



## International Education and Student Preferences: A Focus on Kyrgyzstan

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### ABSTRACT

*The research aims to identify the reasons why international students choose Kyrgyzstan for their education, the challenges they may face, and their future expectations. A qualitative research method was used in the study, and 30 international students participated. The results of the study reveal that students choose Kyrgyzstan for education due to factors such as the opportunity to receive comparatively good education, affordable accommodations and food, free education, scholarship opportunities, and the availability of education in languages with which they are familiar. Additionally, the students expressed the intention to return to their home countries and secure employment after completing their studies. Although most students face challenges, particularly in terms of language, they are generally satisfied with the education they receive. Based on these findings, some recommendations are provided in this study.*

**Keywords:** student mobility, international students, medical education, internationalization

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, international education has gained considerable momentum worldwide. Students' decisions to study abroad are influenced by factors such as the prestige of foreign education systems, the opportunity for higher-quality education, and the desire for diverse educational experiences (Varghese, 2008; Wang, 2024). Key considerations include job prospects, tuition fees, academic regulations, and the language of instruction (OECD, 2007). Consequently, many countries have increasingly adopted English in higher education as part of their internationalization (OECD, 2013). The United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia are among the top destinations, largely due to their status as English-speaking nations (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Historically, over 90% of international students have enrolled in OECD

countries, with the U.S., the UK, Australia, Germany, and France as key destinations (Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

Students are often motivated to study abroad by the pursuit of quality education, better career prospects, improved competitiveness in the job market, enhanced foreign language skills, and opportunities for cultural and professional experiences (Gutema, Pant & Nikou, 2024). Studying abroad allows students to immerse themselves in different societies, languages, cultures, and work practices, providing valuable knowledge applicable in the global labor market (OECD, 2004).

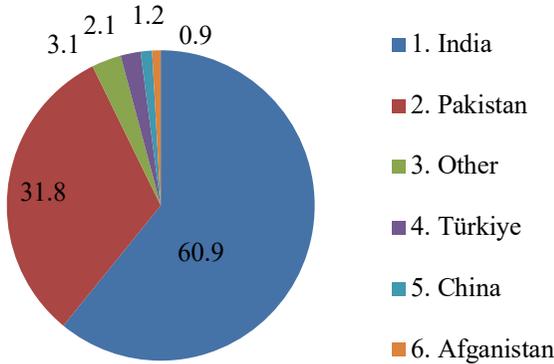
Generally, students expect higher education to facilitate fulfilling careers (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). They seek personal growth, societal respect, and increased confidence, all of which contribute to their intellectual and social development (Killick, 2012). Higher education is viewed as a means to achieve various goals, including career advancement, social status, fulfilling familial expectations, and financial stability (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Perkins, 2013).

Among the primary motivations for international education are enhanced career opportunities and the prestigious reputation of foreign institutions (Lu & Everson Härkälä, 2024). Baier (2009) noted that students choose to study abroad to improve their career prospects and gain prestige. Many opt for similar programs abroad, recognizing that employers highly value international experience. This desire for global exposure and the associated value of foreign education further drive international mobility (British Council, 2008).

Recognizing the significance of internationalization, many countries have actively promoted academic mobility and the global integration of their education systems. While international students typically favor economically developed countries, such as the United States and European nations, Kyrgyzstan has also emerged as an appealing destination for students seeking higher education opportunities.

In Kyrgyzstan, alongside local universities, several international institutions, including those from Turkey, the Arab world, the United States, and Russia, have been established through political and bilateral agreements. Each year, hundreds of international students from countries such as Türkiye, Syria, Afghanistan, the United States, China, Russia, and other Central Asian nations come to Kyrgyzstan to pursue their studies at these institutions.

As of the beginning of the 2021–2022 academic year, approximately 83,000 international students were enrolled in higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan, accounting for more than 35% of the total student population. The majority of these students—over 59,000, or 71%—came from countries in the CIS region. A trend of growth in the number of students has also been observed among those from non-CIS countries (Figure 1), with their share increasing from 8,000 to 24,000 students over the past five years, or by 2.7 times (National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2022).



