

## GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR STUDENT MOBILITY: THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN'S INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM 'BOLASHAK'

Kadisha Dairova, Zakir JumakuLov and Adil Ashirbekov

Governments are increasingly subsidizing internationalization of higher education all over the world. It is taking various forms starting from including new elements of learning cultures and languages of other nations in the higher education curriculum to sending and bringing students, faculty and researchers from abroad. Countries may choose to emphasize one or other forms of internationalization depending on their national goals, which in its turn is dependent on their current development level, higher education quality. This article provides information on the history, purpose, administration, design, funding and impact of Kazakhstan's Bolashak international scholarship program.

After obtaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan had radical changes in the social and political life, as well as in the economic model of the state. Transformation of Kazakhstan's economy to incorporate international market relations and international partners required a new generation of staff with high quality education. Among other problems the country faced was the brain-drain - highly qualified specialists were returning to their historical motherlands and some Bolashak graduates were in search of a better life with the result that higher education in Kazakhstan was not able to produce needed specialists. As Stetar and Kurakbayev state, *"following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's public universities suffered from poor resources, low faculty salaries, and an outdated choice of specialties"* (2010. p. 28). Creation of the program came at a period when Kazakhstan was at its deepest economic recession in its recent history.

Under these circumstances, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan created the Bolashak international scholarship program via national resolution dated November 5, 1993. In its various stages, the Bolashak scholarship aimed to match the needs of the country reflecting the socio-economic changes taking place in the society. When it was initially created, the stated goal was to *"train specialists to fill the needs of the country in transforming the economy to market economy and to build international relations"* (Presidential Decree, 1993).

In 2000, the government, reflecting on the need for the specialists in engineering and technical fields, reduced foreign language competence requirements for applicants of these majors. Another significant change in the program's goal was related to meeting the needs of the government when it was making a transition from planned economy to market economy and set new priorities for its development. In 2005, Kazakhstan aimed to create an economic model based on the competitive advantages of the country, and through rapidly growing its priority industries. It required specialists to advance industrial innovational development, education and science, management, marketing, logistics, information technologies and others. To meet these needs, the Bolashak program increased in scale and scope. The number of scholarships increased to 3000 and doing an undergraduate degree under the terms of the program became possible.

The change in 2011 emphasized the need for preparing specialists for specific government development programs. This change made the scholarship program targeted compared to previously providing the labor market with high quality specialists in various fields.

Although Legally established in 1993, the first students were sent abroad only in 1994. The government saw a continuous need for the program and no official documents defined the ending period of the program. From the time the program started till March 2013, a total of 9250 scholarships were awarded. The number of awarded scholarships has varied at different stages of the program. From 1994 till 2004, a total of 785 scholarships were awarded; starting from 2005 it was decided to have 3000 scholars at any given time. Since then, the average annual scholarship award has been 1056.

### **Academic subject areas**

The permissible academic subject area varied as the goals of the programs changed over time as has been mentioned above. From its early years, the Bolashak program has tried to train specialists in majors that previously had been offered by the Soviet Union and that were not available in the country, for example, in international relations and international trade.

From 2000, to increase the number of engineering and hard science majors, students in these majors were exempted from the requirement of fluent foreign language competence. Since then, students of these majors have been allowed to undergo language training in the country of study for up to two years before they start their formal academic study.

Currently, the Republican Commission on Training Abroad (Republican Commission) defines the list of permissible majors which may be studied through the program. The list represents the needs of the country in the majors identified, which are compiled by the Ministry of Industry and Trade along with the Ministry of Education and Science. They are aggregated into the following categories: economics and management; agriculture and agro-technology; hard and natural sciences, engineering sciences, healthcare and medicine; art; and social sciences. However, the study program options are not limited to the list. If a student is admitted to an academic program which is not included in the list, applicants can request the Republican Commission to consider his or her case and make exception from the rule.

The Republican Commission in its Bolashak Program Development Plan for 2011-2015 emphasizes the need for training specialists for the needs of certain governmental development programs - education and training of public servants, researchers, teachers, engineers and medical staff

### **Level of an academic program**

The Program was initially targeted to Master's degree students but expanded to provide scholarships for students studying in doctoral programs in 2000, undergraduate programs in 2005, and short-term research internships for faculty in 2008. To account for the expected contributions to control program costs and address other issues, the Program eliminated new awards for students at the undergraduate level in 2010. Reflecting Kazakhstan's engagement in the Bologna Process (since 2011), the Program is expected to begin providing funding to support short-term student mobility (one semester to two years in length) in 2015 (Foster, 2013).

