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ACADEMIC MOBILITY MODELS AND THE FORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES IN TOURISM EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS IN THE KAZAKHSTANI CONTEXT

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Abstract: Tourism graduates are expected to combine language ability, intercultural sensitivity, technical know-how, and ethical judgement, yet research rarely asks which form of academic mobility best develops which of these capacities. This article addresses that gap through a comparative conceptual analysis. Using the literature on internationalisation, experiential learning, and intercultural competence, together with publicly available programme documents, it compares four mobility models available to students in Kazakhstan: state-funded long-term study (the Bolashak scholarship), Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility, internship-based mobility under partnership agreements, and short-term or virtual formats. The article proposes a competency–mobility fit matrix that links five groups of tourism competencies to these models and derives five propositions for empirical testing. The analysis suggests that no single model develops all competencies equally: long-term and credit-based study are strongest for linguistic, intercultural, and reflective growth, whereas industry placements are strongest for professional skills, and short-term formats require deliberate design to be effective. Universities are advised to build mobility portfolios rather than rely on one scheme.

Keywords: academic mobility; tourism education; professional competencies; Bolashak; Erasmus+; Kazakhstan; intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Tourism is a business of encounters between people who do not share a culture, a language, or a set of service expectations. A graduate who has only studied this industry inside a single national classroom may know its concepts but have limited practice in applying them across borders. Periods of study or work in another country are widely regarded as a remedy, and universities in Kazakhstan, as elsewhere, have expanded their mobility offer accordingly.

Most existing studies treat mobility as a single phenomenon and report average effects on skills or employability (Brandenburg et al., 2014; Jones, 2013). Less attention has been paid to the fact that mobility takes different forms, and that these forms may serve different educational purposes. A semester spent on a theoretical programme, a placement in a hotel, and a two-week online exchange are unlikely to develop the same capacities. For tourism programmes, which must

prepare students for both customer-facing practice and critical reflection on the industry, the question of fit is practical rather than academic.

This article therefore asks three research questions:

1. Which mobility models are realistically open to tourism students in Kazakhstan, and how do they differ in design?
2. Which groups of professional competencies is each model best placed to develop, according to the existing literature?
3. What follows for the design of mobility portfolios in tourism education?

The contribution is twofold. First, the article offers an analytical matrix that tourism educators can use to match mobility options with intended learning outcomes. Second, it translates general findings on mobility into propositions that can be tested empirically in later studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Internationalisation and the shift towards outcomes

Knight (2004) conceptualises internationalisation as the weaving of international and intercultural dimensions into the aims, activities, and delivery of higher education. Mobility is its most visible element. According to Teichler (2004), scholarly attention has moved away from counting exchange students towards examining what mobility actually achieves in terms of learning and later careers. This outcome-oriented view underpins the present analysis.

2.2. Learning from experience

In Kolb's (1984) model, learning proceeds through a cycle in which a concrete experience is observed, interpreted, generalised, and then tested in new action. Mobility creates frequent opportunities to enter this cycle, because routine tasks such as renting a room, ordering a meal, or following a lecture in another language become small experiments. Kuh (2008) includes both study abroad and workplace internships among high-impact practices, though he stresses that their value depends on quality of design, including feedback and reflection.

2.3. Intercultural competence

Byram (1997) distinguishes five components of intercultural communicative competence: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpretation and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Deardorff (2006) found in a study of higher education professionals that intercultural competence is increasingly treated as a core outcome of internationalisation, but that it cannot be assumed to arise simply because students are abroad. This caveat is central to the argument below.

2.4. The reflective tourism practitioner

Tribe (2002) argued that tourism education should go beyond vocational training and cultivate practitioners who can judge the social, ethical, and environmental effects of their decisions. If this aim is accepted, mobility should be assessed not only by the skills it provides but also by whether it widens students' understanding of how tourism functions in different societies.

