

The impact of international student mobility on educational, professional, and life-course outcomes

Danel Aitmagambet, Lidia Lo Schiavo

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Abstract

Student migration is one of the fastest-growing forms of youth mobility, increasingly framed as a pathway to higher-quality education, international prestige, and improved career prospects. This study examines motivations, perceived challenges, and retrospective evaluations of studying abroad among international students, with a particular analytical focus on Kazakhstani students. The analysis draws on original survey data from 80 respondents collected between August and October 2025 within the Roots & Roads research initiative and combines descriptive statistics with qualitative insights from an open-ended question. Findings highlight that educational quality and career opportunities are primary drivers, while emotional strain and financial concerns represent major costs; nevertheless, most respondents report high satisfaction and a strong willingness to choose studying abroad again.

Keywords: student migration; international education; youth mobility; studying abroad; comparative analysis

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, international student mobility has expanded dramatically, becoming a central feature of global higher education systems. Studying abroad is frequently portrayed as a gateway to academic excellence, global exposure, and upward social mobility. Universities, governments, and media narratives often emphasize benefits such as employability, cultural capital, and personal growth. As a result, studying abroad has become increasingly normalized among ambitious young people.

However, behind this idealized image lies a more complex reality. For many students, the decision to leave their home country is shaped not only by aspiration but also by structural constraints: limited access to affordable, high-quality education at home, intense competition for scholarships, and perceived inequalities between domestic and foreign education systems. In this sense, student migration is not always a purely voluntary choice; it can also represent a strategic response to systemic limitations.

Kazakhstan represents a particularly relevant case within this global trend. Although the country has invested in higher education reforms and internationalization, many students continue to perceive foreign universities as more prestigious, better resourced, and more internationally competitive. High tuition fees, limited scholarship availability, and strong competition for elite domestic institutions motivate many Kazakhstani students to seek education abroad. Similar dynamics can be observed in other post-Soviet and emerging economies, though the intensity of these pressures varies.

This research addresses the following research questions:

1. What motivates students to study abroad?
2. What challenges do international students face after migration?
3. How do students retrospectively evaluate their study-abroad experience?
4. Are there differences between Kazakhstani students and students from other countries?
5. If given the opportunity, would students choose to study abroad again?

2 Literature Review

Existing research conceptualizes international student mobility as a form of youth migration linked to globalization, labor market transformation, and the internationalization of higher education (Altbach and Knight, 2007; King and Raghuram, 2013). Push-pull frameworks identify factors such as limited educational opportunities at home, prestige abroad, and expectations of better career outcomes as key drivers (Brooks and Waters, 2011).

A life-course perspective emphasizes that international student mobility is part of broader youth transitions rather than a temporary educational episode. Cairns' concept of "being mobile" highlights how mobility becomes integrated into identities, aspirations, and future planning (Cairns, 2014). At the same time, extensive research documents challenges faced by international students: language barriers, cultural shock, academic stress, social isolation, discrimination, and mental health difficulties (Marginson, 2014; Wu et al., 2015).

More recent work also emphasizes that international education can influence long-term migration trajectories. Fidler (2025), focusing on Turkey, demonstrates how socio-cultural and professional factors shape whether international academic mobility remains temporary or evolves into longer-term migration. Kazakhstan and Central Asia remain underrepresented in comparative empirical research, and fewer studies focus on retrospective evaluation; this study addresses both gaps.

3 Methodology

This section outlines the research design, dataset, and analytical approach used to examine international students’ motivations, challenges, and evaluations of studying abroad. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to capture both measurable patterns and lived experience.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from an open-ended question. The mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive examination of international students’ motivations, challenges, and retrospective evaluations by capturing both measurable patterns and subjective experiences. Quantitative data provide descriptive trends across key variables, while qualitative responses offer contextual depth and interpretation of lived experiences associated with studying abroad.

