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Academic Mobility and the Labor Market

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The current study is aimed to better understand the concept of *academic mobility* and identify its labor market outcomes in the context of Kazakhstan. The paper considers whether mobility is an advantage for the domestic employment market and whether it enhances graduates' employability. The researcher also investigates whether in Kazakhstan students' participation in the international programs, particularly the Bolashak International Scholarship of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, affects their employment upon completion of their studies. This investigation indicates that increasingly large numbers of students continue to study abroad despite the lack of clear evidence supporting the gains graduates have in finding jobs. This suggests that students who return are not necessarily guaranteed with ideal jobs upon their graduation. Just because someone studied abroad, the competition for them does not disappear: work experience can have a higher priority. Hence, the results of this study showed that the Bolashak program is not always a ticket to a better future, at least in the short term.

Keywords: academic mobility; labor market; Bolashak program; employability

Introduction

In the era of globalization, distance is no longer a barrier to academic mobility. Studying abroad has become so common over the past ten years that it is easier than ever before to go and study abroad as more and more students have this opportunity. Recently, for example, there was a threefold increase in students who chose to study in foreign countries (OECD, 2013).

It seems that many European and American countries are now selected by students of Asian countries to study on site. However, while the majority of students from Asia study in other regions, American and European students tend to stay in their own. Furthermore, due to the variety of grants and scholarships available for students nowadays, one can see increasing numbers of skilled people moving from developing to developed countries. Despite the fact that studying abroad is not something that every student will choose, it is a good option for all.

Today the role of academic mobility seems to have become a key instrument for certain countries to cope with the labor market needs and to move from a Global South towards a Global North position. Kazakhstan is no exception. It is believed that academic mobility gives individuals better job opportunities (Byram & Dervin, 2008, p. 8). However, there are different views on this issue. Hence, this paper tries to clarify the concept of *academic mobility* in the Kazakhstani context and identify its labor market outcomes. Specifically, the researcher investigates whether in Kazakhstan students' participation in international programs, particularly the Bolashak program, affects their employment upon completion of their studies.

The Bolashak program is primarily designed for participants to study abroad. The Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2016) explains that *Bolashak* means *future* in the Kazakh language, and "speaks to the importance Kazakhstan puts on educating its youth at the best universities in the world." Kazakhstan also collaborates with a number of other programs to study abroad such as Erasmus Mundus, Edmund S. Muskie Graduate Fellowship Program, Fulbright Program, International Scholarship DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), KOICA (Korea International Cooperation Agency), Alliance Française (French Alliance) and many others. This is important as students can study abroad with the help of such programs, which will increase their competitiveness in both the global and domestic labor market. However, these programs are not the only ones through which students may study overseas. Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan has various educational agreements with a number of universities in Asia and Europe which support the idea of mobility (MoES, 2010, n.p.). Thus, as one can see, the main reason for advocating programs to study abroad is that they bring various positive effects (better academic achievement, greater cultural appreciation, personal and professional development) for students.

However, the opportunities and outcomes of participation in academic mobility programs are different for different participants, either students or employers. As stated by Kazinform (2009): "The most famous international initiative set up by President Nursultan Nazarbayev is the Bolashak program which covers tuition fees for outstanding students, enabling them to study at the best universities of the world" (para. 1). For twenty years of existence, the Bolashak program has granted a great majority of people the chance to study abroad and as a result to obtain degrees from leading higher education institutions (HEIs) such as Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge and others.

The two research questions which guide this study are as follows:

1. Does academic mobility enhance employability, if at all?
2. To what extent is knowledge acquired abroad applicable and relevant to a domestic labor market?

Academic mobility is meant to include “a period of study, teaching and/or research in a country other than a student’s or academic staff member’s home country” (UNESCO, 2001, para. 1). This phenomenon is crucial for several reasons. It is considered to be one of the significant policies for internationalization of higher education (HE). As mentioned by International Association of Universities (1998),

Whether in the economic, political, or social realms, HE is expected to contribute to raising the overall quality of life. To fulfil its role effectively and maintain excellence, HE must become far more internationalized; it must integrate an international and intercultural dimension into its teaching, research, and service functions. (p. 1)

This is important because HE should become more internationally minded in this competitive world. Thus, academic mobility is considered to be an integral part of the learning process.

