

# Exploring the Lived Experiences of Indian Medical Students in Kazakhstan: Factors Influencing Study Abroad Decisions and Strategies for Intercultural Adaptation

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## Abstract

*This qualitative study examines the factors that influence Indian students to study medicine in Kazakhstan and the strategies they use to navigate the complex intercultural interactions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 Indian students pursuing medical degrees in Almaty and Semey. The study found that affordability, social networks, reputation of higher education institutions, and political climate were major factors influencing students' decision to study medicine in Kazakhstan. Coping strategies used by Indian students to adapt to the new academic and social environment included building communities within the international student body, while their interactions with the host community ranged from negative discriminatory treatment to positive meaningful relationships. The study highlights the need for policies and programs aimed at improving the international student experience in Kazakhstan and similar contexts.*

**Keywords:** cross-cultural exchange, cultural adaptation, higher education, Indian students, international students, MBBS in Kazakhstan, social integration

## I. INTRODUCTION

INTERNATIONAL student mobility is on the rise, with more and more students choosing to pursue their higher education abroad (OECD, 2017; Waters & Brooks, 2021). Kazakhstan, in particular, has become a popular destination for students from around the world, with 28,169 international students enrolled at 113 universities across the country (Astana Times, 2023). Among them are a significant number of Indian students, who make up a sizable proportion of the international student body in Kazakhstan. Approximately 7000 Indian students are currently enrolled in various medical institutions across the country (Embassy of India in Kazakhstan, n.d.).

Despite the growing number of Indian students studying medicine in Kazakhstan, there is a gap in the existing literature on the experiences of this population. Current information available about Indian students in Kazakhstan is limited to financial considerations that motivated their decision and their first impressions upon arrival (Mukhamediyarova, 2022; Jiyengulova,

2023). My study aims to fill this gap in the existing literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Indian students in Kazakhstan, with a focus on the challenges they face, as well as strategies they employ to navigate and adapt to their new environment.

What are the factors that influence Indian students to study medicine in Kazakhstan? How do Indian students navigate the complex intercultural interactions in their daily lives? What strategies do they use to manage the challenges they encounter in adapting to a new academic and social environment? With these questions in mind, this study aims to explore the experiences of Indian students studying medicine in Kazakhstan. Through a qualitative inquiry, data was collected from 12 Indian students enrolled at medical universities in Almaty and Semey. The findings reveal that financial incentives, academic reputation, social networks, and political climate are primary reasons for choosing Kazakhstan as a study destination. However, despite being satisfied with the quality of the academic programs,

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students face various challenges in day-to-day life, including language barriers, cultural differences, and discriminatory treatment. To overcome these challenges, students develop coping strategies, such as forming informal social support networks with seniors and fellow international students. Based on these findings, I found that fostering cross-cultural exchange is essential for facilitating the adaptation process of international students in Kazakhstan. By building bridges between international students and the local community, universities can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment that promotes intercultural understanding and learning.

This paper contains three sections. First, I review the literature on international student mobility and the experiences of international students. Next, I outline the methodology used in the study, including my sample selection and data collection. I then present my findings, organized around the themes of factors influencing Indian students' decision to study in Kazakhstan, daily lived experiences, and challenges faced by students in adapting to their new environments. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings and make recommendations for future research and policy.

This study makes an original contribution to the existing scholarly literature on international education by providing a nuanced understanding of the experiences of Indian medical students in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of giving voice to international students and viewing them as active agents in their adaptation process. The findings of this study have the potential to inform policy and practice in Kazakhstan and in other countries that host international students.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review, divided into four sections, provides a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of international student mobility (ISM) from different theoretical perspectives and geographical angles exploring dominant narratives, power dynamics, ethical dilemmas, and identifying gaps in the existing literature. The first section focuses on Bourdieusian analysis of East-to-West migration streams, highlighting the role of capital accumulation in shaping student mobility. The second section offers interAsian perspectives on the dynamics of compromise and complicity in ISM, challenging prevailing narratives of privilege and highlighting the diverse rationales underlying mobility beyond the global North and South binary. The third section examines the representation of international students in higher education and the ethical implications of such

representations. The final section identifies gaps in the current body of literature and outlines how the present study contributes to existing scholarship. Overall, this literature review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of international student mobility and its complex power dynamics.

### Dominant narratives in international student mobility: A Bourdieusian analysis of East-to-West migration streams

International student mobility has become an increasingly important phenomenon in the globalized world, with the dominant narrative focusing on the movement of students from East to West, from the developing world to the developed world. This narrative has been shaped in part by data collected by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which suggests that the majority of international students come from Asia and study in Western Europe, the UK, and North America (OECD, 2017; Waters & Brooks, 2021).

Previous research on international student mobility (ISM) has frequently employed Bourdieu's notion of "Forms of capital" to construe this type of mobility as a method of capital transformation utilized by affluent groups to perpetuate their societal privilege (Waters & Brooks, 2011). According to this perspective, internationally mobile students are often constructed as an elite category, using study abroad as a means of realizing the conversion between economic, social, and cultural capitals in order to ultimately reproduce class advantage.

Bourdieu's theory of capital accumulation is based on the idea that social life is constructed upon the accumulation of different forms of capital, including social, cultural, and economic capital. Social capital is formed through friendships and networks that can help individuals get a job down the line. Cultural capital comprises various components, including embodied cultural capital and institutionalized cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital encompasses a range of qualities and skills that individuals possess, such as linguistic competencies, a sense of humor, dress, and an understanding of nuances of language and culture in navigating interactions (Ong, 2006; Singh et al., 2007). In contrast, institutionalized cultural capital refers to more formal and recognized credentials in the cultural sphere, such as degrees obtained from prestigious universities, like the Ivy League or Oxbridge. Economic capital is the result of transforming the aforementioned social and cultural capitals into financial wealth, illustrating the interdependence of these capital forms.

International mobility for education is thus understood as a strategy for capital accumulation, with students intentionally engaging in international study to accumulate different types of capital. This perspective reinforces a rationalistic interpretation of student mobility, portraying educational mobility as a highly calculative investment behavior pursued by privileged individuals and families.

However, this dominant perspective has been criticized for overlooking the educational mobility of less privileged youths and assuming that mobility is overwhelmingly pursued by privileged individuals (Yang, 2018). Moreover, the few existing accounts of educational mobilities of less privileged youths have not looked beyond the developed West as mobility destinations, reinforcing a narrow understanding of international student mobility.

Geography is fundamental to understanding international student mobility. The dominant narrative on the internationalization of higher education supports student migration from less affluent countries to more developed ones, and the data collected by the OECD support this perspective (Waters & Brooks, 2011; Yang, 2019). However, this narrative can be problematic in reinforcing a binary understanding of the global North and South, overlooking the diversity of experiences and motivations that drive international student mobility, especially with the rise of intraregional student migration in Asia.

### Reconceptualizing international student mobility: InterAsian perspectives and the dynamics of compromise and complicity

International student mobility has experienced a change in its geographic patterns in the past few years. While the United Kingdom and the United States remain top destinations for international students, there has been a rise in intraregional mobility in Asian countries for higher education, especially in China, Singapore, and Malaysia (Waters & Brooks, 2011; Waters & Brooks, 2021). For instance, China has also emerged as a host country for international students, rather than just a sending country, ranking third as a host nation (Waters & Brooks, 2021).

According to Yang (2018), the logics of behavior and social interaction that underlie interAsian educational mobility, involving non-elite individuals and institutions, differ from the dominant perspective on capital accumulation. Yang's (2018) ethnographic research on Indian students enrolled in a Chinese medical university demonstrates how different actors, namely individuals, intermediary organizations, and institutions, em-

ploy strategies of compromise and complicity to attain their educational and social goals amid the challenges of limited resources and class disparities.

