



Article

The Academic Mobility of Students from Kazakhstan to Japan: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract: Background: Despite the internationalization of higher education (IoHE) in Kazakhstan and it being among the top 15 countries sending students abroad, the level of student mobility between Kazakhstan and Japan and factors influencing it have not been well analyzed. Aim: The purpose of this study was to explore outgoing student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan and the reasons underlining this situation. Methods: A descriptive study, involving a literature review and an analysis of data from the two largest universities in Kazakhstan together with those from the Bolashak international scholarship scheme, was performed. Results: The analysis suggested that outgoing student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan remains at a stable but low level. The mobility of students is mainly a matter of the initiative of universities or the students themselves. The main reasons are the dependence of the policy of the IoHE on the foreign policy of Kazakhstan; the low level of pull factors for students such as affordability, recommendations from acquaintances, or lack of awareness about the country; and absence of a supportive legislative basis for the development of cooperation on higher education between the two countries. Conclusion: Given the areas of common interest economically and politically between Kazakhstan and Japan, there is potential for significantly more student mobility than there is at present.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education; student mobility; educational policy; Kazakhstan-Japan relationship

1. Introduction

According to UNESCO, over the past decade, the number of students studying abroad at all levels of higher education has continued to grow rapidly, exceeding four million—double the number of students who studied abroad in 2000. By 2025, this figure is expected to reach 8 million (Guruz 2011).

The internationalization of higher education (IoHE) in Kazakhstan is also developing. Despite its small population (around 18 million), Kazakhstan is among the top 15 countries for outbound student mobility (Perna et al. 2015). The number of outbound internationally mobile students grew from 20,000 in 1998 to almost 100,000 in 2017 (UNESCO 2020; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2019). While the annual outbound mobility to the Russian Federation and China exceeds 65,000 and 11,000 students, respectively, the number of students going to Japan remains at a very low level at about 150 students.

There are many benefits of student mobility in terms of future job-related opportunities, a positive effect on academic achievements, finding a community of friends, personal benefits such as creativity and openness to diversity, and interaction with others. Researchers have given a variety of definitions of IoHE, but the most common is the one proposed by Knight (2004), which determines this process as embedding international, intercultural, or worldwide measurements “into the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education” at different levels. According to Knight (2004), the broader concept includes policies and procedures that relate to the whole higher education system with a global scope, such as administration, quality assurance, financial planning, etc. This broader interpretation is related to the idea of internationalization as encompassing strategies, policies, and other tools undertaken by academic institutions and other organizations to cope with globalization (Altbach et al. 2009; Altbach 2007). Some researches stress its benefit in terms of creating a new generation of global citizens (Hudzik 2011). More recent studies of internationalization focus on decolonization and its reflection in university policies (Dawson 2020; du Preez 2018).

In the narrower definition by Knight (2004), internationalization refers to student exchange programs, partnerships between universities, and the mobility of staff as well as students. “One of the key elements of internationalization is academic mobility/cross-border education” (Knight 2007, p. 134). The theme of international mobility of students and academics was widely discussed after the Second World War, assuming that “increasing international activities would help overcome the hatred and mistrust between countries and contribute to mutual understanding and readiness to cooperate” (Teichler 2015, p. S7). According to Teichler, international student mobility is a “border-crossing for the purpose of embarking into the study in the country of destination” (Teichler 2017, p. 187).

While some of the patterns of internationalization have been the subject of discussion (Kerimkulova and Kuzhabekova 2017), the IoHE in Kazakhstan has generally been studied by researchers with a narrow interpretation: student mobility and staff mobility (Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018; Seidahmetov et al. 2014), push and pull factors among Kazakh students (Serikkaliyeva et al. 2019), the strategic cooperation of Kazakhstani universities to implement national and institutional missions for internationalization (Sparks et al. 2015), internationalization by modeling a state-initiated elite university (Koch 2014), the adoption of the European credit system (Ilyassova-Schoenfeld 2019), partnership with foreign universities, joint programs, the internationalization of curricula, and the adoption of English for teaching and research (Zenkova and Khamitova 2018; Prilipko 2017).

The concept of internationalization in Japan has some similarities to Kazakhstan in terms of paying more attention to student mobility (Kuroda et al. 2018), international staff and the barriers preventing them from joining in the academic “mainstream” (Brotherhood et al. 2020), regional partnerships with international universities (Kuroda et al. 2010), and English-language instruction (Stigger 2018; Rose and McKinley 2018). However, in Japan, internationalization has been interpreted in a broader context, including the comprehensive transformation of university governance (Yonezawa and Shimmi 2015), a select group of elite universities for the acceptance and education of international students (Burgess et al. 2010), strategies to attract foreign students (Lassegard 2016), and university administration (Murakami 2019). Another significant difference in Japan’s concept of IoHE is to promote Japan’s culture and national interests to the international community through internationalization (Hashimoto 2013; Le Ha 2013).

In this study, we adopt the narrower concept of internationalization as we mainly discuss student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan. The importance and dominance of the rationales of internationalization can differ depending on the country (De Wit 2010). According to De Wit (2010), there are four broad categories of rationales for internationalization: political, economic, social/cultural, and academic. Although economic rationales are considered to prevail in the IoHE (De Wit 2010), in Kazakhstan, the IoHE is mostly driven administratively by the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Science, which were stated in national programs. Higher education institutions (HEIs) mainly join this process to complete the tasks assigned by the ministry.