**Figure 1: The number of international students from non-CIS countries (2021–2022)**

India and Pakistan are the largest groups of international students in Kyrgyzstan, primarily pursuing medical education. In the 2022--2023 academic year, 28,239 international students were enrolled in medical faculties, out of a total of 71,700 international students (Sputnik News Agency, 2022). Furthermore, a decree signed by Akylbek Zhaparov, Chairperson of the Cabinet of Ministers, permits foreign nationals to enroll in accredited medical programs from 2022–23 academic year onward. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for issuing student visas. The key institutions offering English-language medical programs include the International Higher School of Medicine (IHSM), I.K. Akhunbaev Kyrgyz State Medical Academy, Salymbekov University, and Osh State University (Erasmus+ Kyrgyzstan, 2024).

During the Soviet era, mathematics and medical education were key strengths of the country, with high-quality training provided in these fields. However, after independence, a lack of adequate education, financial resources, infrastructure, and equipment has hindered the sector's progress (Cirri, Bolotbek uulu, Shakiev et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, the influx of international students pursuing medical studies remains important for the country.

Kyrgyzstan's education system aims to foster human potential by attracting international students to both secondary and higher education, playing a crucial role in enhancing the country's regional leadership and global competitiveness. In the face of growing global competition, the education system must strike a balance between two key processes to strengthen the country's status and safeguard its national interests. When effectively implemented, these processes drive the innovative development of the state and society (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2012):

**Cultural Identity and Diversity:** Protecting and promoting the country's cultural identity while preserving national distinctiveness.

**Integration into Global Educational Spaces:** Aligning Kyrgyzstan's education system with regional and global educational trends.

The internationalization of Kyrgyzstan's education system is advancing through both traditional approaches—such as sending academics and students to Europe—and the adoption of internationalization models from developing countries. International universities also play a crucial role in promoting global education and advancing the country's internationalization.

This research is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of the current international student population in the country, improving the quality of their education, and advancing the internationalization of the national education system. Furthermore, it provides recommendations for strategies to attract high-achieving students, particularly from more developed countries.

This study aims to explore the motivations and outcomes of students who choose Kyrgyzstan for their higher education. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. Why do international students choose Kyrgyzstan for their education?
2. What academic and social challenges do they face?
3. What are their plans following the completion of their education in Kyrgyzstan?

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### **Driving factors of international student mobility**

Higher education has long been seen as a pathway for improving graduates' economic and social status (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The decision to study abroad is influenced by "push-pull" factors: push factors arise from limitations in the home country, such as poor educational opportunities or a rigid system, whereas pull factors include higher education, career prospects, and supportive government policies abroad (Bhandari et al., 2018).

Key factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels shape students' decisions to study abroad (Van Mol, Cleven, & Mulvey, 2024). Students are often motivated by the opportunity to access advanced education, enhance professional development, and gain a competitive advantage in the job market (Shen & Wang, 2024). These motivations can be categorized into three dimensions:

**Academic Factors:** High-quality education and standards aligned with market demands.

**Career Factors:** Professional opportunities, potential for migration, and career growth.

**Experiential factors** include gaining international experience, engaging with diverse cultures, and participating in social activities (Baier, 2009).

The motivations vary by country; for example, U.S. students often seek language acquisition, whereas Chinese students prioritize new experiences (Sanchez et al., 2006). A survey in middle-income countries revealed five key motivations: gaining new perspectives, improving international career prospects,

enhancing domestic career prospects, improving language skills, and developing independence (European Commission, 2006).

Han et al. (2015) reported that high-quality education and future career prospects were crucial for students choosing the U.S. (88% and 74%, respectively). Similarly, U.K. students value employability and academic quality (Brandon et al., 2021), whereas Australia's appeal lies in its competitive education quality, positive image, and lower living costs (Ha et al., 2023).

Push factors include weak domestic education, economic instability, high tuition, and limited career prospects, whereas pull factors involve high-quality education, institutional reputation, cost considerations, and opportunities for employment and immigration (Becker & Kolster, 2012).

#### Consequences of International Student Mobility

Students who participate in international mobility generally report high levels of satisfaction, highlighting benefits such as increased prestige and personal growth (Waibel et al., 2017; Varghese, 2008). Research indicates that studying abroad fosters self-confidence, maturity, and broader perspectives, contributing to both personal and professional development (Valls-Figuera et al., 2023). It also enhances intercultural competence and social skills, promoting respect and tolerance for diverse cultures, which can lead to academic success and global-mindedness (Teichler, 2017; Roy et al., 2019).

