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Returning through Front or Back Door: Legibility Sorter for Overseas Ph.D. Holders in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

The article reports the results of an interview-based study exploring how internationally educated Ph.D. degree holders re-integrate into research environment in Kazakhstan and how the process of reintegration varies depending on the country of study. We found that returnees from non-Western countries experience greater challenges than returnees from the Western contexts. Applying the concept of "legibility" we reveal that the variation in the experiences is the result of operation of a legibility sorting mechanism used by the state in valuation of the quality of doctoral education of two formerly colonial academic systems – the post-Soviet and the Western one, which compete as they exert neo-colonial claims on the academic system in Kazakhstan. The state uses foreign degree recognition mechanism as a heterogeneity producing system signaling the stakeholders the desired perception of the value of the different degrees. The differentiation in the experiences results from the sorting.

Keywords: legibility, readjustment, research capacity, returning scholars, study abroad

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there has been an increasing interest among policy makers in many transitional economies to strengthen the research capacity of universities in the attempt to stimulate economic development (World Bank, 2010). A key mechanism used by policymakers to increase universities' research potential has been internationalization (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018). Notably, study abroad is considered one of the most effective solutions because it supplements the domestic supply of

high-quality human resources to countries with the lower quality of research training in universities (Stigger et al., 2018). While some researchers raise concerns about undesirable consequences of brain drain from the global South associated with study abroad (Oosterbeek and Webbink, 2011), universities, governments, and international organizations offer international mobility funding to students interested in going abroad (Perna et al., 2014). As a results, the number of international students has been steadily increasing around the world since 2001 (Choudaha, 2017).

This increase in the number of international students (i.e. students who undertake all or part of their tertiary education in a country other than their own (Perna et al., 2014, p.3)) has been accompanied with the rise in the global inquiry on student mobility (Nicolescu & Galalae, 2013; Yudkevich et al., 2016). Most existing research focuses on undergraduate students (Kiisler, 2021) with less attention paid to international mobility of graduate students (Dirkx et al., 2016). In addition, studies tend to focus on international students' motivations and experiences, as well as on outcomes of study abroad (Ogden et al., 2021). While the number of studies on post-graduation experiences, including readjustment of returnees to home country environments, have been increasing (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010), more research is needed on returnees in various country contexts (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019).

The purpose of the study is to contribute to global inquiry by exploring reintegration of doctoral study returnees in Kazakhstan. The study will shed light on variation in the experiences of returnees by the country of study responding to the recommendation of prior studies (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019), which called for further exploration of the potential drivers of such variation.

The study is organized around the following research questions:

(1) To what extent doctoral returnees differ in their experiences of readjustment to Kazakhstani research environment depending on the country of destination?
(2) What are the drivers of these differentiated experiences?

To answer the research questions, we used the theoretical construct of "legibility" (Scott, 1998) explaining heterogeneity of returnees' experiences. The application of the concept allowed us to conclude that the variation in the experiences is the result of the operation of a legibility sorting mechanism used by the state in valuation of the quality of doctoral education and the research performance of two formerly colonial academic systems – the post-Soviet and the Western, which exert neo-colonial influences on the academic system of Kazakhstan.

INTERNATIONALIZATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

Since the first days of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstani educational reformers have reached outside the country for recipes of educational modernization (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). At the dawn of independence, in response to the severe deficit of qualified cadre, the government launched the international "Bolashak" mobility program (Sagintayeva & Jumakulov, 2015). The scholarship has expanded from educating 785 Master's students in top

universities of world by 2004 to educating 12,459 students at various levels of higher education between 2005-2018 (Musapirova, 2019). Thirty years after the country's independence Bolashak alumni have become key agents in transforming leading ministries, think-tanks, big corporations, and research labs, as well as passing their knowledge as faculty at Kazakhstan's top universities (Kiselyeva, 2021).

One of the main driving forces of educational reform in Kazakhstan was signing the Bologna Declaration in 2010 (Tampayeva, 2015). Kazakhstan used the Bologna framework to bring its higher education system in alignment with the European ones (Kuzhabekova, 2020). The framework offered solutions on how to modernize the degree structure, curriculum and teaching methods inherited from the Soviet Union and align them with the new socio-economic reality. Kazakhstan's participation in the Bologna process has resulted in the expansion of international research collaboration, institutional, and joint degree offerings (Tampayeva, 2015). Importantly, joining the Bologna process provided access to European student and faculty mobility schemes (Kuzhabekova, 2019). During the period from 2011 to 2019 the number of Kazakhstani students participating in international mobility has increased from 350 to 2,694 per year. A half of the students (1,273), who participated in mobility in 2019 studied in the EU (Center of the Bologna Process and Academic Mobility, 2019).

Since 2007 the focus of higher education reform in Kazakhstan has shifted from improving the quality and relevance of education to strengthening research capacity of universities. One of the barriers to achieving the goal was the lack of faculty having modern skills in conducting research (State Program for the Development of Science 2007-2012, 2007). In response, the Bolashak scholarship was expanded to doctoral program applicants. Moreover, an increasing number of individuals pursued Ph.Ds abroad via scholarships from the admitting universities, the USAID, the International Monetary Fund, the British Council, DAAD, and other funders (Center for the Bologna Process and Academic Mobility, 2019).

