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NEGOTIATING RETURN: RETURN MIGRATION AMONG HIGHLY QUALIFIED UZBEK MIGRANTS IN JAPAN

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Abstract. *This article provides an overview of the decision-making process of highly qualified Uzbek migrants residing in Japan concerning their potential return to Uzbekistan. The study draws on data from four semi-structured interviews and an analysis of relevant legal and policy documents. The findings suggest that return decision-making is dynamic and changes over time. In particular, it depends on professional opportunities, family responsibilities, adaptation to life in Japan, and employment prospects in Uzbekistan. Successful careers in Japan do not necessarily prevent migrants from considering return and do not necessarily weaken their ties to the home country. The qualifications, work experience, and professional skills of highly qualified Uzbek migrants should be adequately recognized. The Government of Uzbekistan has taken several steps to support foreign-educated specialists and compatriots abroad. However, this article argues for a more coordinated reintegration system, including the recognition of foreign work experience, transparent employment opportunities, and stronger post-return support.*

Keywords: *educational mobility, return migration, highly qualified migrants, reintegration mechanisms, professional skills, employment opportunities*

Introduction

In the last two decades, educational mobility across borders has become an important tool for creating human capital. The state supports citizens' education abroad in various forms such as scholarships, bilateral educational cooperation, and university cooperation

projects. However, in all these efforts, there is one underlying assumption – those who have received their education abroad will ultimately come back and put their knowledge into use to contribute to the economic, scientific, administrative, and social development of their native land. In other words, return migration is no longer just a personal choice of individuals. It has become an important aspect of the state policy associated with national development, labour market needs, and knowledge utilization.

However, in the case of Uzbekistan, the issue also has a constitutional aspect. Article 23 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan stipulates that the state protects and sponsors its citizens at home and abroad. Moreover, in line with international laws, the state must preserve and develop relations with compatriots abroad. These principles are a part of the legal framework for policies regarding citizens and compatriots who receive education, work, and carry out professional activities abroad.

Uzbekistan has placed growing emphasis on the internationalization of education and the preparation of young specialists abroad. A prominent example is the El-Yurt Umidi Foundation, established in 2018. The Foundation finances master's and doctoral study at leading foreign universities and research institutions. Scholarship recipients sign an agreement under which they must return to Uzbekistan after graduation and work in the country for three years (Presidential Decree No. PD-5545, 2018). Later presidential measures further developed the Foundation's activities, broadened the range of scholarships, and gave particular attention to fields such as education, science, healthcare, public administration, and new sectors of the economy. According to the "El-Yurt Umidi" Foundation, 2,225 scholarship recipients were sent to study and intern in 45 countries from 2018 to 2024. Of these, 1,400 returned to Uzbekistan and are working in various fields (Ta'lim Telekanali, 2025).

The Japan-related dimension of this policy is particularly important. The Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship, commonly known as JDS, has been implemented in Uzbekistan since 1999 (Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE), n.d.). Through this program, Uzbek public servants and specialists have been sent to Japan to pursue graduate education in Japanese universities. As of the latest available information, a total of 443 JDS fellows from Uzbekistan have been sent to Japan (JICE, n.d.). JDS also clearly links overseas education with return and contribution: fellows are required to return and work in Uzbekistan for at least three years after completing their studies, to contribute to the country's development through their work in target organizations (JICE, n.d.).

In addition to programs that impose a post-return work obligation, there are also scholarship schemes that support educational mobility without being directly linked to a mandatory return service requirement in Uzbekistan. One of the most important examples is the Japanese Government Scholarship, commonly known as the MEXT Scholarship (Embassy of Japan in Uzbekistan, 2026). Unlike El-Yurt Umidi and JDS, which are closely connected with the expectation that scholarship recipients return to and work in Uzbekistan for a certain period, MEXT is primarily a Japanese government scholarship program designed to support international students studying at Japanese higher education institutions. For Uzbek citizens, this creates another pathway to study in Japan. At the same time, it raises a different policy issue: when there is no formal obligation to return, the decision to come back to Uzbekistan depends even more on personal motivation, family circumstances, professional opportunities, and the availability of reintegration mechanisms in the home country.