Employers value international experience, with 60% of top employers believing it improves employability by providing diverse skills (Fielden et al., 2007). Studies have shown that students recognize benefits, including improved employability and academic performance (Brandon et al., 2021). Graduates often cite their international experience as a significant recruitment asset (European Commission, 2014).

For example, Laotian students in exchange programs gain employability skills such as communication and interpersonal abilities, enhancing their job prospects (Sisavath, 2021). Similarly, studying in the UK improved language skills and career opportunities (Wang et al., 2019; HEFCE, 2004). Graduates who study abroad are also more likely to secure international roles and work in globally oriented firms (d'Hombres & Schnepf, 2021; Knutsen et al., 2024). However, returning students may face challenges integrating into the domestic labor market, whereas those who stay in the host country may not receive equal treatment to native citizens (Teichler, 2017).

### **Determinants of the academic-social challenges faced by international students**

International students face a range of challenges, including academic, financial, and social difficulties (Oz Cetindere & Shin, 2025), which are often more pronounced than those encountered by domestic students (Enterieva & Sezgin, 2016). Studying in a different geography, language, and culture exacerbates these issues. Social challenges, such as homesickness, loneliness, and cultural differences in food and living conditions, can negatively affect academic performance and overall experience (Forbes-Mewett, 2018; Newsome & Cooper, 2016).

Key difficulties include language barriers (Bell, 2016; Ramachandran, 2011), adapting to different educational systems (Quan et al., 2016), academic demands (Enterieva & Sezgin, 2016), and financial issues (Kwon, 2009). Smith and Khawaja (2011) identify common acculturative stressors such as language challenges, adapting to new academic and cultural environments, discrimination, and practical concerns such as finances and accommodations. Both full-programmers and temporary mobile students face difficulties with funding, administrative processes, accommodations, cultural differences, teaching styles, academic standards, and adjusting to climate and food (Teichler, 2017).

According to HEFCE (2004), financial constraints (22.3%), language barriers (14.0%), distance from home (8.9%), and cultural adjustment (8.2%) are common challenges. Studies by Han et al. (2015) and Fennell (2020) also highlight difficulties in cultural, social, financial, academic, racial, and job-related areas, as well as stress, anxiety, and culture shock (Wu et al., 2015; Zheng, 2010).

### **Postgraduation trajectories of international students**

Research on international students' postgraduate plans often frames migration as a binary stay-return decision influenced by push-pull factors. Students' views on "home" impact these plans, with those considering the host country as home being more likely to stay, whereas those with a more ancestral view tend to return. Students with a cosmopolitan or flexible concept of home often adopt more open migration strategies (Wu & Wilkes, 2017).

Many internationally mobile students gain better employment prospects upon returning home (Brooks & Waters, 2011), but those studying in developed countries often choose to remain due to better economic, social, and career opportunities (Han et al., 2015). Students from developing countries often view studying abroad as a pathway to securing jobs in more developed economies (Baruch et al., 2007; Marchiori et al., 2013). For example, Findlay et al. (2017) and Packwood et al. (2015) reported that most degree-seeking students viewed studying in the UK as the first step toward launching an international career.

Institutional culture also affects post-study plans. For example, Oxford graduates often stay abroad due to the high value of their degrees (Lee, 2021), whereas Indian students in Australia frequently seek permanent residency (Garnaut, 2006). Career-related factors, including income, job prospects, and state talent programs, drive migration decisions (Gribble, 2008). In OECD countries, 60–80% of international students intend to work in the host country after completing their postgraduate studies (Berquist et al., 2019), with similar trends observed in Canada (Esses et al., 2018).

The factors influencing postgraduate migration plans also include professional networks and advisor quality (Han et al., 2015). In New Zealand, 53% of students planned to stay, citing superior educational quality and value for money as key motivators (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Social networks formed during studies also play a significant role in shaping migration decisions, with some students viewing countries such as Singapore as transitional points toward "global" destinations (Findlay et al., 2017; Raghuram, 2013).

## **Advantages and approaches to the internationalization of education and development**

International students play a critical role in host countries' economies, particularly in supporting higher education funding. Australia's appeal to students from China, India, and Southeast Asia (Becker & Kolster, 2012) is part of a broader trend, where effective marketing, world-class education, and financial incentives, especially from India and China, give English-speaking nations a competitive advantage (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Countries such as Australia and New Zealand generate a significant portion of their higher education budgets from international students (Van-Damme, 2017), whereas the U.S. and Canada rely less on this source. Internationalization is increasingly prioritized, not only for the revenue international students bring but also for enhancing universities' global standing (Rodrigues, 2012). However, challenges such as language barriers, social integration, and employability issues hinder student mobility, especially in Europe (López-Duarte, Maley & Vidal-Suárez, 2021).