There have been several studies conducted on relationships between the countries as evidence of the socioeconomic and cultural motives of an educational migration from Kazakhstan. As the top three destination countries for outbound Kazakh students are Russia, China, and Turkey, the majority of the research has been devoted to those countries. For example, research topics have included student mobility to the Russian Federation (Rakisheva and Poletaev 2011), factors influencing the cooperation in higher education (HE) between Kazakhstan and China (Valeev and Kadyrova 2015), the interest of China in attracting Kazakhstani students (Serikkaliyeva et al. 2019), and the role of Kazakh-Turkish universities in the development of bilateral collaboration (Tlebaldiyeva et al. 2017). Although political and economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and Japan has been discussed in several studies (Uyama 2003, 2008; Dadabayev 2016a, 2016b, 2008, 2019; Len et al. 2008; Dissyukov 2019), analyzing the socioeconomic conditions in relation to student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan has not yet been done.

Japan is among the top 10 largest foreign investors in Kazakhstan, with a total investment of more than 7 billion USD (National Bank of Kazakhstan 2020). Strategic partnership on the peaceful use of nuclear energy is another plus for the expansion of bilateral relations in HE. This was evidenced through the main topics of the visit of Prime Minister Koizumi to Kazakhstan, where a memorandum on cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and the development of uranium mines was signed (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2006). Living and studying in Japan, working in a Japanese company, and understanding Japanese corporate culture can bring about benefits for those seeking a future career path or wanting to enroll in another program after graduation. Furthermore, Japan is considered one of the safest countries in the world, with a low level of crime and availability of part-time employment.

There are many studies on the benefit of mobility for students (Lee et al. 2012; Milian et al. 2015; Waibel et al. 2018) or the advantages of higher income countries to international students. However, the benefits of cooperation in higher education, specifically student mobility programs between a lower income country and a higher income nation that has a different historical background, political system, and economic situation, have not been studied adequately. Adding to prior studies (Bonilla et al. 2018; Döring et al. 2010), this paper contributes to closing that research gap.

The aims of this work are to show the trend in the number of Kazakhstani mobile students (students studying abroad) choosing Japan as a destination country, to identify the reasons for this trend, and to briefly discuss the political relationship between the two countries. To our knowledge, this is the first work to discuss outbound student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan with a comprehensive analysis of the possible reasons for this trend.

2. Methods and Data Sources

This paper focuses on the data and characteristics of student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan; it is a descriptive study that aims for a better understanding of the trend. We used various available data sources for the comparison of outbound and inbound mobility.

A literature review was used to collect existing research conducted on international cooperation, the IoHE in Kazakhstan and Japan, mobility programs, and factors influencing students' choices, as well as reports published by world organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Policy documents of the Republic of Kazakhstan such as the State Program for the Development of Education for 2011-2020 and the Strategy for Academic Mobility were also analyzed for indicators of IoHE as the ratio of outbound and inbound student mobility, joining Bologna process, etc.

Based on existing literature and governmental statistics, the political and economic relationships between Kazakhstan and various countries were studied and compared, in regional and global contexts. In particular, we considered the relationship of Kazakhstan with Russia, that with China in terms of foreign policy and trade, the policy of Japan towards ASEAN countries, and the Kazakhstan-Japan

bilateral relationship. This helped us to understand the background of each country and the driving forces of their current trends in policy, economy, and higher education.

To conduct the research, the top four multidisciplinary Kazakhstani universities were chosen by the following criteria: inclusion in QS World University Ranking, largest number of students, and top in the Kazakh National Ranking by IQAA 2020. These universities are Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU); L. Gumilev Eurasian National University (ENU); M. Auezov South Kazakhstan State University (SKSU); and Karaganda State University, named after the academician E. A. Buketov. Among these HEIs, only two have Japanese partner universities: KazNU and ENU. KazNU has an interuniversity agreement on cooperation with 20 Japanese HEIs, while ENU has six Japanese partner universities.

For the data sources, we used the records on student mobility of KazNU and ENU, and statistics of the government-funded scholarship program “Bolashak.” Furthermore, statistical data from Japanese official governmental portals were used for confirmation.

Outbound mobility data from KazNU were obtained from the Department of the Far East, specifically the department’s reports that include student and academic staff mobility from 2015 to 2020. A request asking for cooperation in this research and the provision of statistical data was sent to ENU and the Center for International Programs. The summarized data on student mobility for 2015 up to 2020 were provided by ENU which did not include detailed information such as students’ studying year, field of study, or length of stay at a partner university. The Center for International Programs provided full data for all students and specialists who studied in Japanese universities from 2000 to 2020, specifying the graduation year, host university, area of study or research, and employment record after graduation.

We searched for official information about Kazakhstani students on the websites of Japanese partner universities; however, summarized data were not found. As Kazakhstan is not a priority partner for Japanese universities and the number of inbound students from Kazakhstan is very small, that could be a reason why data are not posted on official sites. Nevertheless, we obtained additional information on inbound student mobility from 2016 to 2020 from Japanese universities via the Department of the Far East of KazNU. Unfortunately, as we clarified from the Department of International Cooperation, inbound student mobility is not registered by the university; only the Department of the Far East has such records. Finally, we were not able to get any data on inbound students from ENU.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Internationalization of Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and independence in 1991, Kazakhstan found itself in a deep economic crisis (Griffin 1999). The transition to a market economy and independent development necessitated the training of economists, international workers, lawyers, translators, and managers, who, in the new conditions, would have to think and work in different ways than they did during the Soviet period. One of the obstacles to the training of personnel and the development of Kazakhstan was the lack of a self-sufficient, market-oriented higher education system. A quick solution to the problem was to train specialists through international contacts in the field of higher education, which was mainly implemented at the initiative of Western European countries and the USA and covered only a small number of people (Smirnova 2005).

