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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Employment of master's degree graduates in Kazakhstan: navigating an uncertain labour market

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the employment experiences of government scholarship graduates from one master's degree programme at a flagship university in Kazakhstan. Analysis of interviews with graduates of a master's degree programme designed in response to a national policy agenda shows that graduates encountered numerous challenges transitioning from university to work despite obtaining a degree from a top Kazakhstani university. The key challenges included limited employment opportunities, hostile attitudes toward younger graduates, difficult working conditions and employers' misunderstanding of the new master's programmes. We argue that despite significant government financial investment in education, a weak enabling support system hinders graduates' career advancement and results in job mismatch and underutilization of skills. We suggest that policymakers need to shift debates on human capital development and graduate employability from supply-side factors to a more comprehensive model in which graduate employment is supported through the collaboration of the higher education system, industry, policymakers and graduates themselves.

KEYWORDS

graduate employment; international education; master's degree; labour market; higher education; Kazakhstan

Background

Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic state, a post-Soviet country in Central Asia with a population of more than 19 million people.¹ Between 1936 and 1991, Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union where the economy and education system were centrally planned and managed by state authorities in Moscow. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and independence of Kazakhstan in 1991, the country faced substantial economic uncertainty and severe recession with a significant drop in gross domestic product (GDP) and high emigration (Pomfret 2005). The economic downturn also led to a decline in education quality at all levels (Johnson 2004). However, despite these challenges, Kazakhstan has experienced rapid economic growth since 1999 largely due to its rich natural resources, particularly the oil and gas reserves. Yet, the dependency on the oil and gas sector makes the economy volatile and the employment of youth challenging (Fursova et al. 2017; Kazistayev 2020; Zharbulova 2020).

In the independence period, policymakers placed a heavy emphasis on the development of human capital which was viewed as a crucial contributor to the economic growth of the country (Nazarbayev 1997). This emphasis on human capital development is outlined in several strategic policy documents including ‘Strategy Kazakhstan – 2050’ (Nazarbayev 2012), ‘Strategic Plan of the Development of Kazakhstan till 2025’ (The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2018), ‘Nation’s Plan 100 Steps’ (The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2015) and various versions of ‘State Programmes of Education Development’ covering different periods 2011–20, 2016–19, 2020–25. Following these policy documents, the education system endured significant transformations through a series of reforms. Among these reforms were the following moves: from the Soviet to the European three-tier degree structure (baccalaureate, master’s and doctorate) and to European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System credit system in alignment with the Bologna Process requirements; from a ministerially controlled system to a system of greater institutional autonomy and flexibility; from a centrally conducted attestation of higher education institutions to an independent international accreditation system; from the former corrupted admission processes to a new admission regime with the Unified National Test (UNT) functioning as an end-of-school certificate, requisite for admission to higher education and basis for awarding government-subsidized university scholarships.

Three additional major education initiatives over the past decades deserve special attention as the ones with substantial investments in human capital development. The first initiative, launched in 1993, was the Bolashak scholarship programme,² which to date has provided full funding to almost 13,976 Kazakhstani students to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate studies at reputable universities abroad. Second, in 2007, the language policy of the country began focusing on the idea of school and university teaching in three languages, Kazakh, Russian and English, as a key element for increasing the competitiveness of the country’s human capital and the economy at the global level (Bahry 2020). The third initiative, launched in 2009, was the establishment of Nazarbayev University (NU) for which the goal was ‘preparing the next generation of leaders who can contribute to the future development of the country’ (NU n.d.). NU positions itself as a national flagship university aspiring to become a global-level research university with predominantly international faculty (70%) and English as the medium of instruction. As of March 2022, more than 6365 students are studying at NU (649 foundation year students, 4249 bachelor’s students and 1467 graduate students). Most local students within both undergraduate and graduate programmes are fully state funded, provided with free tuition, free student accommodation and a monthly stipend. Entry to NU is highly competitive. Thus, for example, for entry into all master’s programmes at the NU Graduate School of Education – which operated as a separate legal entity from 2013 to 2019 and from which the study participants were selected – applicants must pass two rounds of screening by a committee of school faculty and international partners. First, the committee makes a shortlist of applicants based on a review of their written documents. This is followed by an oral interview to evaluate applicants’ readiness and fit with the programme goals. In addition, applicants must meet high English language requirements, or demonstrate completion of a degree programme with English as a medium of instruction or pass an institutional

preparatory course. On average, only one-fourth of applicants are selected for these programmes.

