

# **Internationalization of Higher Education: the Formation of Individual Rationales**

by

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### **Statement of Originality**

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## Abstract

Within the last half-century higher education internationalization has shifted to the center of national agendas and furnished universities with additional functions and roles. National expectations embedded in nation building or soft power bestow universities to act as ambassadors to the governments. While it may seem that under such circumstances institutional efforts would synchronously contribute to the nationally-set objectives, a closer examination of the formation of institutional and individual rationales for internationalization is required.

This thesis investigates the effect of political rationales on individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales for internationalization in Kazakhstan. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides the organizational structure for the influencing factors under which institutional stakeholders and individuals engage in internationalization. Hearing institutional and individual perspectives with their internalized understanding of the centrally-driven internationalization sheds light on the disconnection between the policy makers' expectations and the actual implementation of the policies and regulations.

The focus of this thesis is to explore the formation of two-dimensional individual rationales for internationalization within centralized systems drawing on the examples of Kazakhstan and China. The country cases provide rich background information given the complexity of inter-country relations on official and societal levels; and the concomitant influencing factors on internationalization rationales from the perspectives of macro-, exo-, meso- and microsystems. The study analyzes the ways case countries' masterplans (Kazakhstan becoming top 30

economies by 2050 and China's rejuvenation initiative) shape internationalization policies. How do institutional stakeholders and students formulate their rationales within these systems?

The analysis of policy documents of primarily Kazakhstan (and partially China) informed the study of the mechanisms of linking the masterplan to internationalization policies; twenty-nine interviews with Kazakhstan institutional leaders and faculty, and Kazakhstan full-time degree students (graduates) in China provide empirical support on the implementation of the masterplan. The main institutional stakeholders' rationale is international branding and profile to improve country's national benchmarking positions and the key individual students' rationale is career enhancement.

Through centralization, the governments have more leverage to influence institutional stakeholders' rationales while individual students' rationales are decoupled from policies which allows independent decision making. Dominating political rationales create obstacles for internationalization flow reflected in unfulfilled institutional agreements signed as a token of respect to governmental hierarchical structures but bringing minimal benefit for an institution. An unclear understanding of internationalization leads to ad hoc policies targeted to deliver national goals, and therefore overlook higher education stakeholders who operationalize internationalization at institutional and individual levels.

*Keywords:* internationalization rationales, stakeholders, Kazakhstan, China, institutional partnerships, studying abroad, soft power, nation building.

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## List of Abbreviations

|      |   |
|------|---|
| CI   | Confucius Institutes  |
| CIS  | Commonwealth of Independent States                              |
| CNPC | China National Petroleum Corporation                            |
| EHEA | European Higher Education Area                                  |
| HE   | Higher Education  |
| HEIs | Higher education institutions                                   |
| HSK  | Chinese Proficiency Test  |
| IAC  | Information Analytic Center                                     |
| GCI  | Global Competitiveness Index                                    |
| OBOR | One Belt One Road   |
| MoES | Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan |
| UASR | University Alliance of the New Silk Road                        |
| UNT  | Unified National Test   |
| WEF  | World Economic Forum  |



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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

National university [in Kazakhstan] projects the state policy of strategic partnership with China. We always understood we need this partnership because this is one of the priority areas for our country. Despite the official strategic partnership, at the societal level nobody denies alarmist attitude towards China in Kazakhstan.

For Kazakhstan students, China is attractive as a rapidly developing economy because it provides better employment opportunities, but it is not the kind of country like the *American dream* for our citizens. They [students] have a utilitarian approach to their degrees in China meaning they want their foreign degree but they don't want to stay there permanently. (Anar, Faculty, Private University B)

Kazakhstan's connections with China gain particular attention because of the historical connections in the past and active ongoing collaborations in spite of the shifting geopolitical situation. Kazakh-Chinese relations have been developing for centuries in the times of Kazakh Khanate<sup>1</sup> (XV-XIX centuries) and Soviet Union (1922-1991). Relations have been steadily significant for both sides despite the changing political order in the region. Official agreements to renew the trade links along the ancient Silk Road (of which both Kazakhstan and China have been part) manifested into China's grand One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. The OBOR was announced in 2013 in Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan, in front of students, academics and an international audience.

Driven by nation building, in 2012 Kazakhstan incorporated the strategic objective of becoming

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<sup>1</sup> Khanate means state

one of the world's top 30 economies by 2050 in an intensive nation-wide industrialization program, called “Nurly Zhol”; the national program complemented the OBOR with its focus on the domestic territory of Kazakhstan (Li, 2018). For Kazakhstan, the OBOR initiative became an opportunity to simultaneously participate in an important international project and continue the nation building process.

In spite of these kinds of partnerships, academic and research networks between Kazakhstan and China are comparatively at an early stage. The 2003 intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in education signified mutual efforts to build common academic practices and exchange knowledge. Four years later in 2007, the countries signed another official agreement to mutually recognize academic achievements between the two countries' institutions. The legal framework enabled closer links in higher education (HE), including university collaborations and students from Kazakhstan choosing China as their academic destination. However, in reality, relationships between China and Kazakhstan are not as harmonious as the official rhetoric indicates. This study explores the complex perceptions that are actually occurring in Kazakhstan about China's HE and soft power.

### **The Research Site**

Kazakhstan's unique location between Russia, China and Europe provides a rich setting to explore internationalization trends linked to broader geopolitical constellations. The competing geopolitical currents carry additional weight in relation to internationalization discourses occurring in the region. For Kazakhstan, internationalization in relation to countries outside of the former Soviet Union is a comparatively new phenomenon. HE has become an integral part of



fulfilling national expectations since Kazakhstan was established as a nation, while internationalization in HE has been tied to nation building.

The official introduction of the elements of internationalization commenced in 2010 with Kazakhstan's full membership in the European Higher Education Area. Integration in this important regional academic community, however, does not reflect the national principle of multi-vector diplomacy announced early in the 1990s. Multi-vector diplomacy entails that foreign policy is based on principles of openness and flexibility toward international connections. That is why in congruence with multi-vector diplomacy, Kazakhstan's academic and research links expand beyond Europe in the west, and include connections with Russia in the north, and Central Asian countries and China in the east and south. Links with 15<sup>2</sup> former Soviet countries build on their shared historical past and continue initiatives across different areas, such as security, trade, education, culture, etc. In this sense, it is important to study internationalization in the context of competing external forces acting within Kazakhstan; and the government's commitment to steering international HE to serve its national agendas offers a particularly enriching case to study new knowledge that is accumulating on international HE.

### **The Research Problem**

China's image in Kazakhstan is multidimensional. The important strategic partner image of China emerged when both countries intensified their economic growth in recent years. China has also been increasingly present at the international HE arena. In addition, geographic proximity made the country second most popular academic destination for Kazakh students to study abroad

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<sup>2</sup> These former Soviet countries include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

(Koshanova & Rakisheva, 2016). As the next-door neighbor and strategic partner, institutional collaborations in HE play a significant role in further strengthening diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries.

However, within Kazakh society at large, China is associated with fear and anxiety. The fear-inspiring China has more negative features that date back to historical tensions. Earlier in the Kazakh Khanate and later in the Soviet Union stages, contemporary Kazakhstan and China had disputes over territory and national borders. For that reason, social anxiety and the perception of China as an invader formed in Kazakhstan. China's current policies in Xinjiang (a region in China where the state introduced anti-Muslim policies) and soft power aspirations further feed into this anxiety, aggravating the image of China as an aggressor at a societal level in Kazakhstan. For many Kazakhs, these events hit especially close to home because they have family members located in Xinjiang, the area of China that currently hosts the largest group of ethnic Kazakhs abroad. These connections make China's national policies a subject of personal attention for many members of society in Kazakhstan.

China's fear-inspiring image is intensified in scholarly discussions of soft power (Laifer & Kitchen, 2017) and the public intentions of Chinese leaders to increase its impact worldwide. The power-seeking aspirations of the country next-door pose an additional fear on Kazakh society being the potential objects of these aspirations. In this regard, studies of international HE that assume the responsibility for the operationalization of soft power further intensify these fears. For example, examination of foreign students' perceptions of the host country in the context of China (Ding, 2016) and China's international HE policies targeting Central Asia (Tian



& Lowe, 2018) all highlight China's attempts to influence HE globally. Thus, in addition to perceptions that have been formed at the Kazakh societal level, these scholarly discussions further escalate the association of fear with China.

Nevertheless, Kazakh universities continue to seek partnerships with Chinese universities while popularity of Chinese universities among Kazakh students stays unchanged, and yet there is insufficient empirical evidence to explain why Kazakhstan increasingly engages with China in the realm of HE internationalization; and the drivers for internationalization at the institutional and individual levels stay unexamined. In a broader sense, internationalization dynamics between Kazakhstan and China provide a platform for investigating internationalization rationales of various stakeholder groups in the context of the dominating presence of national governments.

In particular, in order to obtain insights on the ways national rationales shape the dynamics of international HE, this study seeks to explore the reasons why Kazakhstan institutional administrators and faculty choose to engage in international collaborations with China, as well as the rationales of Kazakh students to study in Chinese universities. Accordingly, the research aim, objectives and questions were formulated by drawing on the example of Kazakhstan and China as a case of dominating national rationales while also examining yet undiscovered rationales for internationalization in HE.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

It is unclear to what extent HE internationalization policies, formulated within specific national



contexts, are capable of shaping international institutional partnerships. In addition, it is unclear how these policies influence HEIs and students both across borders and domestically. The *aim* of this study is to explore the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual students' rationales for internationalization under the dominance of national rationales. In particular, this study seeks to explain the drivers for establishing and maintaining collaborations with Chinese universities as expressed by Kazakhstan institutions, as well as Kazakh students' rationales for studying in China. Correspondingly, two research objectives were formulated to meet this aim:

- To understand how the Kazakh and Chinese governments shape national internationalization policies;
- To understand individuals' decision making to engage in internationalization; and
- To explore the effect of national rationales (Kazakhstan's nation building and China's soft power) on the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales in Kazakhstan.

The next section presents the research questions developed to meet the stated research aim and objectives.

### **Research Questions**

The overall research question of this study investigates the effect of external forces on the motivations for internationalization by exploring the perspectives of Kazakh university administrators, faculty and students. The overall research question is:

*How do national policies in China and Kazakhstan shape the formation of rationales for HE internationalization in the context of socio-political and diplomatic relations?*

Three sub-questions elaborate on the participants' perspectives by further investigating their motivations for institutional collaborations with Chinese universities and for students to study in China. The first sub-question investigates university administrators' and faculty's lived experiences of collaborating with Chinese universities.

*Why do Kazakh universities collaborate with their Chinese counterparts; and what experiences do these collaborations produce?*

The second sub-question aims to comprehend the rationales guiding Kazakh students as they select China for their HE degree.

*Why do Kazakh students choose China as their academic destination?*

The third sub-question further builds on an exploration of these academic experiences and focuses on students' perceptions of China during their study period.

*What perceptions do students develop about China; and how do these perceptions change before, during and after their studies in China?*

These last two questions provide space for students' reflections on their decisions and perceptions of the host country and invites comprehensive reasoning on their experiences. The answers to these sub-questions will help to constitute the answer to the overall research question. In order to respond to these research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with

Kazakh administrators, faculty and students to reflect their in-depth and personal explanation of their significant experiences on the research phenomena.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the scholarship on the internationalization of HE, making the case for viewing it in a broader socio-political and diplomatic contexts. The study demonstrates that international HE has the capacity to complement diplomatic relations and to be highly regarded by policymakers. However, this study explores whether the weight of national objectives on HE unnecessarily burdens universities and shrinks institutional capacity to implement key academic and research functions. This study also explores the response of individual rationales on the influence of other stakeholders. Competing rationales for internationalization can lead to a lack of clarity on policies, merge disparate stakeholder groups' interests and jeopardize internationalization outputs.

This study presents previously unexplored dimension of Kazakhstan and China's relations in the realm of HE internationalization. In particular, the study demonstrates how socio-cultural, economic and political contexts may have an impact on people-to-people relations, which are an important foundation of engagements within international HE. Kazakhstan and China serve as an example of viewing internationalization in a wider context. However, these countries also have peculiarities embedded in their historical and ongoing relations that need to be considered when analyzing the internationalization activities of their HE systems.

The study speaks to several audiences—HE, political studies and international relations and

provides empirical support for evidence-based decision making at national and institutional levels. In HE, this study can help Kazakhstan and China's educational policy makers to recognize the limitations of international HE in reaching nationally set objectives, and the findings may possibly re-direct their efforts to further academia-related international collaborations. On an institutional level, leaders may re-consider their commitment to fulfilling national aspirations, and prioritize the academic and research functions of their universities within collaborations with foreign peers.

In political science, researchers and practitioners may refer to this study to inquire about national policies (Kazakhstan's nation building and China's soft power) in the realm of HE, which emphasizes that other components of national systems are significant in obtaining a desirable effect without over-relying on international HE. It is also essential that Kazakhstan and China's policy makers recognize the differing rationales for internationalization at national and institutional levels, and the ability of students to pursue their independent agendas, decoupled from policies. Similarly, researchers and practitioners in the field of international relations may find this study useful in analyzing the economic and political relations between Kazakhstan and China where socio-cultural aspects can have significant impact.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Internationalization** - For the purposes of this study, I use Knight's (2004) definition of internationalization, which describes it as "the process of integrating international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p.11). I also used a revised definition that has developed in academic conversations and includes

aspects of purpose, quality, inclusiveness and social engagement (highlights are from original text): “[internationalization is] the **intentional** process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education, **in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society**” (de Wit, Howard, Egron-Polak, 2015, p.29).

The above definitions make an emphasis on the process in which internationalization occurs. It is, however, crucial to have individuals implementing or involved in this process. It is suggested that within the scope of the current study such individuals are referred to as **stakeholder(s)** defined in HE as “[an] individual or collective person with a legitimate interest in HE that, as such, acquires the right to intervene” (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002 as cited in Castro et al., 2015, p. 163). This means that internationalization as the process of HE allows an individual interested in internationalization to get involved or engaged in it.

Knight (2015) further expands the *interest* mentioned subtly in the stakeholder definition above. **Rationale** (or interest) in internationalization of HE can be expressed by an individual or a collective and understood as their set of reasons to engage in internationalization.

### Conceptual Framework

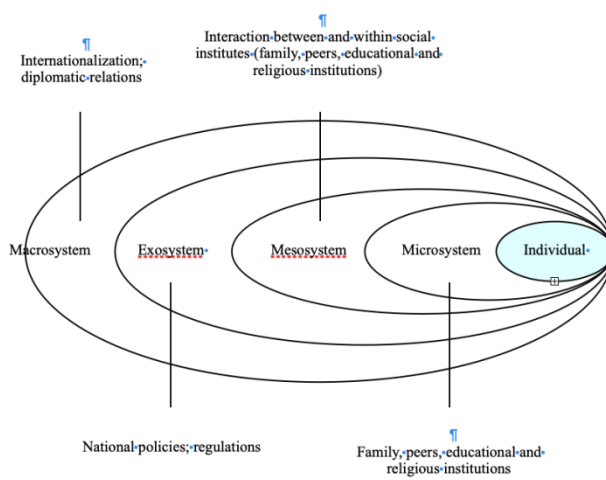
Bronfenbrenner developed an ecological systems theory to analyze the influence of external factors on an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The factors are presented within four systems, and are located in a certain proximity to an individual, who is in the core of the system. The

systems are macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem (Leonard, 2011).

Depending on the closeness of one of the four systems they can have direct or indirect influence on the individual's development.

**Figure 1**

*Illustration of ecological systems theory*



Macrosystem refers to the wide-accepted beliefs and discourses happening across the borders (i.e., internationalization of HE, diplomatic relations, globalization), exosystem represents the lesser-scale rhetorics, such as national policies or regulations. The mesosystem is a layer where social structures interact, and thus it is a platform where social institutes such as family, educational institution or church intertwine and impact an individual. The microsystem represents a system closest to an individual, such as for instance family, peer group, religious and educational institutes (Christensen, 2016). An individual is born to these social structures, that shape them and their behavior. It is also notable that individual would not passively receive

the influence of these structures, but would participate in the way these structures are constructed too.

When applied to HE in general, and Kazakh-Chinese engagement in internationalization in particular, the ecological systems theory organizes the influencing factors of the various systems on the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual students' rationales. It is enriching to learn how Kazakh-Chinese diplomatic relations and national policies of these countries impact individuals' decision making to engage in internationalization. Kazakhstan administrators, faculty and students provide individual insights on their rationales of collaborating with and studying in Chinese universities. It is from their perspectives that we learn of the interactions between the systems. Namely, the interconnectedness between the systems; and the effects on the overall flow of internationalization.

### **Research Methodology**

The empirical qualitative data for this study originates from two sources: document analysis and face-to-face interviews. Prior to conducting interviews, I studied Kazakhstan and China's national policies to gain an understanding on national policies related to HE in general, and internationalization in particular. Proficiency in the Russian and Kazakh languages allowed me to have immersion in Kazakh policies, whereas I studied China's policies in English.

My previous professional networks during administrative and research positions in Kazakh educational institutions helped me to connect with nine research venues between June and September 2019. The sites include seven universities and two think tanks in two major cities in Kazakhstan, four universities and two think tanks in Nur-Sultan (the capital) and three

universities in Almaty (the largest city and the former capital).

To uncover the formation of institutional stakeholders' rationales for HE internationalization, I interviewed 14 university administrators and faculty applying purposeful sampling; the two think tank representatives were helpful in understanding the details of national educational policies and their impact on institutional internationalization activities in Kazakhstan's universities. Selected via snowball sampling, thirteen self-funded students from Kazakhstan with long-term academic experiences from Chinese universities were the source of my data on the formation of individual rationales. All study participants shared their perspectives of engaging in academic and research activities with Chinese universities, which provided the study with insights on why they chose China and the role of national policies on this choice. More discussion on the research inquiry process is provided in Chapter Four (Research Design and Methods).

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

This is Chapter One (Introduction) of the nine chapters in the thesis. The introductory chapter provides an overview of Kazakhstan-China relations and their socio-cultural, economic and political context and identifies the conundrum of active engagement between the two countries' HE systems in the field of internationalization within this complicated socio-cultural context. The research aim was presented to explore the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales for engaging with Chinese universities from Kazakhstan's perspective. I included my research objectives and questions to further locate the participants' motivations for collaborating and studying in Chinese universities.



Chapter Two, Literature Review, identifies the environment and factors contributing to the concept of internationalization, its rationales and the formation of different rationales by different stakeholder groups. Within the vertical governance structures of Kazakhstan and China, national governments are specifically demanding of HE to internationalize in a way that assigns them responsibility for fulfilling national agendas.

Conceptual framework, Chapter Three, presents Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory that is applied to analyze the influencing factors on stakeholders' rationales for internationalizing. External forces have varying effect on stakeholder's decision making whether or not to engage in international HE, of which two particular activities - international university partnerships and studying abroad - are in the focus of the current study.

The study elicited the opinions of administrators, faculty and students on their motivations to engage in international HE to better understand their perspectives and influencing factors on their decision making. Chapter Four, Research Methodology, covers this area of the study.

Chapter Five provides a more thorough analysis of the contextual rhetoric on internationalization drawing from Kazakh and Chinese policy documents that serve as a legislative foundation for envisaging national aspirations. Some of the key documents include Address of the Leader of the Nation, N. A. Nazarbayev, to the people of Kazakhstan. Strategy "Kazakhstan-2050": New Political Course of the Established State (2012) and President Hu Jintao at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress (2007) on the Great Rejuvenation of China that includes soft power.



Chapters Six and Seven present the findings of the study based on my interviews with students, faculty, and administrators in Kazakhstan. Chapter Six analyzes the empirical data on Kazakhstan's institutional stakeholders' motivations and experiences of collaborating with Chinese universities; and Chapter Seven explores Kazakh students' rationales and perceptions of studying in China, as well as demonstrates the changing nature of these perceptions in the span of their time studying in China. Both of these chapters use ecological systems theory to examine the ways that students, institutional stakeholders, national contexts, and internationalization interact in the context of HE.

Chapter Eight, Discussion and Conclusion, links the study findings with the study's theoretical foundation and provides a summary of the findings. It also identifies the study's contributions to the literature on internationalization and its rationales, and sets out questions for further research.

Chapter Nine, Policy and Practical Implications, provides concrete suggestions for the legal system in Kazakhstan to further improve the operationalization of internationalization. This chapter relies on the current legislature and attempts to propose amendments based on the findings of the current study.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This chapter is the literature review; it examines the concept of internationalization by providing its constantly evolving definition. The explanation of the concept is intentionally kept broad to ensure its applicability to various HE settings. The concept is also under the influence of competing internationalization stakeholders that are capable of hindering or boosting its outcomes. This study emphasizes the importance of being aware of the often - contradictory motivations of these various stakeholders. There is, however, a caveat in terms of the role of the state, as an external stakeholder with a capacity to influence internationalization on a large scale. National rationales tend to affect the course of internationalization, and with the increasing importance of international HE, policymakers view internationalization as an extension of political and economic agendas, and it leaves an effect on international relations between countries.

### Macrosystem phenomena - internationalization, soft power

Internationalization of HE is a global phenomenon occurring in the limited space between the national border and yet having a significant impact on the national policies in general, and HE in particular. It is important to highlight that the nature of the concept of internationalization is encompassing and transcending national borders, and the studies on internationalization are attempts to explore its internalization within a country, institution or an individual. The flexibility of the concept allows analyzing it within various scopes while its omnipresence provides rich geographical and cultural contexts for its analysis.

It has been investigated time and again how internationalization was used to mainly target academic purposes in medieval times (de Wit, 2001); compared to the recent shift of the concept to the forefronts of policy makers' attention because it acquired additional functions to aid economic and political agendas within and outside the national borders (de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

One of the national governments' prominent approaches to exercise soft power is internationalization; within which international HE becomes a vehicle to activate national agendas that become the dominating purpose for national HE policies. The conceptual origin of soft power, similarly to internationalization, transcends the borders and exists as *common good* that can be utilized by nation states if national agendas require it. Soft power defined as an endearment to country's political values, culture and international policies, was coined as a theoretical tool for sense making of country's tactic at the international arena (Nye, 1990). It was, however, internalized to the level of announcing long-term national policies under the aegis of soft power.

It is also critical to remember that soft power has the flexibility to cascade from the level of globally accessible phenomenon to dominate national strategies and objectives, and even further to the level of an individual given that national policy successfully activated endearment mechanisms. At each of the levels within which soft power travels (national and individual) it can be accepted or rejected and many factors can have an impact on the perception of a country's soft power (Nye, 2021). While there have been attempts to measure soft power globally (soft power ranking) it still stays uncontrollable and has limited target audience to which soft power



needs to be tailor-made (McClory, 2019). It is erroneous to expect that one-size-fits-all will apply to activation of soft power. Each audience will have their own factors affecting the acceptance or rejection of soft power (Nye, 2021).

It is important to note that both internationalization and soft power narrow down to the level of an individual, who internalizes these vague phenomena and translates them into certain actions. Therefore, policy makers working to target either national or international audience need to be conscious of the ways the particular policy is perceived by the receiver. The intention of the policy and its implementation depend on its interpretation by the individual, therefore, making him/her the major actor in the success or failure of the policy. No amount of financial investment will determine the success or failure of the policy the way an individual understands and accepts (declines) the policy.

The inquiry builds on a number of previous discussions on the internationalization of HE. Knight (2004) investigated the ways HE stakeholders respond to the competing interests in internationalization. The study by Castro et al. (2015) analyzed the formation of two stakeholder groups' rationales for internationalization placed within larger settings of social, political and economic peculiarities of national contexts. Seeber et al. (2016) expanded on the role of the state affecting institutional and individual internationalization rationales within centralized governance. This chapter enters into the discussion on internationalization in HE by looking at the nation-state as a key stakeholder.

### **Identifying Rationales for the Internationalization of Higher Education**

Internationalization rationales can overlap and become a combination of motives by various groups of stakeholders. De Wit (2002) reminded us of the fluid nature of rationales and emphasized that geographical, temporal and stakeholder factors may affect the way a stakeholder group prioritizes certain rationales at any given point. The tensions between stakeholders' expectations of internationalization may have a detrimental impact on the outcomes of internationalization, and therefore, staying aware of the competing nature of rationales pursued by different stakeholder groups is crucial (Knight, 1997). At the same time, the role of the state in identifying internationalization policies is central (Horta, 2009); and this increases the need to explore the interests of diverse stakeholders to ensure internationalization delivers the expected outcomes.

### **Under-researched Stakeholders in Internationalization**

The conceptualization of internationalization rationales has been an ongoing debate for a decade. The question *why internationalize* kept researchers exploring this topic. Knight and de Wit (1995) briefly mention the possibility for each stakeholder group within HE to pursue their own rationales leading to the overlaps and tensions of internationalization perspectives. In 2001, Hans de Wit further elaborated the understanding of rationales within four groups - academic, political, social-cultural and economic (de Wit, 2002). In 2015, Jane Knight expanded the rationales by adding their scope which is regional, national, institutional and individual rationales for internationalization. Table 1 captures a summary of rationales of the various stakeholders, as explained above.



**Table 1**

Internationalization rationales by stakeholder group

| # | Scope                      | Rationales   |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| 1 | <b>National level</b>      | Human resources/ skill development<br>Increased access to HE<br>Commercial trade<br>Nation building<br>Social cultural development<br>Diplomacy and soft power |
| 2 | <b>Institutional level</b> | International branding and profile<br>Student and staff development<br>Strategic alliances<br>Knowledge production<br>Income generation                        |
| 3 | <b>Individual level</b>    | Develop worldview<br>Enhance career<br>Intercultural understanding and skills<br>Knowledge of national/ international issues<br>Develop international network  |

Source: Knight (2015)

**State-Driven Internationalization Rationales**

Research literature from the United States provides the earliest records of internationalization, which was referred to as *international education* prior to World War II (de Wit, 2001).

Universities were passive participants in early international education activities that occurred under mainly political rationales, organized by the state, to establish peace between countries. As a way to support the establishment of diplomatic relations, European countries focused on physical movement of learners between countries (ibid). The changing internationalization trends were humanitarian aid (after World War II), solidarity as a means of improving relations

between industrialized countries, and, more recently, profit-making (Qiang, 2003). In Europe, politicization shifted to a prioritization of economic rationales first initiated by the United Kingdom (UK) government (de Wit, 2001). In recent years, economic drivers have become the primary focus for the leading academic markets such as the UK (Chankseliani, 2017) and Australia (Rizvi, 2021).

Students, and within them international students are a specifically attractive group of stakeholders for policymakers. The exponential growth of international student mobility reached 5.3 million in 2017, compared to 2 million in 2000 (Fakunle, 2020). The recruitment of international students is embedded in national policies often based on economic rationales because international students generate funds for national economy (Chankseliani, 2017). International HE is also perceived as a tool for increasing political influence (Ostashova, 2020), and is an international source of talent to enhance human capital at the country level (Wei, 2012).

The contribution of internationalization to establishing smooth diplomatic relations led to the prevalence of political rationales for these processes (de Wit, 2001). The leading role of the government requires a central approach to internationalization to ensure its continuous input to national objectives (Li, 2016). The political rationale continues to be relevant for HE systems with centralized governance and limited institutional autonomy. Such top-down approaches are criticized for their inability to engage institutional participation in internationalization, as is the case with Kazakhstan (Li & Ashirbekov, 2014). As the political profile of internationalization has strengthened in recent decades, its role in achieving national aspirations has developed (de Wit & Altbach, 2020); however, without adequate institutional engagement, internationalization outputs stay limited.





Driven by external forces, national governments continually reconsider their drivers for internationalization. However, despite the underlying national priorities, these rationales need to be clearly communicated within HE systems to provide guidance and direction. The cases of Kazakhstan and China offer contrasting rationales and expectations for internationalization in the context of their unique socio-economic and political environments.

**Kazakhstan**, a young country, prioritizes nation building in its policies, as manifested in the national goal of becoming one of the top 30 global economies by 2050 (Nazarbayev, 2012; Koch, 2014). Similarly to other nations' developmental stage, Kazakhstani internationalization policies are driven by nation building rationales (Ahmat, 1980).

The rejuvenation of **China** as a world power has been on the national agenda since the early 2000s. A number of policy initiatives, both at the national and international levels, have communicated such intentions. In 2007, President Hu Jintao expanded on the rejuvenation initiative by placing an emphasis on expanding China's soft power through sharing Chinese culture (President Hu Jintao's speech at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress, 2007). In support of policy initiatives to expand China's soft power and influence, the Ministry of Education set a target to become top academic destination in Asia by 2020 with a goal of 500,000 international students (Ding, 2016).

The outlined national aspirations of Kazakhstan and China provide the background for exploring the prevalence of political rationales in the internationalization policies of the two countries, and

these rationales affect institutional stakeholders' and individual motivations to internationalize. Specifically, the political rationale of nation building in Kazakhstan and soft power in China are designed to affect the motivations to engage in collaborations with Chinese universities, and Kazakh students' decisions to study in China.

In the case of China, foreign students are expected to be attracted by cultural experiences in which they immerse during their study period; this should develop their positive emotional attachment to China, and motivate them to share Chinese culture with the world (Tian & Lowe, 2018). While the increasing capacity of international HE to promote country's soft power has been widely discussed (Antonova, Sushchenko, & Popova, 2020; Lo & Pan, 2020; Nye, 2005; Yang, 2010), Nye (2021) has recently reminded us that the success of soft power is in the endearment of the foreign audience (Kazakh students in China, in this case) to all its three pillars; namely foreign policies, political values and cultural attractiveness.

However, such top-down (state) approaches in internationalization policies are likely to overlook institutional participation in these decisions and in carrying these decisions out on a day-to-day basis, which creates obstacles for knowledge exchange across borders. International university partnerships are intended to facilitate the accumulation and dissemination of global knowledge in the context of external forces of globalization and the market economy, which are often driven by competition. Due to these changing external and internal factors, universities constantly shift between competition and collaboration modes in their international partnerships with their peers overseas (Al-Youbi & Zahed). The nature of relations, however, is dependent on the individuals engaged in such collaborations, which once more emphasizes the significant role of

internationalization stakeholders. It is erroneous to expect that individual, institutional, and national stakeholders all have shared interests and approaches in relation to internationalization.

The awareness of cultural diversity cultivated at the university level can have national implications because it has the potential to enhance tolerance and mutual understanding between nations (Yang, 2002). However, at times the needs of the state and the needs of a country's HE stakeholders are in conflict. State-dictated, centralized internationalization policies have the potential to override the direction HE institutions want to take, and also to minimize university stakeholders' influence on international processes within institutions of HE. The next section considers the role of HE institutions in internationalization.

### **The Role of Universities**

HE is one area that has been greatly affected by the forces of globalization and market economy (Yang, 2002). Academia adopted the notion of competition by introducing academic rankings (Naidoo, 2018). Competition for human resources and status wars has been intensified by the emergence of academic rankings. For policy makers, competing for a certain position legitimizes the design of national policies around league tables. Advancement in ranking positions is viewed as a positive effect of implemented policy. Concurrently, universities, motivated by the ranking-driven policy, aspire to improve their status vis-à-vis other institutions. The rankings encourage competition and collaboration dynamics, based on which institutions reach out to their peers across borders to establish collaboration.

There is, however, a caveat in establishing collaboration with ranked institutions. Highly-ranked

universities are more likely to collaborate with either similar or slightly lower (higher) positioned university; the slightly lower (higher) could be ten positions up or down (Taylor, 2016).

Fluctuating interests and perspectives on international partnerships are explained by the shifting institutional behavior (Yarmoshuk et al., 2018). Such paradoxical shift has developed as institutional response to a quickly changing environment at local, national, and global levels (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Therefore, at various points in time and depending on the prevailing internationalization drivers, universities may shift between collaboration and competition modes in relations with their foreign peers.

Informed by the dynamic of institutional and external settings, Ayoubi and Massoud (2012) suggested that international partnerships between universities can be evaluated according to their proposed assessment model, which is comprised of four scenarios: *realistic strategy*, *partner-reevaluation*, *arrangement-reevaluation*, and *unrealistic strategy*. The model recognizes the need to reassess partnerships against the external context and the individual internal university settings and offers a way to safeguard the space for the institutional developmental process. It is therefore, crucial that universities adopt such inventory approach to their international partnerships to stay aware of the hindering factors restraining the desired level of engagement with their foreign peers.

