Article

Journal of International Students
Volume 14, Issue 3 (2024), pp. 131-148
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org

International Student Agency in Emergency: Insights from Government-funded Students From Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study uses data from interviews with 20 recipients of a Kazakhstani "Bolashak" scholarship to explore how international students overcome structural barriers and manifest agency in the conditions of public health emergency. The analysis addresses the gap in the scholarly literature on agency of international students by explicitly focusing on manifestations of agency in the experiences of students from Kazakhstan, who have not yet received sufficient attention in research, and by following the students in a variety of country destinations. In addition, in contrast to the majority of studies conducted in the past, instead of recruiting students on a campus of a specific university or in the context of a single country, this study recruits participants from among recipients of a government-sponsored scholarship. The findings are interpreted with the help of Relational Ecological Theory of Agency.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, international mobility, international students, pandemic, study abroad.

International students have become an important part of higher education across the world. In 2020, out of 236 million students enrolled at universities worldwide, nearly 6.3 million were in mobility[1] compared to 4.8 million in 2015, an increase of 32% (Guillerme, 2022). These numbers are likely to increase as the world is re-emerging from the global pandemic (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

The increasing numbers of international students have stimulated corresponding interest in understanding their experiences and institutional

[1] Internationally mobile student is defined as "an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from their country of origin" (UNESCO).

approaches to recruiting and supporting the students among scholars of international higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2012). Much of the existing literature on the experiences of international students has been shaped by "the narratives of deficiency," assuming a structural perspective in understanding the students' experiences (Lipura & Collins, 2020, p. 349). Within this structural perspective the focus is on understanding how international students "adjust" to the new environment, the kind of barriers they face, the sort of deficiencies they have and the kind of needs they share, which are different from the needs of domestic students (Inouye et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the extent and the ways in which these students exercise agency remains underexplored (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Tran & Vu, 2018; Volet & Jones, 2012). Innouye et al. (2022) attribute this gap in the literature to the embryonic stage in the development of the agency theory and to the lack of understanding how it can be potentially applied in international higher education.

In the attempt to facilitate the development of agency perspective in the study of the experiences of international students, Innouye et al. (2022) has conducted a systematic literature review on the topic. Their analysis has revealed that most of the studies (33%) were conducted on Chinese students and when samples included students from various home country contexts, the studies were based on the data collected in the West[2], frequently on campuses of individual universities. Based on this observation, they recommended that future research should focus on more diverse (not only Western) host country contexts and the experiences of students from various home country origins. Similar recommendations were made earlier by Lipura and Collins (2020) and Waters and Brooks (2013). In addition, the review has uncovered that only about a third of the studies used agency perspective (Inouye et al., 2022). Many studies took agency as given, did not provide a definition, did not include it in the conceptual framework or had only a passing mention of the concept in interpretation of the results and discussion.

This study addresses the gap in the scholarly literature on agency of international students by explicitly focusing on manifestations of agency in the experiences of students from Kazakhstan, who have not yet received sufficient attention in research, and by following the students in a variety of country destinations, including, but not limited to countries in the West. In addition, in contrast to most studies conducted in the past, instead of recruiting students on a campus of a specific university or in the context of a single country, we recruited participants from among recipients of a Kazakhstani government scholarship, following them to different host-country destinations and university campuses. Finally, a novelty of our approach is that we explore agency in the context of global emergency – COVID-19 pandemic. We treat pandemic as a unique event, which disrupted existing structures and created opportunities for more significant manifestations of agency.

[2] Refers to the countries of the European Union, the UK, Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand.

