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## Educational migration as a new direction of labor migration from Central Asia: A theoretical analysis\*

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**Abstract.** Educational migration has become a significant form of labor migration in Central Asia due to a growing number of students seeking higher education abroad and subsequently joining foreign labor markets. The article examines the interconnection between educational and labor migration, highlighting economic, social and institutional factors that make students remain in host countries after graduation. The study focuses on such theoretical frameworks as human capital theory, social mobility and brain drain vs brain circulation, providing a comprehensive analysis of how educational migration influences workforce mobility and national development. The author's findings show that economic incentives, declining quality of higher education in Central Asia and favorable migration policies in destination countries contribute to the transformation of educational migration into long-term labor migration. Host countries of Central Asian students facilitate this transition by work permit programs and job market strategies, making foreign education a direct pathway to permanent employment. However, such challenges as work restrictions, labor discrimination and labor market saturation remain barriers to labor migration. The article also discusses implications of educational migration for both sending and receiving countries. While destination countries benefit from the skilled labor, Central Asian nations face brain drain, losing highly educated professionals that choose foreign labor markets. To mitigate these effects, the corresponding policies should include investment in national education reforms, incentives for return migration, and international cooperation for the degree recognition.

**Key words:** educational migration; labor migration; Central Asia; brain drain; social mobility; human capital theory; international students; higher education

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Educational migration has become a significant trend in Central Asia — thousands of students move abroad to get higher education. While traditionally viewed as a temporary phase in academic journey, educational migration is increasingly recognized as a pathway to the long-term labor migration. Many students leave their home countries for education and do not return after graduation, joining labor markets of host nations. This trend raises important social-economic and policy questions about brain drain, labor mobility and their long-term implications for both sending and receiving countries.

The phenomenon of educational migration as a form of labor migration is determined by multiple factors, including economic conditions, quality of higher education and government policies in both home and host countries. Limited career opportunities, low wages and outdated curricula in Central Asian nations push students to study abroad, often with the intention of remaining in host countries after graduation. In contrast, receiving countries (Russia, EU and China) encourage student retention by favorable visa policies, work permits and integration programs. Consequently, educational migration has become a strategic decision for many young professionals seeking economic stability and career opportunities.

The article explores the evolving nature of educational migration from Central Asia, analyzing its role in shaping the labor migration patterns; examines such theoretical perspectives as social mobility, human capital and brain drain vs brain circulation debates. By assessing motivation, opportunities and challenges of migrating students, the study shows how educational migration contributes to labor migration trends. Furthermore, it discusses potential policy solutions to address the corresponding negative consequences for both sending and receiving countries. The study is based on the qualitative methodology to analyze educational migration as a form of labor migration from Central Asian countries. The research methods include: a comprehensive analysis of scholarly works, theories and empirical studies on educational migration, which includes contributions of key researchers and helps to contextualize educational migration within broader migration theories such as human capital, social mobility and brain drain vs brain circulation debates; a comparative analysis of migration trends and policies in sending (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan) and receiving (Russia, China, Western Europe) countries to show how host nations facilitate or hinder the transition from the student status to employment; a multiple theoretical framework (human capital theory, social capital theory, mobility transition models, etc.) to explain why students migrate for education and how this leads to long-term labor migration (factors of educational migration and observed trends); cases from the literature, such as Central Asian student experiences in Russia, China and EU countries, and reviews of relevant policy documents to show how specific host-country policies (e.g., work permit programs, post-graduation visas) and home-country contexts influence the education-to-labor migration pathway. This multi-method approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of educational migration, combining theoretical perspectives with empirical data and policy analysis.

### **Theoretical definition of educational migration**

Educational migration has become a critical social phenomenon in the era of globalization and higher education reforms: many scholars have explored its causes, implications and theoretical foundations, offering diverse perspectives of its role in shaping demographic and social-economic structures. Thus, educational migration is considered a territorial-social mobility process driven by the necessity of acquiring quality education and better professional opportunities [3. P. 230]. Unlike economic or political migration, educational migration is primarily motivated by the pursuit of knowledge and skills. While academic works tend to focus on challenges associated with educational migration, its fundamental cause is the growing demand for education in the knowledge economy, i.e., individuals migrate for education to enhance career prospects and improve social-economic standing.