Western economies, particularly the U.S. and U.K., focus on recruiting and retaining international students for their socioeconomic benefits. In response to rising competition, many countries have integrated poststudy work rights and visa pathways to retain skilled graduates. For example, Canada's postgraduation work permit (PGWP) program facilitates work experience with fewer barriers (Morris-Lange, 2019).

Countries approach international education differently: the OECD identifies four national strategies: mutual understanding, skilled migration, revenue generation, and capacity building (OECD, 2004). The U.S. lacks a comprehensive policy on student recruitment but views international students as a source of talent and economic benefit (Becker & Kolster, 2012). NAFSA (2023) called for a coordinated U.S. international education strategy to expand international student numbers, increase study abroad participation, and foster global partnerships.

The U.K. strategy, revised in 2019, aims to increase education exports and international student numbers. The 2021 Graduate Route allows students to work for up to two years, supporting recruitment goals (Department for Education, 2021). Similarly, Australia's strategy (2021–2030) emphasizes workforce alignment and global competitiveness, whereas Canada's International Education Strategy (2019–2024) promotes innovation and student mobility (Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

## **METHOD**

This study employs a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research design that focuses on understanding familiar phenomena in depth (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Phenomenology emphasizes individual experiences to describe, rather than generalize, phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). The research examines the lived experiences, perceptions, and motivations of international students who choose Kyrgyzstan for higher education, including their reasons for selecting the

country, academic and social challenges, and future plans. Purposive sampling, which combines criterion and maximum variation techniques, was used. Criterion sampling selects participants based on specific characteristics, whereas maximum variation sampling aims to capture a range of perspectives relevant to the research problem (Ritchie et al., 2003).

This phenomenological study used semistructured interviews to explore participants' experiences and interpretations (Groenewald, 2004). Interviews are effective for capturing perspectives, emotions, and perceptions (Groenewald, 2004). Data were collected via a researcher-developed semistructured interview guide that combines predetermined questions with flexibility for in-depth exploration (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). A standardized open-ended strategy was employed, ensuring consistent administration of questions while maintaining clarity, avoiding leading questions, and incorporating probes (Groenewald, 2004).

The study included 30 undergraduate international students: 5 females and 25 males. The participants' fields of study included medicine, social sciences, languages and literature, and economics and administrative sciences. Geographically, 15 participants were from India, 10 from Pakistan, 1 from China, 2 from Turkiye, 1 from Afghanistan, and 1 from Russia. The participants' ages ranged from 19--25 years.

Semistructured interviews were conducted face-to-face between February and April 2022, lasting 1–4 hours per session. The interviews were conducted in various locations, including empty classrooms, outdoor spaces, and schoolyards. Detailed field notes were recorded immediately following each interview. Prior to each interview, the participants received information about the study's purpose and data confidentiality (ensuring anonymity) and provided informed consent. To enhance external validity, interviews were conducted with individuals sharing similar characteristics, social contexts, and life experiences. The participants were required to have been in Kyrgyzstan for at least a year and a half and were enrolled in a higher education program. Consistent questioning was maintained across all interviews via a predetermined guide. Internal validity was strengthened by fostering extended interaction between the researcher and participants. Probing questions and illustrative examples were used to clarify responses without influencing the participants, ensuring unbiased answers and maintaining data reliability.

Member checking, a strategy for validating findings, was employed by providing participants with written summaries of their statements for review and confirmation. They were also encouraged to share additional insights via email. Key factors enhancing validity in qualitative research, as noted by Groenewald (2004), include proximity to the research setting, the ability to collect in-depth data through face–face interviews, and opportunities for further information gathering. Strategies such as participant validation, comprehensive data collection, literature-based interpretation, and detailed descriptions were used to