INTERNATIONALIZATION IN KAZAKHSTAN AND THE "BOLASHAK" SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Internationalization of higher education is one of the key instruments of higher education modernization in post-Soviet Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019). Since the time the country gained independence Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the international student exporting countries. Only recently, the government started to consider turning the country into a regional higher education hub intensifying its efforts in opening branch campuses, joint programs, and in attracting international students. One of the key mechanisms supporting Kazakhstani students' education abroad was the Bolashak (Kazakh for "future") program, a government-sponsored scholarship for study in top universities around the world. The First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, initiated the program in 1993 in response to the urgent need for qualified specialists as Kazakhstan transitioned to the market economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019). The goal of the program is to prepare specialists for key sectors of Kazakhstan's economy (Bolashaq, n.d.). While the program targeted undergraduates between 2005-2010 along with doctoral and masters degrees, since 2010 awards to undergraduate degrees were terminated due to the establishment of new Western-style Nazarbayev University in the country's capital (Perna et al., 2015). Over the 30 years of the program's existence, 12,689 specialists were trained abroad in top universities around the world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper *agency* is defined as an individual or collective capacity "to act with 'intentionality' in line with 'rational' choices and in response to a given circumstance" (Tran & Vu, 2018, p. 167) and "independently of determining constraints of social structure" (Calhoun, 2002). We assume *a relational-ecological approach* to agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). In this approach, agency is viewed not as a capacity residing in an individual, but as an *emergent* phenomenon (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestly et al., 2015), as "a temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments," which reproduces and transforms these structures through "interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970).

According to relational-ecological theory, agency is always associated with *interaction* or relations with others. The theory posits that "to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act" (Arendt, 1977, p. 188). In order to be a subject of an action we need others who respond to our initiatives. This is the main reason why agency cannot be viewed only as an attribute of an individual. Rather it should be viewed as the process of inter-action (Arendt, 1977).

In addition to that, agency is achieved via conceptualization of one's past, present and future (temporal dimension*)* and via interaction with the environment (contextual dimension). On the one hand, the extent of agency depends on an individual's sense of agency, i.e., their unique configuration of views on what is

possible in the future (projective dimension), what was possible in the past (iterative dimension), and consequently what is attainable at present (practically-valuative dimension) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). On the other hand, the extent of agency depends on the nature of the environment and the possibilities allowed for agency within it. One way in which environment shapes the agency potential is via available resources, which are sometimes conceptualized within the theory in terms of different 'capitals,' including economic, cultural, and social capital (Field, 2005).

Finally, according to this theory an individual engages in agency only *in response* to *problematic situation* (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Responsiveness implies that agency has to do with one's ability to change one's temporal orientations and thus one's relationship to structures (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). The condition of one encountering a problematic situation, in its turn, implies that agency does not mean that an individual engaging in it is creating alternative futures just for the sake of it (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Agency often takes place in a situation of crisis when past approaches to dealing with social structures fail to inform present realities and new structures need to be created. Thus, it is particularly important to study the manifestations of agency during the pandemic, which created disruptions to social structures and one's conceptualizations of past, present, and future. Exploring student agency in the context of global emergency can shed light on the circumstances that may help improve student experiences in crisis and emergency situations.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative exploratory design to address the research questions. The design is frequently used when a phenomenon is relatively new and there is limited understanding about it from prior research. The purpose of the approach is to explore the research questions without offering final and conclusive explanations (Singh, 2007). It leaves the researcher an opportunity for revising initial predictions and possible explanations and often ends in suggestion for more focused future explanatory studies (Reiter, 2017). This approach was deemed appropriate given that few prior studies explored international student experiences in terms of agency. Moreover, according to known literature, this study was the first attempt to understand how agency manifested during the global pandemic.

The study population were "Bolashak" government scholarship recipients from Kazakhstan, who were enrolled in graduate programs abroad during the pandemic. IRB was secured from two universities in which the authors were based. We used a maximal variation purposeful sampling approach to select participants, who would represent a variety of experiences (Creswell, 2013). The target criteria for variation were: (1) country of study, (2) degree level (Master's or Doctoral), (3) gender, and (4) time spent in the host country prior to the pandemic. These criteria were viewed as most important in contributing to variation in the experiences.

This study is part of the larger mixed methods study. For the larger study, participants completed the survey about their experiences during the pandemic,

demographic information, and shared their contact information if they were interested in a follow-up interview. We reached the potential participants with an invitation to participate in the survey in one of the following ways: (1) on Facebook groups, (2) via several WhatsApp and Telegram groups in different countries, and (3) via the official mailing list of the Center for International Programs (CIP), administrator of Bolashak scholarship. Given time differences between the research team and the participants and the overall lack of time that our participants experienced during the pandemic, we were able to recruit only a limited number of participants, which affected the quality of the sample in terms of the variability. Our sample was over-represented in some respects and under-represented in others.