In 1993, Kazakhstan initiated outbound student mobility by establishing the international program of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Bolashak”, which sent young people to study abroad, granting them full state funding. From 1993 to 2011, the Bolashak international program provided funding for diploma education abroad for undergraduate and graduate programs. At the time the program was introduced, there was no restriction on the area of study; therefore, many scholarship holders chose the humanities and social sciences (Sagintayeva and Jumakulov 2015). However, the country lacked scientists and specialists who could raise the country’s profile in the science and

technology sector. In this regard, in 1997 a list of priority specialties was created, which included various scientific and technical specialties. To prevent “brain drain”, applicants are required to provide real estate as a pledge to work for five years in the Kazakhstan civil sector after graduation. As reported by the president of the Center for International Program ([Tengrinews 2019](#)), a very generous amount ranging from 10 to 24 million tenge (approximately 26,500 to 63,500 USD as of 1 January 2019) is allocated for one academic year per fellow.

In general, given that a large amount of money has been spent on training a not very large number of specialists, the program has been an expensive approach to the preparation of human resources. Over the 26 years of this program, more than 12,000 students have received a Bolashak scholarship and studied at 170 leading universities in 35 countries. As stated in [Davydov \(2015\)](#), graduates of the Bolashak program mainly work in the civil sector.

The international Bolashak program had a positive impact on the IoHE of Kazakhstan. Thanks to the program, highly qualified specialists with high foreign language ability, new ideas, and foreign experience appeared in the labor market and got jobs in the best positions, increasing the desire of other students to study abroad. Through graduates working in the field of education, international education began to positively influence the education system in Kazakhstan. A pedagogical transformation and paradigm shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach and innovative learning methods such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning, the use of the flipped classroom method, and e-learning pedagogy, as well as dialogical methods, have been observed among Bolashak graduates ([Ryymin 2015](#)).

Even after gaining and maintaining independence, until 2005 the education system of Kazakhstan retained aspects of the old Soviet system, in which bachelor’s and master’s programs were included in one five-year program. In 2005, the State Program for the Development of Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2005-2010 was adopted ([Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2004](#)), according to which a three-level structure was introduced (bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral programs).

Gradually, the government initiated the integration of Kazakhstan into the international educational process by a transition from financing the education of students abroad, to the creation of a center for training competitive specialists in the country, and, through a change in the entire system of HE in Kazakhstan, the activation of student mobility on a state funding basis.

In 2010, Kazakhstan signed the Bologna Declaration and became the first Central Asian country to join the Bologna Process. As a result, a credit system similar to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was adopted and academic mobility programs began. In 2012, the Bologna Process and academic mobility center were created for scientific, methodological, and information-analytical support of the implementation of the parameters of the Bologna Process (Bologna Process and academic mobility center). Student mobility in Kazakhstan is implemented in two main ways: at the expense of the state budget, and at the expense of alternative financing such as self-funded students, exchange programs between universities, university funds, various foreign scholarship programs, grants, double degree programs, quotas of other countries, etc.

Although the adoption of the Bologna Process provided a substantial stimulus for international student mobility in Kazakhstan, currently there is limited international activity as many agreements are declarative in nature ([OECD 2017](#)). Out of a total of 810,000 students from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries studying abroad, only 6925 outward degree tertiary education students inside the EHEA were from Kazakhstan in 2014/15 ([European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018](#)). This constituted only 1.4% of overall domestic students. Compared with Romania, which has almost the same population as Kazakhstan, and which is listed among the top 10 countries in terms of outward mobility among EHEA countries, the number of outward Kazakhstani students within the EHEA is 4.5-fold lower.

In 2010, Nazarbayev University, a new university in structure and format, was established, the mission of which was to become a model for the integration of education, science, and industry of Kazakhstan in order to prepare the human resources necessary for the development of the country.

The objective for Nazarbayev University was “to adopt the best practices of the world” (OECD 2017, p. 169). Almost immediately after opening, the university became a leader among the universities of Kazakhstan, and the process of internationalization has been going on since the very foundation of the university: 85% of the faculty are foreign experts who were invited to Kazakhstan, all subjects are taught in English, and the university itself cooperates with many of the top universities in the world such as Cambridge University, Duke University, and others (Nazarbayev University 2013). The opening of Nazarbayev University is a major event in the IoHE in Kazakhstan; however, it is not quite right to compare Nazarbayev University with other national or private universities in the country, since it is an autonomous, elite university, and national financing of this university is considered separately from other institutions.

The main regulatory framework for the development of academic mobility was the State Program for the Development of Education for 2011–2020 (hereinafter referred to as “the State Program”), which stated that by 2020 every fifth student would be educated in a partner university by way of academic mobility. In 2012, on the basis of the State Program, the Strategy for Academic Mobility in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2012–2020 was adopted (hereinafter, “the Strategy”) (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2012). One of the expected results of this strategy was that 20% of Kazakh students would study abroad through student mobility programs. One of the main tasks that this program aimed to solve by 2020 was to ensure integration into the European higher education area. In order to fulfill this task, students had to study abroad for one semester or one academic year. Target indicators indicated an increase in the share of foreign students in higher education, including self-funded students, up to 3%.

