in social media that it is difficult to do science there. It is virtually impossible to get a grant or a scholarship when you play fair and square. Connections are everything,” said a PhD student in the UK. “We all know that universities in Kazakhstan are corrupt. Even top officials admit that,” said a master’s student in the USA.

Similarly, nepotism was mentioned by 12,9% of the surveyed 'Non-returnees. 'Jobs-for-the-boys', lack of social mobility, and poor career opportunities were significant push factors. This group of respondents manifested frustration over governance at all levels in Kazakhstan and the failure of its institutions. Those were serious proximate drivers. "I am definitely not coming back. I have no connections to build a career. No-one is interested in what I am capable of, I have been always aware of that," said a student from Kazakhstan.

In the meantime, 13% of 'Non-Returnees' said that their major reason was the desire to live in their ancestral homeland. The study showed unambiguously that such an explanation was given only by those who were studying in Russia and self-identified as ethnic Russians. Notably, in this group parental influence was the most evident. The parents who, for some reason, had been unable to realise their own desire to move to Russia made considerable efforts to persuade their children to do so. Many of them had been granted Russian citizenship and were expecting their parents to move to Russia. During the interviews, they expressed their desire "to move to and find a job in Russia" or "in any country other than Kazakhstan." There was a combination of proximate pull factors and precipitating drivers in Kazakhstan at the micro level.

The additional driver, this time of a more precipitating nature, mentioned by 9,4% of 'Non-Returnees', was the inability to speak Kazakh. According to some participants, the status of the Russian language would probably diminish as the Kazakh language adopted the Latin script. They also tend to think that without being able to speak the language, ethnic Russians would face difficulties building a career in Kazakhstan. "It is very unlikely that I would achieve any success as I do not speak the language. I cannot be employed by any public or government agency... I won't be able to communicate efficiently," noted an interviewed student. However, in the course of the interviews, we could not find those who had been trying to learn the language, but there were plenty of those who expressed reluctance to do so. "Russians in Kazakhstan are rather inflexible in this respect, maybe this is a Soviet legacy when everything was in Russian. After the dissolution of the USSR, the Kazakh language started to dominate and now the nation will adopt the Latin script, that is a big problem... for the Russians, but this is a problem of our own doing. I knew a Russian bloke once, he was fluent in both Russian and Kazakh. And you know what? People treat him with respect! As for me, it is easier to leave than to learn the language," said one respondent, while another stated, "I do not speak the language, that's hard. I am unable to converse about the simplest things in Kazakh. I've always thought that it is too much trouble since everyone speaks Russian. Many successful people, ethnic Kazakhs even, do not speak the language, I hear."

Further, the survey established the interrelation between educational migration and the overall situation in the home country, as predisposing and proximate drivers such as 'probability of conflicts and quality of democratic institutions' were mentioned by 12,4% of respondents. The interviews showed that while those studying in the USA and Europe placed emphasis on the underdevelopment of democratic institutions, concerns about security were shared by the ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan studying in Russia as well as their parents.

The other reasons for choosing the non-return trajectory were 'lower salaries' (12,1%) and poorer 'living standards' (11,8%). The analysis of the data received from the 'Non-Returnees' showed that the push factors in Kazakhstan of structural proximate nature are of crucial importance together with predisposing ones, i.e. the language question and parental pressure while 'desire to gain a life experience' and 'personal circumstances' were referred to only by 5,4% and 5,3% of the 'Non-Returnees', respectively. Thus, the relative deprivation framework suggested by Stark and Taylor (1991a; 1991b) may be applicable. Unlike the utility maximization and conformity of the 'Immediate Returnees' or self-actualization of the 'Deferred Returnees', the non-return trajectory was an attempt to escape a situation perceived as depriving of the life this type of mobile students aspired to. Emigration appeared to be a solution and education was the easiest way to do so.

Thus, the relative deprivation model proved applicable to the two types of 'Definite Non-returnees' but for different reasons. Alongside ethnic Russian 'Non-returnees', there were mostly ethnic Kazakhs studying in the USA and Western Europe. The Russian 'Non-returnees' left Kazakhstan for

Russia – their historic motherland with familiar language and culture - because they thought that desirable life in Kazakhstan could have been feasible only if they were not Russians. The ethnic Kazakhs in the USA and Europe were attracted by civil rights and liberties and had left Kazakhstan due to undeveloped democratic institutions, nepotism and corruption. They all were influenced by the macro-level push factors they deemed to be structural and, therefore, unlikely to change in their lifetime.