An important role in preparing internationally competitive scholars, has been assigned to a newly created Nazarbayev University (NU). The institution was established in 2010 in collaboration with several top universities from other countries with the vision of entering the list of World-class universities. The university enjoys autonomy from the Ministry of Education, hires 85% of its faculty from abroad, selects the best students from around the country, and offers instruction in English. For many students, the university has become a training ground for continuing with doctoral education abroad. The university has become the most attractive place of employment for Kazakhstanis with doctoral degrees from abroad.

Prior research on readjustment of returning scholars

Several studies have been conducted on the topic of readjustment of returning scholars to home countries after receiving a graduate degree abroad. This topic has started to attract attention from over the last decade. Given that the most desirable destinations are in the West and many non-Western countries try to capitalize from the enhanced human capital of the returnees, the research on the

topic tends to focus on the experiences of return to non-Western countries. The existing studies have focused on returnees to China (Gill, 2010; Hao et al., 2016; Jonkers and Tijssen, 2008), Saudi Arabia (Alkubaidi and Alzhrani, 2020; Almuarik, 2019), Vietnam (Hoang & Ho, 2020; Le & LaCost, 2017; Thi Nguyen et al., 2021), Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019; Oleksiyenko, & Ross, 2023) Malaysia (DaWan et al., 2020), Cambodia, Israel (Remennick, 2022) and Tongo (Franken et al., 2016).

The existing research has been qualitative in nature and has been based on interviews with a small sample of students returning to one country. While the findings of the studies are not generalizable, some general themes can be derived about the commonalities of the experiences of returnees. One striking finding is that returning scholars come back with a strong commitment to make a positive change in their societies (E.g.: Kuzhabekova et al., 2019; Franken et al., 2016; Hoang & Ho, 2020). At the same time, returnees report experiencing a cultural shock, which exceeds in level the shock they had faced upon arrival to the country of study (E.g.:Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020; DaWan et al., 2020; Thi Nguyen et al., 2021). Few returnees expect that their own countries have changed, whereas this inevitably happens in addition to the change in the attitudes of the scholars as a result of living abroad (Fanari et al., 2021). Many returnees experience personal life and employment-related challenges (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019). Moreover, returnees in several studies reported that they had not developed understanding of the local context and communication norms, which are expected by the future employees making them less desirable for employment despite the advantage of having more advanced education than local graduates (E.g. Kuzhabekova et al., 2019; Hoang & Ho, 2020).

The personal challenges were explored in greater depth in Saudi Arabia (Alkubaidi and Alzhrani, 2020; Almuarik, 2019), where the Western-trained returnees face the greatest hardships due to radical cultural differences between the host and home country with respect to relations within the extended family. Many returnees start their own families during study abroad. Return challenges their relationships with spouses, which were formed outside the home country context, as well as stresses the immediate family by the push to integrate in the larger extended family hierarchy. Many male returnees face the social expectation to assume financial responsibility for the members of the extended family due to their enhanced social status and income. While other studies have not explored family-related readjustment challenges in depth (E.g.: Le & LaCost, 2017), there is evidence that the issues faced by Saudi returnees are common for returning scholars from other societies with strong familiar ties and this topics needs further attention, especially, because one of the studies reported that challenges within the personal domain have spill-over effects on work-related experiences (Almuarik, 2019).

Existing studies have also revealed that returnees face issues with initial employment (E.g.: DaWang et al., 2020; Hoang & Ho, 2020; Le & LaCost, 2017). This is typically attributed to three factors. First, employment success depends on access to domestic social networks, which is often weakened for scholars educated abroad (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019; Thi Nguyen et al., 2021). Second, the

returnees often lack understanding of the local context, professional norms, terminology, and professional communication skills, which make them less attractive for some employers (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019; Hoang & Ho, 2020). Third, there may be misalignment in the area of training of the returnees, on the one hand, and the needs of the local job market, on the other (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019; Da Wang et al., 2020). In addition, in countries with lower level of development of university research, returning scholars have difficulty finding research-related employment in general (E.g.: Gill, 2010; Hoang & Ho, 2020; Da Wang et al., 2020). Many scholars agree to jobs in adjacent fields or are appointed in teaching/administrative positions.

Prior studies have also identified a set of common challenges/barriers that returnees encounter in their scholarly jobs. Firsts, many scholars report difficulties in access to research funding, modern facilities, as well as other basic research resources (E.g.:Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020; DaWan et al., 2020; Thi Nguyen et al., 2021). In addition, returnees have trouble maintaining their research connections abroad, frequently because of lack of access to conference/research visit travel funding (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019). Third, they often face issues navigating the hierarchically organized domestic universities (Alkubaidi and Alzhrani, 2020; Almuarik, 2019). Another common problem experienced by many returning scholars is lack of time for research a because of heavy teaching, administrative and advisory loads (Hoang & Ho, 2020; Le & LaCost, 2017; Thi Nguyen et al., 2021). Importantly, several studies indicated that challenges experienced by women returnees exceeded the challenges faced by men due to the gendered character of academia and profession amplified by patriarchal gender expectations within the home country societies (E.g.:Almuarik, 2019; Kuzhabekova et al., 2019).