Data obtained from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics indicate a gradual increase in the number of Uzbek students pursuing educational opportunities abroad, increasing from

28,042 in 2015 to a peak of 141,000 in 2022, and slightly decreasing in 2023 to 120,563 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2026).

Japan provides a particularly useful setting in which to examine these developments. Educational cooperation between Uzbekistan and Japan has significantly expanded through various schemes, such as government scholarships, partnerships between universities, the promotion of Japanese-language education, and the emergence of new forms of labour mobility. Japan became an appealing destination for highly qualified Uzbek migrants seeking advanced education, professional experience, and international career opportunities. However, there is limited understanding of how Uzbek professionals in Japan regard return migration, how their plans evolve during their extended time in that country, and what legal, institutional, and other barriers influence their eventual return to Uzbekistan.

The current article tries to fill in a gap existing between two different areas of state policy. While Uzbekistan is actively promoting international education mobility, the system of return and further professional integration of highly qualified specialists is far less developed. Much success has already been achieved in the financing of studies abroad and the ease of recognition of foreign diplomas. However, the post-return period requires more attention.

In practice, highly qualified returnees can face some problems. One such problem is the lack of one institutionalized mechanism by which the qualifications and work experience of Uzbek specialists working abroad can be registered, and their desire to return home and receive suitable job offers can be expressed. Communication between potential returnees and potential employers is far from being organized properly. Often enough, it relies more on personal contacts than on an institutionalized procedure.

Thus, the main problem is not in the desire of specialists who live abroad to come back to their home country or not. The main problem is whether there are legal and institutional mechanisms that will make it professionally reasonable, personally attractive and sustainable both for the returnee and for the state.

The International Organization for Migration defines a highly skilled migrant as “a person who has earned, either by tertiary level education or occupational experience, the level of qualifications typically needed to practice a profession” (International Organization for Migration, 2011). Although the present article uses the term “highly qualified professionals”, this definition is important because it covers both formal education and occupational experience. Therefore, highly qualified Uzbek professionals in Japan may include not only students and graduates of higher education institutions, but also those who have obtained professional experience, technical skills, institutional knowledge, and career competencies in Japan.

In the literature, return migration is also understood as a complex and multidimensional process (Carling & Erdal, 2014). According to the International Organization for Migration, return migration means “the movement of a person returning to his or her country of origin or habitual residence, usually after spending at least one year in another country” (IOM, 2011, p. 86). This return may be voluntary or involuntary. However, in the case of highly qualified professionals, return migration should not be understood solely as a physical return to the country of origin. It also includes recognition of foreign-acquired qualifications and experience, access to suitable employment, and the possibility of applying knowledge and skills obtained abroad.

In the context of Uzbekistan, the question of transforming brain drain into brain gain has become increasingly important. Eraliev’s study, *Return Migration as a Brain Gain for Uzbekistan? The Challenges of Attracting Highly-skilled Uzbeks Abroad*, is one of the most

directly relevant works for this article. It shows that Uzbekistan has expressed interest in attracting highly qualified compatriots living abroad, especially after the beginning of broad reforms in the country. However, the study also points to institutional challenges, including public administration reform, stronger engagement with compatriots abroad, and more effective post-return support (Eraliev, 2019, pp. 21-30).

Domestic literature also contributes to the general understanding of migration law and migration processes in Uzbekistan. Ganiyev, Ganiyeva and Shukridillayeva discuss the concept, types, and sociological interpretation of migration in Uzbekistan (Ganiyev et al., 2024). Although this work is broader and does not focus specifically on highly qualified return migration, it may be used to explain how migration is conceptualized in Uzbek legal and social science literature.

Another relevant regional source is the IOM educational manual *Return Migration: International Approaches and Regional Features of Central Asia*, edited by S.V. Ryazantsev (Ryazantsev, 2020, p. 242). Although this work is primarily a teaching manual and does not offer a deep empirical or doctrinal analysis of Uzbekistan's return migration policy, it is useful for identifying key policy concerns in the Central Asian context. The manual notes several problems that limit effective cooperation with compatriots abroad, including the fragmented nature of communication between state bodies and compatriots, the inefficient use of compatriots' potential in economic, social, investment, scientific, educational, and cultural projects, and the absence of a comprehensive long-term strategy for supporting diaspora organizations. In particular, one must mention the observation made in the manual according to which not enough attention is paid to the Uzbek youth who study abroad and there is no established mechanism of employment of such people in Uzbekistan after their return (Ryazantsev, 2020, p. 171). The mentioned observation helps prove the thesis of the present article according to which the policy of sending youth abroad to study must be accompanied by mechanisms for their reintegration into work life.