The Concept of Academic Mobility

Academic mobility is not a new concept. The root of the concept of academic mobility can be traced back to the Middle Ages. As stated by Musselin (2004): “In Europe, academic mobility has a long tradition which began with the birth of the European universities in the Middle Ages” (p. 55). The idea to go abroad and learn from people of other cultures, for example, was also mentioned by famous writer and poet Shakespeare (Keogh & Russel-Roberts, 2009, p. 108). However, as noted by Rizvi and Lingard (2010), “Never before in history have there been more people moving across national boundaries” (p. 161). It has become a popular trend today as one can see that more and more students are choosing to study abroad.

As mentioned above, academic mobility implies a period of study in a country, different from the home country (UNESCO, 2001). This period is of limited duration, meaning that the length of the program typically ranges from a semester to the full program of study.

Academic mobility is considered to be one of the basic principles of the Bologna process. In other words, one of the aims of the Bologna process is to enhance the mobility of both students and staff. According to the report of the European Higher Education Area (2014), the Bologna process began in 1999 “with the signing the Bologna Declaration.” This European space for HE was initially signed by 29 countries (European Higher Education Area, 2014). Afterwards, other countries continued to join the Bologna process from year to year.

The first mention of academic mobility is noted in the *Magna Carta of Universities*; this expression was continued by the *Sorbonne Declaration* which pointed out “the creation of the European area of HE as a key way to promote the mobility of citizens” (European Higher Education Area, 2014). The *Magna Carta of Universities* is “a document that was signed by 388 rectors and heads of universities from all over Europe and beyond on 18 September 1988” (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum, 2016, p. 1).

As stated by Eremina (2012),

The ‘Magna Carta’ of universities, the Joint Declaration of Ministers of Education (Sorbonne, 1998), the Prague Communiqué of Ministers of Education (2001), the Message of European Rectors (Salamanca 2001), the Berlin Communiqué (2003), the Bologna Declaration, and many other documents contain recommendations on the need to encourage students to spend at least one semester in a university outside their own country, since college students’ mobility is the basis for the creation of the European space of HE. (p. 4)

As a result, recently there has been significant growth in the student and academic staff mobility and student exchange programs. This presents many new opportunities such as increased access to HE, movement of graduates and professionals and improvement of education quality. As stated by Merrill (2012), “If the student can find a job after graduation, then he or she has had a ‘quality’ education” (p. 7). However, while academic mobility affords many benefits to HE, it is clear that there are some challenges as well. For example, increasing emphasis on English as the language of instruction or the possibility of losing cultural identity are considered to be serious risks associated with this complex and growing phenomenon of academic mobility. The problem is that people sometimes do not want to return to their homes after their studies abroad. They seek better job opportunities and a brighter future abroad; therefore, the government may lose a significant labor force. As mentioned by Wiers-Jenssen (2008): “This is probably more likely to happen if the labor market options and general living conditions are better in the host country than the home country” (p. 121).

Rizvi and Lingard (2010) describe *brain drain* as “the loss to the more developed countries of their talented workers in whom they have invested heavily through education” (p. 179). As a result, governments see some measures as necessary, for example, to force students return to home after their studies. The Bolashak

program is one of the bright examples of a scholarship program that requires students to return after completing the international study. However, when the first group of Bolashak students graduated from Western universities, some chose not to come back to Kazakhstan. They did so because they did not follow the contract which obliged them to return. As a result, money invested in these students' education was wasted. The solution for this problem was the contract that obliged students to present a piece property as a warranty for them to come back. It is now expected that students return to their homes right after completing their studies abroad. Some people would argue, perhaps, that this particular scholarship is not considered to be a mode of academic mobility as it gives the possibility to get a full degree abroad.

