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EDUCATIONAL MIGRATION FROM KAZAKHSTAN TO THE UNITED STATES: EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER PLANS OF YOUTH

In the context of globalization, international educational migration has become an important factor in the professional mobility of young people. For Kazakhstan, this issue is particularly relevant due to the country's integration into the international educational environment, the development of academic mobility, and the growing importance of human capital. The United States remains one of the leading destinations for international educational mobility, attracting young people through its concentration of leading universities and advanced research infrastructure. The study aims to identify the factors shaping the educational migration of Kazakhstani youth to the United States. The empirical basis of the study consists of 15 in-depth interviews with Kazakhstani students studying at U.S. universities; purposive sampling was used to select the participants. The findings indicate that university education is perceived by young people as a long-term investment in professional development and an opportunity to enter the international labor market. At the same time, education abroad is regarded as a means of acquiring advanced knowledge and professional competencies that can also be applied in the national labor market. The scientific value of the study lies in examining the gradual formation and transformation of the educational and migration strategies of Kazakhstani youth during their studies at U.S. universities. The practical significance of the findings is associated with their potential use in developing programs and measures aimed at improving mechanisms for the professional guidance and career support of Kazakhstani graduates of foreign universities.

Keywords: educational migration, education, career plans, youth, international mobility.

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Қазақстаннан АҚШ-қа бағытталған білім беру көші-қоны: жастардың білім беру және кәсіби жоспарлары

Жаһандану жағдайында халықаралық білім беру көші-қоны жастардың кәсіби ұтқырлығының маңызды факторына айналууда. Қазақстан үшін бұл мәселе елдің халықаралық білім беру кеңістігіне интеграциялануына, академиялық ұтқырлықтың дамуына және адами капитал рөлінің артуына байланысты ерекше өзектілікке ие. Халықаралық білім беру ұтқырлығының жетекші бағыттарының бірі – АҚШ. Оның жастар үшін тартымдылығы жетекші университеттердің шоғырлануымен және дамыған зерттеу инфрақұрылымымен байланысты. Зерттеудің мақсаты – қазақстандық жастардың АҚШ-қа бағытталған білім беру көші-қонын айқындайтын факторларды анықтау. Зерттеудің эмпирикалық негізін АҚШ университеттерінде білім алып жатқан қазақстандық студенттермен жүргізілген 15 тереңдетілген сұхбат құрады; іріктемені қалыптастыруда мақсатты іріктеу әдісі қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері университетте білім алудың жастар тарапынан кәсіби дамуға бағытталған ұзақ мерзімді инвестиция және халықаралық еңбек нарығына шығу мүмкіндігі ретінде қабылданатынын көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар шетелдік білім заманауи білім мен кәсіби құзыреттерді меңгерудің және оларды ұлттық еңбек нарығында қолданудың мүмкіндігі ретінде қарастырылады. Зерттеудің ғылыми құндылығы қазақстандық жастардың АҚШ университеттерінде білім алу үдерісіндегі білім беру және көші-қон стратегияларының кезең-кезеңімен қалыптасуы мен трансформациясын зерттеумен айқындалады. Алынған нәтижелердің практикалық маңыздылығы оларды шетелдік жоғары оқу орындарын бітірген қазақстандық түлектерді кәсіби сүйемелдеу және мансаптық қолдау тетіктерін жетілдіруге бағытталған бағдарламалар мен шараларды әзірлеуде пайдалану мүмкіндігімен байланысты.

Түйін сөздер: білім беру көші-қоны, білім, кәсіби жоспарлар, жастар, халықаралық мобильділік.

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Образовательная миграция из Казахстана в США: образовательные и профессиональные планы молодежи

В условиях глобализации международная образовательная миграция становится важным фактором профессиональной мобильности молодежи. Для Казахстана данная проблематика приобретает особую актуальность в связи с интеграцией страны в международное образовательное пространство, развитием академической мобильности и повышением роли человеческого капитала. Одним из ведущих направлений международной образовательной мобильности остаются США, привлекательность которых для молодежи обусловлена концентрацией ведущих университетов и развитой исследовательской инфраструктурой. Цель исследования – выявить факторы, определяющие образовательную миграцию казахстанской молодежи в США. Эмпирическую основу исследования составили 15 глубинных интервью с казахстанскими студентами, обучающимися в университетах США; при формировании выборки использовался целевой отбор. Результаты исследования показывают, что обучение в университетах воспринимается молодежью как долгосрочная инвестиция в профессиональное развитие и возможность выхода на международный рынок труда. Вместе с тем зарубежное образование рассматривается как способ приобретения современных знаний и профессиональных компетенций, которые могут быть реализованы и на национальном рынке труда. Научная ценность исследования заключается в изучении поэтапного формирования и трансформации образовательных и миграционных стратегий казахстанской молодежи в процессе обучения в университетах США. Практическая значимость полученных результатов связана с возможностью их использования при разработке программ и мер, направленных на совершенствование механизмов профессионального сопровождения и карьерной поддержки казахстанских выпускников зарубежных вузов.

Ключевые слова: образовательная миграция, образование, профессиональные планы, молодежь, международная мобильность.

