DOI:10.59787/2413-5488-2025-52-4-67-83

Marina Skiba[1], Amantay Nurmagambetov[1], Lyailya Ivatova[2], Alibek Madibekov[1], Karlygash Borgekova[1], Aitzhan Kulumzhanova[1]

[1] National Center for Higher Education Development of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan
[2] M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University, Shymkent, Kazakhstan

RISKS OF TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: OPENING AND OPERATION OF INTERNATIONAL BRANCH CAMPUSES

Abstract: This article examines the risks of transnational education in Kazakhstan, focusing on the opening and operation of international branch campuses. A literature review is provided with references to recent English-language sources (with at least 20% from Scopus/Web of Science publications in the last 10 years). Various forms of transnational education are considered including foreign branch campuses, franchised programs, joint faculties/institutes, etc. and specific risks for each type are described with examples. An expert risk assessment table is presented, in which types of transnational education are compared against categories of risk (with scores from 0 to 10). The Discussion highlights both traditional risk mitigation strategies and unconventional solutions. International trends are taken into account, such as stricter visa rules for international students in the USA, Canada, and the UK, and the resulting opportunities for Kazakhstan to attract a redistributed share of global student flows. The methodology (conceptual analysis, a case study of Kazakhstan, and secondary analysis of expert opinions and regulatory documents) is briefly outlined. In conclusion, practical recommendations are formulated for universities and educational authorities.

Key words: transnational education; higher education; international branch campuses, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

Cross-border (transnational) education, which enables students to obtain a foreign qualification without leaving their home country, has expanded rapidly in recent years and has become an integral component of the internationalisation of higher education (Wang, 2025; Altbach, 2018). Moreover, higher education itself increasingly serves as a foundation for the formation of cross-border spaces (Leontiev, 2025). Transnational higher education is commonly understood as the transfer of educational programmes or the establishment of branch campuses outside the provider's country of origin, allowing students to obtain a foreign degree in their home country.

A wide range of cross-border (transnational) education models exists, spanning from fully foreign-controlled (independent) arrangements to partnership-based (collaborative) forms. These include international branch campuses, franchised programmes, validated (licensed) courses, joint and double degree programmes, joint colleges or institutes, online learning, and other delivery modes (Wang, 2025). While each of these forms offers specific advantages, they also entail certain risks related to quality assurance, institutional sustainability, and the effectiveness of governance and management (Bamberger & Morris, 2024).

The academic literature increasingly addresses the risks and challenges associated with transnational education. Critics highlight the commercialization of many TNE initiatives and insufficient regulatory oversight, which may result in declining academic standards and reputational damage (Wang, 2025). For example, as noted by P. Altbach (2010), a number of

overseas campuses fail to replicate the academic environment of the home campus and instead represent only a weak approximation of it (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Well-documented cases of failure include the University of New South Wales campus in Singapore, which closed after just one semester and incurred multimillion-dollar losses (Tee & Tan, 2010), as well as the Michigan State University branch campus in Dubai, which was forced to discontinue its programmes due to financial instability and insufficient student enrolment (Wilkins, 2016). Analyses of the causes of such failures (Bollag, 2024) point to an overestimation of demand, underestimation of costs, and challenges related to accreditation and partnership arrangements (Tee & Tan, 2010; Healey, 2015). Transnational education is often attributed both benefits and shortcomings, many of which take the form of persistent myths. These myths – such as claims of neocolonialism, declining interest in TNE, quality loss at transnational campuses, and a poorer student experience compared to home campuses – are critically examined and challenged by Wilkins and Juusola (2018). The authors emphasize that transnational education is a complex field characterized by both risks and potential benefits.

The empirical study by J. Paniagua et al (2022) examines the development of international branch campuses as a specific form of foreign direct investment and analyses the factors shaping their global diffusion. The authors construct a gravity model based on two dimensions: the "extensive" margin (the number of international branch campuses between a pair of countries) and the "intensive" margin (the number of master's programmes delivered through these campuses). Their findings indicate that the establishment of branch campuses is primarily driven by economic demand in the host country (GDP), transaction costs (distance), and the existence of regional trade and investment agreements. In addition, cultural and institutional linkages such as a common language, religion, colonial ties, and shared borders are found to be significant. Educational determinants mainly operate as "push" factors from donor countries: increasing expenditure on higher education and declining domestic teaching intensity (higher education participation rates) encourage universities to expand abroad. At the same time, scientific output functions as both a "push" and a "pull" factor, facilitating both the export and the import of branch campuses.

Undoubtedly, the successful implementation of TNE projects requires careful risk analysis and risk management at all stages, from planning to day-to-day operations (Odlin et al., 2022). This includes the recruitment of high-quality academic staff who meet the standards of the home university, as well as the preservation of institutional values and organizational culture (Yudkevich et al., 2016). Universities engaged in cross-border activities must have a clear yet flexible risk management framework (Bosire & Amimo, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2024) that encompasses financial issues, reputation, academic standards, safety concerns, human resource relations, and other relevant dimensions (Girdzijauskaite & Radzeviciene, 2014). This study identifies five main types of risk: (1) academic risk, understood as the threat of declining educational quality, misalignment with academic standards, and constraints on academic freedom; (2) financial risk, referring to the possibility of financial losses due to insufficient student enrolment, high operating costs, or changes in market conditions; (3) reputational risk, defined as damage to the university's brand and public image in the event of project failure; (4) regulatory risk, involving non-compliance with accreditation requirements, policy and legislative changes, and bureaucratic barriers; and (5) cultural-organizational risk, encompassing difficulties of integration into the local context, staff management challenges, intercultural misunderstandings, and governance conflicts. This typology resonates with the approach proposed by N. Healey (2015a), who developed a risk-oriented classification of TNE partnerships across six dimensions, reflecting the likelihood of project failure in different spheres of interaction (academic, financial-legal, organizational, and others) (Healey, 2015b).