Each step in partnership-related activity has significance and capacity to meet the internal needs of universities. Taylor (2016) proposed nine stages of partnership and argues that each partnership is to undergo all nine stages. The stages are: 1) motivation; 2) strategy and planning; 3) identifying partners; 4) making contacts; 5) building links; 6) formalizing the partnership; 7)

embedding; and 9) sustaining. The chain of stages takes partners through critical steps of establishing the partnership and carries it to the level when activities within partnership weave in the architecture of the institution. Once the embedding stage is reached the partnership becomes institutionalized and requires no additional efforts (Amey, 2010). Through the logic of partnership stages, Taylor (2016) guides institutions to initiate collaboration based on the internal institutional needs, such as fulfilling strategic objectives. Internally-driven interest for partnership has the potential of reaching sustainability and serving the needs of stakeholders.

Recognizing the level where motivations for partnership occurs may also determine the success of partnership. Along with the external factors impacting the collaborations, institutions may require internal evaluation mechanisms to stay aware of stakeholders' perceptions regarding internationalization activities, and establishing partnerships in particular. The diverging perspectives on internationalization may emerge within an institution too which becomes observable when considering institutional stakeholders as individuals with their personal rationales for internationalization, and an institution as a unit with university-wide objectives for internationalization.

The variation of rationales becomes observable based on the previous discussion of rationales (de Wit, 2002; Knight, 2015); in particular, institutional rationales, individual rationales and individual rationales at institutional level. One illustration of institutional rationale for internationalization is competition-driven effort (in which internal stakeholders may not necessarily have personal interest) to recruit international students. This quest for international students is known as the “great brain race” (Sa & Sabzalieva, 2017), and is a pursuit for

universities worldwide. External encouragement of competition drives universities to engage in this global race and compete against one another.

Institutional stakeholders employed by the university (administrators, faculty) may actively support institutional objectives or may be influenced by external forces, not reflected in institutional priorities. This means that when an overall institutional stance on international collaborations is competition-driven, the institutional stakeholders may not necessarily support that stance; and based on Yarmoshuk et al. (2018) argument on the importance of human perceptions in establishing partnerships, the institutional stakeholders could demonstrate an individual stance.

In this increasingly competitive environment, academic notions of knowledge exchange and dissemination depend on the current mode of institutional rationales. Therefore, the paradoxical shift between competition and collaboration is observed. The shift might be because of the varying perceptions of institutional stakeholders operationalizing such partnerships.

Nevertheless, staying internationally engaged stimulates universities to actively incorporate international and intercultural dimensions into the delivery of HE (Knight, 2004). The nature of the shift is based on the intentions of institutions and its stakeholders. It can, however, happen that some stakeholders stay subtle in the process of engaging in international HE; and it is crucial that common set of rationales are developed to ensure active participation and commitment from all stakeholders.

### **Institutional Stakeholders Sharing Institutional Rationales: Choice or Requirement?**

There is a dearth of sources that dive deep into the discussion of faculty and administrators'

internationalization rationales. From the available sources (Sanderson, 2008; Friesen, 2012; Seeber et al., 2016), it becomes evident that faculty and administrators may pursue their own rationales for internationalization. This means that their engagement in internationalization activities occurring within their institutions may have underlying personal rationales to emphasize previously mentioned argument of the variation of rationales. The unexplored gap between institutional rationales and individual rationales at institutional level emerges.

Individual rationales at institutional level tend to receive less attention from researchers because it is expected that institutions and their stakeholders have a shared set of rationales. Not only this has been demonstrated erroneous but it has been earlier identified as a serious obstacle in the flow of internationalization (Knight, 1997).

Internal and external stakeholders have the capacity to affect institutional processes (including internationalization) as argued in Seeber et al. (2016) who rely their argument on organizational theory perspective. It is therefore expected that stakeholders stay conscious of identifying their own rationales and recognizing the variety of competing rationales when it comes to international HE. This also includes conscious understanding of the external influence factors that could affect the development of rationales at the institutional and national levels; both of the levels are likely to influence individual (faculty and administrators') rationales at institutional level.

Institutional stakeholders (administrators and faculty in particular) have been identified as the substantial liaison in international collaboration between universities (Knight, 1997; Seeber et al., 2016). Studies exploring human interaction within collaborations in HE highlight the

perception verbs such as *feel, think, consider* etc. when participants described international partnerships (Yarmoshuk et al., 2018). In a similar vein of effect of human factors on international university partnerships, Leng (2015) explored the mutuality in collaborations and identified an increasing impact of the strength of human connections for the maintenance of international links. By bringing stakeholders into the forefront of institutional partnerships, their significance in the establishment and sustainability of collaboration between universities increases.

Considering the previously accumulated knowledge, it is essential that internal university stakeholders are perceived as the individuals they are, with their own perspectives and expectations of internationalization, rather than policy-driven subjects. Thus, the growing gap between institutional rationales and individual rationales at the institutional level is explained. Such acknowledgment will not only decrease the tension between stakeholders, but will help to address various stakeholder groups' expectations leading to fruitful outcomes of internationalization.

**Students: Unrecognized Force in Academia** Criticizing the policies designed to compete for international students, viewed as consumers, Brooks (2017) lamented such approaches because they keep students agency-less and dominate HE. By viewing students as passive participants, their internal motivations for engagement in international HE are diminished. In this sense, Brooks (2017) defined policies as “ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions; a means of classifying and regulating the spaces and subjects they hope to govern” (p. 746), which echoes Foucault’s ideas of the distribution of power in education (Ball,



2012).

I argue that the movement of international students occurs despite the national initiatives in internationalization, rather than because of these policies. This is to mean that students have their individual (different from institutional stakeholders') rationales for internationalization. Drawing from the individual rationales proposed by Knight (2015), the rationales could evolve around developing worldview, enhancing career, expanding intercultural understanding and skills, obtaining the knowledge of national/ international issues and developing international network. Sa and Sabzalieva (2017) add to the discussion of students' independent decision making; their longitudinal analysis of the policy competition across Australia, Canada, England, and the US demonstrated how policy decouples from foreign students' choices of their academic destination. Despite the targeted policies in analyzed case-countries, students were capable of following their personal motivations when choosing where to study abroad.

In this sense, Fakunle (2020) suggested that international students' decision-making should be analyzed via Sen's comprehensive model, which captures two aspects of students' motivations for studying abroad (as cited in Fakunle, 2020). The first aspect is when students pursue international degrees to acquire human capital, which students might interpret as the ability to earn higher salaries and have better employment opportunities. Knight (2015) captured the human capital as enhancing career among the individual rationales. The second aspect in Fakunle (2020) is theorized as human capability, it revivifies the notion of agency in students' choices, and extends to students' pursuit of well-being and freedom. Summarized as instrumentalist (human capital) and non-instrumentalist (human capability) approaches, Sen's framework applied to empirical data reiterated the theoretical discourses of students' perspectives on studying abroad, rather than being entangled within instrumentalist and

neoliberal manifestation of students' decisions (Fakunle, 2020). Widely applied and empirically tested push-pull model, elaborated in early 2000s (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), has long served as the explanation of reasons pushing international students out of their home countries to their prospective academic destinations. The push-pull model, however, has outlived its theoretical and empirical capacity (Fakunle, 2020) because it captures students' decision-making as reaction to external factors and dismisses the intrinsic individual motivations for studying abroad.

### **Conclusion**

The reviewed literature depicts scholarly discussion on the concept of internationalization and provides the foundation for the current study. There is still lack of studies that explored stakeholders' internationalization rationales, how they are formed and interact. This study fills this gap by exploring the influence of governments' political rationales on the ways academic institutions and students formulate their motivations to engage in the internationalization of HE. This analysis on internationalization uses bottom-up (individual) and top-down (national) approach to explore the dynamic relationship between these three levels of stakeholders. Lastly, as Knight (2004) has reminded us, it is important to clearly identify the motivations for internationalization among stakeholders because its outcomes are based on them. The rationales of these three stakeholder groups (government, academia and students) are at the center of this inquiry.

Next chapter, conceptual framework, helps to locate stakeholder groups and their motivations for internationalization. The framework is also helpful in identifying the influence factors of differing levels that might affect these motivations. Prior to proceeding to empirical findings, it

is essential that a reader obtains a lens presented in the chapter on conceptual framework as well as procedures of the study given in the consecutive chapter on research methodology.



## CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

International HE continues to stay at the forefront of individual, institutional and national agendas. The studies on dimensions of internationalization (i.e., international collaborations, studying abroad etc.) have been well-documented. Less has been written on the interplay of various levels especially when there is a bottom-up influence affecting the implementation of national policies in general and internationalization policies in particular. Furthermore, though much of the theory within international HE follows stakeholders as a collective, there is a dearth of theory that is individual-centered. This research uses ecological systems theory to better understand the effect of individual rationales within international HE.

Bronfenbrenner designed ecological systems theory to analyze the effect of external factors on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). There are four systems located in certain proximity from the child; depending on the closeness of the system it can have direct or indirect influence on the child's development. The focus of the theory is on the influence of the systems on the development of the child, rather than interlinks between the systems. The order of the systems is further described starting from the large context and narrowing down to the most influential system for a child. The systems are macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem (Leonard, 2011). This, however, is a reverse order in Bronfenbrenner's presentation of the theory but it serves the interest of the current research. It is also in the service of the study that the child is further referred to as an individual to extend the applicability of the ecological systems theory to the current research project focusing on internationalization of HE.

The macrosystem is an encompassing culture or regulation within which societies live (Christensen, 2016). These could be large-scale processes occurring across countries (i.e., internationalization, globalization). This layer is the furthest in proximity to an individual yet it envisages multiple scenarios for an individual to explore his/ her developmental pathways.

The exosystem is a setting with indirect influence on an individual yet it has the capacity to steer an individual (Christensen, 2016). Specifically, larger scope social structures can influence individuals through their microsystem social circle. For example, an individual might be affected by government (i.e., policy, regulation) or information from mass media sources.

The mesosystem is the next layer where interactions between social structures occur (Christensen, 2016). In other words, ecological systems theory with the focus on an individual, acknowledges the richness of experiences obtained by interactions of social institutes. Thus, an individual becomes the medium for interactions of social structures. Such as for instance, family experiences will interact with educational institution experiences, allowing an individual to develop and mature.

The microsystem represents a system closest to an individual, such as for instance family, peer group, religious and educational institutes (Christensen, 2016). An individual is born to these social structures, and they shape an individual and their behavior. It is also notable that individual would not passively receive the influence of these structures, but would participate in the way these structures are constructed too.

The next section expands on the relevance of ecological systems theory to internationalization of



HE. In particular, the ways Bronfenbrenner's theory is applicable to institutional international partnerships and studying abroad.

### **Ecological Systems Theory in Higher Education**

In international HE, glonacal agency heuristic is one of the frameworks that provides an understanding of the interactions between various stakeholders by indicating the forces at global, national and local levels (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). Developed specifically to capture the multiple dimensions within international HE processes, the glonacal agency heuristic, however, puts insufficient emphasis on the individual stakeholders that can potentially impact the flow of internationalization. While the two concepts, glonacal agency heuristic and ecological systems theory similarly recognize the multidimensional external factors, the former lacks the centeredness on an individual that is addressed in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Further in the chapter, each of the levels is discussed separately to demonstrate the specificities of the layer with their influence mechanisms. Ecological systems theory is also discussed along other concepts developed in HE (glonacal agency heuristic and model of stakeholders).

### **Macrosystem**

The nature and scope of internationalization expand across national borders and locate it in the outer macrosystem of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Internationalization was placed within macrosystem following the logic of glonacal agency heuristic where internationalization is viewed as a context within various levels - global, national and local (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). Both ecological systems theory and glonacal agency heuristic acknowledge the



interaction between actors of internationalization whereas recently developed model of stakeholders complements the fluidity of influence streamed bilaterally from the macrosystem to the individual in the core of Bronfenbrenner's theory (Castro et al., 2015). The model of stakeholders, however, is lacking the clarity of systems available in ecological systems theory.

What the model of stakeholders does successfully is it analyzes internationalization at the institutional level and by doing so macrosystem (internationalization) is brought to the context of HE institutions; this highlights the flow of mutual influence (Castro et al., 2015). Thus, the global process of internationalization is operationalized at the institutional level; this becomes visible upon the combination of ecological systems theory and model of stakeholders with its emphasis on the criticality of stakeholders. In particular, according to the model, each stakeholder is at a certain level of relationships with internationalization. Students, teaching staff and researchers are - internal stakeholders - in *equal relation of influence* category which proposes that they are equally influenced by internationalization and can influence it themselves. This becomes possible because internationalization is institutionalized as an everyday process for universities.

### **Exosystem**

In the interest of the current research project, government policies are recognized as the force; and the exosystem challenges its immunity towards influence. The policy-as-the-force is also aligned with the representation of the government in the model of stakeholders. More specifically, government is illustrated as a powerful force capable of influencing the others but immune to influences itself (Castro et al., 2015).



Nation states, ensured of their unilateral influencer role, recognize HE internationalization as a supplementary mechanism to enhance economic and political ties (Yang, 2002). In the analysis of *policy - internationalization* interaction, or speaking in the language of Bronfenbrenner *exosystem - macrosystem* interaction, power dynamics proposed in the model of stakeholders skews towards government that “influences, but is not influenced” by internationalization (Castro et al., 2015, p.176). Such approach might be constructed on the logic of internalizing of internationalization. More specifically, internationalization became an instrument in government’s policy, rather than a transcending process, unattached to specific national policies.

However, compared to internationalization (presented as the macrosystem level force above) government policies affect stakeholders within national borders. Knight’s (1997) analysis of three-levels of stakeholders, adds that government has a strong influence in identifying internationalization policies which strengthens the perception of central role of a sole stakeholder; yet leaves space to further investigate the effect of such positioning on individual rationales for internationalization. Policies designed for a specific country are limited and targeted, whereas internationalization transcends border limitations. Therefore, to bring the two concepts’ ideas to a shared denominator, the government will be treated as a force; and in addition, the logic of government’s immunity of influence will be challenged.

The unequal perception of stakeholders may need some adjustment when thinking of internationalization as macrosystem which is external to nation states with its scope crossing national borders. This line of thought challenges the role of government as captured in the model of stakeholders.





### **Mesosystem**

Given the hierarchical governance practices in some HE systems, more efforts are required to balance the extent of influence from various stakeholders. In this sense, Knight (1997) reminded that competing rationales only hinder the development of internationalization, and closer collaboration between and within stakeholder groups is needed. This is to say that mesosystem - the system where social structures communicate with one another - needs to be utilized more actively as it provides space for interaction.

The implication of competing expectations and lack of interaction between stakeholders is unredeemed capacity of internationalization mainly for two groups - state and academia - because progressive and innovative research (that largely contributes to national economic growth) is born in academia; and internationalization facilitates the global dissemination and exchange of accumulated knowledge, platform of innovation (Yang, 2002).

The first step to more interaction is collaboration and awareness of the rationales that are driving a specific stakeholder group, which, as suggested by Castro et al. (2015), may need a thorough investigation due to the changing dynamics within macrosystem (i.e., internationalization trends, geopolitical situation) and exosystem (i.e., national socio-economic situation).

### **Microsystem**

The varying degree of influence among stakeholder groups is further explored on the examples of administrators (middle and senior managers), as well as faculty and students (Seeber et al.,

2016). Microsystem develops an individual by enabling their interaction with closest social systems, eg., family, religious circle, peers, educational institution. Taking an institution as a social structure, it is observable that student-centered universities most likely prioritize teaching in their internationalization process (i.e., academic mobility programs). Universities that center a faculty member, focus on joint international research, knowledge exchange and dissemination as well as enhancement of networking among faculty and researchers. Middle management driven institutions concentrate on the benchmark and increase of institutional links that encourage international collaborations and elevate institutional reputation.

When social institutes fail to meet individual's expectations of internationalization, this leads to the overlaps and reduced benefits for all stakeholders (Knight, 1997). Eventually, mismatched and divergent rationales disrupt internationalization flow. Such as the case of growing instrumentalism of internationalization by national governments (Yang, 2002); this has a probability of becoming a hindering factor for institutional expectations of internationalization embedded in the pursuit to strengthen academic capacity in teaching, producing knowledge and conducting research (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018).

### **Individual at the core of Ecological Systems Theory**

The discussion on forming stakeholders' expectations of internationalization strengthens the argument of the significant role an individual actor plays in international HE. The significance of internationalization stakeholders has been explored in various contexts and timeframes of for instance Europe and Brazil (Castro et al., 2015; Seeber et al., 2016), Canada (Knight, 1997) and China (Wen & Hu, 2018). Stakeholder in HE is defined as “individual or collective person with a

legitimate interest in HE that, as such, acquires the right to intervene” (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002 as cited in Castro et al., 2015, p. 163).

Thus, an individual in this study is a student, an administrator or a faculty member. Each individual then is surrounded by different systems. It is important to keep in mind that the decision-making process on internationalization rationales would affect the interpretation of the system within the current study. Thus, a system that is more likely to influence the decision-making process is in the focus. Administrators and faculty have multiple microsystems, such as their family, friends etc.; but the microsystem within their HE institution would be directly linked to their decision-making to engage with Chinese counterparts. At least two microsystems related to students are considered here; because it depends on where students are based physically. For example, at the stage when a student is deciding on going to study abroad, his/her family has a substantial influence on them as the social structure in immediate proximity to the student; but when a student is away from home studying, peers and university can become the primary microsystem.

It might be expected that faculty and administrators’ professional roles within their microsystem prescribe them to follow institutional policies which shrinks the space for personal opinions. However, Yarmoshuk et al. (2018) highlight the perception verbs such as *feel*, *think*, *consider* and etc. when institutional stakeholders described international partnerships. In a similar vein of effect of human factors on international university partnerships, Leng (2015) explored the mutuality in collaborations and identified an increasing impact of the strength of human connections for the maintenance of international links. By bringing stakeholders into the



forefront of institutional partnerships, their significance in the establishment and sustainability of collaboration between universities increases. Therefore, national governments' central role expressed in the top-down approach and expectation that institutional constituencies and citizens follow the policy and contribute to its implementation becomes questionable.

The centeredness on an individual within ecological systems theory becomes even more relevant for the discussion of internationalization within the contexts of hierarchical governance of Kazakhstan and China's HE. But before diving in the contextual dimension of the discussion it is pertinent to explore the theoretical basis of the perception of an individual. The notion of human agency can be complementary of the centeredness on an individual within Bronfenbrenner's theory.

### **The Acting and Thinking: Human Agency**

In the diverse interpretations of agency, this study employs Sen's (1985) perception of it captured in individual's mental capacity. It is important that an individual is pictured with full capacities to act and demonstrate thinking capabilities that affect his/ her actions. In this regard, agency expands to incorporate both action and mental abilities. Sen's (1985) perception of agency merges with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1986) through the recognition of individual's ability to shape the external settings. The central role of an individual does not allow assuming that external forces guide and steer certain conduct and actions; an individual has full responsibility of their actions and choices.

Human agency, however, is paid little attention within institutions of HE (faculty, administrators,

students) as observed in the discussion of power in academia in Donald van de Graaff et al. (1978). Students are missed in both internal and external landscape of HE institution. Students, faculty and administrators appear to be fully considered as institutional constituencies without an opportunity to exercise their human agency. Moreover, faculty and administration were perceived as a collective either opposing each other or represented as an institutional group in the cases of external invasion of power. Ecological systems theory, on the contrary, develops around individual's agency and their capacity to act. The centeredness on an individual allows observing the interplay of influence between individuals, and microsystems (institutions, family, peers), exosystem (national policies) and macrosystems (internationalization, globalization) within the ecological systems theory.

### **Contextualization of Ecological Systems Theory**

Internationalization of HE in Kazakhstan plays a significant role in the integration process in global landscape of HE. It also contributes to benchmark Kazakhstan as top 30 economies in the world. This study explores the development of internationalization in Kazakhstan drawing on the examples of two particular dimensions of international HE. Namely, they are Kazakhstani-Chinese university partnerships and Kazakhstani students studying in China.

Ecological systems theory aids in analyzing the two dimensions of internationalization drawing on the examples of Kazakhstan and China. Thus, the *macrosystem* unfolds the broad settings of internationalization enabling the engagement between the two systems; and provides an understanding of another substantial element - diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and China - to observe the environment for university partnerships and studying abroad. While

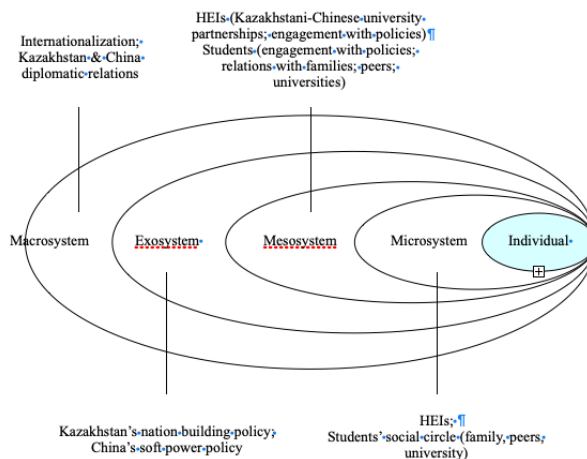
geopolitical situation is crucial, it is national policies and regulations that can either disrupt or support the internationalization flow. Thus, *exosystem* expands our knowledge on the relevant policies linked to internationalization practices in the two case countries.

The next level, *mesosystem*, observes the interaction dynamics between the individuals in the center (administrators, faculty and students) and their surroundings represented by governments, other social structures and society. It is important to note that students and Kazakhstani HE institutions are only linked through their citizenship in Kazakhstan. This means that the study addresses the participants mostly in two groups - institutional stakeholders (administrators and faculty) and students (full-time degree students in China). This is also visible in the Research Methodology chapter.

*Microsystem* analyzes participants' immediate settings such as institutions for administrators and faculty; and family, peers (more stable social networks in Kazakhstan and newly acquired connections in China) and host university in China for students. These particular systems are identified because of their relevance to the development of rationales to engage in internationalization for administrators, faculty and students.

**Figure 2**

*Illustration of ecological systems theory in higher education*



The illustration of the ecological systems theory as it is applicable to the current research highlights the positionality of an individual (administrators, faculty and students) towards the larger contexts. This intersection between stakeholders within the ecological systems theory in general, and mesosystem in particular affects an individual and their decision-making about the engagement with Chinese HE. The reverse flow of influence, from an individual to the macrosystem through other three systems also occurs. This is because, as mentioned earlier, individual possesses the capacity to shape the external settings. Thus, with the provided insights from Kazakhstan administrators, faculty and students we obtain insights on the ways national rationales shape the dynamics of international HE. The study seeks to explore the reasons why Kazakhstan institutional administrators and faculty choose to engage in international collaborations with China, as well as the rationales of Kazakh students to study in Chinese universities.

It is also useful to remind the *research aim* of this study; that is to explore the formation of institutional and individual rationales for internationalization under the dominance of national rationales. In particular, this study seeks to explain the drivers for establishing and maintaining collaborations with Chinese universities as expressed by Kazakhstan institutions, as well as Kazakh students' rationales for studying in China. The three research objectives are as follows:

- To understand how the Kazakh and Chinese governments shape national internationalization policies;
- To understand individuals' decision making to engage in internationalization; and
- To explore the effect of national rationales (Kazakhstan's nation building and China's soft power) on the formation of institutional and individual rationales in Kazakhstan.

The overall research question is:

*How do national policies in China and Kazakhstan shape the formation of rationales for HE internationalization in the context of socio-political and diplomatic relations?*

Three sub-questions are:

*Why do Kazakh universities collaborate with their Chinese counterparts; and what experiences do these collaborations produce?*

*Why do Kazakh students choose China as their academic destination?*





*What perceptions do students develop about China; and how do these perceptions change before, during and after their studies in China?*

Next section further expands on the participation of an individual in the current study.

Specifically, the section explains how participants were selected, recruited and the ways the data was further analyzed and stored.



## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The main objective of this chapter is to present the research methodology of the study.

Qualitative inquiry helped to obtain in-depth experiences to extend our understanding of individual rationales at institutional level and individual internationalization rationales. The flexibility of qualitative inquiry provided space to keep the focus of the study within the identified phenomenon of internationalization with necessary adjustments discovered due to practical reasons in the course of the study.

According to the initial plan, the study was to explore institutional internationalization rationales by collecting data from both Kazakhstani and Chinese universities to understand the reasons for collaboration. However, the study shifted to one research site because of the recent changes on visa regulations for Kazakhstan citizens in China. My Kazakhstani passport, therefore, required that I entered and left China with a group of tourists had I to apply for tourist visa. The rigidity of this option would limit data collection in terms of the period of stay and the locations I was allowed to visit as a part of the tourist group. Consequently, the study focused on individual rationales at institutional level and individual internationalization rationales relying on the data solely from Kazakhstan.

The adjustment enriched the deeper understanding of internationalization rationales by exposing them from various stakeholders' perspectives and unveiling the larger context that impact the formation of rationales to engage with Chinese HE. It is also beneficial that within one-on-one interviews, participants were given time and opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences that

helped to formulate individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales of internationalization. This chapter further presents a discussion of the research questions, methodology, research sites, participants, data analysis, ethical considerations and limitations.

### **Research Aim, Objectives and Questions**

As stated in the Introduction (Chapter One), the aim of this study is to explore the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales for internationalization under the centrality of political rationales. Qualitative inquiry serves the thorough examination of the study aim by focusing on the question *how*. How does the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales occur? In this case, identifying rigid statements to confirm or disregard a certain hypothesis would drive the extraction of different evidence while polar statements would keep the study within the pre-defined frame without allowing the exploratory pursuit this study intends. It is for this reason that the study relies on the functions of multi-directional qualitative inquiry. In order to deepen our understanding of this particular aspect of internationalization, the study draws on the examples of Kazakhstan and China, for which I formulated three research objectives:

- To understand how Kazakhstan and Chinese governments shape national internationalization policies;
- To understand individuals' decision making to engage in internationalization; and
- To explore the effect of national rationales expressed by Kazakhstan's nation building and China's soft power on the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales in Kazakhstan.

Being familiar with the central governance practices in Kazakhstan and China guided the

sequence of analyzing internationalization rationales. Starting with the analysis of national policy documents informed the study how the government centrally designs internationalization policies. This helped to reiterate the domination of national rationales in internationalization policies. By further conducting semi-structured interviews, the study followed the effect of policies on individuals. The space provided to participants within interviews, stimulated the sharing of in-depth experiences revealing the ways in which internationalization rationales of institutions and individuals are constructed. The awareness of wider context and the domination of national policies are further reflected in research questions.

The principal research question is: *How do national policies shape the formation of rationales for HE internationalization in the context of socio-political and diplomatic relations?*

Three sub-questions elaborate on the participants' perspectives by recognizing the varying motivations each of the categories of participants may be driven by. It is also essential to mention that administrators and faculty respond within their professional capacity and reflect on collaborating with Chinese counterparts from their individual stance. Interviewing institutional representatives allows us to identify rationales and perceptions of international partnerships in HE. Focusing on a specific example can further inform the exploration of motivations for collaboration and point to other factors that create the context for such collaborations. Thus, a sub-question focused on individual rationales from institutional internationalization rationales perspective is formulated as follows:

*Why do Kazakhstani universities collaborate with Chinese counterparts; and what*

*experiences do these collaborations produce?*

The second sub-question aims to comprehend the rationales guiding students to select China for their HE degree. It leaves space for students' reflection on their decision and invites for comprehensive reasoning while the third sub-question explores students' changing perceptions of China within a time span around their studies. The comprehension of students' reasons to study abroad showcases the construction of individual rationales for internationalization.

*Why do Kazakh students choose China as their academic destination?*

*What perceptions do students develop about China; and how do these perceptions change before, during and after their studies in China?*

The answers to these sub-questions would constitute the answer to the overall research question. To elicit the experiences significant for administrators, faculty and students required their in-depth and personal explanation of these experiences obtained through semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Participants would have had less opportunity to share personal perspectives on internationalization rationales had the method of data collection been focus group discussion because of time-limitations associated with number of participants in a group setting.

### **Research Paradigm and Research Design**

The paradigm helps a researcher to define his/her philosophical disposition in which the external world is viewed (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This study leans towards empirical epistemology because of the value given to participants' experiences of engaging with Chinese HE which, in

the case of institutions, is collaborations, and, in the case of individuals, is studying abroad. It is prominent that neither category of participants derives their knowledge on rationales from official policies, but rather speaks from their lived experiences. Thus, it is empirical data that provide us the knowledge to observe the patterns and draw conclusions on the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual internationalization rationales; deriving from the data, knowledge is constructed (Muis et al., 2006).

In line with the discourse of meaning-making based on the empirical data, the study is further defined under the constructivist paradigm. Based on Mack (2010), the interpretivist paradigm is also known as constructivist paradigm. Similarly, Kivunja & Kuyini (2017) approach these two paradigms as closely related in meaning by placing them both under the same type of paradigms. Complexity of paradigms became clearer when discussed as a part of decision-making in designing the empirical research. Thus, Lauckner, Paterson and Krupa (2012) thoroughly explain the selection of specific methodological approaches, among which there is an explanation and guiding questions of identifying constructivist paradigm.

Applying similar approach as Lauckner, Paterson and Krupa (2012), I reflected on questions to locate the study under a certain paradigm. In particular, my positionality as a researcher in relation to the studied phenomenon - internationalization rationales - and in what way my previous and current experiences (administering and researching HE internationalization; and being an international doctoral student) can play a role in conducting the study. I strived to stay as the observer and several factors helped me: a) the current study focuses on collaborating with Chinese universities specifically while in my previous administrative position (head of

international department at national university in Kazakhstan) I was responsible for a wider institutional internationalization activities, and therefore had to learn more on how collaboration with Chinese counterparts occur, b) institutional international offices changed since I have worked at an institution myself, and c) my current status as an international postgraduate student from Kazakhstan in Hong Kong SAR still left the gap to learn Kazakhstani undergraduate students' perspectives of studying in China.

The reflexive process and my porous knowledge of research phenomena guided me towards constructivist paradigm because I was driven by participants' experiences to construct new knowledge, while my personal experiences stayed as a prerequisite. Familiarity with university international office allows having an internal perspective on the operationalization of institutional internationalization policies, and exploratory nature of qualitative approach provides further depth into the understanding of the formation of internationalization rationales. This process (formation of rationales) is embedded within personal perceptions and experiences. For instance, university administrators and faculty share their individual rationales for collaborating but keep institutional rationales for internationalization as their reference point. Students' rationales for studying abroad are constructed through their individual worldviews and preferences for future careers and lives. National and institutional policy documents create theoretically favorable environment but only individuals' lived experiences can portray the situation in reality. Therefore, agreeing with Bryman (2016) it is through learning these diverging perspectives that the literature on internationalization is enriched.



Diverse participants recruited for the study are given a platform, under constructivist paradigm, to express multiple “truths” emerging along with the evolution of the internationalization concept and its rationales over time (Mertens, 2010). Accepting the coexistence of multiple perspectives on various stakeholder groups’ motivations for internationalization allows to stay open-minded to multiple drivers that will emerge because stakeholders’ perspectives are different (Guba & Lincoln, 2006). On the contrary, holding a pre-conceived assumption would direct the study to seek for empirical support to accept or reject such assumption without considering the diverging and evolving rationales for internationalization.

The variety of perspectives is captured as patterns on the formation of rationales emerging from various institutional or individual cases inductively (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This is why employing the elements of case study benefits the current research because of the immersive capacity of the named method (Tellis, 1997). In particular, such strengths as boundaries of case study help to keep the focus on the formation of internationalization rationales within one case, while temporal element addresses the scarcity of time allocated for doctoral dissertations.

Producing generalizable knowledge was outside the objectives of the current study, rather the understanding of formation of rationales is based on the observed patterns. That is why selecting the cases with ongoing engagements with Chinese HE contributed to the extraction of the trends and patterns across institutional and individual cases, it was therefore crucial that sampling considered the typicality of cases under investigation.



## Selection of Research Sites

### Selection Procedure

Initially I planned to include research sites in both Kazakhstan and China. I was planning to interview stakeholders at universities in Kazakhstan and their partner institutions in China to understand motivations for cooperation from both contexts. However, due to visa restrictions for Kazakh citizens in China during the period of my data collection, I was unable to interview individuals at Chinese institutions in person. I considered conducting online interviews or obtaining a different category of visa (student or business) but neither option was fruitful.

In view of absence of established network in Chinese universities, securing participants for online interviews as an outsider was a complicated and time-consuming exercise. The initial plan of face-to-face interviews involved the participation of Kazakhstan universities expected to support the current study by introducing me to their Chinese partners for a follow-up round of interviews on institutional collaboration. But even then there was a risk of Chinese counterparts not responding positively for interview invitation, and even greater risk was to rely on online participation. It is also necessary to note that the planning of the research design occurred in the 2019 pre-pandemic reality when the online meetings were rare, compared to the current 2020 onwards familiarity with the online space.