Table 1 illustrates the shifts between 2005 and 2011 in the study-level of Bolashak recipients. In 2011, no new scholarships for students in undergraduate education programs were awarded; 86% of Bolashak scholarships were awarded for Master's degree programs,

3% for doctoral degree programs, and 11% for research internships. By comparison, 69% of Bolashak scholarships in 2005 were awarded to students at the undergraduate level, 27% at the Master's degree level, 3% in doctoral degree programs, and 1% in post-graduate student assistantships (Center for International Programs, 2012b).

**Table 1.** Number of Bolashak scholars by year

Study Level	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013*	Total
Bachelor	1 243	441	97	636	419	543	-	-	-	3379
Master	478	299	138	607	561	881	447	560	6	3977
Candidate of Sciences (post-Soviet degree)	18	5	1	10	-	-	-	-	-	34
Residency	2	14	20	15	10	26	-	-	-	87
PhD	55	19	11	15	11	11	14	15	1	152
Internships	-	-	-	28	12	200	59	527	10	836
Total	1796	778	267	1311	1013	1661	520	1102	17	8465

Source: Official website of the Center for International Programs <http://bolashak.gov.kz>  
\* before March 2013

### Participation and selection

Currently, only Master's degrees, doctorates, and short-term research internships are funded through the Program. The Program's 2011-2015 development strategy (Republican Commission for Training Abroad, 2011) defines five categories of applicants with a certain set of requirements for eligibility criteria. The categories are: 1) Self-admitted students, 2) Public sector servants, 3) Educational managers, 4) Fresh graduates, 5) Applicants for internship.

The selection process consists of five consequent examinations - foreign language knowledge, Kazakh language knowledge, a psychology examination, an interview with the Independent Expert Commission, all leading to the Republican Commission's final decision. The Bolashak Program does not discriminate against gender, income or ethnicity. Over the past eight years, scholarship awards have been shared equally between men and women. However, relatively few students from rural areas have received the Bolashak scholarship. The majority (85%) of applicants are from cities, with more than half (55%) coming from Astana and Almaty; only 15% are from other regions (Perna et al., 2013).

### Post completion requirement

Recipients of the scholarship are obliged to return home after graduation and work in the country for five years, otherwise they are required to repay the full scholarship, plus a certain amount of interest payment. Employment is also conditional on the type of scholarship received. Provisions regarding post-completion requirement have changed over time. In the early years, graduates had to work only in the government sector. Later, from 2005 till 2009, graduates were allowed to work in any field regardless of their studied major. Since then, only work corresponding to the academic study major counts towards fulfilling the five-year-work requirement.

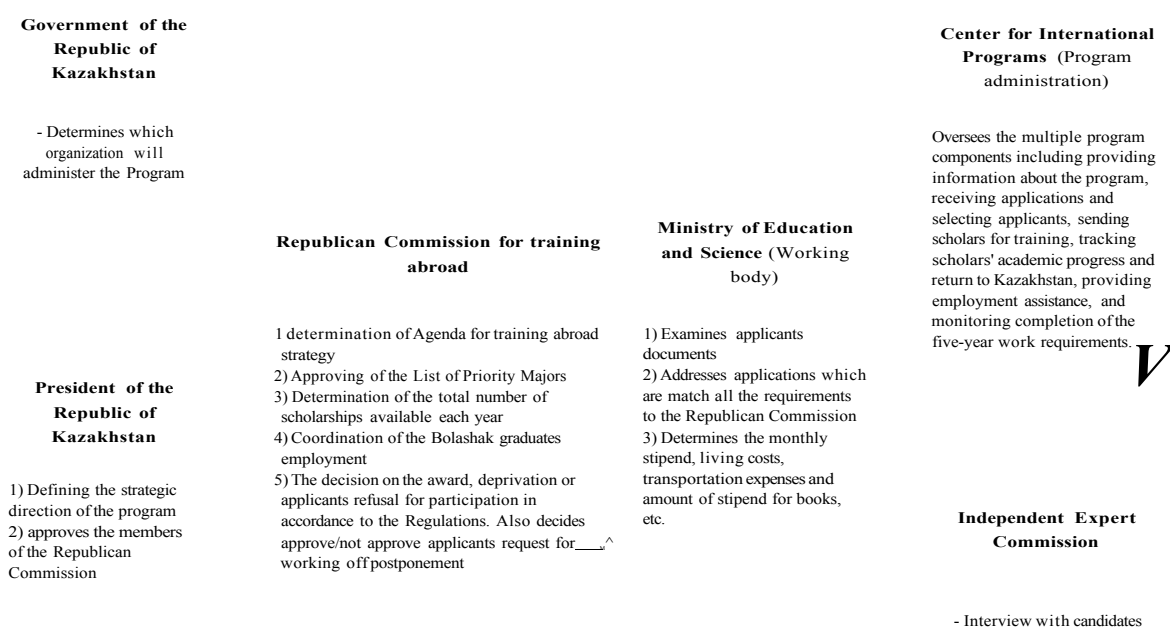
To guarantee the performance of this obligation scholarship holders are obliged to put down a collateral which has to cover the total cost of the scholarship. This provision could have

Limited the participation to better-off families only has there been no guarantor agreement. Guarantors are required if the collateral does not cover the full cost of the scholarship. A required number of guarantors depends on what percentage of the scholarship cost is covered by the collateral. Up to four guarantors can guarantee the students keeping to their obligations.

