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# **Student mobility, experiences of return and employment in Kyrgyzstan**

**The SRC's Research Fellows Working Paper, October 2011**

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## Introduction

Labour migration has become a widespread phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan. Up to 20 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's population have left in search of better economic opportunities in Russia and Kazakhstan, sending back remittances that account for 30 per cent of GDP (Sadowskaja 2008, Schmidt and Sagynbekova, 2008).

Apart from the national scale the positive impact of remittances on household level has been confirmed in various ways (e.g. Thieme, 2008; 2009; Tynaliev and McLean, 2011). Despite the positive effects of remittances, labour migration and brain drain represent significant obstacles to balanced poverty reduction throughout the country<sup>1</sup>. One way to prevent brain drain and encourage brain circulation are scholarship programmes for temporary migration for education, which form the starting point for the research project. Knowledge in general is seen as a fundamental source of wellbeing and progress that has great potential to help a countries development (Tejada Guerrero and Bolay, 2005, p. 2; UNESCO, 1998). These expectations are true of all sectors of education, but students who have been educated abroad promise even more. This is not exclusive to migrants and moreover not all former student migrants might have the ability, but generally post-graduates are expected to gain new knowledge and to transfer this new knowledge by building bridges between different knowledge communities (Williams 2007, pp. 41-42).

The number of students from Kyrgyzstan at foreign universities has increased in recent years, but little is known about the mobility of this fraction of the population. This research project therefore has three aims: firstly to provide an overview of possible scholarship schemes for students who wish to go abroad to study; secondly, the project intends to understand students' reasons for going abroad and their expectations, why former students returned and how they are experiencing working life after their return and finally, I wish to understand the perspective of employers and the broader context of job availability and employability in Kyrgyzstan.

The project is still in an early stage and 3 months of data collection just passed. Therefore the research report is an introduction to the topic and a preliminary overview of the data collected.

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP, 2011, Millennium Development Goals MDG's Monitor – Kyrgyzstan. Available at: [http://www.mdgmonitor.org/factsheets\\_00.cfm?c=KGZ&cd=417](http://www.mdgmonitor.org/factsheets_00.cfm?c=KGZ&cd=417), accessed 11 October 2011.

The report looks at how knowledge is conceptualized and provides a short summary on the topic of higher education and the labour market for high-skilled citizens in the country. Finally I provide a first insight to the data collected and possible themes, which I expect to be most relevant for the ongoing data analysis and interpretation, whereby the focus is on the information collected from returnees only.

In a literature review on student migration, King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) and Balaz and Williams (2004) characterise student migration in general as an under-researched field in migration studies. In particular, little research exists on the process of return, human capital transfer and integration into the domestic labour market. Migrants are potentially significant as knowledge brokers, crossing boundaries and building bridges between different communities be it as migrants or returned migrants (Williams 2007, p.34). The knowledge they bring seems to be crucial for their success in the labour market.

Different definitions of knowledge do exist. I differentiate between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is understood as knowledge gained through interpersonal knowledge exchanges and learning that cannot be easily expressed in explicit forms (Williams 2007, p. 30). Explicit knowledge is theoretically accessible to everyone, for example theoretical knowledge from lectures according to the subject studied such as business administration or sociology, as well as language and writing skills. In practice, of course, different types of knowledge are fluid and interrelated. Furthermore, the way in which knowledge is gained, shaped and used as well as which social boundaries people cross depends on personal factors as well as on the outside social environment (Williams 2007, p. 33-34).

The empirical work in Kyrgyzstan was done during 3 months field study between April and July 2011. In the absence of reliable context-specific migration data, I carried out theoretical sampling. I focused on three groups of informants: people who formerly studied abroad, representatives of scholarship programmes as well as employers and representatives of labour market or employment related institutions (e.g. Chambers of Commerce). The selection criteria for former students were a completed Master's level education abroad, thus separating the sample from labour migrants and people migrating abroad on other educational programmes such as high school or language courses. Furthermore, most of the respondents had been living in Kyrgyzstan for a minimum of one year since they returned. Many scholarship programmes require their scholars to return to Kyrgyzstan for a certain time. For example programmes to USA issue visas, which

require two years back in the home country before one is able to apply for a new US visa. Scholarships from one university in Bishkek require scholars to return and teach for four years at the university. In summary, the sample included post-graduates who had studied Master's programmes on scholarships in Europe and the USA and had then spent a minimum of one year in Kyrgyzstan since their return. In a more explorative manner Salzmann (2008) did a study on return students in Bishkek in 2008. His results were fed into the research proposal which generated the funding for this ongoing research project. Therefore I contacted also respondents of the former research and finally managed to get a follow up of four former respondents. In total I interviewed 52 people who had studied abroad and returned to Kyrgyzstan.