Introduction

In the context of globalization, international educational migration has become an increasingly important form of youth mobility. The growing number of students pursuing education abroad reflects the internationalization of higher education and the expanding role of the global educational environment in developing human capital for the international labor market (Li, Haupt & Lee, 2021). For Kazakhstan, this phenomenon has gained particular significance in the context of the country's integration into the global educational space, the expansion of academic mobility, and the development of human capital. Educational migration serves not only as a means of obtaining high-quality education but also as an important pathway to professional and social mobility of young people. Educational migration is one of the most stable forms of international youth mobility and an important means for attracting highly qualified human capital. Over the past decades, the sum of international educational migration has grown steadily. According to official statistics, the number of international students worldwide increased from 2.1 million in 2000 to 7.3 million in 2023, representing an average annual growth rate of approximately 5.5% (Government Resolution,

2025). Europe, North America, and China continue to be the leading destinations for international students. At the same time, educational migration is increasingly viewed not only as a means of obtaining education but also as a channel for attracting young highly skilled professionals to national labor markets. The United States occupies a prominent position within the global system of educational migration. Since the 1970s, the United States has remained one of the world's leading destinations for international students. The inflow of international students has had a significant impact not only on the development of the U.S. higher education system but has also contributed to the formation of an additional source of highly qualified human capital for the national economy (Clemens, 2013, p. 103).

International students' educational choices are mostly concentrated in specific fields of study. STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs, together with business, administration, and law, account for the largest share of international student enrolments, whereas health and education programs attract comparatively fewer international students. This pattern is closely linked to the evolving immigration policies of host countries, which increasingly prioritize attracting and retaining highly skilled talent (OECD, 2026). Changes in

the structure of international student mobility have also been reflected in U.S. immigration policy. The growing demand for highly skilled professionals has led to the development of policy that facilitates the transition of international graduates from educational to labor migration. As a result, employers seeking to recruit highly qualified specialists increasingly sponsor work visa for international graduates of American universities (Muzumdar et al., 2020). One example of this policy is the expansion of post-graduation employment opportunities for graduates in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Under the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program, international students are permitted to obtain legal employment after graduation their studies, while graduates of STEM programs are eligible for an extended period of employment authorization in the United States. This policy enables graduates to gain professional experience in the U.S. labor market, expand their employment opportunities, and increase their chances of obtaining an employer-sponsored work visa (Muzumdar et al., 2023). Thus, educational migration is increasingly regarded as an important pathway for attracting and retaining highly qualified professionals in the host country.

International students are regarded by host countries not only as participants in the educational process but also as an important resource for human capital development and for addressing shortages of highly qualified personnel. Consequently, educational migration has become increasingly integrated into national strategies for economic development and enhancing the competitiveness of labor markets. The growing importance of academic mobility is also driven by intensifying global competition for talent. Population ageing and the shrinking working-age population in developed countries, together with demographic growth in a number of developing nations, have encouraged member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to strengthen policies aimed at attracting international students and highly skilled professionals. To achieve this objective, governments employ various policy instruments, including simplified visa procedures, expedited recognition of foreign qualifications, expanded opportunities for post-study employment, and the creation of favorable conditions for the long-term integration of international graduates into host societies.

Against the backdrop of these global trends, the educational migration of Kazakhstani youth represents a subject of particular scholarly interest. De-

spite the large-scale reforms implemented in Kazakhstan's higher education system since the early 1990s, the country remains one of the major sources of international student migration. Kazakhstan's higher education policy has focused on expanding access to higher education, developing university infrastructure, improving educational programs, and enhancing the quality of specialist training. A significant milestone in the modernization of Kazakhstan's higher education system was the country's accession to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010. This accession facilitated the implementation of a comprehensive set of reforms aimed at adopting international educational standards, expanding academic mobility, and integrating Kazakhstani universities into the global higher education system (Pogorelskaya & Pokrovskaya, 2025). An important role in this transformation has been played by Nazarbayev University, which serves as an institutional model for the modernization of higher education based on international best practices. The government has also encouraged Kazakhstani universities to expand international cooperation, participate in global university rankings, and strengthen their competitiveness in the international higher education market. Nevertheless, despite these reforms, the scale of educational emigration among Kazakhstani youth remains substantial, highlighting the need for further research into the factors shaping young people's educational and migration strategies.

Educational migration among Kazakhstani youth takes place through a variety of institutional pathways, including government-funded and international scholarship programs, academic mobility initiatives, inter-university agreements, and independent admission to foreign higher education institutions. A particularly significant role in promoting the international educational mobility of Kazakhstani young people have been played by the Bolashak International Scholarship Program, established in 1993. The program provides state-funded opportunity to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate education, as well as research internships at leading foreign universities, on the condition that recipients return to Kazakhstan and pursue their professional career in the country after graduation of their studies. Since it was launched, approximately 13,000 individuals have participated in the program (Ryazantsev et al., 2020), making it one of the country's principal instruments for developing highly qualified human capital and strengthening international educational cooperation.

The present study aims to identify the factors shaping the educational migration of Kazakhstani youth to the United States. Particular attention is given to the analysis of students' educational and career motivations, as well as the formation of their migration intentions. In examining educational migration, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of migration factors and migration motives. Migration factors refer to the objective conditions that shape the migration environment, whereas migration motives reflect the subjective perceptions and interpretations of these conditions by migrants themselves. In the scholarly literature (Analysis of Central Asian Educational Market and Recommendations for Central Asian Higher Education Systems Development, 2022), the determinants of educational migration are commonly examined within the framework of the push–pull model and are further classified according to their level of influence (individual, family, regional, national, and global) and their substantive characteristics (economic, social, cultural, political, and educational).

The scientific novelty of this study lies in advancing the theoretical understanding of educational migration as a dynamic process that is shaped and transformed by the interaction of educational, social, and institutional factors. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily relied on the quantitative analysis of migration intentions, this qualitative research provides new insights into the formation, transformation, and implementation of the educational and migration strategies of Kazakhstani youth through the case of students enrolled at universities in the United States. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the study presents original empirical evidence on how academic experiences, career expectations, social networks, and the conditions of the host country influence decisions to return to Kazakhstan or to stay abroad. The findings broaden the current understanding of the determinants of educational migration among Kazakhstani youth and provide both a theoretical and an empirical foundation for improving public policies aimed at the development, retention, and return of highly qualified human capital.