Finally, prior research pointed to some common strategies used by returnees to deal with barriers. First, many returnees focus on training the next generation of local scholars, whom they actively engage in their research teams (Da Wang, 2020; Kuzhaberkova et al., 2019). Second, a key to survival in the global scholarship is cultivating social networks with researchers at home and abroad (Jonkers and Tijssen, 2008; Le & LaCost, 2017). Third, a common strategy is engagement in policy making as a consultant to influence the direction of the development of research-related policies (Da Wang, 2020; Kuzhabekova et al., 2019). Finally, in some countries returnees mobilized to lobby certain policy solutions by cooperating with other returnees (Da Wang, 2020; Kuzhabekova et al., 2019).

One of the main limitations of the prior research is that it treated the returnees homogeneously without paying attention to whether there is any differentiation in their experiences depending on the country of study, type of employing institution, major, level of the graduate degree, etc. Meanwhile, the experiences of the returnees may vary across various parameters.

THE CONCEPT OF LEGIBILITY

The concept of "legibility" comes from James Scott's monograph "Seeing like a state" (1998). In Scott's book, "legibility" refers to the rationalizing practices states use to "see" society, resources and land in a way, which simplifies governance tasks, such as taxation, surveillance or Army conscription. As a result of these practices some units of land, resources and society remain visible or legible, while others are ignored or invisibilized. The concept of legibility arises from Bourdieu's earlier work on "symbolic capital" (1991). Legibility practices can be conceptualized as manifestation of Bourdieu's "symbolic power/violence" – the ability of the state "to constitute the given" and to determine the norm (Bourdieu, 1991, 242). In Bourdieu's view, the state has monopolistic control of "symbolic violence" in the same way it has such control over physical violence (1999, 40). It unilaterally decides which lands, groups within society or individuals are subject to its control and protection, are responsible for mandatory service or collections, and qualify for its protection, distribution and services.

Importantly for this paper, legibility practices may lead to either greater homogeneity or heterogeneity within the state. For example, state determination of official and unofficial languages brings about cultural and linguistic unification (Bourdieu, 1999, 62) and the production of national imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). In contrast, states often used legibility for the purposes of drawing distinctions, at times artificial, between its different territories, languages and social groups (Wallerstein, 1974; Barkey, 2008), for example in classifying two dialects of the same language as separate languages or in differentiation between closely related ethnic minorities. These distinctions are made with two purposes: (1) to draw and to police clear boundaries between groups and territories, which are conceptualized as superior or inferior (Chatterjee, 2020; Steinmetz, 2007, 36-40) and (2) to emphasize differences within its inferior, less powerful and subjugated constituents with the intention to prevent their mobilization relying on "divide and conquer" principle (Wyrtzen, 2017, 207), as in the case of drawing artificial distinction between closely related ethnic minorities to break down the emerging common cultural identity.

There are ample examples, which demonstrate legibility mechanisms at work. Some very good ones were provided together with an explanation of the state functions by Zhu et al. (2020). For example, many modern cities are built geometrically, using a layout with straight lines and repetitions, which delineate the territory and people into equal and manageable units. Such a layout facilitates policing and control by making it easier for the police to find certain locations in the city and makes the territory of the city easily manageable for conscription, tax collection, listing on the real estate market, infrastructure development, city planning and epidemiologic monitoring and control (Scott, 2006, 2). Another example of the use of legibility mechanism is the adoption of the official format of naming (Zhu et al., 2020, 2). Citizens can use ambiguous names to achieve anonymity, thereby obtaining security protection that escapes state control. To counteract such acts of disobedience, the state adopts means of forcing citizens into the surname system. This allows the state to have a clear idea and to account for the number of people it controls and to collect taxes and to conduct censuses

more effectively and efficiently, to implement marriage registrations and to ensure public order (Zhu et al., 2020).

Legibility is one of the instruments, which is used by the state in administering education policy. For example, the system of licensure and accreditation allows the state to sort out educators and educational organizations meeting certain desirable quality standards from those falling behind. Telling apart the former from the latter allows the state to distribute education funding more effectively/efficiently and to understand the pool of individuals and institutions primarily responsible for implementation of education policy. Similarly, standardized testing mechanisms allow the state to sort out students capable of higher education from those who are not, and, therefore, distribute financial aid more effectively.

METHODS

The central phenomenon in the study is the variation in the research-related experiences of Kazakhstani returning scholars. Given that we sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon and to unpack the potential drivers of the variation, we chose a qualitative interview design as the most appropriate for the study (Creswell, 2013). Skype interviews were viewed as most feasible in the context of the global pandemic and most informative in our attempt to understand the experiences of the participants in words of the participants themselves. The semi-structured format allowed us to dynamically follow up on unexpected themes in the process of interviewing (Creswell, 2013).

