Studying abroad: encouraging students to return to Kyrgyzstan

More and more students from Kyrgyzstan are now studying at foreign universities, where they gain knowledge and skills that are vital for Kyrgyzstan’s development and prosperity. But many face difficulties in finding opportunities to apply their new skills upon their return. This issue of evidence for policy examines the causes and consequences of this situation, and examines challenges of making student migration advantageous for Kyrgyzstan.

Linking education and employment

The number of people studying outside their home country is increasing worldwide, with some 4 million students migrating abroad for education in 2010 (OECD 2012). This trend holds for Kyrgyzstan too: the number of students from Kyrgyzstan at foreign universities has increased in recent years, but only selective numbers are available and they vary widely depending on the source. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD 2012) indicates that 1.5% of all students from Kyrgyzstan study abroad. Top destinations include Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Germany, and the USA. Looking at Turkey, for example, there are no agreed-upon official numbers that enable tracking of students from Kyrgyzstan – only partial statistics are available: the Turkish Embassy in Kyrgyzstan sent 3,286 students to Turkey between 1991 and 2012; the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education registered between 1,800 and 2,000 students who were sent through a Turkey-Kyrgyzstan interstate agreement between 1991 and 2010; and the Association of Kyrgyz students who graduated in Turkey “Egemendik” (Independence) suggests that 6,500 students from Kyrgyzstan received education in Turkey so far. The main attractions of pursuing a degree abroad are the higher quality of education, better job opportunities, and the ability to study certain disciplines not taught in Kyrgyzstan. Plus, studying abroad is a chance to visit other places and escape from local norms such as early marriage.

Many students hope that an international degree will be an entry ticket for a career abroad or into the international arena back in Kyrgyzstan. The return of graduates is thus closely linked to the labour market and a potential gain or loss of skilled workers.

Incentives to return

In a market economy it is difficult to regulate the return of student migrants and promise them jobs, especially for those who self-fund their studies or find independent scholarship programmes. A barrier would foster the return of young professionals to Kyrgyzstan.

Recognition of foreign PhD degrees

A two-level degree system: undergraduate (bachelor’s degree) and graduate (master’s). Because an increasing number of students earn PhD degrees from foreign universities, policymakers should be recommended to scholarship programmes and incorporated into national programmes.

Initiatives like the “Cadre of the 21st Century” are important for Kyrgyzstan, but they need to be aligned to the return of graduates and be expanded to help students with small stipends to apply for scholarships or other opportunities.

Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

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Effective use of skills and knowledge of returned students

For a country with few natural resources like Kyrgyzstan, human capital is an important element for social and economic prosperity. Studying and living abroad enhance explicit skills, such as subject-specific knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge such as enhanced language, communication and management abilities. They encourage contacts with the outside world and make it important for Kyrgyz students to retain their academic careers, improve their job prospects, and contribute to their country. The Open Society Foundations started their Academic Fellowship Program in 2004. The aim is to contribute to higher education reform by supporting promising local scholars and promoting their return, and assisting progressive universities in Southeastern Europe, parts of the former Soviet Union, and Mongolia in reform. In Kyrgyzstan, the programme supports over 20 returning scholars in two partner universities: the American University of Central Asia and the Kyrgyz National University. It encourages these scholars to be part of international academic networks, follows their academic progress, and supports them financially. It helps promising returned young scholars to build their academic careers, improve curricula, and contribute to their country.

Student migration channels: opportunities and limitations

Students from Kyrgyzstan go abroad through four main channels: foreign scholarships, programmes offered under intergovernmental agreements, funding by the government of Kyrgyzstan, and self-funding. Most foreign scholarship programmes support study only in certain disciplines, while in intergovernmental agreements the host universities allocate quotas for each discipline to students from Kyrgyzstan. At present, there is no specific information on how many graduates Kyrgyzstan needs in which fields and disciplines. Most scholarship programmes are open for collaboration to ensure that they contribute to and address a country's needs. But Kyrgyzstan's government does not have an effective procedure for such collaboration.

