

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE APPLICATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES OF GRADUATES OF FOREIGN UNIVERSITIES: THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

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**Abstract.** *This paper analyzes the effectiveness of the application of the professional knowledge and competencies of Kazakhstanis who have graduated from foreign universities. Based on the results of a survey of 1,111 Kazakhstanis who completed their studies abroad and in-depth interviews with 44 graduates of foreign universities, the authors consider how effectively Kazakhstani graduates of foreign universities apply their knowledge and competencies in Kazakhstan and abroad. At the same time, this research analyses the main motives of Kazakhstanis for studying abroad, the factors preventing the use of intellectual potential in Kazakhstan, as well as the reasons that prompted them to stay abroad or return to Kazakhstan.*

*According to the results of the study, the use of the intellectual potential of graduates is influenced by: the high degree of bureaucracy in the country (34.5%); low wages (28.3%); and the absence of the conditions necessary for effective work (26.8%). Only 21.3% of the survey participants fully apply their acquired knowledge and skills at work.*

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**Keywords:** *intellectual potential, Kazakhstan, intellectual migration, Bolashak program, graduates of foreign universities.*

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** *intelektualinis potencialas, Kazachstanas, intelektualinė migracija, „Bolašako“ programa, užsienio universitetų absolventai.*

### Introduction

According to scholars, since 2012 the net migration rate in Kazakhstan has been negative (Бокеев и Оспанов 2018). Official statistics show that 32,256 people left the country in 2021

(29,088 people in 2020), including 27,505 to the CIS countries and 4,751 to other countries (**Бюро национальной статистики** 2022). In 2021, the negative balance of migration amounted to 21,217 people (17,718 people in 2020) (**Бюро национальной статистики** 2022). A significant number of those leaving the country are young people. Thus, scientists associate the negative indicators of migration processes in the country with such reasons as: learning activities, including within the framework of the Bolashak governmental scholarship program; visa-free travel to 28 countries; and change of residence due to employment (Бокаев и Оспанов 2018).

According to various sources, in 2017 the number of Kazakh students abroad was around 90,000 (EurAsiaDaily 2019), and more than 100,000 in 2021 (Kapital.kz 2021).

At the same time, there are concerns that educational migration may be reclassified as intellectual migration if graduates of foreign universities decide to stay and work in another country or migrate for the purpose of permanent residence. Studies by Kazakh scientists (**Исмаилова и Бокаев 2019; Бокаев и Каймолдиев 2021**) show that, despite the existing negative balance, mechanisms for the strategic interaction of key government bodies in the field of migration policy have not yet been developed in Kazakhstan. These mechanisms of strategic interaction must meet all modern requirements and make up for the shortage of personnel with highly qualified specialists, for whom the conditions necessary for the full use of intellectual potential must be created.

In this article, intellectual migration is understood as “the movement of qualified specialists for the purpose of carrying out intellectual and professional activities” (Bokayev, Torebekova and Davletbayeva 2020, 29).

Since 1993, Kazakhstan has been actively sending Kazakhstanis to the best foreign universities under the Bolashak program, providing full financial support.

According to the data of the JSC “Center for International Programs” (2022), 14,033 scholarships have been awarded over the 27 years of the program. Of these, 10,981 specialists are actively working in Kazakhstan. Of the total number of graduates, 54.3% completed their studies in social and humanitarian specialties, 36.7% in engineering, 7.2% in medicine, and 1.8% in creative specialties. Graduates studied in the following countries: Great Britain and Ireland – 45.2%; the USA and Canada – 25.7%; European countries – 13%; Asian countries – 8.2%; and the Russian Federation – 7.9% (Center for International Programs 2022).

The aim of this research is to analyze the effectiveness of the application of the knowledge, skills, and competencies of graduates of foreign universities in the socio-economic space and in other areas. In this regard, the following research questions have been identified:

- 1) How effectively are the knowledge and competencies of Kazakhstani people who studied at foreign universities applied in Kazakhstan?
- 2) What factors influence the use of the intellectual potential of graduates of foreign universities?