Despite the significant financial investments in human capital development, particularly the Bolashak programme and NU, research on these initiatives remains scarce. While some studies examine the Bolashak programme, its characteristics, benefits and employment of graduates (Perna et al. 2014; Perna et al. 2015), there is little research on NU programmes or its graduates. In the last few years concerns have been raised over the significant financial expenditures on the university – which some argue is equivalent to the budget of several social sectors in Kazakhstan – as well as whether the contribution of the graduates to the country's development after graduation warrants the significant outlay of resources (Bizhanova 2020; Exclusive 2019; Osipian 2018; Tengrinews 2018). Despite the stated university goal for graduates to become 'change agents' and 'future leaders' in the country and the significant financial investment in each student, little is known about the labour market and employment experiences of these graduates.

One NU postgraduate programme that merits investigation of these experiences is the Master of Arts in Multilingual Education programme, the first programme of its kind in Kazakhstan and one that has been developed in explicit response to the national priority for implementing the trilingual education policy for Kazakh, Russian and English (Mehisto, Kambatyrova, and Nurseitova 2014). Unlike most language education programmes in Kazakhstan and Central Asia that focus on more traditional approaches to philology (language and literature), pedagogical practice or a combination, the MA in Multilingual Education is branded as a unique research- and leadership-oriented programme designed to prepare graduates to influence policy, research and teaching practice in multiple sectors of the Kazakhstan education system seeking to implement the trilingual education policy. While some course offerings in the MA programme focus on linguistics and methods of teaching, a greater emphasis is placed on understanding language policy in Kazakhstan and abroad, on researching in multilingual education contexts, and on designing and implementing a year-long thesis research project. Moreover, the university is the first and only university in Kazakhstan with a fully autonomous legal status granted by law. The status of the university provides freedom from ministerial control and the MA programme, like all other programmes at NU, is not obliged by the Ministry of Education to follow certain standards as other universities in Kazakhstan are required to do. Instead, programmes at NU are developed by a diverse group of faculty, which has an international background and develops programmes year on year based on the feedback from both students and faculty.

This study of graduates from this new master's programme was guided by two research questions: What is the experience of graduates in the transition process to the job market? What are the barriers that graduates encounter in the transition process to employment? Our study sheds light on the employment experience of this unique group of graduates and provides valuable insight into how individual factors, individual circumstances, labour market issues and learning experiences at university influenced their employment outcomes. The findings demonstrate a complex set of factors that hinder the transition of graduates to the job market and suggest that successful employment outcomes are dependent on a range of stakeholders including graduates, the university, employers and the government.

Literature review

For many graduates the transition to the labour market is a difficult period (Kövesi and Kálmán 2020; McKeown and Lindorff 2011) during which they encounter challenges while both searching for a job and adapting to the working environment. Previous research points out that holders of a master's degree have better chances to secure employment, higher salaries, promotion and education–job match (Nghia, Giang, and Quyen 2019; Sin and Neave 2016; Støren and Wiers-Jenssen 2016). However, all these advantages are relative.

Research studies report that the growing competition in the labour market around the world (Cheng 2015; Li, Whalley, and Xing 2014) is caused by the recent economic slowdown, which has resulted in stalling economies, high unemployment rates and job insecurity – all of which have combined and significantly challenge graduate employment across all levels of education within the last decades. Santos (2020) describes these external force-based challenges as contextual and labour market boundaries. Moreover, in the context of higher education massification, employment prospects also deteriorate (Allen and Belfi 2020), sometimes forcing master's graduates to take the first job offer to secure employment (Choi et al. 2015). Although often described as 'a filtering device' (Holmes and Mayhew 2015, 28), a master's degree may result in better employment opportunity (Canal Domínguez and Gutiérrez 2019; Osseiran 2020; Sin and Neave 2016); nonetheless, this does not address the challenge of underutilization of skills, specifically in those jobs that do not upgrade their content (Holmes and Mayhew 2015). Thus, over-qualification and over-skilling are also common among master's graduates. Skills mismatch is viewed as a serious labour market challenge causing low stability in a job and low job satisfaction, and this raises the daunting potential for limited contribution of graduates to economic growth and the waste of public funds (Carroll and Tani 2013; Holmes and Mayhew 2015; Zamfir, Militaru, and Mocanu 2020).

External force-based challenges also encompass cognitive–cultural boundaries and organizational and work-related boundaries (Santos 2020). Using Holmes's (2013) terminology, these challenges present employability and employment as 'positional' constructs depending on the social, economic, political, cultural and technological environment of a country. Thus, the literature suggests that master's graduates' employment outcomes are also influenced by their social capital or connections (Piróg 2016; Ren, Zhu, and Warner 2017; Santos 2020). While some research shows that regardless of degree attainment, men have more job opportunities and higher salaries than women (Allen and Belfi 2020; Santos 2020), several recent studies show no impact of gender on employment (Canal Domínguez and Gutiérrez 2019; Chen 2018), and Li and Zhang (2010) argue that in competitive labour markets employers prioritize competitive employees irrespective of gender. Furthermore, master's graduates also experience employer- or work-related challenges. These challenges include heavy workloads, late payments, lack of job autonomy and job recognition, employers' insufficient support in skill training, as well as too competitive and even rival working environments (Berg et al. 2017; Menon, Argyropoulou, and Stylianou 2018; Santos 2020).

