

**Policies to Increase Attraction of International students:
The Case of Nazarbayev University**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of report

It is widely recognized that the presence of international students has an overall positive impact on the image and reputation of the educational system of the country as well as can have broader favorable implications for socioeconomic development. It facilitates cultural awareness as well as international relations which has a capacity to stimulate international trade. Growing digitalization of the services and the introduction of the new scholarship opportunities created a favorable environment for students seeking education in Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev University accounts for the highest number of the students from abroad with 2,85% out of the 3,34% of the national total in 2023. International students that selected Nazarbayev University as their educational destination primarily come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Ghana. Despite some progress made over the last years, the national average is low in comparison with other countries. Based on the case of Nazarbayev University, exploring details of the current situation with the international students including demographics, and the reasoning behind their choice provides important insights that can be used to devise more context-sensitive policies and strategies.

The purpose of this report is three-fold:

1. To explore the strategies and programs at Nazarbayev University that are designed to attract international students.
2. To examine current trends in terms of international students' presence at Nazarbayev University.
3. Suggest policy changes that can further improve the appeal of the Nazarbayev University to students from abroad and hence increase its international outreach.

Research Methods

The study is based on the mixed method research design including both qualitative and quantitative methods used to collect information about the patterns and shifts of the international student engagement at Nazarbayev University. First, statistical information available since the creation of the University in 2011 with respect to students' demographics is analyzed and their composition across the faculties. Second, a survey questionnaire consisting of ten questions was disseminated among a total of 42 respondents, currently enrolled students excluding the graduates of the University. Survey participants were randomly selected to increase the validity of the results. Survey questions look into the motives behind students' choice of the institution, challenges experienced during the educational journey, and satisfaction levels. Once data was collected, the analysis of the statistical data was carried out

using analytics available at the google form which was used for the survey. Lack of the views of the alumni is identified to be the main limitation of the study. The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to during the collection of primary data.

In terms of qualitative data, current policies regarding the student engagement strategies, and educational programs are examined to capture their effect on making university more appealing. In addition to the data regarding the enrollment dynamics and trends, initiatives such as tuition fee discounts and adjusted selection criteria to support students are discussed.

Results and Conclusion

It is revealed that there was a significant increase in the international students enrollment between 2020 and 2022. Most of the international students seek graduate programs rather than undergraduate programs. Available statistics demonstrate that international students' presence increased from 0.4% in 2015 to 10.0% in 2023. Countries that are leading are Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Nigeria, Ghana, China, Kyrgyzstan. School of Humanities and Social Sciences and School of Engineering and Digital Sciences have observed the highest number of the students enrolled from abroad. While Master's programs at the School of Medicine and the School of Engineering and Digital Science have been the most popular, the School of Science and Technology and the School of Engineering and the Digital Science have been the primary choice for PhD programs. The office of enrollment management of Nazarbayev University contributed to the attraction of the students from abroad as a result of improved communication, easier application procedures, application fee waiver, participation in the international educational associations and conferences, and more scholarship opportunities.

According to the survey results, it was discovered that availability of financial aid played a crucial role in the choice of the Nazarbayev University with 82.7% of respondents. Other factors that affected this choice are English as a language of instruction with 38.5% and recommendation from family and friends with 23.1%. Regarding the challenges that were experienced while studying, most of the respondents noted the lack of Kazakh and Russian language knowledge (61.5%) and visa processing prior to the beginning of the studies (30.8%). Lastly, the majority of the survey participants indicated their satisfaction with Nazarbayev University, as no one rated it less than 6.

It is concluded that Nazarbayev University has made some progress in attracting foreign students given the time it has functioned. It can also be recognized to be the most preferred education institution in Kazakhstan. It contributed to the overall attraction of the student to Kazakhstan. The international talent has a potential to drive national innovation and research.

Hence, it is important, Nazarbayev University continues to strengthen its strategies for wider international outreach.

Recommendations for improving the international attractiveness of Nazarbayev University

Based on the results of the study, among the most effective and tangible recommendations the following options are proposed:

- Collaborate with competent authorities of the government to facilitate faster and easier visa procedures and acquisition for international students admitted to the Nazarbayev University.
- Create more scholarships targeting specific regions including Central Asia and Southeast Asia and beyond through increased collaboration with private and public sectors in Kazakhstan.
- Create more research grants within the University to attract international perspective into the current research and innovation projects within the University.
- Participate in the regional educational associations and university networks to enhance the exposure of the University.
- Improve the alumni engagement and network to provide mentorship for prospective students as well as establish a base for potential recruitment of new students from abroad.
- Encourage continuous improvement and review of the existing programs and policies through the mechanisms including feedback from the students.
- Provide more internship opportunities for all students in the international companies to boost the career perspectives.
- Conduct similar studies by collecting information from the alumni to have a more nuanced understanding.

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ABSTRACT

International students are crucial for all university since it effect on their ranking, accreditations, and global academic collaborations. Since Nazarbayev University, the leading institution in Kazakhstan, strives for a world-class level of education quality, attracting international students is one of the main strategies and challenges.

This research is aims to analyze policies and strategies of Nazarbayev University to attract international students. Attracting international students became a key success indicator of the universities globally, as it enhances cultural diversity and fosters global academic collaborations.

The research uses a mixed-methods approach, which combines quantitative data and survey with qualitative data. Key activities such as scholarships offerings, marketing campaigns and partnerships with foreign universities are evaluated in detail.

These activities set the further objectives of placing NU into an aperture of a competitive international education market with a focus on international students and enhancing the trends towards internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan.

Additionally, the study compares Nazarbayev University's enrollment data with other successful institutions in the region.

Key words: International students, enrollment, student diversity, Nazarbayev University, scholarships, internationalization.

INTRODUCTION

International students can bring benefits to a country, the education industry, and universities. The proportion of international students enrolled for higher education in Kazakhstan amounted to 3,34% in 2023 that hangs behind international levels. Particularly in Nazarbayev University, international students amounted to 2,85% in 2023. Through the analysis of statistics of the Nazarbayev University and a survey of the international students in the Nazarbayev University, the paper will investigate what policy changes in the Nazarbayev University could improve the attractiveness for international students.

BACKGROUND AND THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Tahira Jibeen (2015), international students can bring benefits to a country, the education industry, and universities. From country-level perspectives Hegarty (2014) proves that international students enhance international relations and consequently to international trade, while Chellaraj et al. (2008) discovered that enrollment of international students positively affects innovation process. Newsome and Cooper (2016) considered cultural benefits to a country through deepened awareness of self and the appreciation of different cultures of domestic students who experienced a kind of cultural shock from interaction with foreigners. Kell and Vogl (2012) considered the presence of international students as a positive image of the education industry and particularly universities on the quality of educational services that helps to attract new students (both domestic and international) and to gain new income. And Ravichandran Ammigan (2021) spotted that universities tend to adapt their curriculum and educational programs and standards to respond to the needs of international students and consequently increase the quality and competitiveness of their own educational services.