Inbound academic mobility of students is poorly developed compared to outbound mobility. This is due to several factors such as the lack of competitiveness of Kazakhstani universities in the international market, the low level of technical support and comfortable accommodation services, and the small number of courses taught in English. According to the Bologna Process Center (The Bologna Process Center 2020), from 2013 to 2019, a total of 4006 inbound mobile students came to study in Kazakhstan. The majority are students from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Asia with 1642 and 1618 students, respectively. This is due to the fact that most citizens of the CIS countries speak Russian, which allows them to conduct their studies in Russian in Kazakhstan. Another factor is the relative price acceptability—in other words, the low living costs and tuition of studying in Kazakhstan compared to European countries.

3.2. Kazakhstan-Japan Political Relations

Japan was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan on 28 December 1991. Bilateral diplomatic relations began on 26 January 1992. Over 28 years of the history of bilateral cooperation, the Japanese side has provided technical and economic assistance, including Official development assistance (ODA) loans, grant assistance, technical cooperation projects, development research, and the reception of interns. Japan’s assistance to Kazakhstan until fiscal year 2003 amounted to 8.7 billion yen in technical assistance (based on Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) expenses) (more than 72.5 million USD), 5.7 billion yen (more than 47.5 million USD) in grant aid (based on Exchange of Notes (E/N)), and 88.8 billion yen in loan aid (based on E/N). According to the White Paper on ODA 2004, in 2003 Kazakhstan was the main recipient of Japanese aid (345.53 million USD) in Central Asia and the Caucasus on a net disbursement basis. This accounted for 5.7% of total bilateral assistance (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2005).

Bilateral trade between the countries in January–October 2019 amounted to 1.3 billion USD: exports from Kazakhstan were 756 million USD, while imports from Japan to Kazakhstan were 516 million USD (data of the Committee on statistics of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan). This comprised only 1.25% of Kazakhstan’s total trade (Statistics Committee Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2019). The main export items from Kazakhstan to Japan are metals, oil, solid fuels, and chemical products, while the main import items from Japan

are transport equipment and medical devices ([Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Japan 2017](#)). Economic cooperation between Japan and Kazakhstan has developed only at the level of natural resources and is represented only by large corporations, while medium and small businesses are absent. All 77 Japanese companies registered in Kazakhstan are mainly engaged in the extraction of mineral resources and are represented by large corporations ([Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Japan 2017](#)). The two countries signed the Convention on Avoiding Double Taxation and Prevention of Tax Evasion with respect to Income Taxes, the Agreement on the Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy, and the Agreement on Mutual Protection and Promotion of Investments.

There are no agreements in the field of educational development, which could give an additional impetus to the development of economic cooperation. In 2016, the governments of the two countries signed the Joint Statement “On the Enhanced Strategic Partnership in the Century of Asian Prosperity”. Despite the fact that the parties noted the importance of strengthening cultural and humanitarian relations, no major educational programs were implemented.

Political relations between Kazakhstan and Japan have been studied by a number of scholars, who mostly discussed the policy of Japan towards Kazakhstan. While Dadabayev ([Dadabayev 2008](#)) argues that Japan needs to make clear its strategy towards Central Asian countries, [Uyama \(2003\)](#) states that Japan’s lack of a clear strategy for its relations with Central Asia is due to gaps in its history, and that it is understandable that the Japanese government would seek to develop comprehensive relations with Central Asian countries and cooperate in specific areas that meet Japan’s capabilities and needs. [Dissyukov \(2019\)](#) stressed the role and multilateral nature of the “Central Asia Plus Japan” Dialogue in the development of relations between the countries.

3.3. Cooperation in the Field of Higher Education between Kazakhstan and Japan

Cooperation in higher education between the Central Asian countries (including Kazakhstan) and Japan was discussed during the Central Asia Plus Japan forum in 2004, in which Japan envisaged providing educational opportunities for students and specialists from Central Asia to Japanese educational institutions ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2004](#)). Nonetheless, strategic cooperation in the field of HE between Kazakhstan and Japan is still poorly developed due to the absence of intergovernmental agreements between the two countries, and only certain interuniversity agreements. For equal cooperation with Japanese universities, well-developed educational bases and adequate financing are needed; therefore, only large Kazakhstani universities may work in partnership with them.

The area of Japanese studies (future Japanese language teachers, translators, IR-related specialty, historians, etc.) is an interuniversity collaboration program that is progressing well.

The most developed type of cooperation between the countries is interuniversity cooperation on the basis of bilateral agreements.

According to the KazNU Department of the Far East (formerly the Department of Japanese and Korean studies) data, from 2015 to 2020, 49 Kazakhstan students participated in academic mobility for a period of two to 12 months in Japanese universities. Forty-seven (96%) of them were mainly financed by Japanese (government and nongovernment) grants, and the other two (4%) were self-funded exchange program students (Table 1). The University of Tsukuba hosted more than half of the students (data not shown). So, there is a positive dynamic of student mobility to Japan.

At KazNU (the biggest multidisciplinary national university in Kazakhstan), the Japanese studies field accounts for the majority of students who come from Kazakhstan to Japanese universities, since most Japanese-government-sponsored grants are targeted at students with Japanese language ability. In addition, the cooperation in HE between Japan and Kazakhstan primarily began with the teaching of the Japanese language and culture at universities and the Japanese Human Resources Development Centers opened by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The first department of Japanese language and culture in Kazakhstan was opened at KazNU in 1993 at the Faculty of Oriental Studies.

Table 1. Outbound student mobility Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Department of Far East) to Japanese universities between 2016 and 2020.

