

## **A mixed-methods study of the lived experiences of student migrants studying for medical degrees in Kazakhstan**

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### **Research Domains**

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### **Abstract**

Global student mobility flows are changing, and new international higher education hubs are emerging. Additionally, the notion 'international student experience' is increasingly being challenged. This paper reports on a mixed-methods study of the lived experiences of student migrants studying at medical universities in Kazakhstan, an under-researched context. Data were collected through a quantitative online self-report questionnaire (N = 211) and qualitative biographical encounters (N=10). The quantitative data illustrate that sense of belonging and personal wellbeing correlate strongly with academic and sociocultural adaptation. The qualitative data indicate both 'challenge' and 'excitement'. Financial worries alongside identity challenges as part of cultural shifts to the host country were paramount for participants. Yet, these were tempered with a joy of learning and an appreciation of the new experiences afforded by study abroad. This paper recommends further consideration of lessons for burgeoning higher education hubs on the 'periphery'.

### **Full paper**

### **Background**

Increasingly, attention is turning to the multifaceted nature of the 'international student experience' as the prevailing narrative of student migrants as a 'privileged' group is being challenged (Ploner, 2017; Glass et al., 2022; Schartner & Shields, 2023). Nonetheless, student migrants continue to be conceived as a homogenous group of transnational elites (Yang, 2018) both in the academic literature and in everyday discourses in higher education. As growing numbers of students from a wider range of geographical areas and socio-economic backgrounds are seeking international student mobility (Deuchar, 2022), critical perspectives in research with international students are needed (Mittelmeier et al., 2023) that deconstruct simplistic and stereotypical images associated with student migrants. There is increasing evidence that the experiences of student migrants are highly contingent on non-academic aspects of their identity (Xu, 2022) but as global student mobility flows are shifting what is lacking are critical inquiries into the lived experiences of student migrants in emerging regional HE hubs.

### **The study**

This mixed-methods study researches the lived experiences of student migrants from India undertaking medical degrees in Kazakhstan. The aim is to consider the structural inequalities experienced by student migrants from the 'Global South' who opt to study in a country on the 'periphery' of global higher education. There is limited evidence suggesting that student migrants from the Global South face pre-existing inequalities such as dependence upon precarious paid employment whilst studying and status of country of origin (Malet Calvo et al., 2022), but little is known about Kazakhstan as an international study destination. In its efforts to internationalise, the country is attracting small but burgeoning numbers of student migrants, in particular from the former Soviet republics, China and India. It is the latter sending country that was of interest to this research given that there are approximately 9,500 Indian students studying for a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) in Kazakhstan (Embassy of India, 2024). These students are attracted by relatively affordable tuition fees and living costs, and an alternative to a highly competitive Indian HE system (Abzhapparova, 2020); Kuzembayeva et al., 2021).

### **Data and initial findings**

The data in this study includes quantitative data collected through a self-report online questionnaire (N = 211) and qualitative data collected through biographical encounters (N = 10) (Nada et al., 2023). The questionnaire collected data on socioeconomic background as well as several outcome measures: sociocultural and academic adaptation, personal wellbeing, sense of belonging, loneliness, and social support. Descriptive and correlation analysis indicated that overall, adaptation scores were broadly in line with student migrants in other contexts although respondents reported having adapted better academically than socioculturally. There were statistically significant correlations between the adaptation measures and wellbeing indicators. Respondents reported relatively low levels of social support in the host country indicating that forming meaningful social ties may be a challenge. The qualitative data indicate both 'challenge' and 'excitement'. Financial worries alongside identity challenges as part of cultural shifts to the host country were paramount for participants. Yet, these were tempered with a joy of learning and an appreciation of the new experiences afforded by study abroad.

### **Conclusions**

The data in this study emphasises the importance of 'humanising' the student migrant experience. We put forward suggestions for HE practitioners and researchers regarding the value of 'migratory profiles' (Nada et al., 2023), QuantCrit principles (Whatley, 2022; Gillborn et al., 2018), and the study contributes to a much needed diversification of voices from less explored HE contexts on the 'periphery'.

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