The option of choosing a different category of visa became inaccessible when the requirements for each category were carefully studied. In particular, business visa allowed the entry by the invitation of Chinese company for business-related purposes. I did not have such connections in China. Student visa required that I enrolled in Chinese university's courses for a minimum of six

months, to which I found a host university but without financial and organizational support from my home and host institution. The unsuccessful attempts to secure funding and the additional course load were recognized as additional factors that contributed to the decision to focus entirely on one research site, Kazakhstan, where I am a citizen and have less restrictions to collect data.

**Figure 3**

*Map of Kazakhstan*



I used several criteria when deciding which universities to use as my research sites. I selected three cities in Kazakhstan: Nur-Sultan (the capital city), Almaty and Karaganda because these cities host 54% of Kazakh universities. These cities are also geographically distributed throughout the country and represent Kazakhstan's major universities.

After I narrowed down the research sites to these locations, I identified gatekeepers to gain access and this further narrowed the research sites to nine universities. The last major selection criterion was these universities' partnerships with Chinese universities, which I confirmed by accessing lists of foreign partners available on institutional websites. One of the nine universities (a private university located in Nur-Sultan) was excluded because it did not have any partnerships with Chinese universities, and a university in Karaganda did not respond. The table below shows territorial breakdown of research sites based on their number of partners in China, which varied from three to 35 partners per research site (Table 2). Ultimately, eight universities met all the selection criteria and were included in the study.

**Table 2**

*Research Sites by city and number of partners in China*

| # | Kazakhstan HEIs (coded) | City       | Number of Chinese partners |
|---|-------------------------|------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Mixed University A*     | Nur-Sultan | 11 universities            |
| 2 | Mixed University B      | Nur-Sultan | 3 universities             |
| 3 | National University A** | Nur-Sultan | 18 universities            |
| 4 | National University B   | Almaty     | 3 universities             |
| 5 | Private University A    | Nur-Sultan | 4 universities             |
| 6 | Private University B    | Almaty     | 3 universities             |
| 7 | National University C   | Almaty     | 35 universities            |

\*Mixed university – is an institution with participation of both public and private funds.

\*\*National university – is a public institution with special status

After deciding on the eight research sites, I sent invitations explaining the details of the study via email. Gatekeepers from three universities responded promptly and I proceeded to schedule interviews with them. It was beneficial for the study to gain access to research sites via social contacts without which entree to the research site would have been more challenging (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Participants' names and identities are protected by assigning them pseudonyms that sound natural for Kazakh settings but do not reveal participants' identities. Here, I have activated the confidentiality clause of conducting research because the researcher's presence is more traceable in ensuring confidentiality than anonymity. More particularly, anonymity is when responses are obtained in a complete blind circumstances by a researcher (there is no link between a participant and a certain response), whereas confidentiality allows the researcher to stay informed of the participant identities and their responses but efforts are needed to keep the participant data disclosed (Allen & Wiles, 2015).

As a further measure for data protection, the participant's position within a university is indicated as a general title without further specifics, such as vice-rector, rector, department member etc. It is also important that institutional affiliation is kept secure because some positions may point to a university; that is why I chose university's ownership status, such as private or state owned institution, and assigned the alphabet letters to keep track of universities.

The three gatekeepers are Aliya, Vice Rector, Private University B; Duman, Vice Rector, National University B; and Marat, Rector of Private University A. Since some gatekeepers were unresponsive or unavailable, I sent official invitations addressed to the rectors of the other five

universities through the email on the university website. Of these, two universities (one in Almaty and one in Karaganda) did not respond and I proceeded with only six universities. However, the research site in Almaty that did not respond still informed the study because one of the interviewees (Anar, Faculty, Private University B) participated in the study, and answered interview questions based on her experience at National University C.

### **Description of Research Sites**

All 14 interviews with institutional administrators and faculty were conducted in universities which allowed me to physically visit university campuses and observe the institutional environment. This was important because ownership type (public and private) is visible in the campus set up. Roughly divided into two groups there is a caveat in attributing the ownership of research sites. Specifically, two groups are constant in the ownership; they are public (or state) owned and private owned institutions. Public and state are utilized interchangeably. With mixed type of institutions, the ownership is transient because both state and private companies can own the majority of shares which characterizes ownership as either state or non-state institution. Participating university, Mixed University B, had an experience of state as the major shareholder which was reflected in the university title where the word “state” was added; and the link to the state would disappear respectively when the private company holds major volume of shares.

Participating state universities are made up of two national universities, which have a strong presence of the state through a variety of state-related attributes, such as images of state symbols and former President N. Nazarbayev’s quotes: “Perfect knowledge leads mankind to deep thought” and “Your [university’s] major goal is to provide quality education and educate

knowledgeable manpower for economic growth; teach young generation to be patriotic and ready to serve their motherland”. However, the infrastructure in these universities is generally poor, with outdated buildings and quotes on the walls, which serve more as a reminder of the country’s Soviet era than an enriching learning environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The second group of research sites is four non-state universities, which includes two mixed and two private universities. Mixed universities had private companies as their major shareholders at the time of the fieldwork. Private universities are fully owned by private companies. Private universities in Kazakhstan vary widely in quality and size, from prestigious and reputable institutions to suspicious diploma mills that are questionable. This study included only trusted private and mixed institutions with high positions in domestic ranking (IQAA, 2019).

The contrast between non-state and state universities is striking from your first moments on the campus; it is visible how state universities are making efforts to demonstrate their link to the state. This is further noticeable in the interview responses when participants from state universities demonstrate institutional aspiration to meet the national goals. State has a leverage of state institutions which are perceived as the extension of the state.

On the contrast, Private University B and Mixed University B were conspicuous in creating a student-friendly environment with colorful interior design and modern study and recreational areas for students. Moreover, Mixed University B had a finger-print system to access common staff rooms. Non-state universities are more aggressive in recruiting students because tuition fees comprise their major source of revenue. These universities’ dependence on tuition for revenue is a big factor in why they strive to create an attractive and modern learning environment for young

people.

However, both groups of university research sites had little information on international partnerships visible on the campuses. Mixed University A had a small plate commemorating a foreign delegation's visit at the entrance to the campus and Mixed University B had a world map indicating partners around the world. I did not notice any advertisements or brochures with information on academic mobility or any other international activities on the campuses. There is, however, a limited-access virtual space on each institution's website (as informed by institutional participant), which serves as a platform to inform students and staff of ongoing opportunities abroad.

### **Additional Research Sites**

Data collection in qualitative study is presented as a circular activity, which however, can be flexible based on the researcher's access to research sites (Creswell 2007). It is also important to note that qualitative study provides such flexibility to ensure the richness of the data. During the fieldwork, I added two educational think tanks that report to the Ministry of Education and Science as research sites because one of them was often mentioned in interviews (Think Tank A) and the other one was involved in elaborating national educational policy for the next five years (Think Tank B). However, due to the uniqueness of these think tanks for Kazakhstan HE, limited descriptive information can be shared to keep the confidentiality clause expressed by the participants from these entities. Therefore, mostly general description information is provided.



Both think tanks are fully state-owned and conduct research and other education-related activities (such as conducting surveys, participating in educational policymaking, etc.) for state agencies. Think Tank A works in the area of HE and regularly communicates with universities and other state agencies. Think Tank B has a wider scope of work that includes variety of education levels. Both think tanks work closely with the Ministry of Education and Science to provide evidence-based support for educational policies and regulations. The think tanks also provide system-level expertise on HE in general, and internationalization in particular.

### **Selection of Research Participants**

I recruited 29 participants total across three categories of participants: administrators, faculty and students. The sampling method varied depending on the category of the participant. The question especially significant for doctoral students is the sample size. I was guided by the recommendation that depending on the study method, the smallest sample number is one participant (i.e. life history) and the largest is ninety-five as for example in case study (Mason, 2010). And, the adequate number of participants is in the range between 25-50 participants (ibid).

After providing rough estimation on a number of participants, Mason (2010) further advised to follow saturation as a guiding principle in qualitative doctoral studies; this recommendation is based on the Mason's revision of five hundred and sixty abstracts of doctoral dissertations. It is important that a researcher establishes informativeness and uniqueness of the data content without relying on the number of interviews. However, saturation has a weakness applicable to doctoral students conducting qualitative study. Saturation requires sufficient time and funding to



achieve it in all aspects of the research study; yet saturation is not necessarily the goal of the qualitative study where the need to showcase individual experiences is of more considerable value.

It is also timely pointed out that saturation lacks conceptualization as a methodological tool; Saunders et al. (2018) identified four models of saturation. Conceptualization is based on the approaches to saturation when a researcher seeks saturation at the stage of sampling, analysis or data collection. A different perspective suggests viewing saturation through the angle of replicating the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). However, the latter perspective does not indicate at which stage saturation for the sake of replication should become accessible to a researcher.

Mason's (2010) advice and the conscious perception of saturation weaknesses guided me in utilizing the saturation at the stage of data collection. An awareness of when knowledge from interviews was exhausted and became redundant served as the point at which I decided to complete fieldwork. In particular, repetition of institutional incentives, as interpreted by administrators and faculty, to collaborate with Chinese counterparts inspired by national policies, and students' instrumental approaches of Chinese degree kept emerging. Saturation informed me of the consistent patterns and trends within these particular Kazakhstani groups of stakeholders when engaging with Chinese HE.

### **Sampling: Administrators, Faculty and Think Tank Representatives**

Institutional administrators and faculty were selected by purposeful sampling based on their current position in the university and the university's partnerships with Chinese universities.

Convenient or snowball sampling, for example, will not be compatible as sampling techniques for institutional participants because of the pre-defined selection criteria. Specifically, the selection criteria for institutional administrators and faculty mentioned in the invitation letter required that participants are: a) currently employed in one of the participating universities, and b) are involved and/or informed about their university's partnership with universities in China. Administrators represent a diverse group, with seven mid-level managers (five heads of international offices and two heads of other offices), three senior managers (Vice Rectors from National University B and Private University B; Rector from Private University A), two international office specialists (National University B), and two faculty members (Private University B and National University B).

After I sent out interview invitations, three gatekeepers promptly responded and I immediately scheduled interviews with them. Two Vice Rectors (Duman, National University B, and Aliya, Private University B) identified seven staff members eligible for the study. Other institutional participants were identified according to the selection criteria outlined in the officially sent invitation. I contacted each university's Administrative Offices to track the invitation letter, and was provided with the contact information of the potential participant. I then contacted each participant to schedule an interview.

### **Table 3**

*Information on participants by pseudonym, gender, position and university*

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Participant

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| #  | Pseudonym | Gender | Position                            | University                                   |
|----|-----------|--------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1  | Samal     | Female | Head of International Office        | Mixed University A                           |
| 2  | Aina      | Female | Head of International Office        | National University A                        |
| 3  | Aiman     | Female | Head of International Office        | Mixed University B                           |
| 4  | Marina    | Female | Deputy Head of International Office | National University B                        |
| 5  | Botagoz   | Female | Head of International Office        | Private University B                         |
| 6  | Nazym     | Female | Head of Strategic Office            | Private University B                         |
| 7  | Adina     | Female | Head of Language Office             | Private University B                         |
| 8  | Duman     | Male   | Vice Rector                         | National University B                        |
| 9  | Aliya     | Female | Vice Rector                         | Private University B                         |
| 10 | Marat     | Male   | Rector                              | Private University A                         |
| 11 | Merey     | Female | Specialist of International office  | National University B                        |
| 12 | Array     | Female | Specialist of International office  | National University B                        |
| 13 | Anar      | Female | Faculty                             | Private University B (National University C) |
| 14 | Elvira    | Female | Faculty                             | National University B                        |
| 15 | Alina     | Female | Senior Manager                      | Think Tank A                                 |
| 16 | Anel      | Female | Deputy Department Head              | Think Tank B                                 |

The two participants from Think Tanks A and B were also purposefully selected. The participant from Think Tank A has extensive experience in HE as a practitioner, researcher and policy maker. The participant from Think Tank B is an expert in HE, similarly knowledgeable about policies and reforms in current HE system, and she was personally involved in the elaboration of the State Program on Education and Science Development 2020-2025 (State Program of Education and Science Development 2020-2025, 2019).

After the consideration of saturation presented in Mason's (2010) study, I decided to finalize with the interviewing of the administrators, faculty and think tank representatives and moved further to the interviews with students. However, due to the nature of sampling (purposeful and snowball sampling) it became difficult to ensure the representation of participants by gender, age or other demographically-diverse background.

For institutional participants (administrators, faculty, think tank representatives) I have mainly relied on their knowledge of the collaborative activities with Chinese institutions, rather than any other identifiers. For students, the main criteria was citizen of Kazakhstan who self-funds(ed) their full-time degree in China; in which the categories of gender or institutions were also difficult to control.

### **Sampling: Students**

Students were recruited using snowball sampling which, compared to purposeful sampling, was more appropriate for this category of participants because students had networks through which they referred the next participant. Unlike to universities, I, as a funded postgraduate student in



Hong Kong SAR, was an outsider to these student networks who studied (are studying) in China and purposeful sampling would not have worked to select students. The main criteria for students were: a) citizens of Kazakhstan, and b) full-time and self-financed students/graduates of a Chinese university. I chose self-financing as a selection criterion because it demonstrates the student's intentional choice of China as an academic destination without an external incentive in the form of a scholarship. Since these students are not associated with specific institutions in Kazakhstan, it was harder to find eligible student participants. I commenced the recruitment by placing a short invitation with information about the study in social media. Specifically, WhatsApp groups were extremely helpful and led me to recruit eight students, while the other five students were recruited through personal connections.

Table 4 below demonstrates the chain of contacting each student participant starting with the primary source of social media channel or personal connections. The table also provides basic information regarding a student's gender, and current status which has two categories. A student either has graduated (and the graduation time varies) or still studies in Chinese university. In the end of each interview with students, I asked to recommend their friend eligible for the study and reminded the selection criteria. For example, Bibi (Female, Graduate) recommended her friend Abylai (Male, Student) who then recommended Askar (Male, Student). Raikhan (Female, Graduate) linked me with Tomiris (Female, Graduate), and Fatima (Female, Student) shared contact information of her friend Kamila (Female, Graduate).

**Table 4***Recruitment of Student Participants*

| Student (pseudonym, gender, status) |                      |  |                           |                       |                            |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|--|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| #                                   | Recruited through    | First contact                                  | Second contact            | Third contact         | Fourth contact             |
| 1                                   | WhatsApp group       | Bibi (Female, Graduate)                        | Abylai (Male, Student)    | Askar (Male, Student) | Tomiris (Female, Graduate) |
|                                     |                      | Ansar (Male, Student)                          |                           |                       |                            |
|                                     |                      | Raikhan (Female, Graduate)                     |                           |                       |                            |
|                                     |                      | Madina (Female, Graduate)                      |                           |                       |                            |
|                                     |                      | Saule (Female, Graduate)                       |                           |                       |                            |
| 2                                   | Personal connections | Aigul (Female, Graduate)<br>(Female, Graduate) |                           |                       |                            |
|                                     |                      | Andrey (Male, Graduate)                        |                           |                       |                            |
|                                     |                      | Fatima (Female, Student)                       | Kamila (Female, Graduate) |                       |                            |

|       |                           |
|-------|---------------------------|
|       | Sulu (Female,<br>Student) |
| Total | <b>13 students</b>        |

Overall, 13 student participants were recruited for the study. A larger group of students would have been preferable to obtain more details on students' opinions about the challenges and benefits of studying in China. However, the current sample already allowed identifying trends among Kazakh students who choose a Chinese university for their degree. Snowball sampling was also helpful to observe the patterns because participants were spread across majors, host universities in China and hometowns in Kazakhstan (to name a few of their hometowns with the location in Kazakhstan: Nur-Sultan is in the center; Karaganda, Kokshetau are in the north; Aktobe, Oral are in the west; Almaty is in the south), and yet their perceptions of studying in China merged into similar responses.

### Research Ethics

Prior to fieldwork, I obtained Approval Letter from University Human Research Ethics Committee required for any study involving human participants (Appendix E). Participants were informed of the research purpose and other relevant details, and face-to-face participants were asked to sign the consent form before interview started whereas consent from online interviewees was orally obtained. I asked permission to audio-record the interviews and I explained to respondents that their participation was voluntary, free of any consequences, that they could skip any question and that they could withdraw from the study without providing an explanation at any time.

The study utilizes pseudonyms that are common names in Kazakhstan to protect participants' identities. Participants' status and position remain confidential. Their personal details are stored on a password-protected computer to prevent access by any third party, except for the researcher and the supervision team.

The only risk participants incurred was a possible impact on their reputation if someone is able to identify them, in spite of using a pseudonym and removing identifying information.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My professional and personal experience helped in the process of the study but there were situations in which being relatable with the participants required additional caution to avoid incomplete responses from them. My professional experience of researching HE in a think tank (3 years), teaching at a private university (2 years) and administering an international office in a national university (4 years) provided me with enriched contextual knowledge about the internationalization of HE in Kazakhstan. This professional experience was specifically helpful in developing a rapport with administrators, faculty and think tank representatives.

During interviews with institutional participants, however, I needed to stay conscious of participants' assumptions that I know the response due to my previous experience in Kazakhstan HE; in order to avoid incomplete responses, I asked the participants to elaborate on their answers. I experienced similar assumption during interviews with students who found our common citizenship or student status relatable and would tend to shorten the responses. The



same strategy of asking student participants to fully explain themselves aided to obtain full responses too.

## **Data Collection**

### **Data Collection: Researcher Journal**

In order to keep data as the major source of knowledge embedded in the constructivist paradigm, I kept a research journal with essential insights and findings observed during the fieldwork. As pointed out in Devers and Frankel (2000), it was my objective to keep the notes as thorough as possible. Two types of notes were produced during the fieldwork. They are notes done during the interviews, and summaries of observations written after each interview. I recorded these observations of the research sites and interviews to use in further analysis.

Both types of notes were helpful in building the understanding on how individuals formulate their internationalization rationales (i.e., students kept demonstrating their instrumentalization of learning Chinese); and what additional factors impact institutional or individual decision to engage with Chinese HE.

### **Data Collection: Administrators, Faculty and Think Tank Representatives**

Data from participants was collected through face-to-face and online interviews. Online interviews were conducted with students and are described in the next section in more detail.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with institutional administrators and faculty members in university campuses and with think tank representatives in their offices in Kazakhstan. Face-to-face interviews are one of the most widely utilized data collection tools in qualitative research (Punch & Oancea, 2014). They were useful in interviewing this group of participants because the

interview format allowed individuals to refer to institutional documentation for more details in answering my questions.

For example, Marina (Deputy Head of International Office, National University B) consulted her institution's strategy for details on the current number of international partners and the status of partnerships with Chinese universities. This level of trust would have been more difficult to reach if participants were in focus groups because along with the competitiveness between universities there is confidentiality universities adhered to. One-to-one interviews also allowed staying flexible on the interview logistics because they better accommodated the availability of each participant.

The first interview with Aiman (Head of International Office, Mixed University B) was conducted on June 6, 2019, at the university campus in Nur-Sultan, and the last interview with Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) occurred on June 28, 2019. All face-to-face interviews were conducted in June 2019 and required traveling between the two cities in Kazakhstan.

Interviews lasted approximately 35-40 minutes on average and followed semi-structured interview protocols (Appendixes A-D). Institutional participants (administrators, faculty and think tank representatives) did not know about the interview questions prior to the interview but were informed of the interview theme: collaboration with Chinese partner institutions. The interviews with the two think tank representatives loosely followed interview protocols elaborated for universities because think tanks were less focused on collaboration with Chinese

universities; but dealt more broadly with the processes of policymaking and internationalization of HE in Kazakhstan, as well as its rationales. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed in Russian. Only the excerpts quoted in the study were translated in English.

### **Data Collection: Students**

Conducting interviews online with students was an unavoidable data collection method within this study due to students' (then) dispersed places of residence in Kazakhstan and China.

Collecting student data occurred after interviews with faculty, administrators and think tank representatives. Utilizing long-distance interviews method allowed me to interview students in different locales, which might have otherwise been challenging had they occurred in person due to associated financial and travel restrictions (O'Connor & Madge, 2017). As Burke and Miller (2001) mentioned, long-distance interviews as research method has the benefit of allowing researchers to be thoroughly prepared for such interviews. Technical details become more significant in data collection via long distance, such as ensuring a stable internet connection, eliminating possible disruptions (uncharged equipment, finding a quiet and private environment, etc.) and proper recording of the interview. Long distance interviews are demanding because they require more interpersonal skills from an interviewer to build rapport with the participant without interaction in person (Khalil & Cowie, 2020).

Timing was also a significant constraint to conducting face-to-face interviews with students for two reasons: a) due to the prolonged recruitment process, I could not schedule interviews with students at the time I was in Nur-Sultan or Almaty; and b) I was recruiting student participants in the middle of the summer break and students were less responsive. It was also more difficult to

secure a specific date with all student participants because of their work or study commitments, which required me to be flexible and adapt to their circumstances. For example, an interview with Andrey (Male, Graduate) had to be split in two parts because he could only allocate 20-30 minutes at a time. However, an advantage of conducting online interviews with students was that it opened the recruitment call for any location and any time zone, as long as the student met the eligibility criteria of the study (Kazakhstan citizen; self-paid; student/graduate of Chinese university).

Once the time constraint issue was resolved, student interviews successfully commenced on July 2, 2019 with Saule (Female, Graduate) as the first participant. The last interview was with Andrey (Male, Graduate) on September 3, 2019. The process of interviewing students also came with certain challenges that required skills and preparedness. For example, students used their personal connection to the researcher (students recruited through personal networks), shared citizenship (Kazakhstan citizens), status (student) or even gender (specifically female students) to explain their opinions in a shorter way. In these cases, I asked students to provide more elaboration or clarification to ensure their complete responses.

For example, Fatima (Female, Student) assumed I knew her story of starting a degree in China, and she was surprised when I asked her to explain in detail the whole process. Her complete answer offered an illuminating insight of how trade opened China as an academic destination for Kazakhstan students.

Another peculiarity of the online interviews was that equipment required special attention and preparation prior to each interview. The main two pieces of equipment were mobile phone and an audio-recorder. Shortly into the recruitment process, students who referred me to their friends asked to send WeChat information for their contacts in China, and interviews with the latter were conducted via WeChat. I reminded students of the interview an hour in advance to ensure they were in a quiet place to eliminate additional distractions and noise. The process was not always predictable because not all students could allocate specific time, and some treated telephone interviews as an informal chat. While videoconferencing interviews could have created a more formal atmosphere, the informality of the social media-based interview process within this study allowed me to build rapport with students and facilitated openness and honesty of responses. I conducted interviews in a separate room with the speaker on (without camera) behind closed doors to enable smooth audio-recording. Students responded to questions about their motivations of studying in China. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Russian, and only the quotes utilized in the study were translated into English.

**Table 5**

*Interview details with students*

| Participant |                             | Interview |              |               |          |
|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------|--------------|---------------|----------|
|             | Pseudonym (gender, status)  | Location  | Date         | Duration      | Tool     |
| 1           | Saule<br>(Female, Graduate) | Almaty    | July 2, 2019 | 1 hour 3 min  | WhatsApp |
| 2           | Fatima<br>(Female, Student) | Beijing   | July 4, 2019 | 1 hour 17 min | WeChat   |

|    |                               |            |                                   |                  |          |
|----|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| 3  | Ansar (Male, Student)         | Shanghai   | July 4, 2019                      | 45 min           | WeChat   |
| 4  | Kamila<br>(Female, Graduate)  | Shanghai   | July 13, 2019                     | 1 hour           | WeChat   |
| 5  | Abylai (Male,<br>Student)     | Beijing    | July 16, 2019                     | 44 min           | WeChat   |
| 6  | Askar (Male, Student)         | Beijing    | July 17, 2019                     | 1 hour 11 min    | WeChat   |
| 7  | Sulu (Female,<br>Student)     | Dalian     | July 18, 2019                     | 51 min           | WeChat   |
| 8  | Aigul (Female,<br>Graduate)   | Nur-Sultan | July 28, 2019                     | 54 min           | WhatsApp |
| 9  | Madina<br>(Female, Graduate)  | Semei      | July 31, 2019                     | 30 min           | WhatsApp |
| 10 | Raikhan<br>(Female, Graduate) | Nur-Sultan | August 5,<br>2019                 | 1 hour 10 min    | WhatsApp |
| 12 | Tomiris<br>(Female, Graduate) | Almaty     | August 6,<br>2019                 | 1 hour 30 min    | WhatsApp |
| 13 | Andrey<br>(Male, Graduate)    | Nur-Sultan | July 20 &<br>September 3,<br>2019 | 18 min<br>27 min | WhatsApp |

### Data Collection: Post-Fieldwork Document Analysis

The final stage of data collection was a more in-depth document analysis, which emerged as a necessity after the completion of fieldwork to fact check some information. Kazakhstan's most trustworthy and credible source of published policy documents is [adilet.kz](http://adilet.kz) - an online database of official documents adopted in the country. Websites of national agencies (Committee on Statistics) and government offices (the Ministry of Education and Science, Kazakhstan's

embassies abroad etc.) also contain credible information. The materials are published in Kazakh and Russian, rarely in English. I read the documents in Russian and translated the excerpts for the study into English. I consulted institutional documents (strategies, regulations) via participating universities' official websites.

### **Data Analysis**

Raw data was transcribed in Russian, then coded and categorized in English following inductive thematic analysis in order to look for an in-depth explanation to the central phenomena of the study (Creswell, 2014). Analyzing the data inductively also reflects the meaning of the constructivist paradigm open for multiple "truths" unlike for example, positivist paradigm that is more applicable to fields with one assumption unchangeable despite the observations.

Only quotes included in this dissertation were translated from Russian to English. I used NVIVO software to code data line-by-line and sentence-by-sentence to allow the data speak. In particular, I used descriptive coding method to assign interview segments a certain descriptor, and according to Saldana (2016) a descriptor can be a word or a phrase expressed in a single-word normally in the form of a noun (as cited in Elliott, 2018). I coded in phrases, for example, code from the student data set that expressed one of their rationales to study in China is *language learning*. After I saw more and more students' opinions on how China was viewed as an academic destination to master the language, I proceeded to the next stage of data analysis – categorization.



The categorization stage is characterized as applying more analytical (compared to descriptive coding stage) approach because at this stage of qualitative data analysis the researcher engages into observing patterns and gathering the codes in certain categories (Chowdhury, 2014).

Drawing on the same example of code - language learning, this code became a category of language capital to display the value students included in learning Chinese as one of their rationales to study in China. Upon the completion of the categorization stage, I moved to the next stage allocating themes to categories.

At the third stage of working with raw qualitative data, the stage of identifying themes, the researcher engages in understanding and capturing the meaning behind the categories (Belotto, 2018). In inductive thematic analysis, researcher follows the data to construct an understanding to a certain research inquiry by capturing the themes that emerge from the data (Jovadi & Zarea, 2016). Thematic analysis is useful to capture participants' insights and perspectives on the studied research phenomena; it provides the structure to free-flowing text and can be comparatively quick to comprehend for novice researchers working with large body of qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017). The above-mentioned code of language learning evolved into instrumentalization of the Chinese language, which is understood within this study as recognition of the language for its career opportunities. Along the mentioned advantages of the thematic analysis there are disadvantages.

Thematic analysis relies on the researcher's interpretation of the data, and can be recognized as subjective raising the issues of trustworthiness of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). To avoid such perceptions of the current research findings, I have utilized data triangulation to enrich



empirical data from participants by additional sources, i.e., written texts and videos from media on the issues raised by participants about the national policies in Xinjiang. It was also helpful to utilize peer debriefing to enhance the validity of the research findings; peer researchers were invited to read and comment on the preliminary research findings, and through their questions further explanation was provided in the following stages of writing of the current research.

However, linking different sets of data (institutions and students) to theoretical foundation was an uneasy exercise because of diversity of participants. The flexibility of inductive thematic analysis provided the space for iteration of analyzing the data. In the continuous process of returning back to the scholarly literature and current study's raw data, the conceptualization approaches became observable. Particularly, the variety of factors and their level of influence on individual and institutional decision-making around internationalization pointed to the need to seek for multilayered instrument to explain the influencing factors on an individual.

### **Limitations**

The current research project has a number of limitations that could be considered for the future research. The limitations are related to methodology such as geographical representation of the participants and the provider of funding for students' overseas academic experiences.

Considering the west of Kazakhstan would enrich future studies because Chinese investment in oil companies is located there. This means that research sites and students might provide a new layer of understanding to the rationales of collaborating with Chinese institutions and studying in China.



Another limitation is related to the financial support to students studying in China. Since scholarship students were purposefully excluded from the current study, getting these groups' perspectives on their views of studying in China might be adding to the discussion on internationalization rationales. In other words, Kazakhstani students studying in China on Chinese scholarship could hold an unknown data that could potentially diversify the perspectives on forming of individual rationales. This is especially relevant viewed through the ecological systems theory where the systems can affect the development of an individual. As such, provision of scholarship could be presented as an external incentive accessible at macrosystem with its consequent impact on an individual in the core of Bronfenbrenner's theory.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described the research inquiry of the study and identified main stages of data collection and analysis. Constructivist paradigm kept the researcher susceptible to various responses and multiple truths and invited participants' diverging rationales emerge, that, as mentioned in Knight (1997) can compete and overlap depending on stakeholders. A qualitative approach provided in-depth exploration of participants' experiences of collaborating and studying in China, and it is through these stakeholders' perspectives that internationalization literature keeps expanding.

Overall, the study recruited twenty-nine participants of which sixteen were representatives of institutions (universities administrators, faculty and think tank representatives) and thirteen self-funded Kazakh students studying or graduating from Chinese universities. The obtained data provided rich insights on how internationalization rationales are constructed. Through the

various stages of data analysis such as descriptive coding, categorizing and theme allocation, the researcher conducted thematic inductive analysis, which illuminated stakeholders' internationalization rationales presented in the next two chapters.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: POLICY ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the analysis of policy documents to comprehend the status of HE internationalization in Kazakhstan, and particular policies around institutional collaborations with Chinese HE. Total of 31 policy documents were analyzed, of which sixteen are national policies in Kazakhstan outlining national strategy and educational policy in the period of 1985 - 2020; and one document is an international policy observed by Kazakhstan due to the membership in EHEA. Seven policies from China have been reviewed to identify the national aspiration, and its reflection and implementation within HE. Kazakhstan and China signed seven joint agreements on cooperation including the cooperation in the field of HE in the period of 1992-2015. Hence, the policy analysis stage informed the study about general guidelines on internationalization in order to obtain more in-depth information during the face-to-face interviews.

Kazakhstan and China acknowledge the importance of bilateral international partnerships. Both countries are committed to fulfilling identified national aspirations through relevant policies and international collaborations. This chapter presents an analysis of Kazakh and Chinese policy makers' expectations of internationalization of HE in implementing national objectives. It is essential to highlight that for practical reasons identified in Chapter on Research Methodology, empirical data for the study was only collected in Kazakhstan. However, the current chapter



analyzes the policy documents of both Kazakhstan and China (only policies available in English were analyzed in the case of China) to have a better understanding of the ways national policies could drive institutional collaborations between Kazakh and Chinese universities.

Section one highlights Kazakhstan nation building process in which HE plays a significant role both domestically and abroad. National expectation of Kazakhstan HE is to provide the labor market with relevant manpower whereas international objective is to aid the country in becoming one of the world's leading economies by 2050. The analysis of Kazakhstan policies contributes to the understanding of HE governance and internationalization practices. Centrally designed yet ad hoc approach to internationalization of HE in Kazakhstan is critical to acknowledging the role of the state in international HE activities.

China's national aspirations of rejuvenating the country are discussed in section two.

Rejuvenation with an emphasis on culture allocates a space for culture and international HE expected to facilitate people-to-people relations between Chinese and foreign citizens. China's approach to internationalization, similarly to Kazakhstan's, is central with a significant role of the state.

Section three provides more details on symbiosis of Kazakh-Chinese national aspirations embedded in bilateral international agreements and national policies. This also illustrates the positive official image the countries have of one another. Kazakh-Chinese inter-governmental efforts depict a favorable environment for partnerships between universities reflected in international legislative framework between the two countries. Over the years, Kazakhstan and

China have accumulated a plethora of foreign policies pertaining to the national border, the economy and culture, including HE legislation that has enabled Kazakh student flows to China. These harmonious relations outlined in current chapter, however (as demonstrated further in the study, in the consecutive chapters), tend to stay on paper without reaching the societal level.