Furthermore, an overview of existing funding sources and institutions providing services in the field of education abroad was produced by interviewing representatives from (with the exception of one) all international education/scholarship programmes, embassies, the foreign affairs departments of six universities, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education, international organizations dealing with education and employability, and by researching and analysing the literature and websites of programmes, universities and embassies. The interviews covered the requirements for graduate students, the application procedure, the programme's services, and the number of scholarships.

To get an overview of the general employment situation as well as the employability of returned students I interviewed representatives (if possible people closely related to human resource development) of 10 major companies, of government institutions, of universities, international organizations as well as people who are self-employed resp. started their own business. In addition I attended a two days alumni meeting of one scholarship programme, as well as the roundtable discussions held in the parliament on the former government scholarship programme "Kadr 21". Upon request of my respondents and since the data analysis is at its very early stage all names are kept confidential.

### **Higher education in Kyrgyzstan**

Compared with other countries, the level of education in Kyrgyzstan is still high, but public expenditure has declined and there is evidence of falling quality as well as narrower access to education (UNDP, 2010). Despite declining governmental expenditure, enrolment for higher education has more than doubled since

independence (ICG 2006, p. 6). One of the reasons for this is the establishment of private educational institutions (UNDP & CIS 2005, p. 151), which has led to an expansion of the tertiary education system. The general contribution of the government towards higher education is estimated to be only one tenth of the overall budget. In 2005 87 % of all students in Kyrgyzstan paid at least part of their tuition fees (Franke, 2005). In 2003/04, 169,059 students (including long-distance learning students) paid between US\$ 200 and 1,500. The 11,338 international students paid up to US\$ 3,500 per year (Franke 2005, p. 14). Most university fees are paid not to non-governmental but rather to governmental universities.

Despite Kyrgyzstan's regional reputation for higher education, educational standards vary greatly and many institutions are perceived to have a low educational standard and to be corrupt, leading to a general devaluation of university degrees (Baiturova, 2006). One aspect of how satisfactory academic performance is undermined became obvious during fieldwork. Copy shops close to universities sell complete Master's dissertations, which are mainly downloaded from Russian web sources and updated for an additional fee (also Salzmann 2008). Also the latest National Human Development Report 2009/10 states, that "Education has become an issue of social status rather than a conscious choice to work hard to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare for a profession." (UNDP, 2010: 24)

Programmes of educational reforms in Kyrgyzstan are on the way (Amsler, 2009). To eliminate corruption in access to education and governmental scholarships, the Kyrgyz National Scholarship Examination (NSE) was introduced in 2002 (Franke 2005; Salzmann, 2008). The introduction of this test meant that university staff lost an important source of informal income (Franke 2005, p. 20).

### **Kyrgyzstan's labour market for high-skilled persons and migration for labour**

The population of working age both in Central Asia as a whole and in Kyrgyzstan in particular is expected to grow, but job opportunities remain limited (Kaser, 2005; UNDP 2010). In 2007, 35 % of Kyrgyzstan's population lived in poverty and 6.6 % in extreme poverty, although there are large regional variations. Poverty is mostly - although not exclusively - a rural phenomenon. A sharp rise in prices since autumn 2007 has threatened to push the majority of the population back into poverty. Currently, one million people in

Kyrgyzstan suffer from food scarcities and are at risk of under-nourishment. Huge energy and water shortages hold back an already sluggish economy and agricultural production (Omarov, 2009). In addition the political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan has hit the national economy substantially. In spite of the lack of raw materials and slow industrialisation, Omarov (2009) views government mismanagement and the lack of a coherent development model and economic strategy as the main causes of the crisis. The private sector is the driving force of economic growth and employment, but its possibilities are limited by massive corruption within the state apparatus. Recent changes in the law have also hampered private-sector growth. For example, taxes and fees for patents have been multiplied, hitting small and medium-sized companies particularly hard. The consequence of this miserable situation is a huge increase in the size of the informal sector. There are different estimates of the size of the informal sector, which vary from 16-38 % (Franke, 2005) and 60-70 % of GDP (Omarov, 2009). As a consequence, only a small number of private companies exist thus far and mainly rely on family labour rather than hired staff (Kaser, 2005; UN 2003, UNDP 2010). Since the early 1990s, many international state and non-governmental organizations have entered Central Asia. Of all Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan has benefited most. To give an example, Kyrgyzstan has received the largest amount of funds (per capita and in total) through USAID programmes of all Central Asian countries since 1991<sup>2</sup> (USAID, 2007). Those organizations pay high wages and offer a productive working environment. Development co-operation is therefore an important branch of the current economy and provides employment for a highly skilled labour force.

