

The Practice of Implementing International Scholarship Programs: Experience of the Republic of Kazakhstan

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Abstract. Bolashak Kazakhstan International Presidential Scholarship was introduced to provide citizens with access to advanced knowledge in newly emerging fields when economy was being restructured and manufacturing industries were being pushed out by innovational ones. The Bolashak Project was launched in 1994 and involved 6,282 people by 2013.

The initiative-related experience is analyzed based on the documents regulating participation in the program and on a survey among administrators, scholars and graduates conducted by the Graduate School of Education of Nazarbayev University between 2011 and 2013. Throughout the twenty years of existence, the program has enhanced its effects in the following aspects: providing equal access to participation in the program for all citizens of the country; identifying the priority areas for degree programs; developing the list of foreign higher educational institutions to provide an opportunity for learning abroad; determining the levels of education that need financing under the program; creating conditions to make scholars of the program return to the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Keywords: international scholarships, Kazakhstan, Bolashak program, access to education, Bachelor's degree.

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As the Republic of Kazakhstan gained its independence, it faced a series of new challenges. With an almost dead industry and mass exodus of skilled professionals from the country, the government had to provide conditions for development of "new knowledge" that would ensure a successful transition of planned economy to market rails.

The Bolashak Program was designed to become the mechanism that would enable Kazakh experts to access advanced knowledge in fields that were still undeveloped in the country, while national economy was being restructured and translated from raw materials production to high-tech industries.

It was in 1993 that the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan first mentioned the opportunity for Kazakhstan students to learn in the best universities abroad under this program. In 1994, the first 187 candidates were granted the international scholarship. As of 2013, 6,282 students have participated in the Program¹.

Nowadays, the Republic funds 3,000 Bolashak scholarships every year². The practice of earmarking funds to international education projects is not the only way of financing scholarship programs. Thus, the Chile government allotted \$6B to deliver the Becas Chile Program (BCP). The money was deposited in overseas banks to fund the program with annual interest of \$250M [OECD, World Bank, 2010. P. 43].

Students awarded the Bolashak scholarship may use it only once to get a Bachelor's, Master's or PhD degree. Those who have already entered and studied a while in a foreign university are also allowed to participate.

Higher education, medical insurance, and any other services that may be required by the university are paid for winners of the Bolashak scholarship. Throughout the period of studies, students receive education maintenance allowance to cover the costs of food, accommodation, and learning materials.

Over the twenty years of existence, the Bolashak Program has been considerably improved. The changes affected the five key aspects of the Program implementation:

- providing equal access to participation for all students;
- identifying the priority areas of studies;
- developing the list of foreign higher education universities to study in;
- determining the education levels that need investments under the Program;
- providing conditions for scholarship winners to return to the Republic of Kazakhstan.

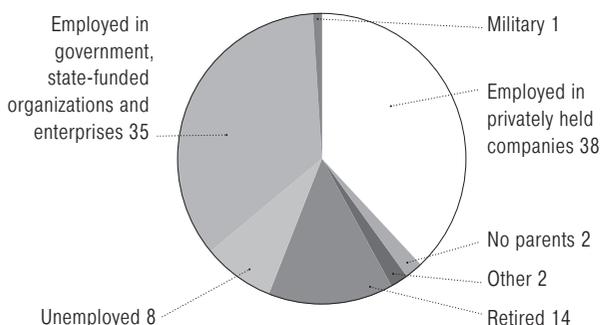
Providing equal access to participation in the Program

As the Program was just introduced, the limited number of scholarships and insufficient information available to the public made the latter think the Program was intended for children of the top echelon of power [Perna et al., 2014. P. 12]. The 2007 statistics included, apart from generic data, the information about the social status of parents of students who were awarded the scholarship. 48% of students had parents employed in the business sector, 15% in state-funded organizations, and 12% in retirement. Only 10% of participants had parents

¹ <http://www.bolashak.gov.kz/index.php/ru/o-stipendii/istoriya-razvitiya>

² http://www.bolashak.gov.kz/images/Pretendentu/Documents/%D0-%9F%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B0_%D0-%BE%D1%82%D0%B1.pdf

Fig. 1. Social status of the parents of the students who were awarded the Bolashak scholarship in 2005–2012 (%)



who were government employees. The proportions have not changed much over the last six years (Fig. 1).