## **Materials and methods**

In order to comprehensively study the effectiveness of the application of the intellectual potential of Kazakhstanis who have completed foreign university studies, quantitative and qualitative research methods are used in this article. Scholars point out that mixed methods of research, using the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches, help to better understand research problems (Creswell 2009).

Thus, the main results of this study were obtained with the help of sociological surveys. A

survey was conducted from April 26 to May 29, 2021, using an online Google form distributed among Kazakhstanis who completed their studies abroad and returned to Kazakhstan (93%) or stayed to live and work abroad (7%).

In total, 1,111 people participated in the survey: 60% from 26 to 35 years old; 25% from 36 to 45 years old; 5.5% from 18 to 25 years old; 6.5% from 46 to 55 years old; and 2% over 56 years old. There was a gender balance among respondents, of whom 49.7% were women, and 50.3% were men. Of the total respondents, 59% were married, around 35% were single, 6% were divorced, and 1% were widowed.

Respondents lived in the following regions: 47% in Nur-Sultan; 23% in Almaty; and 2.5% in each of the Aktobe, Atyrau, East Kazakhstan, and Karaganda regions. In addition, around 2% of respondents lived in Shymkent, while the percentage of respondents from each of the other regions (Akmola, Almaty, Zhambyl, West Kazakhstan, Kostanay, Kyzylorda, Mangystau, Pavlodar, North Kazakhstan, and Turkestan) was less than 2%.

In terms of education, 67% of survey participants had a master's degree, 16% had a bachelor's degree, 16% had a doctoral degree, and only 1% of the respondents had completed residency. Most of the respondents spoke Kazakh, Russian, and English.

The monthly income of respondents was as follows: 19% received up to 200,000 Tenge; 17% up to 300,000 Tenge; 14.3% up to 400,000 Tenge; 5% up to 100,000 Tenge; and 11% up to 500,000 Tenge. Of the graduates of foreign universities, 5% received up to 100,000 Tenge; 6.5% up to 600,000 Tenge; 5% up to 700,000 Tenge; 4% up to 800,000 Tenge; 3% up to 900,000 Tenge; 4% up to 1 million Tenge; 5% up to 1.5 million Tenge; 3% up to 2 million Tenge; and 5% over 2 million Tenge.

Most survey participants indicated that they graduated from universities in the UK (42.6%), the USA (19.5%), and Russia (13%). Slightly fewer graduates of foreign universities studied in the CIS countries (7.7%), Germany (4.5%), Canada (3.2%), South Korea (3.2%), European countries (2.9%), China (2.9%), Switzerland (2.9%), or France (2.2%). Less than 2% of respondents indicated that they completed their studies in Malaysia (1.8%), Australia (1.5%), Poland (1.5%), the Netherlands (1.4%), Hungary (1.3%), the Czech Republic (1.1%), Japan (1.1%), or Asia (1.1%). The least popular countries for training Kazakhstanis were: Spain (0.9%), Austria (0.7%), Italy (0.7%), Singapore (0.6%), Israel (0.5%), Finland (0.5%), Sweden (0.3%), African countries (0.3%), Norway (0.2%), and South American countries (0.1%).

The framework of the Bolashak international program supported 82.4% of the survey participants; 13.7% studied at the expense of personal or parental funds; 8.9% and 4.5% of respondents studied at the expense of university and intergovernmental grants, respectively; and 9.2% of graduates of foreign universities studied at the expense of other scholarships.

Respondents also indicated their year of graduation. Thus, in the period from 1992 to 2007, less than 1% of the total number of respondents completed their studies at foreign universities each year. In 2008, this figure was 1%; from 2009 to 2012, an average of 5.5%; and in 2013, 10.5% of respondents graduated from foreign universities. In the period from 2014 to 2020, on average, around 8.5% of annual graduates completed their studies at a foreign university, with the exception of 2017, in which 9% of graduates did so. As of May 29, 2021, 3% of graduates had completed their studies at foreign universities.

The total duration of study at foreign universities was 1 year for 32.5% of respondents, 1.5–2 years for 25%, 2.5–3 years for 15.2%, 3.5–4 years for 9.6%, 4.5–5 years for 9.8%, and more than 5 years for 7.8% of respondents.