Overall, we have interviewed 20 students (Table 1). Eight of the students studied in the UK. The remainder of the participants were from the U.S. (5), Netherlands (2), Germany (2), China (1), Singapore (1) and Switzerland (1). A third of the students started their studies in 2020, seven students came to the host university in 2019. The rest of the students came between 2016 and 2018. The majority of the students were enrolled in a Master's program (13) with the rest of the students in a doctoral program. Twelve respondents had kids under 18 years old. The sample was balanced in gender.

The data were collected with semi-structured Zoom interviews in June - December, 2021. The choice of the Zoom format was determined by the travel constraints, which had not yet been lifted at the time when interviews were conducted. The semi-structured format allowed us to organize the process of interviewing around the questions, which arose from the theoretical framework while also leaving flexibility to incorporate clarifying and follow-up questions, as well as to pursue unexpected themes.

The main body of the protocol included four categories of questions: (1) questions about individual experiences with COVID and the potential effects of the disease on the participant or their family; (2) questions about challenges and opportunities encountered as an international student during the pandemic; and (3) questions about strategies used by the students to deal with the novel challenges presented by the global pandemic.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Country of study	Program of study	Gender	Marital status	Have kids younger than 18?
Qanat	UK	Master's	Male	Single	No
Altay	The Netherlands	Master's	Male	Single	No
Gabit	UK	Doctorate	Male	Married	Yes
Nurlan	UK	Master's	Male	Divorced	Yes
Aray	U.S.	Master's	Female	Married	Yes

Nurgul	UK	Master's	Female	Married	No
Jandos	Germany	Master's	Male	Married	Yes
Madina	UK	Doctorate	Female	Married	Yes
Nazym	U.S.	Masters	Female	Married	Yes
Batyr	U.S.	Doctorate	Male	Married	Yes
Kairat	U.S.	Masters	Male	Single	No
Janat	U.S.	Masters	Male	Married	Yes
Murat	UK	Doctorate	Male	Married	Yes
Lyazzat	UK	Doctorate	Female	Married	Yes
Dana	Switzerland	Doctorate	Female	Single	No
Saken	China	Master's	Male	Single	No
Nurzhan	Germany	Master's	Male	Married	Yes
Dana	The Netherlands	Doctorate	Female	Single	No
Askhat	Singapore	Master's	Male	Married	Yes
Ayaulym	UK	Master's	Female	Single	No

The interviews were conducted via Zoom at the time convenient for the participants. The participants were explained the purposes of the interview and potential risks and benefits of participation. They signed a consent form, which included a permission for recording. In addition to the recording, the interviewers also took notes during the interviews.

The process of data analysis was guided by insights from related studies and Relational-Ecological Theory, which was used to interpret students' interactions with one another and others including family, friends, peers, university faculty and staff as well CIP staff. In addition, we explored temporal and contextual dimensions to better understand students' manifestations of agency. While temporal dimension analysis revealed students' manifestations of agency in the present as they made sense of the past and the future, contextual dimension analysis focused on agency manifestations as students interacted with their environment including the disruptions caused by the pandemic in academic and non-academic lives. The focus of the analysis was to explore how students engaged in agency in response to problematic situation presented by global pandemic (Biesta & Tedder, 2006).

The data was analyzed with the help of NVivo by two authors using a sequence of open, axial and selective coding, which led us to theory development. Each of the coders conducted coding separately. Subsequently, the resulting codes were compared, discussed, and modified to achieve an agreement. Final themes were derived from the collaboratively negotiated codes. In developing the themes, we tried to answer the research questions and organize the results based on the ideas from the theoretical framework.