We selected participants from individuals, who were employed as faculty, researchers or research-active instructors in universities and non-academic research centres. We included only the participants, who spent no less than six months in Kazakhstan after their return and who were within five years of graduation. This allowed us to ensure that the participants have managed to find a job, have gained some initial experience to talk about, and have not yet forgotten about their first impressions on adaptation.

Maximal variation sampling was used as a sampling strategy. This approach allowed us to ensure broad representation of the experiences in a relatively small sample of participants, while capturing possible variations in the experiences. In addition to the country of doctoral training, the participants were varied on such characteristics as gender, area of specialization, type of funding received for doctoral studies, and experience in Kazakhstani academia prior to departure.

Overall, we interviewed 32individuals (Table 1). 13 participants came from Europe (UK, Italy, Norway, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic); 4 - from North America (the U.S.); 9 – from Asia and Middle East (Turkey, Japan, China, Malaysia); as well as 6 from post-Soviet Eurasia (Russia, Kyrgyzstan). The sample was somewhat overrepresented in terms of gender (44% females and 56% males). The participants came from a variety of disciplines, such as engineering, natural, social, biomedical, and applied sciences. The sample included graduates employed as junior research personnel (19%), faculty (50%), instructors (25%) and academic

administrators with teaching/research responsibilities (6%). The study of the participants was covered from several funding streams, including government scholarship (Ex.: Bolashak), international agency scholarships, foreign university scholarships, KZ university scholarships (Ex.: Talap), and self-funding. Fifty percent of the participants work at an international level research university. Other participants are employed at national level public research-intensive universities, as well as some research- and teaching- oriented private international and domestic universities.

In addition to demographic questions, the protocol for the interview included questions about the pathway for enrolment into the doctoral program, about the experience during graduate studies., about the process of transition to employment in Kazakhstan, and about the strategies used in the process of transition in terms of their research activity.

RESULTS

Variation in Readjustment

Our analysis has revealed that the experiences of readjustment are different for returnees who graduated from universities in different regions of the world. There was a clear distinction in the experiences of those, who pursued study abroad in the Western and non-Western contexts. The majority from the first group were funded with the Bolashak scholarship, whereas most in the second group were self-funded or funded with a scholarship from the foreign universities or governments.

The academic market in Kazakhstan seems to have a clear preference for graduates from Western universities or graduates from universities at the top of the global ranking. Most such graduates landed jobs in top research universities, including Western-style ones. These universities typically have a strong research mission, have better equipped research facilities, access to talented graduate students, research-active faculty, and relatively good level of research funding. In contrast, graduates of non-Western universities tend to land jobs in smaller scale teaching-oriented universities, which have underdeveloped research infrastructure and culture, as well as lowered expectations in terms of research performance.

The difference in the job placements results in different conditions in relation to research. The graduates of Western universities are perceived as having strong research skills and advanced subject matter knowledge, which are treated as assets at doctoral training research-intensive universities, so the graduates are appointed in Senior Researcher roles at research centres, are asked to serve as PIs on funding applications and are assigned to teach graduate courses. In these research roles, research productivity is not merely encouraged, but is also financially rewarded via salary and incentive systems. In addition to that, many of the graduates are actively engaged by the university administration in leadership roles to serve as consultants, as representatives of the university in national-level education-related advisory groups, or as leaders on various reform efforts within their institution.

> When I came back to my Kazakhstani alma mater I had several publications and experience as a Graduate Research Assistant, so the Rector suggested me to become the Head of the Research Center…We have been fortunate to get two Ministry of Education research grants, so I was productive in terms of publications…I am now involved in the advisory capacity in the Council of Junior Scholars, which provides advice to the Ministry of Education and Science (P11).

> I have been hired as a faculty before I defended my dissertation. The school for which I was hired was still being created at the time. I was one of the first faculty hired and I was lucky to be assigned to teach methods courses and to supervise graduate students. This allowed me to improve my research skills and to identify some talented students for my future research projects (P5).

Graduates from non-Western universities are initially hired to teach undergraduates. While they are encouraged to engage in research, this engagement is perceived as secondary to teaching by the administration. The graduates have heavy teaching loads and little time to remain active in research. In addition, their research efforts are not taken into consideration when determining salary levels.

> This department does not have expectations for faculty to engage in research. I also do not have time for research because I have many teaching hours. I am involved in some publications, but mostly as an interpreter being asked to translate abstracts or to lead communication with English-speaking journals (P30).

> I have no time for research. Our salary is rather modest, and I have a family of four. I am not paid for doing research, whereas extra teaching hours are reimbursed. So, I end up assuming extra teaching load and this leaves little time for engaging in my research projects (P27).

Whereas Western graduates might get access to graduate student supervision via research projects, their counterparts from non-Western universities have much fewer opportunities for graduate student supervision. Meanwhile, graduate student supervision has been shown (Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018) to be one of the most effective mechanisms for scholars in resource constrained countries to stay active in research. Faculty employed in teaching-oriented universities continue to rely on student supervisees in conducting their research, however, their ability to produce quality papers is limited by the fact that their students are undergraduates with limited research skills.