For Kazakhstan, which is investing substantial resources in the development of international educational partnerships, it is critically important to anticipate and mitigate risks

so that transnational education becomes a driver of quality enhancement rather than a threat to system sustainability. Strategic partnerships with foreign universities are viewed as instruments for improving the quality of teaching, strengthening academic sustainability, and advancing the internationalisation of local institutions. However, intensified global competition for students – including geopolitical rivalry for international learners – means that Kazakhstan needs to develop its own model of sustainable transnational education. The country positions itself as a new regional education hub (Kai, 2025; Haidar, 2025; Packer, 2025) in Central Eurasia (Kuzhabekova, 2024; Amirbekova et al., 2025).

At present, the government is implementing a strategy aimed at attracting leading global universities. Foreign universities are offered various incentives, including free land plots, tax exemptions, scholarships, and other forms of support. As a result, since 2021 there has been an active expansion of international branch campuses: 40 strategic partnerships with foreign universities from Russia, the United Kingdom, Italy, China, the United States, France, South Korea, and other countries are already in operation. In 2025, branch campuses of MSIIR, Coventry University, Woosong University, and Anhalt University were opened. Foreign universities are regarded by Kazakhstan as "strategic partners" in education, contributing to the enhancement of quality in local universities and helping to meet the growing demand for higher education that is not fully satisfied by the national system.

Figure 1

Map of Kazakhstan showing the locations of branch campuses and partnerships of foreign universities (based on data from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). The figure presents the total number of agreements (40) and their distribution by type, including branch campuses, strategic partnerships, consortia, double degree programmes, and others.

The active attraction of foreign campuses has been accompanied by growth in the international student population. The number of international students in Kazakhstan has reached 35,057; in 2024 it stood at 31,500. The government has set a target to increase this figure to 100,000 by 2028 and to 150,000 by 2029. While Russia has traditionally been the main destination for academic mobility for Kazakhstan and neighbouring countries, this

situation is now changing. Against the backdrop of geopolitical tensions and Russia's withdrawal from the Bologna Process which complicates the recognition of Russian degrees in Western countries Kazakhstan is increasingly viewed as an attractive alternative for students from the post-Soviet space. Moreover, Kazakhstan aims to attract students from India, China, Pakistan, and countries across Asia and Africa by offering programmes taught in Russian and, increasingly, in English, lower tuition and living costs compared to Western countries, as well as political stability and cultural proximity. In an increasingly complex global environment, there is a shift toward more hybrid partnership models that require deep strategic alignment and mutual trust. Partnership projects often face intercultural and organizational challenges, requiring substantial efforts to align curricula, assessment standards, and staff management practices across different academic cultures.

The rapid expansion of transnational education entails significant risks for all stakeholders, both for foreign universities, such as financial and reputational risks associated with unsuccessful campus launches, and for the host country, including risks related to educational quality, alignment of branch campuses with national priorities, and competition with local universities. Under these new conditions, several key research questions emerge: What are the main types of risks inherent in different forms of transnational education? What specific risks arise in the establishment and operation of international branch campuses in Kazakhstan? What strategies can be employed to mitigate these risks? And how can global trends be leveraged to the country's advantage without compromising the quality of education?

The aim of this article is to examine and systematize the risks of cross-border education in Kazakhstan, with a particular focus on international branch campuses, drawing on international experience and expertise, and to propose recommendations for risk management for universities and regulatory authorities.

Materials and Methods

To achieve the stated objective, the study employs a research design combining conceptual analysis, case study, and secondary data analysis. At the conceptual analysis stage, a review of contemporary scholarly literature on transnational education and its associated risks was conducted. International journal articles, reports, and analytical reviews, including publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science from 2015 to 2025 were examined, focusing on the experience of establishing international branch campuses and partnership programmes, classifications of TNE, and risk management strategies in this field. Particular attention was paid to studies identifying risk categories and factors contributing to the success or failure of cross-border education projects.

Within the Kazakhstan case study, information on the current state of cross-border education in the Republic of Kazakhstan was collected and analysed. This included regulatory and policy documents and strategies of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, statistical data on branch campuses and international students, and news related to the opening of new campuses and partnerships. Official sources (such as maps and press releases of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education) as well as media materials covering the country's efforts to attract foreign universities were used. A series of expert interviews was conducted, along with a survey of representatives from Kazakhstani and foreign universities. In parallel, policy changes in the field of academic mobility in other regions (the United States, Europe, and Asia) and their potential implications for Kazakhstan were examined.