It is necessary to note that there are several types of academic mobility. For example, in the Bologna process, two different types of academic mobility are identified, among which there are "vertical mobility in which the student acquires a complete education in pursuit of an academic degree in a foreign institution of higher learning; and horizontal mobility in which the student is enrolled for a limited amount of time" (Eremina, 2012, p. 5). In addition, academic mobility is divided into external and internal (teaching students at foreign and domestic HEIs, respectively). In this paper, however, the focus is more on *external* and *vertical* mobility to support this idea and answer the research questions.

As stated by Rizvi and Lingard (2010), study abroad programs are "based on the principles of internationalization, as a way of not only supporting structural cooperation but also promoting curriculum development and the creation of networks and credit transfer arrangements" (p. 173). Thus, the high quality of education by either program seems to be the guarantee to a constant demand for Kazakhstani graduates in the labor market. They, therefore, have reasonably good opportunities for gaining employment. However, some would argue that mobile students might come across some difficulties as their skills are sometimes not enough for today's competitive labor market. Yet, they have a possibility to change their job opportunities for the better by acquiring necessary competitive skills required by employers. Each of these points is important to the discussion below of the next question: Does academic mobility enhance employability, if at all?

Employability of Mobile and Immobile Students

Although there are some opportunities of academic mobility such as an increased access to HE, movement of students and teachers, and the improvement of academic quality, there is still limited evidence about students' benefits from their educational experience abroad. Nonetheless, academic mobility is more likely to improve students' chances in the labor market. As mentioned by Rizvi and Lingard (2010), "The educational rationale underlying international education was largely concerned with the development of skills, attitudes and knowledge so that, upon their return, graduates could make a robust contribution to national development" (p. 169). This is important because nowadays knowledge gained while studying abroad is considered to be the most valuable treasure that a state can invest in. But does it really give the highest return on investment, or do people only think that it does? It is important to take into account students' personal qualities when addressing such questions.

It is often said that studying abroad can extend students' vision and their perspectives about life. In addition to getting a Western diploma, students acquire different competencies including language skills, research skills and cultural knowledge (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013, p. 474). But it does not, or should not, necessarily mean that these social capital skills are required in the home country (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013, p. 474). As stated by Wiers-Jenssen (2013): "Students spending several years abroad may in fact score lower on certain capabilities and features such as relevant networks and familiarity with domestic rules and regulations" (p. 474). Thus, it can be claimed that mobile students face several challenges such as lack of professional connections, less familiarity with domestic laws and regulations, international qualifications not recognized by domestic employers, and most importantly lack of work experience (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013, p. 474). For this reason, a study abroad may not be used as an advantage in the domestic labor market.

Bolashak scholars receive a good education; however, it is not very easy for them to find a job. As mentioned by Sukhomlinova (2013), "Normally graduate specialists face great difficulties finding a job for a simple reason - employers prefer experienced workers" (n.p.). Does it mean that employers put work experience as a priority over Western education then? Conversely, it is said that one of the requirements for Nazarbayev University employees, for example, is having a Western diploma (Nazarbayev University, 2013). However, some employers are skeptical toward the study abroad experience. They value work experience more highly than academic experience abroad. Wiers-Jenssen (2008) explain this saying, "Employers are not always competent to judge diplomas from abroad; hence, it may seem rational to select graduates with a known educational background rather than spending resources on obtaining information about education from abroad." (p. 105).

Clearly, there is still much debate about the role of Western universities in developing students' employability skills.

At this stage of writing the definition of employability is necessary. For example, employability is defined by Confederation of British Industry as "the possession by an individual of the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help to realize his or her aspirations and potential in work" (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 199). Mason, Williams and Cramer (2006) add that employability is not about graduates themselves, but about how they will help the employer:

"Employability' often seems to refer to 'work readiness'; i.e. the possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that, soon after commencing employment, will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organizational objectives" (p. 2). Hence, mobile graduates should be ready to make important contributions to their fields preferably in their home country regardless of different factors. In other words, employability can be interpreted as having the skills both to gain employment, and to make a direct contribution to the company's success (ADEST, 2002).