FINDINGS

Non-academic Challenges

"Bolashak" students faced a variety of non-academic challenges during the pandemic. One of the most important ones was associated with the lack of clarity about access to health care for themselves, their families abroad, as well as the absence of a mechanism for reaching relatives in Kazakhstan in situations of emergency. Unarguably, access to health care became an issue for all citizens of the host countries, but the status as an international student made things more complicated. Sometimes, students were not clear about availability of vaccines for their children and spouses. Even when students and their families did not get sick, they were concerned whether they would be given lower priority in medical assistance in overwhelmed hospitals when compared to locals and whether they will be provided emergency transportation to Kazakhstan by the insurance companies in the novel context. These concerns about personal health and the health of immediate family were also combined with worries about the health of their parents and extended family in Kazakhstan, as well as about the impossibility of quick travel to Kazakhstan if such a need emerged due to travel restrictions. As Lyazzat shared: "We were really concerned about our families back at home…My husband's relatives, I mean his father and his brother and his brother's family - they all got COVID."

In addition to their concerns as international students, study participants had unique concerns in relation to their obligations for their sponsor as sponsored students. Beyond physical health, these concerns exacerbated mental health issues as Kairat said:

> My stress impacted me… Some questions I worried about included: What happens if I am at the hospital with COVID? Will my health insurance as an international student cover my treatment? If suddenly my health deteriorates in the U.S., and I die how my body will be delivered? One of the most important pressures was related to my fear that if something happens to me, my parents will lose the house they put as collateral for my studies [requirement of "Bolashak"].

Social isolation has affected the "Bolashak" students to a greater extent than local students. The need to isolate and concerns about health prevented students from participating in social events, interacting with the community, and building local social networks. This inevitably affected the ability of students to learn cultural norms and to integrate with the host culture. For some students like Nurlan, this affected the overall quality of their study abroad experience:

> Our studies transitioned to fully online… During my entire 9-10 months here, I have not experienced student or cultural life… There are about 200 students in my cohort, and I have not seen anyone. It is unfortunate… When you go to a foreign country you want to meet your groupmates from all over the world, network. But I could not make that connection… Since we've come

> here, we wanted to learn the local culture... But since everyone was in lockdown, I could not learn their culture and mentality.

Many students reported issues with finding housing, securing, or breaking property leases during the pandemic. Those who arrived in the middle of the pandemic had trouble renting apartments and were pushed to rent without having a chance to look at the property:

> We could not find housing for a long time. We had to choose apartments based on online pictures… Another challenge was related to not being able to find housing on campus as we wanted. Campus staff did not respond because they were closed… We had to live in Airbnb for two months. (Madina)

Those who wanted to go back home for the duration of lock down to be closer to their families were not able to do so because their landlords did not allow them to break lease contracts and the funding agency was not willing to pay for continuation of the lease in case of the students' relocation back to Kazakhstan. As Altay shared:

> At some moment, I realized that everything will be online all the time and thought I would go back to Kazakhstan to continue studies. I thought I would save on accommodation and living costs. But I realized that I cannot terminate my lease contract early…The only exception for early termination of the contract is if you discontinue your studies or die.

The pandemic has made financial issues more stressful for many "Bolashak" students. Unable to travel to Kazakhstan due to travel restrictions at the beginning of the pandemic or making a choice to stay for an additional summer semester to catch up with their studies when travel became possible, students had to find resources to pay for their housing and sustenance over the summer, when the funder does not normally cover their living and studies abroad. Those students, who had to support families left behind in Kazakhstan or staying with them abroad at times found the amount of scholarship insufficient to cover increasing costs while jobs hard to land with hiring freezes and transfer of operations online. As Kairat shared: "I had financial issues… I didn't have a stipend during summer. Bolashak said I could take summer classes [to get a stipend]… But I could not find a class I was interested in."