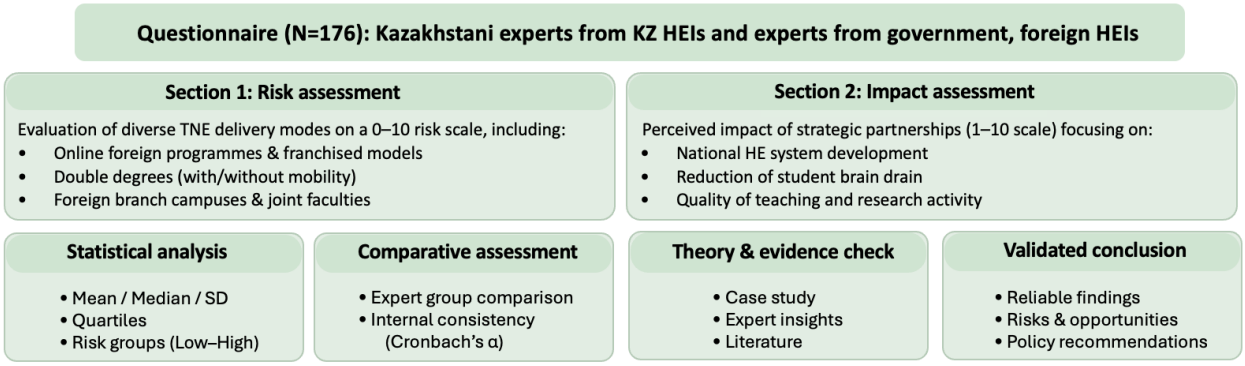
At the stage of secondary analysis of expert and regulatory data, the views of specialists and the requirements of regulatory authorities were synthesised. Conclusions and recommendations of international organisations, such as the British Council, UNESCO, and the OECD (Vincent-Lancrin, 2012), as well as quality assurance agencies (e.g., the QAA) concerning quality assurance and risks in cross-border education were taken into account. In

addition, expert evidence was used to assess risks, including insights from interviews and public statements by university leaders and representatives of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan regarding the establishment of branch campuses (for example, comments by the Minister of Science and Higher Education, S. Nurbek) (Packer, 2025), as well as data from surveys and studies of key stakeholders (students, academic staff, and managers).

For the quantitative assessment of risk perceptions and the impact of strategic partnerships, a questionnaire survey was conducted among representatives of the academic community. The target group consisted of university managers and experts familiar with internationalisation processes: heads of international offices, vice-rectors and deans for academic affairs, experts from Kazakhstan (working both in national and foreign universities), as well as several representatives of the Ministry and independent analysts. The survey was conducted online in September 2025, yielding a total of 176 completed questionnaires (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Research design



The questionnaire comprised two sections. In the first section, respondents assessed the relative level of risk associated with various forms of cross-border education, including online programmes of foreign universities delivered through Kazakhstani institutions, franchised programmes, double degree programmes (with and without student mobility), fully foreign branch campuses in Kazakhstan, "2+2" models (branch campus with continuation of studies abroad), joint faculties or institutes, and the practice of transferring a Kazakhstani university into trust management by a foreign partner. Assessments were made on a ten-point scale, where 0 indicated the absence of significant risks and 10 indicated the highest possible level of risk.

In the second section, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with a series of statements regarding the impact of strategic partnerships on the development of the national higher education system (on a 1–10 scale, from minimal to maximal impact). These statements included: "The functioning of strategic partnerships (branch campuses, campuses, double degree programmes, etc.) will have a positive impact on the development of Kazakhstani higher education"; "The opening of branch campuses will reduce the outflow of Kazakhstani students abroad"; "The quality of teaching in Kazakhstani universities in regular programmes will improve"; "The impact on research activities in Kazakhstani universities"; and "The attractiveness of Kazakhstani universities for the employment of foreign academic staff."

The collected data were processed using statistical methods. Mean scores, quartile distributions of responses, and intergroup comparative analyses (by expert category) were calculated to identify differences in perspectives. Statistical processing included the calculation of means, medians, and standard deviations. In addition, the proportions of responses were calculated for low-risk groups (scores from 1 to 3), moderate-risk groups (scores from 4 to 7),

and high-risk groups (scores from 8 to 10). Comparisons were also conducted across aggregated respondent groups, and the internal consistency of the question batteries was assessed. Cronbach's alpha (α) was used to assess internal consistency, with $\alpha \geq 0.70$ considered indicative of acceptable reliability (Doval, 2023).

At the final stage, the survey and case study results were compared with theoretical expectations. The findings were verified through data triangulation, whereby patterns and trends identified in the quantitative survey were cross-checked against qualitative expert comments and published research. This approach enabled a more rigorous interpretation of the results, enhancing the reliability and validity of the conclusions. A limitation of the study is its reliance on available open data and expert judgements; quantitative analysis of student performance or financial indicators of branch campuses was not conducted, as this falls beyond the scope of the article. Nevertheless, the combination of methods provided a comprehensive picture of the risks and opportunities of transnational education in Kazakhstan and allowed for the development of practically oriented recommendations.

Results

Models of transnational education and strategic partnerships

In the literature, transnational higher education (TNE) is described through a variety of cooperation models, ranging from independent foreign branch campuses to joint programmes and online learning (Wang, 2025; Knight, 2025; Knight & McNamara, 2017; Knight & Simpson, 2023). J. Knight (2015) distinguishes between independent forms of TNE, fully controlled by a foreign university, such as international branch campuses, franchising arrangements, and distance programmes, and collaborative forms, including joint institutes and double degree programmes, each of which entails specific advantages and risks (Wilkins, 2016; Tee & Tan, 2010; Beecher & Streitwieser, 2019).