> We are lucky to have access to extremely talented research assistants and students. Our students are the best in the country, and we can also hire Bolashak Master's alumni, who are trained in methods and theories and

> do not have any other research-related employment options with a good pay in Kazakhstan, so they all come to us (P6).
>
> I am employed in an interdisciplinary department, which teaches English to students in various programs. I do not have access to student supervision and cannot rely on students in my research. I wish I had because this would allow me to use students in at least literature reviews as they write their theses (P30).

Heterogeneity exists not only between the two groups of graduates from Western and non-Western universities. In fact, the first group of students break up further into those, who manage to land employment in Western-style universities, and those who are employed in domestic universities. The research environment in the Western-style universities is more conducive for research when compared to the environment in research-oriented domestic universities. However, Western-educated reported difficulties in gaining full-time faculty positions or getting promoted to higher ranks in Western-style universities when compared to their international colleagues. Opportunities for advancement towards full-time and higher rank positions were better for Western-educated returnees at domestic research universities than for returnees at international research universities hiring many international faculty. In the elite, Western-style institutions, domestic Ph.D. holders reported being perceived as less experienced than their foreign colleagues.

> I did not have any issues landing the Postdoc position, however, I have found it difficult to transition to a full-time faculty position at X university despite my publications and even a couple of grants. There are also many other Postdocs, who are from Kazakhstan and who have degrees from abroad at our university. They are all in the same situation. For some reason, we are not as competitive as foreigners and many of us are stuck in the Postdoc positions for a while. Meanwhile, there are no alternatives in other universities due to difference in pay, so I do not really know what will happen to me if I do not get a faculty job here (P8).
>
> I had to work really hard to get my research agenda started, but this paid at the end. Once I got several publications in prestigious journals on my resume and got hold of two large research grants, our leadership have noticed that. I have suddenly become a key asset at the university and was asked to head a research lab and, subsequently, a research centre (P23).

Similarly, heterogeneity is present within the second group of returnees. Some of the returnees manage to transition to research roles and higher academic ranks within their institutions or succeed in changing their place of employment from a smaller-scale teaching-oriented universities to the national level research

universities. Others continue to work primarily as teachers or leave the academic profession for opportunities outside higher education.

> At the beginning I worked at a private international university, which was mostly teaching oriented. I taught there six hours a week. I was also head of department and in that role I had to do lots of paperwork. So, during my first year I had no time for research. I got rid of my head of department job and started to come to university only for my teaching hours trying to stay away from the department and spending my time in the coffee shops writing and reading. I had to physically leave the university to be able to do my research… (P12).

One of the differences between the two types of returnees is in their ability to maintain scholarly networks. Western-educated returnees tend to be better integrated in the global scholarly networks. This allows them to capitalize on the connections when applying to collaborative funding opportunities, when publishing in international journals, when conducting complex experiments, which require access to expensive equipment and facilities, as well as when looking for sites for research visits abroad. To be able to maintain the important external connections, the returnees of the first type have better financial resources and administrative support, which allows them to take breaks from teaching and to participate in international conferences. In addition, being better positioned to apply for funding makes this type of returnees better prepared to reimburse their overseas partners for expert contribution, for mentorship or for hosting them as visitors.

> It is relatively easy for me to make new connections abroad. At the beginning I had issues, but now people are getting an idea about the quality of work done by our university. For example, last year we sent a student to MIT and a couple of students to other top universities. So, the news about the quality spreads and I was approached at conferences a couple of times by curious professors, who heard about the university. are curious to know what kind of labs we have and, once, they understand we have the capacity, they become interested to start projects with us (P6).

Meanwhile, returnees from non-Western contexts have less opportunities to maintain the connections that they established while studying abroad. On the one hand, they have less time and resources to attend conferences, to engage their former advisors and classmates into collaborative projects or to make scholarly visits abroad. On the other hand, their advisers frequently reside in countries with lower levels of research funding than in the West and have limited opportunities to fund the engagement of their Kazakhstani collaborator.

> This is exactly the problem in Kazakhstan. When I worked in St. Petersburg, I managed to travel even to Kazakhstani conferences at the

> expense of the institute. They covered all the costs. I have collaborators in Russia and want to initiate a project with them, but this is difficult if the only mode of communication is via the phone (P31).

Overall, our analysis shows that there is a clear difference in the experiences of the returnees, which seems to be determined by the country where they pursued their education. The returnees come back to different research environments and the type of environment that is made available to them is determined by the country of study.

Drivers of Variation

As we revealed the difference in the experiences of the returning scholars, we were intrigued to understand the drivers, which generated the heterogeneity in the process of readjustment. A recurring theme that we heard in the interviews with the returnees from non-Western countries was the issues that they faced while undergoing the procedure of official degree recognition, which is referred to as "nostrification of degrees" in Kazakhstan. Nostrification is required from all graduates of foreign universities, except for the recipients of the Bolashak scholarship, who pursue their degrees in top universities in the world according to the program rules. All graduates of other foreign universities cannot be considered Ph.D. degree holders unless their foreign degrees have received official domestic recognition.