3. Methodology

The study is a conceptual and document-based comparative analysis; it does not report primary data. The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the competencies expected of tourism graduates were grouped into five categories on the basis of the frameworks reviewed in Section 2. Second, four mobility models were identified from public information on programmes available to students in Kazakhstan, including official programme websites and national and international media reports. Third, the models were compared on six design features: typical duration, funding, selection, presence of a work-based component, recognition of credits, and opportunity for structured reflection. Fourth, on the basis of the literature, the expected contribution of each model to each competency group was assessed qualitatively as strong, moderate, or limited.

The resulting ratings are analytical judgements, not measurements. Their purpose is to organise existing knowledge and generate testable propositions. The limitations of this approach are discussed in Section 5.1.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Mobility models available in Kazakhstan

The Bolashak International Scholarship, established in 1993, is the best-known state mobility programme. Reported figures indicate that it had produced 12,731 graduates over its first thirty years (Astana Times, n.d.), and that scholarship holders are required to return and work in Kazakhstan after completing their studies (Astana Times, n.d.). For 2026, 635 scholarships were reported, of which 20 were for bachelor's, 400 for master's, and 50 for doctoral programmes (KGMU, 2026); applications were accepted until 16 October 2026 (Ivannikova, 2026). Applicants study at institutions on an approved list (Bolashak Center for International Programs, n.d.). Whether tourism and hospitality fall within the priority fields should be checked against each year's official list.

Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (ICM) is the principal European scheme open to Kazakh universities. It supports exchange of students and staff between Kazakh and European institutions, normally for a semester or an academic year, with credits earned abroad recognised at home. During 2015–2018, ICM projects involving Kazakh universities received 11.3 million euros and funded the mobility of 3,224 students and staff, and Kazakh institutions accounted for 65 percent of the Central Asian ICM budget (Astana Times, 2019).

Two further models complete the picture. Internship-based mobility under bilateral agreements places students for several months in hotels, travel companies, or destination management organisations in another city or country. Short-term and virtual formats include summer schools, study tours, and online joint courses. Specific figures for these formats vary by university and are not aggregated nationally, so they are described here in general terms.

Table 1. Comparison of mobility models for tourism students in Kazakhstan

Feature	Bolashak scholarship	Erasmus+ ICM	Internship-based (bilateral)	Short-term / virtual
Typical duration	Full degree programme or research internship	One semester to one year	Several months	Days to a few weeks
Funding	State scholarship	EU grant via partner project	University, employer, or student	Often self-funded or low-cost
Selection	Highly competitive; return obligation	Competitive within each university	Depends on agreement	Usually open or lightly selective
Work component	Limited, unless research internship	Limited	Central	Rare
Credit recognition	Degree awarded abroad	Credits recognised at home	Varies by agreement	Varies
Main strength	Depth; long immersion	Language and academic exposure with home credit	Direct professional practice	Accessibility
Main constraint	Very few places; strict selection	Limited places per partner	Quality depends on employer	Shallow exposure without design

Source: author's synthesis based on the sources cited in Section 4.1.

4.2. Competency–mobility fit matrix

Five groups of competencies are used in the matrix. Linguistic and communication competencies cover professional use of foreign languages, negotiation, and service communication. Intercultural competencies cover knowledge of cultural norms, sensitivity to guests' expectations, and work in multicultural teams. Professional and technical competencies include destination management, hospitality operations, tour design, booking systems, and service quality standards. Personal and transferable competencies include adaptability, independence, resilience, and problem

solving. Reflective and ethical competencies concern critical thinking and responsible approaches to tourism development (Tribe, 2002).

Table 2. Expected contribution of mobility models to competency groups (analytical assessment)

Competency group	Bolashak	Erasmus+ ICM	Internship-based	Short-term / virtual
Linguistic and communication	Strong	Strong	Strong	Limited
Intercultural	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate
Professional and technical	Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Limited
Personal and transferable	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate
Reflective and ethical	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Note: ratings are qualitative judgements derived from the literature (Section 3) and are intended as hypotheses, not empirical findings.