In the case of Indian students attending a medical university in China, Yang (2018) argues that the university compromised its admission standards to accept Indian students for the sake of tuition fee revenue and the supposed prestige of internationalization, resulting in compromised education quality. Meanwhile, Indian students also operated on a logic of compromise due to their socio-economic circumstances and exclusion from subsidized medical education in India. Complicity arises as both the university and students share an unspoken understanding of these compromises and choose to maintain collective silence in order to safeguard their interests and avoid potential disruptions in the pursuit of their educational or financial objectives. The compromise-complicity model contrasts with the theory of capital accumulation in elite-driven international student mobility, offering insights into navigating class disadvantage and resource inadequacy.

Yang's study challenges the prevailing image of privilege associated with international educational mobility. While it is still largely true that international students come from privileged backgrounds, recent research has shown that students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds and locations are gaining access to international student mobility (Yang, 2019). Thus, the logic and rationales of educational mobility are more varied, diffuse, and socially embedded than previously thought (Yang, 2018).

This shift in perspectives highlights the need to expand our understanding of international student mobility beyond the traditional East-to-West narrative. As more students gain access to international education, we need to explore the different logics of behavior and social interaction that drive educational mobility. By doing so, we can advance our theorization of educational mobility as a tool for social mobility and a catalyst for change.

Finally, while the model of compromise and complicity proposed by Yang (2018) provides a useful framework for understanding student motivations, the present study on Indian students in Kazakhstan suggests that it falls short in capturing the complexities of their lived experiences. The model of compromise and complicity focuses primarily on the institutional and individual motivations, yet it does not provide information on the broader social and cultural factors that shape the experiences of international students in their host country. It needs to be complemented by a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the students, in particular, day-to-day life, access to support

systems, and interactions with the host community.

## Ethical considerations in studying the experiences of international students

As international students leave their home countries to study abroad, they encounter various challenges and opportunities that profoundly shape their experiences. However, the narrative of higher education institutions in the English-speaking world often casts these students as mere “cash cows,” perceiving them as a source of tuition fee income (Baas, 2006; Robertson, 2011; Cantwell, 2015; Yang, 2019). This reductionist viewpoint oversimplifies their identities, undermining their agency and perspectives. It paints a circumscribed view of who international students are and what they expect from the host country and institution, framing their role in a transactional light and marginalizing their experiences.

In parallel, education scholarship has directed its focus towards issues arising from international students’ encounters with unfamiliar teaching and learning environments, as well as the broader socio-cultural landscapes within host-country contexts (Yang, 2019). This scholarship has highlighted the vulnerability of international students, which led to discussions about their security and well-being. Implicitly, the ethics and politics of intercultural encounters and adjustments are at stake because international students and their host communities are in asymmetrical relations of power and resources. Due to reasons such as their legal outsider status, information gap, communication difficulties, and cultural differences, internationally mobile students live what Marginson (2012) calls an “uncertain, vulnerable, and de-powered existence”. Therefore, recognizing and addressing this vulnerability becomes essential to cultivate a safe and supportive environment conducive to the holistic development of international students.

Furthermore, Ploner’s (2018) examination of academic hospitality unveils a spectrum of concrete forms that this concept can take, encompassing material, virtual, epistemological, linguistic, and touristic dimensions. Hospitality is a mode of relating between the host and the guest, where the host is assumed to be in a position of power, capable of giving or withdrawing it (Ploner, 2018). However, the guest-host relation in international student mobility need not adhere to this dichotomy. Ploner’s insights prompt a shift in perspective, advocating for a reciprocal relationship. Guests, upon receiving hospitality, have the agency to respond in kindness, reciprocating the goodwill. They can also extend hospitality by welcoming the host into their own communities and lifeworlds. This reciprocal dynamic, termed “dialogic mutuality” by Ata et al. (2018,

p.13) underscores the necessity of an expansive understanding of hospitality, particularly in the vulnerable positions international students may face.

A critical step in respecting and valuing international students is listening to their perspectives and examining their experiences. As Susan Robertson has written, “critical sociologists of education have been concerned with the way in which education –as an organized system of knowledge production and distribution– is potentially and paradoxically a force for individual and social transformation as well as also being a force for the production of social inequalities” (Robertson, 2005, p.137 cited in Waters & Brooks, 2012). This duality particularly resonates with the experiences of international students navigating higher education systems which can either empower or marginalize them. Therefore, to fully understand the study abroad experiences of international students, their voices need to be heard and their experiences studied.

## Identifying gaps and opportunities in the literature on international student mobility

My research on Indian students’ experiences in Kazakhstan contributes to the academic discussion on international student mobility in several ways. Firstly, it sheds light on a region that is underrepresented in the academic discourse of international student mobility and the internationalization of higher education. Central Asia, to this day, has been largely overlooked in this field, despite the growing number of international students in the region. My study fills this gap by providing insights into what international student mobility looks like in the context of Kazakhstan, including the problems that students face.

Secondly, my research contributes to understanding the adaptation of international students in Kazakhstan. As the number of foreign students in Kazakhstan increases, it is important to assess the extent to which they receive support and guidance to ease their adaptation process. This study provides insights into the types of support that are currently being offered and identifies any gaps in support that need to be addressed.

Lastly, this study benefits our understanding of student migration more generally. By focusing on internationally mobile Indian students in Kazakhstan, my research contributes to the growing body of knowledge that recognizes the differences within international student mobility and how these differences are potentially perpetuating social inequalities. As international student mobility diversifies, there is a need for more research that explores these differences and their implications for the social integration of international students

in their host countries. Overall, my research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of international student mobility and informs policies and practices that promote the well-being and success of international students in Kazakhstan and beyond.

### III. GATHERING THEIR STORIES: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

This study investigates the factors that influence Indian students to study medicine in Kazakhstan, their daily lived experiences, and the challenges they face in terms of adaptation. To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, qualitative methods were used, and 12 Indian students studying medicine in Semey and Almaty were interviewed.

Given the research questions, a qualitative research approach — interview methods in particular — was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The interview questions covered various aspects of the experiences of Indian students studying medicine in Kazakhstan. They began with questions about the students' background, such as where they were from and how they learned about the program. Then they explore why students chose to study in Kazakhstan, their expectations before arrival, and how their experiences compared to those expectations. The questions also cover challenges the students face on a daily basis, including navigating the university and social life, as well as how they spend their time outside of the classroom. The full interview guide is included in Appendix-A.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 12 Indian students who were currently enrolled at medical institutions in Kazakhstan and had been in the country for at least one academic year. Recruitment was done through online platforms such as social media and email, as well as through personal contacts. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants. In total, there were 7 female and 5 male participants who were equally distributed across two cities — Almaty and Semey. Semey is a smaller city in Eastern Kazakhstan with a population of 400,000 people, while Almaty is Kazakhstan's largest metropolis with a population of 1.8 million. The choice of cities was partly influenced by the snowball sampling technique, as the first respondents were from Semey and one of them introduced me to their contacts in Almaty, which then helped me access more students there. It is worth noting that one participant had studied in Almaty and then transferred to Semey. The age range of the respondents was between 20 and 22 years old, and they were from 2nd, 3rd, and 4th

years at university. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written consent before interviews.

Data for this study were collected through structured interviews that were conducted in English and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. A pre-designed interview guide was developed based on the research questions and literature review. The interviews were conducted via video-conferencing tools (Zoom, WhatsApp) to accommodate for the geographical distance between the researcher and the participants. Data collection took place in the months of January and February, 2023. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used in place of their real names in all transcripts and in this paper.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with grounded theory methodology (GTM). GTM enables researchers to produce brand-new theoretical insights and contributes to the creation of novel frameworks and detailed models without being constrained by pre-existing paradigms (Bryant, 2020). Interview codes, in the case of GTM, ought to be abstract to facilitate the process of conceptualization in developing a grounded theory. To ensure the validity of the study, the relevant literature was consulted twice: 1) at the beginning of the study to get familiar with the general area of interest and formulate interview questions, and 2) at the end of the study to juxtapose existing concepts with the findings.