### **Through the Prism of Kazakhstan Nation Building**

Kazakhstan had just embarked on its journey of nation building, and the process was further narrowed down in 1997 when the government developed the goal of being among the top 50 global economies by 2030 (Address of President N. Nazarbayev to the people of Kazakhstan. “Kazakhstan-2030”: Prosperity, Security and Ever Growing Welfare of all the Kazakhstanis, 1997). Economic development is a center of the nation building process to which HE is expected to provide adequate manpower. Kazakhstan’s international activities strive to create an image of safe and stable country welcoming international investment that aids nation building stemming from economic development.

### **Forming Strategic Goal within Nation Building**

By 2012, Kazakhstan nation building aspirations delivered global recognition, expanded international link; and the country commenced on positioning itself as an intermediate agent between different nations. In his annual address to the peoples of Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev emphasized the government’s activities that resonated with the international community and involved peacemaking events held or initiated in Kazakhstan such as the anti-nuclear movement, congresses of world leaders, and gatherings of world religions:

Our initiatives for enhancing nuclear non-proliferation are ultimate contribution in world stability, order and security. All this is the recognition of our role in global politics. In the XXI century Kazakhstan should become a bridge for dialogue and interaction between the East and the West. (Address of the Leader of the Nation, N. A. Nazarbayev, to the people of Kazakhstan. Strategy “Kazakhstan-2050”: New Political Course of the Established State, 2012)

Kazakhstan’s national efforts were acknowledged in the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) Report 2012-2013 by the World Economic Forum (WEF), which placed Kazakhstan as the 51<sup>st</sup> most competitive country in the world (Schwab, 2012). Thus, in 2012 the President re-assessed the Strategy’s 2030 goal and set a new goal of joining the world’s top 30 economies by 2050 according to the same GCI WEF index. Particularly the index captures countries’ holistic development through 12 pillars<sup>3</sup> ranging from economic to social issues. HE, as it contributes to human capital, is linked to these 12 pillars, and therefore, education is recognized as a key element to national growth in all areas.

### **Higher Education as a Way to Achieve National Goal**

Following the footsteps of other nations that allocated equally prominent role to HE in nation building (Tsang, 2000 for China; Ahmat, 1980 for Malaysia), Kazakhstan perceived HE as a supplement to economic development. This is resonated in the third priority of the strategy<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 12 pillars are - Institutions; Infrastructure; ICT adoption; Macroeconomic stability; Health; Skills; Product market; Labour market; Financial system; Market size; Business dynamism; and Innovation capability

<sup>4</sup> Priority 1 - Modernized and dynamic economy; Priority 2 - Economy breakthroughs; Priority 3 - Social policy supporting the vulnerable and supporting economic development; Priority 4 - Democratization and political modernization; Priority 5 - National security; Priority 6 - Foreign policy

where its objective is to prepare a skilled workforce. Policy makers incorporated national goals in educational policies in 2010; the two educational policies in the period of 2000-2010 - State Program for Education 2000-2005 (2000) and State Program on Education Development 2005-2010 (2004) - worked together to address national growth from an economic perspective by considering economic needs in terms of manpower. In order to provide adequate labor force to foreign investments and growing national economy, the decision to integrate Kazakhstan's HE into international academic space was made.

In particular, the State Program on Education Development for 2005-2010 (2004) refers to three levels of HE (bachelor's, master's and PhD) that are widely accepted in the world's leading universities in Europe and the USA. The three levels also facilitate international academic mobility and the employability of graduates. Such three-tier structure is an instrument integrating students and graduates into the global HE landscape and globalizing workforce to elevate their economic contributions in nation building.

The State Program on Education Development 2011-2020 (December 7, 2010) sets the next step in the international integration process. Consistent with educational policy makers' vision to engage with the global academic community, Kazakhstan became the member of European Higher Education Area in 2010. Immediate educational output of the integration process was possibility of academic exchanges of faculty and students between Kazakhstan and European universities through mutual recognition of academic achievements. Establishment of the Center of Bologna Process and Academic Mobility in 2012 represents an institutionalized commitment of Kazakhstan HE to adopt international academic standards (Presidential Decree, 2010).



### Higher Education Rankings as Benchmarking Tool for Nation Building

HE contributes to national attempts to build an international reputation by targeting international academic rankings. In the academic realm, ranking is a tool for image-building that places a country on international radars, thereby increasing a country's visibility would contribute to attract more investment toward national economic development. Rankings, as the most accessible visibility tool, serve as a yardstick to benchmark the status quo and track progress. Elevating academic ranking is viewed by educational policymakers as contributing to achieving GCI WEF ranking positions in other pillars. The higher Kazakhstan universities elevate in the academic rankings, the more attention the country will garner from the international community.

The State Program of Education and Science Development 2016-2019<sup>5</sup> (2018) clearly aimed to have 16 Kazakh universities in QS WUR 2019's top 701+. The table below compares the State Program of Education and Science Development 2016-2019 (2018) plans to have a certain number of Kazakhstan universities in QS top universities by 2017 and 2019, and the actual ranking result in 2019 which indicates the ranking featured less number of universities than planned.

**Table 6**

*Ranking plan and result in QS WUR general ranking*

**Plan**

**Result**

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<sup>5</sup>The first program was introduced in 2016, and in 2018 the program was amended. The reference is to the latest version.



|              | 2017      | 2019      | 2019      |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Top-200      | 0         | 2         | 0         |
| Top-300      | 2         | 2         | 1         |
| Top-500      | 2         | 3         | 4         |
| Top-701+     | 7         | 9         | 5         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>16</b> | <b>10</b> |

A ranking-driven approach to national development in Kazakhstan shows the role of the centralization of HE governance in general, and in internationalization efforts in particular. The chapter further explores policy intentions to decentralize HE as well as centrally designed internationalization approach in Kazakhstan.

### **Towards Renewed Approaches in Higher Education Governance**

The legacy of highly centralized governance stems from the Soviet period when republics within the Union followed the central command from Moscow. With the independence in 1991, Kazakhstan attempts to move away from the planned economy and centralized approaches in the governance system which, however, comes at a cost of deteriorated HE quality because the system was unprepared for privatization reform. A decade later in 2010, Kazakhstan returns to the decentralization exercise influenced by the membership in European Higher Education Area. However, the journey to self-governing institutional behavior is a time-consuming shift, to which the need to consider national rationales for internationalization at institutional level is an indication.

### **The Soviet Origins of Kazakhstan's Centralized Education System**

The centralized HE system in Kazakhstan is a legacy of the Soviet Union that the country inherited after independence (Decree of the Council of Ministers of KazSSR, 1988; USSR, 1985). When Kazakhstan was part of the USSR, the planned Soviet economy harmoniously synchronized with centralized HE, which produced the required work force. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, the Kazakhstan market economy demanded more space for the private sector in education and in all other sectors.

In HE, the Law on Higher Education (1993) allowed the private sector to have access to the previously monopolized educational market under Article 5: "State and private universities can function in the Republic of Kazakhstan." In 2001, the number of universities skyrocketed to 182 (compared to 61 universities in 1991), which is the highest number of universities ever recorded in Kazakhstan (IAC, 2017). The massive growth of universities seriously affected the quality of HE because institutional human resources and infrastructural capacity were unable to meet the demands of creating a quality learning process at so many institutions (ibid). In 1999, the Law on Higher Education was terminated, which meant central control of HE was re-established (On the Termination of Some Education Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1999).

The echo of privatization reforms, however, is still present in Kazakhstan. It cost HE its reputation and thousands of students who left the country to avoid poor HE. Short-term reform spreads through a decade within which domestic HE diplomas converted from unattainable tokens of knowledge into worthless documents purchasable at no effort from a mushroomed number of diploma mills. The bitter words of student participant Tomiris (Female, Graduate)

illustrate the devaluation of domestic HE diploma: “I can buy a diploma lying on my sofa, what’s its value?” Two important social issues emerge in this quote - low quality of HE and corruption.

More radical scenario of bribery in the academic environment in Kazakhstan is “to find the right words to talk to the right faculty. Then they act through several teachers to avoid being caught” (Tomiris, Female, Graduate). When a student is unable to meet academic requirements of university program the purchase of the grade keeps the student in the program. A vicious circle of low quality HE enables corrupt practices in university that lead to deterioration of university education. It is against these settings that the central control is released gradually because institutions are unprepared for full self-governance while the changing environment of HE in Kazakhstan requires institutional responsibility and accountability.

### **Shift towards Liberal Approaches: Decentralization Exercise**

At the dawn of Kazakhstan integration in international academic space, universities struggled to implement international activities such as short-term academic exchanges or running double degree programs with foreign counterparts because of the restrictions from the domestic regulations. Since then decentralizing HE returned to the agenda of policy makers, and, as observed by the participant Alina (Center for Bologna Process and Academic Mobility), this is the positive outcome for the system from EHEA membership.

Although, the changes were needed in a wider scale of Kazakhstan HE because autonomous universities in Europe are the catalyst of democracy, transparency and social engagement. These

principles were foreign for Kazakhstan HE accustomed to fulfilling the orders from central authorities, a tradition inherited from Soviet system. Nevertheless, paragraph eight of the Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area emphasizes the principles that Kazakhstan needed to implement in its national educational policy:

We, the Ministers, recommit to academic freedom as well as autonomy and accountability of HE institutions as principles of the European Higher Education Area and underline the role the HE institutions play in fostering peaceful democratic societies and strengthening social cohesion. (Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area, 2010)

Following the membership commitment in international educational space, Kazakhstan educational policy makers re-introduced decentralization of HE governance. In 2018, the Kazakh government passed a law expanding academic and organizational autonomy (On Amendments in Some Legislation Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Issues Expanding Academic and Organizational Autonomy for Higher Education Institutions, 2018). One of the dimensions of the law is a more flexible curriculum that offers more favorable conditions for academic collaborations between Kazakh and overseas institutions. Simultaneously, academic flexibility has implications for solving domestic concern of misalignment between academia and labor market. Now industry can work closely with universities to formulate its needs for manpower by participating in the development of academic programs. Time, however, is required to allow these regulations to settle within structures and human perception. The next section demonstrates how centrality is still persistent in educational policy making when Kazakhstan institutes strive

to solidify a national identity within larger integration processes.

### **Centrally Designed Internationalization Strategy**

This section presents an overview of Kazakhstan's overarching internationalization activities to set the ground for further analysis of establishing links with China in particular.

Decentralization as a newly introduced approach still allows central decision-making to occur which means that regardless of intended self-governance practices there are still cases when decisions are made in a top-down approach. Therefore, internationalization objectives are formulated in line with national goal to ensure all HE dimensions contribute to the aspiration of becoming top 30 economies by 2050. At this stage, however, internationalization objectives are mostly outward-looking with prevalence of outbound international activities.

### **Steered But Ad Hoc Internationalization Objectives**

The centralization of HE governance penetrates through specific objectives in Kazakhstan universities' international activities. The State Program for Education and Science Development 2016-2019 (2018) identified the following specific activities to internationalize HE: 1) inbound/outbound academic mobility of students and staff; 2) recruitment of foreign students and staff; 3) joint academic and research activities with foreign institutions (including degree programs, research and publications); and 4) participation in academic rankings (QS WUR in particular). The latter, the participation of Kazakh universities in academic rankings, has been discussed earlier in the chapter, so the rest of this section focuses on the internationalization indicators (1, 2 and 3) in Kazakhstan's HE.

In relation to the first objective, to improve inbound and outbound mobility of staff and students, the exact policy document wording on this objective is that “universities will develop academic mobility of students and faculty, as well as recruit foreign researchers and faculty” (State Program for Education and Science Development 2016-2019, 2018). The vague and open-ended wording of the objective could be due to the government’s uncertain position on the ways to support these two activity types for mainstream institutions. This wording encourages universities of all types to engage with foreign colleagues and introduce exchange programs but unlike other indicators, the funding of such activities is mainly an institutional responsibility.

The second objective, the recruitment of international students and staff, is a means to inform the global academic community that Kazakhstan’s universities are of trustworthy quality and should be recognized among inbound learners from all over the world. For this objective, the State Program on Education and Science Development 2016-2019 (2018) established a target: to increase the number of foreign students to 6.7% of the domestic student population by 2019; this goal was successfully achieved with 6.68% of foreign students in 2019 (Report on Implementation of the State Program on Education and Science Development 2016-2019, unpublished). The number of international students is also featured in the methodology of the QS ranking (QS, 2021). Thus, expanding the body of overseas students studying in Kazakhstan affects universities’ QS ranking position favorably as well. The mechanisms of recruitment of foreign staff focused on recruitment of foreign researchers and faculty, for which an additional funding scheme has been introduced (details are in the next section on funding).

The third objective, bringing together joint international expertise with local researchers and faculty, is intended to facilitate industrial and economic growth through developing innovative university programs. According to the State Program on Education and Science Development 2016-2019 (2018), Kazakhstan universities were to develop 72 joint-degree programs in collaboration with foreign experts and international partners by 2019, which is triple the number in place at the time of setting the goal (24 joint programs in 10 Kazakh universities)<sup>6</sup>. The selection of these particular ten universities was based on the areas— engineering industry, metallurgy, chemical industry, petro-chemistry, manufacture of construction materials and food—that Kazakhstan recognized as alternatives to resource-based economy. The ten universities that already had these collaborations were comprehensive universities with degrees in the mentioned areas who were participating in the country’s industrialization program. The outlined objectives on internationalization of HE demonstrate the government’s centralized approach to integrating into the global HE space which might be a necessary measure given the long history of central governance in Kazakhstan HE. The next section identifies the funding mechanisms allocated to achieve certain internationalization items.

### **Measuring International Integration via Student Academic Mobility**

The current ad hoc approach to internationalization is similarly reflected in the funding mechanisms of international activities. The State Program of Education and Science Development 2016-2019 (2018) total funding is close to two billion tenge<sup>7</sup>, which is the public

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<sup>6</sup>National reform within economic development manifested in variety of policies such as State Program on Innovative and Industrial Development (2003-2015; 2015-2019; 2020-2025) that is related to higher education. Universities with industry and innovation related majors provide manpower for program realization.

<sup>7</sup>Exact funding is 1 868 400 000 KZT (approximately 5 626 355 USD with 2018 exchange rate of 332.08KZT - 1USD)

education expenditure for 2016-2019. According to the State Program, two of the aforementioned internationalization objectives (outbound academic mobility of students, recruitment of foreign staff) receive target budgets. The rest of the items are within the total education expenditure, which does not provide a break down by levels of education or by other objectives of internationalization.

Financial support for the outbound academic mobility of students enables an ongoing monitoring of harmonization with European academic standards. Statistics on academic mobility of students for the period of 2011-2017 demonstrate ongoing growth as shown in table below (State Program of Education and Science Development 2016-2019, 2018). This means that Kazakhstan's academic processes have become more responsive to European standards, which enables mutual recognition of academic achievements and facilitates academic mobility. There is an observable two-fold growth of academically mobile students in 2015-2017 compared with 2011-2014. To further facilitate the harmonization process, the outbound academic mobility of students was allocated fixed funding of close to three million tenge.<sup>8</sup> Notably, academic student mobility did not appear with a separate budget in previous educational policies supposedly due to lesser extent of joint recognition of academic achievements which disabled mobility programs (State Program Education 2000-2005, 2000; State Program on Education Development 2005-2010, 2004; State Program on Education Development 2011-2020, 2010). And Kazakhstan's membership in the Bologna Process substantially facilitated flows of students on academic mobility.

### Table 7

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<sup>8</sup>Exact funding is 2 670 700KZT (approximately 8 042USD with the exchange rate of 332.08KZT - 1USD in 2018)



*Academic mobility of students for 2011 - 2017*

| <b>Year</b>                    | <b>Number of students</b> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2011-2014                      | 4,381                     |
| 2015-2017                      | 7,312                     |
| 2015                           | 2,329                     |
| 2016                           | 2,473                     |
| 2017                           | 2,510                     |
| <b>Total – 11,693 students</b> |                           |

### **Facilitating Domestic Changes through Foreign Staff**

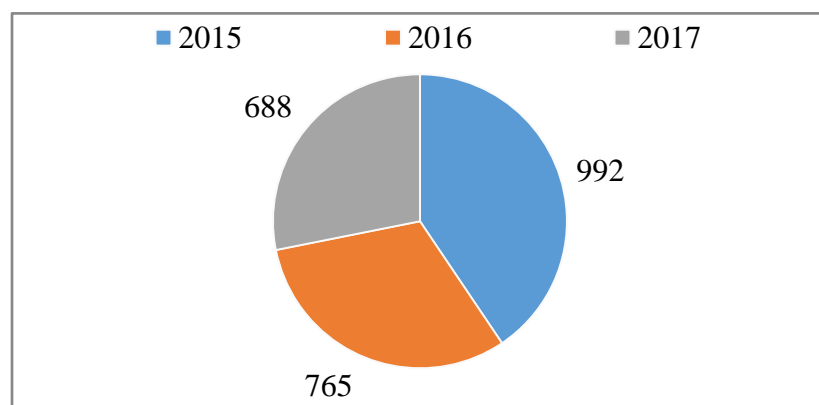
Further integration in global academic space is facilitated through the adoption of research and governance practices at the institutional level. Recruitment of foreign researchers and faculty initially commenced as a line in the end of the State Program on Education Development 2011-2020 (2010). The total allocated budget in 2010 was 509 billion tenge<sup>9</sup> for the entire educational system, a specific budget for the recruitment of foreign scholars emerged later. In the three-year period of 2015-2017, Kazakhstan's universities recruited 2,455 foreign academics and researchers (State Program of Education and Science Development 2016-2019, 2018). The target funding for recruitment of foreign staff transformed into a wider initiative of recruiting administrators in 2016, with close to two million tenge in the budget (ibid)<sup>10</sup>

### **Figure 4**

<sup>9</sup>Exact funding is 509 700 000KZT (approximately 4 283 193USD with the exchange rate of 119KZT - 1USD in 2010)

<sup>10</sup>Exact funding is 1 794 800KZT (approximately 5 404USD with the exchange rate of 332.08KZT - 1USD in 2018)

*Number of Recruited Foreign Academics, by year*



The outbound academic mobility of Kazakh students serves as a yardstick to measure the level of harmonization with European standards, however institutional changes in academic, research and governance occur by recruiting foreign staff. Students perform the function of ambassadors abroad while foreign staff is expected to update domestic practices in accordance with students' international academic experiences. It is also observable that the two internationalization objectives with specific allocated funding have an unequivocal statistical record compared to other objectives without target budgets.

The analysis of Kazakhstan nation building process demonstrated policy makers' expectations of HE. Centralization of HE governance ensures the flow of HE contributions to the national development. Economic growth, dependent on adequate human capital support, is the core of ongoing nation building process in Kazakhstan. Policymakers expect liberal approaches in HE to align with international academic standards and ensure the domestic manpower responds to local labor market and the needs of foreign investment companies. There is, however, a possibility that the role of the state will stay essential in the next couple of decades even with further decentralization because the system with a centralized memory (primarily universities) needs

time to adjust to new governance approaches. Another centralized system, Chinese HE, experiences similar policymakers' expectations. The next section discusses China's national aspirations and the role of international HE in achieving them.

### **The Great Rejuvenation of China**

This section delineates on Chinese policymaking approaches to understand the ways national rationales for internationalization are formulated in China. The analysis demonstrates similarities in Kazakhstani and Chinese central approaches. In particular, the forthcoming section outlines China's policy makers' expectations of HE in serving the nationally set objectives. In the absence of empirical data directly from Chinese universities, the analysis of policies informs on national rationales for Chinese universities to collaborate with Kazakh counterparts. The analysis of Chinese policies conducted for this study prepares the ground for further research on institutional rationales for internationalization, and drivers for Chinese-Kazakh university collaboration by locating Kazakhstan within China's foreign (and educational) policy.

The national aspirations and consequently the expectations of the international HE of Kazakhstan and China vary due to the different stages of economic and national development. China, as demonstrated in policies, aims to increase its international influence with a relevant goal in international HE - to become a popular academic destination.

### **Centrality of Culture in China's National Aspiration**

The pursuit of recognition and strengthening an international country image was one of the main items in China's agenda early in 2000s. Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013 is the

country's grand strategy that "has proposed a global community of shared future and has won extensive recognition and a warm response from the international community" (The State Council Information of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The Belt and Road initiative connects China with Europe through maritime and land routes, the latter starts through Kazakhstan, thus making it the core partner in the further development of China's grand plan. Kazakhstan's unique geographic position, therefore, presents a major reason for being one of the strategic partners for China.

Culture played a significant role in rejuvenation because it has the capacity to increase nation state's attractiveness in the global competition. Moreover, culture is intended to soften the ground for China's political influence and economic expansion globally, and in adjoining Central Asia specifically (Plotnikov, 2016). Then – President Hu Jintao announced in his speech at the 17th National Congress in 2007:

In the present era, culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength.

Policymakers expect culture to be the core of China's increasing power. Engagement in cultural activities with foreign nations is identified as a vehicle to diversify domestic culture and simultaneously gain influence through the exposure of national culture abroad. The rejuvenation of the country is closely linked to the prosperity and acceptance of national culture by both domestic and foreign citizens.



We must ... enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country... . We will also strengthen international cultural exchanges to draw on the fine achievements of foreign cultures and enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide. The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture.

(President Hu Jintao's speech at the 17th National Congress, 2007)

### **International Higher Education in China's Great Rejuvenation**

Cultural exchanges, as part of educational activities are recognized to increase mutual understanding and gain support for China among foreign citizens. It is academic and cultural exchanges that are expected to provide solid platform for wider economic and political relations between China and other nations, the core of China's rejuvenation plans. Education, therefore, plays an essential role in power enhancing exercise. Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2017) provides more details on the implementation of such jointly beneficial collaboration:

Educational exchange can serve as a bridge to closer people-to-people ties, whereas the cultivation of talent can buttress the efforts of these countries toward policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, and financial integration along the routes.

Belt and Road Initiative, with its two land and maritime routes, leans on the national governments for support in steering their education systems towards cooperation with other

countries engaged in the initiative. Central leadership of local authorities is expected to promote partnerships within education and lead to better understanding between nation states. Chinese university leaders supported the national initiative by establishing University Alliance of the New Silk Road (UASR) intended to strengthen collaborations in HE between countries of the Belt and Road initiative (Li & Ruby, 2020). It is believed that education has the capacity to create a positive image for China, centralization of governance in this sense allows cascading ideas favorable for policymakers' plans.

Governments of the Belt and Road countries should strengthen mutual communication and coordination, combine various resources and steer the integrated development of education. We should give full play to the proactive role of schools, enterprises, and other social actors to promote dynamic cooperation and diverse exchange in education. (Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017)

China further provides mechanisms of closer cooperation with countries along the route to bring foreign cultures to China and facilitate mutual understanding that should positively affect cooperation areas beyond education. Yet, the state's central role is still significant in building international partnerships between universities. For example, in the policy excerpt below the policymakers envisage certain activity for cooperation between Chinese and foreign universities thus aligning international HE with China's national plans.

We will ... encourage institutions from the Belt and Road countries to work in partnership with Chinese institutions to establish programs that teach their own languages in China. (Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017)

As earlier discussed, rejuvenation of China equalized to the increase of national influence abroad in Hu Jintao's speech (President Hu Jintao's speech at the 17th National Congress, 2007) allocates an important role to international HE in particular by steering international university collaborations. Recruitment of international students is also acknowledged for its contribution to enhancing China's image abroad. By hosting international students, China educates necessary manpower for economic growth and establishes better people-to-people relations. Enormous size of national HE system "generates more than 8 million college graduates each year" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019) and is still expandable to host international students both funded through special scholarships and at foreign students' own expenses.

The Chinese government will set up the Silk Road Scholarship, aimed at training leading talent and technicians for countries along the routes. China will place equal importance on receiving international students, encouraging self-sponsored overseas studies, increasing the number of international students. (Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017)

International student flows are expected "to turn China into a popular destination for students from the Belt and Road countries" (Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative,

2017). China is steadily gaining momentum by annually increasing the number of international students studying for a full-time degree. The 2018 statistical data from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2019) did not change significantly (+2 985 international students in 2018) compared to 2017 (in the quote below) but the growth was still identified (2018 - 492 185 international students; 2017 - 489 200 international students). The breakdown of 2017 statistical data shows that more international students are choosing China for their full-time degree year by year (15.04% annual growth). According to this trend, China is becoming a popular destination for international students from all over the world, beyond Belt and Road countries.

In 2017, 489 200 international students furthered their studies in China, marking an increase of over 10% for the second consecutive year. The number of degree students reached 241,500 (49.38% of the total), up 15.04% year on year. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018)

Ministerial statistical report of 2019 marked 196 countries of origin of international students of which fifteen are ranked as top sending countries with 50 per cent students from these countries (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Kazakhstan, as the key partner in the land route of the Belt and Road Initiative, is listed as the tenth sending country with 11 784 students. Geographic proximity is also a significant factor when Kazakhstan students choose China as their academic destination.



The rejuvenation of China embedded in the pursuit of soft power and increase of national influence abroad, similarly to Kazakhstan's nation building process, leans on HE to achieve the national aspiration. Centrality of governance in both countries is beneficial for implementation of policymakers' decisions. In the difference of national objectives and rationales to internationalize HE systems, Kazakhstan and China's approach - central decision making - is similar. HE needs to contribute to nationally set objectives by interpreting and implementing them within educational policies. The next section analyzes the symbiosis of national aspirations in Kazakh-Chinese international relations with details on the commencement of diplomatic dialogue between the two countries.

### **Symbiosis of Kazakh-Chinese National Aspirations**

The approach of Kazakhstan and China diplomatic relations is fueled by national aspirations in the sense that both countries embark on bilateral inter-country relations to fulfill their national objectives. The analysis of international agreements concluded in the first decade of newly established Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China (1991-2009) range from political issues such as national borders and security, military, trade and economic cooperation (especially cooperation in oil and gas sectors), transportation routes, negotiations of trans-border rivers and commitment to a non-nuclear world. In addition to these cooperation items, the two countries actively cooperate on other issues such as environment protections, education, culture and tourism, as well as promoting peace in the region.

This section reiterates the strategic image of China perceived by Kazakhstan policymakers. Yet, these joint policies and agreements do not fully reflect the societal perception of China in

Kazakhstan. For example, Kazakhs' concerns around their relatives in Xinjiang that have been under a precise attention of China's national policies do not emerge in official Kazakh-Chinese agreements. Thus, fear-inspiring image of China exists outside official agreements and is more populous because it spreads to regular Kazakh citizens unaware of strategic-partner-China image (more details are provided in Chapters Six and Seven).

### **Kazakhstan-China: Focus on Territorial Integrity**

Kazakhstan and China share similar elements historically, and the sensitivity to territorial integrity is a subject of common interest. Territorial issues are critical for Kazakhstan's nation building process; for China's rejuvenation (and recent Belt and Road Initiative) it is equally important to maintain neighboring countries' support of the territorial unity of People's Republic of China. Early in the independence, territorial disputes with neighboring countries were the priority. Diplomatic relations between the contemporary PRC and the Republic of Kazakhstan commenced on July 16, 1991, roughly six months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Agreement about Principles and Major Development Directions of Cooperation between Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic with Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China).

The main idea of the agreement was to maintain good-neighborly relations, develop trade and expand transport links. The establishment of national borders was the most important item in the Kazakh-Chinese joint agreements, since both sides remembered almost three centuries of disputes over national borders. That is why, at the dawn of independence, Kazakhstan opted to primarily reach joint agreements with neighbors. The 1992 communique with China (Joint



Communique on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China, January 3, 1992) declared joint respect of national boundaries, as well as sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs of the signatories. The agreement emphasized that Kazakhstan recognized "one China" and refrained from establishing official relations with Taiwan, and China respected Kazakhstan's sovereignty, independence and aspirations for national economic growth. As the Communique (1992) explained it:

The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan confirms not to establish any official relations with Taiwan. The Government of the People's Republic of China supports the efforts of the Republic of Kazakhstan to protect national independence and economic development. (Joint Communique on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China, January 3, 1992)

### **The Economic Core of Kazakh-Chinese Collaboration**

Parties recognize the benefits of geographic proximity of the two countries and pay special attention to the wide cooperation in areas of international transport communication. The Parties are ready to jointly make efforts to revitalize the ancient Silk Road (Joint Declaration between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China about Further Enhancement of Comprehensive Cooperation in the Twenty First Century, Beijing, November 23, 1999).



The agreements mentioned joint intentions to revitalize the Silk Road that historically served as a trade route carrying goods and products from the Global South to the North, and vice versa. Since both countries played an integral role in the Silk Road, the joint intention to revive trade activities for the benefit of both nations is reasonably reflected in international agreements. The backbone of the Kazakh-Chinese relationship is economic development. As of 2019, China is one of the few neighbor states with 5% investment share in Kazakhstan (Zhussupova, 2019). Since 1991, China has been one of Kazakhstan's largest trade and economic partners, with investments of \$20 billion<sup>11</sup>. China's special status is reflected in Kazakhstan's policy documents. The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030 (the Concept 2020-2030) lists China as one of the country's strategic partners together with Russia, the USA, the Central Asian countries and the European states.

### **Alignment of China's Rejuvenation with Kazakhstan's Nation Building**

The revitalization of the ancient Silk Road could not have occurred at a better time. Kazakhstan was selected as the venue for the announcement of the Belt and Road initiative in 2013. President Xi Jinping presented the grand plan of uniting Asia and Europe by maritime and land connections in front of an audience of students, academics and invited guests at Nazarbayev University. Aside from international status, participation in the Belt and Road initiative presented domestic advantages to the young developing nation of Kazakhstan as they attempted to align external opportunities with domestic needs. The Belt and Road initiative complemented Kazakhstan's nation building process that included further development of its international connector position and enhancement of the relationships with Belt and Road signatory countries.

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<sup>11</sup> Other investor states are six European countries: over 50% of trade comes from the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Italy, Belgium and Germany); 5% comes from the UK and 15% comes from the USA (Zhussupova, 2019).

To further Kazakhstan's domestic agenda in 2014, the President N. Nazarbayev's annual address introduced a national program Nurly Zhol (President's Annual Address, Nurly Zhol – Path to the Future, 2014). Nurly Zhol is a national version of the Belt and Road initiative adopted to enhance transport routes across the country (State Program of Infrastructural Development Nurly Zhol 2015-2019, 2018). Kazakhstan's pursuit of economic growth was intended to "continue the journey to make Kazakhstan a trans-continental transit-logistical hub on express tracks Global East - West and North - South relying on the potential of the national program Nurly Zhol (Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030, 2020). Moreover, the Nurly Zhol program overlapped with a previously introduced industrialization program designed to create transportation hubs to facilitate trade and industrialization (Address of the President N.Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan, "Nurly Zhol – Path to the Future", November 11, 2014).

Kazakhstan's positive feedback to China's grand initiative aligns with the former's nation building process with the central focus on economic growth. For China obtaining the support of the country where the land route to Europe commences was similarly critical. Amidst geopolitical and economic relations, Kazakhstan and China recognize the importance of engaging in socio-cultural areas too. In the next section inter-governmental initiatives of establishing partnerships in HE are discussed.

### **China-Driven Educational Collaboration with Kazakhstan**

This section shows how in official Kazakh-Chinese collaborations in HE, China is more active

because, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, the two countries are in different developmental stages. Before further focusing on Kazakh-Chinese relations, it is worth mentioning that Kazakhstan establishes wide range of collaborations with various countries, it is due to the focus of the current study that Kazakh-Chinese relations are under research.

China has rapidly flourished economically, and is already the second largest economy in the world compared to Kazakhstan that is, while the most developed in Central Asia, still on its journey to becoming the world's top 30 economies by 2050. While both countries have bilaterally official image of strategic partners, the analysis of joint agreements in HE demonstrates how China's economic advancement creates more space to welcome foreign students (among them Kazakh students) for academic experiences by generous support for domestic universities and financial incentives to study in China.

Following the strategy of building good-neighborly relations with countries at the border, China builds platforms for closer collaboration within HE. These include official ministerial cooperation agreements in HE, providing scholarships and extending collaboration initiatives to wider participation from Central Asia and Russia.

### **Legally Enabled Access to Chinese Higher Education**

In 2003, the Ministries of Education of both countries signed an agreement of cooperation in education. The document supports joint efforts to exchange students, faculty and teaching materials. Both countries recognized the importance of people-to-people communication and indicated their willingness to subsidize their students' studies, as well as provide reciprocal

assistance for academic exchanges. Their agreement (2003) specified many details about educational exchanges:

Sending Party covers the visa expenses, two-way transportation costs to the study or internship destination for their undergraduate and graduate students, as well as interns of the sending Party. Host Party waves study fees for undergraduate, graduate students and interns. The Host Party provides teaching materials, accommodation in the student hostels and stipend. (Agreement on Cooperation in Education between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, June 3, 2003)

In 2007, Kazakhstan and China signed another significant agreement in education on recognition of academic qualifications and degrees (Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Government of the People's Republic of China on joint recognition of documents on education and academic degrees, November 6, 2007). According to this agreement, both systems accept academic qualifications earned at the secondary school level, technical-vocational education, and higher and postgraduate education levels. This enabled the flows of self-financed students in both directions at any level of educational attainment significantly easing the accessibility to HE in another country. However, according to the empirical data extracted for this study, student flow from Kazakhstan to China is more active than the reverse. This could be explained by the growing international influence of China; the Kazakh students strive to secure future careers by obtaining Chinese degrees.