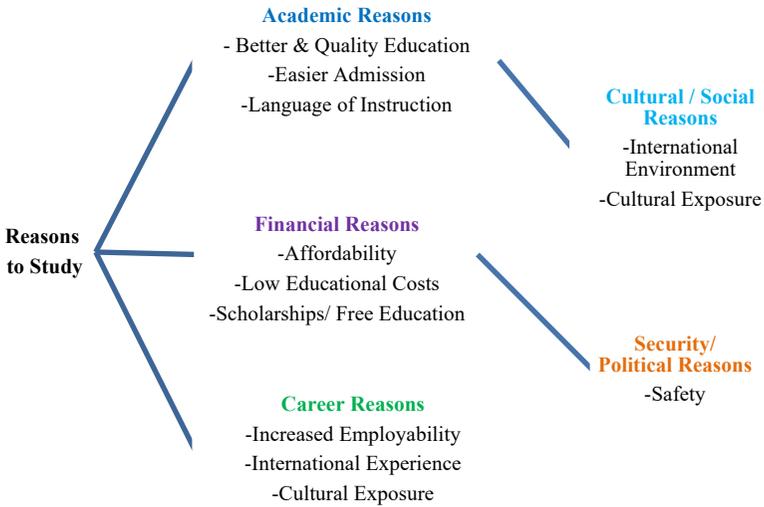
create a holistic view of the phenomenon and strengthen both internal and external validity.

The study data analysis aimed to uncover lived experiences and their meanings. Content analysis was used to identify themes and conceptualize the data. This systematic technique categorizes text through coding, revealing beliefs, attitudes, values, and thoughts (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The interview data were described on the basis of the questions asked, using direct quotes for a descriptive approach. Face-to-face interviews were manually transcribed, and codes and themes were inductively derived from the questions and responses. For example, responses to the question about reasons for choosing the target country were categorized under the theme "academic reasons," with subcomponents such as "quality education." Data analysis and interpretation were grounded in the relevant literature, with findings connected to identified themes. Interpretations were crafted to remain objective to ensure the validity of the study. The validity of qualitative research ensures an unbiased representation of the phenomenon under investigation. To enhance validity, the interview data were transcribed verbatim and presented descriptively, with direct quotes used to increase reliability. The participants were identified via the abbreviation "S" followed by a unique number. The responses were coded with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and facilitate the use of direct quotations.

The example interview questions included the following: 1) What were your reasons for choosing Kyrgyzstan for your education, or what motivated you? (Probes: education quality, career prospects, financial considerations, international education experience, other); 2) What academic and social challenges have you experienced while studying in Kyrgyzstan? (Probes: language, course difficulty, faculty, social adjustment, other); 3) What are your plans for the future after graduation? (Probes: employment, further education, leaving education, other). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed about the study's purpose, data confidentiality (ensuring anonymity), and the exclusive use of the data for scientific research.

## **FINDINGS**

Figure 2 presents the reasons why students choose Kyrgyzstan for their education. The most common factors include better education and a brighter future ( $n = 25$ ), financial affordability and low educational costs ( $n = 24$ ), career opportunities ( $n = 20$ ), the ability to study in a familiar language ( $n = 20$ ), and the opportunity to receive international education ( $n = 15$ ). Other reasons include free education or scholarship opportunities ( $n = 7$ ), easy access to universities and graduation ( $n = 7$ ), education in a different cultural environment ( $n = 1$ ), and safety ( $n = 1$ ).



**Figure 2: Reasons for Choosing Kyrgyzstan for Education**

The students' quotes are presented below:

"I wanted to find the education I could not find in my own country here. I saw that many people from my country came here to study and work. This pushed me to study here. In the end, you can say that you studied abroad. This sounds better to others. The education here has been better for me." (S1)

"Admission to the university I chose was easy; I couldn't easily get into university in my own country. With the score I got in my country, I was able to get into this university, and I am very happy. In addition, I can study in my own language." (S6)

"This university is international, offers free education, and provides scholarships, which made me come here to study. I also enjoy studying in an international environment. I have the opportunity to be taught by teachers from my country and other places. Everything is available: library, dormitory, computer room, all of it." (S19)

"I am not satisfied with the education and job opportunities in my own country. The university education in Kyrgyzstan is of higher quality. I came here with hope. I believe that after I finish, better opportunities will open up for me." (S9)

"I think I will have more job opportunities when I leave here. I can study in English, improve my language skills, and learn about different cultures. Maybe I will go to Europe and continue my education there, or maybe find a job. There are people who have gone to work there after graduation." (S2)

"It is difficult to get into a good university in my country. Here, I can get in with fewer criteria. The exams are easier. If I do not pass, I can retake the exam or continue next year." (S17)

"I am gaining international experience. There are students from different countries in my class. The campuses are nice, and there are diverse and good resources in the libraries." (S20)

"I am not facing financial difficulties. Accommodation, food, and transport are inexpensive in the country. Additionally, educational resources and expenses are also low." (S28)

"In my country, there was insecurity and a war environment. In Kyrgyzstan, I feel safer and am living a good life while receiving education." (S7)

Figure 3 outlines the academic and social challenges faced by students. The majority reported language difficulties ( $n = 18$ ), whereas others mentioned challenges related to social integration ( $n = 7$ ) and the low number of female students ( $n = 3$ ). Additionally, some students stated that they did not encounter significant challenges ( $n = 5$ ).