In an increasingly complex global environment, there is a shift toward more hybrid partnership models that require deep strategic alignment and trust between universities from different countries. Strategic educational partnerships can be defined as long-term cooperation between universities across borders, involving joint programme development, knowledge and resource sharing, and co-governance of academic processes. Such partnerships are regarded as a key mechanism for the internationalisation of higher education and for quality enhancement through the attraction of external expertise and increased programme competitiveness (Altbach & Knight, 2007). At the same time, partnership projects often encounter intercultural and organisational challenges, as significant efforts are required to align curricula, assessment standards, and staff management practices within different academic cultures.

In Kazakhstan, cross-border education is implemented in several main formats, each with its own specific features:

International branch campus. A full-fledged campus of a foreign university established in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan, with physical infrastructure and staff. As a rule, instruction is delivered according to the curricula and standards of the home university, and graduates receive a degree awarded by the foreign institution. Examples include Nazarbayev University (with a special status, established in partnership with a number of foreign universities), branch campuses of Lomonosov Moscow State University (operating in Astana since the 2000s), as well as the new campuses of Cardiff University and De Montfort University in Kazakhstan, among others.

Franchised educational programme. A local university in Kazakhstan obtains a licence or rights from a foreign university to deliver its educational programme. Teaching is carried out at the local institution (academic staff may be local, while the curriculum and assessment are controlled by the foreign partner). Graduates may receive a degree awarded by the foreign university or a joint certificate. For example, Coventry University Kazakhstan is an overseas

campus of Coventry University (United Kingdom) operating under a franchising model, which was opened in 2024 in the city of Astana.

Joint faculty / institute. A structural unit is established within a Kazakhstani university in partnership with a foreign university. Governance and academic activities are shared: both parties participate in curriculum development, staff exchange, and joint academic management. Students may obtain double degrees (a Kazakhstani and a foreign degree) or a degree from one university with the involvement of the partner institution. For example, cooperation between Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University and Université Sorbonne Paris Cité, M. Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University and the University of Arizona, and others.

Double degree programme (joint degree). An agreement between a Kazakhstani and a foreign university under which students study part of the programme at each institution (or selected modules are delivered by the partner university). Upon completion, students are awarded either a single degree recognised by both universities or two separate degrees, one from each partner. In Kazakhstan, such programmes are common in formats such as 2+2 (two years of study in Kazakhstan plus two years abroad) or 3+1. Unlike the previous type, no separate organisational unit is established; cooperation is programme-based. For example, as of the end of 2025, double degree programmes are being implemented by 53 Kazakhstani higher education institutions (compared to 56 universities in 2024) across 228 double degree programmes, of which 83 programmes (36%) are delivered in English.

As part of the study, a survey was conducted among the following groups of experts to analyse risks:

– kazakhstani experts working in Kazakhstani universities;

– kazakhstani experts working in foreign universities;

– foreign experts involved in the implementation of strategic partnerships in Kazakhstan;

– representatives of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan;

– representatives of accreditation agencies;

– independent experts.

Among the 176 valid questionnaires, respondents identifying themselves as Kazakhstani experts working in Kazakhstani universities predominated, accounting for 71.6 per cent of the sample. The remaining responses were distributed among independent experts, representatives of governmental and other organisations, foreign experts, and other categories of university staff.

This distribution indicates that the aggregated assessments primarily reflect perceptions of risk within the Kazakhstani university sector. This is important for interpretation, as universities bear the main operational responsibility in the implementation of cross-border education formats.

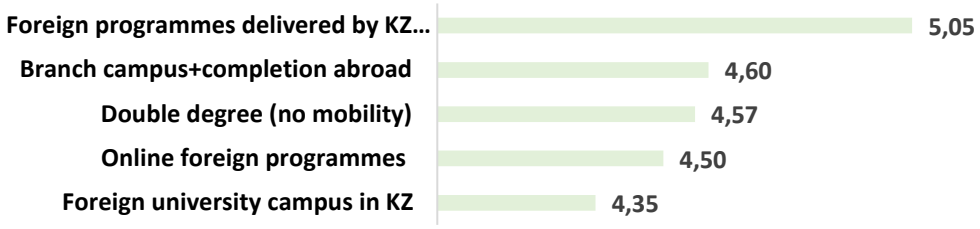
The analysis shows that the majority of respondents represent the Kazakhstani expert community, and that the most attractive forms of partnership are those that offer a full educational programme of a foreign university delivered in Kazakhstan or double degree programmes that do not require student mobility abroad. The impact of partnerships on the development of Kazakhstani higher education is assessed positively, while their potential attractiveness for foreign academic staff raises some doubts.

Respondents perceive all the formats considered as involving a moderate level of risk. Mean scores across all six formats fall within a narrow range from 4.35 to 5.05 points. Median values for each format are equal to 5 (interval 1-10), indicating a stable concentration of responses around the centre of the scale.

Three partnership categories, foreign university campuses in Kazakhstan, joint faculties or schools, and Kazakhstani universities under trust management, exhibit a substantial number

of missing responses, which may indicate either limited expert awareness of these formats or their perceived irrelevance for part of the audience (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Partnership categories assessment



The highest average risk level is recorded for educational programmes of foreign universities delivered entirely by the Kazakhstani side, with a mean score of 5.05. This is the only format exceeding the threshold of 5 points on average, although the exceedance is marginal.