A general problem, although it is particularly relevant for the government sector, are low wages. The average income throughout the country was in 2009 about US\$ 135 per month per person<sup>3</sup> (NSC, 2009) but there are of course large variations and salaries of specific sectors were raised in 2010 and 2011. Nevertheless, many people working in the government still rely on additional income from either other family businesses or bribes. In addition, education plays a subordinate role when entering the government sector, since a combination of social connections and money is needed to start a career.

At the same time, governmental and private higher education is already an important part of the service

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<sup>2</sup> USAID, 2007, Europe and Eurasia, available at: [http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe\\_eurasia/](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/), accessed 5<sup>th</sup> Oct. 2011.

industry and does have high future potential for the Kyrgyz labour market. Overall, Franke (2005: 14) counted that 11,649 teachers and an unrecorded number of technical staff work in institutions of higher education.

Kyrgyzstan's labour market is highly gender-segregated. Men represent over 90 % of employees in the mining, construction, transportation, and communications industries. They also dominate the production and distribution of electricity, gas and water (78 %). Women are in the majority in the education, healthcare and social services sectors. Salaries in these sectors are approximately 2.5 times lower than salaries in the traditionally male sectors listed above, providing only 86 % of the minimum consumer budget (UN and Government of Kyrgyz Republic, 2009).

Insufficient job opportunities at all educational levels encourage many people to look for better opportunities abroad. The nearly 500,000 labour migrants remitted in 2007 more than \$1 billion, or about 27-30 % of GDP (Sadowskaja, 2008). In 2009, remittances from Kyrgyz citizens declined given the economic situation in Russia and Kazakhstan but still substantially contributed to the country's economy. A majority of migrants work in Kazakhstan and Russia below their skill level and without the necessary permits in e.g. the service sector, construction or petty trade (the other silk road, 2008; Thieme, 2008; 2009; Forthcoming). At the same time, excellent graduates from Kyrgyzstan have access to booming sectors in Kazakhstan with better career prospects and higher wages than in their home country.

In light of the limited opportunities on the national labour market, migration for education is of particular relevance. Although usually separated from skilled labour migration, student migration is often a first step towards further migration for labour or else students choose to remain in the destination where they received their diplomas.

### **First insight into data**

#### **Aspirations to migrate for higher education**

Migrating great distances for educational reason is not an entirely new phenomenon. At the time of the Soviet Union, a degree from a prestigious university such as Moscow or St. Petersburg (formerly

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<sup>3</sup> National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, Statistic on salaries 2009, available at: <http://www.stat.kg>, accessed 6 August 2009.

Leningrad) was highly distinguished and is still linked to better career prospects today. But only after 1991 did opportunities emerge to migrate to Western Europe, Asian countries such as Japan, or North America. Increasing contact with foreigners in Kyrgyzstan such as tourists and volunteers from the Peace or the Mercy Corps made people curious to spend time abroad. Sometimes a person's older siblings had also already been abroad.

As has been described above, the quality and fees of colleges and universities, as well as corruption, vary enormously and a degree is no longer a guarantee of secure employment. Therefore respondents felt that going to Europe, North America or Japan was the only way of obtaining an internationally recognized degree. Moreover, an international degree is expected to provide better job opportunities and a higher salary, and many also planned to go and work abroad again in a qualified position at some stage in the future.

In addition, many subjects - and especially Master's degrees - are not yet available, and students go abroad to study a specific area of social, economic, political and natural science. Along with its educational interest, respondents saw a stay abroad as a chance to visit other places (as many Kyrgyz people cannot afford to go on holiday far away from home), to escape from conservative conceptions of marriage, or generally to search for a better place to live. Overall, those people benefit from an increasing range of choices and incentives that were not available to previous generations. The experience of having been abroad allows them to build up a "do-it-yourself biography" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p.3 in King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003, p. 232).

### **Scholarship programmes and application procedures**

The high cost of international education makes it accessible only to a minority of people. Therefore, the only realistic option for students without their own financial resources is to apply for a grant. There are a variety of opportunities for different educational purposes and a range of destinations. The following overview does not include funding schemes for short-term further education such as language courses or training programmes. According to interviews with representatives of some responsible institutions, there are four major funding sources for a Master's degree abroad: organisations for international education, gov-



ernment scholarships, bilateral university agreements, and direct applications to foreign universities. Scholarships are offered to countries like USA, France, Great Britain, Germany, Sweden, Hungary, Switzerland, Turkey, China, India, Iran, Korea, Egypt, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.