The analysis process involved several stages, including coding, categorization, and theme identification. The following themes emerged from the interviews:

1. *Factors influencing the decision to study medicine in Kazakhstan*: this includes codes such as learning about medical programs in Kazakhstan, admissions process, and social network.
2. *Living in Kazakhstan*: this includes codes such as expectations before arrival, daily routine, housing, public spaces, linguistic landscape, cultural differences, new experiences, and weather.
3. *Social support*: this includes codes such as power of ties, immediate circle in Kazakhstan, support system, forging authentic relationships, and senior student support.
4. *Interactions with locals*: this includes codes such as student separation, studying in mixed groups, local students, superficial encounters, discrimination, and authentic relationships.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at New York University Abu Dhabi approved all recruitment, information, and interview materials used for this study, which fulfills the standards of human subjects protection. The study contributes to the academic discussion of the internationalization of higher education by examining the case of internationally mobile Indian students in Kazakhstan with a focus on their perspectives.

My personal position as a researcher has both strengths and limitations. Being an international student at NYU Abu Dhabi, I have personally experienced the challenges that come with adapting to a new environment, which has enabled me to establish a rapport with study participants and develop a deep understanding of their experiences. However, it is also important to recognize that my Kazakhstani identity may create certain biases or limitations in the data collection process. Specifically, migrant students may feel hesitant to share negative aspects of their experiences in Kazakhstan due to my national identity. Therefore, to minimize any potential biases, I have taken steps to ensure participant comfort throughout the study. Participants were informed about the importance of open sharing, reassured about the confidentiality of their responses, and briefed on the use of pseudonyms in interview transcripts and the final paper. This information was explicitly outlined in the consent form and reiterated at the beginning of each interview.

#### IV. FINDINGS

##### Deciding to go

##### Why Kazakhstan?

Deciding to pursue higher education abroad can be daunting, especially when it comes to choosing a destination. For Indian students looking to study medicine, Kazakhstan has emerged as an increasingly popular option (Economic Times, 2023).

During the interviews, participants were asked about their reasons for choosing Kazakhstan as a study destination, and their answers varied considerably. While some respondents mentioned the cost-effectiveness of pursuing a medical program in Kazakhstan, others followed in their siblings' footsteps. This suggests that the decision to study abroad is not straightforward and is influenced by multiple factors. Based on the interviews, it became apparent that affordability, social networks and connections, the reputation of higher education institutions, and the political climate were the main drivers behind students' decisions to study in Kazakhstan.

Financial incentives are a key consideration for Indian students looking to study abroad, and Kazakhstan offers affordable medical programs that are attractive to many. As one interviewee stated, "The cost of studying medicine in Kazakhstan is much cheaper than in India or other countries." This sentiment was echoed by several other interviewees who cited the cost-effectiveness of studying in Kazakhstan as a major factor in their decision-making process.

The influence of strong and weak social ties is another crucial factor that motivates Indian students to pursue medical studies in Kazakhstan. Personal connections with individuals who have studied in Kazakhstan and can offer guidance and assistance are invaluable, as evidenced by statements such as "My brother studied in Almaty, and he told me that medical study was good there", as well as:

"I was at school with my friend and hadn't even chosen university at the time. Then one day, different consultancy agents visited and told us about countries where we can study medicine. At that moment my friend mentioned that her brother studied in Kazakhstan, so I got interested, too."

*Kaira, 21 y.o., female, Almaty*

"I talked to doctors that work at top medical hospitals in India, and they told me that they studied here, so that's how I made my choice. I relied on their experiences more than on what consultancy agencies have told me. They managed to pass all their exams and clear the reentry exams too."

*Mariam, 20 y.o., female, Almaty*

"Actually, it was my father's idea. He knew someone whose child studied in Kazakhstan, so he convinced me to give it a try. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him."

*Meera, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

All of these examples highlight the important role that social connections play in the decision-making process of studying abroad and, particularly, in Kazakhstan.

The reputation of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan emerged as another significant factor for Indian students. They look for competitive and academically rigorous programs that will prepare them well for the National Medical Council exam, which is required for all students that want to practice medicine in India after obtaining their medical degrees abroad. For example, in her account above, Mariam mentions

that the practicing doctors she has talked to thought highly of medical programs in Kazakhstan. She also added:

"I was looking at medical programs in Russia and Ukraine too, but clinical exposure was best here in Almaty. Compared to other countries, the quality of education in Kazakhstan just seemed better."

*Mariam, 20 y.o., female, Almaty*

A similar sentiment was echoed by Yash who paid extra attention to facilities available to students:

"The medical university of Almaty was well-known. When we look at college, we also look at the facilities they provide, the condition of the country or of the university, we look at whether the university is reliable or not. We learned that this college was semi-governmental, and it was well-known, the studies were also good."

*Yash, 21 y.o., male, Almaty*

These accounts demonstrate the importance of the reputation and quality of education in Kazakhstan for Indian students. They are particularly interested in academically rigorous programs that will prepare them for the National Medical Council exam in India, as they plan to practice medicine there after completing their degree programs.

Finally, the political climate of Kazakhstan is another factor that influences Indian students to study medicine there. As a peaceful country in good diplomatic relations with India, Kazakhstan is seen as a safe and stable destination for Indian students. As one respondent noted:

"China was also an option for me. But then I felt that Kazakhstan was safer. For India and China, there are so many differences. When I considered studying in Ukraine, I learned about the war in 2014. Kazakhstan has peace with most of the countries around them. I don't think you're having any problems with other countries or that I will have to go back to my country because of differences."

*Aarya, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

According to Aarya's account, the peaceful and stable environment of Kazakhstan, as well as its good diplomatic relations with India, make it a favorable choice for Indian students.

In summary, the factors that influence Indian students' decisions to study medicine in Kazakhstan include financial incentives, the power of weak and strong social ties, reputation of Kazakhstani higher education institutions, and Kazakhstan's political climate. These findings are consistent with existing research on international students' decision-making, which emphasizes the importance of economic factors, social networks, institutional reputation, and safety in choosing study abroad destinations (Beech, 2014; Singh & Srivastava, 2018).

### Intermediary agencies

Intermediary agencies play an important role in facilitating the decision-making process for Indian students who study medicine in Kazakhstan. These mediators offer a range of services, including assistance with the application process, meeting students at the airport, and enrolling them in a hostel or dormitory. Many Indian students rely on intermediary agencies throughout their application process to medical universities in Kazakhstan. Arnav, a 20-year-old male student in Almaty, describes his experience in the following manner:

"Consultancy agencies are established businesses. They care about making money, they don't care about education. Some of the information they gave me about university in Almaty was not even true, but not everyone does the fact-checking. But because it is a business, people rely on it to do the application process. It is nearly impossible to do the application process to medical programs without using agents."

*Arnav, 20 y.o., male, Almaty*

Arnav's account highlights the dependency of Indian students on intermediary agencies during the admissions process. The students' reliance on these agencies may stem from their lack of familiarity with the education system in Kazakhstan and the challenges of navigating the application process.

The role of intermediary agencies in facilitating migration decisions has been widely studied. These agencies are often considered important actors in the migration industry, serving as mediators between migrants and the receiving country's institutions (Lindquist et al., 2012). Agents can establish a strategic presence in both the global and local context of student migration, positioning themselves as the key players in facilitating student mobility, from providing information about study abroad options to assisting with the application process and sorting out accommodation in the host

country (Collins, 2012). However, as these agencies are primarily profit-driven businesses, concerns about the quality and reliability of the information they provide have been a significant issue, extending beyond the borders of Kazakhstan (Huang et al., 2014).

Studies have shown that the information provided by intermediary agencies may not always be accurate, leading to misguided decision-making by students (Huang et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important to not only recognize the significant role played by intermediary agencies in the decision-making process of Indian students studying medicine in Kazakhstan, but also to critically evaluate their practices and ensure that students have made informed decisions based on accurate and truthful information. As illustrated in students' account above, one way Indian students have tried to manage this conundrum is through having conversations with their personal connections that have had the experience of studying in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, students who may not have such ties are at higher risk of being misguided into making a decision that is not in their best interest, which will in turn have a direct impact on their expectations and actual lived experiences upon their arrival to Kazakhstan.

## An immersive account of life in Kazakhstan

### Worries and wonders: Preconceptions and discoveries in Kazakhstan

The students had various expectations about Kazakhstan before arriving, including concerns about safety and language barriers, but the majority was pleasantly surprised by the country's beauty and relative ease of communication. They also had expectations about university, with some anticipating difficulty and language barriers but ultimately finding the workload challenging yet manageable.