The proportion of international students enrolled for higher education in Kazakhstan hangs behind international levels, suggesting potential for increase. In 2022 the total number of students enrolled in Kazakhstan was reported as 163 472 including only 4 749 international students or 2.91% (BNS RK, 2022, p. 10) while 5% of students enrolled in Bachelor programs, 14% – in Master programs, and 24% – in Doctoral programs in OECD countries (38 countries) are international students (OECD, 2023, p. 35).

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Bachelor	5	10	no data	6	6	7	6	5
Master	11	18	no data	13	14	14	14	14
Doctoral	26	32	no data	22	22	24	24	24

Table 1. OECD Countries Total Share of International Enrollment, %

On the other side, the gap could be partially explained by higher education policies and/or migration policies adopted by Kazakhstan. We would consider the case of the Nazarbayev University, a flagship of Kazakhstan's higher education, as demonstrational to the whole country. Although Nazarbayev University has made progress in attracting students, currently has 203 international students out of 7 111 students in total, i.e. 2.85% that is lower even than the country's average and far beyond OECD benchmark. Considering this, we will try to find out what factors influence students' choices to study abroad, how these factors relate specifically to Nazarbayev University, and what policy changes of Nazarbayev University may improve the attraction of international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Min-Jung Kwak and Ann H. Kim (2018) considered positive experience in policy-making pertinent to international students in Canada. International students boost the economy through their spending, create jobs, and pay taxes. Canada actively recruits top talent through initiatives like Edu-Canada and Imagine Education in/au Canada. Global citizenship is encouraged among international students for cultural diversity and intercultural skills. Nyland et al. (2013) observed the experience of Australia, Ramia et al. (2013) also studied New Zealand's active participation in the global student mobility market, alongside Australia, positions the country at the forefront of international education trends and opportunities Fischer (2011) described a particular experience of Northeastern University in the United States. Hayes and Findlow (2022) opposite to others considered the experience of international students from the Middle East as users or objects of national policies. Ata and Kostogriz (2015) provided insights into the experiences of students from a cultural and linguistic perspective. It offers guidance on how to improve efforts towards integration. Particular practices of a particular country or university may be partially relevant or irrelevant at all to our case because of cultural, socioeconomic, and

political differences, however we believe that approach, strategy, and concepts used by others could positively contribute to our research.

Studies proposing various policy recommendations to increase attraction of international students may be classified into two groups: one is focused on national-level policies while other contains recommendations for universities. Although our research will consider a particular case of Nazarbayev University we count both groups relevant to our research since we hope our research would outcome the whole higher education in Kazakhstan.

An analysis of student enrollment data at Nazarbayev University for the fall of 2023 (Office of the Provost, 2021, p. 6) shows a significant predominance of local students compared to international ones. In total, the university had 7,089 students, of whom 6,880 were citizens of Kazakhstan, while only 209 were international students. This disproportion between the number of local and international students may indicate a number of factors, including admission policies, the degree of internationalization of programs and the level of attractiveness of the university to international students. This highlights the need to develop strategies to increase the university's appeal to international audiences and perhaps expand the offering of programs aimed at international students.

Despite the growing importance of international education and its potential impact on higher education systems, there appears to be a significant research gap in the context of Central Asia, particularly concerning effective strategies for increasing the enrollment of international students in Kazakhstan.

Therefore, national policies also may particularly influence enrollment of international students to Nazarbayev University.

There is a wide understanding of national policies implications and government involvement. NRC (2005) explores the policy implications surrounding graduate students providing suggestions, for both institutions and governments to consider. Peter Michael Kell and Gillian Vogl (2012) provides recommendations in the context of the global economy and an increasingly competitive trans-national education market with a focus on the Asia Pacific region. Sylvie Lomer (2017) examines changes from New Labour policies in the United Kingdom under Tony Blair's Prime Minister's Initiative. Rajika Bhandari and Peggy Blumenthal (2011) contain analysis of how national-level investments and developments affect academic migration trends. Lomer (2014) sheds light on policy perspectives, emphasizing the role of government policies in shaping strategies for attracting international students. Another study worth to be mentioned is by Chang and Gomes (2021) that highlights government policies

in developing strategies to attract students from around the World focusing on digital transitions and networks, effects of the digital environment, and digital engagement strategies.

Following studies considering policies of universities, McNamara and Harris (1997) delves into the difficulties and factors to consider when it comes to creating environments for students, from around the world. It offers insights on how their learning experiences could be enhanced. Peters (2010) delves into the importance of libraries, in providing support for students. It provides insights on how to make the most of campus resources to improve the experience for these students. Hoekje and Stevens (2018) explores ways to build an inclusive atmosphere on campus with a focus on importance of the cultural awareness and the availability of support services. Carswell (2010) delves into marketing tactics aimed at attracting students from around the world with an emphasis on the importance of branding and promotional campaigns.

Bista, Allen, and Chan (2021) explores how the COVID 19 pandemic has impacted the movement of students offering insights into adjusting strategies for a world after the pandemic. Engagement and Campus Environment. Glass, Wongtrirat, and Buus (2015) explores strategies that can be used to foster a sense of inclusivity and connectedness on campus making it more attractive to students.

The reputation of an institution, although important in attracting students, may not be sufficient to ensure wide geographical coverage in some cases. An academic analysis of applicant data for the OSCE Academy in Bishkek shows that despite its prestigious international reputation and the participation of 57 countries, including Europe, Central Asia and North America, most applications come from Central Asian countries.

In 2022, out of 2,775 applications for master's programs, only 37 applications came from candidates from other OSCE countries, except five Central Asian countries (OSCE Academy, 2022, p. 12). A similar trend was observed in the undergraduate program, where out of 1,707 applications, only eight were from candidates from countries outside Central Asia (OSCE Academy, 2022, p. 12). This indicates that geographic location and regional connections play a critical role in the student attraction process, even for institutions with an international reputation.

The existing materials emphasize the need for the comprehensive market evaluation and the demands of the possible applicants coming from different countries in order to adopt strategies that focus on adding the appeal and improving the reputation outside of the national boundaries. This analysis can provide important critical information for educational institutions which strive to expand influence on the global level.

The OSCE Academy in Kyrgyzstan serves as an example of the institution that focuses on ensuring special opportunities for its students. This is viewed to be the main motivation that drives interest in the Academy. For instance, there are fully funded summer internships that are given to distinguished students. The Academy partners with organizations including OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. Together with these partners, the internship grant covers the expenses in terms of relocation, monthly payments that allows students gain real world experience. What is more, there is a NUPI Scholarship offered by the OSCE Academy which represents a program that gives its best students an opportunity to spend a year at the Department of Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. This program assumes the financial assistance to the selected students with the monthly stipend of USD \$2,200 as well as future career and academic possibilities in international relations. In addition to European partners, the OSCE Academy also made collaborations within the Central Asian region. For example, as a result of the agreement with Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Junior Public Officers (JPO) Program provides an opportunity for Kazakhstani students to have a three-month traineeship at the Ministry in order to gain practical insights into the foreign affairs what increases their chances to have future employment in the public sector. These programs focusing on both theoretical and practical knowledge demonstrate the OSCE Academy's commitment to offer educational experiences that are oriented toward achieving career development. In this way, the OSCE Academy maintains and further develops its appeal to the students from different parts of the region.