Nostrification was introduced in Kazakhstan as a part of the degree transferability initiatives within the Bologna framework. As a part of the Bologna process, the conferral of Soviet doctoral degrees was terminated in Kazakhstan and all universities switched to offering Western-style Ph.D. programs. One of the issues that emerged in the process was the fact that many Kazakhstani students continued to leave for doctoral education to post-Soviet countries, where such a transition to Western-style Ph.D. degrees had not happened. Russia was the most notable example, which continued to be attractive as a destination for study abroad for many Kazakhstani students, especially those who could not pass foreign language requirements of Bolashak. Some students left for Kyrgyzstan or other Central Asia republics due to lower fees.

Upon return from study abroad, those who studies in post-Soviet contexts had to face the reality, in which Kazakhstani Ph.D. degree was used as a measurement stick to assess the quality of doctoral education. In this reality, many participants with non-Western educational background reported difficulties in having their degrees recognized in Kazakhstan.

> I had problems with nostrification. To have our degree recognized, we need to have 6-7 publications (!), one of which should be a Kazakhstani one. I did not have a publication in Kazakhstan and did not have enough articles. I sent an article last year to Turkey, but then it turned out to be a predatory one. My other friends, who studies in Turkey, China, Russia and some other countries are in the same situation. Bolashak graduates

> do not have this problem. Nobody has questions if you have a degree from Cambridge, Oxford, or some top university in another Western country (M32).
>
> I had trouble getting appointed at the Associate level. The university agreed to hire me in the rank, but on the condition that I have my degree nostrified. I have all the required publications in the ranked international journals, and I have passed a very rigorous procedure of defence in Russia. I, in fact, believe that the quality of my training surpasses the one in Kazakhstan, but there seems to be an unwritten rule that a candidate for the positions should have a Kazakhstani Ph.D. degree or the one recognized in Kazakhstan and comparable to Kazakhstani (P29).

All participants, who have issues with nostrification of their degrees mentioned that at the time of their return their hiring universities did not have any doubts about their qualifications. The returnees claim that universities experience a deficit of Ph.D. degree holders, whom they need for accreditation and marketing purposes. In most of the cases, the administration of the university had plans to promote the returnees after official nostrification of their degrees. When a negative decision on recognition was made, many deans and rectors tried to keep the doctoral degree holders in at least teaching capacity to make use of their research skills. In other words, differentiation was made not at the level of the market but was an outcome of an unarticulated official policy.

In the absence of the official Ph.D. degree, the returnees cannot not get promoted to the desired senior level teaching and research positions and do not qualify for salary increases, which were the original perks that they hoped to obtain by completing doctoral education. This causes much frustration among the returnees, who continue to believe that the quality of their doctoral education is superior to education provided in Kazakhstan.

With significant time, effort, and, at times, money spent on obtaining a doctoral degree in non-Western countries, the returnees use several approaches to get return from their investment. Some, focus on producing international-level publications hoping that an impressive list of publications will make university administration close eyes on the absence of a formal degree. Others try to get a degree from Kazakhstani or Western universities using their existing dissertation. Still others, consider leaving the profession.

Overall, our analysis reveals that the emergence of heterogeneity was attributed to the mechanism of foreign degree recognition. With Bolashak scholars having their degrees automatically recognized in Kazakhstan, all universities have their doors open for their employment. On the other hand, returnees from non-Western contexts must make their way through to get hired at universities. In a sense, they must enter through the back door.

DISCUSSION

Variation in Readjustment

Our analysis has revealed that the experiences of readjustment are different for returnees who graduated from universities in different regions of the world. There was a clear distinction in the experiences of those, who pursued study abroad in the Western and non-Western contexts. The majority from the first group were funded with the Bolashak scholarship, whereas most in the second group were self-funded or funded with a scholarship from the foreign universities or governments.

The academic market in Kazakhstan seems to have a clear preference for graduates from Western universities or graduates from universities at the top of the global ranking. Most such graduates landed jobs in top research universities, including Western-style ones. These universities typically have a strong research mission, have better equipped research facilities, access to talented graduate students, research-active faculty, and relatively good level of research funding. In contrast, graduates of non-Western universities tend to land jobs in smaller scale teaching-oriented universities, which have underdeveloped research infrastructure and culture, as well as lowered expectations in terms of research performance.

The difference in the job placements results in different conditions in relation to research. The graduates of Western universities are perceived as having strong research skills and advanced subject matter knowledge, which are treated as assets at doctoral training research-intensive universities, so the graduates are appointed in Senior Researcher roles at research centres, are asked to serve as PIs on funding applications and are assigned to teach graduate courses. In these research roles, research productivity is not merely encouraged, but is also financially rewarded via salary and incentive systems. In addition to that, many of the graduates are actively engaged by the university administration in leadership roles to serve as consultants, as representatives of the university in national-level education-related advisory groups, or as leaders on various reform efforts within their institution.