Along with the survey above, in-depth interviews were conducted with 44 graduates of foreign universities as part of this study: 22 living in Kazakhstan and 22 living abroad. According to other authors, in-depth interviews are an appropriate, qualitative data collection method that helps to obtain detailed and useful information for research (Boyce and Neale 2006).

The in-depth interviews conducted with 22 graduates of foreign universities currently living in Kazakhstan involved respondents who graduated in the following countries: 5 in the UK; 3 in China; 2 in Canada; 2 in Hungary; 2 in Russia; 2 in the USA; 1 in Australia; 1 in Austria; 1 in the Czech Republic; 1 in Malaysia; 1 in South Korea; and 1 individual who graduated in both Russia and Switzerland. The ages of interview participants ranged from 27 to 46 years.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with 22 graduates of foreign universities currently living abroad. These respondents graduated in the following countries: 4 in the UK; 2 in Russia; 2 in Canada; 1 in China; 1 in Germany; 1 in Hungary; 1 in Italy; 1 in Latvia; 1 in France; 1 in the USA; 1 in Japan; 1 in Poland; and 1 in Turkey. Additionally, 4 graduates completed their studies in several countries: 1 from universities in the USA and Russia; 1 from universities in Sweden and Hungary; 1 from universities in France and Japan; and 1 from universities in Canada and Finland. The age of these participants ranged from 23 to 44 years. These respondents live in different countries: 4 in the United States of America; 3 in Germany; 2 in Japan; 2 in Russia; 2 in France; 1 in the UK; 1 in Canada; 1 in Norway; 1 in Poland; 1 in the United Arab Emirates; 1 in Serbia; 1 in Sweden; 1 in Turkey; and 1 in Vietnam. All 22 interview participants currently reside and carry out professional activities in foreign countries.

In-depth interviews and a mass survey made it possible to: reveal, in more detail, the issues of using the intellectual potential of graduates of foreign universities; determine the effectiveness of state policy on investing in human resources; and analyze the factors influencing intellectual migration.

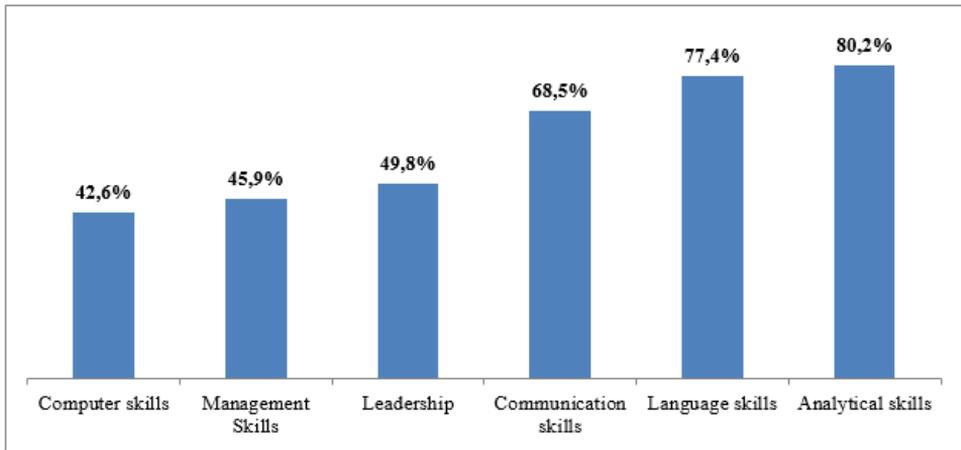
## **Research Results and Discussion**

The results of the study show that the main motives for studying at foreign universities for Kazakhstanis are receiving a quality education, developing language competencies, and learning about new countries and cultures.

*“I decided to study abroad to broaden my horizons, and also because I had heard that foreign education in Western countries, in general, was of better quality than in Kazakhstan at that time”* (male, 30 years old, graduate of a Canadian university, lives in the Karaganda region).

*“Because I wanted to go abroad, to feel that whole atmosphere... to see their views on life, how they differ from us...”* (male, 28 years old, graduate of a Malaysian university, lives in the Aktobe region).

At the same time, studying abroad made it possible for Kazakhstanis to broaden their horizons, gain new knowledge, and develop professional competencies and skills.