It is important to note that "labor market success may vary in respect of different segments of the labor market and according to country in which education is undertaken" (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013, p. 485). Nevertheless, in the globalization era, students need to be prepared to enter the domestic and foreign job markets. This may involve different skills as the acquisition of foreign languages, a variety of learning experiences and soft skills including critical thinking skills, communication skills and interpersonal skills. However, due to high demands, mobile students sometimes think that they do not need to find a job by themselves as employers will be looking for them upon completion of their studies.

Many graduates believe that the Bolashak program is "a golden ticket to success, but reality is harsher than some realize" (Burns, 2008). There is statistical data given by the Center for International Programs (CIP) that "67 percent of Bolashak graduates hold entry-level jobs as junior managers or specialists. In fact, finding work has been so difficult for many alumni that the CIP was charged with finding employment for every graduate" (Burns, 2008). This means that the requirements in the current economy are really tough. In this context, the CIP is interpreted as a center which supervises the administration of Bolashak scholarships for students from Kazakhstan.

To sum up, the purpose of this study was to find out whether academic mobility enhances employability. To do so, the researcher tried to investigate first whether mobile students differ from immobile students in terms of employability capabilities. As mentioned above, mobile students encounter more challenges when entering the job market in comparison with immobile students. For example, it requires more time for Bolashak graduates to find a job compared with others. There are different reasons for this, for example, the expectation to have a high salary and better position from the very beginning. However, it seems that differences in labor outcomes between mobile and immobile students are not substantial; everything depends on the person and one's ability to apply knowledge in practice. Studying abroad is more likely to improve students' employability skills by obtaining skills that are much appreciated in the workplace. But different employers have different priorities. Depending on the type of employer, one can see work experience as a high priority.

Academic Mobility and Labor Market Relevance

From the discussion above, it can be seen that studying abroad could improve students' employability and most importantly make them obtain skills that are highly desirable to prospective employers. However, nowadays more and more employers complain that the training abroad is sometimes not applicable to the current labor market (Tashkinbayev, 2013, para. 4). Thus, the ability of graduates to find relevant jobs and contribute to the government may be suffering. As it is known, the government spends a lot of money to send students to study abroad. But this does not, or should not, necessarily mean that the money spent on international education produces desired outcomes. For example, according to the requirements of the Bolashak program, graduates must engage in labor activity in their specialty acquired through the program for five years. If their jobs do not match with their specialties, it means that scholars of Bolashak program fail the terms of agreement and must repay the full costs of the scholarship (Center for International Programs, 2013). Thus, graduates may have difficulty finding a job that fits their education and labor market needs.

Another problem is related to the list of the main specialties for award of a Bolashak scholarship. As the former President of the Bolashak program, Sayassat Nurbek, said, "When we started the program twenty years ago, there was a big need for people with degrees in certain fields. Later, the Bolashak program began training scientists, engineers, information-technology people and others for Kazakhstan's Industrial and Innovation Strategy" (Foster, 2013, para. 14). There is then a list of priority specialties of Bolashak program in the labor

market of Kazakhstan which changes every year. If, for example, engineers are on the priority list this year, the majority is likely to decide to become engineers. This *trendy* choice can be the motive why students work outside of their specialties. As a result, graduates do another job than they were educated for. Students do not use their knowledge; they simply choose other jobs which in turn contradicts the agreement.

Generally, the Bolashak program has undergone different changes throughout twenty years. These changes were connected with the constant demands and needs of the labor market. Along with degree programs, Bolashak added short-term internships abroad from a semester to two years. The reason for introducing these short-term training programs was to provide students with study-abroad experience valued by employers. Hence, it seems that current employers “do not need more degree programs; they need more short-term training” (Foster, 2013, para. 22). These shorter programs are similar to Western adult education, which “retrains degree holders throughout their lives to obtain the latest, most relevant skills” (Foster, 2013, para. 23).

At the present time, for example, there are more than 200 Bolashak scholars working at Nazarbayev University. It is important to note that some of them are not necessarily working in their specialties. Why are they working at Nazarbayev University if it is not relevant to their specialties? It seems that Bolashak scholars who studied abroad feel more inclined to “have jobs including ‘international’ aspects,” which Nazarbayev University provides (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013, p. 487). As it turns out, academic mobility experience has implications for finding such an international job at home. As stated by Wiers-Jenssen (2013): “Mobile students are more likely to work for international employers, to travel abroad on business, and apply foreign language skills on a weekly basis” (p. 481).