Master's graduate employment outcomes significantly depend on internal factors called 'personal-related boundaries' (Santos 2020) and forming 'possession' perspective on employability and employment (Holmes 2013). One of these factors is field of study.

Previous research found that non-science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) master's graduates experience unemployment (Canal Domínguez and Gutiérrez 2019) and vertical mismatch more often than STEM graduates (Okahana and Hao 2019; Støren and Wiers-Jenssen 2016). Moreover, locality and mobility affect graduates' transition to the labour market. For example, women with family responsibilities tend to choose work depending on its geographical proximity (Santos 2020). Finally, with the importance of skills in securing employment, some research underscores that a skill gap challenges the transition, specifically when graduates do not meet employers' expectations (Cheong et al. 2016; Monteiro, Ferreira, and Almeida 2018). Overall, the challenges encountered by graduates in the university–job transition are diverse. While some of them are common across countries and regions, others are context-specific. Different combinations of these factors in different contexts can result in different employment outcomes.

Like the experiences of graduates in the contexts discussed above, graduate employment is one of the critical social issues in Central Asian countries. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, all Central Asian countries experienced growing massification in higher education and economic downturn that resulted in oversupply of graduates and challenges with securing employment. Existing studies point out that limited decent employment opportunities, uncertain job markets, high unemployment rates, issues with quality of education, skills mismatches and a widespread 'diploma disease' are some of contributing factors to the challenging transition of university graduates to employment in the region (DeYoung 2011; Jonbekova 2015; Jonbekova et al. 2021, 2022; Kasimova 2011; Sondergaard et al. 2011). Moreover, research shows that favouritism and nepotism in securing jobs are additional reasons for graduates' challenging transition into the job market (Tashtanova 2019; Trotsenco 2018). Yet, in some cases, graduates who have international education and possess knowledge of a foreign language (particularly English) appear to have a relative advantage in the Central Asian job market (Paterson 2019; Jonbekova et al. 2021).

However, regarding international education, research results are not conclusive. Although some studies underscore a privileged position of those who have international experience (Blackmore, Gribble, and Rahimi 2017; Koda and Yuki 2013; Nghia, Giang, and Quyen 2019), others shows that such graduates also encounter challenges associated with supply and demand factors while looking for employment, with some left unemployed and others forced to work outside their area of specialization (Li 2013; Nghia, Giang, and Quyen 2019). Thus, there is debate in the international literature about whether and how international education provides advantage in the labour market (Blackmore, Gribble, and Rahimi 2017), something important in the Central Asian context as well.

Our review of the literature shows that there are gaps in knowledge about master's graduates' employment. First, most studies use surveys to analyse their transition. Even though the number of case studies focusing on a specific field of study and context is growing, there are no studies to our knowledge about transition experiences of master's graduates in Central Asian countries, where master's programmes are relatively new. Second, there is still limited research on the transition experiences of graduates in Kazakhstan who received at-home international education.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Behle's (2020) employability framework to make an argument that employment of graduates is not solely dependent on their achievements, skills and personal attributes as often explained by simplistic definitions of employability in the literature (Yorke 2004). Behle's (2020) emphasis is on an interrelated set of factors that enable and constrain graduate success in securing, remaining in and progressing in a labour market. Specifically, the author presents employability as a construct based in four categories: (1) individual factors (e.g., age, gender, ethnic group, skills, previous employment experience); (2) individual circumstances (e.g., caring responsibility for children and adults, workplace culture, financial, social and cultural capital, geographical factors, networks); (3) an enabling support system (e.g., access to labour market, access to career guidance, initiative to enhance students' and graduates' employability); and (4) the labour market factors (e.g., demand and supply, regulations, institutional factors, recruitment practices, discrimination). These four factors are not autonomous but rather inter-related. This framework was particularly useful as it facilitated our understanding of how specific factors independently (e.g., higher education) or in combination with other factors (higher education and the labour market) impact graduates' labour market experiences and outcomes.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, with data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 recent graduates from the MA in Multilingual Education programme at NU Graduate School of Education. Invitations were sent to two graduated cohorts of the master's programme who had been employed for a year following graduation at the time of the interview. Interested graduates were provided with further details about the study and participated in the interviews on a voluntary basis. All participants were female and the age range was 22–25 years. Of 20 participants, 10 were working as English language instructors following graduation, three as teaching assistants and seven in various administrative roles in a range of educational institutions. Table 1 provides demographic data about the participants. Some details have been omitted deliberately to assure confidentiality, given that their identity could be revealed due to the uniqueness of their field of study and their university. Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms, and the ones they chose were not necessarily associated with their ethnic identity.