Year of Graduation	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Government (MEXT, JASSO)	9	8	10	10	37
Other Japanese funds	1	2	2	5	10
Self-funding	0	0	0	2	2
Total	10	10	12	17	49

ENU (the second-biggest national university in Kazakhstan) had 15 students who went to Japan between 2015 and 2020. In this university, there is also a program for the Japanese language.

In terms of interuniversity cooperation, there are three main ways of financing student mobility to Japanese universities: the first is through the national budgets of Kazakhstan or Japan, the second is through individual scholarship programs of Japanese organizations or Japanese universities, and the third is at the students' own expense. The first method of financing is often implemented through state programs of the ministries of education of the two countries, which students can receive through their or partner universities. For example, the Ministry of Science and Education of Kazakhstan annually allocates funds for foreign internships for undergraduates and doctoral students at Kazakhstani universities. Under this program, students can conduct short-term studies at a partner university abroad. The Government of Japan provides grants for foreign students, such as MEXT, JASSO, and other programs. Grants of Japanese state programs are provided to Kazakhstani universities, which cooperate with Japanese universities based upon agreements established between the individual universities. Therefore, only students at those Kazakhstani universities that have agreements with Japanese universities can apply for these scholarships and get the opportunity to travel. The second type of funding includes scholarship programs such as those of the Heiwa Nakajima Foundation and the Mitsubishi Corporation. This type of financing is limited in quantity and is also allocated through partner universities or organizations. Self-financing is the least common option, and often supplements the first or second type of funding.

In general, outbound student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan is growing, but only with well-established Kazakhstan universities and in a small range of areas of study.

Unfortunately, Kazakhstan still does not have agreements with Japan at the government level on cooperation in education; there are no agreements on the mutual recognition of diplomas, so students who have studied in Japanese universities need to nostrificate their diploma after returning to Kazakhstan. There is strict student visa regulation between Kazakhstan and Japan, which some scholars suggest may be one of the constraining factors when choosing a country for study abroad (Eder et al. 2010). On the contrary, the cooperation of Kazakhstan with Russia and China in the field of higher education is supported by regulations and intergovernmental agreements; these documents became the rationale for the pro-Russian and Chinese directions of the IoHE in Kazakhstan.

3.4. Student Mobility in the Field of Higher Education between Kazakhstan and Japan

Data of outbound students from Kazakhstan to Japan are mainly limited to data of the Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan, where the total number of students is shown. To explore the composition of those numbers, we accumulated data from the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan; the Bolashak program; and the two biggest national universities, KazNU and ENU, which have relationships with Japanese universities.

Statistics from Japan show a larger number of Kazakhstani students, as Japanese statistics are based on the number of entry visas issued and those who stay on student visas, which in many cases can be extended after the first year (Table 2). The number of Kazakhstani students studying in Japan includes students who come for short-term study and students who come for graduate programs. According to this statistic, the number of students from Kazakhstan over the past seven years has increased by almost 1.5 times and in 2019 amounted to 138 people. This is only 0.04% of the total of

336,915 international students in Japan in 2019 ([e-Stat Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan 2019](#)). The ratio of Kazakhstani students choosing Japan is exceedingly small in relation to the number of students coming from Central Asia to Japan. It is 16 times less compared to the number of students from neighboring Uzbekistan, despite the fact that the ratio of Kazakhstan student's population for 2018–2019 academic year was 1.5 times more compared to Uzbekistan's. In 2019 alone, a total of 2575 students arrived from Central Asian countries, of which more than 80% were from Uzbekistan and only 5% were from Kazakhstan ([e-Stat Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan 2019](#)).

Table 2. Number of outbound students from Kazakhstan to Japan between 2012 and 2019.

Year of Registration	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number of students registered by Statistics of Japan *	87	100	112	127	131	146	153	138

* Includes newly and repeated registered.

From 2000 to 2019, only 54 Bolashak scholarship holders studied in Japan, which is only 0.5% of the total 12,000 Bolashak program students who studied abroad; this reflects the low attractiveness of Japan as a destination country (Table 3). Almost half of the students came for a master's degree program; only 7% came for a bachelor's degree. Thirty-seven students (68%) used the Bolashak scholarship for a full degree program.

Table 3. Number of students from Kazakhstan to Japan who used Bolashak program by degree level between 2000 and 2019.

Year of Graduation	* 2000	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Training			15				1	1					17
Bachelor's			1				2	1					4
Master's	1	1	4	5	1	5	1		2	3	2	1	26
PhD					3				1	1		2	7
Total	1	1	20	5	4	5	4	2	3	4	2	3	54

* There are no students in 2001–2006, 2008, and 2014.

For Kazakhstan's citizens, Japan is better known as a technologically developed country, so 50% of Bolashak residents chose technical specialties, 30% chose arts and humanities, and 18% chose medicine and biotechnology majors (Table 4). Fifty-six percent of those who majored in art and humanities chose to get degrees at the University of Tsukuba in such fields as public policy, area studies, and international relations (data from the Bolashak scholarship program). This, too, is due to the launch of the Special Program for Central Asian Countries in International Studies and Public Policy. More than 40% of Bolashak graduates who studied in Japan work in the field of education, while about 20% work in public services.

Table 4. The Bolashak international scholarship holders by area of study.

