

**Abstract**

Based on the results of interviews with Kazakhstani government-sponsored international students, this article argues that the benefits of short-term mobility do not accrue equally to the host and sending institutions. Northern institutions are the main beneficiaries, generating revenue from international student fees. Southern institutions are often degraded to secondary roles in capacity-building projects, whereby they must perform more effort-intensive and seldom recognized administrative and field responsibilities, while gaining few results.

A Critical Perspective on Short-term Mobility: The Kazakhstan Experience

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This article looks at the relatively understudied phenomenon of short-term international mobility of faculty from a critical internationalization perspective. It uses data from interviews with academics from Kazakhstan who participated in short-term professional development trips abroad. The data showed that international mobility and internationalization in general are not as benign as often presented. Academic mobility brings economic benefits and contributes to the social mission of developing international awareness and producing graduates equipped with the intercultural competence required for success in global competition. Yet it may contribute to reproducing existing structures of inequality.

Internationalization and Kazakhstan

Internationalization has become the main approach to modernization of higher education in Kazakhstan. Ever since Kazakhstan became an independent state, Kazakhstani reformers have tried to position the country—neither a member of the developed Western club, nor a former colony in the Global South—as an emerging “Asian tiger.” Several initiatives were undertaken in an effort to modernize higher education and develop the research capacity.

One of the earliest steps was a commitment to the Bologna Process, which facilitated the development of international partnerships between Kazakhstani and European universities and different mobility schemes. In parallel, the Kazakhstani government generously supported national mobility schemes, the most notable being the “Bolashak” program, originally envisioned to provide scholarships to degree studies at top universities abroad. In addition to Bolashak, the government supports short-term mobility of faculty and students enrolled at domestic universities. This mobility funding is distributed directly to the recipients and is intended to support the development of intercultural awareness of students and the improvement of teaching, research, and administrative skills of the faculty.

Short-term faculty mobility refers to mobility measured in days and weeks, rather than months and years, during which faculty are working on a long-term contract abroad. Recently, the amount allocated for this short-term training increased significantly, as compared to the stipend received by degree-seeking international students. Short-term faculty mobility is a topic that is relatively less discussed within global scholarship.

While some research is available on academic mobility and its benefits, less is known about short-term mobility. Our recent study on mobile Kazakhstani scholars allowed us to shed some light on this issue.

Short-term Mobility: Critical Insights from Kazakhstan

We conducted 21 interviews with academics from Kazakhstani universities who took part in short-term mobility schemes. The interview participants were selected among individuals employed as faculty with at least one year of academic experience prior to departure, who had spent one to nine months abroad, and who worked at least six months in an academic position after returning. Most of the participants were humanities scholars, and their countries of destination were within the European Union.

The data analysis showed that this type of mobility can be beneficial for all involved. Some participants reported that they had gained new teaching and research skills and had also developed useful networks, which helped them improve their performance after returning to Kazakhstan. Yet, the general impression from the data is that mobility was beneficial predominantly for host institutions. These benefits also seemed to come mostly in the form of hard cash. While going to great lengths to attract Kazakhstani visitors, host institutions provided very modest support once their visitors arrived on campus. Faculty mentors did not prioritize advising their Kazakhstani guests, who were frequently excluded from fee-based activities on campus (such as courses, seminars, and workshops), and were frequently left to themselves.

In line with the findings of prior critical explorations of internationalization, benefits appear to accrue mostly to host institutions in the North—the key benefit being access to alternative revenue. Meanwhile, international faculty, their home institutions, and the sending country look at short-term mobility as a pathway to increasing their individual-, institutional-, or national-level research and teaching capacities, which is essential for success in the knowledge economy. However, with faculty receiving little support from the host institutions, short-term programs rarely lead to significant improvements in individual teaching and research skills. Consequently, little effect is produced for the sending institutions and the sending country. In conclusion, the findings of our study on short-term faculty mobility are in line with key findings from other studies of internationalization, in the sense that this activity contributes to the reproduction of epistemic hegemony and academic domination by the global North.

Hosting short-term visitors seems to be driven predominantly by neoliberal, profit-seeking motives, rather than by the humanistic mission of universities to produce and disseminate knowledge, including mutually beneficial knowledge exchanges with institutions in other countries. According to the reports of our Kazakhstani study participants, host institutions charge significant amounts of money from funders, while providing Kazakhstani visitors with nothing more than an opportunity to superficially experience (mostly observe) their campuses. Such provision does not require any additional money, effort, or specialized services. The findings about the neoliberal underpinnings of the host institutions' interest in short-term mobility were consistent with the observation of the move “from aid to trade” in international education exchanges, made by many other scholars. These scholars deplore the decline of initiatives by Northern institutions aimed at providing assistance to countries of the South, and their replacement by profit-seeking projects and programs.

From Critical Awareness to Just Policies and Practices in Short-term Mobility

Education policy makers and practitioners need to realize that what makes this unfair exchange possible is the normalization of the global competition discourse, which reaffirms the cultural hegemony of the global North, positions higher education systems in Northern countries above those in the South, degrades universities and individuals in the South to a status of complete worthlessness and invisibility, and creates a sense of necessity for those in the South to catch up. This mechanism is evident in the motivations of sponsors to fund short-term mobility, in the way the funded programs are planned and administered, in the way faculty participants are treated prior to and after their stay abroad by their home institutions, and in the way they are “serviced” at their host institutions.

However, with faculty receiving little support from the host institutions, short-term programs rarely lead to significant improvements in individual teaching and research skills.

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To mitigate these negative effects of short-term mobility, policy makers and practitioners in the field of international education need to contribute to an open communication between the parties, allowing them to clearly understand each other's needs and goals when engaging in mobility schemes. In other words, there is a need for international partners to understand local contexts and needs and individuals' expectations and interests, and to reach an overall agreement on the goals of the mobility initiatives. In their terms of reference, both government and private sponsors of mobility should articulate clear requirements for host institutions or contractors that develop and administer short-term mobility schemes, to engage sending institutions and individual participants in the process of planning and administering the programs. ▲