This UNDP report titled "Support and Reintegration of Labor Repatriates in Uzbekistan: Challenges and Prospects" can be used to help understand the challenges faced by the process of reintegration in Uzbekistan (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). While the report concentrates on labor migrants, its conclusions are also applicable to this article. In particular, the report demonstrates that migrant workers require assistance in finding work, recognizing their skills, entrepreneurship, and adaptation after repatriation. The situation is likely to be different for highly qualified specialists: in addition to general employment problems, they may need mechanisms to link their skills with institutions or organizations.

The Guidelines of the International Labour Organization on Recognition of the Skills of Returning Migrants Workers are significant in the context of the legal and policy component of the paper (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2010). It is noted that skills of migrants can be formal, non-formal, or informal. They may come from education, employment, training, or practical work experience. Therefore, countries of origin should develop procedures for assessing and recognizing these skills. This is directly relevant to Uzbekistan, where the recognition of foreign education has been gradually simplified, while the recognition of foreign work experience and its reflection in the national labour system continue to create practical difficulties for returnees.

Recent policy-oriented studies also show that Uzbekistan needs to connect migration policy with skills development and labour market planning. The World Bank's 2025 report *The Road Home and Abroad: Enhancing TVET for Youth and Migration in Uzbekistan* is relevant because it discusses migration, skills, and employment in the Uzbek context (World Bank, 2025). Its principal focus is vocational education and labour migration, yet

it reveals a wider institutional issue: education policy, labour-market policy, and migration policy cannot operate separately. That coordination becomes even more important for highly qualified returnees. They need more than ordinary employment services. An effective system must be able to identify their qualifications, record work experience obtained abroad, and connect them with positions that make proper use of their expertise. Otherwise, there is a risk for Uzbekistan to be spending money on its citizens' studies abroad without utilizing the knowledge and experience gained there.

Existing research has addressed brain drain, brain gain, return migration, reintegration, and social remittances from a variety of international and regional perspectives. Important gaps nevertheless remain.

This article makes two main contributions. First, it contributes to the limited literature on return migration of highly qualified Uzbek professionals, with a specific focus on Uzbek migrants in Japan. While migration from Uzbekistan has often been studied in the context of labor migration, less attention has been paid to highly qualified professionals who study or work in advanced economies and later consider returning to Uzbekistan.

Second, this article connects empirical findings with legal and policy analysis. It argues that return migration should not be treated only as a sociological or economic phenomenon. For highly qualified professionals, return is also shaped by legal and administrative factors, including employment mechanisms, recognition of foreign experience, digital labor records, and procedures for recognizing documents obtained abroad.

The objective of this article is to analyze the factors influencing the decision-making process of highly qualified Uzbek professionals in Japan who are considering returning to Uzbekistan. Furthermore, it seeks to identify and address the legal and institutional barriers that may impact their successful reintegration into Uzbekistan.

The article addresses the following research questions:

1. What determinants influence the decision-making process of highly qualified migrants regarding their potential return to Uzbekistan versus their continued residence in Japan throughout their educational and professional endeavors in Japan?
2. What legal and institutional barriers affect the professional reintegration of highly qualified returnees in Uzbekistan?

Methods

Research Design and Data Collection

Utilizing semi-structured interviews with highly qualified Uzbek migrants, academics, policymakers, and representatives from the Uzbek community in Japan, this study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the evolving nature of return migration decisions over time.

The article forms part of a broader doctoral research project on educational mobility and return migration among highly qualified Uzbek migrants in Japan. Within the scope of the doctoral research, nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Uzbek migrants and other relevant stakeholders in Japan. The researcher, after a thorough analysis of interviews, selected four of those interviews as they dealt most directly with return migration.

During the interview, participants were asked to answer questions regarding their migration paths, educational experiences, employment, and integration into life in Japan, as well as legal and institutional difficulties, future migration plans, experiences of return and reintegration, and possible policy responses. The interview guide was tailored to be flexible, and follow-up questions were used whenever further explanation was needed.