Area of Study	Technical Specialties	Humanities	Medicine & Biotechnology	Others
Number of students	27	16	10	1

According to UNESCO, in 2017, 84,681 students from Kazakhstan studied abroad (excluding students studying in China), which is 30% more than from Russia, whose population is eight times larger than that of Kazakhstan (142.2 million versus 18.5 million in 2017) ([Central Intelligence Agency 2017](#)). If you include the number of students studying in China, a little under 100,000 students from Kazakhstan study abroad annually ([Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2019](#)). The data show that, despite its small population, Kazakhstan is among the top 15 countries sending

students abroad (Perna et al. 2015). However, an extremely small number of Kazakhstani students want or can afford to study in Japan, since only about 0.1% of all Kazakhstani students studying abroad choose Japan.

We shall consider several factors that may help us to understand this trend. First, the higher education policy of Kazakhstan is directly related to its foreign policy. As stated by a group of researchers (Glinkina et al. 2016), Kazakhstan's strategic partners in foreign policy are Russia and China. The two nations vie for supremacy of influence in the Central Asian region (Collins and Bekenova 2017; Kim and Indeo 2013).

Russia is the most popular destination among Kazakhstanis studying abroad. As reported by Sputnik Kazakhstan (2019) in 2018, the total number of foreign students studying in the Russian Federation was 274,000; the biggest group represented was Kazakhstan, which accounts for about 24% of the total, amounting to more than 65,000 people. In other words, every seventh Kazakhstan high school graduate becomes a student at a Russian university (Kursiv 2019). About 60% of Kazakhstani students are self-funded, and the remaining 40% study on a grant basis (Sputnik Kazakhstan 2018).

According to the Ministry of Education of China in 2018, the number of students from Kazakhstan was 11,784 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2019) (Figure 1). These figures show that, following Russia, Kazakh students choose neighboring China as their preferred destination. In less than five years, Kazakhstan was listed among the top 10 countries in terms of the number of students studying in China.

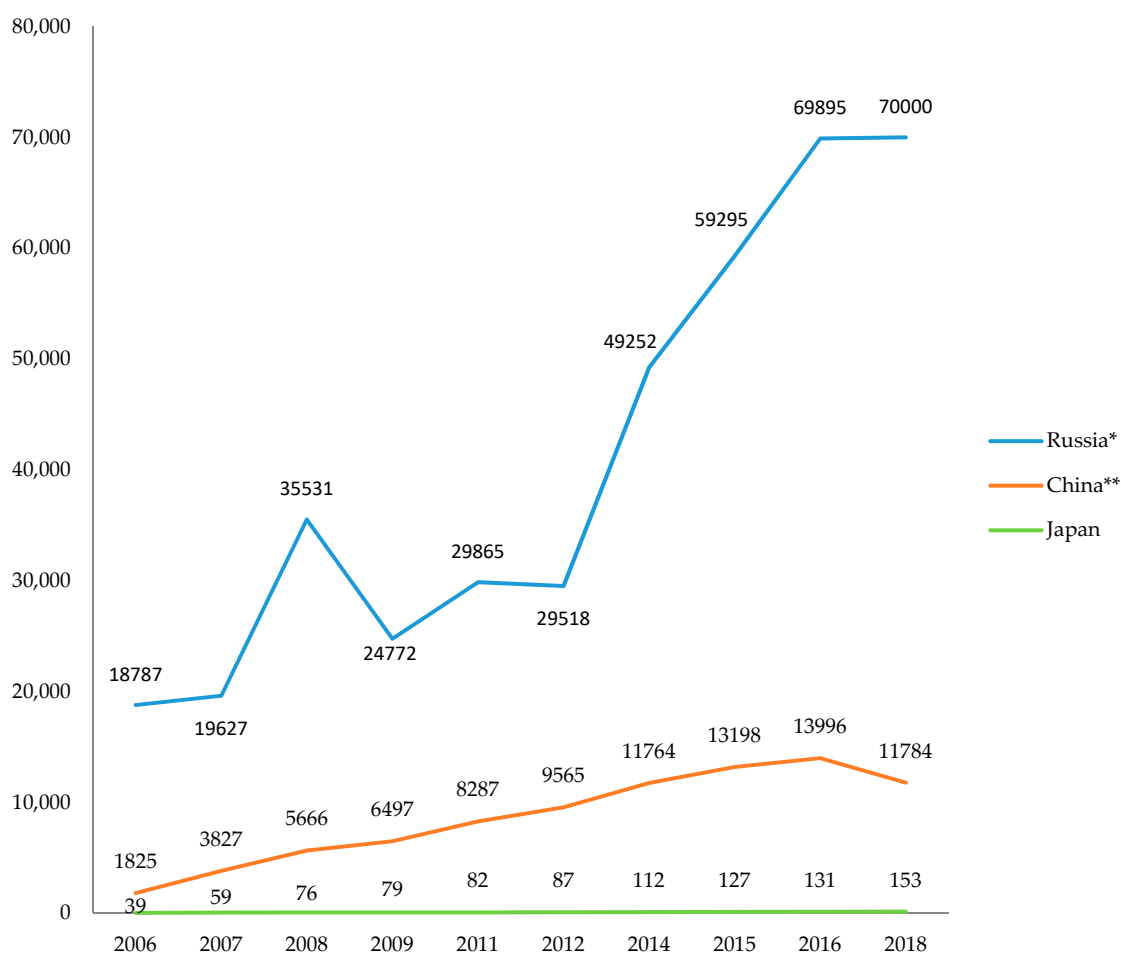


Figure 1. Outgoing mobility from Kazakhstan by destination country (both sexes), 2006–2018 Notes:

* Based on data of UNESCO and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation

** Based on data of the Ministry of Education of China and website China Education Online (China Education Online 2014).

According to Kazakhstani researchers ([Serikkaliyeva et al. 2019](#)), the pull factors for Kazakh students to choose China are “a high level of education, reasonable tuition and scholarships allocated by Chinese universities.” To this list, we can add the number of Chinese companies and business representatives in Kazakhstan, which increases the possibility of further employment and the influence of the Chinese economy in general.