Moderately higher risk perceptions are also associated with study at a branch campus of a foreign higher education institution with programme completion abroad, with a mean score of 4.60. A similar level is observed for double degree programmes without student mobility, which have a mean score of 4.57.

The lowest average risk assessment relates to study at a foreign university campus located in Kazakhstan from entry through graduation, with a mean score of 4.35. Online learning on foreign educational programmes combined with enrolment in a core programme at a Kazakhstani university shows a comparable value of 4.48.

At the same time, international branch campuses and foreign university campuses in Kazakhstan do not stand out as significantly more risky than other forms of transnational education: their scores are in the range of 4.4-4.5, and the distribution of responses is similar to that of other formats (approximately 40 per cent of respondents classify them as low risk, and about half as moderate risk).

The survey results indicate that university management recognises the presence of risks across all forms of cross-border education but does not tend to regard any particular format as "critically dangerous." The emphasis thus shifts from prohibiting specific models to the need for thoughtful risk management and the selection of formats that best fit the specific goals and institutional context of a university. Risks are perceived as manageable, while strategic partnerships and branch campuses are viewed as having the potential to enhance quality and the international competitiveness of Kazakhstani universities, provided that well-designed policies and systematic governance are in place.

The most polarised distribution is observed for double degree programmes involving student mobility abroad. In this case, a high share of low-risk assessments (42.1 per cent) coexists with a notable share of high-risk assessments (17.6 per cent), while the proportion of moderate assessments declines to 40.3 per cent. This profile points to heterogeneous perceptions, which is typical of formats that combine academic mobility with financial costs and organisational complexity.

Expectations regarding the effects of cross-border education are strongly positive (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Impact assessment

Substantively, a consistent pattern emerges. Higher perceived risk is associated with formats in which the main responsibility for delivery and control lies with the host institution. This is particularly evident in the case of foreign university programmes delivered entirely by the Kazakhstani side. By contrast, somewhat lower risk is attributed to the format of a foreign university campus operating in Kazakhstan, which is intuitively linked to more direct control by the foreign provider and more standardised procedures.

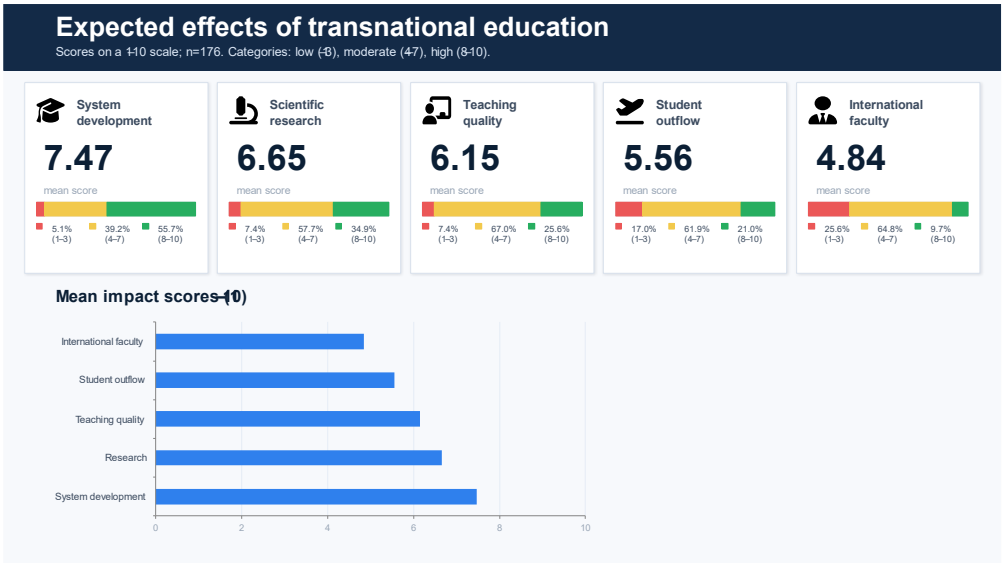
Expectations regarding the effects of cross-border education are strongly positive. The impact of strategic partnerships on the overall development of Kazakhstani higher education is rated most highly, with a mean score of 7.47. More than half of the respondents assigned high ratings in the range of 8 to 10 points, accounting for 55.7 per cent of responses.

The impact on research activity is assessed as stronger than the impact on teaching quality. The mean score for the perceived impact on research is 6.65, while the mean score for the impact on teaching quality in regular programmes is 6.15. For both variables, moderate assessments in the range of 4 to 7 points predominate; however, the share of high ratings is greater for research, reaching 34.9 per cent.

The expected effect (Figure 5) of opening branch campuses on reducing the outflow of Kazakhstani students abroad is assessed as moderate, with a mean value of 5.56. The most frequent category consists of moderate ratings, accounting for 61.9 per cent of responses, while high ratings represent 21.0 per cent. This suggests expectations of a partial redistribution of demand rather than a radical reversal of the existing trend.

Figure 4

Expected effects of transnational education



The weakest expectations concern the attractiveness of Kazakhstani universities for the employment of foreign academic staff. The mean score for this item is 4.84. One quarter of respondents assigned low ratings in the range of 1 to 3 points. High ratings (8–10 points) are

relatively rare, accounting for only 9.7 per cent. This pattern stands out in comparison with other effects and identifies the most problematic area in stakeholders' perceptions.