P.A. Sorokin's theory of social mobility is particularly relevant to explain educational migration [29]: migration, including that for education, serves as a key mechanism for upward social mobility. The ability to access higher education in more developed regions or countries provides individuals with greater opportunities for career, thereby enabling social-economic mobility. This perspective was expanded by incorporating educational migration into the broader category of territorial mobility, since globalization and the competitive nature of education systems have intensified student movement across borders [4. P. 63; 34]. These perspectives underestimate the fact that educational migration is not just about acquiring knowledge but also about securing better life prospects.

The Human Capital Theory, pioneered by G. Becker and expanded by J. Mincer and T. Schultz, focuses on an economic rationale for educational migration [8; 15; 26]: education is an investment that enhances individual productivity and earning potential. Thus, migration for education is a rational decision aimed at improving one's economic and professional prospects, which is why migration for education should be viewed as a long-term investment in human capital [28. P. 1622]. This theory suggests that individuals who pursue education abroad often have higher employment opportunities and income levels, which proves that educational migration is a strategic move for long-term success. This perspective is widely accepted as it explains migration decisions in economic terms, highlighting the role of education in improving financial and social status.

P. Bourdieu and J.S. Coleman introduced the concept of social capital as playing a significant role in educational migration decisions [9; 10]. Social capital refers to the resources gained through social networks, and in the context of educational migration it influences how students choose study destinations. Factors such as alumni networks, institutional affiliations and family recommendations often guide students in their migration decisions in addition to institutional factors, such as university rankings, scholarships and international partnerships, which facilitate student mobility [3. P. 231]. This approach highlights that educational migration

is not merely an individual choice but is deeply embedded in social and institutional networks that shape opportunities for students.

Educational emigration from low developed countries can be considered part of labor emigration, since educational migration from these regions eventually transforms into labor migration [19]. This perspective suggests that students who migrate for education often seek employment in host countries instead of returning home, thereby contributing to brain drain in countries of origin. This approach highlights the economic dimension of educational migration and its potential long-term effects for labor markets and national economies. Moreover, there are different forms of educational migration: social interaction migration involves cultural and social integration alongside education, fostering international cooperation; soft power migration highlights that education serves as a diplomatic tool for building international relations; scientific and educational migration implies an exchange of knowledge and expertise. This classification broadens the understanding of educational migration, stressing its cultural, political and intellectual dimensions [24. P. 5].

The analysis of different scholarly perspectives shows that educational migration is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various social, economic and institutional factors and affecting territorial and social mobility, economic aspects of human and social capital, labor migration and brain drain, geopolitical and academic situation. Educational migration is not a single process but an interplay of multiple factors that shape individual decisions and national policies. While it offers numerous benefits (knowledge transfer and global workforce development), concerns about brain drain and social-economic inequalities persist, which explains the need for a more comprehensive approach to challenges and opportunities associated with educational migration in the contemporary world.

### **Educational emigration as a path to labor migration**

Migration for educational purposes has evolved into a structured pathway for labor migration, which makes scholars examine the relationship between international student mobility and employment in host countries, focusing on its opportunities and challenges. While some authors emphasize the role of host country policies in facilitating labor market integration, others stress obstacles that hinder a seamless transition from the student status to professional employment.

E.M. Girsberger argues that host country policies significantly affect the transition from education to employment for international students [11]: migration policies, such as scholarships, work permits and post-study visas, play a crucial role in educational migrants' situation on the labor market. Thus, students who study abroad are more likely to remain in host countries (skilled labor force). This perspective underscores the structural role of educational migration in shaping global talent distribution and workforce development. R. Banerjee and A. Verma support this idea, emphasizing that many new immigrants in Canada get education

to obtain credentials for employability [7]: the link between education and labor migration is not only strong but also essential for immigrants seeking stable careers in host countries. Likewise, education-related migration often leads to long-term labor migration, since economic incentives and job availability encourage international graduates to stay [5. P. 40].