One of the most common expectations among Indian students was related to the safety in Kazakhstan. As Nidhi, a 22-year-old female student, noted in her interview, her parents were worried about her safety before she left for Kazakhstan because "she's a girl." However, her brother assured her parents that Kazakhstan was a safe country, and Nidhi felt that Semey was a safe place after her arrival.

Another common expectation among Indian students was related to the language barrier. Almost all of the respondents mentioned that they expected most people in Kazakhstan to speak English, but faced a drawback in this regard. It is important to note that English is not the official language in Kazakhstan, and most of the population speaks Kazakh or Russian. Therefore,

some Indian students face difficulties in communicating with local people or reading signs in the local language, which will be addressed in the subsequent sections of the paper.

The expectations students had about university were varied. Some, like Yash, a 21-year-old male, anticipated that the university would be "difficult due to its fame and there would be a major language barrier with teachers who couldn't speak English well." However, upon the start of classes, Yash discovered that he could easily understand English and communicate with the teachers. Students that had family members and acquaintances who have studied in Kazakhstan, on the other hand, were warned about the need to study hard and stay on top of academics:

"My brother told me, 'You're choosing this university. That's great. But when you come here, you have to study really hard. Topics go according to schedule, so if you miss a single day, it's going to finish your career'. And he wasn't wrong, we have exams every week."

*Nidhi, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

As exemplified by student accounts, the expectations of students about university varied depending on their prior knowledge about the academic system in Kazakhstan. Yash's assumptions of language barriers turned out to be incorrect, while Nidhi's brother was correct in warning her about the rigorous academic schedule and the need to stay on top of studies.

Mariam, a 20-year-old female student, had a unique expectation that was not related to safety or language barriers:

"I never expected that Kazakhstan would be so beautiful. When I arrived, it was autumn. I could see all the leaves changing colors. That combined with the mountain view in Almaty was just gorgeous."

*Mariam, 20 y.o., female, Almaty*

Mariam's account suggests that some Indian students may have had limited knowledge about Kazakhstan before their arrival.

Overall, Indian students had various expectations about Kazakhstan and their university experience before arriving there. Safety and language barriers were common concerns, while others had more specific expectations about academic workload. However, as the students arrived in Kazakhstan and began their university experience, some of their expectations were challenged.



## Daily life: Routine, studying, and living arrangements

The life of Indian medical students in Kazakhstan is characterized by a demanding daily routine that requires a high level of dedication towards their academics. Their day usually starts early in the morning, with wake-up times ranging from 5 to 6 am, followed by studying and revising materials. Students typically commute to the university by taking public transport, such as buses, which can take up to an hour to reach their destinations.

Additionally, international students are required to live in dormitories, also called hostels, which can be a significant adjustment for students used to living with their families. These dormitories often have shared living spaces and require students to follow certain rules. Moreover, classes for international students are taught separately from local students, which can create additional challenges for students trying to adapt to a new academic and cultural environment.

All of the students interviewed noted that their classes start early in the morning at 8 am and last for three hours, with a one- or two-hour break in between for lunch. Students have an average of two to three classes per day. After classes, they return to their hostel and some students prepare their meals, as the food provided at the cafeteria is not satisfactory. Cooking can be a challenge for students as they have to cook everything on their own, and especially for those who are accustomed to spicy Indian food, which is not readily available in Kazakhstan.

In the evening, students spend their time revising and preparing for the next day's classes. They devote most of their time to studying to maintain good grades. Nevertheless, students make time to call their families on a regular basis. On the weekends, they also make sure to go out and explore the city.

The daily routine of Indian medical students in Kazakhstan is summarized in Table 1:

Time	Activity
5:00-6:00 am	Wake up, revise topics, breakfast
7:00-8:00 am	Take the bus to the university
8:00-11:00 am	Attend classes
11:00-1:00 pm	Break for meals
1:00-5:00 pm	Attend classes
5:00-6:00 pm	Come back to the hostel, prepare meals
6:00-8:00 pm	Study, revise, prepare for the next day's classes
8:00-10:00 pm	Spend time with family/friends, relax
10:00-12:00 am	Study, revise, prepare for exams/quizzes/assignments
12:00-6:00 am	Sleep

Table 1: Weekday routine of Indian students in Kazakhstan

In summary, the daily routine of Indian medical students in Kazakhstan is demanding, involving attending classes, studying, preparing meals, and performing daily chores. The cultural differences, particularly in food habits, can pose a challenge for some students. Despite these challenges, students have demonstrated different strategies to adapt to their new environment and make the most of their experience.

## Finding belonging in a foreign land

Moving to a new country with a different culture, language, and lifestyle can make one feel isolated and homesick. Finding a sense of belonging abroad becomes a crucial aspect of one's experience, which can impact academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being.

### *Navigating a new world: Support from senior students*

One of the most significant support systems that international students from India rely on while in Kazakhstan is their senior students. These senior students act as mentors and advisors, helping new students navigate the unfamiliar terrain of living and studying in a foreign country. In this context, informal gatherings with senior students play a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and support among international students.

When new international students arrive in Kazakhstan, they are often overwhelmed by the various challenges they face. From navigating the bureaucratic processes of getting their documents to making friends, the initial period can be daunting. Mariam shares her experience of arriving in Kazakhstan and meeting senior students at her university who supported her very well:

"When we arrived, the university officials helped us with our documents, and senior students helped us to get an Onay bus card<sup>1</sup> and to open a Kaspi Bank<sup>2</sup> account. They made us aware about the traffic rules, about the shops, how the bus system works, how to use the 2GIS navigation system, Yandex apps... everything."

*Mariam, 20 y.o., female, Almaty*

<sup>1</sup>Onay is an electronic payment card used for public transportation in Almaty.

<sup>2</sup>Kaspi Bank, also known as Kaspi.kz, is a commercial bank that provides a wide range of financial services to individuals and businesses in Kazakhstan.

In addition to practical advice on transportation and opening bank accounts, senior students provide invaluable support and guidance through informal gatherings.

“In our hostel, there are students from all five years. So when we come here for the first time, all of the seniors gather us and give us basic info. For example, ‘Don’t go outside too late at night’, ‘Don’t go alone, because you don’t know how to speak the language’ and things like that. I think it’s good when we find some seniors who are from nearby regions in India. I have a senior at my hostel who’s from the same city I am from. That helps a lot because I can ask him anything about the city, about the studies, because there is that sense of familiarity. Sometimes people think that if they’re our seniors, we have to call them ‘boss’ or something. Actually, it’s not like that at all. They are like our brothers. And it’s good.”

*Krish, 21 y.o., male, Almaty*

Krish’s interview excerpt highlights that informal get-togethers with senior students offer an opportunity for the seniors to give advice and assistance on various aspects of student life, such as academics, socialization, and adaptation. These gatherings offer a chance for newly arrived students to establish connections with their seniors and inquire about their experiences in Kazakhstan. The significance of such gatherings cannot be emphasized enough, as they provide a sense of community and belonging, which is particularly vital for students who are far from home and may experience isolation and homesickness.

While it is undoubtedly beneficial for Indian students to have a support system provided by their seniors, there are also potential drawbacks for relying on them too heavily. Seniors may not always be available to offer guidance, and their perspectives may not always be representative of the broader student population, as they only speak from their own experience. Additionally, relying too much on senior students can lead to a lack of independence among new students, preventing them from fully immersing themselves in the new culture and developing their own support networks. Therefore, it is crucial that universities also provide structured support systems and resources to complement the informal mentoring and advice facilitated by senior students. This will help ensure that international students have access to a range of support options and are empowered to make informed decisions

about their education and well-being while studying in Kazakhstan.

Overall, informal gatherings with senior students play a vital role in supporting Indian students in Kazakhstan. By fostering a sense of community and belonging, these relationships help international students from India feel more comfortable and supported during their studies.