According to Bekbauova et al. (2017), and Oralova (2012), collaboration with foreign education institutions as well as the membership in the Bologna process has played a crucial role in the internationalization of Kazakhstan's higher education as it allowed the learning of the possibilities for creating policies for further internationalization efforts. Maudarbekova and Kashkinbayeva (2013) came up with a similar conclusion but focusing on student exchange programs. Kenebayeva (2019) in addition to others also considered the impact of the "Bolashak" program to the internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan. Akkari et al. (2023) and Tazhibayeva (2017) considered policies regarding promotion and learning of English language in Kazakhstan as significant factors to attract foreigners to the country's universities. As opposed to others Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev (2013) did not consider factors to increase internationalization but internationalization itself as a positive factor enhancing the success of the State Program of Industrial and Innovation Development and proved the importance of our topic particularly for Kazakhstan.

But focusing on actions that could increase the attraction of international students seems to be a one-sided story. A set of authors like Alberts and Hazen (2013), Glass et al. (2015), Hoekje et al. (2018), Peters (2010), and Tannock (2018) enlighten adaptation issues of international students. Their observation would help us to understand discouraging aspects. Assuming that negative experience may negatively affect the attraction of international students, we should also pay attention to policies aimed at the adaptation process.

Based on the information gathered from various sources, this literature review provides a thorough understanding of the various factors that impact the enrollment of international students. In the following sections of our study, we will combine these findings and considerations to create customized strategies for boosting the number of international students at Nazarbayev University that also could be used by other universities of Kazakhstan.

RESEARCH DESIGN

At broad view the research problem could inquire what policies of Nazarbayev University may improve the attraction of international students. While answer to such question could be find in a complex of various policies from price and marketing strategies to strategy on faculty members, and even Kazakhstan's state policies, this study would focus particularly on two exercises.

First one is analysis of data of the Nazarbayev University to find out if any changes in university policies improved or, au contraire, limited attraction of international students. Analysis of annual statistics of Nazarbayev University might find a correlation between target indicators and adoption of certain policies to identify their effectiveness. The performance of Nazarbayev University could be benchmarked over others to identify weaknesses and opportunities for improvement. The mixture of quantitative data (e.g., share of international students by year) and qualitative data (e.g., a policy is adopted and applied) would be collected from the university, however data availability and quality as well as proper benchmarks availability might put some limitations to our research. Confidentiality policy and ethical aspects and possible related limitations to retrieving data process must be considered (Bryman, 2012, p. 424). Data accuracy also must be considered. (Booth et al., 2008, pp. 274-275).

Second is identification of university attractiveness factors from perspective of international students.

Rationales and concerns of international students might be revealed from a survey-based analysis. International students as a unit of observation would be proposed to complete a survey

to determine what factors forced them to apply to Nazarbayev University. Determined features of the university attractiveness would provide us a focus on what aspects are more important as attractiveness factors from the perspective of international students. The university would not provide contacts of international students for the survey because of confidentiality policy and ethical aspects – that’s why snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012, p. 424) would be used for the survey.

Ethical aspects were considered in the research. Voluntary participation and informed consent as well as confidentiality and anonymity are major principles during both survey and interview to be used in the research. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity proper coding of gathered data must be applied to address human rights protection and possible concerns from the staff regarding their critical opinion. Data accuracy must be considered under the risk of concern from the university or particular staff on how they are going to be represented. (Booth et al., 2008, pp. 274-275).

Collected data consist of two parts: statistics of the university and results of survey poll. Statistics of the university was provided by the university and does not contain any personal data, it is aggregated.

Statistics of the university is available for all possible years since the foundation of Nazarbayev University. Data collected is based on documented indicators such as year of application, nationality, school (faculty), level of programs (undergraduate/graduate), etc.

The only calculations were made are ratio of

Survey poll and interviews have been collected anonymously from current students of the Nazarbayev University (no alumni included). The survey consists of 10 questions. 42 responses have been received for the survey.

FINDINGS

Enrollment of international students to Nazarbayev University reached its peak in 2023.

As we may see from the table below, the share of international students is growing gradually and reached 2.9% in 2023.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total	0.3%	0.6%	0.7%	0.7%	0.9%	1.5%	2.5%	2.8%	2.9%
Undergraduate	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	2.8%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%
Graduate	0.4%	1.3%	1.5%	1.6%	2.3%	6.8%	7.7%	10.3%	10.0%

Table 2. Nazarbayev University International enrollment

The dynamics showed sharp increase for graduate programs in 2020 and in 2022. However, share in undergraduate programs is still below 1%. Despite growing dynamics Nazarbayev University is still lagging behind its peers in Kazakhstan and abroad. Average level in Kazakhstani universities is 2.91% in 2022 (4 749 of 163 472) and 3.34% in 2023 (5 742 of 171 699). Particularly: Kazakh-British Technical University – 2.7% (146 international students of 5378 in total), KIMEP – 13%, Farabi University – 14.24% in 2016-2017 (3612 of 25363), Maqсут Narikbayev University – 6% (180 of 3000).

According to the World University Rankings, the Nazarbayev University falls in category of 501-600 ranking that includes 100 universities. Among them, NU showed poor results in terms of share of international students – 88th position in the group.

So, Nazarbayev University has a room for improvement. However, we need to notice that there is a significant growth in international student enrollment. To find a way to success we need to dig up why it happened. A notable increase in the number of international students was observed in 2020-2021. This growth can be attributed to multiple factors, including targeted recruitment efforts, policy changes, and enhanced support mechanisms for international applicants. The Office of Enrollment Management (OEM) contributed to the smooth execution of the strategies which eventually considerably improved the attractiveness of the university to potential students coming from different parts of the world.

