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# Chapter 1

## Educating the Central Asian Librarian: Considering the International MLIS in Kazakhstan

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Why do Central Asian librarians enter the profession, and how do they decide which educational strategies to pursue in developing their careers? Using 13 conversations and 10 qualitative interviews with Kazakh and Kyrgyz librarians, this chapter finds that librarians enter the profession due to personal interest, by happenstance, or for university funding and continue when they perceive an opportunity for career growth as well as salary mobility. Central Asian librarians evaluate their educational options, including local bachelor's degrees; distance education from Russia; MLIS programs in Asia, Europe, or America; and short-term online training, while balancing family responsibilities and career prospects in and outside of librarianship. Prospects for creating a local MLIS or other improved professional training programs are discussed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Librarianship has a long history in Central Asia, flourishing in medieval Bukhara, and praised by scholars of the time such as Avicenna. But the experience of recent librarians in the region has been rockier, as stable Soviet employment shifts to

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stagnating wages and pensions in the post-Soviet era. Modern library administrators who seek to recruit and retain talented librarians are constrained by bureaucratic structures that limit the pay and incentives they can offer. And contemporary professionals pursue library education while evaluating their career against their marketability in comparable careers and their own changing personal needs. At what point, then, do Central Asian librarians seek out a professional education, and how can we improve education in the region? This chapter uses face-to-face and online interviews with librarians from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to explore how librarians enter the career, make educational choices, and balance career objectives with economic and family pressures common to the region.

Most contemporary libraries in the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan were founded during the Soviet era, at a time when communist librarians were expected to support political goals (Anghelescu, Lukenbill, Lukenbill, & Owens, 2009), goals such as public education and scientific progress (Zverevich, 2014). Yet Soviet librarians were also expected to limit access to approved readers depending on their rank, connections, or social status (Vaiseta, 2012).

As Zazersky (1974) outlines, Soviet librarians were to promote “Marxist-Leninist ideas, and scientific and technological achievements, devoting their efforts to harmonious development of the individual” (1974, p. 222). Aspiring librarians from the Central Asian republics could attend teachers’ training colleges in Tashkent and or Alma-Ata, study at one of 23 higher education institutions in the Russian Federation, or attend lectures in Tashkent, Shymkent, Frunze [Bishkek], and Alma-Ata, by visiting library science professors (Zazersky, 1974, p. 221). When the Tajik SSR’s new state library was opened in 1954, librarians were required to have a library education, a specialized secondary education, or at least to have worked in the library field for ten years (Mamadzimova, 2018). Soviet librarians controlled access to information as well as to the indexes used to locate books (Kasinec, 2001), and yet could also subvert government directives by showing selected readers the full catalog of restricted books (Rogachevskii, 2002). Indeed, some post-Soviet archives still require documented scholarly affiliations (*razreshenie*) before providing access to researchers (Rosenberg, 2001).

Even after 1991, post-Soviet librarians have relatively low pay and status (Benz, 2009). Central Asian librarians in particular work under lingering Soviet models of closed stacks and control of books (cf. King, Dowding, & Pflager, 2013) in spite of a growing pressure to adopt international models for librarian education and professional conduct. For instance, at independence, Kazakhstan had the advantage of 99% literacy rates and a good infrastructure, yet it is still striving for the goal of “establishing research and innovation as a key driver of economic growth” (OECD, 2017, p. 3). As with the other republics, Kazakhstan struggles to

maintaining publishing output and readership in a digital age, publishing 1223 new books in 1999 (Rondestvedt, 2007). Kazakh librarians collect books published by local publishing houses such as *Asyl soz*, *Zhibek zholi*, *Azia arna*, *Aiganym*, *Dauir-Kitap*, *Kainar baspasi*, *Kazakh encyclopediasi*, *Mektep*, *Balalar adebieti*, *Foliant*, *Zhalyn*, and *Almatikitap* (Tukpiyev 2018), and benefit from trade periodicals such as *Kitaphana*, *Kitaphana Alemi*, *Kitap Patshalygy*, *Kazakhstan Kitaphanalary*, and *Kitap & Kitaphana*, in orienting themselves to new professional trends (Imanyuskova, 2015, Altinsarin Library, n.d.).

Within Kazakhstan, one survey of curricula for a library science master's noted the need to meet strict Russian and Kazakh accreditation standards, while juggling tensions between global information science *concepts* and local perceptions of what a librarian *does* and why (Champeny & Bergalieva, 2006). At present, Kazakhstan offers 10 bachelor's degree programs in library science (*bibliotechnoye delo*, 5B091000): at Al-Farabi University, Central Asian University, and Kazakhstan Women's Pedagogical University in Almaty; Kokshetau State University; Pavlodar State University; South Kazakhstan State University in Shymkent, West Kazakhstan University in Uralsk; Ak-meshit Technical Institute and at Bolashak University in Qyzylorda; and at Zhambul State University in Taraz (EDU RK, 2014). There are also two locally accredited master's programs in library science (*bibliotechnoye delo*, 6M091000) at Pavlodar State University and South Kazakhstan State University (EDU RK, 2014).