There are also specific disciplines as American law, British law, American history and many others studied abroad by means of different programs. By studying American law or history, students do not fully understand that applying acquired knowledge to the Kazakhstani context is not easy. Sometimes there is a great necessity for graduates to adapt knowledge acquired abroad to the local context. As stated by Wiers-Jenssen (2013): “Graduates who have a diploma from abroad face more challenges entering the labor market; they are more likely to experience unemployment and overeducation compared to graduates that have an all-domestic degree as well as graduates who have had a sojourn abroad during studies” (p. 475). *Overeducation* in this context, perhaps means being overqualified for available jobs or being educated rather than having relevant skills.

Nonetheless, although a significant number of graduates have experienced unemployment after studying abroad, unemployment is not a consistent problem. The good thing is that “graduates with a diploma from abroad eventually obtain higher wages and more international jobs” (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013, p. 475). This suggests that the long-term outcomes are partly due to job selectivity, unwillingness to work, low wages and high demands.

In general, the knowledge acquired abroad seems not always to fit the current labor market needs. However, adding short-term internships abroad makes students highly desirable to prospective employers and retrains them to obtain the latest, most relevant skills which are applicable for the domestic labor market.

Conclusion

To sum up, the paper begins with the concept of academic mobility which existed long before the introduction of the Bologna process. To gain a better understanding of academic mobility, the researcher gave background material on the Bologna process and other conventions as the *Magna Carta of Universities*, the *Sorbonne Declaration*, the *Prague Communiqué* and the *Berlin Communiqué* which encourage students to study abroad. Generally, there is a large number of students who have studied abroad at present time. However, there are some students who do not want to return to their home countries and use the skills they have learned abroad. Hence, there are serious risks associated with this trend such as brain drain, losing cultural identity and others. Mobile students might struggle as their skills were insufficient for today’s competitive labor market. To solve this issue, students need to acquire necessary skills to increase their employability opportunities.

In section two, it was questioned whether mobility is an advantage for the domestic employment market and enhances graduates’ employability. Academic mobility seems to increase the demands for graduates on the labor market and assist them to better adapt to the new economic conditions. However, along with a number of opportunities (an increased access to HE; movement of students and teachers; and the improvement of academic quality), it is still not clear what benefits students gain from their educational experience abroad. It seems that academic mobility has a number of effects on the labor market regarding employability skills and work experience. A potentially fair reason is that skills obtained abroad cannot be fully adapted to employment opportunities in the domestic job market. Nevertheless, the investigation indicates that the employability of mobile and immobile students is pretty similar either in the domestic or international market. Thus, a Western

diploma “seems to be neither an advantage nor a serious drawback regarding employability” (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013, p.485).

It was also assumed that studying abroad enhances students’ employability skills. But it seems that everything depends on the person and one’s ability to apply knowledge in practice. Just because someone studied abroad, the competition for them does not disappear. Furthermore, different employers have different priorities; some employers are still skeptical toward the study abroad experience. Depending on the type of employer, one can see work experience as a priority over Western education.

The third section highlighted how academic mobility can lead to issues regarding relevance and applicability of certain skills in the labor market. In particular, research shows that Bolashak graduates have skills that do not always fit the current market needs. This suggests that students who return are not necessarily guaranteed ideal jobs upon their graduation. Work experience can have a higher priority instead. There is also a necessity for Bolashak graduates to adapt their knowledge acquired abroad to the local context to gain better job opportunities. Hence, the results of this study showed that the Bolashak program is not always a ticket to a better future, at least in the short term.

The outcomes of this study reveal to the wider community of HE the effects of studying abroad on graduates’ employability. This study may serve as a guide to broaden and deepen the knowledge and understanding of the Bolashak program and the impact it has on graduates’ employability in the domestic labor market of Kazakhstan.

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