A more region-specific analysis of Central Asian students' motivations for studying abroad [20. P. 63] shows that students from Tajikistan view foreign education as a strategic step towards securing stable employment in more favorable labor markets. Educational migration is not merely about knowledge but a rational decision for a long-term career. For instance, students from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan choose study destinations based on employment prospects [31. P. 74]; Russia seems a key destination for them, since the state facilitates the transition from the student status to full-time employment. The alignment of educational migration with labor market demands, particularly in Russia, seems a significant driver of long-term migration trends, and the empirical data strengthens this argument: over 60% of Central Asian students in Russia stay after graduation for employment [12. P. 85]. This statistical evidence supports the idea that educational migration acts as a major contributor to labor migration; moreover, many Central Asian students perceive the Russian labor market as more favorable than the return to home countries, which proves that educational migration serves as a gateway to long-term labor market integration.

However, not all scholars share this optimistic view: according to a more critical perspective, the transition from education to employment is not always straightforward [32. P. 94] due to various barriers (complex work permit procedures, employer discrimination and job market saturation). Thus, while studying abroad offers opportunities, foreign graduates face significant challenges securing stable employment and residency, which highlights the limitations of educational migration as a direct pathway to labor migration. Moreover, scholarly opinions on the link between educational and labor migration vary significantly: some researchers stress economic advantages and structural support that encourage international students to remain in host countries, while others — obstacles that complicate this transition. The extent to which educational migration leads to labor migration largely depends on host country policies, labor market conditions and legal frameworks.

### **Key drivers of educational emigration as connected to labor migration**

Educational emigration is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by economic, academic, social-political and policy-driven factors. Scholars have explored motivation of student migration and its connection to labor migration, offering diverse perspectives on the underlying causes and implications. Many scholars emphasize economic factors as the primary drivers of educational migration: students often consider educational programs as a means to secure employment

and long-term settlement (student visas as pathways to work authorization and permanent residency) [22. P. 1225]; students from Somaliland and Puntland pursue foreign education due to the limited recognition of local degrees, which hinders their employment prospects [25]. A stronger economic perspective emphasizes that the lack of high-paying jobs in Central Asia pushes students toward international education in pursuit of stable employment [20. P. 65; 14. P. 59], which aligns with global migration trends (financial stability remains a dominant factor in student mobility). Countries like Russia and China strategically attract Central Asian students with affordable education and good employment opportunities [33. P. 85]. However, these approaches underscore the economic rationale behind educational migration, reinforcing that financial incentives are often the primary motivation.

In addition to economic reasons, the quality of higher education is a critical push factor: students view foreign education as a steppingstone to enhanced career prospects due to the superior quality of institutions and research abroad [6] and the systemic problems in the national higher education (corruption, outdated curricula, inadequate research facilities) [16. P. 142; 13. P. 77]. Thus, students seek not only better salaries but also a high-quality education that increases their competitiveness in the job market. Foreign universities' graduates get benefits both domestically and internationally but are more likely to remain abroad after completing studies [20. P. 66]. There is a strong link between educational migration and long-term labor migration, since students often choose to stay in host countries in which their qualifications are better recognized and valued.

While economic and educational factors dominate the discussion, some scholars focus on political and social aspects of migration: political instability, restrictions on freedoms and limited career opportunities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan motivate students to study abroad, which often leads to permanent emigration [1. P. 60]; students from authoritarian states prefer democratic societies due to greater academic freedom and professional mobility [23. P. 95]. The social-political dimension of educational migration suggests that governance and civil liberties significantly affect student decisions. The idea that political instability can drive educational migration aligns with broader migration patterns: individuals from restrictive or unstable regimes seek opportunities in more stable and democratic environments.

Another crucial aspect of student mobility is the proactive role of host countries: for instance, Russia's state-sponsored programs attract Central Asian students with scholarships and streamlined work permit policies, ensuring that many remain after graduation [33. P. 88], i.e., receiving countries' policies influence student decisions and facilitate the transition from educational to labor migration. Thus, educational migration is not driven only by push factors in home countries but also by pull factors in by host nations. By implementing policies that encourage students to remain after graduation, destination countries strengthen the link between educational emigration and labor migration.