### Incentivized University Degrees in China

In addition to the academic activities mentioned in the agreements, China introduced generous scholarships to Kazakh citizens. For example, the Center for International Programs – the Kazakhstan Agency for Study Abroad - administers the Bolashak National Scholarship, and scholarships provided under intergovernmental agreements. As shown in the table below, of the ten countries extending academic scholarships, China is the second largest provider, with 150 scholarships annually (Hungary provides 250 scholarships per year). A separate study exploring the Kazakh-Hungarian collaborations would shed light on such generous scholarship number from Hungary; however, Kazakh-Chinese collaborations are in the focus of the current study. The scholarship-provider nations are mainly the countries of the cooperation groups that Kazakhstan prioritizes: the EU, China, and Central Asia, due to their geographic position. Egypt and Vietnam are outside the cooperation group and there could be other reasons for scholarship provision. Possibly Vietnam is connected via the post-Soviet past whereas Egypt could be linked via the shared religious beliefs.

**Table 8**

*Intergovernmental scholarships by country*

|   | Country                    | Number of scholarships |
|---|----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Hungary                    | 250                    |
| 2 | People's Republic of China | 150                    |
| 3 | Tajikistan                 | 50                     |
| 4 | Ukraine                    | 40                     |
| 5 | Egypt                      | 17                     |
| 6 | Poland                     | 11                     |



|    |            |    |
|----|------------|----|
| 7  | Azerbaijan | 10 |
| 8  | Belarus    | 6  |
| 9  | Kyrgyzstan | 5  |
| 10 | Vietnam    | 3  |

Source: Center for International Programs

The Chinese scholarships come under various funding schemes and have recently included scholarships under the Belt and Road initiative. However, it is unclear if there are additional scholarships available to the aforementioned 150 scholarships for Kazakh students or if these 150 scholarships are streamed under the Belt and Road Initiative now. According to the English version of the Belt and Road initiative, “We should send more students to each other’s countries, and promote cooperation in jointly running schools. China provides 10,000 government scholarships to the countries along the Belt and Road every year” (Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative, 2015).

### **Integrative Educational Initiatives in Central Asia and beyond**

Both Kazakhstan and China are members of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) created in 2001 in Shanghai. In 2008, another member Russia initiated the establishment of University of SCO (USCO), a network-based international education program functioning in Asia (USCO website). The idea of the network was inspired by the European Higher Education Area and enables the universities of member states to run joint degree programs at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Upon completion of half of their studies at home institution, students can

transfer to a partner university for the rest of the academic period. The official languages of the USCO are Russian and Chinese; English is acceptable upon the mutual agreement of the member universities. The visibility of the USCO, however, is subtle due to the absence of joint fund within the platform, which places an additional financial burden on students themselves.

Another more recent initiative intended to promote collaboration in HE between China and foreign countries is newly established University Alliance of the New Silk Road (UANSR). As an extension of Belt and Road initiative, UASR was initiated by Xi'an Jiaotong University, China in January 2015. Seven Kazakhstani universities are members in UANSR, with two (of eighteen total) of them being members of Executive Council, the decision making body of the UANSR. The network aspires for a wide scope of cooperation across the countries, and envisions the development of "Silk Road Academic Belt" with a certain set of expectation for cooperation fields:

to facilitate cooperation among member universities in the fields of inter-university exchange, talent nurturing, research collaborations, cultural exchange, policy studies and medical and health service collaborations etc., strengthening the understanding and friendship across different countries (Xi'an Declaration, May 2015)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the official expectations of Kazakhstan and China's policymakers in relation to national aspirations and HE contributions to them. Centralized governance allows both systems to streamline the policy decisions for implementation. Each nation approaches international collaboration with one another through the fulfillment of national aspiration. Thus,

both Kazakhstan and China engage in international collaboration to primarily achieve the national objective which sifts through the collaboration opportunities and keeps the focus on the national priority. Policymakers' expectation of HE contribution is to formulate objectives aligned with the national aspiration and to enhance mutual understanding at societal level.

Kazakhstan's current nation building process affects HE internationalization practices by focusing on reputation where universities are required to elevate in academic rankings.

Kazakhstan universities are therefore by default focused to cooperate with other high-ranked institutions without consideration of geographic locations. Studying in China emerged as an opportunity for Kazakhstani students when inter-governmental agreements on recognition of academic achievements have been reached. China's great rejuvenation, manifested in the recent Belt and Road Initiative, welcomes academic and cultural exchanges to facilitate better people-to-people relations. In this sense, collaboration between Chinese and foreign institutions as well as recruiting international students are among the top academic activities to do so.

National and international policy documents of both Kazakhstan and China outline a favorable environment for international HE activities including university collaborations and studying abroad endeavors. However, policy documents are limited in reflecting the realities of internationalization processes in the two countries. Chapters Six and Seven present empirical data of Kazakhstani institutional and students' perspectives on collaborating and studying in Chinese university.



## **CHAPTER SIX: COMPETING FORCES FOR INSTITUTIONAL INTERNATIONALIZATION AND COLLABORATION**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the layered approach to internationalization of HE from institutional perspective. Chapter Five has contributed to the understanding of the policy makers' expectations of HE whereas this chapter provides empirical evidence of institutional stakeholders (administrators and faculty) on engaging in internationalization in general and collaborating with Chinese counterparts in particular. To reflect on the factors affecting internationalization (including partnerships with foreign peers) within an institution, the chapter is organized in four themes based on the findings from administrators, faculty and think tank representatives. Each theme is analyzed and being matched with the four systems presented in Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner: macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem. It is useful to consider that the discussion of each of the systems is based on its proximity to an individual in Kazakhstani institution. It is also worth mentioning that the presentation of data is a combination of policies and empirical evidence to better illustrate the systems.

The macrosystem, events and discourses outside the national border that may affect individual decision-making on the engagement with international HE. Individuals within institutions with their internalized internationalization processes demonstrate resistance to such distant discourses based on the empirical evidence presented in the chapter. On the contrary, the influence of exosystem, national-level policies, is visibly more present. This influence penetrates through institutional efforts to align their internal policies with nationally-set objectives. There is, however, another powerful influence that individuals within institutions are unable to ignore, it is

mesosystem. The interchange with Kazakhstan local communities undergoes cautious attitudes towards China, and this does not stay invisible in the perceptions to collaborate with China. Thus, cautious attitudes from the local communities have a spilling effect on institutional stakeholders when the latter engage with Chinese counterparts. Narrowing to the microsystem, institutional stakeholders are informed by all three sources - macrosystem, exosystem and mesosystem when approaching the subject of collaborating with China.

### **Kazakhstan Nation Building: Targeted Recruitment of Kazakhs from China**

Kazakhstan, similarly to other developing nations (Ahmat, 1980), approaches HE through the prism of nation building; the recruitment of foreign students is mainly targeted to restore population size by inviting ethnic diaspora from abroad. The analysis of nation building policy and HE internationalization throughout the four systems demonstrates there is an overlap between the two policies. The top-down approach reveals that policies are insufficiently informed of their further implementation.

#### *Macrosystem*

#### **Higher Education Incentives for Non-Citizens**

Kazakh diaspora from China matches both nation building and HE internationalization goals; the merging point of the two policies is recruiting foreign citizens to Kazakhstan. The stretch of these policies is outside the national borders forming the macrosystem context for the recruitment initiatives.

The program invites young people of Kazakh ethnic background to obtain HE degree in their



historic land. Providing HE as an adaptation platform allows gradual immersion in Kazakh society. Non-citizen Kazakhs comprise the largest foreign student population in Kazakhstan universities. Students utilize a special quota for non-citizen ethnic Kazakhs to pursue HE in Kazakhstan (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018). According to university website, in order to receive a special quota scholarship to attend university in Kazakhstan,

Non-citizen students need to provide an official document confirming their ethnicity.

Individuals' ethnic identity appears in identification documents or can be obtained from the Embassy of their current country of citizenship as indicated at the university website page for ethnic Kazakhs (Eurasian National University, n.d.).

### *Exosystem*

#### **Overlap of National Policies: Unprepared Exosystem**

However, after these students enrolled in Kazakhstan institutions on special scholarships for non-citizen Kazakhs (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018), national education statistic becomes haywire. This is because Kazakhstan's exosystem is unprepared to accommodate them. The students still hold Chinese citizenship; hence, they hold the status of international students at Kazakh universities despite their ethnicity. After some students of Kazakh descent decide to apply for citizenship in Kazakhstan, they are still not accurately represented in educational statistics in Kazakhstan because of their fluid citizenship. Thus, there is an overlap between the pursuit of internationalization and the nation building program that allows maneuvering the geography of foreign students.

### *Mesosystem*

### Reaching to Local Communities to Ease Communication

The top-down approach of the nation building program was focused on the adaptation of the returnees whereas at the mesosystem level, the acceptance by the locals was lacking. Participants (and society at large) demonstrated the relevance of legislature amendments by referring to ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan according to their country of citizenship. As observed from participants' responses, ethnic Kazakhs from China are Kazakh-Chinese. It should be noted that any repatriate Kazakh is viewed as *another* by referring to them by their country of citizenship, such as Uzbek or Russian Kazakhs for those coming from Uzbekistan or Russia respectively.

Insufficient information of the interchange between the local communities and the returnees blindsided the policy; as a result the returning Kazakhs turned out to be alienated in their historical motherland, Kazakhstan. That is why, the discourses within the mesosystem are particularly substantial for both national and institutional level policies, as well as the dynamics around the subject of policy. When such unwelcoming discourse (the locals perceiving the repatriates as others, foes) became known recently, the repatriation policy amended national legislation related to migration by replacing the term *oralman* (returnee in Kazakh) to *kandas* (related by blood in Kazakh). However, new terminology has not yet settled among the society which is visible from participants' responses.

### *Microsystem*

#### Microsystem Approach to Overcome Linguistic Barrier

Social perception, however, does not prevent the institutions from recruiting *kandas* to ease communication between partners linguistically. The microsystem within Kazakh and Chinese



universities lacked linguistic capacity to streamline collaboration. Collaborators embarked on seeking for innovative approaches to find ways of eliminating the obstacles for collaboration. In the case of Kazakh-Chinese university collaboration, *kandas* or ethnic Kazakhs in China facilitate the communication between domestic and Kazakh universities ensuring language barrier is overcome. It became evident that Russian is the lingua franca of communicating with Kazakh universities which means that ethnic Kazakhs in China are at least trilingual (Mandarin, Kazakh and Russian) or Chinese universities turn to Kazakh students in China for assistance.

They [Chinese universities] write emails in Russian. It means they know what language we speak here. We also see Kazakh names. Probably they hire them for these purposes. It is nice they show this awareness of language and do not just write letters in Chinese. It shows they are willing to communicate with us. (Marina, Head of International Office, National University B)

The Kazakh side was appreciative of such resourceful approach from their Chinese counterparts. This might have triggered the local institutions in Kazakhstan to seek similar assistance from *kandas* to facilitate communication with partner institutions in China. Samal's (Head of International Office, Mixed University A) university employed returnees from China to communicate with their Chinese counterparts and, according to Samal, "thanks to them [ethnic Kazakhs from China], our relations [with partners from China] improved."

The positive results of improved communication with Chinese counterparts inspired further structural changes within Mixed University A. Ethnic Kazakhs from China are gathered in a unit



under university's international department. Hence, all communication with Chinese universities runs through this institutional division. This was the only example with specific structure for collaborating with Chinese universities. It is, however, a beneficial approach to maintain institutional partnership by utilizing the local linguistic capacity.

The adaptability of foreign partners to suit language preference identifies the willingness to speak the understood language, and to avoid obstacles in establishing institutional collaboration. However, further elaboration of partnerships depends on institutional commitment to reap the results of these attempts for collaboration. Hence, it is unclear if such language compromise aids in international university collaboration.

### **Microsystem Puzzle: Flexible Educational Statistic**

Through years of nation building program, Kazakhstan universities made efforts to accommodate Kazakh returnees at the microsystem level. Non-citizen Kazakh students take courses in Russian or Kazakh medium of instruction; as most of them speak Kazakh, they learn to comprehend a basic level of Russian during their nine-month foundational course at a Kazakh university. Two national universities principally host ethnic Kazakh students for full degrees, National University A and National University C. Both institutions share similarities in the streams of students coming particularly from China, with students being either self-supporting financially or scholarship students. Administrators describe ethnically Kazakh students from China at their universities this way:

We have several groups of students from China. These are usually [Han] Chinese and

Kazakh-Chinese. [Han] Chinese study on inter-governmental scholarships or are self-financed. They study Russian language. Another group is ethnic Kazakhs, not [Han] Chinese, Kazakh-Chinese. They are majority. Those [ethnic Kazakhs] who need language training enroll in a foundation course, and those who do not apply for a repatriation scholarship to pursue a full degree. (Aina, Head of International Office, National University A)

Citizens of China of Kazakh origin often come to us. They study either on intergovernmental scholarships or at their own expense. (Anar, Faculty, Private University B)

Consequently, within a microsystem of the university these students are counted as international students because, in the words of institutional administrator: “They apply as foreign students but may have submitted their documents for Kazakhstan citizenship, and when the status changes we do not know how to record them” (Aina, Head of International Office, National University A). There are instances when members of migrating families of ethnic Kazakhs have obtained Kazakh citizenship at various speeds and at different moments; in these cases, ethnic Kazakh students create the confusion in Kazakhstan’s educational statistics. As such, an overlap at the policy level, within exosystem, further entangles at the microsystem level within an institution. Without proper guidance on the accommodation mechanisms of Kazakh returnees, they stay recorded as international students. In the next section, Kazakhstan’s wider internationalization process is analyzed to identify current trends and policies, including recruitment of international students that is hardly attainable for Kazakh universities.

### **The Centralized Internationalization of Kazakhstan Higher Education**

The merger of two policies discussed above becomes possible due to the overall centralization of governance, including internationalization of HE. Specifically, such vertical approach is observable through the centrally-set indicators and funding for internationalization. Country membership in European Higher Education Area put Kazakhstan at the connecting point for China, Central Asia and Europe. This decision, however, has its implications in institutional partnerships (with China in particular) when it cascades down to the microsystem level.

#### *Macrosystem*

#### **Between Asia and Europe: Benefits and Challenges**

Kazakh-Chinese institutional collaboration is a part of wider internationalization activities for both parties taking place at the macrosystem level. Among China, Kazakhstan and the European Union (EU), Kazakhstan is an intermediate country, the so-called gate to Europe for China (and Central Asian countries). Similarly, in the Belt and Road initiative, the route from China to Europe lies through Kazakhstan. And the reverse flow is also active. For example, according to Anar (Faculty, Private University B) when Europeans want to strengthen cooperation with Asian countries, Kazakhstan emerges in such cooperation arrangements.

Capitalizing on the geographic location, Kazakhstan is a major actor on facilitating the engagement between European, Chinese and Central Asian universities. And Kazakhstan's decision to become the member of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) further strengthened this key role. However, there is a less favorable implication of Kazakhstan's EHEA



membership for partnerships beyond Europe. Similarly, Kazakh-Chinese institutional collaborations occur within Kazakhstan's commitment to European academic standards and regulations. This indirectly affects educational partners by shrinking the space for partnership with non-European institutions.

### *Exosystem*

#### **Internalizing European Membership: Institutional Autonomy**

Kazakhstan's membership in EHEA stimulated system changes within domestic exosystem. The commitment to incorporate European standards was institutionalized in Kazakhstani HE with the launch of the Center of Bologna Process and Academic Mobility (the Center). During the interview with one study participant Alina, a representative of the Think Tank A, we discussed the work of the Center and membership in EHEA that, according to Alina, "stimulated Kazakhstan for a number of reforms in HE such as institutional autonomy." Alina further explained this comment, saying the membership in the Bologna Process allowed the shift to decentralize HE governance, since this is one of the principles of European universities.

It brings benefits to Kazakhstan's HE too, but the implementation of decentralized governance itself is complicated because domestic universities have been in a centralized system since the days of the Soviet Union. It has also come to our attention how the idea for the creation of the Center (channel European standards in Kazakhstan academia) has outlived itself. The Center's current aspiration is to broaden their international activities; this includes establishing links with similar centers in Asia and beyond. This revelation demonstrates gradual maturity of Kazakhstan's outlook on HE internationalization.



### **Student Mobility Funds: Interactions Between the Systems**

There is, however, less matured mechanism of funding allocation for academic mobility in Kazakhstan. The funding is centralized and country-specific which means that funds are distributed with a particular destination region (i.e., 4000 USD for Europe per student). Such governance practice, has further implications cascading from the exosystem to meso- and microsystems because institutional ongoing links with foreign peers steer the mobility funding. For this, knowing the details of mechanisms of funding allocation (as explained by study participant below) helps to better understand the reasons why European countries are more often chosen as academic destination countries for student exchange while Asian (and Chinese) universities host Kazakh students on rarer occasions.

The representative of the Think Tank A, Alina, served at the public university (Almaty) and observed the influence of institutional links on the funding allocation. Her administrative experience at the public university informed the study on the details of funding allocation. The mechanism is applicable to all public universities in Kazakhstan and is streamed directly to institutions without official publication. MoES collects the number of requested grants for outbound student academic mobility annually from universities. For this, the public university reports the overall number of international partners indicating which foreign partner-institutions are willing to accommodate Kazakhstan students for one semester. The foreign partner also needs to provide recognizable academic courses and waive the tuition fee. The MoES gathers a state commission under the chairmanship of the vice-minister of MoES to allocate academic mobility grants.

Alina (Think Tank A) was against such dissemination of funds: “Because you give us autonomy on the one hand, and on the other you distrust universities.” For Alina, the distrust is having to allocate the funds at the ministerial, rather than institutional level. The MoES responded that centralization of fund allocation is a forced measure due to public complaints regarding cases of corruption and nepotism when mobility funds were distributed at the institutional level.

Given the mechanism of collecting institutional requests it now becomes evident that earlier raised issues of Kazakh-Chinese institutional impediments (mismatch of academic programs and language limitations) in academic programs affect the allocation of academic funds to China. In the absence of recognizability of academic programs and linguistic mismatch, Kazakhstan universities do not indicate Chinese peers as potential hosts of short-term Kazakhstani students.

### *Mesosystem*

#### **Local Social Obstacles For International Faculty Engagement**

Mesosystem holds the space to observe the interaction between the state and institutions.

Governmental expectation of institutional internationalization outcomes concentrates on certain indicators, such as academic mobility of students, faculty exchange and research collaboration.

At this stage, student exchanges bearing academic credits are rare in the Kazakh-Chinese institutional partnerships. Faculty exchange or research collaboration becomes alternative outlets for maintaining collaborative activities. There is, however, an overlap between government’s expectations and institutional capacity to fulfill these expectations; and Kazakhstani modest public funding on HE is specifically unsupportive of institutional internationalization outcomes.



Kazakhstani initiative of inbound academic mobility of faculty is meant to facilitate collaboration among academics. Recognizing the future value of cooperation with the visiting scholars, institutional departments attempt to invite foreign researchers for a longer visit of one semester but the faculty request can be denied within an institution with funding limitations as one of the possible reasons. A faculty member Elvira (National University B), for instance, shared that their current international collaborator from China was invited to another university as a visiting professor. Through the established faculty network in the city, Elvira was introduced to the visiting scholar and identified common research interests.

We submitted an application to invite her for a semester-long visit but administration declined it. We do not know the reason and we still want to invite her as a visiting professor next year because we see that our master and bachelor students can learn a lot from her. (Elvira, Faculty, National University B)

There is a two-fold purpose for visiting professor program; on the one hand it is meant to enhance institutional internationalization activities, and on the other hand it is expected to contribute to the expansion of an institutional database of foreign scholars who then share their opinion of Kazakhstan's universities in QS WUR's academic reputation survey. This is significant for the government since participation in world academic rankings simultaneously increases the visibility for Kazakhstani HE system and the country. The visibility that is needed to attract investments as the country is moving towards becoming world's top 30 economies by 2050.

### *Microsystem*

#### **Steering Academic Mobility: the Role of Students**

At the institutional level, the microsystem around destinations of academic mobility program is driven by students' choice of the country. Given the membership in EHEA, central funding was allocated to European countries by default. For example, Aina's (Head of International Office, National University A) university had to request region-specific (Asian) funding due to the Europe-focused approach to academic mobility from the central authorities. Upon satisfied institutional request, National University A opened Asia as an academic mobility destination; the students chose South Korea, not China for a short-term academic exchange:

Academic mobility mostly favored Europe and partially US. We started writing letters [to MoES] asking to allocate funding for Asia because a lot of our students want to go to Korea for example. Last year we got 5 grants [for Asian countries] and all students went to Korea. (Aina, Head of International Office, National University A)

The preference of South Korea also emerged in the interview with Anar (Faculty, Private University B) and she explained such preference by indicating the popularity of K-pop culture among young people globally, including youth in her institution. But it can also be the case that students of Mandarin majors utilize other funding schemes (i.e. Confucius institute scholarships) and do not apply for governmental support to visit Chinese universities.





Scarce HEIs funding in Kazakhstan affect institutional capacity for international exposure globally, and within Asia specifically. Short-term credit-bearing exchanges stay underutilized because of students' preferences. Next section on linguistic competencies intertwined with academic achievements within institutions elaborates further on students' rationales to select Europe over China for academic mobility programs.

### **Academic Short-Term Exchanges: Convenient Europe, Difficult China**

The analysis of microsystem within Kazakhstan institutions demonstrates that exchanging students with Chinese institutions mainly concentrates in a handful of Kazakhstan institutions because there is a linguistic pre-requisite for the development of this internationalization activity. Since Chinese universities' medium of instruction is mostly Mandarin, only universities with language majors (i.e., European languages - German, French, and Asian languages - Korean, Chinese, Japanese) in Kazakhstan can send their students for academic mobility to China.

In addition, the level of Mandarin taught in language majors in Kazakhstan leaves substantial space for development. This means that Kazakhstan students do not feel confident in their mastery of Mandarin to fully study in it. Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) further explains that mobility to Chinese universities triggers anxiety among students because of the language; it carries over to concerns regarding their academic performance: "They [students] cannot reach the required level of Chinese and get low grades. This disables them from getting a diploma with distinction [in their home institution]" and therefore, selecting China for short-term academic exchange is outside students' choice options. This echoes Kazakhstani full-time degree students' comments on the low level of professional knowledge they received

from the Chinese degree due to their lack of mastery of Chinese, which forces them to value the linguistic skills they acquire over their university degree from China. Therefore, the speed of language comprehension defines the study destination for short-term academic exchanges.

In these circumstances, the difficulty of mastering a new (Mandarin) language diverts Kazakhstani students' intentions of obtaining short-term foreign academic experiences in China. Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) commented that it is inappropriate to compare mastering Chinese and European languages (English, German, French) for Kazakh students because reaching fluent levels will take different periods of time. In two years, a Kazakh student may reach an intermediate/upper-intermediate level in a European language and be able to comprehend academic information in that language. However, in the same period, the student's level of Chinese may not advance to the level required for academic comprehension.

In addition to unwillingness of students, the following explanation of microsystem linguistic capacity deepens our understanding on the reasons why Kazakhstan's ongoing links with European countries are active while less engagement with Chinese universities is observed. This is because partnerships built with Eastern European universities in particular are based on shared linguistic and historic past when these regions used to be part of the Soviet Union. Linguistic skills and shared development trajectories form the common ground for smoother cooperation with European partner institutions. Availability of Russian, as the lingua franca with Eastern European partners, and low levels of English and almost non-existent Chinese in Kazakhstan institutions create expected impediments of similarly easy communication with Chinese institutions.

Lately, we have been sending and hosting students and faculty on academic mobility to and from Lithuania. We ourselves went to Finland on staff mobility, a PhD student went to Finland. Lithuania is the easiest to communicate for us, some of their older generation still speak Russian. Their experience to shift from the Soviet to European path might help us avoid some mistakes and speed the shifting. (Merey, International Office team member, National University B)

Kazakhstan's limited linguistic capacities stumble on China's similar limitations when short-term educational exchanges with Chinese partners are only available in Mandarin. Insufficient level of language serves as an impediment to establishing more engagement between Kazakh and Chinese universities. Although there are some short-term solutions (i.e., recruiting ethnic diaspora) it still does not solve the language barrier for the microsystem of institutions.

### **Complexity of Collaboration: Flexibility and Rigidness**

Microsystem within an institution experiences the effects of the national decision-making in terms of establishing partnerships with foreign universities. In order to both fulfill the state's expectation of expanding collaboration with country's strategic partner, China, and further develop internationalization, Kazakhstan universities tend to be flexible and opportunistic in responding to foreign counterparts' initiatives from European and Asian countries. Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) commented on such forms of cooperation her university managed to find beneficial angles. This specifically relates to cooperating with universities from Europe and Asia with European funding. In Aina's response, it is observable

that Kazakhstan institutions are in the beginning stages of reputation building that is why the institutional strategy is to adapt to international partner's initiatives:

We have an Erasmus project that includes our Chinese partner. European partners are interested in the financing for the project. Erasmus projects always teach us something. They are even ready to teach us something we already know, as long as they are being paid. Since we also receive some financial bonus and support of our facilities, we agree to such initiatives. In addition, we get to enhance our partnerships with the Europeans and Chinese. There's another similar Vietnamese-European project.

Cognizant of the aforementioned opportunities to extend wide cooperation with many countries, universities strive to be flexible and adaptable in their academic procedures and regulations to accommodate their partners. Moreover, universities find international academic standards responsive to various educational systems. For example, Anar (Faculty, Private University B) observed that European academic standards are applicable to both the Kazakh and Chinese university systems. These international standards are crucial in creating the common ground for the two countries to build institutional cooperation.

This revelation is yet to sink in within larger university stakeholders in Kazakhstan because current practices mostly focus on Europe while collaboration with China (even with signed partnership agreements) stays muted. For example, administrators' descriptions of their ongoing links with Europe capture the limited understanding of internationalization as a commitment to academic standards accepted regionally. Marina (Head of International Office, National



University B) explained “I do not think we need to scatter our focus. Since we are in the Bologna Process, we need to establish stronger links with them first.” Aiman (Head of International Office, Mixed University B) explained why her institution is more active in exchanging students for mobility programs in Europe but not in Asia. In her experience, membership in the Bologna Process substantially eased engagement in academic activities because the academic standards, processes and evaluation are synchronized. However, the exchange is imbalanced because her institution is mostly engaged in outbound mobility with Europe while hosting students from Asia and Central Asia.

Our academic advisors and European advisors negotiate the content of academic program and make sure it aligns with local programs. We automatically transfer disciplines because both sides weigh them in ECTS [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System] and our assessment mechanisms are similar too. Unfortunately, European students do not come to us yet; but we host students from South Korea, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Aiman, Head of International Office, Mixed University B).

Elvira’s (Faculty, National University B) university programs are modified to match their European partners. This shrinks the space to coordinate academic mobility of students or faculty with partners in China further increasing the gap in academic programs. Elvira commented: “We will not be able to exchange students or faculty with China because the programs are absolutely different and transfer of discipline is impossible.” Anar’s (Faculty, Private University B) university, on the contrary, managed to take advantage of structural changes due to EHEA

membership because in her language majors commonality of European standards creates common ground for engagement with Chinese universities in relation to academic mobility (for 1-2 academic semesters). However, this commonality is most likely driven by the content of the degrees when language majors have space to accommodate language exchange (Anar's university), whereas non-language majors are more rigid (Elvira's university). It is also notable that language-major flexibility no longer applies to double degree diplomas because the range of Kazakhstan and China difference in disciplines becomes unmanageable.

### **Rankings and Ranking-ization Culture**

The policy makers in both Kazakhstan and China value image building through HE. For this, academic league tables have long become a policy instrument (Hazelkorn, 2018). Along with the pressure to appear in the rankings themselves, Kazakh universities now seek partnerships with high-ranked institutions. Re-iterating Koch (2014), it has been observed that competition is a significant part of nation building policy for Kazakhstan; in HE competition translates as participating in academic rankings.

#### *Macrosystem*

##### **High Ranked and Unreachable Universities from China**

Chinese HE is making efforts to build world-recognized institutions to increase the attractiveness of domestic universities. High-league players are most likely to engage with their level institutions to maintain the status. Similarly, Chinese high-ranked universities follow ranking logic too when establishing cooperation with foreign partners. Research participant, Anar

(Faculty, Private University B) shared the insights of the organization of ranking in China through the experiences of her institution in Kazakhstan.

Anar (Faculty, Private University B), explained the rationale of Chinese high-ranked universities in establishing cooperation. Her previous Kazakhstani university sent a high-profile delegation to Peking University in order to establish cooperation. However, the visit was fruitless because Peking University, similarly instructed by their government, focuses on collaboration with higher-ranked universities in the USA to further enhance institutional (and China's) profile internationally. The Kazakh delegation was met in a friendly and amicable manner but nothing changed. Peking University runs double degree diplomas with US ranking leaders.

In addition, according to Anar, Chinese universities follow an unspoken division of cooperation countries which means that Chinese government has allocated certain territories for cooperation to domestic institutions. For example, a certain group of Chinese universities prioritizes collaboration with Central Asia (as shown in the quote below), whereas another group (i.e. high-ranked Tsinghua University, Peking University etc.) collaborate only with similar status universities abroad. Kazakhstan's fruitless delegation visit was a demonstration of Peking University's respect of such division. Chinese universities follow a certain mechanism for establishing foreign cooperation.

According to China's division, Lanzhou and Dalian Universities are expected to cooperate with Central Asia. University receives a directive with a priority region that comes with financial support to develop such collaboration, and then these universities

visit us because they have money for the partnership with us in particular. Peking and Tsinghua have different objectives (Anar, Faculty, Private University B).

Institutional areas of focus also affect the establishment of partnerships with Chinese ranking leaders. Anar (Faculty, Private University B) pointed out another essential obstacle for establishing cooperation with Chinese high rankers. Her previous comprehensive university's main collaborator with China was a division with a social science and humanities focus (department of Chinese language), and this heavily misaligned with the STEM area Chinese giants are focused on; and when the Kazakh-Chinese collaboration areas match, other impediments (academic misalignment, government-led divisions, language) stand in the way.

There is simply “insufficient common ground for cooperation”, as Anar highlighted for more active Kazakh-Chinese university collaboration. That is why her institution settles for short-term exchanges in linguistic majors with Chinese non-ranked or lower ranked universities. Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) echoed such exchange practices involving cultural and language visits. It is essential to emphasize that such linguistic major exchanges are available to a few Kazakhstan institutions only.

### **Additional Collaborative Platforms as Alternative to Unreachable High-Rankers**

Unable to exchange students in a wide spectrum of academic disciplines, joint efforts to maintain collaboration in additional educational platforms emerged. These platforms are top-down initiative by Chinese policymakers aimed to activate the collaboration with Kazakhstan in academic field. Meant to enhance people-to-people relations, these engagements are organized as



short cultural programs or site-visit trips that allow young people to immerse in Chinese culture. It has been observed that China is a more active investor in such types of cultural engagements which could be a dedicated financial support under the Great Rejuvenation process. As Anar (Faculty, Private University B) mentioned student flow to China enhanced lately; students participate in non-formal education held through the “Confucius Institute, Silk Road Program, University Alliance of the Silk Road or through our departmental contacts.” Normally, these trips outside institutional activities are scholarships for a full degree in Chinese universities or cultural trips to China.

There are other platforms facilitating educational partnerships but they depend on students’ financial capacity. In particular, University of Shanghai Cooperation Organization created as a platform for academic cooperation between Central Asia, Russia and China theoretically provides a stable collaboration base but in practice it is subject to the financial capacity of individual households. For example, according to Aina (Head of International Office, National University, A), the collaboration within the University of Shanghai Cooperation Organization was brief due to Kazakhstan students’ financial limitations.

We had a double degree diploma with Shanghai University in languages but since it was self-paid, it stopped. We only had one batch of undergraduate students who studied two years here and two years in Shanghai. We no longer have enrollments for that program.