**Figure 1. Skills, knowledge, and competencies developed by graduates of foreign universities in the process of studying abroad.**

Thus, according to the results of the survey, 80.2% of respondents developed analytical skills in the process of studying at foreign universities; they developed research and problem-solving skills, learning how to interpret information, how to write policy briefs, and so on. Furthermore, 77.4% of graduates developed language competencies and 68.5% of respondents developed communication skills, including oral, written, interpersonal, non-verbal communication, presentation, public speaking, negotiating, and belief-based skills. Leadership qualities were developed by 49.8% of graduates, including motivation, delegation of authority, decision making, cooperation, strategic and critical thinking, and more. Knowledge in the field of management was acquired by 45.9% of respondents, including skills in people management, project management, time management, conflict resolution, budgeting, finance, organizational skills, logistics, action planning, risk management, and other competencies. The computer skills of 42.6% of graduates were enhanced, including skills in working with office programs, working with data, etc. (Figure 1).

However, despite the wealth of acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies, the ability to apply them is an acute problem that depends both on the individual themselves and on the conditions they experience. In this regard, the study showed that only 21.3% of respondents fully apply their acquired knowledge. The degree of application of skills, knowledge, and competencies in their current job was rated at 9 points out of 10 by 8.9% of graduates. Similar numbers of graduates, 15.8% and 16.6%, rated the applicability of their knowledge, competencies, and skills at 7 and 8 points out of 10, respectively. The application of knowledge, competencies, and skills was assessed at 5 and 6 points by 8.7% and 12.3% of respondents, respectively, while 4.4% of graduates assessed the application of these factors at 4 points. At the lower end of the scale, 5.7% of graduates assessed the application of knowledge, competencies, and skills at 3 points; 2.1% at 2 points; and 2% at just 1 point. Finally, 2.3% of graduates believed that they did not apply their acquired knowledge, competencies, and skills in their current job in any way (Figure 2).

The results of the survey on the applicability of the knowledge, competencies and skills of graduates acquired abroad in their current work indicate 2 likely problems in the current situation. Given the fact that the vast majority of respondents are graduates of the Bolashak program, problem 1 is that the list of priority specialties for studying abroad is incorrectly formed, and includes specialties that are not relevant in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The second possible problem is that the labor market in Kazakhstan is not yet ready for graduates of foreign universities to be able to put into practice their acquired knowledge, competencies, and skills to the fullest extent. That is, the necessary conditions for work and professional development are not fully created, or there are not enough vacancies corresponding to the specialties of graduates of foreign universities.

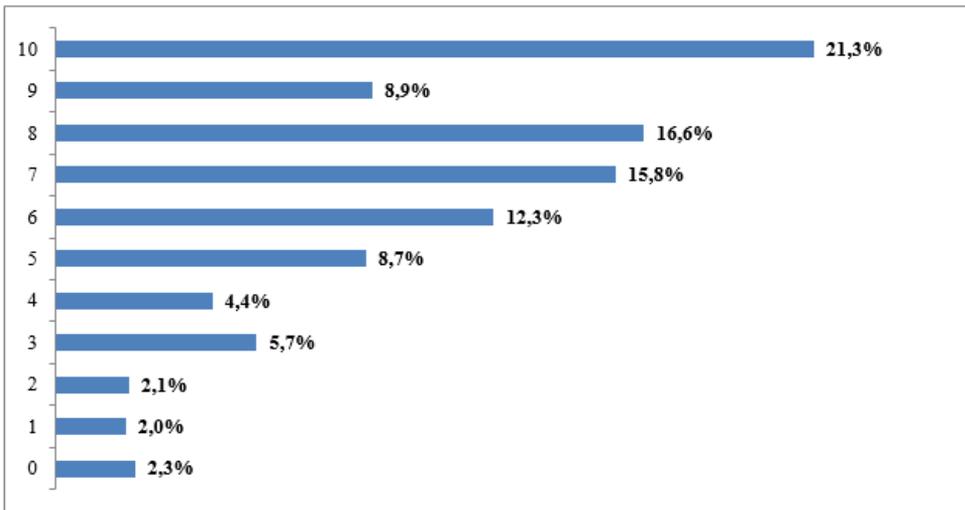


Figure 2. The degree of application of the knowledge, competencies, and skills acquired by graduates of foreign universities in their current work.