3.2 Dataset and Sample

The primary data source is an original online survey developed within the Roots & Roads project. Data collection took place between August and October 2025. The final dataset includes **80 respondents** who were international students or young professionals studying or working abroad. The sample was constructed through non-probability purposive sampling based on voluntary participation; while not statistically representative, it is appropriate for exploratory analysis focused on perceptions and experience.

3.3 Demographic Profile

Table 1 and Figure 1 present the demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 80). The sample is predominantly composed of young individuals, with more than 90% in terms of country of origin, students from Kazakhstan constitute the largest group, accounting for nearly half of the sample. The remaining respondents originate from a broad range of countries, each represented by relatively small shares, indicating a diverse yet Kazakhstan-centered composition. A similar pattern is observed for the current country of study. Almost half of the respondents are studying in Kazakhstan, with Poland and Italy emerging as the most common international destinations. Other countries are represented at lower frequencies, reflecting heterogeneous individual mobility pathways. With respect to educational level, the majority of participants are enrolled in Bachelor’s programs, followed by Master’s students. A smaller proportion of respondents report doctoral studies or other educational categories. Overall, the demographic profile reflects a young, predominantly undergraduate and early postgraduate population with strong representation from Kazakhstan and varied international study destinations.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents ($N = 80$)

Age Group	Number (Proportion)
17–19 years	33 (41.3%)
20–22 years	22 (27.5%)
23–25 years	19 (23.8%)
26–30 years	4 (5.0%)
30+	2 (2.5%)
Country of Origin	Number (Proportion)
Kazakhstan	37 (46.3%)
Poland	5 (6.3%)
Russia, Uzbekistan, Austria	3 (3.8%)
Egypt, Italy, and Ukraine	3 (3.8%)
Level of Study	Number (Proportion)
Bachelor's	48 (60.0%)
Master's	21 (26.3%)
Other (PhD/Doctoral, etc.)	11 (13.7%)

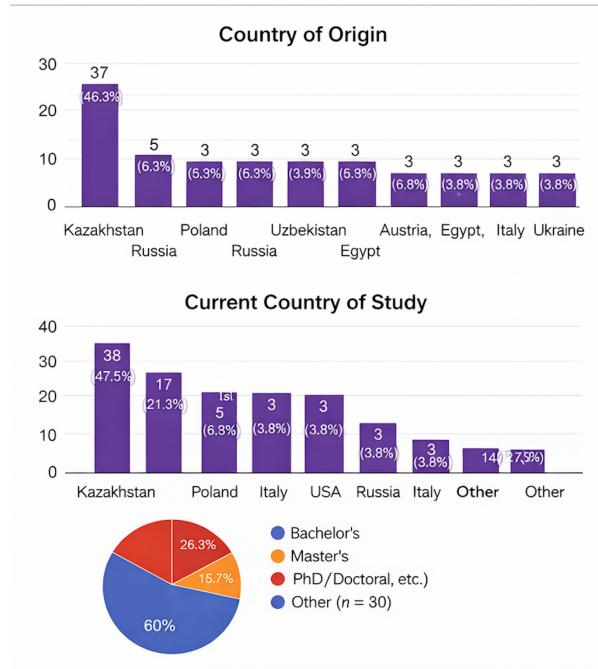


Figure 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents ($n=80$)

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

The survey consisted primarily of closed-ended questions and one optional open-ended question. Closed-ended questions captured motivations for studying abroad, the perceived difficulty of leaving home, financial considerations, major fears prior to migration, satisfaction with the experience, and willingness to choose studying abroad again. The open-ended question produced 17 responses used for qualitative thematic insight.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and visualized through bar and pie charts. Qualitative responses were interpreted thematically, identifying recurring themes such as independence, sacrifice, emotional strain, and personal growth.

3.6 Methodological Flowchart

The methodological process involved the following stages: research design and literature review; survey construction and pilot testing; online distribution; data collection (August–October 2025); data cleaning and organization; descriptive statistical analysis; thematic interpretation of qualitative responses; comparative analysis between Kazakhstani and non-Kazakhstani respondents; and final interpretation and writing.