International Student Enrollment by Leading Countries (2014-2022)

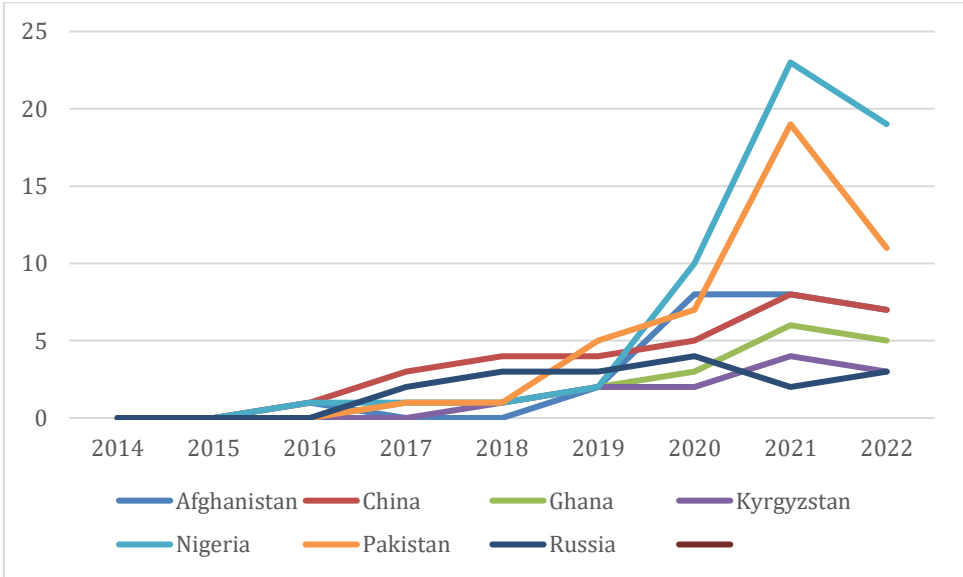


Figure 1. Number of current international students per year and country in the period from 2014 to 2022

The figure shows the amount of the students from abroad who were enrolled in the time frame between 2014 and 2022. There was a notable rise of the students from Nigeria, Pakistan, and

Afghanistan witnessed in 2020-2021. The main reason that is responsible for such a spike can be attributed to recruitment campaigns as well as creation of the policies that seek to provide regional support.

Undergraduate Enrollment by School

The graph below demonstrated the trend of the enrollment of foreign students in different schools between 2014 and 2022. In particular between 2019 and 2020, there was a dramatic rise of the enrollment in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SSH) and the School of Engineering and Digital Sciences (SEDS). Among the causes that led to the increase depicted are promotional initiatives that targeted specific groups as well as emergence of new educational programs. Effective teamwork of both the OEC and Schools also played a decisive role in attracting more students to enroll at Nazarbayev University. While the OEM sets out the recruitment strategy by reaching out to markets and providing centralized admissions assistance the schools actively connect with potential students. A standout instance is when they host Open House Days where each school presents its programs, facilities and job opportunities to entice prospective applicants. These occasions offer students a chance to delve into particular academic programs firsthand by engaging with faculty members and experiencing the learning atmosphere directly. Factors that frequently play a crucial role in influencing their enrollment choices.

Lately there has been an increase in the number of students enrolling in the SEDS mainly due to the emphasis on specialized programs that are in line with the latest technological and innovative trends worldwide. SEDS has effectively showcased the importance and high demand for its programs during these occasions which appeal to students seeking degrees that lead to promising career opportunities. The focused strategy not highlights the educational excellence of the institution but also establishes NU as a desirable choice for individuals aspiring to enter sought after professions, in various industries.

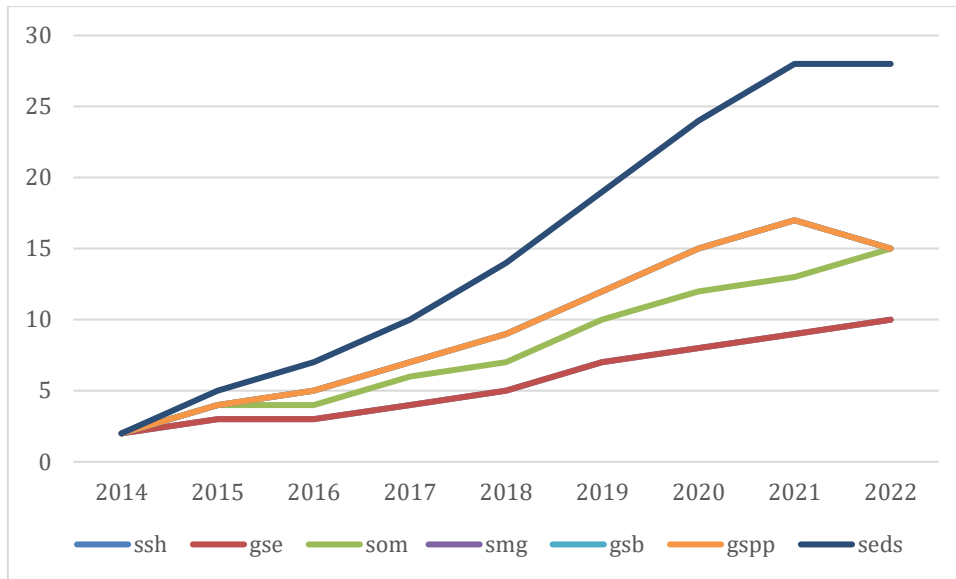


Figure 2. Number of undergraduate international students enrolled by school and year

Master's Enrollment by School

Enrollment in master's programs showed a marked increase in 2020, as seen in the graph below. The School of Medicine (SOM) and the School of Engineering and Digital Sciences (SEDS) were the primary contributors to this growth. Both SOM and SEDs sought to expand the demographics of their students by carrying out new collaborations and programs.

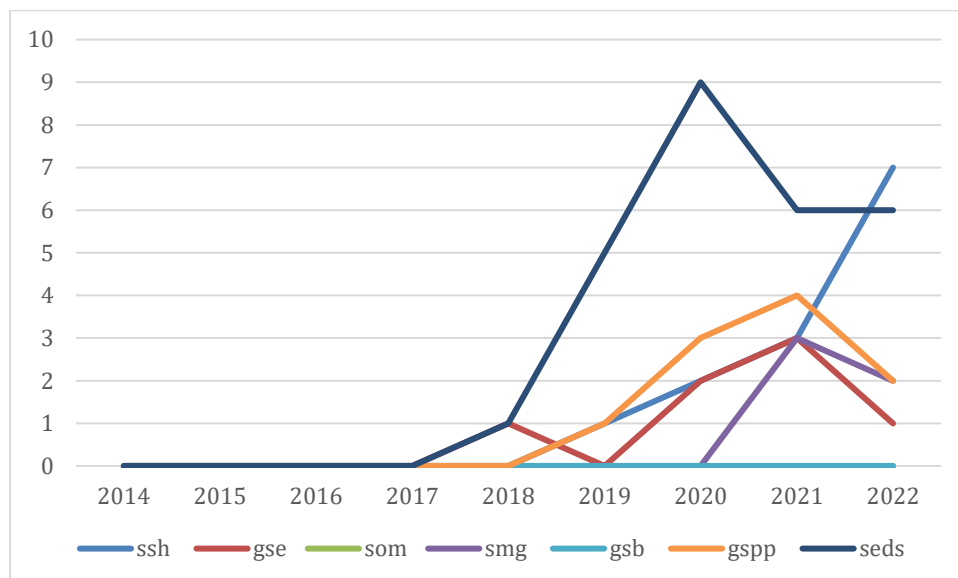


Figure 3. Number of student from abroad admitted to Master's postgraduate programs based on the year and School enrolled

PhD Enrollment by School

It was revealed that PhD programs at Nazarbayev University experienced welcoming more foreign students in 2020. However, there was some decline noted afterwards. The figure below provides an overview of the doctoral students and their distribution across the faculties. The School of Engineering and Digital Sciences (SEDS) and the School of Science and Technology (SSH) are highlighted as their initiatives in terms of research and improved partnerships led to the growth observed.