The students' quotes are presented below:

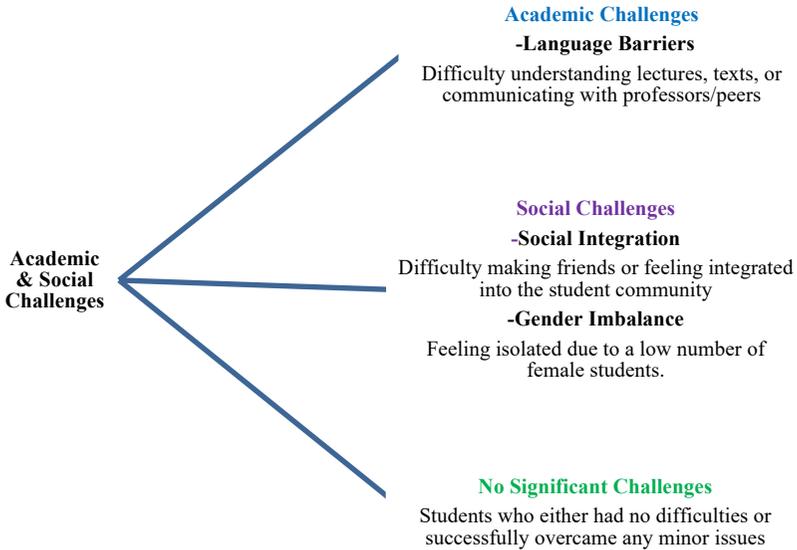
"At first, I had difficulty with the language. There were things I didn't understand. There were also new terms. Moreover, I did not know Russian or Kyrgyz. However, little by little, I understand simple things and can speak now." (S16)

"I am studying in my own language, but education is also provided in other languages. Fortunately, I learned the other languages by attending the preparatory class. It was a great advantage for me to learn a different language for free." (S17)

"Honestly, I haven't had many difficulties. It would have been better if there were more female students. The place is always filled with male students. If there were more female students, it would be easier for me to integrate and find accommodations." (S3)

"When I go outside, I cannot talk to people. I only ask questions. Otherwise, no one usually sits and talks with me. I mostly hang out with people from my own country." (S10)

"I didn't face any difficulties. There were some, but I managed them. I solved them in a short time." (S5)



**Figure 3: Academic and Social Challenges Faced by Students**

Figure 4 presents information about students' expectations and post-graduation plans. The majority of the students planned to return to their home country and seek employment ( $n = 19$ ), whereas some ( $n = 8$ ) intended to stay in Kyrgyzstan for work. A few students considered settling in Kyrgyzstan or relocating to Western countries for work or further education ( $n = 2$ ). One participant ( $n = 1$ ) reported being undecided.

The students' quotes are presented below:

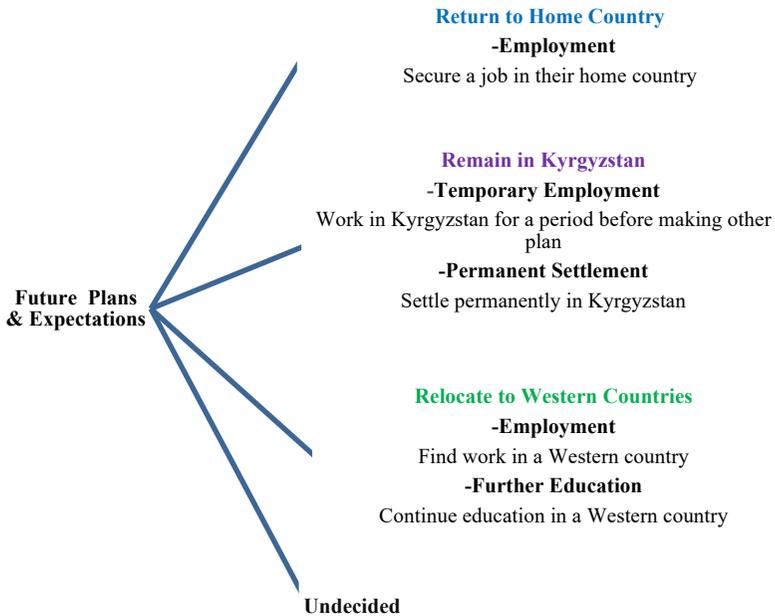
"I want to go back to my country and get a job. I will be with my family." (S11)