The results of the analysis of interviews with graduates of foreign universities living in Kazakhstan also confirm that not all graduates fully apply their knowledge, skills, and competencies at work. For example, a graduate of a Canadian university with an engineering degree observed the following:

*“In my current job, I only use English-related skills... also the ability to give presentations”* (male, 30 years old, graduate of a Canadian university, lives in the Karaganda region).

The answers of other respondents also indicate that their knowledge, skills, and competencies are not fully applied.

*“Well, unfortunately, very little, probably. Well, something more... maybe I use a little from project management, but in general, no, practically none”* (male, 30 years old, graduate of a British university, lives in Nur-Sultan).

*“Well, [I] probably [use] even less than half”* (female, 32 years old, graduate of a British university, lives in the East Kazakhstan region).

The results of the survey show in more detail the degree of applicability of certain knowledge, competencies, and skills of graduates of foreign universities. Thus, more than half of the respondents, 54.4%, use language competencies to the maximum extent at work, assigning a score of 5 out of 5. Meanwhile, 14.1% of graduates of foreign universities rate the applicability of language competencies in their current job at 4 points out of 5, around 10% use knowledge of a foreign language at the level of 3 points, 8.6% of respondents rate the applicability of language competencies at 2 points, 6.1% at 1 point, and 7.4% of respondents do not use language competencies at work at all. The incomplete applicability of language competencies at work may be due to the fact that graduates work in Kazakhstani companies, in which, according to their job responsibilities, knowledge of a foreign language is not required. Thus, if this trend continues in the future, over time, around half of the graduates of foreign universities will lose their language skills.

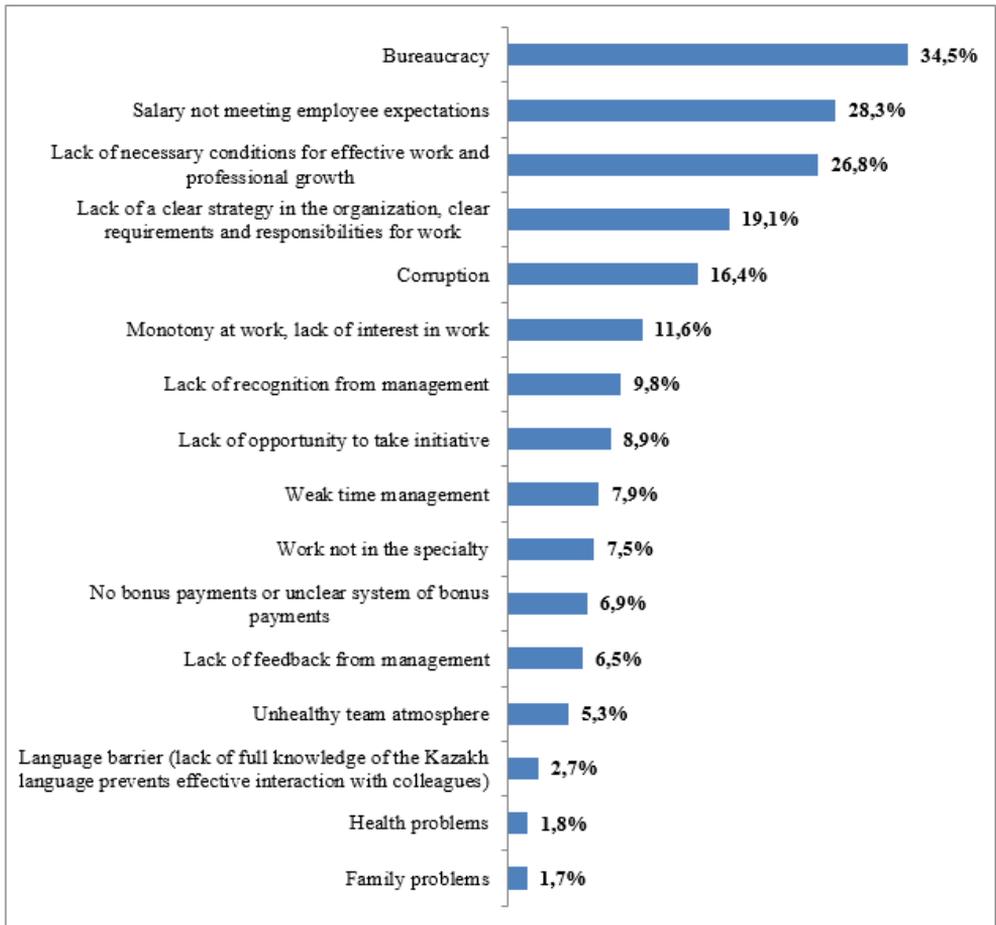
Despite the importance of computer skills in the modern world, even they are not fully used by graduates of foreign universities. Only 44.7% of graduates rated the degree of applicability of computer skills in their current job at the highest score of 5 out of 5; 18% at 4 points out of 5; 14.8% at 3 points out of 5; 10.3% at 2 points out of 5; 7.3% at 1 point out of 5; and 5% of graduates do not use computer skills at all. Considering that computer technologies will continue to develop in the future, it will be very important for Kazakhstan to achieve high rates of the application of computer skills by its citizens.