The internal consistency of the block of impact-related items is acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74. This indicates that respondents' optimism regarding system development is correlated across the items, but the relationships are not perfect and allow for differentiation of expectations across different dimensions.

Discussion

Global experience has produced a range of approaches that help mitigate the risks outlined above in the implementation of cross-border education projects.

Careful partner selection and preliminary due diligence.

Before opening a branch campus or launching a joint programme, a thorough analysis of both the partner institution and the operating environment is required. This includes assessing the financial stability and reputation of the partner university, the alignment of its academic standards with required quality benchmarks, market analysis (student demand), and the legal and regulatory context. Practice shows that weak justification of a branch campus business model significantly increases the likelihood of failure. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct risk analysis already at the planning stage: estimating projected student enrolment under pessimistic scenarios, calculating break-even points, and analysing competitors. In some cases, it is advisable to start with a less capital-intensive format (for example, a joint programme or a small centre) and expand to a full branch campus only if the initial stage proves successful. Such a two-stage approach was applied by the University of Reading in Malaysia, which first established a partnership with a local college and later opened its own campus.

Clear legal structuring and allocation of responsibilities.

Cooperation agreements should specify in as much detail as possible the distribution of responsibilities between partners, including financing, recruitment and remuneration of academic staff, quality assurance, degree awarding, marketing and student recruitment, and infrastructure support. Clarity at the outset helps to prevent conflicts. Contracts should also include dispute resolution mechanisms and an exit strategy in case of early project termination. For example, some universities stipulate procedures for completing the education of currently enrolled students and settling financial obligations in the event of campus closure (Brown, 2024). The presence of such contingency plans reduces reputational damage and demonstrates a responsible approach to risk management.

Quality assurance and unified standards.

To minimise academic risks, an integrated quality assurance system for transnational education is required. Practical measures include the approval of curricula and teaching materials by the foreign university; regular audits and inspections (for example, visits by quality assurance committees from the home campus); dual academic leadership (such as appointing a deputy dean from the foreign partner); certification of branch campus academic staff in accordance with the requirements of the home university; and systematic monitoring of student performance with benchmarking against outcomes at the main campus. Many Western universities establish dedicated offices responsible for overseeing overseas programmes and ensuring academic equivalence. International practice generally assumes that the degree-awarding institution bears full responsibility for quality, regardless of the country in which the programme is delivered.

Staff development and cross-cultural communication.

The human factor is critical to the success of cross-border projects. Reducing cultural and organisational risks is achieved through careful staff selection and training. Branch campus leaders and administrators need training in intercultural communication and management within different institutional systems. Appointing bilingual (or bicultural) managers often

serves as a “bridge” between the headquarters and the local team. There is also experience of recruiting staff who act as carriers of quality assurance policies, share the values of both partners, and are capable of resolving emerging disagreements promptly. Regular face-to-face interactions between teams (delegation visits, joint workshops) help build trust and mutual understanding, which, according to experience, significantly mitigates the risk of conflict.

Financial planning and diversification.

To manage financial risks, universities often adopt income diversification strategies. Alongside enrolling international students at branch campuses, they may offer online courses, short-term certificate programmes, and consultancy services, creating alternative revenue streams and improving project viability. Some institutions establish reserve funds or insurance mechanisms to mitigate the risk of under-enrolment. For example, it is reported that a number of UK universities include a “risk contingency” in branch campus budgets to cover losses during the initial years of operation. Another approach involves attracting co-investors (such as businesses or local authorities) to share the financial burden, or securing support guarantees. In Kazakhstan, the practice of providing state-funded scholarships for study at branch campuses, particularly in priority fields, may serve as a measure to reduce financial risk for both universities and students.

In addition to these traditional approaches, recent years have seen the emergence of new ideas and models that may support the sustainable development of cross-border education.

The creation of education hubs and consortia.

Instead of isolated branch campuses, a number of countries (such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and China) have developed entire educational clusters – zones that host campuses of multiple foreign universities, often supported by the state through infrastructure funding. A prominent example is Education City in Qatar, where the government fully covers the operational costs of campuses of leading US universities. Within such hubs, institutions can share resources (libraries, laboratories), exchange knowledge about the local context, and distribute certain risks. If one university encounters difficulties, others may support initiatives to address them or absorb students. Kazakhstan is also moving in this direction: by concentrating new branch campuses in Astana, Almaty, and regional centres, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education encourages interaction among them and with local universities (for example, through joint research projects and university consortia). This contributes to the collective resilience of the cross-border education ecosystem.

Hybrid learning models (“glocal” approach).

New technologies make it possible to mitigate risks through greater flexibility of delivery formats. Hybrid models combine online instruction provided by a foreign university with on-site support. For example, instead of establishing a full physical campus, a foreign university may open a learning centre where students attend online lectures delivered by overseas professors, while practical sessions are conducted by local tutors. This approach significantly reduces costs (lower infrastructure requirements and fewer expatriate staff) and financial risks, while maintaining academic control. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such models expanded rapidly, and although face-to-face education has largely returned, many programmes are now reconsidering the balance between in-person and online components for optimisation. Virtual exchanges and joint online programmes also enable institutions to reach a broader student market, reducing dependence on a single country. For Kazakhstan, this represents an opportunity to attract international learners to distance programmes offered by Kazakhstani universities in partnership with foreign institutions, effectively exporting online educational services.