Educational emigration is a complex process driven by multiple factors. While economic incentives remain a primary motivator as students seek higher-paying jobs and financial stability, concerns about educational quality, political instability and governance also affect migration decisions. In addition, policies of host countries shape migration trends by facilitating the transition from student status to long-term residency and employment. In general, educational migration is deeply intertwined with labor migration. As students seek better opportunities abroad, they join the workforce of host countries, reinforcing the broader trend of migration as a pathway to improved economic and professional prospects. This interplay between education and labor migration reveals the need for policymakers to consider both push and pull factors when addressing global migration trends.

### **Brain drain or brain circulation**

Educational migration has led to debates about its effects in source countries. Some scholars argue that the outflow of skilled professionals depletes the national workforce and hinders economic development, while others believe that the effectively managed migration can foster knowledge exchange and innovation. The pessimistic view emphasizes that the migration of talented youth weakens home countries by reducing their human capital and innovation potential [17. P. 62; 27. P. 101], which aligns with the traditional notion of brain drain — the outflow of skilled professionals exacerbates shortages in such critical sectors as healthcare, engineering and technology. Authors argue that without adequate policies to encourage return migration source countries will continue to struggle with economic stagnation and weakened institutional capacities. This viewpoint is particularly valid for developing economies that fail to provide competitive wages, career growth opportunities or research funding, which makes skilled workers seek better prospects abroad. However, this argument assumes mainly a one-way loss, overlooking potential benefits such as remittances, knowledge transfer and expatriate engagement with home economies.

A more optimistic stance asserts that educational migration can contribute to brain circulation rather than brain drain if managed effectively [21. P. 38]: returning graduates can “inject” advanced skills, innovation and global networks into home economies, provided active government intervention, including job placement programs, research funding and economic incentives to encourage repatriation. Thus, migration does not have to be a permanent loss — with the right policies source countries can stimulate their educated diaspora to enhance national development. This argument hinges on the ability of domestic labor markets to absorb and reward highly skilled workers; otherwise, return migration will remain limited despite incentives.

The third perspective shifts the focus from return migration to diaspora engagement: rather than calling professionals to return, Central Asian governments should harness digital connectivity and remote work opportunities

to integrate their expatriates into national development efforts [2; 10]. This model acknowledges the global workforce realities — emigrants can contribute through remote collaborations, mentorship programs and investment initiatives without physical relocation — and is particularly relevant in the digital age. However, while this approach provides an alternative to return migration, it may not fully compensate for the lack of professionals in critical sectors requiring physical presence (medicine or engineering).

The above-mentioned perspectives highlight different dimensions of educational migration: the pessimistic one underscores the challenges of brain drain for developing economies, particularly when structural weaknesses drive skilled individuals away; the conditional optimism suggests that with proper government intervention migration can be converted into brain circulation; the pragmatic approach recognizes that diaspora engagement can be alternative strategy for leveraging the expertise of expatriates. Ultimately, the impact of educational migration depends on how home countries respond to its challenges and opportunities. While brain drain can be detrimental in the absence of supportive policies, strategic initiatives (return incentives and diaspora engagement) can transform migration into an asset. Therefore, a nuanced approach that combines elements of all three perspectives — addressing structural weaknesses, driving return migration and fostering digital engagement — may offer the most effective solution.

### **Policy recommendations**

Higher education in Central Asia faces multiple systemic challenges, including outdated curricula, insufficient infrastructure and corruption, which have led to significant brain drain due to many students getting education abroad and choosing not to return. Scholars make various recommendations to improve national education systems and encourage the return of educated professionals [13. P. 78; 18. P. 95; 30. P. 115], primarily focusing on reforms, return migration incentives and international cooperation for degree recognition.

*Investment and reforms in higher education*, including for infrastructure and curriculum modernization and anti-corruption measures [13. P. 78]. The improved quality of local universities would enhance their appeal, reducing the necessity to seek education abroad, since well-developed institutions can retain talent and increase research productivity. However, implementation of such sound recommendations depends on the political will of Central Asian governments to allocate resources effectively and enforce anti-corruption policies.