All interviews in this study were conducted in Japan in April 2026. All participants were male. Purposive sampling was employed to choose Respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience or professional expertise related to educational mobility and return migration. Two had lived in Japan for more than ten years, while the remaining respondents had stayed for a shorter period. Participants' experiences also differed geographically and professionally: they were based in Nagoya, Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, and included an academic, business owner, an employee of a Japanese company, and a person working at an Uzbek government institution in Japan.

Interviews were conducted both online and in person, in Russian or Uzbek, depending on the respondent's preferences and lasted between approximately 40 and 90 minutes. All conversations were recorded with the participants' informed consent and later transcribed.

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines. Before each interview began, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the right to refuse to answer any question or withdraw without any negative consequences. Each participant provided informed consent before recording started.

To preserve anonymity, identifying information was removed during transcription and translation, quotations used in the article were anonymized, and audio files and transcripts were stored securely with access restricted to the researcher.

Legal and Policy Analysis

The legal component of the research encompasses legal analysis and policy analysis. The former analyzes the substance, essence, and relevance of certain normative legal acts of Uzbekistan. The latter considers whether those instruments operate together as a coherent framework for the return and professional reintegration of highly qualified Uzbek citizens who have studied or worked abroad.

The materials were selected because they relate, either directly or indirectly, to cooperation with compatriots abroad, youth policy, support for highly qualified young specialists, recognition of human capital obtained overseas, and employment incentives available after return. The purpose is not to survey every rule connected with migration in Uzbekistan. The analysis is more narrowly concerned with the legal and policy tools that may turn outward educational mobility into brain gain.

The following normative legal acts and institutional documents are analyzed in this article:

1. Presidential Resolution No. PD-3982 of 25 October 2018 "On measures for the further improvement of the state policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the field of cooperation with compatriots living abroad". This act is important because it establishes the general state policy on cooperation with compatriots abroad.

2. Presidential Decree No. PD-6260 of 13 July 2021 "On additional measures to comprehensively support youth and further increase their social activity". This decree is relevant because it reflects the broader state policy of supporting young people, including their education, professional development, and social activity.

3. Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 101 of 7 March 2022 "On measures to create necessary conditions for young specialists and young compatriots working in state bodies and organizations". This resolution is particularly important because it provides for the creation of the automated information system "Yosh vatandoshlar reyestri" and its integration with the open electronic registration platform of the EI-Yurt Umidi Foundation for compatriot scholars, experts, and researchers working abroad.

4. Presidential Decree No. PD-61 of 26 March 2025 "On measures for the implementation of the tasks defined during the open dialogue of the President of the

Republic of Uzbekistan with youth”. This decree is relevant because it contains measures aimed at supporting young people, including employment-related and financial support mechanisms. In the context of this article, it is used to assess whether such incentives may contribute to the reintegration of highly qualified young specialists upon return.

5. Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 159 of 9 April 2026 “On introducing the procedure for granting mortgage loans for the purchase of housing to young specialists who have obtained academic degrees from foreign higher education institutions included in the rankings of prestigious international ranking organizations”. This resolution is directly relevant as a specific incentive for young specialists who obtained academic degrees abroad.

The approach will allow the detection of both the existing assistance and the shortcomings. Special emphasis is made on the analysis of the system in terms of the existence of a mechanism to register highly skilled Uzbek specialists abroad, to connect them to suitable job vacancies, to take into account their experience and to help them on their return.

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be kept in mind. The article focuses on four interviews selected from the nineteen conducted for the wider doctoral study, as they are closely related to decisions regarding returning home. The sample size is small and consists solely of men. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to all highly qualified Uzbek migrants abroad and may not fully reflect gender-specific experiences associated with return migration or family obligations.

All the interviews were conducted in Uzbek or Russian and then translated into English for analysis. A researcher has made an effort to maintain the participants’ intended meanings, but some subtle language details may have been lost during translation.

Results

Return Migration Intentions Evolve Over Time

The interviews suggest that respondents rarely viewed return migration as a final decision made before they left Uzbekistan. Their plans continued to develop during their study and work in Japan. The idea of returning to Uzbekistan remained conditional, and participants, from time to time, reconsidered it based on their career opportunities both in Japan and in Uzbekistan, family circumstances, and the extent to which they had integrated into Japanese society.