Communication skills are also not used very actively, with only 49% of respondents answering that they use them to the maximum extent of 5 points out of 5. The applicability of communication skills was rated at 4 points out of 5 by 20.9% of graduates of foreign universities, 12.4% of respondents rated it at 3 points, 11% at 2 points, 5.2% at 1 point, and 1.5% of respondents do not use communication skills at all. In the age of computer technology, the role of flexible skills, of which communication skills are a part, has increased. As such, communication skills should be given due attention.

Graduates assessed the degree of applicability of analytical skills at work as follows: 50.1% rated their applicability at the maximum, 5 points out of 5; 22.2% at 4 points; 10% at 3 points; 11.3% at 2 points; 5.2% at 1 point; and 1.2% of interview participants do not use analytical skills at all.

Management knowledge is also not fully applied: 32% of respondents rated the applicability of management knowledge at 5 points out of 5; 18.9% at 4 points; 17.2% at 3 points; 12.5% at 2 points; 10.7% at 1 point; and 8.7% believed that they do not apply knowledge of management in their work.

Regarding leadership skills, only 34.8% of respondents made full use them, assessing their application at 5 out of 5. The applicability of leadership skills was assessed by 20% of respondents at 4 points; 15.1% at 3 points; 13% at 2 points; 1.7% at 1 point; and 6.4% of graduates from foreign universities believed that leadership skills are not applicable to their current job.



*Figure 3. Factors hindering the full use of acquired knowledge, competencies, and skills at work.*

As the analysis shows, graduates of foreign universities do not fully apply their acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies. In this regard, a logical question arises as to the nature of the barriers and factors affecting the use of intellectual potential.

Thus, 34.5% of respondents believe that the high level of bureaucracy in the country prevents them from fully applying their acquired knowledge, competencies, and skills in their work; 28.3% of respondents consider low wages to be the primary barrier; 26.8% of graduates name the lack of necessary conditions as obstacles for effective work and professional growth; 16.4% highlight corruption; and 19.1% point to the lack of a clear strategy in their organization, including clear requirements and responsibilities (Figure 3).

The results of the survey are also confirmed by the answers provided in the course of interviews with graduates of foreign universities. Thus, respondents living in Kazakhstan point out such barriers and factors as: work not in their specialty; completely different approaches to work and record keeping in Kazakhstan and abroad; poor development or absence in Kazakhstan of the specialty in which they studied abroad; lack of management support; and a lack of desire to work under someone else's leadership.

*"... a different system of development of the public administration system and differences in the system of government abroad and in Kazakhstan. I would like the system of state governance in Kazakhstan to be more flexible, well, like in the West, probably"* (male, 29, graduate of a Chinese university, lives in Nur-Sultan).

*"For example, as a teacher, we don't even have such branches of science as those in which I studied. For example, we have more commercial law, yes, but international commercial law... we just don't have such a subject in Kazakhstani universities. No, and there is no court... Secondly, probably to a greater extent the political system in Kazakhstan does not allow for the full implementation of human rights, or there is a lack of support for free, peaceful rallies in Kazakhstan, or for example some kinds of marches. In Kazakhstan, this is simply impossible according to our constitution. Because of this, I, unfortunately, am not able to apply all the knowledge that I have gained"* (female, 30 years old, graduate of a Canadian university, lives in Almaty).