Originally, the Program didn't have overcoming the social inequality among its goals. However, President Nazarbayev made a point at the Bolashak Students' Forum that the scholarship might be viewed as a social elevator for young Kazakhstan people³. The Program has in some way materialized the "Kazakhstan dream". Bolashak graduates are largely demanded in the labor market. Employers appreciate their strong professional skills, good knowledge of foreign languages, and the modern way of thinking.

Local seminars are held in all regions and monotowns of the country to accept applicants' documents and to ensure equal access to the Program. Plus, a relevant public e-service has been introduced. Before 2008, all candidates had to apply in person, which meant going to Astana, often more than once. Now anyone from any corner of the country can apply through the e-government portal or through a public service center [Perna et al., 2014].

All of 336 students awarded the Bolashak scholarship before 1997 had entered universities independently. At the very first stage, the State's primary function consisted in financing education of those who had already been enrolled. It neither specified nor regulated the list of universities available to participants or the areas of studies to pursue.

Kazakhstan's 2030 Strategy adopted in 1997 brought some amendments to the process of Program implementation⁴. The re-

Identifying the priority areas of studies

³ <http://inform.kz/rus/article/2609778>

⁴ http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/kazakhstan-2030_1336650228

quirements to selecting the field of study were changed with the introduction of the list of priority areas which should be developed yearly based on the requests from national and local executive authorities, research and development institutes, higher education institutions, and other public-funded organizations. The list of priority areas of studies gets additional items based on the analysis of long-term staffing needs revealed in specific industries through the national development policy documents. The final list gets approval of the Republican Committee for preparation of specialists abroad and is disclosed through print media and the official website of the Center for International Programs⁵.

Employer sponsorship was added to the Program in 2011. Since then, trilateral agreements have been concluded between the employer, the student, and the Program administrator. A mechanism like this makes it easier to train specialists for implementation of specific national industry development programs.

During the first years after introduction, the Program was mainly awarded in humanities and economics [Irsaliyev, 2003. P. 173], while students in technical fields accounted for less than 20% of participants. This was primarily explained the poor language skills possessed by engineering and technology students. Later on, application requirements were modified for such students by lowering the passing score threshold and providing an opportunity to take language courses of up to four academic terms in a relevant language environment abroad. After that, candidates could take the test again and get enrolled at a university.

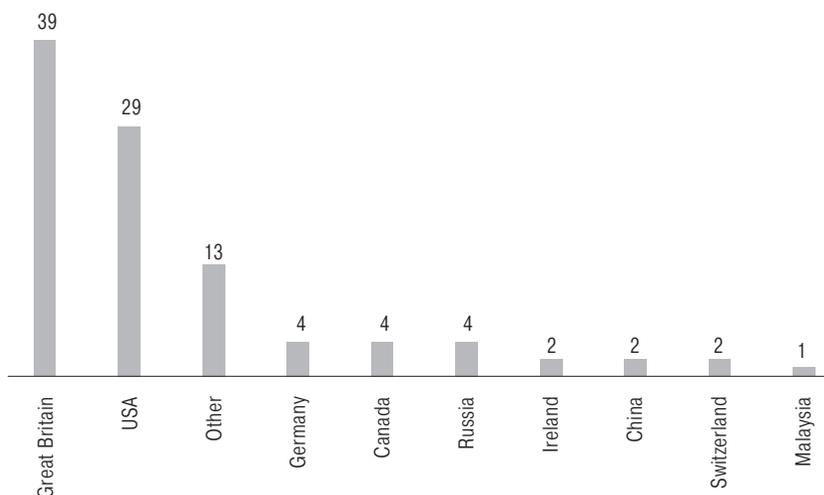
**Developing
the list of higher
education
universities**

In 2005, the Bolashak Program was greatly extended. 1,796 students were awarded the scholarship that year, as compared to only 785 from 1994 to 2004. Considering the constantly growing need for experts in innovative postindustrial development, education, science, and new information technologies, the government decided to send 3,000 students abroad each year, particularly for Bachelor's programs.