Interviews were conducted in English and Russian between January and February 2018. The duration of the interviews was 40–60 min. Participants were asked questions around four key themes: (1) overall experience of the transition process from university to job market; (2) the time it took to secure a job; (3) the challenges faced in the transition process to the job market; and (4) the factors that helped to secure employment. The interview questions were developed based on our review of literature. Content analysis of interview data, as presented in the Findings section below, was based in Behle's (2020) four-dimension framework: (1) individual factors; (2) individual circumstances; (3) enabling support system; and (4) the labour market factors. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded by two members of the team in NVivo

Table 1. Demographic data of participants.

	Pseudonym	Job title	Job location
1	Svetlana	Administrator	Astana
2	Assel	Administrator	Astana
3	Sara	English teacher	Pavlodar
4	Zukhra	Administrator	Astana
5	Nazgul	English teacher	Almaty
6	Damira	English teacher	Astana
7	Bota	Language coordinator/English teacher	Shymkent
8	Yana	Administrator	Astana
9	Saule	English teacher	Astana
10	Katya	Teaching assistant	Almaty
11	Tina	Teaching assistant	Astana
12	Alima	English teacher	Astana
13	Gulnaz	Administrator	Astana
14	Masha	English teacher	Astana
15	Moldir	English teacher	Almaty
16	Elvira	Teaching assistant	Astana
17	Nazgul	English teacher	Karaganda
18	Aray	English teacher	Almaty
19	Dana	English teacher	Almaty
20	Tatyana	Administrator	Astana

software. Using content analysis and a thematic approach, we merged the codes and developed overarching themes that guided our data analysis and interpretation. The research was conducted in accordance with the guidelines and research ethical principles of NU and was approved by the NU Institutional Research Ethics Committee. Every effort was made to assure participants' confidentiality at all stages of the research and writing process and in all presentations or discussions of the study.

Findings

Challenges in the transition to employment

The findings showed that although securing the first job after graduation took no longer than six months, most graduates were not satisfied with their jobs. Our findings suggest that despite holding a degree from one of the most reputable universities in Kazakhstan, the graduates' transition to the labour market was complex and challenging. The challenges are analysed below, following Behle (2020), in the following categories: (1) labour market factors; (2) individual factors; (3) individual circumstances; and (4) support environment.

Labour market factors

Labour market factors were the most influential and challenging in graduates' transition process to the job market. The challenges included: limited understanding of new fields of studies by employers; low salaries; job and skills mismatches; 'unrealistic expectations' of employers; and issues with transparency in hiring practices.

Limited understanding of new fields

Employers' limited understanding of newly offered degrees in Kazakhstan was one of the key challenges for graduates to secure a desired job and to effectively use their skills and

knowledge developed during their master's degree study. Several participants claimed that most employers did not understand the value they could bring to their institution due to their acquired skills and knowledge, and instead viewed them narrowly as English language teachers or translators due to their English language capacity. The following quotation underlines further the employers' limited understanding of newly offered fields of study in Kazakhstan and suggests a misalignment of government policy intentions and the actual practices resulting from policy implementation:

The surprising thing is that the Ministry of Education wanted people who can implement the trilingual education and Nazarbayev University developed such a programme to prepare specialists with trilingual education background. However, when we graduated we went back to this Ministry of Education, they're saying we don't need you we just need people who have teaching skills. So there is miscommunication, inadequate connection between purpose and the final product. (Alima)

Our findings suggest that while the government has been promoting a new type of university training aimed at preparing locally and internationally competitive graduates responsive to job market needs, the career advancement and success of the graduates are constrained by employers' limited understanding of the new fields of studies offered in Kazakhstan and the range of soft and hard skills (including research skills) that the graduates of new programmes possess.

Low salaries

Salaries had a major role in graduates' trajectory to the job market and employment experience. According to several participants, the jobs that were most easily available to them were among some of the lowest paid, including English language teachers in public schools or temporary translation jobs. Although some graduates enjoyed teaching at school, due to financial reasons and the need to cover their family expenses they chose jobs outside their field and area of interest, as seen in the following quotation from Alima: 'I needed a salary because no matter how passionate you are about research and education you still have to pay the bills.'