Literature review

Contemporary migration theories emphasize the multifactorial nature of educational mobility, which is shaped by both structural conditions and the actions of various actors involved in the migration process. Educational institutions, recruitment agencies, households, professional and ethnic networks,

diaspora communities, and government institutions are regarded as key actors capable of either facilitating or constraining educational migration. The interaction of these factors and actors creates a complex decision-making environment that shapes young people's educational and migration strategies. In the scholarly literature, educational migration is traditionally defined as a specific form of international migration involving the temporary movement of individuals abroad for educational purposes. Migration transition theories conceptualize international migration as a natural outcome of socioeconomic development. Contrary to the assumption that development reduces emigration, this perspective argues that, at certain stages of modernization, improvements in educational, economic, and social opportunities increase international mobility. Only after countries reach higher levels of development does emigration gradually decline, allowing them to transition from countries of emigration to countries of immigration (Skeldon, 2012). This relationship is explained by the capabilities-aspirations framework, which suggests that migration is shaped by the interaction between individuals' capabilities and aspirations (Carling & Schewel, 2018). Socioeconomic development enhances human, social, and financial capital while simultaneously expanding access to information about educational and career opportunities abroad. As a result, migration aspirations among young people tend to increase, although they gradually weaken as differences in opportunities between origin and destination countries diminish (De Haas, 2020). The intensity of international student mobility varies according to countries' levels of socioeconomic development. The choice of a study destination is shaped by a combination of economic, institutional, and sociocultural factors, the influence of which differs for students from countries at different stages of development (Weber and Van Mol, 2023).

The capabilities-aspirations framework is also applicable to educational migration, as decisions to pursue higher education abroad are influenced by the same macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that shape other forms of international mobility (Van Mol et al., 2024). Unlike traditional push–pull models, migration transition theories interpret educational migration as a dynamic process driven by evolving capabilities, aspirations, and socioeconomic conditions rather than solely by push and pull factors (Lipura & Collins, 2020). However, unlike other forms of migration, educational migration is characterized by a high degree of selectivity, as it

primarily involves youth possessing educational, social, and economic resources. The expansion of educational migration is closely associated with globalization, the internationalization of higher education, and the growing transnational mobility of youth. In recent decades, educational migration has increasingly been viewed not only as a means of human capital accumulation but also as an instrument of soft power, enabling countries to strengthen their international influence and foster global professional networks. Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes educational migration as the result of the interaction between individual educational strategies and the institutional dynamics of the global higher education market. Within this perspective, the decision to study abroad is understood both as an investment in human, social, and cultural capital and as a consequence of the growing internationalization of higher education, whereby universities actively compete to attract talented international students (Findlay, 2011).

The United States occupies a distinctive position in international educational mobility and is widely recognized as one of the world's most attractive destinations for higher education owing to its concentration of leading universities, advanced research infrastructure, and extensive opportunities for academic and professional development. Studying at American universities is perceived by youth not only as a means of obtaining a high-quality education but also as an investment in long-term professional success. Within the framework of the brain drain concept, educational migration is regarded as a factor contributing to the potential loss of highly qualified human capital when graduates do not return to their home countries. In Kazakhstan, this issue is associated with the outflow of talented youth and the need to improve strategies for retaining and attracting highly skilled professionals. At the same time, the concept of brain circulation has gained increasing prominence in contemporary research. According to this perspective, international mobility facilitates the development of transnational professional networks and creates opportunities for applying the knowledge and competencies acquired abroad for the benefit of the country of origin, regardless of where graduates subsequently reside.

Young people decide whether to migrate or return to their home country for a variety of reasons that are often interconnected and shaped by factors such as socio-demographic characteristics. One of the strongest incentives for remaining in the host country is participation in internships undertaken

during the course of study. Such internships provide students with opportunities to engage with local employers and gain first-hand insight into career development prospects in the host country. The significance of this factor highlights the substantial role of higher education institutions in shaping students' migration intentions. Previous research also identifies global identity as an important driver of migration. Identifying this personal characteristic has practical implications, particularly for career counselors seeking to better understand students who aspire to pursue international career (Rueff-Lopes et al., 2024).

Despite the broad educational and professional opportunities offered by studying abroad, international students encounter a number of challenges that may hinder their transition into the labor market after graduation. These barriers include cultural differences, limited willingness to seek professional guidance and career counseling, as well as visa restrictions and immigration regulations. International students constitute a distinct group whose career trajectories are shaped by the specific conditions of adaptation, education, and migration. Consequently, policies aimed at expanding access to career counseling services and increasing students' engagement with these services are of particular importance. Furthermore, extending the period of lawful post-graduation residence for international students facilitates more effective career planning and enhances their readiness to enter the labor market (Chen & Li, 2023).

Research on the effects of international educational mobility demonstrates that studying abroad has a substantial influence on youth's subsequent career pathways. Compared with their peers who have no international study experience, young people who complete a full degree abroad are 19-22% more likely to work outside their country of origin, while those who participate in academic mobility programs for part of their studies are 3-5% more likely to pursue employment abroad. Moreover, international education expands professional opportunities and increases the likelihood of securing positions with a strong international dimension, even within the domestic labor market. The absence of statistically significant differences between graduates who completed an entire degree abroad and those who participated in short-term academic mobility programs suggests that the international educational experience itself, rather than its duration, plays the more important role in shaping internationally oriented career strategies. These findings

indicate that different forms of educational mobility have a comparable impact on young people's career aspirations and professional pathways in the context of an increasingly globalized labor market (Knutsen et al., 2025).