The first diplomatic relations with the PRC after the independence of Kazakhstan were established on 3 January 1992. In the first half of the 1990s, in Kazakh-Chinese relations, more attention was paid to the legislative and regulatory acts and economic interactions. Over time, the parties began to focus on relations in the humanitarian fields and to educational ties, which were legitimated in the early 2000s ([Valeev and Kadyrova 2015](#)). In 2003, Kazakhstan and China signed the “Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Education”, with the provision of a grant worth 20 million yuan for the training of Kazakhstani youth in China ([Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2003](#)). In 2006, an agreement on the mutual recognition of documents in the field of education, including diplomas and academic titles, was signed ([Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2007](#)). In 2009, the governments of the two countries made amendments and additions to the agreement signed in 2003, namely: the exchange of information about the education system; the exchange of students under the programs of higher, postgraduate and further education; assistance in learning; and disseminating the state languages of the two countries. The first version of the agreement stated that the total number of students in each state should not exceed 20 and in 2009 these numbers were increased to 100 people ([Valeev and Kadyrova 2015](#)). These regulations and grants have contributed to enhanced student mobility from Kazakhstan to China.

For Japan’s strategic foreign policy, it is more important for it to strengthen its role in East Asia (the countries belonging to ASEAN), meaning that Central Asian countries (including Kazakhstan) play a less important role. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the geographically remote location of Japan and the Central Asian countries is a barrier to the development of bilateral relations, trade, and economic ties. Secondly, historically, Japan has been strongly connected with East Asian countries such as China and South Korea, while Kazakhstan has built ties with neighboring CIS countries. The focus on East Asian countries in Japanese foreign policy also determines the trend of the IoHE. One of the initiatives of the Ministry of Education of Japan discussed by [Rose and McKinley \(2018\)](#) serves as an example. The main target regions for the implementation of this initiative were East Asian countries, in particular China and South Korea, and Central Asia was not included.

There is limited information on inbound students from Japan at Kazakhstani institutions. Data are not recorded or not presented in the annual reports. The only source of information was the Department of the Far East. From 2016 to 2020, a total of 47 Japanese students visited KazNU to study abroad (Table 5). In most cases, the inbound students came for a short period of time (less than a month). Their visits were mainly self-funded or partially funded by the Japanese home university. About 40% of inbound mobile students came from the University of Tsukuba, one of the closest partner universities. It is clear from the data that inbound students mainly come from big universities such as the University of Tokyo and the University of Tsukuba. In recent years, the number of inbound students has increased dramatically—for example, in the 2017–2018 academic year there were only two Japanese students studying at KazNU, but in the following year that number reached 41 students. The data for the 2019–2020 academic year have not been fully retrieved, but the number of inbound students from Japan is expected to be higher than in 2017–2018.

Table 5. Inbound student mobility from Japanese partner universities to Al-Farabi KazNU, 2016–2020.

Academic Year	Sending Japanese University	Program	Students	Mobility Duration
2016–2017	The University of Tsukuba	Academic mobility	2	8 months to 1 year
2017–2018	The University of Tsukuba	Academic mobility	2	10 and 11 months
2018–2019	The University of Tsukuba	Winter school. Campus in Campus program	13	3 weeks
	Tokyo University of Foreign Studies	Winter school	7	3 weeks
	The University of Tokyo	Spring school.	19	12 days
	Kochi University	Regional studies. Politics, Economics and Culture of Central Asia	1	7 days
	Kobe University		1	7 days
2019–2020	The University of Tsukuba	Academic mobility by the program “Global educational program for training staff in the economic and scientific fields of the multi-linguistic system in Japan, the CIS countries and the Baltic countries”	2	From 8 months up to 1 year

3.5. Factors that Influence the Study Destination Choice of Students

Using hypothetical models from the previous literature on the motivations and factors influencing international students’ decisions (Srikatanyoo and Gnoth 2002; Cubillo et al. 2006; Nafari et al. 2017), we selected those factors that can be at least partially applied to student mobility without the empirical approach of interviewing and can be supported by the available data. The selected pull factors include cost issues, financial aid or scholarships, the quality of an institution, personal recommendations, environment, and geographical proximity.

One of the most important pull factors influencing decision-making is cost, including accommodation, tuition, travel, etc. (Kemp et al. 1998; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Chen 2007; Wadhwa 2015). In terms of cost issues, Japan is not attractive to Kazakhstani students. Even though Kazakhstan is a medium-developed country with GDP per capita of 26,300 USD (The World Bank 2018), the average salary in 2017 was 144 thousand tenges (approximately 435.6 USD). Almost three-quarters of the employed did not receive that average monthly salary (Birmanov 2018). Therefore, it can be presumed that at least three-quarters of the population cannot afford self-funded, expensive education in a developed country like Japan, where the GDP was 42,800 USD per capita in 2017 (The World Bank 2018).

Compared to Japan, in terms of cost, Russian universities have more advantages for Kazakhstani students: the tuition does not differ greatly from that of Kazakhstan’s prestigious universities, and there are multiple possibilities of obtaining tuition reduction and financial support from the host universities.