> When I came back to my Kazakhstani alma mater I had several publications and experience as a Graduate Research Assistant, so the Rector suggested me to become the Head of the Research Center…We have been fortunate to get two Ministry of Education research grants, so I was productive in terms of publications…I am now involved in the advisory capacity in the Council of Junior Scholars, which provides advice to the Ministry of Education and Science (P11).

> I have been hired as a faculty before I defended my dissertation. The school for which I was hired was still being created at the time. I was one of the first faculty hired and I was lucky to be assigned to teach methods courses and to supervise graduate students. This allowed me to improve

> my research skills and to identify some talented students for my future research projects (P5).

Graduates from non-Western universities are initially hired to teach undergraduates. While they are encouraged to engage in research, this engagement is perceived as secondary to teaching by the administration. The graduates have heavy teaching loads and little time to remain active in research. In addition, their research efforts are not taken into consideration when determining salary levels.

> This department does not have expectations for faculty to engage in research. I also do not have time for research because I have many teaching hours. I am involved in some publications, but mostly as an interpreter being asked to translate abstracts or to lead communication with English-speaking journals (P30).

> I have no time for research. Our salary is rather modest, and I have a family of four. I am not paid for doing research, whereas extra teaching hours are reimbursed. So, I end up assuming extra teaching load and this leaves little time for engaging in my research projects (P27).

Whereas Western graduates might get access to graduate student supervision via research projects, their counterparts from non-Western universities have much fewer opportunities for graduate student supervision. Meanwhile, graduate student supervision has been shown (Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018) to be one of the most effective mechanisms for scholars in resource constrained countries to stay active in research. Faculty employed in teaching-oriented universities continue to rely on student supervisees in conducting their research, however, their ability to produce quality papers is limited by the fact that their students are undergraduates with limited research skills.

> We are lucky to have access to extremely talented research assistants and students. Our students are the best in the country, and we can also hire Bolashak Master's alumni, who are trained in methods and theories and do not have any other research-related employment options with a good pay in Kazakhstan, so they all come to us (P6).

> I am employed in an interdisciplinary department, which teaches English to students in various programs. I do not have access to student supervision and cannot rely on students in my research. I wish I had because this would allow me to use students in at least literature reviews as they write their theses (P30).

Heterogeneity exists not only between the two groups of graduates from Western and non-Western universities. In fact, the first group of students break up further into those, who manage to land employment in Western-style universities, and those who are employed in domestic universities. The research

environment in the Western-style universities is more conducive for research when compared to the environment in research-oriented domestic universities. However, Western-educated reported difficulties in gaining full-time faculty positions or getting promoted to higher ranks in Western-style universities when compared to their international colleagues. Opportunities for advancement towards full-time and higher rank positions were better for Western-educated returnees at domestic research universities than for returnees at international research universities hiring many international faculty. In the elite, Western-style institutions, domestic Ph.D. holders reported being perceived as less experienced than their foreign colleagues.

> I did not have any issues landing the Postdoc position, however, I have found it difficult to transition to a full-time faculty position at X university despite my publications and even a couple of grants. There are also many other Postdocs, who are from Kazakhstan and who have degrees from abroad at our university. They are all in the same situation. For some reason, we are not as competitive as foreigners and many of us are stuck in the Postdoc positions for a while. Meanwhile, there are no alternatives in other universities due to difference in pay, so I do not really know what will happen to me if I do not get a faculty job here (P8).

> I had to work really hard to get my research agenda started, but this paid at the end. Once I got several publications in prestigious journals on my resume and got hold of two large research grants, our leadership have noticed that. I have suddenly become a key asset at the university and was asked to head a research lab and, subsequently, a research centre (P23).

Similarly, heterogeneity is present within the second group of returnees. Some of the returnees manage to transition to research roles and higher academic ranks within their institutions or succeed in changing their place of employment from a smaller-scale teaching-oriented universities to the national level research universities. Others continue to work primarily as teachers or leave the academic profession for opportunities outside higher education.

> At the beginning I worked at a private international university, which was mostly teaching oriented. I taught there six hours a week. I was also head of department and in that role I had to do lots of paperwork. So, during my first year I had no time for research. I got rid of my head of department job and started to come to university only for my teaching hours trying to stay away from the department and spending my time in the coffee shops writing and reading. I had to physically leave the university to be able to do my research… (P12).

One of the differences between the two types of returnees is in their ability to maintain scholarly networks. Western-educated returnees tend to be better

integrated in the global scholarly networks. This allows them to capitalize on the connections when applying to collaborative funding opportunities, when publishing in international journals, when conducting complex experiments, which require access to expensive equipment and facilities, as well as when looking for sites for research visits abroad. To be able to maintain the important external connections, the returnees of the first type have better financial resources and administrative support, which allows them to take breaks from teaching and to participate in international conferences. In addition, being better positioned to apply for funding makes this type of returnees better prepared to reimburse their overseas partners for expert contribution, for mentorship or for hosting them as visitors.

> It is relatively easy for me to make new connections abroad. At the beginning I had issues, but now people are getting an idea about the quality of work done by our university. For example, last year we sent a student to MIT and a couple of students to other top universities. So, the news about the quality spreads and I was approached at conferences a couple of times by curious professors, who heard about the university. are curious to know what kind of labs we have and, once, they understand we have the capacity, they become interested to start projects with us (P6).