One of the factors explaining the influence of international educational mobility on graduates' career outcomes is the development of social capital. Professional networks established during study with faculty members, employers, and representatives of the academic community provide access to labor market information, career opportunities, and employment channels. Thus, studying abroad contributes not only to the accumulation of human capital but also to the development of social resources that enhance graduates' competitiveness in the global labor market (Pham et al., 2024).

Alongside social capital, career competencies play a crucial role in the professional development of international students. Graduates' career plans are closely associated with their perceptions of post-graduation employment opportunities and their ability to effectively utilize available educational and professional resources. Social and professional networks established both in the host country and in the country of origin are particularly important in this regard. Such networks expand access to labor market information, career opportunities, and professional resources, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful career outcomes for graduates (Tamontseva & Akkermans, 2025). Decisions to pursue a career in the host country or return to the country of origin are determined not only by individual career aspirations but also by graduates' assessments of career prospects, employment conditions, and opportunities for professional self-realization across different countries. Consequently, educational migration is increasingly viewed as part of a broader strategy of career mobility, in which the choice of study destination is closely linked to expectations regarding future employment and career development (Lin, 2025).

International graduates' decisions regarding their country of employment are largely shaped by their career expectations, life plans, and perceptions of the advantages associated with overseas education (Lin & Xu, 2023). Accordingly, international graduates are increasingly recognized as a valuable source of human capital capable of contributing to the socio-economic development of both their countries of origin and host countries through their advanced education, professional competencies, and international experience (Delva et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2021).

Despite the substantial growth of research on educational migration, the educational and career strategies of Kazakhstani students studying in the United States remain insufficiently explored. Most existing studies examine educational migration within the broader context of international mobility or focus primarily on the factors driving students to study abroad. Considerably less attention has been paid to students' career expectations, migration intentions, and the factors influencing their decisions to return to Kazakhstan or pursue careers abroad after graduation. This gap underscores the relevance and timeliness of the present study.

At the same time, students' career and migration decisions are shaped not only by individual expectations and accumulated educational experience but also by broader institutional conditions that determine opportunities for employment, professional integration, and continued residence in the country of study. In this context, migration policies are of particular importance, as they largely establish the institutional framework within which international students' post-graduation strategies are formed and pursued.

A substantial share of international experience in migration governance has already been incorporated into Kazakhstan's migration policy, particularly in the areas of attracting foreign migrants and improving migration management mechanisms. Nevertheless, the further development of migration policy should take into account both the country's resource capacity and the existing demographic, socio-economic, and labor market challenges. International experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of migration policy largely depends on the level of digitalization of migration processes, interagency coordination, and institutional coherence among authorities responsible for migration. The experiences of Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Norway show that ensuring national security and maintaining international mobility can be successfully balanced through an integrated migration governance system supported by advanced digital infrastructure.

In economically developed countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, migration policy is primarily aimed at attracting human capital and addressing shortages of skilled labor. To achieve these objectives, governments employ selective immigration mechanisms based on applicants' educational attainment, professional experience, qualifications, and integration potential. South Korea and Singapore provide successful examples of digital tools for labor migration management

that simultaneously reduce migration-related risks and enhance national economic competitiveness. National migration policies and strategies directly influence the educational and career plans of international students by creating conditions that may either encourage graduates to remain in the host country after completing their studies or motivate them to return to their countries of origin (Tran et al., 2020).

The experience of Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Norway shows that ensuring national security and maintaining international mobility can be successfully combined through an integrated migration management system supported by advanced digital infrastructure. In economically advanced countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, migration policy is primarily aimed at attracting human capital and addressing shortages of highly qualified personnel. To achieve these objectives, governments employ selective immigration systems based on applicants' educational attainment, professional experience, qualifications, and integration potential. South Korea and Singapore demonstrate the effectiveness of digital tools for labor migration management, which simultaneously reduce migration-related risks and enhance national economic competitiveness. The migration strategies implemented by governments directly influence the educational and career aspirations of international students by creating conditions that either encourage graduates to remain in the host country or stimulate their return to their countries of origin (Tran et al., 2020).

Particular attention should be given to the experience of the United States, which has long regarded migration as one of the key drivers of socioeconomic and scientific and technological development. The strong attractiveness of the U.S. higher education system, its well-developed research infrastructure, and established pathways from educational to employment-based migration ensure a sustained inflow of highly skilled professionals from around the world. U.S. immigration policy combines measures aimed at attracting highly qualified workers, supporting family-based immigration, admitting refugees, and promoting the country's ethnic and cultural diversity (American Immigration Council, 2021). Of particular importance for the development of intellectual migration are immigration pathways that select migrants on the basis of educational attainment, professional achievements, and investment potential (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022), as well as opportunities for subse-

quent naturalization and long-term integration into American society (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023).

Educational migration represents one of the most effective instruments for fostering intellectual migration. The consistently high ranking of U.S. universities in global league tables, together with the country's advanced research environment, has established the United States as one of the world's leading destinations for international students (Times Higher Education, 2023). The U.S. experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of migration policy depends not only on the scale of migration flows but also on the state's capacity to attract, select, integrate, and retain talented individuals. This experience is of particular practical relevance for Kazakhstan in the context of strengthening its policy for regulating educational and intellectual youth migration.