It was interesting to observe that, initially, many respondents regarded Japan as a destination for education, gaining professional experience, or earning money sufficient to set up their business in Uzbekistan. However, their plans changed over time once they entered the Japanese labour market. Stable jobs, higher earnings, and greater familiarity with life in Japan motivated them to stay longer than they had first planned. Of course, this did not necessarily mean that they wanted to settle permanently. For instance, one respondent said that he did not plan to return to Uzbekistan soon, but also could not imagine himself staying in Japan for the rest of his life. Another expressed willingness to work in Japan for another ten to fifteen years, obtain professional experience, and then return to Uzbekistan. These narratives show that return is better viewed as an ongoing process of evaluation of various factors rather than as a single, fixed decision.

Professional Integration in Japan Delays Return

Respondents who had been working in Japan found the experience highly valuable for their future career prospects. They highlighted several aspects of working in Japan, such as job security, workplace discipline, and opportunities to develop technical or managerial skills, which made a longer stay even more attractive.

The same aspects, however, complicated return to Uzbekistan. As migrants spent more time in Japan, they became accustomed to local working conditions, stable income, reliable social services, and predictable institutions. Leaving that environment could be challenging, even when there was still a strong emotional attachment to Uzbekistan.

One participant described the change as a movement from a freely chosen stay to a situation in which continued residence had become forced. Initially, favourable employment may lead a migrant to stay in Japan voluntarily. Later, career advancement, the formation of a family, and children's adjustment to Japanese life can limit the practical possibility of returning. Professional integration, therefore, does not eliminate the wish to return home, but it can significantly change both the timing and feasibility of return.

Family Obligations as a Significant Factor in Migrants' Attachment to Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, particularly in rural areas, parents and other elderly community members play a crucial role in making decisions for the younger generation, and the latter is obliged to adhere to these decisions. Therefore, it is not surprising that professional integration in Japan did not remove the importance of family obligations. For many respondents, parents and close relatives remained among the strongest reasons for considering an eventual return to Uzbekistan.

Several interviewees acknowledged the advantages Japan offers, including personal safety, social stability, and career opportunities. Nevertheless, they could not imagine about permanent settlement while their parents and extended family remained in Uzbekistan. Family obligations did not necessarily lead to an immediate decision to return, but they kept the option of returning as a significant long-term possibility.

Return Depends on Reintegration Opportunities in Uzbekistan

The interviews indicate that a mere desire to return is insufficient for making it a reality. Respondents repeatedly connected the feasibility of return with the availability of suitable work and effective professional reintegration in Uzbekistan. Highly qualified migrants may hesitate to come back when their education, skills, and professional experience gained in Japan are not adequately acknowledged or utilized.

For example, one interviewee said he would be prepared to return if he could obtain work that matched his qualifications and experience. In this context, employment is not just an attractive advantage; it is a fundamental requirement that transforms the idea of returning into a feasible choice.

An institutional representative raised the same concern from a policy perspective. Although many Uzbek professionals in Japan may be interested in returning, Uzbekistan currently lacks a well-developed mechanism to connect these individuals with appropriate jobs.

Return Migration: Influences from Japan and Uzbekistan

The conditions in both the host country and the country of origin interact to shape the decision to return. In Japan, factors such as employment prospects, social stability, workplace culture, immigration policies, and overall quality of life play a crucial role in migrants' decision on whether to stay in Japan or return to Uzbekistan. Similarly, conditions in the home country—such as family responsibilities, cultural identity, career prospects, and the availability of reintegration support—can also impact the decision to return.

Respondents did not characterize Japan and Uzbekistan as simple opposites. Throughout their migration experience, they weighed the pros and cons of both countries. Japan provided professional growth and a stable social environment. Uzbekistan remained important because of family and cultural connections, along with the potential to contribute to the nation's development in the future.

Legal Policy on Return Migration and Professional Reintegration

The legal and policy analysis shows that Uzbekistan has adopted several measures that are directly or indirectly connected with the return and professional reintegration of highly qualified Uzbek professionals who studied or worked abroad. These measures are found in legal acts concerning cooperation with compatriots abroad, youth policy, support for foreign-educated young specialists, and employment incentives.