### *Bonds across borders: International student cloisters*

International students in Kazakhstan often form close bonds with each other due to their shared experiences and physical proximity. Students live in dormitories designed specifically for international students, which enables them to interact with each other frequently. Additionally, their shared status as foreigners in a new country means that they often have similar experiences and can bond over these.

During the interviews, it became clear that having a support system while studying abroad is crucial. For the vast majority of respondents, their immediate circle of friends in Kazakhstan is often made up of their fellow international peers. As Anika, a 22-year-old female student in Semey, points out, there is a common misconception that Indians and Pakistanis do not interact well. However, she is best friends with a Pakistani student in her class:

“People here tend to think that Indians and Pakistani don’t interact well and they get so surprised when they see us together. Because usually there are disputes between our countries. We have our classes together, and I usually sit next to her. Once a professor asked ‘Don’t you fight?’ I had to explain that once we came here, there is no difference between countries. We’re all just international students and we need to support each other. It’s a very big misconception.”

*Anika, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

Anika’s account serves as a testament to the transformation that can occur when individuals from different national backgrounds come together in a foreign setting. In the context of international education, it suggests that the commonality of being an international student often transcends the historical tensions and fosters strong bonds of friendship and support.

While for some students studying abroad has provided an opportunity to challenge their conventional beliefs about international tensions and engage in cross-cultural exchange, for others studying in Kazakhstan, the experience has provided them with greater freedom

in dating and socializing.

“Dating life here is very different. People here can date openly, but in India, it’s not like that. In India, if you date someone, it’s a top secret and our parents can’t know about it. I am also in a relationship. He’s Indian. He graduated last year, so we’re now in a long-distance relationship.”

*Kaira, 21 y.o., female, Almaty*

In this account, Kaira highlights the differences in dating culture between India and Kazakhstan. She points out that in India, dating is often kept a secret, whereas in Kazakhstan, students can openly date without fear of judgment.

Kaira also mentions that in India, there are more boundaries between males and females, and close friendships between opposite sexes are not common. However, in Kazakhstan, these boundaries are more relaxed:

“Another thing that I noticed here is that there is no difference between males and females. You can be friendly with everyone. In India, we have more boundaries. I didn’t have any close friendships with boys before. At first, I was so surprised. In India, even if we have co-education, we would have separate boys and girls sections. From our schooling system we learn that boys don’t talk to girls. But here, it’s different. I became more open-minded and became friends with guys.”

*Kaira, 21 y.o., female, Almaty*

Anika and Kaira’s accounts reveal how studying in Kazakhstan can enable students to form diverse and supportive communities transcending cultural and national boundaries. By defying stereotypes and experiencing new freedoms and norms, students can form meaningful cross-cultural friendships with their fellow international peers and have experiences that they would not have had otherwise.

However, some students, like Arnav, find themselves in a different situation. Arnav came to Kazakhstan with the expectation of gaining international exposure and meeting local people. Instead, he found himself living in separate dormitories with Indian students and having limited opportunities to interact with locals. As he explains:

“It feels like I haven’t left India. I’m still surrounded by Indians. The only difference

is that I don’t live with my family anymore. In my classes, we have students from India and Pakistan. In my hostel, I have Indians living on my floor.”

*Arnav, 20 y.o., male, Almaty*

Arnav believes that being isolated in separate dormitories is hindering his ability to fully experience the country’s culture and customs. His experience highlights the unexpected challenges of studying abroad and the importance of creating opportunities for cultural exchange.

The accounts of Anika, Kaira, and Arnav shed light on the complex and varied experiences of Indian students studying in Kazakhstan. While many students form close bonds with their fellow international peers and experience newfound freedoms and cross-cultural exchange, some students find themselves isolated and limited in their ability to fully immerse themselves in the host culture. These accounts demonstrate the importance of having a support system while studying abroad and creating opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.

### *A tale of two cities: Regional variations in students’ perceptions*

As foreigners in a new country, many international students are eager to learn more about their new surroundings. Exploring the city together is an essential part of strengthening bonds between international students, which can make the experience more enjoyable and less intimidating.

When asked about leisure activities, many students mentioned public spaces. They offer a neutral ground for students to explore the city, study for exams, or simply have casual conversations. Students reported that public spaces like cafes, shopping centers, and parks offer a welcome break from the rigors of academic life and allow them to explore their new surroundings with others.

“My friends and I, we just go to cafes to prepare for classes and exams together. And sometimes we just have conversations, talk about what is happening and all that stuff. We do our girly conversations, too.

*What do you mean by girly?*

\*Respondent laughs\*. Like...other girls or like, how should we dress up? We say things like ‘We should go to other cafes, take pictures, and update our social media.’

Appearance or relationship with guys and this kind of stuff.”

*Jaya, 21 y.o., female, Semey*

This example suggests that Indian students in Semey often spend their free time socializing with friends, particularly in cafes where they can study together and talk. The example also shows that some of these conversations revolve around topics that might be considered stereotypically “girly,” such as appearances and relationships. Overall, Jaya’s account suggests that Indian students in Semey value socializing and maintaining relationships with their peers, both in-person and online.

In addition to strengthening relationships with friends, students also explore the local food scene. This illustrates that Indian students in Semey are not just focused on their academic studies, but are also making an effort to immerse themselves in the local culture and community:

“There’s this restaurant near Central Park called *Terrasa*. Then *Aura*, *Tyubetey*, and *Pepperoni*.<sup>3</sup> I’ve been to many places, but I am blanking right now on the names. I do have a list with my friend. I wanted to explore Semey, so we created a list of all the places we want to go to.”

*Jaya, 21 y.o., female, Semey*

It is also interesting to note that the students engage in different activities depending on the season. In the excerpt below Nidhi shares her experience of celebrating winter holidays in Semey:

“This Christmas I went to the Central Square, it was so beautiful with all the decorations. First, I went to Church because I’m Christian. It was very late. We arrived at almost closing time. We went in and prayed. I’m a protestant. It was my first time going to Orthodox church here, the blue one by the bridge. The mass here is very different. They do prayers in Russian, but it’s okay. Then one of my friends mentioned that the decorations at the Central Square are so pretty, and we went there. It was so cold and we couldn’t take pictures. We wore thin jackets.”

*Nidhi, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

Nidhi’s visit to the Church and Central Square to see the Christmas decorations with her friends highlights the importance of social connection and shared experiences during the holiday season. The fact that they were not able to take pictures due to the cold weather shows that students in Semey may have to adapt to different weather conditions compared to what they are used to in their home countries. Overall, this excerpt provides insights into the religious practices and social connections that Indian students in Semey experience.

Similarly, Indian students studying in Almaty also take advantage of what the place has to offer:

“Almaty is a great city. We can go anywhere. There are many good malls and parks. Central Park is great, for starters. There’s a lake there, too. The scenery there is so beautiful. And Zenkov Cathedral Church, that’s good. And on weekends, if we’re free, we go to *Almaarasan*.<sup>4</sup> There’s a station nearby. The scenery is so amazing there. *Shymbulak*<sup>5</sup> is my favorite place to go, because the scenery is good.”

*Yash, 21 y.o., male, Almaty*

It is evident that Indian students in Semey and Almaty share a love for exploring their new surroundings and immersing themselves in the local culture. Nevertheless, there are notable differences between the experiences of students in the two cities. For example, as Jaya mentions, Almaty is a more developed city compared to Semey:

“I’ve been to Almaty with my friend. It’s a whole different vibe. Almaty is very beautiful. It’s more developed compared to Semey, but I think Semey is safer. Semey feels like home now.

*You said that Almaty has a different vibe. What is the vibe?*

I don’t know how to say it, but there’s something about it. You can enjoy Almaty. It’s a city vibe. Semey is more countryside. Semey is more like... how to say it... For your enjoyment, there aren’t many places. But in Almaty, there are so many places, so many international people that you will meet. People there know English better.”

*Jaya, 21 y.o., female, Semey*

<sup>3</sup>*Terrasa*, *Aura*, *Tyubetey* and *Pepperoni* are the names of the restaurants and cafes located in Semey city center.