The reviewed studies reveal several interrelated levels of analysis of educational migration. At the macro level, international educational mobility is explained by socioeconomic development, the internationalization of higher education, and differences in opportunities between countries (Skeldon, 2012; De Haas, 2020). At the institutional level, universities, the international education market, career support systems, and post-study residence conditions play a significant role (Findlay, 2011; Chen & Li, 2023). At the micro level, young people's decisions are associated with their educational and career aspirations, career competencies, professional networks, and perceptions of future employment opportunities (Rueff-Lopes et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2024; Tamontseva & Akkermans, 2025; Lin, 2025).

A comparison of these approaches demonstrates that educational migration cannot be fully explained only by «push» and «pull» factors. The choice of a study destination, the transition from educational to professional mobility, and the decision to return or pursue a career abroad represent sequential, yet non-linear, stages of a broader mobility strategy. Consequently, factors that shape the decision to study abroad do not necessarily retain the same significance after graduation. Obtaining an education in the United States does not necessarily imply permanent departure from Kazakhstan: international educational experience may simultaneously enhance individual career mobility and foster transnational professional networks that maintain graduates' potential connections with their country of origin. Thus, the country of study may function not only as a destination of migration but also as an

intermediate space in which new career, social, and professional resources are developed.

In this regard, the findings of Knutsen et al. (2025) on the impact of international educational experience on subsequent career trajectories are complemented by research on social capital (Pham et al., 2024), career competencies (Tamontseva & Akkermans, 2025), and career expectations (Lin, 2025; Lin & Xu, 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that the decision to return to Kazakhstan or continue a career in the United States should not be understood as a simple choice between two alternatives. Rather, it results from the interaction between the educational experience acquired abroad, available career opportunities, professional networks, and anticipated living and working conditions.

Overall, the literature review demonstrates that existing research provides a substantial understanding of the factors influencing educational mobility, career decisions, and subsequent migration trajectories. However, these dimensions are often examined separately. For Kazakhstani youth studying in the United States, the key issue is precisely their interrelationship: how the initial educational choice is transformed into professional expectations, how social and career resources develop during the period of study, and how these changes subsequently relate to intentions to return to Kazakhstan or pursue a career abroad. This interrelationship between educational mobility, career strategies, and migration intentions provides the analytical foundation for the present study.

Materials and methods

The data presented in this article are part of a larger qualitative study on the educational migration of Kazakhstani youth, encompassing students enrolled in universities across different countries. The present article is based on the analysis of a homogeneous subsample comprising 15 in-depth interviews with Kazakhstani students studying at universities in the United States, that ensured the comparability of the educational, social, and institutional contexts of the participants. The interviews explored participants' educational and career plans, the process of migration intention formation, and the factors influencing their migration-related decision-making. The interviews were conducted in 2026. The study program and research instruments were approved by the Local Ethics Committee of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (IRB00010790, IRB #1 Al-Far-

abi Kazakh National University, Protocol No. IRB-1719).

The sample included both male and female students with diverse marital status who were pursuing degrees in the social sciences and humanities, engineering, and economics majors. The sampling strategy also considered the source of educational funding, including both scholarship recipients and students financing their studies through personal or family resources. To ensure the credibility of the data, participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent, and respondents were given the opportunity to choose the language of communication. Depending on their preference, interviews were conducted in Kazakh, Russian, or English. The interview guide covered topics related to the motivations for choosing higher education abroad, experiences of studying and living in the United States, and participants' educational, professional, and migration plans following graduation.

Reflective thematic analysis, developed by V. Braun and V. Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021), was employed to analyze the interview data. This approach enables the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns of meaning within textual data, providing a systematic analysis of participants' individual experiences and their interpretation in relation to the research objectives. The analysis followed the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke, including familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and refining themes, and producing the final interpretation. Following the transcription of the interviews, open coding was conducted through the systematic identification of text parts reflecting motivations for choosing the destination country, the transformation of educational and professional aspirations, changes in migration intentions, the influence of the academic and research environment, social networks, and the institutional context of the host country, as well as factors shaping decisions to return to Kazakhstan or to pursue long-term residence abroad. The resulting codes were then systematically compared across interviews, grouped according to conceptual similarity, and organized into thematic categories reflecting the stages of formation and transformation of the educational, professional, and migration strategies of Kazakhstani students. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing the coding framework and thematic categories to be contin-

uously refined as new empirical evidence emerged. Interviewing was completed once theoretical saturation had been achieved, that is, when the analysis of additional interviews no longer generated new codes, thematic categories, or conceptually meaningful interpretations. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the identified themes were repeatedly compared with the original interview transcripts, while the interpretation of the findings was informed by the analysis of both recurring and divergent cases, ensuring the internal consistency, credibility, and analytical rigor of the study.

Results and discussion

Motivations for Studying Abroad and Choice of Destination Country. The interview findings indicate that Kazakhstani students' decision to pursue higher education in the United States is shaped by a combination of educational, professional, and personal motivations. The most influential factors include the pursuit of high-quality education, access to advanced research resources, and broader career opportunities. Respondents repeatedly emphasized the academic excellence of U.S. universities and their well-developed research infrastructure. In several interviews, the choice of the United States was also associated with prior interactions with American academics and participation in internationally oriented educational programs.

Another important factor influencing the choice of destination was the perception of the United States as a global center of higher education and scientific research. When comparing potential study destinations, respondents considered university rankings, the duration of academic programs, and opportunities for research activities. Alongside educational motivations, professional expectations also played a significant role. Studying abroad was viewed as a means of enhancing competitiveness in the labor market, gaining international experience, and expanding long-term career prospects.