Joint risk management at the governmental level.

An innovative approach involves concluding intergovernmental agreements that allocate risks between countries. For example, when two states officially support the

establishment of a joint university, they may agree on mutual recognition of accreditation, tax incentives, and investment protection. Such arrangements are common in the creation of large international universities (for instance, the Kazakh-German University has been supported by the governments of both countries). For Kazakhstan, which seeks to attract foreign universities, concluding cross-border education agreements with key partner countries (such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, and China) could reduce regulatory risks and create a more predictable environment for higher education investors.

Orientation toward new student markets and the internationalisation of Kazakhstani higher education.

In light of global trends, Kazakhstani universities and branch campuses should adopt more innovative approaches to student recruitment. There is currently a noticeable outflow of students from traditional education destinations (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada) to alternative countries due to stricter visa policies and high costs in these destinations. This creates an opportunity to attract talented students who previously may not have considered Kazakhstan as a study destination. Non-traditional markets include countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. Already, increasing numbers of students from India, China, Pakistan, Nigeria, and other countries are enrolling in Kazakhstani universities.

One possible pathway is the development of international programmes taught in Russian, aimed at students who do not have sufficient proficiency in English but wish to study abroad. Given that demand for Russian-language education remains high in several CIS and Eastern European countries, Kazakhstan could attract these students by offering programmes jointly with foreign universities. In this way, Kazakhstan effectively imports international students, reducing the risk of under-enrolment for branch campuses.

Although still rare in higher education, the idea of an analogy with project insurance is also conceivable. For example, a consortium of universities, possibly with state support, could establish a fund to insure branch campus risks (such as under-enrolment or force majeure events like political instability). Universities would pay a modest insurance contribution, and in the event of an insured occurrence (for example, a sudden loss of students due to border closures), the fund would compensate part of the losses. This could encourage participation by new institutions by alleviating some concerns.

Global trends and opportunities for Kazakhstan.

It is also important to consider the impact of broader global processes on the risks and prospects of cross-border education in Kazakhstan. At present, several key trends are shaping international student flows: first, the tightening of immigration rules in a number of traditional destination countries (Adebayo, 2025); second, changes in the geopolitical environment, including sanctions and conflicts; and third, the longer-term consequences of the pandemic, such as the digitalisation of education and the growing emphasis on localisation.

Thus, under the 2025 U.S. administration, a number of measures were introduced that created uncertainty for international students, including temporary suspensions of student visa issuance, stricter background and social media checks for applicants, and cases of visa revocation due to political statements. Although the United States remains the leading destination, hosting a record 1.126 million international students in 2024, such measures generate perceptions of risk and an “unwelcoming” environment among prospective applicants.

Canada faced market overheating in 2023-2024: the inflow of more than 600,000 international students placed pressure on housing and social infrastructure, prompting the government to introduce a cap on new study permits – 10 per cent fewer in 2024 than the previous year. This resulted in a decline in student numbers from India, Nigeria, and the Philippines. The United Kingdom, having reached a peak in international enrolment in 2022, has also tightened its regime: since 2024, international students (with the exception of doctoral

researchers) have been prohibited from bringing family members, which has particularly affected students from countries where studying with family is common (such as Nigeria and Pakistan), leading to reduced inflows. Australia has introduced an annual cap on international enrolments (270,000 students) due to a housing crisis. Taken together, these developments signal that the era of unhindered growth in international student numbers in Western countries has been temporarily paused.

For Kazakhstan, this situation opens a unique window of opportunity. Students who might previously have chosen the United States or Europe are now seeking alternative destinations that are more affordable and welcoming. Interest in universities in Asia and the Middle East is already increasing: for example, Dubai has announced a target to raise the share of international students to 50 per cent by 2033, while universities in Japan and Hong Kong are offering scholarships and simplified admissions for students who were unable to secure places in the United States. Through the active establishment of branch campuses of leading universities, Kazakhstan can position itself as precisely such a "non-traditional market," ready to host international students who face barriers in Western destinations. With well-designed policies, this could not only reduce the risk of under-enrolment for branch campuses themselves but also generate economic and soft-power benefits for the country, including growth in the export of educational services, the formation of internationally oriented alumni networks, and the development of multicultural campus environments.

At the same time, the risks associated with these trends must be acknowledged. A sharp increase in student inflows would require the expansion of infrastructure (student housing, support services), adaptation of educational programmes for linguistically diverse cohorts, and the strengthening of safety and visa support systems. Some steps are already being taken: new dormitories are under construction, and the "Study in Kazakhstan" campaign has been launched, including simplified visa procedures and recruitment fairs in Asian countries. It is important to sustain and deepen these efforts. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that Western policies may soften again in a few years or that new competitors will emerge (for example, China is actively improving its higher education system and also seeking to attract international students). Kazakhstan therefore needs to capitalise on its current time advantage by strengthening quality. If foreign branch campuses in Kazakhstan can offer an educational and service experience comparable to that of Western institutions, they will remain attractive even when competition intensifies again. Conversely, rapid quantitative expansion without adequate safeguards risks quality erosion or the emergence of questionable "degree mills." Any such incident could seriously undermine international trust in Kazakhstan as an education hub, creating a reputational risk of national scale.