<sup>4</sup>*Almaarasan* is a picturesque gorge near Almaty, located on the northern spur of Ile Alatau mountains. It is a popular destination for hiking, picnics, and different wellness programs.

<sup>5</sup>*Shymbulak*, also known as Chimbulak, is a popular mountain resort located near Almaty

While Semey may be perceived as safer by some, Almaty is more developed and offers a wider range of leisure activities and places to visit, attracting more international visitors. A similar sentiment was shared by Meera, a 22-year-old female student who transferred from Almaty to Semey in her third year of medical program. Meera also mentioned that she finds Semey more insular and lacking in terms of things to do.

Although Meera's perspective is just one example, one can gain a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each city, which can be useful for future students considering studying in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Meera's experience serves as a reminder that each student's experience is unique and that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions when it comes to choosing a university or city to study in.

Overall, Indian students in both cities share a love for exploring their new surroundings and immersing themselves in the local culture. They do so in different ways due to the differences in the cities' development levels and amenities. Despite those differences, Indian students foster connections they developed with their peers by immersing themselves in and exploring public spaces, ultimately enhancing the sense of community and belonging.

### Building and burning bridges: Interactions with the host community

In the previous sections, I explored the daily routine and living arrangements of Indian medical students in Kazakhstan, as well as their efforts to find a sense of belonging through support from senior students and bonding with international students. It is important to also explore their experiences of interacting with the host community. As these students are living in a foreign country, it is inevitable that they will encounter locals and have to interact with them in various ways. In this section, I will delve into the experiences of Indian medical students as they navigate through the linguistic landscape and interactions, both positive and negative, with locals in Kazakhstan.

Indian students' interaction with the host community can be seen on a continuum:

Negative experiences  
of discriminatory  
treatment

Superficial encounters  
with strangers

Positive experiences of  
forming meaningful  
connections

Figure 1: Indian students' interactions with the host community

At one end of the continuum are negative experiences of discriminatory treatment by locals, which can include things like racist remarks or discriminatory actions. These types of interactions can be hurtful and

challenging for international students, and they may feel isolated and unwelcome as a result. Moving along the continuum, the center can be represented by superficial encounters with strangers on the streets, such as brief conversations with shop assistants or taxi drivers. These interactions are often limited to basic exchanges and do not necessarily involve any deeper connection or relationship-building. At the other end of the continuum are meaningful connections with local students, which involve more in-depth conversations and opportunities for relationship-building. These types of interactions are often facilitated by shared interests or experiences, such as studying in the same program. While these interactions may be less common than superficial encounters, they can be more fulfilling and rewarding for international students. Before discussing nuances of each type of interaction, it is important to clarify how Indian students navigate through the linguistic landscape.

### Breaking the language barrier: Communication through Google Translate

The linguistic landscape plays a crucial role in the daily lives of international students. Language barriers can create communication challenges, and this can be an obstacle for students adapting to a new country (Malau-Aduli, 2011). In the case of Indian students in Kazakhstan, language barriers are not considered a major issue, but it is still a challenge for them to communicate with locals who do not speak English. As mentioned earlier, upon their arrival, students were surprised by the fact that the majority of locals had a very poor command of English. In this section, I will discuss the strategies they use to overcome language barriers.

All international students at Kazakhstani universities have to take language courses during their first and second years. Later on, if they wish, they may continue studying either Kazakh or Russian. All of the respondents noted the difficulty of learning Kazakh or Russian, since they use Cyrillic alphabet. Furthermore, the language learning process for upper class students currently in their fourth and fifth years of the medical program has been significantly hindered by remote classes during the pandemic. One of the respondents from Semey noted:

"Luckily, my university teaches Russian. But you know, you cannot learn a language at the snap of a finger, it takes time. I felt more comfortable at the end of my first year communicating in Russian, but then COVID came and I went back to India. So I came back to Kazakhstan in my third year, but

since I stayed at home, I didn't have enough time to learn Russian. I can manage somehow, I can survive. And you know, when I got back to Kazakhstan after two years of online classes, I even forgot how to take the bus here."

*Aarya, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

Indeed, Aarya's experience illustrates the difficulties and importance of learning the basics of local languages. While students may easily re-learn how to use public transportation, maintaining language proficiency is not an easy task. This is especially evident from Aarya saying that, although she has not mastered the Russian language, she knows just enough so she "can survive."

It is also interesting to observe how Indian students view the language barrier as a temporary challenge until they find ways to overcome it.

"Language barrier is an issue the first time, like, how do we order things? How do you say to the waiter that we need that? How we translate the menu. That's like, a one or two time problem. When we get used to it, it's normal."

*Kaira, 21 y.o., female, Almaty*

Kaira's sentiment is echoed by other Indian students that rely on Google Translate:

"You know, if I have a problem in ordering, I'll just translate and show it to the waiters, and I'm sure that they will understand it. Google Translate is a great help."

*Devaki, 21 y.o., female, Almaty*

"A lot of times we go to *Zhansaya*<sup>6</sup> for shopping. I actually went last week. Shop assistants are so nice. When they see us, they say 'These are *inostrannye* ["foreign" in Russian] students' and take out Google Translate."

*Nidhi, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

In the quotes provided, students mention using Google Translate as a great help in communicating with locals. This is not surprising, as technology has made communication easier and more accessible. With the help of Google Translate, students can translate signs, menus, and other texts, making it easier for them to navigate their surroundings. However, in some cases,

instead of relying on modern technology, some students prefer to avoid situations which may involve interacting with locals that do not speak English:

"So I don't go to bazaars, because if you're going to bazaars, you have to communicate. It is a problem, because if I cannot communicate properly, I can't shop properly. I just search on Instagram before going and then I have my local friend, she helps me a lot. She translates everything and if I really want to buy something, she just comes with me and we go together."

*Jaya, 21 y.o., female, Semey*

"When shopping, I prefer big stores like *Magnum*<sup>7</sup>, so we don't need to communicate. We can pick up anything we need, put it in our cart and go pay. There is very little conversation. The only thing they speak to us like '*Paket nado?*' ["Do you need a bag?" in Russian] and '*Oplata*' ["payment" in Russian]."

*Yash, 21 y.o., male, Almaty*

While some students rely on their local friends or social media to overcome language barriers while shopping or interacting with locals, others choose to avoid such situations altogether and stick to big stores where communication is minimal. This may mean missing out on some experiences, such as shopping in traditional bazaars, but for these students, it is a trade-off they are willing to make to avoid the discomfort of language barriers (Trentman, 2013; Wang & Hannes, 2014; Wilczewski & Alon, 2022). Interactions Indian students have with locals are multi-faceted and will be explored in the next section.

### *Shallow waters: Superficial encounters on the streets*

As mentioned earlier, one way to describe Indian students' interactions with the host community is by viewing them on a continuum (Figure 1). The center of the continuum is represented by superficial encounters with strangers on the street, such as brief conversations with shop assistants or taxi drivers. These interactions are often limited to basic exchanges and do not necessarily involve any deeper relationship-building.

"People are very welcoming. The way they speak, they get so excited. Sometimes it

<sup>6</sup>*Zhansaya* is one of the main bazaars, souq-like marketplace in Semey.

<sup>7</sup>*Magnum* is a grocery store chain in Kazakhstan.

<sup>8</sup>*Anandi* is the name of the main character from an Indian soap opera *Balika Vadhu* which aired in Kazakhstan in the 2010s.

happened that people just started calling me *Anandi*<sup>8</sup> on the street. I was so surprised that everyone in Kazakhstan knew about the show or the movie *Seeta and Geeta*.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes even with my professor, when we are having conversations outside the class, she would ask me if I know or watched *Seeta and Geeta* or *Anandi*. I think it's pretty cute. And it's very sweet of them that they appreciate the films. More often, we start conversations based on those movies and then move on with our days."

*Jaya, 21 y.o., female, Semey*

From Jaya's statement, we can see that the familiarity of locals in Semey with Indian culture stems from Bollywood movies and Indian soap operas, which may perpetuate stereotypes and homogenize Indian culture in the eyes of the host community. Nevertheless, Jaya has a positive outlook and appreciation for people's enthusiasm in approaching her and her culture.