When participants identified these platforms and additional collaborative activities, it became evident that not all platforms are actively utilized. For example, the Alliance of Universities of

the New Silk Road has not been mentioned, although universities participating in the study carry membership in this network. The reason could be that surface official initiatives and the following maintenance at institutional level mask the underlying issues of the lack of common ground for meaningful connection in research and academic fields. Constant attention of policymakers who keep creating new opportunities for collaboration persistently stumble on the same obstacles without processing the root causes of the inability to connect in academic and research fields. As long as central initiatives stay unaware of these underlying challenges, institutional leaders will stay bound to maintain such surface connection. It is therefore, the responsibility of institutions both Kazakh and Chinese to pro-actively communicate these obstacles to their respective governments to find better solutions for establishing collaborative activities.

### *Exosystem*

#### **Compromise: Unranked Academic Collaborations and National Strategic Goals**

The perception of HE as a contributor to nation building discussed in the cases of China (Tsang, 2000) and Malaysia (Ahmat, 1980), Kazakhstan with its national objective of becoming top 30 economies by 2050, laid similar ranking expectations on Kazakhstani educational institutions. In the case of Kazakhstan, however, ranking plays a significantly prominent role.

Under the double ranking effect (at national level - becoming top 30 global economies; institutional level - moving higher in the QS ranking), defined in the context of this study as omnipresence of rankings in nation building, Kazakhstan's universities pursue academic partnerships with high-ranked institutions, and ranking becomes the major driver of institutional

collaborations. This is especially visible in the case of Kazakh-Chinese partnerships when the Kazakhstan universities aspire to collaborate with Chinese high-ranked counterparts.

However, the desired high-ranked Chinese collaborators are inaccessible because of their own agendas envisaged by Chinese government. Nevertheless, Kazakhstani universities still strive to maintain academic collaboration with Chinese universities because of China's official status of strategic partner for Kazakhstan. In this sense, the record of high value of national goal emerges within Kazakhstan's HE.

Institutional leaders identified their role in national aspiration this way: “to become top most developed global economies, we need the best people in the world, and that's why we focus on human capital development” (Marat, Rector, Private University A). Kazakhstan actively participates in international education surveys—PIAAC and PISA by OECD, TIMSS, ICILS and PIRLS by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)—to become visible on the global educational landscape. Hence, active engagement with global education community is expected to showcase Kazakhstan for the flow of investment that should affect Kazakhstan's position at the global economic market.

### *Mesosystem*

### **Mesosystem: The Interchange Between National Policy And Institutional Interpretation**

Given the policymakers' vision of strategic partnerships, Kazakhstan universities compromise to any links with Chinese institutions to maintain the status identified at the official level. This stems from the constant explicit emphasis done by institutional leaders' interpretation of national policy; however, it could also be an institutional strategy for survival to earn policymakers' trust that universities are fulfilling national aspirations. Nonetheless, the interchange between the institutional interpretation and national policy occurring within the mesosystem allows observing the collaboration from both government and university's perspectives.

Kazakhstan universities participate in the state-set aspirations fully recognizing their role in nation building. Supplementing the previous participants' experiences, Aiman (Head of International Office, Mixed University B) shared that her institution contributes to the "top 30 economies" national objective because when the university, as a part of Kazakhstan society, promotes itself it affects the entire country's image too. Anar (Faculty, Private University B) emphasized that her previous public university had to fulfill the government's expectations, reflected in keeping the officially achieved agreements active between Kazakhstan and China: "National University projects state policy of strategic partnership with China." Marat (Rector, Private University A) identified the paradox of having academic links with more distant locales (Kazakh-British University, Kazakh-German University, Kazakh-Turkish University) but having less active links with next-door China, Kazakhstan's strategic partner.

This lack of active links with Chinese universities reiterates the concerns expressed by other participants when they emphasized the strategic partnership at the country level but could hardly

identify academic (or research) output of this collaboration. In order to improve the situation in establishing closer educational collaboration, the two countries discussed the plan of action at the official level. It needs to be highlighted how the central decision making is again put to use, and collaboration initiative cascades top-down. This may entertain official protocols but the unchanged approach of central allocation of collaborators may stumble upon the same impediments in implementing this collaboration at institutional level:

Several years ago Yelbasy [President N. Nazarbayev] discussed the establishment of joint research platform with the Chairman Xi Jinping at the G20 meeting, I think. At that point, the Chinese side identified Fudan University and Kazakh side identified us (Marat, Rector, Private University A).

It might be a matter of time before the two collaborators from the quote above will slide into similar challenges of attempts for cooperation between differently ranked institutions of Kazakhstan and China. Marat's (Rector, Private University A) institution is a newly opened establishment which requires time and graduated cohorts to start participating in academic rankings. Fudan University (China) is an institution with long-established history, and its ranking position in top 50 best universities according to QS. The gap between research and academic capacity will prevent these two institutions from putting official announcement of collaboration into active institutional engagement. Consequently, to fulfill the official promise by the governments of Kazakhstan and China, the two collaborators will symbolically maintain the partnership by occasional cultural visits and joint invitations to participate in events (conference,



workshops etc.). This scenario is based on the lived experiences of collaborative attempts with high-ranked Chinese institutions shared by other participants within this study.

### *Microsystem*

#### **Ranking-ization as Collaborator Selection Tool**

Ranking became an institutional tool to establish international collaborations. This way, institutions have internalized the ranking-ization culture at the microsystem level both in their operationalization of everyday functions and internationalization strategies.

Universities seek similar or higher ranked counterparts for collaboration because the ranking position roughly gives an estimate of the university's background. Aina (Head of International Office National University, A) shared such an opinion during our interview. In her practical experience, ranking serves two purposes: 1) to increase her institution's image received from the association of her university with the prestigious partner, and 2) to pre-assess the foreign university requesting partnership. This is especially applicable for ranked universities cognizant of further improvement of their positions that are therefore being selective.

Anar (Faculty, Private University B) re-iterated the necessity of cooperating with institutions of similar or higher-ranking positions as a requirement from international accrediting agencies. Botagoz (Head of International Office, Private University B), however, mistakenly assumed that the need to cooperate with high-ranked universities is a directive from the MoES. But the following explanation unfolds the institutional perception of Chinese universities and the



importance of ranking in a more realistic way; it is also aligned with students' opinions of the plethora of Chinese universities.

We pay more attention to the ranking now. If we find an institution of less interest for us, we just say 'your agreement is being considered.'; This happens with Chinese universities because there are so many of them, and when we start getting too many requests from unknown universities we have to be careful (Aina, Head of International Office, National University A).

The spread of ranking-*ization* culture penetrated in various spheres of national development and identified new benchmarks for assessment. Academic ranking, however, became more than just a benchmark; for high rankers, it is a partnership prerequisite. The higher the ranking, the higher are the requirements for future collaborations.

Institutional administrators successfully internalize ranking-*ization* culture in Kazakhstan to sift through cooperation agreement initiatives. This elimination method applies to all partner institutions, old and new regardless of territorial location of the foreign institution. Possibly the earlier mentioned rejection of Elvira's departmental request to invite her Chinese collaborator (from unranked institution) as a visiting scholar was subject to the new system of establishing partnerships.

On the positive side, administrative authority helps to establish selective institutional partnerships. Aina (Head of International Office, National University, A) has witnessed her



institution's evolution from signing partnership agreements for quantitative gain to their current stance of selectivity. The reason for signing an ample number of agreements before was the respective requirement from the MoES that equated the number of international agreements to successful international engagement. However, over a period of annual reports, the increasing number of agreements made no change in institutional internationalization performance, which identified the need to change the approach. As Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) shared, "Now that every faculty comes with their own agreement, we introduced limitations." The administrator elaborated on the nature of these limitations. Since recently her university started focusing on high-ranked partner institutions, when faculty members bring an unknown university, the international office encourages signing departmental agreements instead of university-wide ones. Piles of inactive agreements taught the National University international office team that a higher quantity of agreements is useless for the university's international profile and engagement. These inactive agreements tend to be with universities from post-Soviet countries for which faculty most likely have utilized their old personal and professional connections.

### **Maintaining Institutional Collaboration amidst Challenges beyond Higher Education**

The study findings indicated there are additional impactful challenges for Kazakhstani-Chinese engagements in HE. The analysis of these challenges via Ecological Systems Theory helped to locate the societal perception within the mesosystem as the driving force. The intermediate positioning of mesosystem combines the macrosystem discourses, exosystem policies with microsystem interpretations. This means that macro and exosystem rhetorics are interpreted within mesosystem before being transferred to microsystem for implementation; and that is why



insufficient attention to mesosystem can become detrimental in operationalization of foreign and national policies.

### *Macrosystem*

#### **Macrosystem: Ambitious Intentions, Limited Results**

National perception of strategic partnership and willingness to maintain close relations penetrates through official channels but demonstrates limited results at the institutional level. Most probably Chinese side is aware of current cautious societal perception of China in Kazakhstan society because of the constant investment in cultural activities. Aliya (Vice Rector, Private University B) has been involved in institutional international activities consistently. For example, she recollected her institution's established friendly relations with the Chinese Consulate General in Kazakhstan: "They [Consulate] supported our trip to China and organized the visit to leading universities. It was completely free for us. And later similar trip was organized for our students too." It is observed that these visits by both administrators and later students were cultural tours as Aliya did not mention further activities stemming out of the visit, such as signed agreements or joint activities with the visited universities. Institutions from both sides were unable to internalize these officially created possibilities and translate them into academic links. Active intentions to create friendly relations, therefore, stay at the official level.

There is another channel to access China but it comes in a more structured form. Confucius Institutes (CIs) work across the globe to provide foreigners a platform to learn Chinese language and culture. As earlier mentioned by Anar (Faculty, Private University B) CI provide scholarships for cultural and language visits to China in addition to teaching Chinese locally.

Normally, CI partner with local universities, engage local and Chinese staff in teaching and administration, and provide their learning programs on university campuses for wide audience. Thus, CIs are an attempt to link officially-set intentions with local communities, i.e., CIs are government's attempt to interchange with the locals within the mesosystem.

### **Confucius Institutes as an Image Remediation Measure**

The interchange within mesosystem is sensitive to any forced hierarchical actions or interventions from the national governments. This is visible at the example of recent criticism towards CIs. The collaborative intention of CIs with their host institutions resulted in closing down some of CIs (i.e., North America, Europe). The criticism sparked after host countries recognized the curriculum was projecting Chinese Communist Party ideology alongside the cultural and language learning.

Kazakhstani institutions' experiences of collaborating and hosting CIs vary domestically, and are different from the experiences of other host institutions around the globe. CIs contribution to image remediation initiative is to expose wider audience of locals to China's culture and education. Altering the perception about China might be more likely when the cultural immersion starts in the CIs domestically and extends to visiting China for a period of time; and citizens of neighboring countries might be primary audience for China due to geographic proximity. There is, however, an inconsistency of policies when some of them aim to expand the cultural immersion to the country, while other policies prescribe restrictive access to the country (i.e., visa regulation).



### **Restricted Access: Preferential Visa**

As it has been discussed earlier in the study, visa dynamics have been changing from visa-free regime to recent more restrictive visa regulations between Kazakhstan and China. In particular, cancellation of individual tourist visas for Kazakhstan citizens to China. This change might be due to situation in Xinjiang and Muslim population; sensitive issue for both sides based on what has been learnt in the course of the study. As a citizen of Kazakhstan that is a secular country but the majority of population is of Muslim background, I personally have experienced the restricted access to China. Some other acquaintances from countries with the majority of population practicing Islam faced similar access restrictions to China (i.e., Malaysia, Turkey) compared to citizens of other countries who experienced less difficulties (i.e., Switzerland, Canada). These inconsistencies between China's goals in education - become popular academic destination - and the way visas are handled at a national level have also been pointed out by study participants. Moreover, visa regulation has its implications for implementation of academic activities between the two countries. Botagoz (Head of International Office, Private University B) identified visa regulations as one of the obstacles in exchanging students with Chinese universities: "It became a very complicated procedure. They ask to have 5,000 USD in the bank account."

### *Exosystem*

#### **Exosystem: Ready For Collaboration**

At the country level, Kazakhstan has been building stable connections with China in HE for almost three decades now. Chapter Three - policy documents review - showed the educational engagement commenced between the two countries early in the 1990s. Anar pointed out in her

interview another document - the Agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China on cooperation in education (dated June 3, 2003). This Agreement laid the ground for further collaboration in education between the two countries.

If you make a comparative analysis by countries, you will notice that the results of China's educational policy are especially visible in Kazakhstan. We were one of the first countries to sign relevant documents between our Ministries [of Education]. Uzbekistan has just signed such an agreement this year (Anar, Faculty, Private University B).

It was underlined that Kazakhstan has been in the focus for China among other Central Asian countries. There are, however, more nuanced perceptions towards China that have been recorded at the mesosystem in Kazakhstan.

### *Mesosystem*

#### **Mesosystem: Invisible Challenges for Collaboration**

Sentiments related to Chinese occupation are present in Kazakhstan to this day. Long-lasting territorial disputes, national policies targeting Muslims in Xinjiang and current aspirations for influence comprise the factors of fearful China image. It needs to be reiterated how Xinjiang policies affect the perception of China in Kazakhstan; this is because the largest ethnic group of Kazakhs currently resides in Xinjiang with their relatives distributed through all of Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular. It is at the edge of these two images that Kazakh universities need to stay balanced and aware of both images while establishing collaboration with Chinese

counterparts.

For next-door Kazakhstan, the issue of territorial disputes is additionally layered with fears around ethnic diaspora in Xinjiang. National policies in Xinjiang which particularly target Muslims (including ethnic Kazakhs) have direct links to Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. Detainment of separate citizens in Xinjiang sometimes affects their family members outside national borders; such as for example young people studying abroad who are summoned to return for interrogation, and may not be allowed to resume their studies overseas.

The 2016 land protests are most recent illustrations of societal anxiety around Chinese occupation. Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) reflected on occupation, linking it to the 2016 land protests: “It all started with land. These ideas about occupation emerged after that. They [China] pursue soft power. Everybody knows that. They occupied everything everywhere.”

It is observed that the current societal anxiety and fear are based on little knowledge about the neighbor. Marat’s (Rector, Private University A) opinion about the fear of Chinese suggests the importance of having the awareness of such societal perceptions of China in Kazakhstan. As suggested by Nye (2021), more efforts from the Chinese national government, especially in including civic society, can aid to form a more favorable image of the country abroad. However, as it has been already discussed, image remediation tools manifesting in the additional collaboration platforms are still centralized. Another case of government-introduced mechanism for promoting China’s image is CIs.



### **Recovering Positive Image: Controversial Mechanisms**

Among the image building mechanisms, CIs are the controversial ones. Discussed earlier from the perspective of the Chinese government's intention, the experiences of Kazakhstani university on collaborating with China within CIs provide different from the intended outcome. Based on these experiences, universities carry certain opinions to society which certainly affects the rhetorics around China at the mesosystem level.

Most recent encounter of negotiating terms and conditions of establishing CI on the campus of a mixed university in Kazakhstan was unsuccessful because of unilateral character of collaborating with CIs that jeopardized the possibilities of expanding the collaborative networks. Aiman (Head of International Office, Mixed University B) shared her administrative experience with the Confucius Institute. She had been negotiating the establishment of a CI on behalf of her university but had to reject them when she learned of conditions that were detrimental to her university.

We tried to cooperate with Confucius Institute and were already discussing to provide an entire floor to them, but their terms were absolutely unacceptable. They wanted to recruit our students, which is wrong. If you want our students, you need to send your students to us too. We don't agree to only work one way (Aiman, Head of International Office, Mixed University B).

Aiman's quote above demonstrates her institution's conscious choice to refuse to be a platform to source students while having little academic or research output for the host institution. In this

sense, institutional stance on the clarity of priorities such as respecting national objectives, obtaining academia-related outputs or pursuing financial gain is crucial. In the contrast, CIs emerged on a more positive note with emphasis on collaborative and educative mode during the interviews with other participants. Marat (Rector, Private University A) mentioned the growing number of CIs that aim to inform the world about Chinese culture.

Given the cautious sentiments towards China already present in Kazakhstani society such cases of controversy around opening of CIs might further deepen the societal not-so-positive perception of China. In addition, Chinese official policies and their implementation confuse Kazakhstan academics (and civil population). Specifically, the incongruence between China's national aspiration of becoming top academic destination and restricted visa regulations. According to Marat (Rector, Private University A), "In strategic goals, China aspires to increase the number of international students to half a million." The current complicated visa procedures, however, make China more difficult to understand for Kazakhstanis.

Institutional leaders and faculty participating in the study provided ideas for improving China's image in Kazakhstan. But these ideas split them into two camps when some suggest that engaging society directly into understanding the root causes of societal fears around China in Kazakhstan might help. Studying these fears through surveys and interviews with society will be necessary to understand the causes and find solutions. But the opposite camp doubts that evidence-based studies on the Chinese presence (number of labor migrants, number of investment companies etc.) in Kazakhstan would change the situation because rumors at the societal level, according to Aina (Head of International Office, National University A), are "still



a deal breaker.”

The skepticism of the latter camp might be closer to reflecting the complexity of the societal perception unreachable for immediate change by studying them. In addition, inconsistencies of governmental regulations further confuse the civilians for who the country image and their home country's relations with it consist of plethora of factors. The civilians receive mixed signals on the official relations between countries when their access to a certain foreign country is being restricted, and yet the official discourse is about strategic partnership.

### **Cascading Implications: the Microsystem**

Immediate implications of Xinjiang policies targeting Muslims, is observable through ethnic Kazakhs studying in Kazakhstan. Domestic universities hosting ethnic Kazakhs lose their students who never return after visits to China during academic breaks:

We still hear the cases when our ethnic Kazakh students leave and never return. They [the students] are summoned. It was known they had relatives and parents [in China]. They [the students] were detained, and some never came back to Kazakhstan. There was some noise for a year, maybe. We also were affected by this [events in Xinjiang]” (Aina, Head of International Office, National University A).

The above quote suggests the cases of missing students are repetitive and occur within a number of universities in Kazakhstan; the contributing factor to the fear-based China image. However, little actions are taken, as it is observable from the quote, which suggests there is insufficient



reverse interaction from the microsystem to exo- and macrosystems. In other words, the missing students within separate institutions might be taken as too little ground for serious engagement of officials from both sides. It was learnt informally that when Kazakhstan citizens appeal to the national government asking for support to return a certain individual from China, these requests might be successful and Kazakhstani government helps to reunite families; but these are most frequently individual cases without official engagement from both sides. The possible explanation could be willingness of both Kazakhstani and Chinese governments to maintain the official strategic partnership discourse.

Another obstacle experienced at an individual, microsystem level but with larger implications is restricted access to China. Anar (Faculty, Private University B) elaborated on the implications of visa regulation on HE. She shared her experience of working in National University C, where Anar was an administrator responsible for communication with Chinese partners prior to her current teaching position in Private University B. Her detailed response elaborated on the difficulties in cooperating with Chinese partner institutions, in particular, when the joint activities involved the physical movement of staff or students. In her professional experience, there were cases when visa restrictions disrupted joint academic activities (i.e. co-organized conference or students struggling to obtain a visa to commence their academic year in China in a timely way).

According to Anar,

My previous university had a national status which allowed us to apply to the migration office for visa support for our guests. And the process is very long, 45 days. Our Chinese

colleagues, being from a similar bureaucratic country, understand it and start visa application long in advance. But even then slip-ups occur, such as when the entire delegation from our partner institution in Wuhan could not come because of visas. Maybe conference organizing committees overlooked but tensions and the worsening of visa regulations due to political reasons could also contribute. We raised the visa issue at the meeting with the Chinese Consul on Education and Culture and even discussed establishing a visa center for students only because of the increasing flow but not much has changed even though they are willing to help.

The respondent links the delay in visas to institutional or national level factors, and specifically referred to the political situation between Kazakhstan and China. The National University C attempted to ease the visa issue by communicating with the Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan, but little has changed as of the writing of this dissertation.

### Conclusion

This chapter analyzed Kazakhstani institutional perspectives on collaborating with Chinese counterparts. Summarizing the findings presented above, it is useful to turn to research sub-question two *Why do Kazakh universities collaborate with their Chinese counterparts; and what experiences do these collaborations produce?*

The first part of the sub-question on the *why collaborate* is reflected in the combined national efforts of close collaboration from both Kazakhstan and China. The official discourse of China as a strategic partner, stimulates Kazakhstani institutions to seek partnerships with their peer-

institutions in China. In other words, national expectations form the initial institutional rationales for engaging in international partnerships with Chinese universities.

Responding to the second part of the sub-question on experiences produced as a result of such collaborations it is essential to mention a number of obstacles for Kazakh-Chinese institutional collaborations that emerge specifically within Kazakhstani mesosystem with further serious implications for microsystems of administrators and faculty.

Kazakh society carries the memories of China that have been previously established, and China's current pursuit of soft power embedded in great rejuvenation further exacerbates the cautious attitudes from civilians in Kazakhstan. The official macrosystem image of China in Kazakhstan is a strategic partner that does not align with the perceptive attitude and the consequent image of China at mesosystem level as a fear-inspiring China.

Universities, as bridges between the state and local settings, are sensitive to both policymakers' visions and locally formed tendencies. The inconsistencies of policies at macrosystem, officially-set strategic partnership formed at exosystem as well as perceptions lingering at mesosystem eventually affect the institutional engagement with their Chinese partners; causing the mixture of experiences for Kazakhstani institutions. This results in surface engagement and symbolic collaborations. Specifically, institutional collaborations are sealed with memoranda of understanding but lack further activation of these official intentions in the form of joint academic and research activities between Kazakhstani and Chinese universities.



Next chapter, Chapter Seven, presents an analysis of students' perceptions of China through a similar frame of analysis where the effect of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory tracks the factors influencing students' decisions to study in China.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: DEFYING NATIONAL EXPECTATIONS: KAZAKHSTANI STUDENTS' HOPES OF A CHINESE DEGREE

### Introduction

This chapter examines Kazakhstani students' decision making process to study in China, and the major influencing factors on embarking on such life-changing experiences. Earning a university degree in China initially commenced as an alternative to the locally provided lesser-quality HE. China's national policies inspired by Great Rejuvenation were designed to make China attractive for foreigners. Macrosystem image of China records a success on the surface beyond which students' decision making rarely extends. China is presented as a desirable study destination with the promises of knowing the *language of opportunities* and global employment. Kazakhstan's exosystem built an image of strategic partner for China, and has started developing a respective infrastructure such as inviting Chinese investment in the country. Students' mesosystems also contribute to the decision making process because the adults (similarly to the young) are also responsive to the employment promises.

Young people's microsystems gradually shift as students' experiences sink deeper in learning the country. They start observing the differences within quality of the local universities in China. The young are in transitioning period of learning to make informed decisions based on the labor market demands. It comes to students' attention that not all universities in China give high-quality HE, and the difficulty of academic process could be an indicator of quality. Therefore, students should not be misled by easy studies but instead be ready to commit and invest in their future profession.



Another unexpected students' discovery of China was an establishment of critical opinion of political regime and policies in China. In this regard, students have based their criticism on human rights perspective. This means that irrespective of a human's background or religious beliefs, anyone possesses the right for the freedom of opinions, actions and religion. Through this prism of political views, students criticized the governance system and anti-Muslim policies in Xinjiang. Students also commented on the existing cautious attitude towards China in Kazakhstani society. Based on their first-hand experience in both Kazakhstan and China, students explained the factors on which this attitude is built.

### **Higher Education: Connecting Economic Growth, Language and Trade**

#### *Macrosystem*

#### **Discovering China For Successful Career**

At the macrosystem level Kazakhstan and China engagement was mainly around trade early in the 1990s. Along with the official country-to-country trade relations, China was being explored by individual shuttle traders from all over Central Asian countries, including Russia. Shuttle trading fulfilled three main functions. Firstly, it provided population in Central Asia and Russia with an income to survive the turbulence of unstable economy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Secondly, shuttle trading met the deficiency for the goods of everyday use, the consequence of economic instability and lack of industrial sector in post-Soviet space. Third, shuttle trading became an opportunity to visit a foreign country for tourist purposes. It is within these trips that visitors started exploring wider range of goods and services available at Chinese market.

Occasional shuttle trading trips have opened China's educational market to Kazakhstan. Factors such as geographical proximity and affordability of the degree further promoted Chinese diplomas among Kazakhstani citizens to the extent of locally increased demand to learn Chinese in Kazakhstan.

The main selling factor of learning Chinese and studying in China is career opportunities. For Kazakhstani students, China is presented as the second best HE provider after Russia while the USA is ranked as number one for international student flows globally. For example, the CCN language school website boasts that "20-50% increase of the labor market demand for graduates of Chinese universities, large scale Kazakh-Chinese investment projects and employability anywhere in the world due to the growth of e-commerce with China."

### *Exosystem*

#### **Chinese Language Contribution: Economic Development and Multilingualism**

Discovered at a turning point in national economy, Chinese HE started winning more space within Kazakhstan's exosystem. Extremely limited in funding due to transitioning economy, local HE faded against the opportunities of foreign degrees. Gradually, study abroad option became a better alternative to Kazakhstani HE. During that period, the volatile economy barely provided for any social needs; and citizens were forced to make a living in any way they could. Small-scale trading, known as shuttle trading in post-Soviet space, became a survival tool for many households. Individual traders purchased goods of everyday use in the neighboring countries to resell them at local markets. China was one of the most popular destinations for shuttle traders.



Kazakhstan already ethnically diversified country, expanded further linguistically; and Chinese as a popular language among locals contributes to the multilingual development of human capital in the country. A multiethnic country like Kazakhstan aims to simultaneously develop Kazakh (national language), Russian (language of inter-ethnic communication), and English as the “ticket to a global life” (Kazakhstan President N. Nazarbayev’s Address on XXII session of Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, April 23, 2015). In education, the President’s words became part of the “Roadmap of Trilingual Education 2015-2020” plan (Joint order of the Ministers of Education and Science..., 2015).

A quote from the Deputy Prime-Minister’s speech in 2016 builds on the trilingual policy, adding Chinese as the fourth language. In the same speech, the official emphasized the importance of Chinese investment in Kazakhstan’s economy, hence the need to know the Chinese language. Empirical data from participants in this study vividly reflect such sentiments about the importance of the Chinese language, along with other foreign languages.

Deputy Prime Minister Dariga Nazarbayeva,

We all need to teach our kids to obtain knowledge in three languages at the very least.

Very soon, we will anyways need to know Chinese too. This is our great southern neighbor, this is our fate (as cited on Chinese.kz b, n.d.).

The Chinese language has become so popular in Kazakhstan that English instruction had to give over some of the learning space or even allow purely Chinese language schools to function. Multiple Chinese learning language schools emerged in the country, especially in regions



strategically linked with China such as in the southern cities of Almaty, Shymkent, Kyzylorda due to proximity of the national Kazakh-Chinese borders; in the western cities of Aktobe and Atyrau due to the accumulation of major Chinese investments in the Kazakh oil industry; and in the central Kazakhstan where the capital Nur-Sultan is situated. Language schools' websites<sup>12</sup> reflect some of students' instrumentalist rationales for choosing China for their HE degrees.

Another approach to satisfy manpower with Chinese language skills emerged in Almaty through a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institute, the International Kazakh-Chinese Language College. The students are promised China's leading experience and innovative approaches in TVET, along with in-depth learning of Chinese and 97% employment rates after graduation (International Kazakh-Chinese Language College, n.d.). The majority of college students pursue HE degrees mostly in Chinese universities, and previous language training is helpful.

Learners are promised the fastest and most reliable linguistic experiences with professional local teachers and native Chinese speakers (Laoshi, n.d.).

### **Capitalization on Popularity of Chinese**

Popularity of Chinese country-wide opened a new business opportunity that local companies raced to fill. One of the largest specialized language and study abroad centers, Chinese.kz, has branch offices in all key regions and actively recruits Kazakh students to learn Chinese. Half of 13 student participants in this study knew this language school and/ or enrolled in Chinese

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<sup>12</sup> CCN [www.ccn.kz](http://www.ccn.kz) Laoshi School of Chinese [www.laoshi.kz](http://www.laoshi.kz) Chinese.kz [www.chinese.kz](http://www.chinese.kz) Chinese Simple [www.chinesecenter.kz](http://www.chinesecenter.kz)

universities via this school's services. Network of Chinese universities for which the school recruited students and additional set of services gives this language school an advantage at the market of Chinese learning in Kazakhstan. The school provides unique services such as issuing special bankcards for Kazakh students in partnership with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and Union Pay. The Center built wide partnerships with key players in Chinese language and culture such as the Confucius Institute Headquarters (in 2020 rebranded as the Center for Language Education and Cooperation) and the Association of Silk Road Countries and appears in popular local (Kazakhstan Today, 365info.kz) and foreign media channels (Financial Times, CCTV, BBC).

The combined effect of advertisements and official speeches are reflected in the scope of the growing student population committed to studying the Chinese language prior to university enrollment. The Chinese.kz center offers tailored language courses to different audiences and age groups. The Center accommodates children, teenagers, and adults. Youngsters start learning the language prior to the degree and attempt to obtain their HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) certificate required for international students in Chinese universities. Special foundation programs developed in collaboration with two Chinese universities, Guilin University of Electronic Technologies and Guilin University of Tourism, guarantees to save up to two million tenge (approximately \$5,000 USD). The foundation program is flexible and can be completed entirely in Kazakhstan within ten months, alongside current full-time studies or a job. In any payment mechanism, a student's family supports them financially, and the study abroad decision is a joint matter.

### *Mesosystem*

#### **Mesosystem: Trade, Family And Chinese Higher Education**

The story of embarking on a study abroad journey of student participant Fatima (Female, Student) illustrates the interaction between various systems. Specifically, the participant's story is an example of the effect of shuttle trading on family survival, and a consequent unexpected decision to study in China.

The family lived in a small northern town near the current capital. In the 1990s-2000s, the mother of Fatima, as with many other unemployed people at that period, travelled through the entire country to reach Almaty in the south and then take a bus to Urumqi, China. Goods purchased at Urumqi markets were sent back to Kazakhstan by cargo. The story of the retail business of Fatima's family started small in her hometown, and later relocated to the capital where Fatima's sister is in charge of the now thriving business. On one of the shopping trips to China, Fatima's mother learnt that students from other countries study in China and the tuition fees are affordable. Given the low quality of domestic HE at that time, studying in China presented a better opportunity for a successful career. Studying in a foreign language and earning a foreign degree would increase employability too. So, the family made the decision to send Fatima to China for a university degree.

The story of another student, Kamila (Female, Graduate), resonates with the story of Fatima (Female, Student) in the sense that neither student personally considered China as a potential study destination until trade trips identified study abroad plans.

My parents' friend who always went shuttle trading in Urumqi met a local Kazakh born in China who said that lots of CIS<sup>13</sup> students come to China for HE degree. They learn Chinese, and this is a very good investment in the kids' future. Before this, I never thought of going to study in China as I was not interested in the country. But I always wanted to study abroad. So, when this opportunity came up, I grabbed it. (Kamila, Female, Graduate)

Now that Chinese educational market has been winning an audience among Kazakh consumers, the local profit-making education market identified a niche in Chinese teaching and learning.

### **Mesosystem Informing Students' Decisions for Studying Abroad**

As Kazakhstani social and economic conditions improved, study abroad options became more and more intense. The appealing advertisements about successful careers spread quickly, combining the information from policies and innovative business solutions to learn Chinese. Mesosystem holds space to interchange the latest trends and possibilities related to HE and further careers. An opportunistic discourse on China penetrates through various sources and shapes students' perceptions of the utility of the Chinese language. The Chinese.kz website banner says, "Do you speak the language of opportunities?"

Captivated students and their families believe in the sentiment of the high value of the Chinese university degree (Chinese.kz, n.d.). For example, Tomiris (Female, Graduate) shared during an

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<sup>13</sup> Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is a regional partnership union established after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Members are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine.

interview how she read about the international recognition of the Chinese diploma, and advised her aunt to consider China as academic destination. Later, following her own advice, Tomiris went to China for bachelor's degree. Both Tomiris (Female, Graduate) and her cousin studied in Beijing, even though previously the primary choice of Tomiris was Europe; however, she went to China so she could stay closer to her family:

My mother did not want to let me go as I am the only child and she did not want me to be too far from her. So, that's why I had to change from faraway Europe to China, which is closer (Tomiris, Female, Graduate).

Other student-participants have also demonstrated the influence of family and wider community on their decision to study in China. In his initial plans, Abylai (Male, Student) was committed to study in France. In order to do so, he started learning French early in his secondary school. But by the time of starting the university degree, Abylai changed his mind and followed his mother's advice to learn Chinese as the language of the future. Bibi (Female, Graduate) listened to her elder's advice and applied to a Chinese university: "My grandpa wanted me to study in China and know Chinese because he believed in that country's future." According to Bibi, the world politics and her grandfather's latest readings were often the topics of dinner discussions that solidified her decision to pursue her university degree in China. Thus, students' decision-making process of studying in China was impacted by the family circles, or mesosystem in the language of the Bronfenbrenner's theory.

