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Title [‘The diploma is not enough’: students’ views on the role of higher education credentials for employability in Kazakhstan](#)

Submitter [Dr. Dilrabo Jonbekova](#)

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Abstract

This study examined university students’ perceptions of the role of their academic credentials in relation to future job prospects, and how much control they feel they have over their future employability. Findings from focus group discussions with undergraduate students in the final year of social science degree programmes suggest that a university degree is only a minimum requirement, and that employability depends on a range of structural and individual factors. While students in smaller towns and less economically developed urban areas voiced greater concerns regarding their future employability, there appears to be generally high level of optimism in terms of future employment, together with the feeling of a substantial degree of ‘control’ over transition from education to work.

Keywords: higher education, graduate employability, Kazakhstan, Central Asia.

Outline

Higher education is viewed as a critical contributor to the socio-economic development of Kazakhstan within competitive international markets for labour and services (Nazarbayev , 2012). To this end, much attention has been paid over the past two decades on increasing the number of institutions of higher education - from 61 in 1991 to 127 in 2015. Enrolment within this period has also risen from 288 400 in 1991 to 459 369 in 2015 (MoES, 2015). Yet, over the past few years, concerns over university graduate’s preparation for employment, and their difficult transition from higher education to the job market, are growing (Agimbetov, 2015). Numerous reports and media outlets continue to highlight the challenges which graduates experience in their transition from university to the world of work (IAC, 2016; Karablin, 2015; OECD, 2007). One prevailing concern is that a large number of graduates remain unemployed, or are forced to work outside of their area of specialization (Baikhozha, 2016; Baktiyaruli, 2015). Some blame it on the disproportionate oversupply of graduates, while others claim that higher education institutions are failing to equip students with relevant knowledge and skills. The government believes that more effort needs to be paid to quality in the delivery of education, as well as in the creation of

favourable conditions for qualified specialists to attain gainful employment within domestic job markets in order to avoid brain drain. However, empirical research on this issue remains very limited in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region more generally.

A review of relevant literature related to youth employment issues in Kazakhstan suggests that there has been scant attention paid to issues related to employment from a student centred perspectives. Students' voices are missing in terms of how they understand the role of higher education in future employability, its anticipated role in opening up labour market opportunities and the role of structure and agency in their preparation for entering the job market. In order to fill this gap, this study examined (a) how university students in Kazakhstan perceive the role of higher education credentials in shaping their future work and employability; and (b) how much control they feel they have over their preparation for employment and transition from education to work.

Data was collected through focus groups discussions with 72 final year undergraduate students specialising in areas of social science from four universities in Kazakhstan; two of which are located in economically developed cities and two located in relatively underdeveloped urban areas where employment opportunities are limited. The choice of concentrating on social sciences is influenced by an observation that increases in total enrolment numbers over the past two decades have been most notable in so called 'prestigious' fields such as economics, management, finance and law.

The study was guided by the framework of structure and agency in order to shed light on the influence of different structures in students' lives including dimensions of social class, gender and ethnicity; and economic features such as labour markets and unemployment rates (Brown, Hesketh, Williams, 2003; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Rudd, 1996; Rudd, 1998). This framework also enabled an examination of individual student responses on the problems being faced and coping mechanisms against external pressures.

Preliminary findings indicate a belief that a higher education degree has a critical role in future employability, but that this is only a minimum criteria, with employability dependent on range of other factors such as social status, gender, ethnicity, geographical location, and the general state of the economy. Although students in smaller and less economically developed cities voiced greater concern related to future employability, overall the findings indicate a high level of optimism in terms of future employment. Moreover, students strongly believed that they have a substantial degree of 'control' over their transition process from education to work and their employability.

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