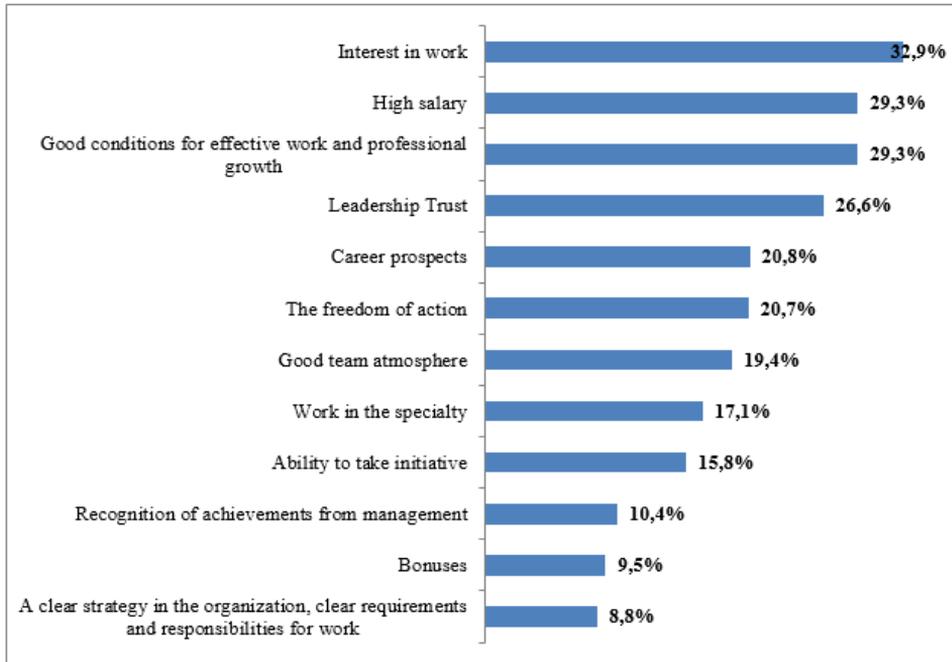
*"There is a reluctance. Reluctance to work for someone... Office work is not for me and that's why I left. I need, as it were, movement, I can't sit in one place. I can't sit here from 8 am to 6 pm. This, here, is not mine. I understood and that's why I left"* (female, 29 years old, graduate of a Chinese university, lives in the Mangistau region).

On the other hand, among the respondents who currently carry out professional activities and live abroad, reasons for migration and barriers to the full use of intellectual potential in Kazakhstan include wages, bureaucracy, and gender bias.

*"Well, I, so, approximately, I took into account that, probably, there will be a salary of around 150,000. And I just thought. What will it take for me? I thought. Will I be able to be financially independent in Kazakhstan?"* (female, 27 years old, graduate of German universities, lives in Germany).

*"There is this specialty in X-ray endovascular diagnostics and treatment, in Kazakhstan, in order to deal with patients. Namely, in this profile, you need to complete either a residency in cardiology in order to deal with cardiac interventions, so to speak, in simple terms, or X-ray diagnostics in order to deal with peripheral arteries. Without a certificate in these specialties, Kazakhstan does not allow specialists in clinical practice, unfortunately"* (male, 28 years old, graduate of a Russian university, lives in Russia).

*"It is easier for men to build a career in terms of management than for women. So, I didn't want this prejudiced attitude either"* (female, 28 years old, graduate of a Polish university, lives in Poland).