"American specialists visited our university and provided training, which inspired my interest in studying in the United States". (Second-year female student)

"The university's ranking was important to me because U.S. universities are highly ranked, internationally recognized, and I believe their degrees carry greater value". (Third-year male student)

The Influence of Social Networks and Universities on Migration Motivations. Although the de-

cision to pursue education abroad is typically initiated by the students themselves, their migration motivations are strongly shaped by their social environment. Friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who have previously studied abroad play a particularly important role. Their recommendations and personal experiences increase awareness of international educational opportunities and reduce the uncertainty associated with deciding to study overseas. Respondents frequently noted that interactions with peers who had already completed studies abroad encouraged them to consider international education as a realistic and achievable option. Advice from such friends not only provided practical information about admission procedures and scholarship opportunities but also strengthened respondents' confidence in their own decisions.

"My friends kept asking why I wasn't applying to study abroad. Later, they told me about the «Bolashak» scholarship program, explained the application process, and after that I also began to seriously consider this opportunity" (First-year female student)

"I asked all of my friends and spoke with acquaintances who had studied abroad. Most of them told me there was no reason to hesitate and advised me to apply to universities in the United States. Their opinions had a significant influence on my decision". (Second-year male student)

The host university itself also emerges as an independent factor shaping migration motivations. Respondents expressed positive views regarding the organization of the educational process at U.S. universities, highlighting academic freedom, opportunities to personalize their educational pathways, practice-oriented learning, and access to advanced research resources. The flexibility of academic programs was identified as a particularly attractive feature, allowing students to design a substantial portion of their curriculum according to their academic interests and long-term career goals. These characteristics of the educational environment are perceived by respondents as significant advantages of studying abroad compared with the more standardized and rigid curricula typically offered in their home country.

"You create your own study plan, and there are relatively few compulsory courses. The university provides part of the curriculum, while you choose the remaining courses based on your own interests. As a result, everyone can build an educational pathway that best suits their individual goals". (Fourth-year female student)

The identified motivations indicate that the choice of the United States is not simply based on a comparison of individual characteristics of the destination country. Educational, professional, and research expectations form an interconnected system: the quality of education is valued primarily in relation to its expected impact on professional mobility, while university prestige is associated with the international recognition of the qualification obtained. This suggests that the choice of destination country should be interpreted not as a response to a single dominant “pull” factor, but as an assessment of the expected returns from educational mobility over the longer-term educational and professional trajectory.

Formation of Youth Migration Motivation. The formation of migration motivations is a sequential, multi-stage process in which youth’s personal aspirations interact with the influence of their social environment and the characteristics of the host educational system. The process begins with the emergence of educational and career aspirations, driven by the desire to obtain a high-quality education, expand career opportunities, and enhance competitiveness in the labor market. At the next stage, the social environment plays an increasingly important role by serving as a source of information about international educational opportunities and fostering positive attitudes toward educational mobility. Friends, colleagues, teachers, and graduates of foreign universities are particularly influential, as their experiences reduce uncertainty and strengthen confidence in the feasibility of studying abroad.

Subsequently, prospective students undertake a comparative evaluation of potential destination countries and universities, considering factors such as the quality of education, international university rankings, learning conditions, academic opportunities, and future employment prospects. This evaluation leads to the development of migration intentions, which are eventually translated into the decision to enroll at a foreign university and pursue educational migration.

Based on the findings of this study, the following conceptual model of youth migration motivation formation is proposed: Personal educational and career aspirations → Influence of the social environment and migration networks → Formation of a positive perception of overseas education → Comparative evaluation of destination countries and universities → Development of migration intentions → Decision to enroll in a foreign university → Educational migration. The sequence presented indicates

that migration motivation is not formed directly by the conditions of the destination country. Between the possibility of migration and the actual decision to undertake it, there is an intermediate stage of interpretation, during which young people relate the available information to their educational and career goals. Therefore, the same characteristics of a country or university may have different meanings for different respondents, depending on their prior experiences, resources, and anticipated career trajectories.

Formation of educational and career aspirations. At the initial stage, youth develop aspirations to obtain a high-quality education, strengthen their professional competencies, and expand their career opportunities. This is accompanied by a desire to gain international educational experience, access advanced research resources, and benefit from broader opportunities for professional development.

Increasing informational influence of the social environment. At this stage, social networks become an important source of influence, including friends, family members, teachers, alumni of international programs, and professional contacts. Through these networks, young people acquire initial knowledge about opportunities for studying abroad and the living conditions in potential destination countries.

Construction of the image of the destination country. A stable perception of specific destination countries gradually develops, encompassing views on the quality of education, the level of research infrastructure, career prospects, and socioeconomic conditions. At this stage, youth engage in a symbolic comparison of alternative study destinations.

Evaluation of universities and academic programs. Young people begin to more rationally assess available options by comparing university rankings, academic program content, tuition costs, access to research facilities, and post-graduation employment prospects. As a result, the decision-making process becomes increasingly structured and evidence-based.

Formation of migration intentions and decision-making. A clear intention to pursue educational migration is established, culminating in the submission of applications and the selection of a specific destination country and university. Perceived international applicability of education is one of the key factors shaping students’ migration aspirations and intentions. The stronger students perceive the international value of the knowledge and competencies they acquire, the more likely they are to develop aspirations and intentions related to studying and

pursuing professional careers abroad. This relationship is particularly pronounced among students who are already oriented toward international mobility, highlighting the close interconnection between educational strategies, career expectations, and migration aspirations (Kulka et. al., 2025).

Changes in career plans during study. After graduation their studies abroad, students' migration intentions and career aspirations may undergo substantial transformation. Exposure to new professional opportunities, research environments, and academic and professional networks often leads them to reconsider their initial plans regarding return migration or future employment.