Expansion in the number of scholarships awarded under the Bolashak Program was determined by the objective need for high-skilled professionals. However, it affected the quality of training. Some foreign universities lowered their admission requirements significantly, especially during the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, which ultimately affected the general quality of learning. In 2007, the list of foreign universities recommended for Bolashak applicants was developed. While the overall number of higher education institutions available for participants was 630 in the beginning of 2007, it was re-

⁵ www.bolashak.gov.kz

Fig. 2. **Bolashak scholarship learning geography (%)**



duced to 480 in 2008 and to less than 200 universities in 33 countries today (Fig. 2)⁶.

Since 2008, students have been actively transferred to universities with higher positions in the global rankings, such as Academic Ranking of World Universities, or the Shanghai Ranking, and QS World University Rankings published by The Times Higher Education magazine. While developing the list of recommended universities, account is also taken of university's position in the national ranking, such as the US News and World Report in the United States, for example The Bolashak Program does not allow learning in university-affiliated colleges located abroad.

By the number of Bolashak students, Russian universities are steadily ranked third, being preceded by the U.S. and British institutions. 840 students from Kazakhstan studied in Russian higher education institutions under the Program as of 2013.

Only degree programs were granted financing at first. However, in 2008 the list of financed programs was extended, allowing for short-term training abroad for the academic and teaching staff. Organization of academic trainings with the Bolashak Program had multiple positive results through internationalizing the curriculum, building up publication activity, and increasing the number of research co-projects.

Determining the education levels

⁶ <http://www.bolashak.gov.kz/index.php/ru/o-stipendii/istoriya-razvitiya>

Another important change of the recent years was the cancellation of scholarships for Bachelor programs in 2011. The reasons for this can be traced in the results of the surveys among administrators, participants and major stakeholders of the Bolashak Program conducted by the Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Education between 2011 and 2013. The surveys covered 62 respondents in total.

Sending students for Bachelor's degree programs appeared to be unviable due to:

- The young age of participants. The average age of Kazakhstan students enrolling in Bachelor's degree programs is 17–19, i. e. these are teenagers that have not yet reached sufficient level of psychological and civic maturity to learn abroad. Commenting on this cut-off in financing, the Program administrators argue that *“employers give preference to Master's graduates. This is a very small country where every employer wants a Master with a foreign university diploma”* [Perna, Orosz, Jumakulov (in print)]. Some of the respondents believe investing in Bachelor's programs is a *“waste of public funds”*, as participants are too young and inexperienced to gain and understand benefits and advantages of learning abroad: *“The State invests so much in a student for three or four years but the student is not yet mature enough to get the most of it”* [Ibid.];
- The high costs of Bachelor's degree programs abroad. Training a Bachelor is more expensive than training a Master;
- establishing of a new higher education institution in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev University, designed to provide the necessary academic and scientific environment in the country and to offer educational services of international standing without the need to go abroad.

The methods of ensuring that graduate students return to their homeland

Following completion of their studies, Bolashak participants are required to return to Kazakhstan to work for five years in their fields of study. A Program graduate who has performed their obligations does not have to pay off the money invested in their education. The return is guaranteed by the student's obligation to secure a pledge that would cover the expenses for education. Given the high price of studying in the world's best universities and sometimes the young age of participants, conditions of participation in the Program provide for the possibility for participant's parents/relatives to act as pledgers. If the cost of property does not cover the expenses for education, the participant may engage a co-guarantor.

Such mechanism of ensuring that graduate students return to Kazakhstan has been largely criticized, rather effective though, with isolated cases when students didn't actually return.

Other countries use different mechanisms of attracting graduate students back from abroad. For instance, the governments of Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea guarantee high-paying jobs and fast career advancement to scholarship participants. Graduates of the Bolashak Program in Kazakhstan do not enjoy a privilege like that.

Some countries (India, China), though, choose not to get in the way of graduates' desire to stay in the country of studies, counting upon dividends in the form of development of economic relations and transfer of scientific knowledge.

The Bolashak Program remains relevant at the lapse of twenty years. Having evolved and grown together with the key economic, political and social institutions of the country, the Program has proved to be adaptive, flexible and, consequently, viable.

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