Meanwhile, returnees from non-Western contexts have less opportunities to maintain the connections that they established while studying abroad. On the one hand, they have less time and resources to attend conferences, to engage their former advisors and classmates into collaborative projects or to make scholarly visits abroad. On the other hand, their advisers frequently reside in countries with lower levels of research funding than in the West and have limited opportunities to fund the engagement of their Kazakhstani collaborator.

> This is exactly the problem in Kazakhstan. When I worked in St. Petersburg, I managed to travel even to Kazakhstani conferences at the expense of the institute. They covered all the costs. I have collaborators in Russia and want to initiate a project with them, but this is difficult if the only mode of communication is via the phone (P31).

Overall, our analysis shows that there is a clear difference in the experiences of the returnees, which seems to be determined by the country where they pursued their education. The returnees come back to different research environments and the type of environment that is made available to them is determined by the country of study.

Drivers of Variation

As we revealed the difference in the experiences of the returning scholars, we were intrigued to understand the drivers, which generated the heterogeneity in the

process of readjustment. A recurring theme that we heard in the interviews with the returnees from non-Western countries was the issues that they faced while undergoing the procedure of official degree recognition, which is referred to as "nostrification of degrees" in Kazakhstan. Nostrification is required from all graduates of foreign universities, except for the recipients of the Bolashak scholarship, who pursue their degrees in top universities in the world according to the program rules. All graduates of other foreign universities cannot be considered Ph.D. degree holders unless their foreign degrees have received official domestic recognition.

Nostrification was introduced in Kazakhstan as a part of the degree transferability initiatives within the Bologna framework. As a part of the Bologna process, the conferral of Soviet doctoral degrees was terminated in Kazakhstan and all universities switched to offering Western-style Ph.D. programs. One of the issues that emerged in the process was the fact that many Kazakhstani students continued to leave for doctoral education to post-Soviet countries, where such a transition to Western-style Ph.D. degrees had not happened. Russia was the most notable example, which continued to be attractive as a destination for study abroad for many Kazakhstani students, especially those who could not pass foreign language requirements of Bolashak. Some students left for Kyrgyzstan or other Central Asia republics due to lower fees.

Upon return from study abroad, those who studies in post-Soviet contexts had to face the reality, in which Kazakhstani Ph.D. degree was used as a measurement stick to assess the quality of doctoral education. In this reality, many participants with non-Western educational background reported difficulties in having their degrees recognized in Kazakhstan.

> I had problems with nostrification. To have our degree recognized, we need to have 6-7 publications (!), one of which should be a Kazakhstani one. I did not have a publication in Kazakhstan and did not have enough articles. I sent an article last year to Turkey, but then it turned out to be a predatory one. My other friends, who studies in Turkey, China, Russia and some other countries are in the same situation. Bolashak graduates do not have this problem. Nobody has questions if you have a degree from Cambridge, Oxford, or some top university in another Western country (M32).

> I had trouble getting appointed at the Associate level. The university agreed to hire me in the rank, but on the condition that I have my degree nostrified. I have all the required publications in the ranked international journals, and I have passed a very rigorous procedure of defence in Russia. I, in fact, believe that the quality of my training surpasses the one in Kazakhstan, but there seems to be an unwritten rule that a candidate for the positions should have a Kazakhstani Ph.D. degree or the one recognized in Kazakhstan and comparable to Kazakhstani (P29).

All participants, who have issues with nostrification of their degrees mentioned that at the time of their return their hiring universities did not have any doubts about their qualifications. The returnees claim that universities experience a deficit of Ph.D. degree holders, whom they need for accreditation and marketing purposes. In most of the cases, the administration of the university had plans to promote the returnees after official nostrification of their degrees. When a negative decision on recognition was made, many deans and rectors tried to keep the doctoral degree holders in at least teaching capacity to make use of their research skills. In other words, differentiation was made not at the level of the market but was an outcome of an unarticulated official policy.

In the absence of the official Ph.D. degree, the returnees cannot not get promoted to the desired senior level teaching and research positions and do not qualify for salary increases, which were the original perks that they hoped to obtain by completing doctoral education. This causes much frustration among the returnees, who continue to believe that the quality of their doctoral education is superior to education provided in Kazakhstan.

With significant time, effort, and, at times, money spent on obtaining a doctoral degree in non-Western countries, the returnees use several approaches to get return from their investment. Some, focus on producing international-level publications hoping that an impressive list of publications will make university administration close eyes on the absence of a formal degree. Others try to get a degree from Kazakhstani or Western universities using their existing dissertation. Still others, consider leaving the profession.

Overall, our analysis reveals that the emergence of heterogeneity was attributed to the mechanism of foreign degree recognition. With Bolashak scholars having their degrees automatically recognized in Kazakhstan, all universities have their doors open for their employment. On the other hand, returnees from non-Western contexts must make their way through to get hired at universities. In a sense, they must enter through the back door.

Note

Appendices for this article can be found on the JIS website at https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis

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