Prior studies reported an increase in racism towards Asian people during the pandemic (Findling et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023). Several students from Kazakhstan shared stories about being subjected to racism-motivated insults due to their Asian appearance. Some mentioned that they stopped going outside at nights and avoided Asian restaurants being afraid of becoming a target of attacks. Others shared feeling unsafe in public spaces like buses because people would avoid sitting next to them or close their mouth when they were passing by. Inevitably, these concerns contributed to the feeling of anxiety and depression:

> We do look Asian… I was afraid of going outside especially in the evening because you do read about all that Asian hate during COVID especially in

> Europe or in the U.S. Then I remember a couple of times when myself, my husband, and my daughter were taking a walk in the evening in the summer, a group of local teenagers yelled at us: "Oh, you, Corona people"... (Lyazzat)

The combination of the problems indicated above contributed to the decline in mental health among some "Bolashak" students. The feelings of anxiety and powerlessness affected the academic motivation of students, as well as their ability to engage in complex academic tasks, inevitably affecting their performance. Worries about grades and their potential effect on funding cycled back into the feeling of anxiety.

Two features of the context contributed to variation in student experiences. The first feature was associated with the presence of immediate family. The experience of married couples was different than the experience of single students. Some problems were more severe, such as difficulties with funding housing or financing one's living in the host country. However, some problems were simplified by having a close relative in the vicinity with whom one could maintain close social relationship despite the social isolation requirement. For some families COVID became a wreckage of dreams and hopes of living together happily ever after. For others, it became a test, which led to strengthening of relationships. As Madina shared:

> COVID helped to strengthen my relationships with my husband. When we were in Kazakhstan, he was busy at work, and I was always with kids. Then there were also relatives…Since we came …we became closer with my husband… He started helping me around the house such as vacuuming or washing dishes. When we were in Kazakhstan, we had traditional roles because of social pressures and stigma…We used to fight a lot in Kazakhstan.

On the other hand, for Nazym, the absence of family to support during these difficult times contributed to family falling apart:

> Pandemic accelerated the process [of our separation] because we were stuck in four corners with no opportunity to just take a break or distract ourselves. Everything was under pressure. We could not relax. This experience of living abroad without anyone's support… Even if there was support, I don't know. As they say relationships either become stronger under difficult circumstances…or they fall apart.

Overcoming the novel challenges presented by the pandemic was more difficult for students, who were the only Kazakhstani students in their host university or were one of the very few in the host country. Many students relied on networks and friendships with other Kazakhstani students for advice and help. Not having access to such help and advice made the experience tougher.

Academic Challenges

Academic experiences of international students during the pandemic were very stressful. Many of the students had continuing struggles with the foreign language,

which had repercussions for comprehension of and performance in complex graduate level courses even before the pandemic times. It worsened during the times of the pandemic when paired with online format of delivery, lack of access to the sufficient amount and quality of supervision, and peer support. Students mentioned that online format of delivery made oral comprehension of the foreign language more difficult, affected the quality of online group work, and did not leave room for asking clarifying questions or asking for help. While instructors were generally available for supervision, establishing personal connection and explaining unique individual circumstances was difficult due to the online format of meetings. Many advisers were troubled by mental health issues and were overwhelmed with requests for personal meetings. For instance, Altay elaborated on not being able to receive the needed support from his advisors:

> I have study advisors at the university. But they were not available when I needed them most… I also could not see other students. We sat in lectures online, but everyone's screen was turned off and no one could see each other. Mentally it was difficult.

Much of the work in host universities required establishing social contacts with peers and working in groups. However, "Bolashak" students had trouble developing relations with local students due to lack of cultural knowledge and skills, which would have otherwise emerged in normal face-to-face classrooms. Opportunities for face-to-face interaction with peers were constrained by social isolation requirements or by restriction on conducting meetings within dormitories. Many students felt lonely and left to themselves in dealing with their problems unless they were able to develop relations and form study groups with a small group of co-nationals or other international students. As Qanat shared:

> It was so hard to understand some courses. I struggled at the beginning because there was nobody to ask for help – we were all stuck in our homes. At some point I decided to get in touch with some of my classmates and to meet with them regularly in a study group. I was afraid to get sick, but I also could not survive by myself with my limited English.

One of the most troubling complications of COVID-19 pandemic was associated with the constraints of the living space, which had to be used as study space. Many single "Bolashak" students shared apartments or dorm rooms with several other students. With several roommates attending Zoom classes, Internet connection frequently failed, and the noise level made classes difficult to follow: "When I studied in my dorm room, I had trouble focusing. My roommates had online classes at the same time. Some used headphones others didn't…It was distracting" (Altay).