Presidential Resolution No. PD-3982 of 25 October 2018 is the main legal act establishing Uzbekistan's policy on cooperation with compatriots living abroad. The resolution identifies several problems in this field, including weak and fragmented communication between state bodies and compatriots, insufficient use of compatriots' potential in economic, social, investment, scientific, educational, cultural, and other projects, and the absence of an established system for working with Uzbek youth studying abroad and supporting their employment after return.

The resolution also provides several support and incentive measures for compatriots. These include simplified procedures for entry visas, including multiple-entry and long-term visas, temporary residence and work permits; recruitment of highly qualified personnel in specialties needed in Uzbekistan; assistance in resolving social and household matters; allocation of vacant state-owned facilities and land plots for entrepreneurial, scientific, educational, innovative and other projects; full or partial financing of education, work and other social matters; simplified citizenship procedures; and other support measures provided by legislation.

For the purposes of this article, two elements of PD-3982 are particularly relevant. First, the resolution provides for attracting highly qualified specialists from among compatriots to leadership and responsible positions in state and economic management bodies, local executive authorities and other state organizations, as well as engaging them as consultants or advisers. Second, the first-priority program approved by the resolution includes the creation of a database of Uzbek youth studying abroad to prepare proposals for their employment in Uzbekistan after graduation. These provisions show that the issue of employment after return was already included in the state policy on cooperation with compatriots abroad.

A later stage of this policy can be seen in measures aimed at young specialists with foreign education and academic degrees. Presidential Decree No. PD-6260 of 13 July 2021 introduced additional salary allowances for young specialists working in state bodies, organizations and institutions who graduated from foreign higher education institutions included in the top 300 of reputable international ranking organizations, or who obtained a PhD or equivalent academic degree from such institutions. These allowances are paid in addition to the official salary and are linked to the ranking position of the foreign university and the level of education or academic degree.

Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 101 of 7 March 2022 is important because it provides for the creation of the automated information system "Yosh vatandoshlar reyestri". The system is intended to support the registration of young compatriots and young specialists abroad and to facilitate communication between them and relevant state bodies and organizations in Uzbekistan. In this respect, the resolution introduces one of the first institutional tools aimed at identifying and engaging young Uzbek professionals abroad.

Available public information, however, indicates that the practical implementation of this mechanism remains incomplete ("El-yurt umidi" jamg'armasining yagona avtomatlashtirilgan axborot tizimi, n.d.). The Digital Government register describes the relevant "El-Yurt" information system as a system intended to maintain information on

compatriots who study, work, or reside abroad, provide access to electronic CVs, and support their employment after return. At the same time, the register indicates that the system/resource has not yet been implemented.

A more direct post-return employment mechanism was introduced by Presidential Decree No. PD-61 of 26 March 2025. According to this decree, scholarship holders who studied abroad through the El-Yurt Umidi Foundation are included in the national personnel reserve and are employed in state bodies, organizations and institutions without a competitive selection procedure. The rule provides a concrete employment pathway, although only for a defined category of returnees.

The same Decree introduced housing assistance for specialists under the age of 35 who had obtained a PhD or an equivalent academic degree from a foreign university included in the top 100 of recognized international rankings. From 1 June 2025, eligible specialists could receive financial support for purchasing housing for a period of ten years, in an amount not exceeding 2,150 times the basic calculation amount.

Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers №159 of 9 April 2026 was made in order to implement this measure. The procedure for providing mortgage loan to young specialists with degrees obtained at internationally recognized universities is approved here. The mortgage loan may be taken during ten years period and it does not exceed 2,150 of basic calculation amounts. The commercial bank provides the mortgage loan with the terms of 14 per cent per year, and the ministry is obliged to repay the interest from the State Budget.

The case of Tashkent State University of Law illustrates the application of foreign degrees in the process of recruiting. In accordance with the regulation approved by the Rector's Order № 60-um of 19 April 2023, some candidates are proposed for employment without competitive procedure. These candidates are Uzbek citizens who have successfully completed the master's program in the university which is rated as the top 500 universities according to Times Higher Education, QS or ARWU rating system, and those who have the PhD, DSc or an equivalent foreign degree in the universities ranked by these agencies as top 1000 universities.