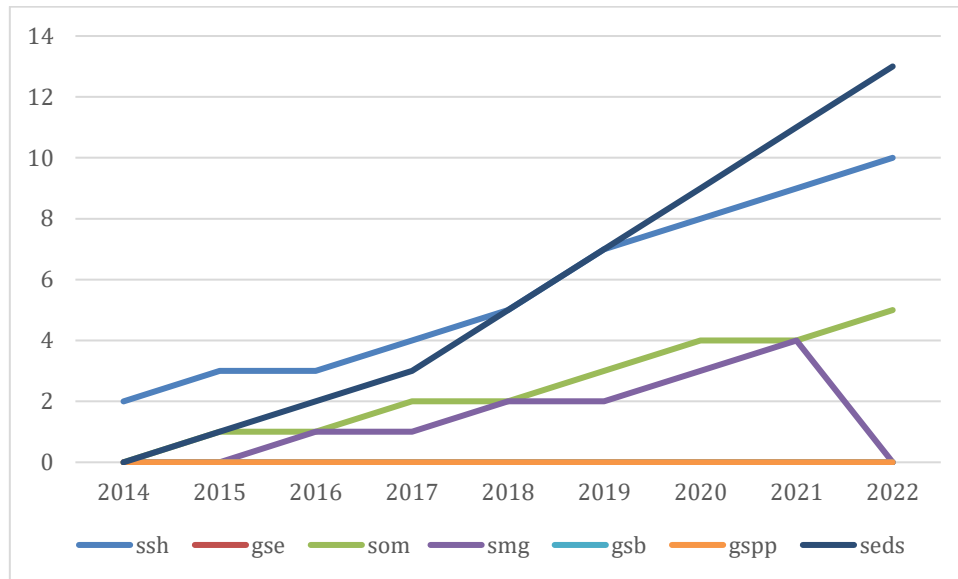


Figure 4. Number of students from abroad admitted to doctoral postgraduate programs based on year and the School

Key Activities Contributing to Increased Enrollment in 2020

The key changes in the strategic approach and the programs that are associated with the significant increase in the admission of the student from abroad in 2020 are the following:

- Exemption from Application Fees,
- Amendments to the Abai Kunanbayev Scholarship,
- Enhanced International Outreach and Conference Participation,
- Development of Discount Programs and Financial Aid,
- Transition to a Fully Online Application Process.

For instance, the application fee waiver was granted to international applications in order to eliminate the financial burden for those coming from less developed places. The waiver also sought to make the application process more accessible to more vulnerable populations. The CIS countries such as Mongolia, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkmenistan were among the countries for which the scholarship criteria was adjusted. These changes led to the growth of

the applications from the mentioned countries. The University global potential was further improved through its active involvement in the educational congresses such as NAFSA and NACAC. These initiatives set a platform to showcase the university's programs and facilities to a broader audience, attracting more applicants. Another factor that made it possible for less developed countries to apply to Nazarbayev University is the introduction of the tuition fee discounts in accordance with the World Bank's income country classification.

The growing presence of the international students at Nazarbayev University was made possible due to the carefully designed recruitment policies and ensuring a supportive environment. The year 2020 was marked as the year that hit the record in terms of the enrollment which mainly attributed to the mix of strategies and awareness initiatives. It is important that the university continues to prioritize these areas and develop new more sustainable ones that would align the needs and demands of the international students.

Digital transformation of the application process has enhanced the processes of application and admission in terms of logistics which was a response to the obstacles posed during the COVID-19 pandemic and what can as well help to overcome similar issues.

What is more, the University has used digital channels which allowed it to reach out to the wider audience. For example, conducting open days online, webinars, and Q&A sessions helped students from abroad to get informed about programs and application process from the representatives of University. Potential students have had an opportunity to stay informed and connected through the digital events regardless of their location. At the same time, the University also harnessed the power of digital interaction by adapting its communication strategies and using data analytics to understand the demographic information to design effective marketing campaigns.

Survey of the motives, challenges, and the overall experience of the international students at Nazarbayev University

Survey questionnaire was conducted among currently enrolled students based on the principles of anonymity and confidentiality excluding the alumni. The questionnaire was based on ten questions that explored the main reasons behind student's choice of the country and the University in particular.

Absence of the alumni perspectives represents one the limitations of the study. While the present research design provides important insights into the opinions of those who reflect the actual situation within the University, collecting data from alumni could also provide a more nuanced understanding of the motives and challenges. For example, alumni could share

important information and feedback regarding their experiences during the complete course of study as well as their activities in terms of career and further education after graduation. This limitation can hinder the generalizability of the results and therefore suggest that future studies should take into account alumni perspectives to capture the long-term effects of their studies at Nazarbayev University. Moreover, the sample selection did not consider those who were admitted but eventually chose not to pursue their studies at Nazarbayev University. Understanding the reasons behind such decisions is essential for a more complete analysis of the factors influencing student choices. Those who decided against enrolling could offer insights into perceived barriers, concerns, or competitive advantages of other institutions, which are not captured by focusing solely on enrolled students. Consequently, the survey results may be skewed toward the experiences of students who had positive motivations to study at Nazarbayev University, while missing out on the broader picture that includes the reasons potential applicants might opt for alternative educational options.

Results and observations from the survey

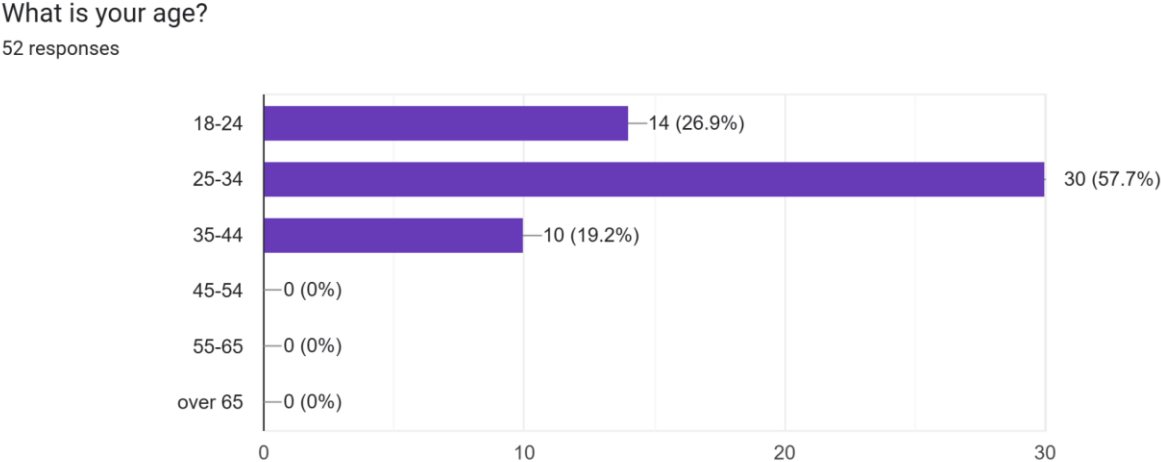


Figure 5. Age distribution of respondents.