Graduates claimed that jobs in the public sector and particularly civil service were unattractive due to low salaries. As a result, most attempted to find jobs in the private sector:

We have ridiculous salaries for teachers which are around 35,000 *tenge*³ [approximately US \$109] and no health insurance, no bus, no lunches provided. How can I survive in Astana (capital city) to pay for rent and live at this salary? So, I decided to go to a private school and not a state school. (Elvira)

Graduates who were working as teachers in public schools noted that 30–40% of their salary was spent on rent. Teachers' monthly salary in public schools was particularly low at the time of the interviews and ranged between US\$162 and US\$465 (Vaal 2019). Although private school teachers' salary is relatively higher (Sokhareva 2019), our participants' accounts suggest that such salary did not allow them to rent an apartment on their own (Shashkina 2018).

Due to this issue, many of our participants did not aspire to work for the public and civil service sector and made an effort to work for private and international organizations and institutions offering relatively higher salaries. Yet, such opportunities are limited, and the competition was reportedly fierce considering the rapidly growing number of master's

degree holders from local and specifically international universities where many Kazakhstani students studied under the Bolashak programme. Though participants working at private schools received relatively higher salaries than in the public sector, they were disappointed by the difference in the salary and benefits between them and expatriate teachers who were claimed to earn a significantly higher salary and receive generous benefit packages, including medical insurance, free accommodation and travel allowance to their home country. These benefits were not included in local employees' contracts. Participants viewed this as a 'discrimination against the local employees' and expressed their disappointment, noting that they delivered the same volume and quality of work as their expatriate colleagues. Salary issues forced several participants to reconsider their career and leave teaching jobs. The findings suggest that poor salaries led to job and skills mismatches and by constraining graduates' transition to the job market, impeded achieving their career aspirations and potential contribution to society.

Skills mismatch

Most graduates felt that they did not have an opportunity to use the skills learnt in their master's degree programme because of their job not matching their skills. The most frequently mentioned skills underused in the workplace were research skills, data analysis, critical and analytical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, organization of content and learning integrated learning, and writing academic papers. Participants working in administrative jobs noted that their work was tedious and did not enable them to use the analytical and critical thinking skills they developed as part of their programme, as described by Yana: 'I think I will do better in a job connected with research rather than organizing something, so I think that I like more writing and analysing something.'

Graduates feared that the inability to use and apply their skills in the current workplaces will degrade their knowledge over time and diminish the chances of advancing their career. As a result, some interviewees were already planning to change their job and a few were planning to pursue a doctorate with the hope that it would enable them to get a desired job. The desire to earn more degrees points to the fierce competition for decent graduate jobs in the market and the need for these graduates to differentiate themselves from others by having more degrees.

'Unrealistic expectations'

The expectations of employers were perceived to be 'unrealistic' during the process of securing a job and continued even after employment was obtained, causing numerous frustrations for graduates. First, most participants noted that almost any professional job announcement highlighted a minimum of three to five years of work experience – even at low-level administrative jobs that participants described as not needing significant experience. Only the few who had several years of work experience reported being satisfied with their transition to the job market and workplaces.

Participants also noted that Kazakh language skills were required during the hiring process of all candidates irrespective of ethnicity, but were not used in the workplace. A few participants believed that such requirements help employers to disqualify many candidates who do not fluently speak the national language (Kazakh), as such making their recruitment process easier. However, two graduates described such requirements

as a means to prioritize the hiring of ethnically Kazakh citizens and disqualify candidates of other nationalities.

Other employers' expectations that created challenges for graduates' university–job transition were long working hours and working on weekends. The most frequently mentioned example of such workplaces was the civil service sector, as described by one participant:

When I asked some of my peers who work within civil service sector, they told me that they have to work until 11 pm and it is normal for them to stay there that long [...] if I go for such jobs, I will get only small amount of money and work for long hours for nothing. I don't want to be that kind of person because I don't want to be like a slave [...] I want to have freedom and choice. (Elvira)

Moreover, 'unrealistic deadlines' for tasks in the civil service and public sector were found to prevent graduates to work for a civil service. The following quotation well illustrates this challenge: 'they [employers] give unreachable deadlines. They give a short notice, and you have to produce a monthly or annual report by the end of evening or by the end of the week' (Albina).

Our findings suggest that working long hours and working weekends are pushing away talented graduates from some sectors and limiting their employment choices. Such unfavourable working conditions were clear reasons for some participants not to consider civil service sector. Our participants' accounts suggest that private and international organizations had better working hours and more favourable conditions. This explains the drive of our participants seeking employment largely in such organizations.