The major organisations for international education are the American Council for Collaboration and Education (ACCELS), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), and the George Soros Foundation and Open Society Institute. Government scholarships are provided by the Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Education, Cadre 21st Century is not working at the moment and a reform of the programme is under discussion (Round Table Discussion June 2011) and through individual government programmes for specific countries. Furthermore various bilateral university agreements with universities in different countries exist.

Standardised testing, merit-based competition and transparent application procedures should guarantee the highest possible equal access to higher education abroad. With a certain number of differences, the general selection procedure for organisations and direct applications to international universities are designed as follows. All programmes require a Bachelor's degree or equivalent, an application form, a letter of motivation in the language of the programme, a CV, references and a language test (e.g. TOEFL for English, certificate from the Goethe Institute for German). Some programmes allocate students to specific universities others demand a letter of invitation from the respective university. Applicants have to pass a language test (e.g. TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language) and/or an academic performance test (GRE, Graduate Record Examination, required for the USA and Great Britain). American University of Central Asia (AUCA) graduates do not have to pass a separate English test, since TOEFL is part of their examination at AUCA and the marks are given on the final certificate. International education programmes with offices in Kyrgyzstan invite semi-finalists for interviews. There are roughly twice as many people invited for interviews as scholarships available. Applicants have to talk about their academic excellence, their reasons for migrating, their educational and personal goals, and also the potential contribution they could make to their home country Kyrgyzstan when they return. Selection committees are formed of two to eight professors from abroad, alumni and foreign experts (also Salzmann 2008).

Most of the students did not get accepted first time round and had to apply several times and for several different programmes. Already a preliminary analysis of the data shows that many of the respondents had

already been abroad for educational purposes before they had their postgraduate studies at an American high school financed through the FLEX (Future Leaders Exchange) programme. Although it is definitely not a compulsory pre-condition, they considered that an earlier experience of having been abroad gave them a competitive advantage. Scholars as well as representatives of the international education programmes confirmed that good writing as well as oral language and presentation skills were a prerequisite for passing the application procedure.

### **Experiences upon return**

There are no national statistics about student return migration and not all organisations keep detailed records of returnees. According to programme managers, about 50 % of scholars who go abroad do not return to their home country after completing their Master's degree. As the focus was on returnees, I wanted to find out about our respondents' initial plans and their reasons for returning. Returnees said that most of their colleagues who did not return had trouble continuing their education and could not immediately find a skilled job position that matched their expectations, so they took on menial jobs. Working in a low-skilled service sector job was not an option for those who returned and they also did not want to start working at the bottom of a large company in the hope of climbing up the job ladder. Up until now the interviews indicate, that all returnees hoped to have a respected job with an above-average salary instead of being an undervalued foreign worker in a Western country, though men emphasised salary and job requirements and responsibilities much more than women did.

Employment trajectories cannot be interpreted without taking the personal and societal environment into consideration. Here women expected some possible constraints because of what they called "patriarchal constraints" but generally felt very positive. From their experience, men especially are associated with prestigious jobs and decision-making power, which makes it more of a challenge for women to accede to leading positions. Most of the women mentioned another important social boundary: they were not yet married – some returned to get married. All women described a certain amount of pressure from their families to prioritise having their own family rather than higher education and a career, leading to continuing nego-

tiations within their families. Men, by contrast, are expected to have a good job position with a high salary. In addition they are responsible for the various needs of their parents and extended family, which they are able to fulfil as long as they earn an appropriate salary. Nevertheless, male respondents also described these financial expectations from their families as not always being free of conflict and sometimes a burden. Men also experienced some restrictions in the labour market due to their youth, but in general they felt they had opportunities to get leading positions with decision-making power.

### *Newly acquired knowledge and skills*

All returnees completed their Master's degree abroad and acquired subject-specific theoretical knowledge in their lectures and seminars. Some respondents had also worked as interns, either as part of their course or by organising it themselves. Improved academic writing skills were also seen as major benefit, which were also seen as valuable for the local labour market but especially crucial for further education such as a PhD or a professional career abroad. Before studying abroad, interviewees expected to acquire explicit skills that would be crucial for their future prospects on the labour market. Since their return, however, interviewees appreciated that tacit knowledge was at least equally crucial in finding a job in reference to language proficiency, general communication skills and professional attitudes. While a decade ago English speaking alone was a sufficient reason for an international organisation in Kyrgyzstan to employ someone, competition is much higher today. Graduates highlight their English proficiency as going far beyond school or even university level English. Of particular importance is the tacit knowledge acquired through experience of the social and cultural context. Respondents also highlighted that they felt to have gained organisational skills in general resulting in a more efficient style of work and planning as well as project management skills.