### *Microsystem*

#### **Microsystem: Multilingualism for Successful Careers**

As shown above, external forces of various magnitude feed into Kazakhstani students' decision of studying in China. It is, however, students' personal purposes that drive their exposure to the difficulties of unknown language of Mandarin, additional language in their toolbox for successful careers. Whether or not the application of the language is foreseen within the closest future (i.e., employment for Raikhan (Female, Graduate) or it is observed in a more distant perspective (Abylai (Male, Student), it is students themselves that need to obtain decent level of the language to further capitalize on it.

Learning Mandarin is a conscious choice based on the careful consideration of the future labor market. One of the largest employers in Raikhan's (Female, Graduate) hometown, AktobeMunaiGas, is the China National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) first project in Central Asia. AktobeMunaiGas can meet employment expectations by recruiting both local and Chinese employees; thus, knowing Chinese is essential for local candidates. Informed young people like Raikhan recognize the importance of stable employment early in their life.

In 2007-2008 when Raikhan studied in Aktobe High School (Western Kazakhstan), a few Chinese language schools only served businessmen and adults in her town. The perseverance led young Raikhan to seek for opportunities elsewhere. This is how she commenced her language foundation course in China. Similarly to Raikhan, all student participants reported having to complete foundation course in China because at the time when they enrolled in Chinese



universities, the language learning market in Kazakhstan did not provide such a plethora of adjustable opportunities to learn Chinese.

Learning Chinese through a foundation course in China has its advantages too. In most of the cases, students utilize the language learning time (approximately 1-2 years, depending on the student's performance and learning abilities) to familiarize themselves with the local academic standards as well as culture and lifestyle. Students build networks of friends with other international and/or local students that serve as primary information source. On the downside, these years of study pose an increased financial burden for students earning the HE degree. That is why students attempt to study harder to enroll in university degree faster. Both Bibi (Female, Graduate) and Raikhan (Female, Graduate) demonstrated phenomenal results in language learning and were motivated to communicate on their own with locals more quickly. Raikhan (Female, Graduate) enrolled in the university after eight months of language course, and Bibi (Female, Graduate) skipped her first semester of her bachelor's degree after a year of a language course.

My university enrolled me conditionally to the first year of my bachelor degree and I was supposed to provide HSK certificate after the first semester. When I sat the exam, I got HSK level 6 and that saved me a semester-worth of time (Bibi, Female, Graduate).

Students were strategically planning their future career opportunities by enhancing their multilingual skills; and Chinese is the fifth language for them. Normally, when students say “additional foreign language” it means a language other than the three languages from the

trilingual policy in Kazakhstan (Kazakh, Russian and English). Abylai (Male, Student) studied in a linguistic gymnasium and was seriously committed to French. Bibi (Female, Graduate) too studied in a specialized school and knew an additional foreign language, Turkish.

Upon the commencement of their degrees in China, it was the multilingual skills that revealed students the opportunities publicized by the language learning companies in Kazakhstan. Abylai (Male, Student), discovered these opportunities in business, self-development, and career. In his understanding, language provides an opportunity to expand his networking circle in China for further business and career development. Andrey (Male, Graduate) identified opportunities in the development of his research skills, university-provided resources, communication, and networks. He shared how grateful he was for all the opportunities he received while completing his HE degrees, and that he plans to make proper use of them in his further professional life. Bibi (Female, Graduate) named China “the country of opportunities,” especially for foreigners. Her experience in China demonstrated that the local market favors multilingualism and as long as a job candidate knows more than one language, decent employment is guaranteed. Bibi herself worked as a part-time translator during her studies in China. Therefore, students’ willingness to learn Mandarin emerged as a result of internalized intent of building a successful career where a language is viewed as a tool.

Despite of all the opportunities that language brings, academic knowledge is the core of the university degree. Yet, students were not always fully satisfied with the level of knowledge they have obtained from the Chinese institutions.



## **Students' Academic Endeavour in China**

### **Macro- and Exosystem**

#### **Kazakhstan and China: National Aspirations**

Macrosystem analysis and inquiry into the policy documents, have shown ways in which China has been aspiring for Great Rejuvenation through cultural attractiveness. It is in the vein of this national aspiration that HE has become one of the pillars to form a positive perception among the foreigners, and serve as a platform for them to learn more about the country from the inside.

In the analysis of Kazakhstan's exosystem, the aspirations for nation building and economic development have come forward. The two aspirations are interlinked in the way that an economic development leans on human capital, and the reverse. HE is the means for the development of human capital (Marat, Rector of Private University A), and the Kazakhstani policy makers utilize both budgetary and household funds to advance the level of education among the citizens. Free market approach to economy, however, creates space for the formulation of expectations from the labor market, which might (or might not) align with governmental expectations.

There is also a third party to this policy discourse of nation building and economic development, the laborers themselves, represented in this study by the students. The major part of this section communicates the student-participants' perceptions of their university degrees in China.

*Microsystem***Students' Choice Dilemma: Easy diploma, Poor-Quality Knowledge**

The academic experiences of Kazakh students in China can be divided in two phases. The first phase, discussed earlier in the chapter, is when Kazakhstan's students discovered Chinese HE as a better alternative to the lower quality domestic HE. At that phase, any university in China successfully met their requirements. Any Chinese university diploma sufficed, and graduates could expect the return on their investment in a Chinese degree by securing high-paid jobs upon graduation. The initial demands of Kazakhstan's students to Chinese universities were straightforward - mastering the Chinese language and obtaining a foreign degree.

Even though the first phase is fading, there are still remainders of that phase observable in the interviews with students. The young, captured by the idea of obtaining a foreign degree, are unaware of the weight of their academic decisions on their further professional lives. That is how uninformed or ill-informed decisions (such as choosing a university for a full degree) emerge. The choice of mediocre or low-quality universities spreads through Kazakh students' networks. Students advise one another on the university and the choice of major which then is reflected in the popularity of majors in humanities and social sciences. For instance, in this research project, most of student participants study International Economy and Trade. The students of these majors seem to be driven by the advice from the networks of students, rather than demands at the labor market.



A triangulation of current study participants' experiences and earlier survey results on Kazakh students in China<sup>14</sup> (Koshanova & Rakisheva, 2016) re-iterated students' preference of majors in social sciences and humanities. Ansar (Male, Student) shared that students choose these majors (he himself studies engineering in one of China's top 10 universities) due to two main reasons - lower enrollment requirements (HSK level 4) and easy academic experiences. "Good universities" (in students' language to refer to high quality and prestigious universities) require high HSK scores, like level 5 out of 6 maximum levels (level 1 - beginner, level 6 - advanced) in contrast with mediocre universities where HSK level 4 is allowed. In most cases, neither these universities nor these majors appear in international rankings or have other prestige-increasing features, for instance being a leading provincial university or a top-ranked major in China.

The latter criterion, easy academic experiences, needs more elaboration. Ansar (Male, Student) explained how the choice of university and major makes studies harder or easier. In addition to these two factors, academic experiences vary depending on the country of origin (locals and foreigners). Thus, when given the choice to study in Chinese with locals or international students, the majority of foreigners opt for international cohorts because of the language limitations. Teachers in international cohorts can utilize English when foreign students' Chinese language skills impede the comprehension of the study materials. Students also mentioned the difference of assessment for foreign and local students, when faculty members are less strict with foreigners. The combination of these factors ultimately affects the quality of HE degree from China.

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<sup>14</sup> The 2016 survey respondents included 407 Kazakh students in China, where the majority (at least 80%) indicated majors in social sciences and the humanities.

### **Hard-Earned Degree: Students' Informed Decision Making**

The second phase has recently started and is characterized by students' more considerate choice of universities in China. After thousands of graduates with Chinese diplomas have returned home, Kazakh employers became more selective and more aware of the variety of university types and levels in China. Ansar (Male, Student) and Sulu (Female, Student) both agree that Chinese universities may add value to the Kazakhstan labor market but learning experiences vary depending on a student's choice of Chinese university. Ansar (Male, Student) shared:

I think the majority of Kazakhstan students in China study in non-prestigious universities. Those who go [to China] through [recruitment] companies end up in bad universities. There [in these universities] education will be no better than at home [in Kazakhstan]. On the other hand, it's easier to study there (Ansar, Male, Student).

Without knowing, this student expressed an opinion of low-quality university choices that is significant on a larger scale. Ansar (Male, Student) studies in one of China's highly ranked universities that appears in the QS ranking among the top ten Chinese institutions. His choice of China, however, was unintentional. He failed the UNT<sup>15</sup> in Kazakhstan and decided to go to China, even though in parallel he was considering German universities; due to the price, he eventually chose China. In his words, higher or similarly ranked universities in China are more accessible tuition-wise compared to German universities. He criticizes his Kazakh fellow students and is disappointed that they choose low-quality universities.

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<sup>15</sup> Unified National Test (UNT) - countrywide university entrance exam

Students' informed choice of university is crucial if the target is to obtain a high-quality education. Students themselves chose universities with easy enrollment requirements and basic academic processes, and they are now dissatisfied with the quality of degree they receive upon graduation. Andrey (Male, Graduate) and Ansar (Male, Student) are the only participants studying in high-ranked Chinese universities. These students consciously selected their academic destination to ensure successful career opportunities upon their return to Kazakhstan. Thus, Andrey (Male, Graduate) demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the local labor market requirements and varying level of Chinese universities.

There are lots of universities in China now, and it is insufficient to simply bring a diploma from China, and expect the employer immediately consider it as good. They [employers] are smart now, and they are aware China has universities of different level. In good Chinese universities, you really have to study hard to earn a diploma (Andrey, Male, Graduate).

Ansar (Male, Student) also counts on employers' awareness of international rankings and the high level of his education upon graduation.

I hope my future employer will immediately recognize my famous university, or if the university is unknown to him/her can easily Google it and see the high ranking (Ansar, Male, Student).

As a more mature master student, Sulu's expectation of study abroad was high and when faced with academic disappointment she utilized the word "mess" to describe the academic and organizational processes in her current university in China. Another student, Bibi (Female, Graduate), shared her reservations about obtaining an academic degree in China. In her words, professional knowledge in her studied major is equitable to the basic information on Economy and Trade shared on YouTube; so, it is better to come to China only for language courses and complete a HE degree elsewhere, not in China.

Students' attitudes to their foreign degree also play a significant role in constructing a certain image of their academic destination. Sulu (Female, Student) further criticized her compatriots' irresponsible behavior and negligent attitude to studies. Fatima (Female, Student) mentioned she avoided other Kazakh students because of diverging interests in which her primary focus was her studying and others were idling without much interest to their learning. Abylai (Male, Student), as one of the subjects of criticism, confessed that he enjoys leisure time but he is also conscious of his study and work responsibilities:

I can hang out with my friends at night and sleep the whole next day, for example. But when I have certain plans, I try to work according to my schedule. When I have my studies then everything else is secondary, my studies come first (Abylai, Male, Student).

The awareness of variety of Chinese universities is gradually changing the curve of overall perception of Chinese universities from its earlier perception as a homogenous mass of foreign

degrees. Institutional constituencies similar to students seek links with higher quality high-ranked universities.

### **Students' Post-Graduation Plans: Leaving Home and Host Countries**

China was perceived through an instrumentalist approach meaning that young people viewed their university degree (and the years spent earning it) as an instrument helping them to advance further in their professional life. This echoes Fakunle's (2020) argument presenting decision making process via instrumentalist and non-instrumentalist approaches. Such approach becomes observable when students shared their further plans after the completion of their degrees in China.

Europe emerged as the next step for employment and personal reasons for both Fatima (Female, Student) and Kamila (Female, Graduate). Fatima (Female, Student) envisioned employment opportunities opening up to her due to her linguistic skills: "A friend in Germany said people with English and Chinese are in high demand there." The student is aware of such career prospects because of the Belt and Road initiative, and China's investment in Europe. For Kamila (Female, Graduate), the European lifestyle is attractive. When comparing Kazakhstan with Asia or Europe, Kamila (Female, Graduate) leaned towards Europe for quality of life issues, not economic reasons, like Fatima (Female, Student) mentioned.

I want to go to Europe for my soul, I think people there know art of life. They enjoy the moment and live beautifully. Since I am from Uralsk [Western Kazakhstan], we lean towards Russia and Europe because we are closer to them. Our people speak mostly



Russian unlike in the south [of Kazakhstan] people speak mostly Kazakh; hence our mentality, culture and lifestyle differ (Kamila, Female, Graduate).

Only having had an immersive experience in China, students pointed out the difference between Kazakhstan and China, and recognized their certain habits and world views closer related to Europe. Trivial but essential factors as food were mentioned by two groups of participants (institutional participants, and students). This became an obstacle of relating to China long-term. The difference between two categories of participants was that for institutional participants, the food factor was temporary while for students it was spread in a longer-term perspective which meant young people had to adjust and find strategies around food. For example, Bibi (Female, Graduate) commented about Chinese food: “How did I deal with food? I just avoided Chinese food, and I am lucky I lived in Beijing where it was possible due to wide choices.”

Overall, students did not link their future lives and careers with being physically in China (or Kazakhstan in the case of Fatima and Abylai, for example), their future employment may link them to China because they know the language; but in their understanding academic time spent in Asia is sufficient, and now it is time to explore Europe to which they hope their habits and lifestyles would align better. It is also noticeable how students refer to the two regions, and are still unsure of their regional belonging as native residents of Eurasia, the intersection between Asia and Europe.

### **Discovering Different China: Corruption, Democracy, Human Rights**

The chapter further explores students’ perceptions of China from the inside. Once students are



immersed in the local community and started observing political and social environment, their opinions of the country start building up. Students' perception of China as a successful start to their professional career expanded to perceiving the country and forming certain opinions unavailable had they stayed in Kazakhstan. Students' previous experiences and background serve as lenses through which they perceive China.

### *Macrosystem*

#### **Corruption: Prerequisite of Distrust**

In the Global Corruption Barometer 2017<sup>16</sup>, Kazakhstan and China are in the same country group, with 29% percent of Kazakhstan and 26% of China's citizens indicating that they paid bribes to obtain public services in the 12 months prior to the survey (Transparency International, 2017). Chinese companies are known for corruption and a lack of transparency; for example, Chinese companies have a reputation for bribing officials in order to achieve favorable outcomes (Ileuova & Zhandos; Satpayev, 2019). I heard similar critiques from the student participant Saule (Female, Graduate), a graduate of a Chinese university who is currently employed in a Chinese company in Kazakhstan. The company where Saule (Female, Graduate) works applied for funding under the aegis of Belt and Road initiative, and only later she learnt that social connections with state executives were the major selection criteria which her company lacked; therefore, the application was unsuccessful. According to Satpayev (2019), small-scale companies were never meant to obtain any funding under this initiative because one of the principles of Chinese business is affiliation with the state; this principle empowers state-

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<sup>16</sup> Transparency International is a global movement working to end corruption in over 100 countries. The Global Corruption Barometer is the world's largest survey on corruption. The results on Kazakhstan and China come from the survey in 119 countries, territories and regions.

supported companies whereas small-scale enterprises are sidelined.

In the competition introduced under the Belt and Road initiative, average companies do not make it to the top. Ninety percent of winning companies are affiliated with the state. Moreover, the funding initially was pre-allocated to them. Regular entrepreneurs from both China and Kazakhstan are very unlikely to jointly get additional funding because of the preferential treatment of state-supported companies (Saule, Female, Graduate).

It is, therefore, unknown how these growing concerns will further shape students' preferences of studying in China; but according to the participants' observations, the distrust to Chinese diplomas among Kazakhstani employers have already been noticed.

### **Devaluation of Higher Education Diploma**

In HE, the notion of corruption undermines the validity and quality of the university diploma. Studying in China is informed by the discourses at the labor market, including recent doubts about Chinese diploma as the cases of purchased degrees emerged. Student participants did not directly experience cases of corruption but witnessed it in their surroundings. For example, Tomiris (Female, Graduate) knows she can “buy a five-year scholarship [in China].” Aigul (Female, Graduate) learnt about the opportunity to purchase a university degree in China; and met a fake graduate who went on to have a successful career in Kazakhstan. Her words indicate disapproval of such practices, given her personal anecdote related to nepotism and corrupt practices she tried to avoid in Kazakhstan.



I personally know someone who spent three years there [in China] and I know that it is impossible to obtain a degree in that period of time when just the language course will take two semesters at the very least. It is a year-long course, after which you are unlikely to enroll in a bachelor's or master's. I do not know how exactly they forged those diplomas but it was a very convincing fake diploma with a registered number in a university's dean office. Some of my peer students who bought diplomas verified them in a university and it was confirmed" (Aigul, Female, Graduate).

The corrupt practices in academic environment most likely contributed to the raising concerns about Chinese university degrees in Kazakhstan. Domestic employers stay informed of such cases, and therefore would gradually increase their expectation of holders of Chinese diplomas as discussed by two students in particular. Choosing a high-ranked institution with strict academic policies has been identified to counter any devaluation of their degree from China. Further in the chapter, Ansar (Male, Student) and Andrey (Male, Graduate) explain in more details their rationale for choosing a certain university in China. This however came at a higher cost in terms of the academic performance required from students. Based on the students' first-hand exploration of different HE providers in China, there might be a slight decrease in the number of potential students choosing China. Additional factors have also been observed that could contribute to lesser flow of international students to China.

### **Visa Challenges as an Additional Obstacle**

Findings revealed a possible discourse for the sudden change in visa regulations. Saule (Female, Graduate), a graduate of a Chinese university and an employee of a Chinese company in



Kazakhstan, linked recent changes in visa regulations with China's economic initiative. She questioned the usefulness of announced political intentions of strengthening collaboration under the Belt and Road initiative, on the background of restrictive visa policies incorporated almost in parallel with the initiative. Saule even blames the initiative for the complicated visa procedure. In her response, visa complications occurred only recently, around the time of the announcement of the initiative. The changes affected various categories of visa applicants, visa fees and the list of required documents, along with visa issue dates.

Why loudly announce the Belt and Road initiative and joint development and simultaneously restrict visa? Single entry business visa is now around 500 USD, if I am not mistaken. I also have to obtain a letter from the Chinese Ministry with a stamp. It was much easier before. We paid 100USD for a single business entry visa and got it in seven days. If they [China] really wanted to develop Belt and Road with mutual benefits, I do not think visas would be restricted. It was easier pre-Belt and Road (Saule, Female, Graduate).

It might also be the case that visa restrictions are consequences of overlap between economic and political affairs. On the one hand, China is looking into expanding economic ties; but on the other hand, current political instability serves as an obstacle to fully activate economic initiatives. Somewhat similar situation might have been observed earlier, in Chapter Six, when Marat (Rector, Private University A), pointed out that "In strategic goals, China aspires to increase the number of international students to half a million" but complicated visa procedure

makes China more difficult to understand for Kazakhstanis with their Soviet experiences and a newly establishing state.

### *Exosystem*

#### **Exosystem as a Perception-Forming Platform**

As of 2021, it has been 30 years since Kazakhstan gained independence from the USSR.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995) “Kazakhstan claims itself democratic, secular, law-bound and a welfare state. The highest values of the state are a human, his/her life, rights and freedoms” (Article 1). The Constitution is studied within the civic education curriculum in secondary school, and recent amendments in the school curriculum have introduced civic education even earlier, at the primary school level (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021).

Religious freedom is ingrained in the Constitution too, which affects public views of the events in Xinjiang; the situation is perceived as both a violation of human rights and a curtailment of religious freedom and it contradicts what is learned from the Constitution during civic classes. Criticality about the suppression of freedoms in China then spills over into the views on the political regime in China.

In addition, the young critically perceive dependence on the state, viewed positively in socialism. Market-driven consciousness started developing in Kazakhstan since the economy shifted to a market ideology at the dawn of independence; such market consciousness challenges socialist dependence on the state. These changing views on the economy have affected state-society



dynamics. Many individuals interpret the plethora of choices available in a market economy as the opportunity to express multiple opinions in a social context. Access to information from around the globe, which opened up after independence from the USSR, allows Kazakh students to stay informed and consider various viewpoints. A combination of these factors affects student participants' critiques of the single-party regime and its effect on individuals.

### *Microsystem*

#### **Students and the State: Contrasting Political Views**

In academic environment at the microsystem level, students expressed disagreement with lack of choice and directive political regime. Student participant Fatima (Female, Student) attempted to protest a unilateral university decision in China that deeply impacted her. She applied for a Bachelor of Finance degree but her university was unable to enroll a sufficient number of students for the major, so they changed her major to International Trade and Economics. Fatima and other five foreign fellow Finance applicants complained extensively, trying to convince the university to satisfy their request. Her university's response to the complaints was "you do as we say"; ultimately students were unable to change anything and stayed in the International Trade and Economics major because the application period was over for that academic year and other universities were no longer available. Needless to say, Fatima vocally expressed her disapproval of such authoritative practices in a university.

Aigul (Female, Graduate) was vocal on the subject of political freedom. In her opinion, tight state control prevents an individual from exercising their human rights. Aigul cannot comprehend the level of obedience she observed in China. Aigul's referral to the "soul" is about

an individuals' ability to contradict "zombie laws," and be empowered to have personal opinions separate from the Party and the state in China. It is individual's inherent right to act according to their abilities to think and act, and when this right is violated by laws it is considered zombie law that abides citizens to act according to one group of people's beliefs. It is, in Aigul's understanding, a zombie law.

Their life is the Party. The Party is just a bunch of people who produce zombie laws.

This is so weird for me. The majority do not have a soul. I think only those independent of the state have a soul. In China, these people are almost extinct.

### **Students' Choice of Individual Agency over Collectivism**

By being vocal on a number of topics, students demonstrate their agency and capacity to think independently; the ideas re-iterated in Brooks (2017) when policy makers were suggested to avoid treating students as policy subjects. After a substantive amount of time in China during their university degrees, Kazakhstan students started forming opinions such as previously mentioned political views towards Muslims. It has also been observed that students disagree with the way locals respond to the political system in the country. In this regards, the participants Tomiris (Female, Graduate), Aigul (Female, Graduate) and Kamila (Female, Graduate) disapprove of the state's influence on citizens in China. Aigul (Female, Graduate) anticipates that the "Party footprint is going to last for decades," meaning that state influence is deeply ingrained in citizens, and will affect their opinions and behaviors well into the future. Kamila (Female, Graduate) is concerned with the tight state control over civilians, which only became apparent to her after she spent more time as an employee in China.



I am now more opinionated. When you start working, you take off your rose-colored lenses and suddenly you see how the state influences the masses. And what I thought was good before, now I no longer see as good (Kamila, Female, Graduate).

Tomiris (Female, Graduate) also saw the negative impact of the state on individuals' behavior. In her perception, state control suppresses the individual and replaces it with a sole focus on the value of the collective. Student participants counterpose individual freedom and the market with a collective approach that is tied to socialist ideas and the disempowered individual. Obedience is perceived not in the sense of a law-abiding citizen but as a result of the fear that the state implements to control the population. Tomiris (Female, Graduate) explained it this way:

This is China's policy, to eliminate the 'I'. They want everyone to behave as robots and be obedient. They are almost two billion people, and the state wants to keep them all in China under control. That is why they practice teamwork and there is no 'I'. It is all about the 'we' (Tomiris, Female, Graduate).

Students – Aigul (Female, Graduate), Kamila (Female, Graduate) and Tomiris (Female, Graduate) – demonstrate their informed position on individual independence; and young people are specifically sensitive on the topics related to individuality. There is an observable parallel in Aigul's "zombie" and Tomiris (Female, Graduate) "robot" analogy, where the students expressed the obedience in exaggerated terms. Neither zombies nor robots possess human agency to act and choose for themselves. It is important for students to be heard and be able to



exercise their right to express themselves and their agency. Their lifetime experience never exposed them to socialist practices and socialism; that is why they identified the contrast and were specifically against such social order by criticizing and forming their individual opinions based on neoliberal individualist behaviors.

It is also notable that by embracing their agency and speaking out their concerns regarding political and social situations, the students are determined to make a statement of their power; the young and their voices matter. Decades after Donald van de Graaff et al. (1978) discussed power in academia, students start taking their seat at the table by making their queries heard. No longer subjects of policy, students demand that their perspectives are taken into account.

### **Fear-Inspiring Country Image**

#### *Macrosystem*

#### **Respecting Sovereignty: Non-Intervention Policy, Civil Power**

Expressed through interviews, social fears of China in Kazakhstan are disconnected from official discourses. Macrosystem analysis demonstrates that on an official level, Kazakhstan and China mutually recognize national sovereignty and independence, as reflected in joint agreements. Both countries promote non-intervention policy approach when neither of the collaborators interferes with national policies of another party. The policies are designed for national audience primarily; but there are cases when such policies overflow affecting inter-country relations.

Ongoing internal instabilities with Muslims in Xinjiang might have affected visa restrictions for Kazakhstan citizens activated recently in China. The rationale otherwise is unclear given



previously discussed dynamic on visa regulations between Kazakhstan and China when there were periods of visa-free regime early at the dawn of diplomatic relations. Visa restrictions also contradict current economic and diplomatic endeavors undertaken by the Chinese government. Such as One Belt One Road initiative calling for more collaborative activities. Kazakh civilians' critical viewpoints on the situation in Xinjiang, on the other hand, could have contributed to the restricted country access. Even though, the official Kazakhstani government stance on Xinjiang is reserved, regulated visa was required to keep the incoming masses (especially of Muslim background) under control taking into consideration Kazakhstan's general public disapproval of such policies.

### *Exosystem*

#### **Controversial Urumqi**

The current cautious policies around Muslims in Xinjiang, exacerbate the complexity of Kazakhstan and China relations. The multiple channels of communication are dependent on one another. Economic relations with China may be at risk if Kazakhstan issues any official statements supporting the Muslim population in China. Therefore, Kazakhstan does not get involved with China's internal affairs. Additionally, in order to maintain domestic security, the Kazakh government needs to ensure that extremist tendencies (i.e., terrorism and separatism) in Xinjiang are under China's control, especially at the Kazakh-Chinese border territories. At the same time, the largest ethnic Kazakh group resides in Xinjiang, and Kazakhstan expects more ethnic Kazakhs to return under the ongoing repatriation programs, but current national policies in China may impact Kazakhstan's initiatives to restore population.



Social pressure within the country does add to the complexity of Kazakh-Chinese relations. Many ethnic Kazakhs already relocated from China to Kazakhstan as a result of the repatriation programs, but there is still around two million Kazakhs in China (Zhetpysbayev, 2019). Family ties have always been strong despite the border. It is family connections that partially pre-determined the decision to study abroad for the research participants; whose academic pursuit often commenced in Xinjiang. Affected by the current Xinjiang policies, Kazakh citizens with families or relatives in Urumqi demand that their government takes some action on returning the rest of the Kazakhs from Urumqi.

### *Mesosystem*

#### **Mesosystem: Occupation Fears**

The social discontent with anti-Muslim policies has emerged recently, compared with long-existing Chinese occupation sentiments present in Kazakhstan society. This occupation anxiety is aggravated by the rapid development and the fast growing population of the country next door (Syroezhkin, 2010); and forms the complex image of China in Kazakhstani society. The 2016 Kazakh government's plan to give away free land to foreigners was especially disturbing for the local population, who were concerned with their independence and employment prospects. In her experience working with Chinese companies in Kazakhstan, Saule (Female, Graduate) identified that locals perceived of the Chinese as invaders, which emerged as fear that China establishing companies on Kazakh territory was the first step towards expanding economic dominance over Kazakhstan in general.



Social anxiety around territory tied to the past and current legislative plans to lease land to foreigners eventually burst into massive protests, which was unusual for Kazakhstan, a country that stayed previously peaceful despite social unrest in neighboring countries (Forbes, 2016). The 2016 land protests sparked tension in oil-rich western Kazakhstan and further continued in the rest of the country. Cities like Aktobe and Atyrau in the west were specifically affected because the majority of petroleum companies are located there (Smagulov & Nasimova, 2016), and the primary focus of Chinese investment is petroleum mining (Kennedy, 2009).

Sentiments related to Chinese occupation are present in Kazakhstan to this day. The 2016 land protests are visible illustrations of societal anxiety around Chinese occupation. The anxiety and ignorance of individuals in Kazakhstan about modern China affects attitudes towards studying in China. Tomiris (Female, Graduate) said that the idea itself of studying in China “scares people.” The student did not further elaborate the fear-based perception of China, it was however, mentioned in other participants’ responses. Specifically, cases when relatives were concerned on the safety of students studying in China (Saule, Female, Graduate).

### *Microsystem*

#### **Microsystem: Anxieties Anchor Students**

Given the little effect of public demand to safeguard the return of the Kazakhs from Xinjiang, and instead a growing influence of China, Kazakhstani society has little trust in the protection ability of the national government. The anxiety around the Muslims in Xinjiang spreads on Kazakh students studying in China. Saule (Female, Graduate) shared how these anxieties affected her plans after graduation from Chinese university. She wanted to gain work experience

in China after her degree completion but spared her mother's worry and returned home. She recounted, "My mother begged me to return and her words, 'God forbid, something happens to you and I will never find you' affected me to the bones" (Saule, Female, Graduate).

This quote illustrates the frustration among Kazakhs about their relatives in China. The fear came from relatability to Xinjiang Muslims which could mean that Kazakhstani students (as Muslims in China) are likely to fall under similar policies because of their religious profile. It is believed that neither national nor Chinese governments would extend help in case any relative goes missing. The locals in Kazakhstan know that Xinjiang individuals with family members abroad are under special control, and the entire family in Xinjiang may be detained due to that one family member's views (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

### **Microsystem: Students on Urumqi**

The concerns on safety of Muslims are not without reason. Students raised an issue of policies towards Muslims in Xinjiang whose safety was particularly under question. In addition, students were eloquent on the events in Xinjiang, for example, Aigul (Female, Graduate) articulated her negative perception of the events in Xinjiang. She was seriously concerned with the events and took a strongly human rights oriented stance on Xinjiang:

I watched the news about new camps in Xinjiang where Muslims are detained. I am extremely concerned because I have been to Xinjiang and I saw Chinese Kazakhs and Uyghurs. I was there in 2009 and I saw rivers of blood on the asphalt.

Even though, other students were less vocal on the subject of Muslims in Xinjiang, they still mentioned it during interviews (although questions on Urumqi were not asked). The emergence of Urumqi theme was unexpected because the topic was brought by participants themselves. It was observed that more participants were concerned with the Xinjiang events and leaned towards human rights oriented stance. The students especially demonstrated more awareness of the subject compared to the administrators and faculty.

Students' continuous concern stimulated me looking for more information on Muslims in Urumqi, and a number of media coverage has been identified both in English (BBC, 2021; The Guardian, 2021) and Russian (Klevtsova, 2017; Altynbaev, 2021). The English language materials focused on the overall situation around human rights, whereas the Russian language sources conveyed stories of separated family members, and even the word *genocide* was used to describe the effect of Urumqi policies targeting Muslims, the majority of who are Uyghurs. Russian materials come from a left-wing Kazakhstan-based online source that raises contradictory topics, including the inaction and criticism of the state to protect *kandas*.

### **Microsystem: Students on Sinophobia**

Concerns about Kazakhstani students, policies in Xinjiang and territorial disputes snowball into fears and anxiety in Kazakhstani society. Students with their internalized experience of both Kazakhstan and China, have created space between themselves and the fears, and could share the societal sentiments without prejudice to either of the countries.

Region-specific anxieties were noticed in Kazakhstan. Thus, Saule (Female, Graduate) observed a correlation between Chinese companies' location and societal sentiments towards China. Bibi

(Female, Graduate) echoed regional manifestation of cautious attitudes towards China. Bibi lives in Nur-Sultan, capital city located in the north-central part of the country, and observed the regional tensions around China. In her comment, regions where the Chinese presence is specifically visible through Chinese companies and employees, the local population tends to be more cautious and unwelcoming. The two students' responses are informed with their current level of interaction with the Chinese in Kazakhstan. Bibi (Female, Graduate) is employed in a Kazakhstan company in Nur-Sultan with occasional need to communicate with delegations from China.

I think Sinophobia is a region-based phenomenon [in Kazakhstan]. It is more likely to occur in the west; at least it is calm in Astana<sup>17</sup>. Whereas in regions where the Chinese are present, and they are a threat broadly speaking, that is where Sinophobia is most likely to manifest. People can make bad jokes about the Chinese here [in Nur-Sultan] but other than that, it's quiet (Bibi, Female, Graduate).