'Lack of transparency' in recruitment process

'Corruption' in the job market appeared as another barrier in transition process from university to work. Graduates' accounts suggest that recruitment and hiring processes are not always transparent. '[I]n Shymkent you need to pay [...] in my village I was told that we need to pay about one million *tenge* [approximately US\$3000] to get a job at a public secondary school [...]' (Aray).

A few graduates highlighted that 'some jobs are not even advertised'. Several participants stated that in some cases employers select a candidate and advertise a position for formality purposes only. While participants believed that networking was normal and practiced internationally, they felt that in Kazakhstan and generally in Central Asia, the term has a different notion and is exercised unjustly. Participants believed that many Kazakhstani employers use networking to recruit their friends and relatives and disregard the merit of candidates. There was a strong belief that sometimes even when a candidate meets all the job requirements, but has no network, the chance of being hired is slim: 'I don't think it is easy, because you have to know people [...] especially if you want to get a well-paid job' (Sara). However, a few participants expressed a different view, noting that employment mainly depends on a person's individual skills and professionalism rather than on who they know. 'If you are highly qualified professional, you can get a job easily. But if you are not good at your profession, you still need to pay, because this is Kazakhstan' (Aray). A few participants believed that some graduates are unrealistic in their expectations and that is why they encounter greater challenges. These graduates argued that individual agency plays a crucial role in graduates' trajectory to the job market.

Graduates who were confident with finding a job without possessing any network were those with several years of experience. While they did not have anyone helping them, it was clear that their previous experience played a crucial role and provided them with greater awareness of the job market and opportunities that were available to them.

Individual factors

At the individual level, the most influential and interrelated issues were participants' age and gender. As discussed above, employers' expectations and requirements regarding work experience were perceived to be 'unrealistic' particularly because of the age of the participants.

I don't know why they (employers) also require five years of work experience. I was only 22, where do I have those five years of experience. Should I start working from kindergarten? The problem is that my undergraduate was structured in a way that I had classes from 8 am to 5 pm I had no time to work part-time. Where do I get those five years of experience at my age? (Albina)

Our findings suggest that the age of the participants is creating a challenge in the process of seeking employment as well as in the utilization of skills and progression in a workplace. The accounts of several participants indicate that there is a clash between the Soviet and post-Soviet generation which makes it challenging for graduates to initiate and implement their ideas in a workplace. 'The employers are not open-minded to accept new ideas. They have their post-Soviet legacy, their rules [...] your idea should be similar to theirs and they are not willing to accept a different opinion' (Zukhra). Gender discrimination was also evident in the accounts of our participants. Being female and young made it more challenging to secure, keep and progress in a job:

After graduating from university, I went to one language school to find a job. The HR [human resources person] who was conducting the interview started using that sexist language saying that I am a young female, and I should shut up and nobody will adjust to me. (Albina)

My age and my face are the worst enemies because people just don't like me being a very young person. I think in Kazakhstan it is a huge problem. (Katya)

Surprisingly, some of these young female graduates were discriminated by another woman who in most cases was someone in leadership role. Cultural values and role of women in the society influenced graduates' employment experiences. Some participants believed that the 'hierarchical and patriarchal society' in Kazakhstan makes it particularly difficult for women to secure, keep and progress in their career. As mentioned by some participants, women are largely seen as 'caregivers'. Our findings indicate that securing a job is particularly difficult for women with small kids. Several participants noted that employers discriminate against such women thinking that they will struggle to work overtime and on weekends (Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova 2019).

Lack of understanding of their degree

To some extent, the challenge of transitioning to the job market was related to some graduates' lack of understanding of their field of study at the master's level. Surprisingly, and somewhat similar to employers, some graduates did not have full understanding of

the field and even at the time of completion of their degree, they had little awareness about the employment choices available to them. The few graduates who had a clear vision of their future employment were the ones satisfied with their job. They were also clearer about their next steps and plans for enhancing their employability and advancement of their career. However, it seemed that many participants entered their master's degree without much information about the purpose of the programme:

I just entered the programme and expected from it something a little bit different. I thought it would be connected to teaching or teaching in three languages. But it was not like this, because there was not sufficient information on the website [...]. (Svetlana)

Other participants noted the lack of information about programmes on the university website which eventually led to their questioning later whether they entered the right programme. Upon completion of their degree, several graduates did not know what to do next:

I didn't know where to go and what to do. I needed to think what I want to do and I didn't know where I should go. There are not a lot of options if your major is Multilingual Education. (Damira)

The findings suggest that, similar to employers, some graduates themselves had little understanding of the programme goals and future employment options. This issue indicates that the university is not providing sufficient information on its website about its programmes, and students are entering programmes without much thought of future employment prospects until they graduate. This also raises concern about the motives of students pursuing a master's programme and whether they are doing it merely to earn a credential or to study a particular major, something which appears to be a wider issue in Central Asia due to poorly developed economies and limited decent jobs (Jonbekova 2020).