*Figure 5. Stimulating factors for applying knowledge, competencies, and skills acquired abroad in work.*

At the same time, respondents believe that there are certain stimulating factors that can affect the level of application of intellectual potential by graduates of foreign universities. Thus, the largest share of respondents (29.3%) are of the same opinion: that high wages, as well as good conditions for effective work and professional growth, can positively affect the fact that knowledge, competencies, and skills acquired abroad will be fully applied. In addition, the trust of the management (26.6%) and freedom of action (20.7%) are important for the respondents to implement their ideas in practice. Career prospects (20.8%) and a good atmosphere in the team (19.4%) are also considered good incentives. Work in the acquired specialty (17.1%) is considered a stimulating factor for the full use of intellectual potential, and 15.8% of respondents believe that if they are given the opportunity to show initiative, they will be able to fully use their knowledge, skills, and competencies in their work. A smaller number of graduates of foreign universities believe that incentives for the full realization of intellectual potential can include bonus payments (9.5%), recognition of achievements from management (10.4%), or a clear strategy in the organization and the requirements and responsibilities at work (8.8%) (Figure 5).

After graduating from the best foreign universities in the world, Kazakhstani graduates are expected to be able to fully put into practice their acquired knowledge, competencies, and skills, and thereby bring great benefits to the Republic of Kazakhstan. In practice, it turns out that expectations do not always coincide with reality. According to a sociological survey, only 21.3% of graduates of foreign universities make the most of the knowledge, competencies, and skills ac-

quired abroad. This is confirmed by the results of in-depth interviews with respondents living both in Kazakhstan and abroad, in which respondents reveal the reasons why they do not use their intellectual potential at 100% effectiveness. To increase the effectiveness of the application of professional knowledge and competencies of graduates of foreign universities in Kazakhstan, a systematic approach is needed. In other words, it is necessary to eliminate or minimize the influence of factors and barriers that prevent the maximum use of skills, knowledge, and competencies. On the other hand, there is a need to develop stimulating factors that contribute to the effective application of knowledge in practice, which will undoubtedly affect the performance and motivation of graduates of foreign universities. Otherwise, the Republic of Kazakhstan may face the problem of intellectual migration, in which the most talented graduates of foreign universities will move to other countries in order to obtain better conditions for the full realization of their intellectual potential.

## Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, the following can be concluded:

1. The effectiveness of the application of the professional knowledge and competencies of graduates of foreign universities in the Republic of Kazakhstan is at a low level.
2. Graduates living in Kazakhstan continue to carry out their activities, despite the fact that they do not use their potential at the maximum level.
3. Graduates of foreign universities who left Kazakhstan and currently live abroad have found a place where they can realize themselves and put into practice their acquired knowledge, competencies, and skills.
4. Graduates of foreign universities who have moved to other countries for permanent residence continue to maintain contact with their homeland and are ready to return to Kazakhstan if appropriate conditions are created for the full realization of their intellectual potential.

Given this fact, the Republic of Kazakhstan, in addition to those who are in the country, needs to use the intellectual potential of graduates of foreign universities living outside of Kazakhstan by involving them in significant Kazakhstani projects. This will require the creation of a state strategy for the effective use of the knowledge, competencies, and skills of Kazakhstanis, the development of special programs, etc.

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## Užsienio universitetų absolventų profesinių žinių ir kompetencijų taikymo efektyvumas: Kazachstano atvejis

Anotacija

*Šiame darbe analizuojamas kazachų, baigusių užsienio universitetus, profesinių žinių ir kompetencijų taikymo efektyvumas. Remdamiesi 1111 užsienyje studijas baigusių Kazachstano piliečių apklausos rezultatais ir giluminiais interviu su 44 užsienio universitetų absolventais, autoriai svarsto, kaip efektyviai Kazachstano užsienio universitetų absolventai pritaiko savo žinias ir kompetencijas Kazachstane ir užsienyje. Taip pat šiame tyrime analizuojami pagrindiniai Kazachstano absolventų motyvai studijuoti užsienyje, veiksniai, trukdantys panaudoti intelektualinį potencialą Kazachstane, ir priežastys, paskatinusios asmenis pasilikti užsienyje ar grįžti į Kazachstaną.*

*Remiantis tyrimo rezultatais teigtina, kad absolventų intelektualinio potencialo panaudojimui itakos turi: didelis biurokratijos laipsnis šalyje (34,5 %), mažas darbo užmokestis (28,3 %), būtinų sąlygų trūkumas norint efektyviai dirbti (26,8 %). Tik 21,3 % apklausos dalyvių įgytas žinias ir įgūdžius visapusiškai taiko darbe.*

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