Students with children experienced the same issues as their kids had to attend online classes at schools, except parents' experience was now complicated by the need to serve as at home IT support person, who was distracted from own classes by the need to fix Internet connection, computer hardware or software or the duty to police over-indulgence with video games. As Nazym shared: "Balancing

between school and family was difficult… I had to study in the hallways because my kids were home studying online."

Faced with a variety of academic and non-academic challenges several students reported difficulty graduating on time. This was particularly exacerbated for doctoral students who faced additional stressors with disruptions to data collection and fieldwork due to travel restrictions and lockdowns. As a result, some students had to make changes to their dissertation study designs including moving data collection online. Meanwhile, the conditionalities of funding have not changed quickly in response to the pandemic. The recipients were expected to graduate according to the contract regardless of the complications created by the pandemic. Some students filed requests for extension, but the wait time for a response from the funding agency was at times too long and may have reached students close to the expected graduation date. This caused much unnecessary stress and interfered with the ability to focus on theses and dissertations while mental health was already affected by other anxieties of the pandemic. As Murat shared:

> It was a great support that they provided such opportunity [to extend studies]. However, the implementation took a long time. It further exacerbated my stress level because my studies were ending but I was not finishing on time and the decision [about extension] was still not available.

Overall, COVID-19 pandemic has undermined many university structures and practices. In the absence of past solutions for the novel problem, many universities intentionally allowed faculty members and staff unprecedented levels of autonomy and creativity in teaching and student advising. While novel approaches emerged with respect to online instruction and advising, many processes remained ambiguous, and many structures continued to stay loose. This looseness amplified the strength of the problems experienced by international students, but also created opportunities for autonomous action and agency.

Agency Manifestations

COVID-19 pandemic put people in the very unnatural context of social isolation. Interestingly, such social isolation affected both the ability of students to familiarize with and enculturate in the novel social structure, as well as the ability to display agency. Relational-ecological theory predicts that social structure reproduces itself and agency becomes possible only in the process of interaction of an individual with other people. Many students reported the feeling of powerlessness and loss of control during first lockdowns. This feeling made many of the students later in the pandemic gradually subdue the feeling of anxiety for their health and seek social interaction with other people in a way, which would be relatively low risk, but would allow to break debilitating solitude. These first steps to break social isolation could be viewed as one of the earliest manifestations of agency. Because connecting to local social networks was challenging during the pandemic and return to Kazakhstan was problematic for most students due to the travel restrictions, students started to take active steps to connect with other

students in their host country. For instance, students connected with other students or immigrant Kazakhstani families, whom they invited to their homes or visited with lower risk for health. When other Kazakhstanis were not available, students tried to build closer relations with other international students:

> I connected with them [other Kazakhstani students] before I came to the U.S. They helped me a lot before our arrival… We were in close contact with local Bolashak students… Both Bolashak students were with families, and we stayed connected. We broke quarantine rules and often visited each other's homes to feel less lonely. (Batyr)

When in-person interaction was not feasible, students found other creative ways to build community and fill the gap for socialization. For instance, some participants built community through public engagement and volunteering activities online. As Madina shared:

> I am an extrovert. Socialization is very important for me… I missed such opportunities, especially, in terms of professional socialization…That is why I started to volunteer at the association [of graduate students] by giving live talks, writing articles about PhD students… With the help of the association, I expanded my professional network, which would be impossible in the COVID-19 times otherwise. I met many of my colleagues with whom I might collaborate in the future.

Another way, in which agency manifested was in international students taking greater ownership of the process of learning. This agency was frequently the result of students recalibrating and reconceptualizing their pre-pandemic expectations from study abroad and their predictions about their post-pandemic professional futures. Having accepted the fact that their study abroad experience is going to be lacking in interaction with the local culture and people, that their studies are going to be online with repercussions for the quality of group work, lab work, instruction and advising, many of our participants tried to come up with remedial strategies. Two strategies were typically utilized. Some students ignored institutional rules about visitation in dorms and got organized into study rooms to be able to help one another face-to-face. Other students tried to find alternative instructional opportunities online. As Altay shared: "I connected with international students… We met and worked together despite the risks. …We went to each other's rooms and studied together since it was not allowed to study together in the library."