Through deeper understanding of the societal discourses, students formulated the root causes for such perceptions. Bibi (Female, Graduate) explained national resentment toward China due to their history as invaders, while Saule (Female, Graduate) expressed cautious attitudes towards China by describing both personal and societal perceptions. According to Saule (Female, Graduate), social fear is related to establishing two types of relations with Chinese - family and professional; both types accelerate to the slavery:

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<sup>17</sup>The capital city is now called Nur-Sultan but the participant uses the city's former name, Astana.

There is Sinophobia in Kazakhstan. There is a phobia that girls get married to Chinese men. The Chinese will enslave us all and we will work for them. I constantly hear these concerns from locals.

Occupant image of China travels around the countries, for example, Saule (Female, Graduate) shared a personal anecdote of observing the occupation discourse emerge in a Japanese documentary she recently participated in. The comment below reflects the Sinophobic perception of the Chinese and the scope of China's influence. In the participant's opinion, the influence is not *soft* because the response highlights economic power and utilization of the word "enslave," reflects application of force and coercion embedded in hard power as opposed to endearment and persuasion associated with soft power (Nye, 2021).

A year ago, I shot a documentary with a Japanese channel. It was about the Kazakhstan economy and Chinese investors abroad, specifically in Central Asia along the Silk Road all the way to Europe. They shot in Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus; and the Chinese are everywhere, not only in Kazakhstan, the US too. I think they will enslave the world either through economy or through population. Of course, it is not only a threat for Kazakhstan; it is the threat for the entire world. We need to be alarmed because we are closely located. This is people's phobia (Saule, Female, Graduate).

Fears and anxieties around China are distributed in temporal and contextual discourses. In the case of Kazakh citizens, the fears are based on the disputes about territory, Kazakh ethnic minorities and anti-Muslim policies in Xinjiang. Studying in China contributes to knowing the



country in a different way but the further perception of the country is still dependent on young people's previous experiences. It is through these experiences that the young view China, and construct their own perceptions of the country.

### Conclusion

This chapter summarized Kazakhstani students' insights on studying in China. To structure their perspectives it is useful to consider sub-questions *Why do Kazakh students choose China as their academic destination?* and *What perceptions do students develop about China; and how do these perceptions change before, during and after their studies in China?*

Starting on the students' rationales for selecting China it is useful to remember that Chinese diplomas were initially discovered as an alternative to low quality domestic HE. This stimulated the flow of Kazakhstani students to China, making the latter the second most popular academic destination among Kazakh students. China's rapid economic growth and official discourse of strategic partner, led to the expansion of local Chinese learning market in Kazakhstan. The opportunist businesses capitalized on the language learning locally and gradually developed the channels to send Kazakhstani students to China. Macro- and exosystems create favorable image for China, and students inspired by successful careers embark on promising but difficult studies in Chinese universities.

The response to the following sub-question on students' perceptions of China demonstrates that inspired students set off to China with brightest aspirations of becoming competitive at the labor market in Kazakhstan and beyond. *China as a bustling economic zone* is the reason students start



their journeys to China. However, once they dive into the academic and everyday lives, different China emerges. Facing academic dilemmas, students discover not-so-good quality universities but from which they are likely to graduate. Further, fresh graduates encounter another disappointment. Full-time degree from China is valuable for linguistic skills rather than major-related knowledge. Kazakhstani labor market turns out quite sensitive to such shifts in the quality of Chinese university graduates, and there is a need of more informed decision making among those pursuing Chinese degree.

Another unexpected dimension of studying abroad emerged while Kazakhstani students live in China. Students become more aware of the political and social developments, compared to mostly economic rationales prevalent in their initial decision to study in China. Disagreement and strong stance on certain issues unlock students' agency. Compared to pre-study abroad mindset when students' microsystems largely influenced their decision making, now students are more vocal about political situation despite the resistance from both host and home countries' official rhetorics.

Upon graduation, students demonstrate enough expertise to stay impartial towards Chinese attempts to exert soft power and Kazakhstani official and social discourses about China. Students have formed their own opinions about China unreachable by policies and social criticism. With their first-hand experience of studying in China and living in Kazakh society, the students successfully utilize their agency of seeking better living conditions based on their personal choices.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Introduction

This study explored the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales for internationalization under the centrality of national rationales. This is achieved by examining the ways that policies shape internationalization drawing on the examples of Kazakhstan's HE relations with China. Political rationales differently affect the formation of individual rationales at institutional level and individual students' motivations. There is also a varying effect of these rationales based on the proximity of the government to an institution or individual.

A number of external factors affect institutional stakeholders' rationales for internationalization. Macrosystem affects individuals within Kazakhstan institutions lesser, compared to exosystem. Internationalization as one of the macrosystem trends does affect institutional stakeholders in Kazakhstan to engage with international academic community but a separate country's - China's soft power - aspirations are inconspicuous as a driver for establishing collaboration with Chinese counterparts. Kazakhstan universities align institutional internationalization activities with national objective of becoming top 30 economies by 2050 (Address of the Leader of the Nation, N. A. Nazarbayev, to the people of Kazakhstan. Strategy "Kazakhstan-2050: New Political Course of the Established State, 2012). This driver was an influence behind the attempts to establish and maintain partnerships with Chinese counterparts.

For students, the choice of academic destination is driven by their personal agendas. This is to say that students' microsystems play the most significant role in making the decision to study

abroad. Students were able to zoom out on the macro and exosystems, which was mentioned as an important factor for choosing China as academic destination, but still final decision nested within the microsystem. Students utilize their agency to make independent decisions which decouples them from national or foreign policies. This resonates with Brooks' (2017) appeals to reconsider the attitude towards international students, which entails perceiving them as individuals with agency rather than policy subjects. Upon their graduation, students interacted with mesosystems which informed them of plethora of fears around China.

This closing chapter contains three sections. The first section provides summary of research findings - the formation of HE stakeholders' rationales under the dominating political rationale. The second section presents contributions of the study to the literature on internationalization and its rationales. The third section outlines further study areas.

### **Summary of Findings**

Stakeholders of this study have similar lived experiences of macro, exo- and mesosystems. Their perception of each of the systems, however, varied. The summary below is structured to reflect the commonality of the three mentioned systems, and after that provide more details of the effect of these systems on the two groups of participants (administrators and faculty; students) separately.

#### *Macrosystem*

Driven by the Great Rejuvenation of China, a number of education-related initiatives - Plan for Study in China (Jiani, 2016), Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2017) were

launched. Macrosystem level process of internationalization facilitates the national aspirations of promoting China abroad. Chinese universities' growing presence in academic rankings is aligned with China's policy aspirations of becoming one of premier academic destinations by 2020 (Jiani, 2017). Generous investment in HE, research and development, supports national initiatives and concurrently plays its significant role in raising attractiveness of Chinese universities abroad. In addition, geographic proximity to Kazakhstan identifies high-ranking Chinese universities as desirable collaborators and study abroad destinations.

### *Exosystem*

In the case of Kazakhstan, the national government is occupied by a major nation building process. In order to restore population, Kazakhstan initiated repatriation program allowing ethnic Kazakhs to rejoin the country. Respective policies provide adaptation programs to ease the settlement period for the newcomers. HE is one of such platforms. China is particularly important for this program because the largest ethnic Kazakh community still lives in Urumqi, China. The next-door neighbor has also been communicated in Kazakhstan national policies as a strategic partner. Since HE system in general and internationalization in particular stay largely centralized, such image of China appears in HE policies too. There is, however, a different China emerging from the analysis of mesosystem level in Kazakhstan.

### *Mesosystem*

The policy discourse of China the strategic partner has not been successfully accepted by the society in Kazakhstan. As shown in the study data, and stated in expert interviews conducted by Ileuova and Zhandos (2019) anti-Chinese social sentiments are revealed in Kazakh society. In

particular, the current study participants remembered the 2016 social protests in Kazakhstan ignited by the Land reform that demonstrate the insecurities present in Kazakh society related to maintaining a firm border with China that respects Kazakh sovereignty. A study participant Aina (Head of International Office, National University A) reflected on social mood about the 2016 land protests: “It all started with land. These ideas about occupation emerged after that. They [China] pursue soft power. Everybody knows that. They occupied everything everywhere.” The administrator’s words vividly capture the social perceptions and anxiety that proliferated from the land reform to occupation and illustrates China as a power-seeking state; soft power is *not* that soft based on this participant’s words.

In addition, events in Urumqi resonated with Kazakh audience because of the repressed Muslims. Thus, university administrators again reflect societal perceptions by mentioning Urumqi events. The fears and anxiety linked to anti-Muslim policies are further aggravated by the cases when Kazakh universities lose full-time students of Kazakh descent from China who left to visit Urumqi and never returned.

These commonalities of influence factors are shared by the two participant groups. The table below provides the summary of the two countries’ rationales for internationalization, and mechanisms of their activation. The table also presents institutional and individual rationales, the more elaborated summary for which follows after the table.

**Table 9**

*Summary of national, institutional and individual rationales for internationalization*

|   | Kazakhstan  | China   |
|---|---|---|
| Internationalization rationales at national level                 | Political rationale   |   |
|   | Nation building   | Soft power  |
| Mechanisms  | • Ranking-ization   | • Cultural attractiveness   |
|   | • Integration of HE in international academic community (inbound/outbound mobility of students and staff) | • Enhancement of mutual understanding via academic (cultural and academic exchanges) and economic initiatives (Belt and Road) |
|   | • Repatriation of diaspora  | • Recruitment of international students   |
|   | • Centralization of internationalization (and HE governance)  | • Centralization of internationalization (and HE governance)  |
| Individual internationalization rationales at institutional level | • International branding and profile to improve national benchmarking positions                           | N/A   |
| Internationalization rationales at individual level               | • Enhance career  | N/A   |

*Microsystem: Institutional Rationales*

Kazakhstan internationalization is primarily driven by political rationales. Universities engage in collaborations with Chinese counterparts to fulfill nation building. Reiteration of the role of

internationalization in nation building process reminds of such connection. One link is development of human capital by helping in the adaptation to ethnic Kazakhs returning to their historic land; the majority of them coming from China's Xinjiang province. The other link is image building for domestic HE by integrating in international academic space. This is carried out by inbound and outbound mobility of faculty and students, participating in academic rankings, and engaging in international collaborations with foreign peers. These overall internationalization practices in Kazakhstan are similarly reflected in collaboration with Chinese universities.

According to the generated empirical data, the rationale to collaborate with Chinese universities comes from Kazakhstan's overall ranking-*ization*, culture when nation building process is benchmarked against a plethora of international rankings observed in Koch (2014). The pursuit of academic rankings contributes to the visibility of the country at the international level. In this case, rankings are less likely the tool to attract talented students and academics, or research opportunities mentioned in Knight (2004); but rather a shaman spell blinding decision makers (Naidoo, 2018). Collaborating with highly ranked institutions in China is a measure for advancement of institutional positions in the league table for Kazakh universities. According to the study finding, Kazakhstan universities are inspired by political rationale of increasing country visibility and helping to increase country positions, rather than compete internationally with other institutions.

Institutional stakeholders within Kazakhstan universities attempt to combine the pursuit to fulfill nation building process and maintain the announced strategic partner status of China in



Kazakhstan. There is, however, a mismatch of institutional stakeholders' aspirations for collaboration and what Chinese HE can provide. Kazakhstan universities seek partnerships with high-ranked Chinese counterparts who, under similarly centralized system, have an objective to partner with other leaders of academic rankings globally, category of universities to which Kazakhstan universities still do not belong.

Under such circumstances, Kazakhstan universities compromise the stimulus for ranking-ization and maintaining China's status of strategic partner domestically. This is executed by collaborating with available institutions in China but leads to unfulfilled agreements. In this event, academic endeavors are either non-existent or barely respond to academic needs of university internationalization. For example, according to the study respondents, the little number of Kazakhstan students who experienced exchange programs in China was either on cultural or language visits, rarely on academic terms with recognizable achievements. Institutional reluctance to expand academic activities with Chinese partners could be in the lack of funding, mismatch of academic programs or the result of forced collaboration initiatives from the policy.

It is worth mentioning that Chinese universities are still persistently present as academic collaborators with Kazakhstan institutions. There is, however, a disadvantage of policy driven internationalization overall and collaboration with Chinese universities in particular. Quantitative perception of internationalization outcomes in Kazakhstan exaggerates the need for numerous institutional agreements. Thus, under the weight of both China's strategic status and quantitative internationalization value, institutional stakeholders in Kazakhstan universities tend to sign

agreements that satisfy both of these policy drivers. Consequently, the stakeholders are unable to simultaneously commit to a large number of international collaborations which leads to partially paper-based agreements. This has previously been emphasized in Knight (2004) with overcommitted institutions incapable to fulfill their international partnership agreements.

Thus, political rationale formulated by the national government largely impacts institutional stakeholders' motives for internationalization. Steered institutional partnerships with foreign counterparts reflect such impact. There is consequently less space for foreign forces driving internationalization at institutional level.

#### *Mesosystem: Individual Rationales*

According to study findings, Kazakh students' primary rationale for studying in China is embedded in their aspirations for future careers and development. Students are driven by their intrinsic pursuit rather than being attracted by culture, political values or foreign policies of China. Awareness of economic development at the international level, and China's rise as economic power were primary rationales to select China as an academic destination but this perception changed as students have obtained first-hand experience of living in China.

Students' instrumentalist approach to the degree in China is manifested in the acknowledgement of the country's growing economic capacity, which is believed to provide them with opportunities to access a dynamic international economic and trade community. Kazakh students planned to become part of the largest economy of the future by learning Chinese during their HE degree. This was well-captured by the growing in Kazakhstan educational market for Chinese



language that framed Chinese as the “language of opportunities” (Chinese.kz, n.d.). Student participant Abylai (Male, Student), saw opportunities opening in business, self-development, and career with his knowledge of Chinese. Viewing the language as a tool for career advancement indicates the instrumentalization of the Chinese language, rather than a focus on the cultural immersion that learning a foreign language can provide.

China’s geographic proximity to Kazakhstan, the affordability of its HE offerings and foreignness of diploma are pull factors that make China the second most popular academic destination for Kazakh students. Trade links with China, a large network of people of Kazakh origin in China and mutual recognition of academic achievements between Kazakhstan and China further facilitate students’ choice of China for their HE degrees.

Chinese universities of various ranking positions, including those outside international ranking systems, attract Kazakhstan students. The high-ranking position of several Chinese universities is a newly emerging attraction for Kazakh students, who are now more focused on prestige of the university because it gives an advantage on the domestic labor market. For example, Ansar (Male, Student) shared:

I hope my future employer will immediately recognize my famous university, or if the university is unknown to him/her can easily Google it and see the high ranking.

These, however, are mostly the pre-departure anticipations of how Chinese diploma can benefit students. In alignment with Nye’s (2005) focus on democracy, students rejected the Chinese state’s current non-democratic practices of denying political pluralism and enacting strict control

over citizens in China. Driven by neoliberal principals, students leaned towards individualist behaviors, whereas collectivist practices in China were alien to them. Kazakh students also echoed the international community (BBC, 2021; The Guardian, 2021) in disapproving of the violation of Urumqi Muslims' human rights and freedoms in Xinjiang.

The summary of findings presents formation of institutional and individual rationales under the domination of political rationales. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory analyzes these rationales based on the forces that could affect the decision to engage in internationalization. The proximity of the system has an advantage to influence an individual in the core of the ecological systems theory. In other words, the closer the system is, the more likely it will have an impact on an individual. The implication of this finding is to be considered by policy makers when developing strategies and long-term strategies. The next section builds on this summary of findings and discusses contributions of this study to the literature on internationalization and its rationales.

### **Contribution to the Literature on Internationalization and its Rationales**

The findings of this research align with previous studies indicating substantial role HE internationalization plays in diplomatic relations (Ahmat, 1980; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Nye, 2021). Centrally-designed internationalization and its effect on stakeholders, however, stay underexplored (Knight, 1997). This study examines the interaction between national, and two-dimensional individual rationales for internationalization. Politicization of international HE will further generate interest among researchers as the geopolitical situation becomes more entangled

to regional and global challenges. Castro et al. (2015) have identified the significance of learning the varying interests among stakeholders but the role of the state is still significant (Horta, 2009).

Thus, this study makes several contributions to the literature on internationalization in HE. First, it demonstrates the operationalization of (macrosystem trend) HE internationalization in national policies, making institutional partnerships closely linked to the larger international and diplomatic relations between countries where HE institutions are located. In the context of China and Kazakhstan, national objectives in centralized HE systems shape HE institutional links with their foreign counterparts, which indicates an imbalance between national, individual rationales at institutional level and individual rationales. As a result, institutional stakeholders follow the national priorities in collaborating with foreign partners rather than fulfilling universities' academic purposes.

Second, this study provides an updated empirical demonstration of internationalization rationales first explored in Knight (1997). Kazakhstan, as a large regional player in Eurasia aspiring to score the thirtieth top economies in the world, utilizes a variety of tools to achieve the national goal; including international HE expected to facilitate the establishment of strong diplomatic and economic relations with other strong actors in the region. This leads to the domination of political rationale in internationalization strategy. The interaction between the rationales showcased by the current study once more emphasized the consequences of imbalanced rationales. Thus, this study contributes with presenting internationalization rationales in non-Western centralized governance system in which rationales do not compete; rather political rationale dominates institutional agendas.

Third, identified in this study varying effect of political rationale on the formation individual rationales solidifies the argument in Brooks (2017) on students' independence and power. Acting on their agency, students are capable to make decisions regardless of policies using the latter as information source.

Fourth, this study extended theoretical understandings of the internationalization of HE within the context of the broader socio-political and diplomatic relations between countries. Koch (2014) delineated on nation building embedded in increasing country competitiveness, this study expands nation building mechanisms within which entire internationalization policy at the national level is designed to aid national objectives. Theoretical discussions on the link between soft power and internationalization have previously been considered in Lo and Pan (2020); the findings of this study complement the discussion on limitations of soft power activated via centrally-designed internationalization policies.

Finally, empirical findings in this study emphasize the importance of a human agency. The multisystem forces may be important in the decision-making process but it is an individual that formulates the final outcome. For HE internationalization this means that as pointed out in Yarmoshuk et al. (2018) an individual's perceptions are significant in establishing international partnerships. Systematic and consecutive process of building the collaborations is important (Taylor, 2016), but the macro and exosystem trends may interfere with an institutional process. In addition, the societal perceptions (or mesosystem level forces) can reflect institutional stakeholders' decisions to engage in international collaborations. This means that when aiming to



establish partnership relations with a foreign institution, various levels need to be considered, and most importantly the institutional stakeholders with matching perceptions need to be identified.

### **Future Research Directions**

As a follow-up from this study, future studies can focus on geopolitical relations of Central Asian states with other countries in Eurasia and beyond, which could enhance our understanding of internationalization processes within Central Asia and with other countries. This is especially significant in the light of complicated geopolitical situation around Russia, the conflict in Ukraine, anti-Russian sanctions by EU, and given the controversy with Russia, the consolidation efforts of Central Asian states. This line of inquiry can be specifically enriching given the rising agency of Central Asian countries, which has been manifested in the recent initiative of creating Central Asian Higher Educational Area on June 18, 2021, in Kazakhstan (Declaration on the Creation of the Central Asian Higher Educational Area, 2021). By enhancing the inter-Central Asian collaboration, the states solidify the joint efforts with giant political and economic actors in the region, Russia and China.

Future research could also include examinations of competing or dominating internationalization rationales in other national contexts in the region. This will reveal whether shared Soviet past, and current complicated geopolitical situation force the Central Asian nation states to similarly approach internationalization of HE. It will then demonstrate whether there is a trend of centrally-designed internationalization specific for the countries within Central Asia. Also, given Russia's status of the most popular academic destination for Central Asian students, further investigations of students behavioral patterns are required to see if the young demonstrate similar



patterns such as Kazakh students in China.



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## CHAPTER NINE: POLICY AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

### Introduction

This chapter is organized in four sections. The chapter commences with presenting a general picture of the operationalization of internationalization in Kazakhstan. The policy document first referenced for amendment is the most recent one, and even if its status is lower compared to further policy documents, it gives the most recent and fullest vision of internationalization in Kazakhstan. The chapter further proposes policy implications to the legislature related to institutional operationalization of internationalization and moves to the changes to the legislature based on the current level of students studying abroad. The chapter concludes with the practical implications proposing ideas for further amendments in policies and regulations.

Before moving to the policy implications, a few disclaiming points need to be made. Firstly, by the time the current research was finalized a substantial structural change in the Kazakhstani higher education system has taken place. The Ministry of Education and Science was split into two Ministry of Enlightenment (responsible for primary, secondary and TVET education) and Ministry of Science and Higher Education (responsible for higher and postgraduate education, research and lifelong learning).

Secondly, the current policy implications are a work in progress, meaning that proposed policy implications are subject to further discussion and the list of policies that needs changes is not exhaustive. Lastly, the newly established ministries are developing (and changing previously adopted) policy regulations responsive to their education areas, and this chapter commences with one of the most recent ones for higher education.

### Limitless Study Destinations

For the systemic regulation of the internationalization of higher and postgraduate education in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the *Concept for the Development of Higher and Postgraduate Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan* was adopted (as of March 28, 2023). This concept introduces the elements of internationalization in the Kazakhstani system through the implementation of specific actions. However, there is a need for further improvement of this Concept in order to systematize the distribution of funding for academic mobility. The limitations are given in the unofficial documents sent from the Ministry of Education and Science to each university separately. Therefore the Concept is proposed to be amended in the *paragraph 4. Internationalization of higher and postgraduate education* (the proposed amendment is underlined):

Further development of double degree diplomas and global programs, various forms of international and domestic academic mobility of students and faculty will occur.

International academic mobility programs of students will be financially supported by the authorized body in the field of higher and postgraduate education based on the strong partnerships of organizations of higher and postgraduate education.

This measure is necessary to provide organizations of higher and postgraduate education with the opportunity to receive state funding for academic mobility without fixing the number and country of mobility, and considers institutional preferences and strong links with foreign counterparts. It is necessary to direct funding to universities for the purposes of academic

mobility and provide an opportunity to independently conduct competitive procedures and determine the number of students for mobility, as well as the host country and university.

### **Improvement in Educational Statistics**

Law on Education (2007) provides Kazakh diaspora with the opportunities to study in Kazakhstan. The Law needs to clearly state that the Kazakh diaspora are provided with the financial competition-based support to fulfill educational needs; and to clarify the status of Kazakh diaspora in national educational statistics (ethnic Kazakh students are registered as foreign students), it is necessary to mention the changes in this status upon the receipt of Kazakhstani citizenship and students' registration. To propose the mentioned amendments the article 66 of the Law on Education (2007) will read (the proposed amendment is underlined):

Article 66. Meeting the educational needs of the Kazakh diaspora abroad

2. The state contributes to meeting the educational needs of the Kazakh diaspora abroad by providing competition-based scholarships. Students of Kazakh origin have the right to apply for Kazakhstani citizenship and maintain the right to keep the scholarship upon its successful receipt. It is a responsibility of the organization of higher and postgraduate education to timely make relevant changes to the institutional status of such students of Kazakh ethnic origin.

The proposed amendment puts an additional responsibility on universities but this is a forced measure based on the empirical evidence of this study. This refers to the cases mentioned by institutional stakeholders with students of Kazakh origin who received Kazakhstani citizenship but there was confusion with the proper registration of their change in status in the educational

statistics.

### **Aligning National Policy and Educational Capacity**

Law on Amendments in Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Issues Expanding Academic and Organizational Autonomy for Higher Education Institutions (as of July 4, 2018) requires amendments to realize a policy ambition of turning into educational hub. The Strategy on Internationalization (2019) proposes that Kazakhstan become more aggressive in recruiting foreign students. The idea of expanding the geography of foreign students in Kazakhstan is misaligned with the idea of strengthening the diplomatic relations with the national strategic partners. Therefore, considering the clause 46-18) “develops and approves the rules for the selection of applicants for participation in scholarship programs; selection rules” the government is fully responsible for the organization and selection procedures for foreign students.

The clause 53-1) needs to be amended with the following (the relevant amendments are underlined):

scholarship programs - programs that supports education in Kazakhstani organizations of higher and (or) postgraduate education of foreigners, including persons of Kazakh nationality who are not citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and financed from the state budget. Higher and (or) postgraduate candidates from the countries of strategic importance for Kazakhstan are specifically encouraged to apply for scholarships.

Including the status of the sending country will align national policies of development and economic growth with educational initiatives. This is especially important in the light of

prioritizing the countries of origin of foreign students.

### **Practical Implications**

The purpose of this section of the study is to formulate the main practical recommendations for the policy makers, institutional leaders, faculty and staff, as well as researchers investigating this area. In the event the aforementioned policy implications are a better match with different than proposed policies, the information from this section could provide ideas to consequently be reflected in more suitable policies and regulations. The following ideas are mainly related to the processes of internationalization of HE in Kazakhstan occurring at the national and institutional levels.

It also needs to be mentioned that some ideas were kept without a policy outlet due to the need of engaging a larger group of policy-makers and legal aid in the field of higher education in Kazakhstan to identify proper regulatory document. Some of the suggested practical implications are complex and would require changes in a few (or more) policies and regulations. It is also the case with other practical recommendations that these are difficult to capture as a policy because the recommendation requires behavioral change; and it is difficult to capture such recommendations in a policy.

- Current practices of funding mechanisms for international activities can be more institution-friendly in terms of allowing institutions to independently decide which universities to exchange students with on academic mobility programs, instead of prescribing country of destinations as is the current practice;



- The Kazakh government and all the country's institutions of HE need to clearer organize educational statistics by foreign students' country of origin, period of stay, purpose, citizenship and ethnical background. In the case of Kazakhstan, the statistical record may need a clarification of plans to apply for Kazakhstan citizenship, and in that case the statistical record needs to allow options of positive or negative response to citizenship, and based on that automatically transition a student as a foreigner or local citizen. This step will feed into two policies - the migration policy because it will give a clearer understanding of the scope of returnees, and the policy to recruit foreign students;
- Clarity of conceptual approaches to internationalization is essential for communication between the stakeholder groups specifically when institutions seek support from the government to enhance internationalization, or when the regulatory frameworks are being developed. The shared understanding of the concept of internationalization is also beneficial for stakeholder groups because the common understanding shapes the policies whereas practical application of the concept affects its theoretical understanding. Relevant policies could be implemented to facilitate introduction of internationalization modes (at home and abroad) in national system;
- The findings of this study can inform the Kazakh government's national approach to internationalization, including reconsideration of current centralized approach to internationalization in order to provide space for implementation of institutional rationales. It is, therefore, essential that national government fully commits to the principles of autonomy;

- It is also essential to raise awareness among policymakers of Kazakhstan students' rationales to study abroad to instigate policy changes to better serve students' academic and employment needs domestically. There is currently no mechanism to track the number of self-funded Kazakh students abroad, which creates obstacles for research and policymaking. Accurate statistical data is important to avoid brain drain to countries with higher-quality institutions of HE;
- Both participant groups' concerns about anti-Muslim policies in Urumqi suggest that Kazakhstani government made more visible attempts to protect ethnic Kazakhs.

To conclude, presented in the chapter policy and practical implications are research contributions from this study. These are proposals from one point of view – internationalization rationes and their development under the centrality of political rationales.



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### Appendix A: [Interview Protocol for Universities (Russian)]

1. Расскажите об основных направлениях управления?
2. Расскажите о том, как формируется стратегия университета и как международный отдел принимает участие в формировании этой стратегии?
3. При разработке стратегии, на какие данные вы опираетесь? чему уделяете внимание?
4. Каким образом вы определяете стратегического партнера?
5. занимает ли ваш партнер, какие то рейтинговые места? Насколько это для вас важно?
6. С какими вузами вы обмениваетесь студентами, преподавателями?
7. Как часто приезжают студенты зарубежных стран?
8. Как вы сотрудничаете с вузами Китая? Получается ли обмениваться студентами, преподавателями? Совместные проекты какие-то с китайскими вузами имеются?
9. Почему вы думаете, получается/ не получается с ними работать?
10. При выборе партнеров, на что вы обращаете внимание?
11. Почему вы думаете с одними вузами, получается наладить связь, а с другими нет?  
Приведите примеры
12. Как думаете, Болонский процесс нам помогает или мешает интернационализироваться?
13. Среди ваших партнеров есть вузы партнеры, которые очень высоко в рейтинге находятся из любых стран? Насколько это важно для вуза?
14. Какое общее количество партнеров у вас?



15. Можно ли сказать, что все партнеры активно работают, активно сотрудничают?

Из этого числа примерно, какое количество активны и не активны? Что для вас значит активность?



### **Appendix B: [Interview Protocol for Universities (English)]**

1. Could you tell about the main directions of the office?
2. Please tell me how does the university strategy develop? How does international department contribute in its development?
3. What materials/ data do you consider when developing the strategy? What do you pay attention to?
4. How do you identify strategic partners?
5. How important it is for the university that the strategic partner(s) is featured in rankings?
6. What universities do you have academic mobility with?
7. How often does university host international students?
8. How do you collaborate with Chinese universities? Tell me about academic mobility with Chinese partners. Could you also share the joint projects with Chinese collaborators?
9. Why do you think the partnership with Chinese collaborators is successful/ not successful?
10. What is important for university when selecting a partner institution?
11. Why do you think some partnerships are active and some are not so active? Could you give examples?
12. How do you think Bologna process is helping/ not helping us to internationalize?
13. How important is it that your partner is featured in the rankings?
14. How many partners does the university have?
15. Can you say all partnerships are active?
16. What percentage/ number of these partnerships is active/ not active? How do you identify if the partnership is active?

### Appendix C: [Interview Protocol For Students (Russian)]

1. Расскажите, где вы учились и какую степень вы получили?
  2. Когда вы закончили/ заканчиваете университет?
  3. Что вас привлекло в Китае?
  4. Как вы выбрали Китай, расскажите? Кто повлиял на ваше решение?
  5. Расскажите о вашей жизни в Китае? Как вам понравилась/ не понравилась жизнь в Китае?
  6. Порекомендовали ли бы вы обучение в Китае вашим друзьям и родственникам? Почему да/ нет?
  7. Если бы вы могли вернуться назад во времени, вы выбрали бы снова Китай? Или бы вы поехали в другую страну?
  8. Почему вы выбрали именно Китай для обучения?
  9. В чем преимущества и недостатки вашей степени в Китае?
  10. Как вам помогает ваша степень сейчас/ в будущем?
  11. Где вы работаете? Как вы применяете полученные знания на работе?
  12. Вы планируете продолжить ваше обучение в будущем? Вы снова выберете Китай? Почему?
  13. В сравнении с вашими сверстниками ваша степень лучше/ хуже? Почему?
- Насколько важным был для вас рейтинг университета?



**Appendix D: [Interview Protocol For Students (English)]**

2. Tell me please where did you complete your studies and what degree did you obtain?
3. When did you graduate/ are graduating from University?
4. What attracts/ attracted you in China?
5. Please tell me how did you choose China? Who influenced this decision?
6. Tell me about your life in China? How did you enjoy those years spent there?
7. Would you recommend China to your friends and family as an academic destination? Why?  
Why not?
8. If you could go back in time would you choose China again or would you choose a different country? Why?
9. Why did you choose China as your academic destination?
10. What are the benefits or disadvantages of your degree?
11. How your Chinese education is being helpful now?
12. Where do you work? How do you apply the obtained knowledge/ degree in your professional career?
13. Are you planning to continue your education further? Would you choose China again? Why?
14. In comparison with your other school mates is your degree better/ worse? Why?
15. How important was ranking for you when you chose your university?

## Appendix E: [Approval Letter From University Human Research Ethics Committee]



15 January 2019

Miss Dana ABDRASHEVA  
Research Postgraduate Programmes  
Graduate School

Dear Miss Abdrasheva,

**Application for Ethical Review <Ref. no. 2018-2019-0186>**

I am pleased to inform you that approval has been given by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for your research project:

Project title: National Aspirations in Higher Education Institutional Partnership: The Case of Kazakhstan and China

Ethical approval is granted for the project period from 18 February 2019 to 28 June 2019. If a project extension is applied for lasting more than 3 months, HREC should be contacted with information regarding the nature of and the reason for the extension. If any substantial changes have been made to the project, a new HREC application will be required.

Please note that you are responsible for informing the HREC in advance of any proposed substantive changes to the research proposal or procedures which may affect the validity of this ethical approval. You will receive separate notification should a fresh approval be required.

Thank you for your kind attention and we wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely,



Patsy Chung (Ms)  
Secretary  
Human Research Ethics Committee

c.c. Professor CHOU Kee Lee, Chairperson, Human Research Ethics Committee

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