"I want to stay here and gain experience before going somewhere else or returning to my country. I want to develop myself further." (S23)

"I want to stay here for a while. Maybe there will be job opportunities for me." (S25)

"I want to improve myself and then go to Europe. I have friends who went there for work, and it worked out well for them. That's my goal." (S22)

"I am undecided at the moment; I do not know what will happen." (S30)



**Figure 4: Students' expectations and plans for the future after graduation**

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Research results indicate that the primary expectation for international students in Kyrgyzstan is to receive quality education that will help them secure a good profession. Easier access to universities and fewer admission criteria are also key factors influencing their choice. A notable advantage for students in Kyrgyzstan, compared with developed countries, is the relatively straightforward university admission process. In addition to their academic goals, many students are attracted by opportunities for career advancement, scholarships, free education, low costs, and the international exposure they can gain (Varghese, 2008). Similar studies in other countries have shown that international students often seek education abroad for superior academic opportunities and better career prospects. The desire for international experience, viewed as essential for career success, is another motivating factor for students to choose foreign destinations (OECD, 2004; Wang, 2024).

International students are drawn to study at universities in Kyrgyzstan because of their affordability, low educational costs, and opportunities for free education. The country's relatively low cost of living, combined with affordable

accommodations and services such as transportation and food, makes it an attractive option. Additionally, factors such as reasonable food and housing costs, a similar cultural mentality, shared religious beliefs, and the population's tolerant attitudes toward foreigners contribute to this choice. A positive local attitude is reflected in the fact that over 85% of the urban population holds a favorable view of foreign migrants (IOM Kyrgyzstan, 2023). The openness of the local community plays a crucial role in alleviating discrimination, loneliness, and alienation among international students, thereby fostering an environment that supports their integration and promotes the country's internationalization.

Studying in widely spoken languages such as English, Turkish, and Russian offers significant advantages for international students, particularly in terms of global mobility and career opportunities. Education in English, specifically, is seen as a key motivator (Varghese, 2008) and a gateway to Europe and international job markets, further enhancing Kyrgyzstan's appeal as a study destination.

Despite these benefits, international students face academic and social challenges, with language barriers being the most prominent issue. This aligns with previous research, such as that of Kuzhabekova and Amankulova (2024), who reported that Kazakh students struggled with language difficulties in the United States. Similarly, William, Peters, and Hegazi (2024) reported that medical students in Austria faced challenges understanding lectures due to language barriers. To address this, universities in Kyrgyzstan could implement English-language preparatory programs or strengthen language proficiency requirements for student admissions.

Promoting the safety of Kyrgyzstan and encouraging female students to pursue education could attract a more diverse student population. A greater proportion of female students could help alleviate feelings of isolation. Supportive programs aimed at facilitating integration can reduce challenges in forming friendships and becoming part of the student community. Addressing the gender imbalance and providing tailored support services may improve social integration, especially for female students. Inclusive programs could enhance social connections and reduce isolation, fostering a sense of belonging. This approach could also increase the number of women pursuing education and employment in their home countries, positively impacting their economic and social well-being.

Notably, students do not face financial difficulties in their studies in the country compared with international students globally. This result shows that life and study costs in the country are appropriate for international students. Financial difficulties are the main challenge for international education. It can be argued that it is an important factor for students' educational decision making and/or attracting more international students.

The majority of international students plan to return to their home countries after completing their studies, which contrasts with trends in the United States and Europe. This may suggest that the education received in Kyrgyzstan meets their expectations for training and employment opportunities. Upon returning, students often gain enhanced career prospects (Brooks &

Waters, 2011). However, this trend may also be influenced by factors such as Kyrgyzstan's economic conditions, labor market potential, students' cultural or familial ties (including the desire to reunite with or support family), and comparative economic opportunities in their home countries. In addition to students who view Kyrgyzstan as a stepping stone to Europe, those who remain in the country for employment gain international experience, which benefits the local labor market and provides Kyrgyzstan with unique perspectives. Employment opportunities for individuals with advanced skills may expand, allowing successful graduates to contribute significantly to the local workforce. These findings suggest that students' sense of belonging and intention to stay in Kyrgyzstan for higher education may be less pronounced than in more established international educational destinations, possibly because of Kyrgyzstan's relative attractiveness as a study destination.