To account for Lower income population residing in rural areas where the value of property is Lower, applicants are permitted to provide any number of guarantors (1-4) regardless of the property cost.

## Administration

As other characteristics of the Program, administration of it had also evolved over time, changed and improved, always building on the past experience. As Figure 1 shows, there are three main bodies that administer the program. 1) The Republican Commission on Training Cadres Abroad (Republican Commission) that makes strategic decisions. 2) The Center for International Programs conducts operational management of the program. 3) Ministry of Education and Science provides the operation of the Republican Commission and owns the 100 percent of the CIP's stocks.



**Figure 1.** "Botashak" scholarship administration structure (Adapted from official documents: Government resolution #355 to the Amendments on the Selection Rules, dated 03/27/2012 and Presidential decree #470 on Republican Commission dated 10/12/2000)

The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan plays important role in defining the strategic direction of the Program and approves the members of the Republican Commission. The Government of Kazakhstan determines administering body of the Program (CIP) and allocates funds.

The Republican Commission is a consulting body appointed by the President of the Kazakhstan. It is chaired by the State Secretary; the Vice Chair is the Minister of Education and Science; the full Commission consisting of 15 members, eight of whom are Ministers while the others are heads of committees resorting under different ministries and agencies. The Republican Commission determines the total number of scholarships available per each year, coordinates graduates' employment, makes a final decision on the awarding and cancellation of the scholarship, considers and decides on requests for exclusion from the provisions, determines the agenda for training abroad strategy; and approves the list of priority majors. As stated before, the Ministry of Education and Science owns the 100% of the CIP's stock and oversees its work. The Ministry also determines the size of the stipends, examines the applicant documents.

The Center for International Programs is a joint stock company established on April 4, 2005 to administer the Bolashak program. The CIP employs 140 people and has offices in the UK, Germany, Russia, China. Its strategic goal is to train a new generation of professionals who are able to bring the country to a new level of economic and political development through training highly qualified specialists in various fields, in line with the development strategy plan of the country. The CIP oversees the multiple program components including marketing and promotion, receiving applications and selecting applicants, sending scholars for training, tracking scholars' academic progress and return to Kazakhstan, providing employment assistance, and monitoring completion of the five-year work requirements (CIP, 2013a). Besides administering the Bolashak program, CIP implements a set of measures on promoting other international programs for training and retraining abroad.

Until 2007, foreign quasi-governmental agencies played a substantial role in the administration of the Bolashak Program, particularly with regard to placing scholars at universities abroad and preparing travel documents and preparing students for a host country environment. Before creation of the CIP in 2005, the Ministry of Education and Science worked with partners to administer the program, and the CIP continued this practice for another two years. Independent audit revealed inefficiencies with the administrative structure involving partners, which led to terminating the contract with these partners, and the CIP taking full responsibility for the administration the program. The CIP reported a reduction in the budget by 2.8%. (CIP, 2013a).

### **Selection process**

Bolashak Scholarship has a rigorous selection process that has evolved over time. Applicants are selected on a merit basis, with some positive discrimination towards engineering majors and some share of applicants representing public servants, workers in education and research. Eligible candidates (see attachment 1) may submit their documents directly to the CIP, or, starting from 2013, via the electronic government website ([www.e.gov.kz](http://www.e.gov.kz)), or through Public Service Centers.

There are five rounds of examination that measure: 1) the level of foreign language competence; 2) the level of competence in the state language 3) psychological preparedness, and 10 level; 4) Interview with Independent Expert Committee; 5) final consideration by the Republican Commission. The required level of foreign language proficiency may vary according to the category of applicant and the major they chose to study as was mentioned earlier. The psychological examination, among other measures, is used to evaluate if the student is mature enough to be away from the home country - a measure that has been especially useful when undergraduate study was available.

If an applicant passes language and psychological examination, they go through a personal interview with the Independent Expert Committee. It is established by the Ministry of Education and involves representatives of the various Ministries, the names of the members of the committee being held secret, usually being heads of departments and committees. In this interview, knowledge of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, History of Kazakhstan, national symbols, and the level of professional training of the applicant are evaluated. Committee members also may evaluate the candidate's motivation and general preparedness for studying abroad. After the interview, the Committee provides a personalized recommendation for each candidate. A final decision on awarding the scholarship is made by the Republican Commission after considering the results of all examinations. Results are posted on the official website of the CIP.