Most of respondents are in the age group of 25-34 years old.

Note: two respondents chose two groups of age as an answer.

What is your gender?

52 responses

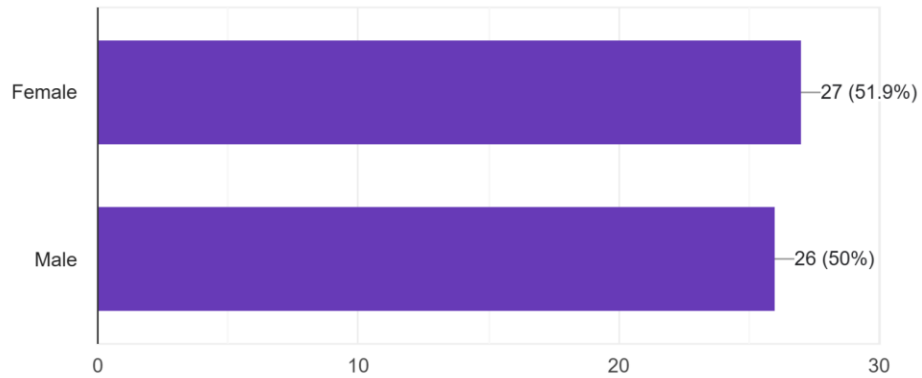


Figure 6. Gender distribution of respondents.

Gender distribution among respondents is almost equal.

Note: one respondent chose both genders as an answer.

What is your current level of education?

52 responses

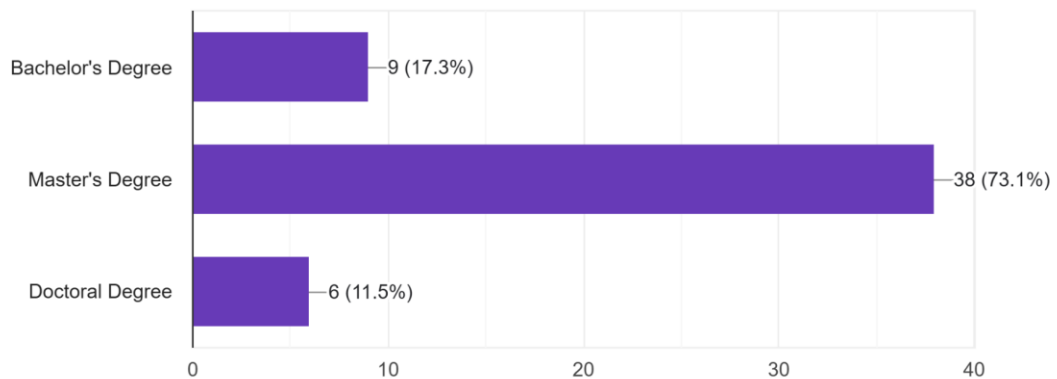


Figure 7. Distribution of respondents by their level of education.

Most of respondents have master's degree. This might explain the age group dominance from the first question that most of respondents are between 25 and 34 years old.

Note: one respondent chose two options as an answer.

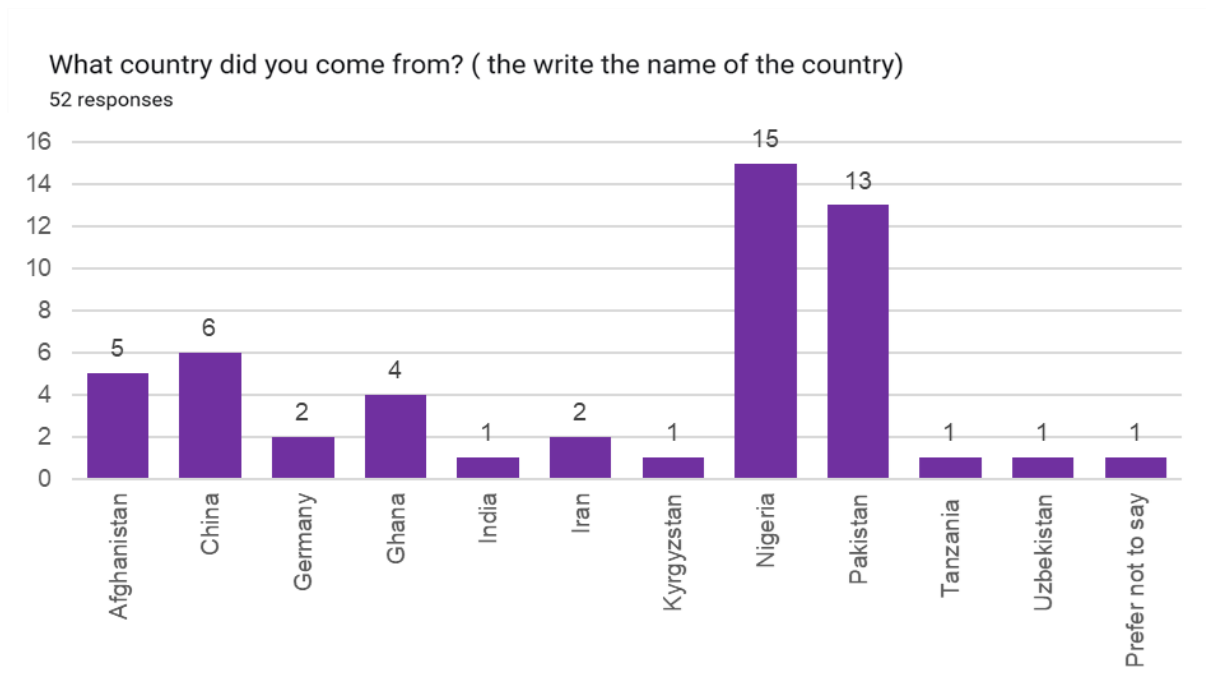


Figure 8. Distribution of respondents by their nationality.

There are two biggest groups from Nigeria and Pakistan that together represent more than half of respondents (28 out of 52). There are also 6 respondents from China, 5 respondents from Afghanistan, and 4 respondents from Ghana.

Note: one respondent preferred not to answer.

When choosing a country and a university, did you compare Kazakhstan and this university with other countries and universities?

52 responses

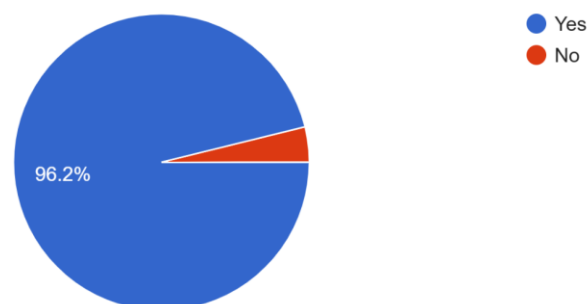


Figure 9. Shares of respondents by if they compared Kazakhstan and Nazarbayev University with other options or not.