Other students manifested agency through advocating for their needs both at university and Bolashak. For instance, Nurgul, struggling with a sense of isolation, stress, and anxiety, reached out to the department leadership in her university and communicated her need for in-person interactions and mentorship support. Based on her advocacy, the university established a mentorship program, which provided opportunities to have weekly meetings with a mentor. Moreover, she initiated a WhatsApp chat for her cohort in the program.

Another unexpected manifestation of agency was in accepting the inevitability of the challenges caused by the pandemic and letting go of worries

about academic matters out of their control including thesis milestones and graduation timeline. Instead, participants found the positive aspects of the pandemic including enjoying the moment with family in lockdown:

> During the pandemic my whole family felt like "Oh, that's peace." I mean we were not rushing anywhere because everything was closed. We could just stay at home or take a walk somewhere in the park by ourselves. So that feeling was good. In a way we understood that there was no point in hurrying. (Lyazzat)

An unusual manifestation of agency was related to interaction of "Bolashak" students with the funding agency. Due to the bureaucratic nature of operation of the Bolashak scholarship administering agency, the reaction time of the organization in response to the pandemic was somewhat slower than in case of less regulated universities. CIP had to receive approval from the national-level decision-makers to make changes or to offer additional support to students during the pandemic. Whereas universities could learn from one another when adopting and introducing emergency measures, the CIP had to deal with the situation on its own having no peer organizations to mimic or compare its own actions with (Kuzhabekova & Amankulova, 2023). Often finding itself at a loss in understanding the situation and identifying possible courses of action, the CIP was seeking for the scholarship recipients' input. The students quickly learned they could mobilize and communicate their needs and preferred course of action more effectively if they organized in WhatsApp and social media groups. We heard students in several countries reporting that they used WhatsApp to raise problems, collaboratively discuss an issue, develop a consensus on a possible solution and get organized for the purposes of discussion on how to present and lobby the issue with the CIP. Below is an example of how students used these spaces to advocate for their needs:

> "Some students used to text in the group chat [administered by CIP] if they did not receive a response from their Bolashak coordinator. If they texted in the chat, they typically received feedback within half an hour to an hour." (Qanat)

These online spaces also helped students to build community and to support each other emotionally. Students shared how they felt supported emotionally because they saw that they were not only ones having such issues and were able to reach out directly to those students who were having similar issues and connect. Students also supported each other by answering questions, sharing experience in relation to visa, rent, insurance, or vaccine requirements:

> What was most useful is that the chat created the connection… The chat's help was enormous. It was not only for connecting with CIP but was also intended to form connections among students. You could ask questions from all students and discuss common issues together. Because we read all students' opinion. What issues they are facing? How did they find solution? Through that exchange we helped each other. It also helped emotionally. You

> start feeling more self-confident. You realize that you are not the only one facing this issue so we can resolve it together… Since they write about their issues in the group chat you identify them and can text them directly and discuss further. (Murat)

As a result of collective action, students were able to impact important policy changes. Examples included: (1) Before the pandemic students were required to return to Kazakhstan within 15-30 days of finishing their studies. However, during the pandemic they were allowed to stay a little longer if there were no flights or financial means to urgently buy tickets for their family even though the scholarship is individual and does not consider the needs of family members of recipients; (2) if the pandemic disrupted the dissertation work process students could apply for extension and receive additional stipend for up to a semester or a year; (3) UK students who returned to Kazakhstan during the summer were able to receive a stipend equivalent to the one they received in the UK if they were not able to terminate their landlord contracts but wanted to return to Kazakhstan. According to previous regulations, students used to receive the stipend equivalent to the stipend of local doctoral students when in Kazakhstan which was much lower than the UK cost of living.