The proposed stage-based model conceptualizes the formation of migration motivations as a dynamic and multidimensional process in which educational, social, and institutional factors interact sequentially, reinforcing and reshaping one another over time. Although the model presents a series of distinct stages, the actual migration decision-making process is inherently flexible and may involve overlapping stages or the reconsideration of earlier decisions in response to new experiences, information, and changing life circumstances. In this sense, educational migration should be understood not only as the outcome of previously formed migration motivations but also as a process through which these motivations continue to evolve and be redefined throughout students' educational experience abroad.

Youth Migration Motivation Scale. Based on the qualitative analysis of the interview data, and human capital theory and the push-pull framework of migration, an indicator-based scale for measuring youth migration motivations was developed. Methodologically, the scale is grounded in the operationalization of latent attitudes identified in the narrative data into a system of observable indicators. This approach enables a transition from descriptive analysis to the structured measurement of migration motivation as a multidimensional construct. It is consistent with the mixed-methods approach widely adopted in educational migration research, in which qualitative interviews provide the empirical basis for the subsequent development of quantitative measurement instruments. In this study, the scale is conceptualized as an analytical system of indicators grounded in theoretical assumptions and empirical interview data. Its primary purpose is to systematize the identified motivational orientations and subsequently operationalize them through observable indicators. This approach establishes a link between theoretic

cal constructs and empirically observable aspects of migration motivation, without reducing it to a single factor or a single type of motivation. The proposed scale comprises five interrelated dimensions representing the principal components of migration motivation: 1) educational, 2) professional and career, 3) research, 4) social network, and 5) migration-strategic. The identification of these five dimensions is based not only on theoretical classification but also on recurring themes and decision-making patterns revealed through the thematic analysis of the interviews. Thus, each dimension represents a distinct analytical aspect of migration motivation, while their combination allows migration decisions to be understood as the outcome of interactions among multiple groups of motives. The proposed framework captures not only the underlying determinants of migration but also the dynamic evolution of migration motivations across different stages of the educational trajectory. From a theoretical perspective, this structure makes it possible to link the individual level of migration motivation with the broader institutional and social context. The *educational dimension* reflects respondents' orientation toward improving the quality of education, gaining access to advanced educational standards, and participating in internationally recognized academic practices. Conceptually, this dimension is consistent with human capital theory, which views educational migration as an investment in individual knowledge, skills, and competencies. The *professional and career dimension* captures expectations related to improving labor market competitiveness, expanding employment opportunities, and gaining access to more advanced career pathways both in the host country and internationally. The *research dimension* reflects the importance of access to research-intensive environments, laboratory infrastructure, and participation in international research projects. Its inclusion is supported by the empirical findings, particularly among students in science, technology, engineering, and related disciplines, for whom opportunities for laboratory-based and experimental research constitute a major determinant of educational destination choice. The *social network dimension* characterizes the influence of reference groups-including faculty members, alumni of international education programs, and professional contacts-through which young people develop cognitive perceptions of destination countries and educational opportunities. This dimension is closely aligned with migration network theory, which emphasizes the role of social ties in reducing uncertainty associated with mi-

gration decisions. The *migration-strategic dimension* reflects the long-term evolution of respondents' educational, professional, and migration plans, including changing intentions regarding return to the country of origin or continued career development abroad. These orientations are inherently dynamic and may evolve throughout the educational experience as a result of newly acquired knowledge, academic socialization, and expanding professional opportunities.

Each of these dimensions is operationalized through a set of indicators derived from the thematic coding of the interview data. The indicators capture both cognitive orientations, such as perceptions of educational quality and evaluations of destination countries and universities, and behavioral intentions, including program selection, willingness to pursue educational migration, and employment aspirations. This structure makes it possible to construct both dimension-specific subscales and an overall youth migration motivation index, thereby providing a robust instrument for subsequent quantitative analysis, including comparative studies across different social and educational groups.

Within the present study, this framework is used primarily to systematize and analytically interpret the motivational orientations identified in the empirical data. The identification of distinct dimensions makes it possible to compare different types of motives and examine their interrelationship in the context of educational migration. At the same time, the resulting system of indicators serves as a basis for structuring the interpretation of the empirical findings, thereby connecting theoretical understandings of migration motivation with the specific substantive characteristics identified in the interviews. This logic of constructing the indicators makes it possible to conceptualize migration motivation as a complex construct in which individual motives do not exist in isolation but are formed and manifested through their interaction. For example, the aspiration to obtain higher-quality education may be associated with expectations of professional development, access to research infrastructure, and the expansion of professional networks. In turn, the educational experience acquired during the migration process may transform initial educational motives and influence subsequent career and migration orientations.

Therefore, the analytical value of the proposed system lies not simply in identifying individual motives, but in revealing their substantive structure and interrelationship. This makes it possible to trace how individual educational and career aspirations

are connected with social networks, research opportunities, and long-term migration plans. As a result, migration motivation is understood as a process of formation and transformation of orientations rather than as a one-time choice made prior to the beginning of educational mobility. From the perspective of the overall research, this approach provides a transition from the thematic analysis of interviews to a more systematic interpretation of the findings. The theoretically informed categories are examined in relation to the empirical evidence, while their combination makes it possible to identify the principal patterns through which migration intentions are formed and transformed. Thus, the system of indicators serves as a conceptual link between the theoretical framework and the empirical material, enabling a more grounded interpretation of differences in the motives, expectations, and migration strategies of young people. In the future, the identified system of dimensions can serve as a basis for quantitative testing on larger samples. Such testing would make it possible to assess the stability and interrelationships of the identified dimensions and, where necessary, refine the set of indicators.