Applicants themselves select the country and institution to study from the recommended list. As of 2013, there are 200 universities from 20 countries to choose from. Scholarship holders may study in universities that are not included in this list, but these institutions must be included in the top 100 universities according to the latest publications of world university rankings such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, QS World University Rankings and Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (Center for International Programs, 2013).

There are also provisions that support graduates' employment opportunities. Bolashak graduates can apply for higher category positions in government service than those with the same educational attainment but with their degrees from local Kazakhstani institutions. This is in part done to retain Bolashak graduates in the government service.

### **Funding**

The Bolashak Scholarship is fully funded by the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Allocation of funds comes from the Ministry of Finance. One can be tempted to relate the level of financing of the Program to the oil revenue of the country; however, there is no stated direct relationship between the two. It is worth-mentioning that the Program was started long before the country started to get revenue from its natural resources. The CIP does not announce the total amount of funds spent on the Program. The amount of funding spent is available for some years on the financial reports of the Ministry of Finance.

Scholarship coverage is considered quite generous. Bolashak students are fully funded by the scholarship; it covers examinations, three university applications, visa and travel related expenses, university tuition fees, accommodation in the host country, and the provision of living allowance. Variation of these expenses by countries and cities define the total scholarship amount. For example, the largest amount of monthly living expense is for students who chose to study in London - this equals 1200 USD. The lowest monthly living expenses is 400 USD for Malaysia. The average disbursement for training a student abroad was equal to 5.6 million tenge per year (about 37 thousand USD) in 2013.

### **Other grants available in Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan has 124 international agreements on equivalent student exchange with other countries. Through these agreements governments agree to send and receive equal number

of students between two countries. Currently only 8 of them are active and provide total of 172 grants: Egypt (7), Belarus (6), Romania (5), Ukraine (40), Kyrgyzstan (5), China (100), Slovakia (4), and Mongolia (5).

### **International Academic Grants for Kazakhstan**

Grants are provided by other countries specifically to Kazakhstan, the total number of grants, at the moment, being 302. These are provided by the following countries: Russia (145), China (9), Turkey (125) and Egypt (23). (Ministry of Education and Science, 2013).

In 2011, in order to facilitate academic mobility at the postgraduate level, the Ministry allocated US\$1.37 million to send Masters students to foreign universities for short-term study (one term). In order to adopt the Bologna Process more actively, the Ministry has promoted institutions sending their postgraduate students to study principally in countries of the European Union (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2013).

There are also some international programs such as the Erasmus Mundus, Fulbright, Chevening programs and other similar ones which are available for Kazakhstani students, which do not match in scale with the Bolashak scholarship. The Bolashak scholarship is a prestigious program in Kazakhstan, and following factors contribute to this:

- High level of political support for the Program - President initiated the Program and he continues to support it;
- Amount of scholarship and financial coverage is more generous than those mentioned elsewhere;
- Large media coverage;
- Largest alumni association (that is, the Bolashak Association);
- Success stories of the Program graduates. Some graduates have become successful politicians;
- Support for the graduates from the Centre of International Programs.

### **Prior evaluation of the Program**

There is a clear lack of attention by the scholarly community to the evaluation of the Program. There are some evaluations carried out by government agencies, however they lack theoretical grounding and in-depth analysis. For example, the Program was evaluated by the Accounts Committee, a committee that audits the appropriateness of government fund spending. The report recommended improving the forecasting of labor market demand, which might have been a trigger to introducing a new list of academic programmes based on current demands of the economy.

Government officials state that the program fully matches all the goals which were stated in the very beginning. Discussing the role of the Program, Former Ministry of Education and Science, Professor Bakytzhan Zhumagulov states: *"The program always aimed to prepare the specialists which are needed in the country. Most of them are at top positions in the government and in national companies. Today more than 20% of all [Bolashak] graduates work in the public sector, 21% in national companies, 55% in private sector and 4% in NGOs... Mainly the effectiveness of Bolashakers work count to be very successful."* (Ministry of Education and Science, 2013).

Apart from the economic benefit of the Program, officials also mention non-material benefits such as:

1. Promoting a positive image of the country, for a young country like Kazakhstan especially in the early years it was essential to be recognizable in the international community;
2. Ideological factors - the program became a social uplift amongst young; and
3. Advancing social capital - scholarship recipients expand their worldview and network.

One of the recent, on-going studies on the Program is done by Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania. The researchers have interviewed scholarship recipients, former and present program administrators and policymakers and have reached following conclusions. The research highlights that the Program has evolved over time making the selection and administration process more open, "*with its longevity and evolution overtime, the Bolashak Program is a potential model for other nations seeking to promote their nation's human capital.*" It also calls to improve secondary education (especially in rural areas) so that more students are prepared to enter and succeed in higher education in Kazakhstan and abroad. (Perna et al., 2013).

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