96.2% of respondents compared Kazakhstan and Nazarbayev University to other options while choosing a place for study.

What factors influenced the choice of this country for study? (choose no more than three answer options)

52 responses

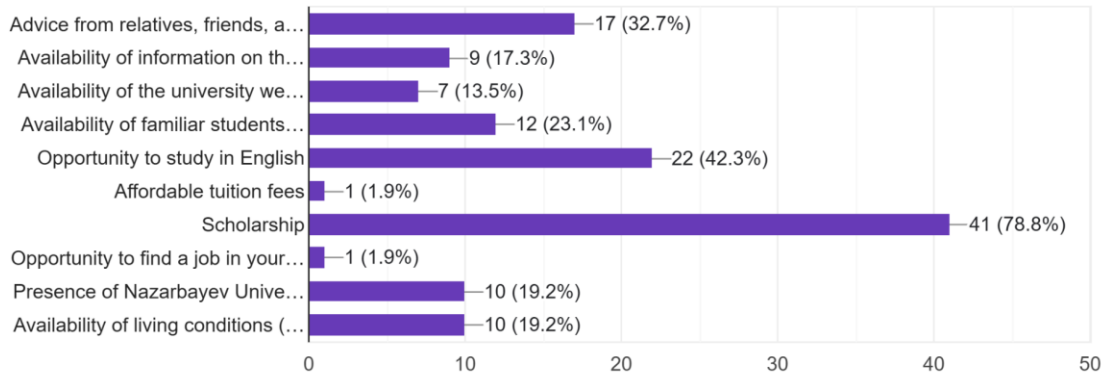


Figure 10. Factors of choice for Kazakhstan

What factors most influenced your choice of studying in Nazarbayev University ? (choose no more than three answer options)

52 responses

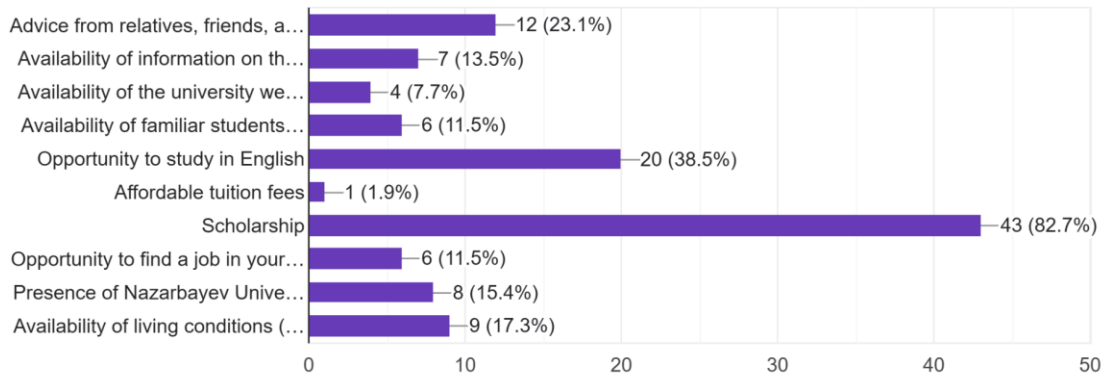


Figure 11. Factors of choice for the Nazarbayev University

Scholarship is the most popular answer as a factor of choice for both Kazakhstan and the Nazarbayev University.

What problems did you encounter when entering university and studying in Kazakhstan?

52 responses

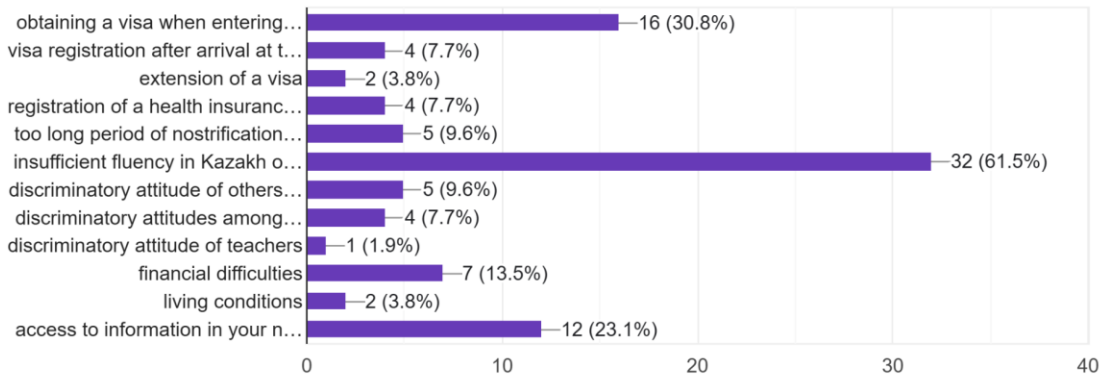


Figure 12. Problems that respondents encountered when entering university and studying in Kazakhstan.

Insufficient fluency in Kazakh or Russian and obtaining a visa when entering a university were the most popular answers as problems for international students.

How would you rate the satisfaction level of support and services provided to international students at Nazarbayev University?

52 responses

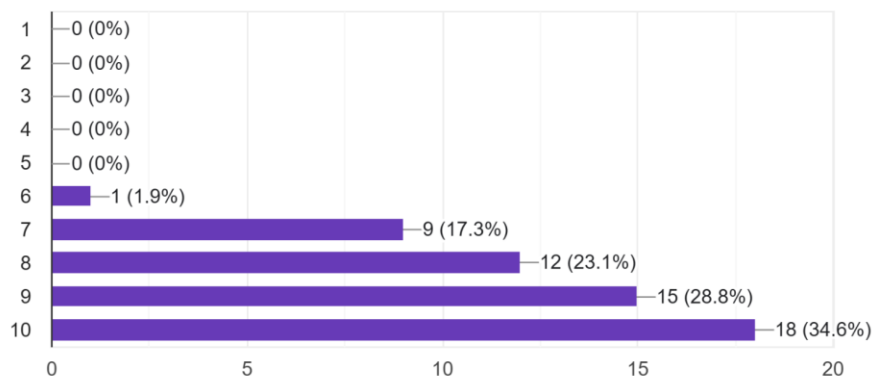


Figure 13. Satisfaction of respondents with Nazarbayev University.

Average satisfaction level is 9.23 out of 10 with eighteen marks as 10 out of 10.

DISCUSSION

1. Significant Growth in 2020:

- Why the Growth? The year 2020 saw a notable increase in international student enrollments. A key factor behind this was the waiver of application fees for international students, making it more accessible for applicants from developing

countries. The Abay Kunanbayev scholarship transformation of the selection criteria which prioritizes students from Central Asian states as well as Mongolia and Afghanistan has been a leading cause of the increasing number of applications from the mentioned countries.

- Role of the Digitalization: Move toward online admission process provided additional leverage for potential students to submit their application documents. Given the constraints to travel, this novelty allowed attraction of the applications from Pakistan, Nigeria, and Afghanistan.