In Uzbekistan, reports state that libraries have limited budgets to buy new books or protect them from theft, and publishers struggle to find financing apart from the government (Johnson, 2013). Bookstore selections are limited, as authors pay to be published; libraries may be asked to withdraw books about communism, just as they were once asked to restrict anti-Soviet books (St. Germain, 2002). Fewer Uzbek librarians hold a formal library education now, and Uzbekistan relies on outside experts to teach marketing and digital library courses (Rahmatullaev, Ganieva, & Khabibullaev, 2017). In 2018, five thousand Uzbek students applied for two hundred state scholarships to study in Russia, of which 32 hoped to study mass media or library science (Sputnik Uzbekistan, 2018).

In Turkmenistan, librarians may start at a salary of \$80 per month, moving to \$160 as a head librarian, yet books remain too expensive for many households and scientific publications are limited (Richardson, 2006). In a recent update, the government continues to restrict import of books or periodicals as well as internet use (Richardson, 2013). At the Turkmen State Institute of Culture's library school, applicants must share why they seek a career in librarianship, and the school assesses "what image of a librarian the student might wish to project, as well as how they feel about books and information technology, in particular"; the school admitted 35 LIS students in 2012 (Richardson, 2013, p. 246). At the library school, seven full-time

faculty teach courses on the book trade, archives, museums, cataloging, children's literature, automation, and reference (Richardson, 2006).

As a mountainous country, Tajikistan has limited television, radio, and newspaper access in rural areas. The country has a Library Society of Tajikistan (Aslitudinova, 2001), but I could not find evidence of an active MLS program. Julie Anderson, an American librarian who lived in Tajikistan from 2003-2005, reported that after independence, rural "librarians had experienced the raw end of tiny salaries, unheated and un-air conditioned buildings and no money for collection development. Most of the librarians I met were trying to supplement their income with hoeing cotton (Tajikistan), knitting garments (Kyrgyzstan), and basic farming" (Gibney, 2007). After economic setbacks, the Tajik government advertised the restoration of libraries and the return of librarians to work in 1332 libraries nationwide—although in remote areas, some small libraries are located in private houses (Khasanova, 2010).

The Kyrgyz Republic has an undergraduate library science program at Bishkek Humanities University (Pun, 2018), although libraries in the country often continue to be closed-stacks and focused on literature and textbooks (Salisbury, 2014). A library director in Bishkek reports that Kyrgyz libraries in the 1990s faced a "lack of funding, limited resources, a decrease of interest in libraries," leading librarians to develop a Library and Information Consortium of Kyrgyzstan and to invest in a national electronic library as well as national and regional collaborations (Bekbalaeva, 2017, p. 110).

## **Methods**

This chapter expands the author's prior survey of librarians (Emmelhainz & Bukhtoyarova, 2016) at a national library in Kazakhstan to interview a range of academic librarians from the region. While on a cultural exchange to Kazakhstan in 2018, the author spoke with 13 librarians about their career choices, taking notes with their permission towards a future research project. After receiving IRB approval to initiate a formal project, the author interviewed eight Kazakhstani and two Kyrgyzstani librarians over Google Hangouts between October 2018 and February 2019, as preliminary research towards a future in-person project. Each respondent discussed their choice to enter librarianship, the education they had considered or completed, and their future career plans. 23 transcripts were analyzed in MaxQDA for emergent themes, and the resulting draft was circulated to regional librarians for critique. This chapter explores preliminary themes and sets the stage for further research on librarianship as a profession in Central Asia.

## **Limitations**

The majority of respondents for this project were young Kazakh women living in urban centers, fluent in English and comfortable completing an interview online. The author sought funding to interview older, rural, and non-English-speaking librarians in person, but funders deemed online interviews to be sufficient for library ethnography. The resulting sample is not as systemic as hoped for. Future research by and with Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek librarians is needed.

## **LIBRARY EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA**

### **Entering the Library Profession in Kazakhstan**

Prior research suggests that younger Kazakh librarians report “falling” into librarianship as the result of geographic moves or family circumstances, while older librarians may have entered the profession with a sense of calling (Emmelhainz & Bukhtoyarova, 2016). These interviews suggest a third route, as post-Soviet librarians may enter the profession as a way to securing funding for higher education. I consider each in turn.