Discussion

The findings help to explain how the return process is perceived by educated and well-educated migrants from Uzbekistan living in Japan. Return is not to be considered as a single event following education or the end of the period of employment. It is a decision that is constantly re-evaluated in terms of changes occurring in the course of migrants' education, work experience, family situation and relations with both countries. Previous studies have discussed various economic, social and institutional factors influencing migrants' return decision. In the context of interviews, it becomes clear how these factors interact throughout migrants' professional life.

Perhaps the most evident finding is the fluid nature of migrants' intentions to return. Migrants rarely arrive in Japan with a single fixed plan regarding whether and when they will return to Uzbekistan. Their decision-making evolves along with their education, entering the Japanese labour market, professional growth and changing family situation. The above conclusion coincides with the general body of migration research, which sees migration as a dynamic process that can change with time. For highly skilled migrants, this process can be particularly obvious since their professional options grow after graduation.

The interrelation between professional integration in Japan and intention to return is not as straightforward as a simple dichotomy between staying or leaving. While professional success and integration in Japan usually postpone the return, they at the same time enhance the knowledge, experience and professional abilities of the migrants, which

can one day be used in their mother country. Respondents commonly viewed their work in Japan as an investment, which can potentially benefit the home country. Professional integration therefore should not always be seen as a sign of decreased attachment to Uzbekistan. Participants maintained strong family, cultural and emotional ties during the process of building up a career in Japan.

The interviews further reveal the distinction between intention to return and ability to return. Many respondents were sincerely willing to move back one day. However, they viewed the possibility to successfully return to Uzbekistan conditional upon appropriate job opportunities, recognition of their qualifications and experience and ability to use the knowledge they gained abroad. Return decision therefore depends not only on personal preferences. It depends on whether the country of origin is ready to facilitate reintegration of its nationals into professional life.

As international experience suggests, the development-oriented use of return migration requires much more than the mere encouragement of citizens to return. The country can offer simplified residence and citizenship procedures, financial aid for relocation, assistance with housing or land allocation, financial assistance with settling, medical and social support for returnees and their families, employment services, language training, education and professional training programs.

The above examples make a more general point. The policy of return becomes really effective only when it is designed taking into account practical needs after the return rather than focusing only on the process of return itself.

The above conclusion is directly applicable to the current framework of Uzbekistan. The country has made significant efforts to involve its citizens and compatriots abroad. However, these efforts should not be seen as a whole return-migration policy, but rather as the basis of such a policy.

Presidential Resolution No. PD-3982 of 25 October 2018 establishes the basis of the country's policy towards compatriots abroad. As concerns the present study, its importance lies in its recognition of two particular problems. First, Uzbekistan does not make sufficient use of the potential of compatriots living abroad. Second, there is no system to work with Uzbek students abroad and employ them after return. By introducing the provision on the creation of a database of Uzbek young people studying abroad and the proposals regarding their future employment, the Resolution shows that the problem of the post-return employment had been identified in 2018.

However, it does not introduce a detailed mechanism addressing all the reintegration process. There is no indication of how to identify highly skilled professionals abroad, verify their education and work experience, how to match them with potential employers and how to incorporate foreign work experience the national labour market a complete absence of legal framework.

The second issue is related to the selectivity of many current support measures. The benefits are usually provided only for a certain category of people: scholarship recipients, young specialists, graduates of foreign universities, graduates of top universities. This is quite helpful, but not everybody who can be called a highly skilled professional abroad belongs to any of these categories. The individual may have gained a lot of skills in Japan thanks to his/her employment, scientific research, entrepreneurship or practical skills obtained abroad, but not belong to the category of people receiving governmental support. In this case, valuable human capital acquired abroad remains outside of the current policy framework.

Brain gain should not be assessed exclusively in terms of physical return. An individual may return to Uzbekistan, but his/her usefulness to the country remains

questionable, if foreign education, work experience and professional skills are not effectively utilized. Legal obligation to return and reintegration are thus two different things. Legal duty to return will bring an individual back to the country, but it will not automatically mean employment, career development and utilization of the knowledge obtained abroad.

The significance of the “Yosh vatandoshlar reyestri” initiative is that it shows that Uzbekistan has already understood the necessity of identification and contacting the highly skilled professionals abroad. Therefore, the problem is not a legal framework, but its imperfect implementation.