International students play an essential role in the economy by contributing through tuition payments, living expenses, and broader financial activities (Crossman, Choi, Lu, & Hou, 2022). In Kyrgyzstan, international students significantly impact the economy, both through direct financial expenditures and broader economic effects (IOM Kyrgyzstan, 2023). According to Rasul Abazbek Uulu, the Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Kyrgyzstan, foreign students act as 'investors' by paying tuition fees and utilizing local services such as taxis, cafeterias, and other personal services. It is estimated that international students contribute approximately \$3,000 annually to the economy, highlighting their essential economic role (Kabar News Agency, 2024).

Foskett (2010) categorizes internationally mobile students into three 'tiers' on the basis of socioeconomic status. Unlike students in the 'top tier', those in the second and third tiers often base their decisions on a cost-benefit analysis, considering limited financial resources. As a result, their choices are typically confined to neighboring countries or low-cost destinations (Choudaha et al., 2012). In the case of foreign students in Kyrgyzstan, many come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and are academically less prepared, seeking affordable yet quality education. These students, however, play a crucial role in the country's internationalization, particularly in the expansion of English-language medical programs, such as those at Osh International Medical University (Osh International Medical University, 2024). This contributes to Kyrgyzstan's integration into the global educational framework, enhancing its prestige and global presence. The internationalization of local education also benefits faculty, offering both local and international staff the opportunity to engage with diverse academic environments.

Additionally, research suggests that students who choose to study in neighboring countries may not always be motivated primarily by the cost of education. Instead, they may engage in what is referred to as 'horizontal mobility', where there are minimal differences in academic quality between the host country and its home country (Teichler, 2017). This is exemplified by foreign students from neighboring Central Asian countries studying in Kyrgyzstan, where the academic standards may be comparable to those in their home countries.

## CONCLUSION

The largest groups of international students in Kyrgyzstan include students from India and Pakistan, who primarily come to study medicine. Additionally, students from other Central Asian countries, which share similar economic and developmental levels with Kyrgyzstan, are also part of this demographic. The prevalence of these international student groups raises essential questions about the quality of local universities and their level of internationalization.

Kyrgyzstan's higher education system, inherited from the Soviet era, is undergoing significant changes. However, it still lags in terms of global competitiveness, especially compared with universities in developed regions. The rapid pace of technological advancements, global economic shifts, and the increasing importance of international collaboration demand that universities undergo restructuring to meet new educational demands. The current educational system in Kyrgyzstan has yet to produce the necessary output in research and employability, which is further influenced by national economic conditions.

Therefore, local universities should strive to improve their competitiveness and internationalization. The education system needs to evolve, incorporating contemporary approaches to education, research, and global mobility to match the growing demands of the global knowledge economy. As Knight (2001) argues, higher education institutions today must adapt to the changing global context by focusing on the core functions of education, research, and internationalization.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**English-language and preparatory programs:** Kyrgyz universities could implement preparatory English language programs to overcome language barriers, attract more international students, and improve language proficiency, ensuring academic success and smoother integration.

**Enhancing university competitiveness:** To meet international standards, Kyrgyz universities—particularly those offering medical education—could update their curricula and teaching methods. This requires investing in faculty development and fostering international partnerships to enhance academic exchange and knowledge transfer.

**Increasing academic mobility and partnerships:** Kyrgyz universities could enhance academic mobility through exchange programs, joint research, and international curricula. Collaborations with leading global institutions would improve education quality and promote cross-cultural cooperation.

**National strategy for internationalization:** A national strategy could be developed to attract high-achieving international students, particularly from developed countries, by offering competitive programs and strengthening

bilateral agreements. This would improve education and research quality and enhance the global reputation of Kyrgyz universities.

**Political, economic, and academic dimensions of internationalization:**

Government policies should position Kyrgyzstan as an attractive destination for international students, enhancing its global educational standing and fostering a competitive academic environment.

**Note:** In the preparation of this manuscript, I did not use artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation.

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