Figure 2: Methodological flowchart of the study

4 Results and Discussion

This section presents the descriptive results of the survey and interprets them in relation to the literature on international student mobility. Patterns are discussed across motivations, challenges, and retrospective evaluations, with emphasis on how structural and

emotional costs interact with perceived benefits.

4.1 Motivations for Studying Abroad

Survey results show that access to higher-quality education and better career prospects are the most frequently cited motivations for studying abroad. Over 60% of respondents selected professional development as a primary driver, followed closely by educational quality. Cultural experience, language learning, and international networking were also highly valued. Among Kazakhstani respondents, limited opportunities within the domestic education system and financial constraints were particularly prominent, supporting existing findings on structurally driven student migration from emerging economies.

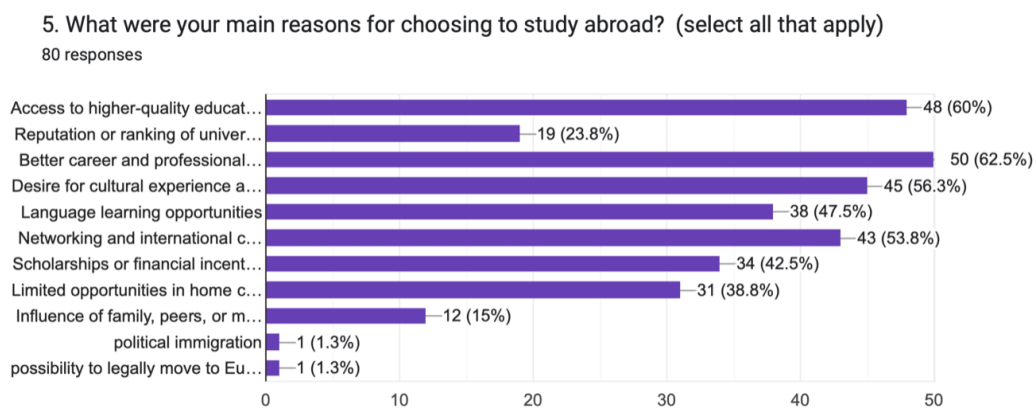


Figure 3: Motivations for studying abroad

4.2 Emotional and Social Challenges

Leaving home was perceived as emotionally difficult by most respondents, with medium-to-high difficulty ratings dominating responses. Homesickness, separation from family, and social isolation were frequently mentioned. Language barriers and difficulties in social integration were especially pronounced during the early stages of migration. Qualitative responses reveal that many students underestimated the emotional cost of studying abroad, particularly the experience of celebrating holidays away from family and rebuilding social networks from scratch. One respondent noted that studying abroad required “learning independence faster than expected, but at the cost of constant homesickness.”

7. How difficult was it for you to leave your hometown, family, and friends to study abroad?
80 responses

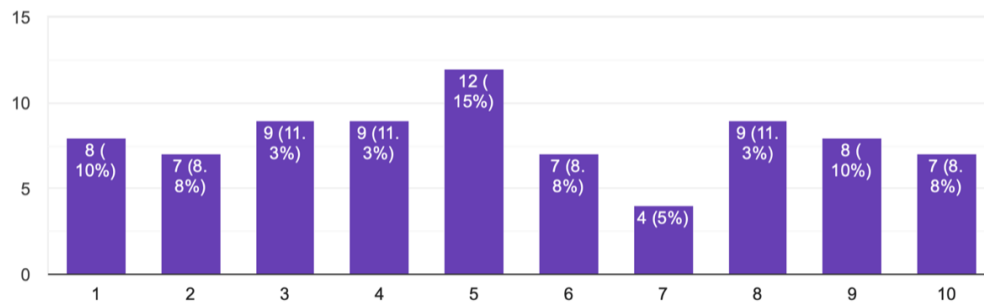


Figure 4: Emotional and social challenges

4.3 Financial Pressure and Bureaucracy

Financial burden emerged as the most frequently reported concern prior to migration, cited by 60% of respondents. Tuition fees, living expenses, and uncertainty surrounding scholarships strongly influenced destination choices. Bureaucratic challenges, including visa procedures and administrative complexity, further contributed to stress and uncertainty.