Individual circumstances

Home, society and regional context influenced graduates' post-graduation employment. Although our participants originally came from various regions of Kazakhstan (South, East, West and Centre), most were working in the former and current capitals, Almaty and Astana. Job opportunities in other regions are scarce and arguably 'less paid'. It appeared that graduates from regions away from the major cities (particularly South and East) were at a disadvantage. On the other hand, securing a job in the large cities was challenging primarily because graduates had to pay for rent which was described as much higher than in other regions of the country. To afford rental costs and to cover essential bills, it seemed that graduates coming from other regions often had to compromise and work in jobs outside their field of study and interest. Our findings suggest that due to the financial aspects, it took longer for such graduates to secure employment in their field and advance in their career.

Enabling support system

Although graduates obtained a job, because of a reported lack of opportunities to use their skills, they were unable to progress in those jobs. This problem stemmed from

the nature of jobs graduates obtained which often did not require a master's degree and the skills these graduates possessed. Several participants noted that what they studied as part of their degree and what is needed in the market was different. Particularly those graduates who were in administrative jobs felt that they rarely used most skills learnt at university and were looking forward to changing their job. Skills mismatches mainly occurred due to the graduates being overqualified for their job. However, there were cases when graduates struggled in the workplace because of deficiency in some skills.

Having pursued their master's degree in an English medium programme reportedly caused difficulties in their communication in Russian and Kazakh. Although Kazakh is the national language of the country, Russian is predominantly used in workplaces particularly in Astana and Almaty where most of these graduates were employed:

After I graduated, I had major issues with Russian because I knew all academic words in English, and it was difficult for me to write and communicate in Russian. [...] People looked at me like I am retarded, because it took so much time to say the right words from my Russian vocabulary which was mainly in a passive form. (Sarah)

Many felt that their Russian and Kazakh worsened during their study in the master's programme. For those who worked in institutions and companies requiring English only, it did not matter whether they spoke the other two languages fluently. Yet, the majority of the participants wished to have had a choice of Russian language class and more hours allocated to the Kazakh language course as they felt it would have enhanced their competitiveness in the job market. The majority of the interviewees were highly satisfied with their programme in terms of gaining new knowledge and developing a range of transferable skills. In addition to the knowledge of their specialization, they learnt about educational policy reforms, research skills, academic reading and writing, and developed capacities for critical and analytical thinking, communication, professional presentation, teamwork, working with people from diverse backgrounds, planning and organization, time management, and ability to work under pressure. As highlighted by several participants, some of the most useful things they learnt were 'thinking outside the box', 'asking questions' and 'articulating their ideas clearly'. Although many graduates reported they were not able to use all the skills in their current jobs and workplaces, they strongly believed that possessing these skills did increase their employment opportunities and prospects for further studies. Having a master's degree was itself an asset that was claimed to improve their employment prospects. Many graduates noted that the credential itself helped them to have an advantage over individuals who did not possess one. However, it seemed this advantage came with having their master's degree from a university which was the top and most prestigious institution in the country:

Before getting a Master degree it was very hard to get a job. I had about six job interviews and all of them declined. But after getting a Master degree it was very easy. Even in my region, I mean in the South Kazakhstan region everyone wanted to hire me. [...] In Kazakhstan the most important thing is documentation I think, if you have articles, you've got a job. (Tatyana)

Coupled with findings from existing research (Jonbekova 2020), our findings suggest that the presence of credentialism is very strong in Kazakhstan. Although participants did not expect the university to fully prepare them for employment, they felt that their transition to the job market would have been easier had their university placed a greater emphasis

on gaining some work experience during their study, and provided some guidance on future employment opportunities. Our analysis of the university website where participants graduated revealed that the university had a career centre. Yet some graduates noted that they were not very clear on how to organize their CV, expectations in the job market or finding internships. The review of the career centre website of their university showed that in comparison with other universities in the country, this centre was well organized and offered students individual sessions on many aspects of employment, including writing a CV. This indicates that, in some cases, students did not make use of the opportunities provided by the university career centre because they were either overloaded with work or did not show interest. However, there was a clear indication that students realized only after graduation that they should have made better use of the opportunities and services their university offered.