Anika's account of her experiences in Semey also adds to the discussion of Indian students' interactions with the host community, which Jaya mentioned earlier:

"Most of the times when we go out to cafes or shopping, there are always people that would like to interact with us. They want to test their English skills, and kids will say just 'Hi' or 'Hello.'. Recently I met a girl and she wanted to talk to us really badly. That was at LC Waikiki. We said 'Hello, how are you?' and she was so cute, and said 'Hi, how are you?'. Normally we don't get that response here, so we were so pleased."

*Anika, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

Anika's experience highlights the curiosity and interest of locals in Semey to interact with foreigners, particularly to practice their English language skills. Additionally, the fact that Anika was surprised by the girl's response suggests that such positive encounters with locals are not common, indicating that interactions with the host community may be somewhat limited for Indian students in Semey.

Anika's most recent encounter with a taxi driver sheds light on the language barrier that international students may face. Despite the curiosity and interest of locals to communicate with foreigners, language can be a significant hurdle (Sawir et al., 2012). As Anika explains, one-word answers are often the only way to respond to questions asked in Russian. Nevertheless,

some locals may still attempt to engage in conversation, as Anika describes in her account of the taxi ride:

"Just today the taxi driver asked me 'Do you know Russian?' and I said *Chut-chut* ["a little bit" in Russian]. And he said 'I know English *chut-chut* and then we had a conversation. 'Where are you from? What's your age? How many years do you study here?' Those are the questions they usually ask. They ask them in Russian and I can understand basic Russian, but I can't reply. If he asks where I am from, I just say 'India'. There's nothing more to say. One word answers usually."

*Anika, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

In their brief exchange, the driver inquired about Anika's origin, age, and the duration of her studies in Kazakhstan. These questions were presented in Russian, and while Anika had a basic understanding of the language, her ability to respond was limited to simple one-word answers.

While the curiosity of the local population is evident in both Jaya's and Anika's accounts, the language barrier often restricts the depth of engagement. These challenges not only influence the way Indian students respond, but also impact their overall experience in a foreign land, where even the basic interactions can serve as a reminder of the linguistic divide.

From a different perspective, Manaav, a 21-year-old male student in Almaty, shares a contrasting experience from Indian students in Semey. While Indian students in Semey may face positive, yet surface-level interactions with the locals, Manaav describes a different scenario in Almaty where the locals are more accustomed to seeing foreigners:

"Actually, in India, whenever we see foreigners, we are too excited. We like to see people who are different from us. But here, people's reaction to foreigners is like it's normal. They're excited to know where we are from, and that's it. We have way less foreigners in India, but here it's normal because there are many Indian students in Almaty. It's also good because they don't give us strange, different reactions. They treat us like normal people, and this feels good."

*Manaav, 21 y.o., male, Almaty*

According to Manaav, in Almaty, people are used to seeing foreigners, particularly Indian students, and therefore their reaction is more subdued. This is perceived as

<sup>9</sup>*Seeta and Geeta* is a 1972 Indian Hindi-language comedy-drama film.

a positive thing by Manaav, as it makes him feel more accepted.

Overall, Indian students' experiences of interacting with strangers can vary depending on their location in Kazakhstan, with those in Almaty facing a more normalized and accepting reaction from locals, in contrast to those in Semey who may have limited yet positive encounters with the host community. In general, as these interactions are limited and involve only surface-level questions that require one-word answers, they are considered superficial. Some of these students' experiences extend beyond the shallow waters, as they encounter more profound troubles.

### *Crossing lines: Policing boundaries, microaggression, and discrimination*

While superficial encounters with locals stand at a center of the continuum (Figure 1), at the far left end of the continuum are negative experiences of discriminatory treatment by locals, which can include things like racist remarks or discriminatory actions. Such encounters are emotionally distressing, fostering the feelings of isolation and unwelcomeness for international students.

For international students in Almaty, discriminatory treatment by locals is not uncommon. Two students shared their experiences of having their personal space violated in public spaces, with locals walking by and striking their shoulders without any provocation:

"There are always one or two people who are rude. We can find them in any country, not just in Kazakhstan. But what happens here is - we're standing on a street or walking, and then there is one or two people, they just walk by us, striking shoulders. Even if there's a path aside, they just go like that.

*Does it happen very often?*

Not very often. It usually happens once or twice a week. Our seniors have advised us — if they do that, it's okay, let them do it, don't go answer them or anything, just let it go."

*Yash, 21 y.o., male, Almaty*

This excerpt highlights the prevalence of microaggressions and the impact they can have on international students. Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional forms of discrimination that can include verbal slights, gestures, and behaviors that communicate negative or derogatory attitudes towards members of a

marginalized group (Nair et al., 2019). While each individual act of microaggression may seem minor, the cumulative effect of repeated experiences can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and stress. The advice given by seniors to "just let it go" highlights the normalization of discriminatory behavior towards international students and the lack of support or resources available to address these issues. The advice to ignore such behavior stems from a fear of escalating the situation or further exacerbating tensions. This can contribute to a sense of powerlessness and a feeling that international students must simply tolerate the mistreatment to adapt to their new surroundings.

The account of discriminatory behavior towards Indian students in Almaty, Kazakhstan is not limited to microaggressions such as personal space violations, as one respondent shares a particularly disturbing incident that occurred while he was out at a club:

"I went to a club once and started dancing with a Kazakh girl. She seemed to be interested. Then a few minutes later another guy came up to me and hit me, and I fell. He did not speak English, but he pointed at the girl, looked at me, and said: 'No dance'. He looked very angry. That was a local guy. He wasn't even with her."

*Arnav, 20 y.o., male, Almaty*

This account provides evidence that discriminatory behavior towards Indian students in Almaty can extend beyond microaggressions and verbal slights to include physical violence. It also illustrates how this discrimination can be expressed through overt aggression. The fact that the attacker was not even associated with the Kazakh girl in question could suggest that the incident was motivated by prejudice, rather than any particular personal dispute. When asked whether such encounter has happened once or multiple times, Arnav added:

"I've seen the look multiple times, but it only happened once. And I've heard of many incidents happening to other international students, but that doesn't make us scared. But yes, I did notice the difference between local guys and girls. Girls tend to be more friendly compared to guys. Girls are more open to conversation, and guys are more reserved and usually approach us with suspicion. In general, I think people are not bad here, and I feel safe when I go out even late at night."

*Arnav, 20 y.o., male, Almaty*



The experiences shared by Indian students in Almaty highlight the prevalence of discriminatory behavior towards them. From microaggressions like personal space violations to overt physical violence, these students are subjected to a range of negative experiences. The normalization of such behavior, as seen in the advice given by seniors to “just let it go”, underscores the lack of support and resources available to international students in addressing these issues. It is important to recognize and address such discriminatory behavior, not only to improve the experiences of Indian students but also to create a more inclusive and welcoming community for all.

While discriminatory behavior towards Indian students in Almaty is, unfortunately, prevalent, it is worth noting that not all interactions with locals are negatively tinted. As such, at the other end of the continuum of interactions are positive experiences of forming meaningful connections with local students, which can help Indian students feel more welcomed and included in their new community. In the next subsection, I will explore the case of having mixed classes as a strategy to forge these authentic relationships with local students.

### *Forging authentic relationships: Connecting with local students*

The experiences and perceptions of Indian students studying with local students vary depending on the region and university. In Kazakhstan, international students often study in a group with other international students due to the language of instruction being English. However, in Semey, during the academic year 2021-2022, third-year international students were mixed with local students.

Nidhi shared her experiences of being in a mixed group and how it positively influenced her academic journey:

“Last year, it was me and two other international students in a group with locals. This year, I am back in a group with international students only. When we were in a group with locals, there were moments when teachers would start speaking in Russian, and students helped us translate everything. We used to feel so special. I liked it a lot when we were in a mixed group. When we said we wanted to go somewhere, they would recommend us places. They used to give us guidance for everything.”