Finally, Kazakhstani students' agency was very evident in the brokerage role they started to play in the relationship between their universities and the CIP. Based on the account of several students, communication between the academic institutions and the funding agency was lacking not only at the time of the pandemic but before that. Universities seem to have treated Kazakhstani students similarly to other international students with little regard to the peculiarities of their particular funding arrangement and limitations on the time for graduation and conditionalities of scholarship provision, which were imposed by the Kazakhstani government. Meanwhile, the CIP often failed at effective communication due to the constraints of the bureaucratic expectations of the government and the need to simultaneously interact with multiple universities from different higher education systems, each with their own idiosyncratic regulations. Many students reported that they often served as mediators in the relationships and communication between their university and the funder, contacting one or the other, clarifying expectations and rules and explaining these to the other party in the language, which took into consideration institutional and cultural intricacies. In establishing and brokering this communication, they also often shaped changes in the policies and interpretations of the policies in their particular situations, thus actively influencing the structure as agents:

> There is a total lack of connection between the university and Bolashak because university does not see Bolashak as an authority. Bolashak also cannot tell the university anything directly because university does not take anything they say seriously…I had to be a mediator between them. For instance, I had to approve the degree plan with Bolashak. University does not have anything like that. But Bolashak needed it… I asked the University, they said: "We don't know." I asked Bolashak they said: "We need it." You are in the middle… I asked several times both sides… Then I drafted it myself and

spoke to university in their language and brought the paperwork. That paper is important for Bolashak because they pay the stipend based on that. (Gabit)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the study clearly indicate the global pandemic served as the "perfect storm", which undermined many established academic structures and policies in universities around the world. This unconventional looseness of structures created a larger zone of possible agency manifestation for international students. In addition, it pushed students to radically reconsider their past expectations from study abroad and approaches to study, their predictions about their professional futures, as well as their evaluation of the present academic opportunities in the university abroad. These reconsiderations pushed students to act outside the limits and "boxes" created by the social structures of the host countries and academic systems and to come up with a variety of unconventional approaches. To achieve their goals regardless of the structural barriers and opportunities, students mobilized and pushed shared agendas and policy approaches with their universities and the funding agency. In that sense, international students from Kazakhstan were not passive recipients of the inculturation pressures of the host societies and academic cultures. Rather, they acted as highly autonomous agents taking ownership of their international education experiences, reaching out to other students for academic support, and actively lobbying and brokering in negotiation of their interests with the universities and the funding agency.

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of previous studies which used agency perspective to explore the experiences of international students. These results demonstrate that manifestations of agency occur not only in Western university contexts but may happen in any academic environment. In addition, the agency was clearly demonstrated using the previously unavailable empirical data on students from Kazakhstan. Finally, the study allowed to reveal that the context of pandemic or, most likely, other emergencies, which disrupt established social structures within academic environments, have a greater potential for agency manifestations by creating ambiguity in the structures and providing students with space for autonomous decision-making and action. Finally, the study shows that funded students originating from the same country might potentially have a greater potential for agency due to their ability to mobilize faster and in greater quantities than other groups of international students in order to lobby their interests with the purpose of modifying social structures and academic or funding policies.

Overall, the paper clearly demonstrates that relational-ecological theory of agency has a great explanatory potential in analyzing the experiences of international students. Unlike dominant approaches to the study of international students, it allows to view these students not only as passive adopters of local practices, cultures and social expectations, but also as active shapers of their own academic experiences and professional futures, who have the capacity to push universities and funders to bend the rules and policies to accommodate the students' needs.

One important practical implication from our study for international educators and funders is that they should pay greater attention to establishing peer-mentoring mechanisms for international students and to increasing international students' engagement in decision-making. The former would enhance the agentic capacity of international students allowing them to learn from and empower one another. The latter could enhance the educational and social experiences of international students leading to the development of greater independence, leadership and collaborative decision-making skills. In addition, greater international student engagement in leadership could lead to improvement in the quality of existing policies and practices with respect to international students, while also enhancing campus experiences of the larger student population.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:

■ *None*
☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
☐ *Some sections, with extensive editing*
☐ *Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
☐ *Entire work, with extensive editing*

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