In the first years after independence in 1991, the government of Kyrgyzstan realised the importance of qualified human resources. In 1995, it initiated a presidential programme called “Cadre of the 21st Century” to prepare future government employees abroad. But this was criticised as corrupt and not transparent, and was stopped, leaving some students to look for alternative funding to complete their studies. Many did not return to Kyrgyzstan. Those who did come back, however, faced little competition, and so were quite successful in their careers. Unfortunately there is very little information about the programme in general, and its effectiveness has not been analysed.

Statistics on student migration

The Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Education and Science (MES) does not have complete statistical data about student migrants. While it is possible to obtain such data for students going abroad under intergovernmental agreements and foreign scholarship programmes from respective sources, there is no unified database on how many people go for study abroad each year, which countries and universities they go to, and which disciplines they pursue. Information about self-funded students and returned graduates is virtually non-existent.

Encouraging return

Both the government and the broader public recognise the potential benefits for Kyrgyzstan of returned graduates. In 2012, for the first time, two forums were held to address the country's need for the skills and knowledge of Kyrgyz citizens studying, working, and living abroad. These forums, titled “Mekendeshter” (“Compatriots”), were organised by the initiative of Roza Otunbayeva, an international foundation, in collaboration with the government of Kyrgyzstan and Zamandash (“Contemporary”), an association of Kyrgyz migrants.
Definitions

Student migration:
For this policy brief we define student migration as where someone takes an entire degree (master’s or PhD) at a university outside their own country.

Brain drain:
Large-scale emigration of individuals with knowledge and skills relevant for the local labour market. The usual causes include the social, economic, and political environment in the home country, a better environment in a host country, and personal preferences.

While foreign scholarship programmes have vital alumni networks, state-funded programmes have little contact with students prior to their departure, during their stay abroad, or after their return to Kyrgyzstan. As a result, many students become completely detached from Kyrgyzstan and choose to remain abroad. Having children during their stay abroad often makes it less likely that students will return. All of the above factors lead to the temporary migration of students turning into permanent emigration.

Recognising foreign PhD degrees
For many years, the recognition of foreign degrees was problematic in Kyrgyzstan. The Ministry of Education and Science says that all foreign BA and MA degrees are now automatically recognised in Kyrgyzstan. But foreign PhDs are still under consideration: a government regulation provides the foundation for recognising such degrees, but it is not clear what status a PhD degree will have compared to the local qualifications of Candidate of Science and Doctor of Science.

Such uncertainties (along with financial considerations) are the main reasons why PhD holders choose to work outside academia, or for international universities based in Kyrgyzstan. Or they leave the country in search of better options. As a consequence, the state educational sector in particular loses potential employees who could develop up-to-date, effective curricula, build international networks, and access the latest knowledge to improve the quality of local education.

Number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship, by destination (2000–2010)

Source: OECD (2012)
Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

Managing student migration

The Kyrgyz government should pay more attention to student migration so as to use students’ skills and potential for the national benefit. It should analyse the potential of various sectors of the economy and prioritise appropriate disciplines for students to study abroad. These disciplines should be recommended to scholarship programmes and incorporated into national programmes. Initiatives like the “Cadre of the 21st Century” are important for Kyrgyzstan, but they need to be transparent and inclusive ways to ensure that participants return and have good employment prospects.

Recognition of foreign PhD degrees

A coherent policy is needed on the recognition of foreign PhD degrees. The country has introduced a two-level degree system: undergraduate (bachelor’s degree) and graduate (master’s). Because an increasing number of students earn PhD degrees from foreign universities, policymakers should consider introducing a PhD system and automatically recognising foreign PhDs. Removing this barrier would foster the return of young professionals to Kyrgyzstan.

Incentives to return

In a market economy it is difficult to regulate the return of student migrants and promise them jobs, especially for those who self-fund their studies or find independent scholarship programmes. A mechanism to encourage students to return and guarantee them jobs should be considered under state-funded programmes and those based on intergovernmental agreements.

Policy coherence

Policies related to cross-border education must be compatible. Relevant policy areas include quality assurance and recognition of university degrees, coherent development efforts in education, and other aspects of domestic education, migration, visas, trade, and the economy.

Further reading

DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service). 2012. Länderinfo Kirgistan. DAAD.

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