4.3. Discussion and propositions

Reading Tables 1 and 2 together suggests five propositions.

P1. Long immersion favours language and intercultural development. Students who live and study for months in another language environment meet professional vocabulary in genuine situations, which is difficult to replicate at home. This supports the expectation of strong linguistic and intercultural outcomes for Bolashak and ICM (Byram, 1997; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008).

P2. Workplace placements are the strongest route to professional competencies. Only the internship-based model puts students inside real tourism enterprises, where they encounter service standards, technology, and management routines that may differ from home practice. In Kolb's (1984) terms, this model combines concrete experience with active experimentation.

P3. Intercultural gains depend on guided reflection, not on presence alone. Deardorff (2006) cautions against assuming that time abroad automatically produces intercultural competence. Therefore, any model without mentoring, diaries, or portfolios is likely to underperform its potential, including the internship model, which is why it receives only a moderate rating for reflective competencies.

P4. Reflective and ethical competencies benefit from academic depth. Degree-level study abroad, which allows exposure to different theoretical traditions and to alternative tourism development models, is best placed to support the philosophic practitioner ideal (Tribe, 2002).

P5. Short-term and virtual formats extend access but need deliberate design. They cannot replace long mobility for deep skills, yet they reach students who cannot go abroad for financial or personal reasons. Their educational value rises when tied to explicit outcomes and reflective tasks, which responds to the equity concerns raised by Teichler (2004).

Taken together, the propositions imply that tourism programmes should think in terms of a portfolio. A student might move through a short virtual project early in the degree, a credit-based semester later, and an industry placement near graduation. Such sequencing would allow each model to contribute what it does best while limiting dependence on scarce, highly competitive scholarships.

4.4. Recommendations for tourism programmes

4. **Map learning outcomes to mobility types.** Use a matrix such as Table 2 when advising students and when negotiating partnership agreements.
5. **Secure recognition in advance.** Agree course equivalence and credit transfer before departure, in line with the principles of credit mobility.
6. **Pair study with placements.** Develop agreements with hotels, tour operators, and destination organisations abroad so that students who study can also practise.

7. **Build reflection into every format.** Provide pre-departure briefing, mentoring during the stay, and assessed portfolios or reports on return (Deardorff, 2006; Kolb, 1984).

8. **Prepare students linguistically.** Offer courses in tourism-specific foreign-language communication before mobility.

9. **Widen access.** Combine scholarships with short-term and virtual options so that financial barriers do not exclude capable students.

10. **Use returning students.** Involve them as peer advisers and as contributors to curriculum review.

11. **Track results.** Collect data on competency development, satisfaction, and graduate careers to inform the next cycle of planning (Kuh, 2008).

5. Conclusion

5.1. Limitations and future research

The study has four main limitations. It is conceptual and relies on secondary sources; it contains no primary data from students or employers. The programme information comes from public documents and media reports, which may be incomplete or change from year to year. The ratings in Table 2 are qualitative judgements and may differ among assessors. Finally, the analysis concentrates on Kazakhstan and may not transfer directly to other national settings.

Future research should test the propositions empirically, for instance through surveys of tourism students with and without mobility experience, interviews with employers, and comparison of competency self-assessments before and after different mobility types. Longitudinal studies of graduates would clarify whether the advantages in Table 2 persist in careers.

5.2. Concluding remarks

This article has argued that the question for tourism education is not whether to promote academic mobility but which kinds of mobility to combine. Comparison of four models available in Kazakhstan suggests that immersion-based study is particularly valuable for language, intercultural, and reflective development, industry placements for professional skills, and short or virtual formats for access. The competency–mobility fit matrix offers a practical tool for planning and a basis for future empirical work. Mobility yields the greatest educational return when it is planned around learning outcomes, supported by structured reflection, and connected with the realities of the tourism industry.

Statements and Declarations

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