The identified dimensions make it possible to view migration motivation not only as a set of factors preceding educational mobility, but also as a structure that may evolve throughout the mobility experience itself. As students acquire new educational, research, and social experiences, their initial perceptions of the benefits of studying abroad may be reconsidered and acquire new meanings. Consequently, educational mobility represents not only the outcome of previously formed motivations but also an environment in which new career and migration orientations emerge. This dynamic helps explain why the intention to study abroad does not necessarily predetermine subsequent decisions regarding the location of professional activity. The empirical evidence from students studying in the United States illustrates how initial motivations may interact with newly acquired opportunities and resources, thereby influencing subsequent career and migration trajectories.

The United States in Young People's Educational and Career Plans. For most respondents, educational migration to the United States is viewed as more than an just opportunity to obtain a university degree. Rather, studying in the United States is closely associated with long-term professional development, research engagement, and the acquisition of international experience. At the same time, educational migration is not necessarily accompa-

nied by clearly defined plans for subsequent labor migration. For the majority of respondents, obtaining a high-quality education remains the primary objective, whereas decisions regarding long-term employment are left open. Some respondents intend to return to Kazakhstan and apply the knowledge and skills acquired abroad within the national context. Others consider pursuing their careers overseas. However, they perceive this as one of several possible career pathways rather than a predetermined goal. Thus, educational migration is initially oriented toward the accumulation of educational and professional capital, while decisions regarding the location of future employment are typically made at later stages of an individual's educational and career strategy. Respondents' career plans therefore remain flexible and largely depend on future professional opportunities.

When I worked at foreign research center, the United States helped establish a modern laboratory for us. We worked according to American standards, using their reagents and research methods. American specialists came to train us, and that experience is one of the reasons I became interested in the United States". (Fourth-year male student)

My field is microbiology, and it is not something that can be done entirely on a computer. To produce research results and write a thesis, I need to conduct experiments. That involves working with mice, biological materials, and cultivating microorganisms. Experimental research is essential". (Third-year female student)

The attractiveness of the U.S. educational experience is shaped not only by the institutional environment of universities but also by access to advanced research infrastructure and the practice-oriented nature of academic training. Participation in laboratory research, the use of state-of-the-art research methods, and collaboration with international research teams are perceived as key components of professional development. In this context, educational migration serves as a pathway to participation in the global scientific community, where the acquisition of research skills and familiarity with internationally recognized scientific standards are considered as important as the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Such experiences are viewed as valuable resources for future academic and professional careers, as they foster competencies in working with advanced equipment, experimental methods, and interdisciplinary research. Consequently, the choice

of an educational pathway is influenced not only by macro-level factors, such as the destination country and the prestige of the university, but also by access to specific research opportunities and scientific practices. Respondents perceive educational migration to the United States as a process of professional socialization in which they develop not only academic knowledge but also a research identity and a broader understanding of potential scientific and professional career pathways.

The findings allow educational migration among Kazakhstani youth to be interpreted not as the outcome of individual "pull" factors, but as a process through which educational, career, research, and social orientations become progressively interconnected. In this context, the choice of the United States is shaped not only by the prestige of its universities and the perceived quality of education, but also by expectations regarding the convertibility of acquired knowledge and competencies into future professional opportunities. Of particular importance is the role of research infrastructure and professional networks, which function not as isolated motives but as connecting elements between the initial educational choice and subsequent career expectations.

The empirical evidence further indicates that educational migration and migration aimed at long-term employment should not be understood as a single decision. For the respondents, studying in the United States primarily represents an investment in educational, professional, and research capital, whereas the decision to return to Kazakhstan or pursue a career abroad remains open and may be reconsidered in light of experiences gained during the educational process. Thus, educational mobility itself becomes a factor in the transformation of initial migration intentions rather than merely their realization.

Importantly, social networks and the university environment perform more than an informational function in this process. They reduce uncertainty, shape perceptions of available opportunities, and make international mobility more predictable and attainable. The motivations identified in the interviews should therefore be understood as an interconnected system in which individual aspirations interact with social resources and institutional opportunities. Migration decisions consequently emerge as dynamic strategies that may change as young people accumulate educational, research, and professional experience.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the complex nature of educational migration among Kazakhstani students studying in the United States and show that migration decisions cannot be explained solely by individual factors influencing the choice of destination country. Rather, educational migration represents a multidimensional process in which individual educational and career aspirations interact with the influence of social networks, the institutional characteristics of host universities, and the structural opportunities offered by the global higher education system.

The decision to study in the United States is shaped not only by perceptions of the high quality of education and the international reputation of U.S. universities but also by access to advanced research infrastructure, practice-oriented learning, and participation in international academic and professional networks. The social environment also plays a significant role in shaping migration motivations by serving as a channel for information exchange and reducing uncertainty associated with studying abroad. Consequently, educational migration emerges as a socially embedded process rather than merely the outcome of individual rational choice.

The dynamic nature of migration strategies is reflected in the fact that students' initial educational and career plans are not fixed but evolve throughout their educational experience abroad. Integration into the host country's academic environment, expand-

ing professional opportunities, and participation in international research activities encourage students to reconsider their career aspirations and develop flexible employment strategies, including both returning to their country of origin and pursuing long-term careers abroad.

The proposed youth migration motivation scale conceptualizes migration motivations as a multidimensional construct comprising five inter-related dimensions: educational, professional and career, research, social network, and migration-strategic. The findings demonstrate that the educational migration of Kazakhstani youth to the United States emerges through the interaction of individual educational aspirations, social influences, and the institutional opportunities provided by the host country. At the same time, migration motivations are not static but evolve in response to students' educational experiences abroad. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing the dynamic nature of migration decision-making when examining international educational mobility and may inform the development of educational and migration policies aimed at the effective management and development of human capital.

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