### **Placement in the labour market**

Personal development, critical reflections of local businesses and high salary expectations translate into expectations of one's working environment and narrows down the number of suitable job opportunities in

Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, respondents had gained valuable knowledge for job applications, and especially for better-paid jobs in an international setting. Many respondents highlighted that if they stayed in Kyrgyzstan, they would only work in the capital Bishkek.

As described above, the labour market in Kyrgyzstan offers limited opportunities for highly skilled people, whether they have an international degree or not. The four sectors discussed by respondents were government agencies, the private sector, university teaching, and working for an international organisation. Respondents equally worked in academia, for international organisations as well as the private sector. It took much more effort to find people working in the government sector. There are clear indications that the government sector is not so attractive to returnees mainly because of low salaries and the expectation of a corrupted and social network based working environment. Nevertheless, the experiences of returnees working now in the government sector contradict the assumption of the explorative study by Salzmann (2008) that only international organisations are interesting employers for people who studied abroad due to higher salaries and an international working environment.

Low salaries (in government but also university sector) were clearly mentioned as constraint. People were not sure how long they would be able to work under such conditions. Nevertheless, many were at least for the time being highly motivated to work in the government sector but also in the generally low paid university sector hoping to be able to apply some of their new knowledge and maybe also to initiate some change. Other respondents worked for international organisations such as United Nations organisations, the World Bank, international non-governmental organisations or NGOs that were partly funded by international donors. Returned post-graduates correspond exactly to the profile sought by international employers of having a Master's degree in either social or political science or economics, being fluent in English, and having the soft skills described above such as punctuality, self-confidence and personal responsibility, writing and critical thinking abilities.

Some interviewees mentioned stories about the importance of social relations to get a job in an international organisation. However, jobs are announced in newspapers and application procedures can be expected to be more transparent than elsewhere - one of the reasons, why international organisations are seen as attractive employers – a topic which will be further explored when analyzing the interviews with employers. At the same time people also mentioned weaknesses, particularly the fact of limited upward mobil-

ity in international organisation, since the top-management is mainly run by internationals, and respondents clearly saw their limitations for a career.

A first analysis of the interviews from the employers side reveal, that students with an international degree were not always only welcomed. There are also debates, that some people who studied abroad have too high salary expectations and are disconnected from the “local” working environment and habits as well as local professional networks.

Some of the respondents also worked in the private sector. A part of them were employees in mainly bigger companies (esp. international ones) and others did set up their own business. Private business is developing, but it is still limited and concentrated in certain regions, especially in Bishkek, partly in Southern Osh and in the tourist area of Northern Issyk-Kul. But all respondents could only see their professional career – if they stayed in Kyrgyzstan - in Bishkek. They could not imagine going anywhere else within Kyrgyzstan or even returning to their original place of birth if they did not originally come from Bishkek. However, the neighbouring country Kazakhstan does offer alternative jobs in the private sector. In fact, returnees as well as international education organisations confirmed that many returnees who do not choose to remain in the country in which they graduated return to Kyrgyzstan first but opt for better-paid jobs appropriate to their skills in Kazakhstan. Many of the respondents could also imagine (or already planned) to go abroad again.

## **Conclusion**

The project intends to contribute to the limited research on student return migration in the Central Asian context through a specific focus on job placement and knowledge transfer upon return to Kyrgyzstan. The research results will provide background information about the on-going transitional challenges in the higher education system and the labour market in Kyrgyzstan, as well as empirical data about the recruiting procedures for international Master’s education. Despite the limitations of snowball sampling, the limited number of interviews carried out and the preliminary stage of data analysis, the study provides a number of useful first insights.

Migration abroad seems to have a great influence on the respondents’ social and working life. Studying and living abroad do enhance explicit skills such as subject-specific theoretical knowledge, and writing and

language skills as well as tacit knowledge such as enhanced language, communication and management abilities. They gained self-confidence and a clearer understanding of their future careers. Tacit knowledge was perceived as especially valuable for employment.

Western values are often distinguished from local attitudes, what those values exactly mean and how it makes respondents feel connected with other people and places wherever these values are part of the social reality has to be further explored. It also points towards further questions, e.g. to what extent those people have imported those values to Kyrgyzstan and if they feel as a part of an internationalised brain training and circulation (also Balaz and Williams, 2004).

More research will also go on the relevance of social categories such as gender and age, since many respondents are at a stage in their life cycle when education, settling into the labour market, and starting a family all happen at once.

Finally, it seems important to look at the fact that a large number of respondents expressed a great willingness to migrate again either for further education or a better job.

End.

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