Thus, the legal framework includes the important elements of reintegration policy, but they are not yet fully operational or a single process. This is why the main obstacle should be seen not as the lack of mechanisms, but as their incomplete implementation and fragmentation.

Another issue is that of legal certainty. Presidential Decree No. PD-61 mentions the “interest-free loan”. The implementing regulation, however, provides for the mortgage at 14 percent offered by the commercial bank, with reimbursement of all interests from the State Budget. From the viewpoint of the beneficiary, the scheme may function as an interest-free loan if the state promptly and fully pays for all interests. However, from the legal-drafting viewpoint, such discrepancy in the formulations creates legal uncertainty. The mechanism should be consistent in the description – either as the interest-free loan from the state or as the subsidized mortgage, in which case the state pays for all interests. Return-related benefits should be easy to understand, predict and apply. For the highly skilled professionals considering the return to their native country, clarity of their rights, procedures and possibilities can influence the decision considerably. Reintegration regulations therefore should minimize the vagueness and administrative discretion.

The above issues are of special relevance for highly skilled professionals living in Japan. Some of them study abroad under programs implying return, while others study or work without any legal obligation to do so. For the latter, the return is largely dependent on whether Uzbekistan is able to offer professional opportunities to returnees, recognizes the experience gained abroad and gives them proper access to the labour market. Such a policy should not depend only on the clauses of compulsory return or isolated benefits. It should create the conditions, under which return is both professional and institutionally supported.

The principal task of policy makers is thus to replace fragmented benefits with an integrated approach to reintegration. Such an approach will require a unified digital platform, transparent procedures for matching the applicants and vacancies, formal recognition of the foreign work experience and professional assistance after return. Only in this way can education and work abroad be turned into sustainable brain gain for Uzbekistan.

Conclusion

This paper addresses the issue of the return migration intentions of high-skilled Uzbek migrants in Japan throughout their education and career paths. Based on the results of qualitative interviews with migrants and key informants, the process of formation of intentions to return and the impact of career opportunities, family ties and institutional environment on return decisions have been analyzed.

The results of the study prove that return migration is a dynamic process which is based not only on personal preferences but on changing circumstances. Career integration may delay return migration, but does not mean de-linking from the home

country. Many respondents perceived their experience in Japan as a source of human capital which could potentially serve their motherland in future.

The results of the study also indicate that intention to return alone does not guarantee successful migration back to the home country. The key factor is availability of appropriate mechanisms of reintegration of returnees, including decent job opportunities which will allow making use of the returnees' skills and qualification, recognition of overseas education and experience, and appropriate institutions that will facilitate interaction between highly skilled specialists and the domestic labor market. Thus, promotion of foreign education requires certain support of graduates after return.

Uzbekistan has already adopted several measures that facilitate attraction and integration of highly qualified professionals who received education or gained working experience abroad. In particular, these include collaboration with compatriots abroad, support of foreign educated young specialists, employment benefits, housing-related benefits, and some mechanisms of registration and involvement of Uzbek professionals working abroad.

However, at present, the measures mentioned above do not constitute a systematic framework of return migration and professional reintegration of highly qualified workers. Mostly, they represent separate incentives for particular categories of population, for example, graduates of El-Yurt Umidi programme, foreign educated young specialists, or professionals working in state bodies. They do not involve all highly qualified compatriots abroad, in particular those studying or working in Japan within the frames of programmes which do not require their return.

Thus, what is currently missing is not a lack of legal policy framework but a full-fledged and efficient reintegration mechanism which would enable highly qualified professionals abroad to get registered, to check their education and employment history, to find transparent employment opportunity, to have their foreign working experience recognized, and to integrate it into the national labor market.

Therefore, the current Uzbek policy can be viewed as an initial stage of formation of the brain-gain policy rather than its fully developed form. To make return migration a brain gain, a transition from separate incentives to a reintegration mechanism must be made. Return should be professionally significant, legally transparent, personally desirable, and institutionally enabled.

This paper is based on limited interview data and focuses on Japan. However, it provides the qualitatively rich perspective on the problem of return migration of highly qualified Uzbek professionals discussed widely in the existing literature.

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