8. Did financial considerations affect your choice of country or university?
80 responses

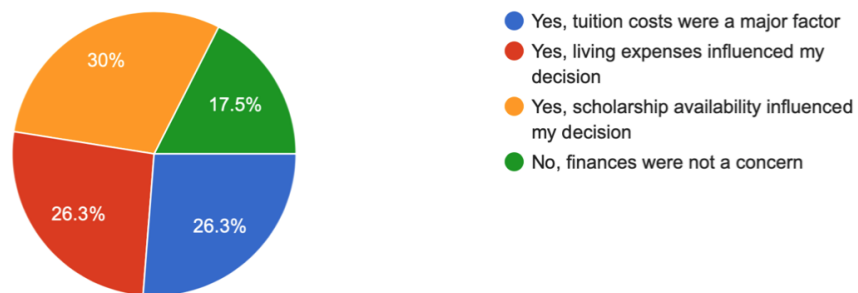


Figure 5: Financial Pressure and Bureaucracy.

4.4 Retrospective Evaluation: Was It Worth It?

Despite these challenges, the majority of respondents expressed high levels of satisfaction with their study-abroad experience. Most rated the professional value of studying abroad between 8 and 10 on a ten-point scale. Importantly, over two-thirds stated that they would definitely choose to study abroad again.

These findings suggest that international education, while demanding, is often integrated into longer-term life transitions and mobility projects rather than perceived as a temporary sacrifice (Cairns, 2014)

12. If you could make the decision again, would you still choose to study abroad?
80 responses

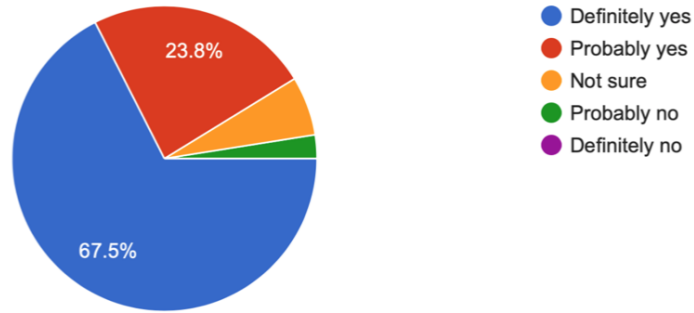


Figure 6: Retrospective Evaluation: Was It Worth It?

Taken together, these findings suggest that international student mobility functions not merely as an educational decision but as a broader life-course transition. Despite significant emotional strain and financial pressure, students retrospectively integrate studying abroad into long-term narratives of self-development, independence, and future mobility. This supports life-course interpretations of migration as an identity-shaping process rather than a temporary educational episode.

5 Conclusion

This study examined international student migration through a comparative lens, with particular attention to Kazakhstani students. Based on original survey data collected over three months, the findings demonstrate that studying abroad is shaped by structural inequalities, emotional costs, and significant personal sacrifice. Yet, despite these challenges, most students retrospectively evaluate the experience as worthwhile and transformative.

The results raise broader questions about national education systems and potential brain drain. When ambitious and capable students consistently seek education abroad, this reflects not only individual aspiration but also systemic shortcomings in access, affordability, and institutional support at home.

These findings carry important implications for higher education policy and student support systems. As international education continues to be promoted as a pathway to success, universities and governments must acknowledge the hidden emotional and social costs borne by students. Enhanced mental health services, transparent financial guidance, and stronger integration programs are essential to ensuring that the benefits of international mobility do not come at the expense of student well-being.

Future research should expand the sample size and adopt longitudinal approaches to explore long-term outcomes of international education. Nevertheless, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of student migration from underrepresented regions

and highlights the importance of balancing the romanticized narrative of studying abroad with a realistic acknowledgment of its costs.

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