*Nidhi, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

Nidhi’s account shows how connecting with local students can be helpful in navigating the academic environment. In addition to the benefits of connecting with local students in an academic setting, as Nidhi described, there are also cultural experiences to be gained outside the classroom. For example, Nidhi recounts her first time visiting a local’s house, which allowed her to try new foods and gain a better understanding of Kazakh culture:

“Last year, Aidana invited us to her house for New Year’s. That was the first time I tried horse meat. We went to her house, and she cooked so many different dishes. I liked the salads too, *Olivier*<sup>10</sup> especially. I got accustomed to putting mayo in salads. Also, that was the first time I visited a local’s house. Our groupmates were so nice, honestly. There was also this guy, Daryn, he would call us all his brothers.”

*Nidhi, 22 y.o., female, Semey*

From Nidhi’s account, we can infer that cultural exchange has a positive impact on the international student experience. By visiting a local’s house, Nidhi was able to taste traditional food and learn about the customs and practices of Kazakhstan. This experience helped her become more comfortable with the local culture and people. Additionally, Nidhi’s positive interactions with her group mates, including being called “brother” in an endearing, friendly manner by a local student, illustrates the potential for building strong and supportive relationships between international and local students. These connections can be invaluable for international students in navigating the challenges of studying abroad and creating a sense of belonging in a new environment.

Taking into account that having a mixed group of local and international students was a one-time occurrence in Semey during the academic year of 2021-2022, it is safe to say that in general, international students in Kazakhstan have limited interactions with local students. As noted by Yash, it is difficult to meet local students given the different languages of instruction:

“I don’t interact with the local students because they have different courses. We just study with the international students only. It would be good if local students and international students were combined. All the local students are in the same group. They

<sup>10</sup>*Olivier*, sometimes also called “Russian potato salad”, is a traditional salad dish popular in post-Soviet countries and usually prepared for New Year’s celebration.

don't study in English. The English course is only for international students."

*Yash, 21 y.o., male, Almaty*

Despite limited opportunities for international and local students to interact, some Indian students like Mariam have had positive experiences when they crossed paths with local students:

"When I go to the university library, I see so many local students there. They seem hard-working. I know a few people among the local students. Usually our schedules are very different, so it's hard to meet them. But when we interact, they are so friendly and helpful."

*Mariam, 20 y.o., female, Almaty*

Mariam's account suggests that there is still a lack of opportunities for international and local students to interact, but when they do, the experience can be positive and rewarding.

Overall, Indian students in Kazakhstan have varying experiences and perceptions when it comes to interacting with local students. Nidhi's positive experience of being in a mixed group with local students highlights the benefits of connecting with locals in navigating the academic environment and gaining cultural experiences. This positive interaction also emphasizes the importance of international and local students studying together. A study by Yamada et al. (2014) on the psychological distress and academic self-perception among international medical students found that peer-friend social support had a buffering effect on the stress that medical students experience. In other words, promoting peer relationships in medical schools can be crucial in protecting students from psychological distress and poor academic performance.

Mixing local and international students in the classroom can provide opportunities for cross-cultural communication and help students develop a better understanding of different perspectives (Yamada et al., 2014). As such, connecting with local students is crucial for international students to forge authentic relationships. Therefore, universities should consider the social aspects of student programs and provide opportunities for cross-cultural communication and the development of peer relationships among local and international students.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the factors that influence Indian students to study medicine in Kazakhstan and the strategies they use to navigate complex intercultural interactions. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews with 12 students pursuing medical degrees in Almaty and Semey, several key findings emerged.

First, the study found that the affordability and the power of social networks were major factors that influenced Indian students to choose Kazakhstan as their study destination. Additionally, the reputation of the higher education institutions alongside the political climate in the country played a significant role in the decision-making process when compared to other countries in the region.

Secondly, the study revealed that Indian students face various challenges in adapting to the new academic and social environment. To manage these challenges, students have developed a variety of coping strategies that include building communities from within with the assistance of their senior students and fellow international peers. In a way, such coping strategies contributed to a cloistered lifestyle, given that they live in separate dormitories for international students and have their classes taught separately from local students.

Moreover, this study put forth a novel finding that the nature of Indian students' interactions with the host community in Kazakhstan varies from negative experiences of discriminatory treatment to positive experiences of developing meaningful relationships with local students, with superficial encounters with strangers in-between. Ethically, the study of lived experiences of students provides a unique perspective that contributes to the literature on international student experiences in new and emerging geographies.

Despite the insightful findings and contributions of this study, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One limitation of this study is the small sample size, which consisted of only 12 students. The use of the snowball sampling method also limits the generalizability of the results, since the participants were volunteers and not randomly selected from the entire Indian student population in Kazakhstan. Therefore, these limitations need to be taken into account when interpreting and applying this study's findings in other contexts. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample size to increase the generalizability of the results. Additionally, alternative sampling methods, such as stratified or cluster sampling, could be used to increase the representativeness of the sample.

Overall, this study provides insights into the factors that influence Indian students' decision to study

medicine in Kazakhstan and the challenges they face while adapting to a new environment. These findings have important implications for policies and programs aimed at improving the international student experience in Kazakhstan and similar contexts. Based on these results, institutions could consider implementing the following policy initiatives to enhance the experience of international students:

1. *Implement cultural exchange programs and events:* Universities can organize various cultural exchange programs and events that promote social interactions between international and local students. These events could include cultural fairs, food festivals, and other social gatherings that provide opportunities for students to interact with one another. The aim of such programs is to promote intercultural understanding, reduce a sense of isolation, and create a sense of community among university students.
2. *Develop mentorship programs:* Universities can create mentorship programs whereby each international student would be paired with a local student, who can act as their guide and global buddy. The aim of this program is to provide a platform for international students to gain assistance with navigating the academic and social environments, and gain insights into the local culture. It would complement the unofficial gatherings facilitated by senior students.
3. *Develop anti-discrimination policies and provide counseling services:* Universities should develop and implement policies that prohibit any type of discriminatory behavior towards international students and promote diversity and inclusion. Additionally, institutions should provide counseling services that cater towards the unique challenges faced by international students, such as cultural shock, homesickness, language barriers, microaggressions, and discriminatory treatment. These services should be easily accessible and offer confidential support to students.

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the complex intercultural experiences of Indian students studying medicine in Kazakhstan. The findings underscore the need for institutions to create an inclusive and supportive environment for international students, including facilitating programs that promote cross-cultural exchange. By taking proactive steps to address the challenges faced by international students, universities can promote social integration, enhance the international

student experience, and contribute to the overall success of international education initiatives. As such, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on international student experiences and offers practical recommendations for improving the quality of education for all.

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## VI. APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Interview guide

1. Could you please tell me about yourself? Where are you from? What brings you to Kazakhstan?
2. What do you study? How did you learn about this program?
3. Why did you choose this particular program?
4. Did you have other options for university destinations when applying?
  - a) Why Kazakhstan in particular? (Why not the Western countries or Ukraine/Antigua, for example?)
  - b) How did you go about deciding?
5. How did your family react to your decision?
6. Did you use any agencies when applying to universities?
7. What were you told (about the program, university, and Kazakhstan) before your arrival?
8. What were your expectations before coming to Kazakhstan?
  - a) Expectations about people and the place
  - b) Expectations about the educational experience
9. How did reality compare with the expectations you set before coming?
10. Institutional support
  - a) Did your institution provide any support when you arrived? (e.g., gatherings to meet other students, assistance when applying for a residence permit, etc.)
  - b) Has institutional support changed over the years? How has your experience of receiving support from your institution changed over time?
11. Describe a typical day from your life as a student.
  - a) What are some challenges that you face on a daily basis?
    - i) Challenges when it comes to navigating university space
    - ii) Challenges when it comes to navigating social life - language barriers, cultural differences, etc.
  - b) How do you describe your experience of being a student in Kazakhstan to your family and friends in India?
12. How do you spend your time outside the classroom?
  - a) Who do you spend more time with?
  - b) Where do you go?
    - i) Can you share with me a couple of examples of public places you have been to and what it was like?
    - ii) Can you recall the last time you went out either alone or with others? What was it like?
  - c) Do you notice any differences in your interactions with local people when compared to local students at your university?
13. What are your plans after graduation?