Overall, migratory trajectories of mobile students were being formed by ‘predisposing’, ‘proximate’, ‘precipitating’ and ‘mediating’ drivers operating on macro, meso and micro levels in the home and host countries. Notably, predisposing macro and meso drivers proved to be stronger when pushing mobile students from Kazakhstan, while micro drivers of predominately precipitating character together with various individual desires and aspirations were more prominent while pulling them to a certain country. Thus, the conventional push-pull model within a functionalist rational choice paradigm was not sufficient; the analysis benefited considerably when the drivers such as relative deprivation and aspiration and desire were added into the push-pull plus framework as a result of the application of the in-depth interview method.

Speaking of the results, the study also demonstrated a reputation and branding problem of education in Kazakhstan. Some of the possible reasons may lie in the predominant discourses produced in conventional and social media and reproduced by families and peers. The interrelation between the brand of Kazakhstan’s education and the trajectories of mobile students from Kazakhstan is worth further investigation. Due to the limited resources and time, such investigation could not have been conducted within the framework of this particular project. Finally, one should also bear in mind that not all intentions would necessarily be realised due to various intervening obstacles (Lee, 1966). A study that would tell us how many of those who planned to stay abroad after graduation were actually able to do so appears rather promising.

## Conclusion

The article discussed the empirical study comprising a survey and a series of in-depth interviews that focused on the migratory trajectories of mobile students from Kazakhstan; whether they were educational or emigrational. The study enabled us to draw profiles of the three types of mobile students each with a distinctive trajectory. The in-depth interviews proved to be indispensable for revealing the factors that were beyond conventional utility maximization paradigm:

- ‘Immediate Returnees’ trajectory was prompted predominately, but not exclusively, by those applying ‘maximisation of utility’. They chose to go because of the poor reputation of Kazakhstan’s education; they were pragmatic while choosing the country to study. They were returning not only to maximise the utility of their more prestigious foreign education but also because it was a household decision in the first place. Some of them, being a product of a more traditional socialisation (the Kazakh language speakers, coming from rural areas or small towns), were under pressure of a more societal nature: family commitments, sense of duty, patriotism, and belonging to a particular culture. The mediating driver for many of them was the Bolashak programme, which entailed contractual obligations. In other words, predisposing and proximate drivers pushed them to study abroad, while proximate and precipitating drivers pulled them back.
- The rational choice of ‘Deferred Returnees’ was combined with desire of self-actualisation that went beyond economy but was sustained economically as they could afford to be the most selective about the country and, most importantly, the university and programme. Quality of life and education were the most important. These students aspired to become highly qualified professionals employable globally. They may be regarded as the embodiment of mobility fetishism (Bauder et al., 2017). Their strategy was formed under predisposing and proximate conditions in both home and host countries, and their migratory trajectory was mostly driven by micro-level factors of a precipitating character.
- The ‘Definite Non-returnees’ are those for whom ‘education for emigration’ was the most



desirable trajectory, because they believed that predisposing and proximate conditions in Kazakhstan would deprive them of the life they aspired to. Those were Russians in Russia and predominately Kazakhs in the USA and Western Europe.

Thus, the preliminary hypotheses that push factors in Kazakhstan would be predominant; education would be a means for permanent emigration for the majority of cases; and that migratory trajectories would be chosen 'rationally' for 'maximization of utility' were all partly confirmed. In other words, answering the headline question, we may state that 'education for emigration' was a popular trajectory for over 18% of those 40% of respondents who stated that were not planning to return, while the majority of mobile students from Kazakhstan were planning to return immediately or after a temporary stay abroad and went abroad for educational purposes.

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**Gulnar Nassimova** is a Doctor of Political Science, Professor, Head of the Department of Political Science and Political Technologies at al-Farabi Kazakh National University. The scope of the publications and research conducted by Professor Nassimova includes the structure, management

and resolution of political conflicts, the issues of social and political stability and electoral participation. Gulnar Nassimova is the Director of the 'Educational Migration from Kazakhstan: Trends, Factors, Societal and Political Implications' research project.

**Marem Buzurtanova** is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Political Science and Political Technologies of al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Her research and academic interests as well as numerous publications focus on the issues of international and national security and human rights, civil society and political stability. Marem Buzurtanova is a Research Fellow of a research project 'Educational Migration from Kazakhstan: Trends, Factors, Societal and Political Implications'.

**Kadyrzhan Smagulov** is a PhD in Political Science, Associated Professor, and Head of the Research Office at al-Farabi Kazakh National University. His research and publications concentrate on national security, political participation and electoral behaviour. He held the position of a research fellow at the Konkuk University, Seoul, South Korea supported by the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies. Kadyrzhan Smagulov is a Leading Research Fellow of a research project 'Educational Migration from Kazakhstan: Trends, Factors, Societal and Political Implications'.

**Kirill Kartashov** holds a Bachelor's degree in sociology and a Master's degree in economics. He is heading the project division in the department of integrated and *ad hoc* research of the BISAM Central Asia. Kirill Kartashov's interests are in conducting sociological studies on identity as well as on inter-ethnic and inter-confessional relations.