Discussion and conclusions

The focus of this article is on the transition of government scholarship master's graduates from university to work. Drawing on Behle's (2020) framework, this article examines the influence of individual factors, individual circumstances, enabling support system, and labour market factors on graduates' employability and employment. Similar to the experience of other countries, the massification of higher education and the ever-increasing supply of graduates (Allen and Belfi 2020; Mok 2016) are diminishing the employment prospects of fresh graduates in Kazakhstan. However, our findings reveal that labour market factors present the most prominent challenges for graduates in their transition to the job market. First, employers' limited understanding of new fields of study appears to narrow job opportunities and career progression. Second, employers' unrealistic expectations, particularly in the civil service sector, are pushing graduates away from this sector and from their area of specialization. It was particularly surprising to find that employers of ministerial agencies, who promote international education and new programmes such as the Multilingual Education programme, appear to be the most unrealistic in their work requirements and expectations, and manifest the most hostile attitude toward young graduates. Third, low salaries and poor working conditions are forcing many graduates to move away from their area of specialization and interest. These issues add to the mounting evidence that investments in education alone do not result in better employment outcomes. Rather, other factors such as employers' limited understanding of graduates' skills, and graduates' weak understanding of their programmes suggest that the investments in education can have limited results when higher education institutions and the labour market are operating in relative isolation.

More broadly, our findings highlight potential for misalignment between state policies for human capital development and the realities of the labour market within which that human capital is designed in policy to have value. Although the government may be making significant financial investments in international higher education, as in our case in this study, the findings indicate that even graduates from a top university in the country, obtaining innovative knowledge and skills in a key national policy priority area (trilingual education), can struggle in their transition from university to work. Although participants reported their master's degree provided them with relative positional advantage generally, the majority reported being unsuccessful in securing

degree-relevant employment and felt restricted in utilizing their knowledge and skills. Ultimately, this situation has resulted in job mismatch and skill underutilization, and this raises important questions regarding the implementation of policies aimed at national human capital development.

Our findings confirm Behle's (2020) argument that improvement of graduate employability requires concerted effort and collaboration across the full range of concerned stakeholders, and this includes state policymakers and institutions, institutions across the higher education system, industry and the graduates themselves. The results of the article concur with other scholars' findings (Ren, Zhu, and Warner 2017; Santos 2020; Sin and Neave 2016) that there is a need for state policymakers to shift their focus from exclusively supply-side employability factors (provision of knowledge and skills) to a more comprehensive view incorporating other components influencing graduates' employment outcomes (labour market conditions, individual circumstances and other factors). Our findings indicate the need for closer cooperation between higher education institutions and industry. It is suggested that universities raise awareness among potential employers of their newly introduced programmes and the skills that their graduates possess, and additionally provide greater support for graduates in their transition to employment. Industries equally need to clarify their employment expectations and requirements and ensure greater job market transparency. It is believed that, combined, these collaborative efforts will provide a more comprehensive approach more conducive to success in implementing human capital policies, resulting in greater skill alignment and utilization and career satisfaction among graduates transitioning from education to employment and moving forward in their careers.

Existing research shows that many of the challenges discussed in this study (limited employment opportunities, oversupply of graduates, skills mismatch) are also encountered by graduates in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (DeYoung 2011; Jonbekova 2015). Significantly, the commonalities in the experiences of graduates transitioning to the job market across these countries can be explained by the radical changes and reforms within higher education systems over the past two decades, the overnight transition of the countries from command to market economy, and the problems endured following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, some of which persist today (shortage of qualified faculty, limited financing and resources at universities, oversupply of university graduates, skills mismatches). This shared history suggests the potential relevance of our findings to the larger Central Asian context as well as the relevance of this historical context to the issues and experiences of our participants seeking opportunities to develop as professionals capable of introducing the innovations of their international education to the economic development of their country as education policymakers imagined.

The study has a few limitations that do not allow for broad generalization of findings. Graduates of this study came from one university and a unique programme that is offered only at this university; therefore, the findings and experiences are not representative of graduates from other universities in the national higher education system. However, our findings provide valuable insights into the employment of graduates who obtained international education in new educational fields at home – a research area which is understudied in non-Western contexts. Therefore, it is believed that the study will contribute significantly to international discussions and debates on policy and practice in similar

educational contexts, particularly those regions and nations undergoing rapid economic and education policy transformation.

Notes

1. Bureau of National Statistics, <https://stat.gov.kz/> (accessed on 5 November 2021).
2. For more details, see <https://www.bolashak.gov.kz/en/o-stipendii/istoriya-razvitiya.html/>.
3. Since the time of the interviews, teachers' salaries were increased at least three times between 2020 and 2022. Most recently, in January 2022, their salaries in schools, kindergartens and technical colleges were increased by 25%; <https://24.kz/ru/news/obrazovanie-i-nauka/item/521651-eshche-na-25-povysili-zarplatu-pedagogov-i-vospitatelej/>.

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