Another significant factor in decision-making is financial aid or scholarships (Cubillo et al. 2006; Wilkins et al. 2012; Li and Bray 2007). As a high proportion of Kazakhstani students studying in Japan receive scholarships provided by Kazakhstan or the Japanese government, we suggest that receiving a scholarship is the key factor in decision-making. Only a few students can afford to travel in a self-funded capacity.

The next factor is the personal recommendations that students receive (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Cubillo et al. 2006; Chen 2007; Bodycott 2009). In general, from 1991 to 2019, a small number of Kazakhstan’s citizens studied in Japan, so there is a small number of people who can share their experiences with other prospective study abroad students. Furthermore, there are few companies in Kazakhstan that promote education in Japan. Such companies have begun their activity in recent years, in connection with the intensification of foreign workers’ attraction by the Japanese government.

The environment (in other words, the society and culture, climate, security, and safety of the host country) is considered to be one of the key factors in student mobility (Wilkins and Huisman 2011; Yang 2007). Although Japan is one of the safest countries in the world with low crime, the cultural and

tourist exchange between the countries is very small. According to Japanese statistics ([e-Stat Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan 2019](#)), the number of Kazakh tourists who visited Japan in 2017, 2018, and 2019 was only 35, 53, and 85 people, respectively.

Geographical proximity is another important pull factor ([Kemp et al. 1998](#); [Cubillo et al. 2006](#)). Japan is very distant from Kazakhstan in terms of geography and logistics. Japan is about 6000 km away from Kazakhstan, whereas Europe is 4000–5000 km away. Moreover, there were no direct flights between Kazakhstan and Japan until 2019, and the ticket cost is still quite expensive, while there are large numbers of direct flights to Europe available at affordable prices. These are additional barriers to traveling to Japan. In this regard, CIS countries, China, and Europe are more attractive for Kazakhstani students.

Another important obstacle constraining the development of cooperation in higher education is the language barrier. Kazakhstan and Japan are not English-speaking countries, and students' general English language proficiency is not high ([Saito 2019](#); [Zenkova and Khamitova 2018](#)). Although both the Japanese and Kazakhstani governments are making efforts to adopt different state programs to improve the limited English proficiency of students ([Lassegard 2016](#), p. 66), the issue remains unresolved.

4. Conclusions

Although cooperation in the field of education plays an important role in building and developing friendly relations, in shaping the worldview between countries in our study it was found that cooperation in higher education (academic partnership) between Kazakhstan and Japan does not receive enough attention.

Fostering cooperation in higher education and expanding the academic mobility of students and teachers can positively affect other areas, including economic relations. Understanding the language and culture of another country contributes to the understanding of people and their favorable collaboration; it can stimulate the development of small and medium-sized Kazakh-Japanese businesses, the exchange of experience in the industrial and technological sector, and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Academic policies have more influence on student mobility from Kazakhstan to Japan. These include developing international dimensions of research and study, improving the status and profile of Kazakhstani universities, and the integration of international academic standards.

Only a small number of Kazakhstani students choose Japan as a destination country.

One of the main reasons is the association of the higher education system policy of Kazakhstan with the foreign policy of the state, as Russia and China are strategic partners. Despite Kazakhstan's entry into the Bologna process, there is no legislative basis for the development of cooperation on higher education.

To develop bilateral cooperation in the field of higher education at the government level, it is necessary to sign fundamental regulatory documents that will solve obstacles such as the nostrification of diplomas, and provide access to information about educational opportunities in these countries. At the university level, Kazakhstani universities should take more initiative, and students need to improve their English proficiency.

The exchange of students is carried out mainly thanks to the initiative of individual universities (the Japanese side is often more active) and the students themselves, who apply to grant programs. In general, the number of Kazakhstan universities collaborating with Japanese universities is small, and the specialties in which exchange is implemented are also limited.

The factors attracting Kazakhstani students to choose Japan as a destination country are insufficient. The financial expenses and the high living and travel costs involved, as well as the geographical distance between the countries, constrains rather than attracts mobile students. Another restraining factor can be the language barrier, including the low level of English proficiency of the students.

In general, bilateral cooperation is necessary, as there are areas of common interest that have great potential. Kazakhstan is rich in natural resources, while Japan needs resources. Japan is a technically

advanced country, and Kazakhstan wishes to adopt advanced Japanese technology. Cooperation in higher education can give a new impetus to the implementation of bilateral relations.

5. Limitations

This study has limitations regarding the statistical data that can be obtained to conduct the research—namely, the number of students from Central Asian countries studying in Japan. The statistics of the Japan Statistical Agency are based on student visas issued by the Japanese government; the data do not indicate students' education programs, so it is difficult to determine the exact number of students who have undertaken study abroad. For example, the majority of Uzbeks that enroll in Japanese schools have subsequent employment or admission to Japanese universities. Since they study in language schools, this does not apply to the IoHE. Secondly, according to Teichler (2017), the goal of such students is not mobility itself, but employment. Therefore, it is necessary to consider such students separately, since they have already studied and lived in the country of study before entering the university; therefore, the education system is not new for them.

The Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan does not keep statistics on outgoing and incoming off-budget funded student mobility, which also affects on available statistical data that can be collected. Outgoing student mobility data often need to be collected from host universities or countries.

Kazakhstani universities do not keep complete statistics on outgoing and incoming mobility. In some universities, data are stored for only the last five years, which also does not provide an opportunity to see the full picture of mobility from the moment of signing agreements on academic exchange with Japanese universities.

The limitations of analyzing pull factors originate from the nature of the approach, which aims to combine the factors proposed in the previous literature. Thus, future research needs to analyze the importance of each factor based on an empirical approach.

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