*Incentives for return migration* include financial measures, research grants and job opportunities to attract students back to home countries [18. P. 101; 30. P. 78]. Many authors assume that economic and professional benefits are key motivators for return migration. While financial support is undeniably important, other factors, such as political stability, career opportunities and

academic freedoms also influence migration decisions, since many students who study abroad might perceive their home countries as lacking these essential conditions, which makes financial incentives alone insufficient. Therefore, policy recommendations need to be combined with structural labor market reforms to be truly effective.

*Agreements for degree recognition:* non-recognition of foreign degrees seems to be a major barrier preventing students' return [30. P. 78], which is why governments should make international agreements to facilitate diploma validation, thus ensuring job opportunities for returning graduates. This recommendation is particularly pragmatic due to directly addressing the bureaucratic obstacle that discourages repatriation. However, such agreements require diplomatic negotiations and mutual recognition of educational standards, which makes such conditions challenging given the diversity of higher education systems and varying academic degrees. Moreover, some countries may refuse to recognize degrees of institutions they perceive as less rigorous.

Thus, infrastructure and curriculum reforms require significant government commitment and resources, while financial incentives for return migration can be supported by broader structural changes and international agreements for degree recognition depend on complex diplomatic negotiations. A holistic approach that combines these policy recommendations while addressing systemic problems (corruption, political instability, labor market inefficiencies) would be the most effective strategy to improve the higher education system in Central Asia and mitigate brain drain. The extent to which educational migration benefits or harms Central Asian nations depends on government policies, labor market structures and international cooperation. Addressing barriers to return migration and leveraging diaspora engagement are the keys to transforming educational migration into a sustainable developmental strategy rather than a permanent loss of talent.

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## **Образовательная миграция как новое направление трудовой миграции из стран Центральной Азии: теоретический анализ\***

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**Аннотация.** Образовательная миграция стала важной формой трудовой миграции в странах Центральной Азии, поскольку растет число студентов, стремящихся получить высшее образование за рубежом и впоследствии стать частью зарубежных рынков труда. В статье рассмотрена взаимосвязь между образовательной и трудовой миграцией, выделены экономические, социальные и институциональные факторы, которые заставляют студентов оставаться в принимающих странах после окончания учебы. Исследование основано на таких концептуальных моделях, как теория человеческого капитала, социальная мобильность и «утечка мозгов» в сопоставлении с «циркуляцией мозгов», что позволило автору показать, как образовательная миграция влияет на мобильность рабочей силы и национальное развитие. Результаты проведенной автором работы свидетельствуют о том, что экономические стимулы и снижение качества высшего образования в Центральной Азии на фоне благоприятной миграционной политики в странах, принимающих иностранных студентов, способствуют превращению образовательной миграции в долгосрочную трудовую миграцию. Страны, принимающие студентов из Центральной Азии, активно содействуют этой трансформации с помощью программ предоставления разрешений на работу и стратегий интеграции иностранных специалистов на рынок труда, что превращает получение высшего образования за рубежом в прямой путь к постоянному трудоустройству. Однако такие проблемы, как ограничения на выдачу разрешений на работу, дискриминация со стороны работодателей и перенасыщенность рынка труда, все еще препятствуют такой трудовой миграции. В статье показаны и противоречивые последствия образовательной миграции для отправляющих и принимающих стран. Например, страны назначения получают выгоду от приобретения квалифицированной рабочей силы, тогда как отправляющие студенты страны Центральной Азии сталкиваются с проблемой утечки мозгов, теряя высокообразованных специалистов на зарубежных рынках труда. Чтобы смягчить негативные последствия образовательной миграции, государство должно наращивать инвестиции в отечественную систему высшего образования, стимулировать обратную миграцию и развивать международное сотрудничество в целях взаимного признания дипломов и ученых степеней.

**Ключевые слова:** образовательная миграция; трудовая миграция; Центральная Азия; утечка мозгов; социальная мобильность; теория человеческого капитала; иностранные студенты; высшее образование

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