2. Faculties with the biggest proportion of the International Students:

- School of Engineering and Digital Sciences (SEDS): SEDS turned out to be a main choice for international students seeking education. This tendency is explained by the growing demand for STEM professionals as well as growing reputation of the school due to its offer of cutting-edge programs like engineering, data science, and IT. Moreover, the school is actively involved in educational fairs as well as partnerships with engineering faculties in countries like the US that helps to promote faculty and improve the content of its programs.
- School of Medicine (SOM): In 2020, the SOM witnessed a significant rise in the interest in its master's degree programs. New residency programs as well as adapting its curriculum to the newly emerging health problems are viewed to be important factors that attract international students. Financial support has further contributed to the appeal of the SOM among less financially individuals.

3. Diverse profiles of the Students:

- Highest Enrollment Rates across countries: Students from Pakistan, Nigeria, and Afghanistan were amongst the top three countries in 2020. This became possible due to the recruitment campaigns specifically in these countries. To provide an example, partnership with higher education institutions in Pakistan helped to promote the programs of the University for continuing higher education.
- More applicants from the African Continent: Nigeria and Ghana were amongst the African countries whose young individuals considered Nazarbayev University to pursue their studies between 2020 and 2021. Again, financial incentives along with the online campaigns that allowed gathering more information about the programs motivated students from this region.

4. Undergraduate vs. Graduate programs tendencies:

- Increasing number of enrollment in Undergraduate Programs: More applicants were also observed in the The School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SSH) and the Center for Preparatory Studies (CPS). The Nazarbayev University Foundation Year Program (NUFYP) was another factor that stimulated the growth since it allowed students to spend one year as an adaptation to both academic program and new environment prior to pursuing a specific program.
- Growing attractiveness of the Master's degree programs at SEDS and SOM: Similar to other programs, scholarships and collaboration with faculties abroad provided students with a possibility to study masters in the school which has made progress in advancing its quality and relevance.

5. Revision of the strategies and their effects:

- Entrance into neighboring markets: Targeted recruitment campaigns that aimed at attracting new students from neighboring countries including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, have been effective given more applicants from these places. Favorable conditions offered by the scholarships was another aspect that benefited the recruitment.
- Promotional Campaigns: a shift toward online marketing campaigns including promotional activities on the social media platforms and webinars contributed to the visibility of the University beyond its borders. These promotional efforts resulted in the development of the image of the University as an alternative to those seeking education in the West.

The year 2020 marked a substantial rise of international students' admission to Nazarbayev University. The growth in the number of newly enrolled students was driven by a set of factors including the removal of the application fees and adjustments of the selection criteria of the Abay Kunanbayev scholarship that currently gives preferences to the applicants from the Central Asian countries, Mongolia and Afghanistan. Moreover, the shift to online application process made it easier for prospective students given the travel restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the more simplified procedures, there is still a notable difference in the representation of the foreign students in the undergraduate programs as they account for less than 1% of the total students enrolled in these programs.

The results of the study are in line with the arguments proposed by Nyland et al. (2013) and Kwak & Kim (2018) who claim that financial help played an important role in engaging international audiences.

With respect to the simplified visa procedures that increased the enrollment rates as demonstrated by the investigation of the educational institutions in Canada and Australia, the findings suggest that difficulties to obtain visa to enter Kazakhstan and lack of language competency are the main barriers that undermine the efforts of the Nazarbayev University to have more international students.

It was also discovered that even though more students from Pakistan, Nigeria and Afghanistan gave their preference to Nazarbayev University, they still experienced issues related to visa application and language barriers. Despite the increasing reward opportunities and digital access, these external barriers indicate the need to ensure the support that not only concerns the academic programs and its attractiveness, but the general journey of the student enrollment process.

In this regard, it is suggested that implementing some special visa exemptions such as “visa on demand” and providing special assistance by the visa issuing authorities in the targeted regions to the student visa applications can greatly minimize the bureaucratic burden. Apart from that, scholarship opportunities should remain a priority and in particular can be created to support specific international students e.g. Africa and Southeast Asia. In order to address the issue of local language barrier, additional assistance programs within University can help newcomers to avoid significant “shocks” and make their adaptation smoother.

Future studies should focus on gathering information from graduates in order to more carefully grasp the impact of their educational experience at Nazarbayev university on their career and personal journey. In addition, understanding the causes that influences the decision not to enter Nazarbayev University for those who have been admitted, would enrich the findings. Moreover understanding how cultural adjustment intersects with achievement could offer valuable insights, for enhancing the holistic student journey.

CONCLUSION

Nazarbayev University (NU) has made progress in drawing in students from around the world through affordable tuition fees and English taught programs it offers."Challenges such as visa procedures and language obstacles can hinder NUs competitiveness against universities, in other nations that have smoother services and well defined career prospects after graduation.

To ensure long term growth in the number of students at NU it is important to review policies and enhance services for students' well-being and success abroad. Improving the visa process

by introducing options such as visa on demand or enhanced regional consular support can greatly simplify the application procedures for students.

It's crucial to establish connections with both global businesses for providing internships and career assistance effectively at NU university, which would also be beneficial to introduce post study work visa opportunities aligning with other esteemed universities policies to enhance the appeal of the university, for potential students.

To enhance connections with applicants in the future and establish a more inclusive and competitive environment at NU University in key locations through alumni involvement and increasing scholarships for students from underserved regions like Africa and Southeast Asia will attract a diverse pool of talented students globally while boosting the university's standing as a regional leader in higher education.

Policy recommendations

- Lobbying adaptable visa and immigration processes.
Work together with the authorities in Kazakhstan to create an efficient visa system for foreign students by introducing faster application processes and easier visa extensions. This will help lower hurdles and make it easier for students to come to the country.
- Creating scholarships, for key regions to support targeted educational development initiatives.
Establish scholarships tailored to draw students from growing education markets like Central Asia, Africa and Southeast Asia with a focus on supporting those from financial backgrounds.
- Getting involved in partnerships and academic networks.
Enhance engagement in educational associations and international university networks to boost exposure, such as joining initiatives, like Erasmus and collaborating on research projects with various institutions globally.
- Boost funding for research grants. Provide more assistance for international students launching startups.
Create funding opportunities. Support programs to motivate foreign students to participate in research initiatives and entrepreneurial ventures at Nazarbayev University encouraging those with a passion for practical research and business development.
- Creating a strategy for maintaining connections with graduates, over the long term.
Create a network of former students that provides career and educational prospects while maintaining ongoing access to university services and facilities; involving alumni as ambassadors will also enhance the university's global recruitment tactics.

- Continual review of global programs and offerings
Make sure to check in on how satisfied international students are and review NU policies every year based on their feedback. This way we can use the data to make quick improvements and provide top notch service at the university.
- Securing backing through collaborations, with government and private investors.
Enhance initiatives to obtain financial support for programs benefitting international students through partnerships, with governmental bodies and private organizations aiming to lessen the university's financial strain and broaden the scope of available scholarships.

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