Analysis of the survey results allows the following conclusions regarding trends and patterns to be drawn. The first key conclusion is that the risks of cross-border education are perceived as manageable. This is evidenced by moderate mean scores and by the fact that high-risk assessments remain a minority across all formats.

The second conclusion relates to the profile of the highest perceived risk. Models in which responsibility for implementation rests largely with the Kazakhstani side, or in which the educational trajectory is split between Kazakhstan and a foreign institution, are perceived as more risky. In such cases, respondents likely associate these formats with vulnerabilities in quality control, alignment of standards, and organisational sustainability.

The third conclusion concerns expected effects. Strategic partnerships and branch campuses are perceived as resources for system development and for strengthening the research function of universities. At the same time, expectations regarding a reduction in student outflows abroad remain moderate. Respondents assume that branch campuses will partially capture demand but will not eliminate the motivation to study overseas.

The fourth conclusion highlights a human resource constraint. Kazakhstan's attractiveness as a place of employment for foreign academic staff is perceived as weaker than other expected effects. This leads to a practical policy implication for internationalisation strategies: priority should be given not only to expanding the number of partnership formats, but also to improving conditions for academic employment, research infrastructure, and support services for international staff.

The survey data reveal a combination of caution and optimism. Risks are acknowledged as real but are not interpreted as critical. Expected benefits are viewed as substantial, particularly with regard to systemic development and research capacity. This provides empirical grounds for concluding that further development of cross-border education is advisable, provided that quality assurance mechanisms and academic staff attractiveness are strengthened.

In conclusion, risk management in cross-border education should be comprehensive and proactive. Traditional risk mitigation approaches have been tested over time and remain relevant. At the same time, the new environment calls for innovative thinking, closer cooperation between universities and government, the use of technology, flexibility in educational models, and careful attention to global trends. As Kazakhstan continues along the path of educational internationalisation, it can and should combine both approaches in order to achieve sustainable success.

Conclusion

Cross-border higher education offers significant opportunities for Kazakhstan but is also associated with numerous risks that must be anticipated and effectively managed. The study demonstrates that different models of transnational education exhibit distinct risk profiles. The greatest challenges are linked to the establishment and operation of full-scale international branch campuses, where financial and reputational responsibilities are highest. More flexible forms of cooperation, such as franchising arrangements, joint programmes, and double degree schemes, entail more localised risks and can serve as gradual stages of development. The literature review and Kazakhstan's experience indicate that the key factors behind project failures include underestimation of costs and overestimation of demand, gaps in quality assurance, cultural and managerial fragmentation of teams, and regulatory barriers. Accordingly, an effective strategy must address each of these dimensions.

For Kazakhstan's successful integration into the global higher education space, it is not sufficient merely to open a certain number of foreign campuses; it is crucial to ensure their long-term sustainability and value for the country. International branch campuses and programmes should not replace the national higher education system but rather enrich it by stimulating knowledge transfer and healthy competition, without creating imbalances or conflicts. Comprehensive risk management will help avoid common mistakes experienced by other countries and enable the development of a distinctive Kazakhstani model of cross-border education focused on quality, innovation, and mutual benefit for partners.

Cross-border education in Kazakhstan should evolve as a strategic partnership among the state, local universities, and foreign institutions. Only through coordinated efforts by all stakeholders in managing risks, from financing to quality assurance and integration, can ambitious plans be realised without losses. Kazakhstan has the potential to strengthen its position on the global higher education map by promoting intellect, ideas, and innovation, while simultaneously maximising benefits for its human capital and economy. Timely identification and mitigation of risks will be key to ensuring that cross-border education serves as a catalyst for positive change rather than a source of new challenges.

Funding

The study was conducted as part of a self-initiated project by the authors; no external funding was received. All data and conclusions presented are based on the analysis of publicly available publications and statistical sources, which are cited throughout the text.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Author Contributions

M.A. Skiba: Lead author; Conceptualization; Writing Original Draft Preparation. Data Processing. A.A. Nurmagambetov: Questionnaire Development, Conceptualization, Data Curation, Drafting Alternative Text Versions. A. S. Madibekov: Conceptualization, Writing Review & Editing. K.B. Borgekova: Formal Analysis, Data Visualizations. A.M. Kulumzhanova: Investigation (Review of the Specifics of Foreign/International Branch Campuses in Kazakhstan).

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Information about authors

Marina Skiba, Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor, Expert, Educational Programme Developer of the Higher Education Development National Center of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: marina.a.skiba7@gmail.com, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4155-9957, corresponding author

Amantay Nurmagambetov, Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor, Adviser to the Director of the Higher Education Development National Center of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: a.nurmagambetov@n-k.kz, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0781-2277

Lyailya Ivatova, Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor of M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University, Shymkent, Kazakhstan, e-mail: livatova2701@mail.ru, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0530-1462

Alibek Madibekov, Director of the Higher Education Development National Center of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: a.madibekov@n-k.kz, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5510-0381

Karlygash Borgekova, PhD, Chief Expert of the Higher Education Content Management Office of the Higher Education Development National Center of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: k.borgekova@n-k.kz, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4230-1333

Aitzhan Kulumzhanova, Head of the Internationalisation Office of of the Higher Education Development National Center of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: a.kulumzhanova@n-k.kz, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7555-7618