#### **Entering the Post-Soviet Library as a Calling**

While more common in an older generation provided with economic security by the Soviet state, younger professionals do seek out librarianship with a sense of intent. Bulbul,<sup>1</sup> for instance, enjoyed her school library and so looked for a bachelor’s program in library science—and her parents were pleased that her associated scholarship covered the cost of an undergraduate degree. Similarly, when Symbat had the opportunity to work either as a librarian or a translator, she chose libraries as a more meaningful path:

*That was a pivotal moment. I picked the library like I wasn’t even thinking about it. I knew it was something I really enjoyed, I knew I liked helping people.*

Both librarians expressed a strong attraction and commitment to their career, one picked up from early exposure to libraries in childhood and adolescence.

## Entering the Profession for Financial Aid

Others studied librarianship with the added nudge of a financial incentive. Limited government scholarships are one way that Kazakhstan has maintained enrollment in bachelors' of library science programs. As a teenager in western Kazakhstan, Lena dreamed of studying translation, but knew she would not be able to find a scholarship and that her parents couldn't fund her university studies:

*The government gives scholarship for specific professions, but if people are willing to pay, they won't give scholarships. I had to think rationally: I would never get the very high score [on entrance exams], so I started to think about other professions where I could at least get a high degree, a bachelor's degree.*

As Lena was deliberating, a library school professor suggested she enter a library program, fully paid for:

*So they met me and said, "I know, Lena, you are dreaming about faraway countries, but you have to think practically. You need to get a degree, and the government gives us lots of scholarships... The government basically gives money to our faculty, but we don't have enough students."*

As Lena explained, Kazakhstan gives around thirty bachelor's scholarships in library science each year across the nation, across ten state schools. With around three grants at each school and 8-10 applicants per grant, she had strong odds of being funded for a university degree. She agreed to apply to the library program, and won a scholarship to attend. She worked in a local library while studying for the bachelor's, and is now studying for a master's in library science in North America.

Lena further commented that tuition varies by the intended degree at some universities, so students who were paying their own way might study librarianship because the price of a bachelor's degree was lower than in other fields. Other students in her program believed promotional materials stating that a BLS would prepare them for secretarial or records management work in oil companies in western Kazakhstan, although they later found that those companies did not respect the BLS.

In nearby Kyrgyzstan, Cholpan saw some enterprising students enter library science in order to gain admission to the nation's top university—and then change to better-paying career paths when they could:

*They provide a full scholarship to study in this program, because being a librarian is not prestigious in our country and not a well-paid job. Students get a scholarship for their first year, and after the second year they can change their major. So it's kind*

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*of a tricky thing... they explain that they just want to get accepted by the university, and later they change.*

Some students, then, use scholarships or affordable tuition just long enough to gain admission to university or an affordable degree—but then leave the career. Others, like Lena, find that financial incentives lead them into a career which offers lasting satisfaction.

## **Entering the Profession by Accident**

Finally, a third group of librarians join the field accidentally, often after finishing another bachelor's degree. Bermet, for instance, applied to work at a top university library, hoping to move into teaching at that university later:

*I saw an announcement that they needed a librarian. And still I wanted to be a teacher. I was thinking, I can start from the librarian position and later on maybe I will have some opportunities for career growth.*

Yet after she became a librarian, Bermet stayed, and never moved into teaching.

Diana, on the other hand, was tending family and household responsibilities on the three-year maternity leave available to Kazakhstani women, yet wanted more adult interaction. When a relative shared their enjoyment of library work, it inspired her to enter the field:

*I was sitting at home, and my mother-in-law came from work and looked so happy. I decided I wanted to do the same, and not to be tired... I talked to the director who said, you can be a librarian and teach other librarians English... Then I was happy!*

Diana's library benefitted from the training a new librarian with foreign language skills could offer their existing staff, and Diana found a profession she could combine with her carework commitments at home.

Finally, Anara applied for a secretarial role at a growing university and—in a twist—was surprised to be hired as a librarian instead:

*I finished my grad school and my brother had a friend who told him they were hiring... I thought it was for a secretary type of position... They asked if I wanted to work for HR, but since I wasn't fluent in Kazakh, it seemed like my chances were lower. Then the manager asked if I would like to work at the library. She said they needed people with good communication skills in English. And I said I wouldn't mind working there. That's all, that's how I got hired.*



Yet Anara never fully connected with the profession, even as she took MLS courses online. During our interview, she shared that she had found a better fit in another career abroad. Having a desire to be a librarian seems related to the desire to stay, while those who join libraries for more pragmatic financial or work reasons may also find pragmatic reasons to look elsewhere.

But before discussing the specific educational options these Central Asian librarians selected among, it is worth noting the constraints they faced on selecting librarianship as a career—which also serve as barriers to library education.

## **Deterrents to Pursuing a Library Education in Central Asia**

Several library managers in Kazakhstan privately expressed that they found it hard to recruit and retain qualified librarians. Curious about these managerial challenges in recruiting and retaining professional librarians, I asked one former student worker if she would consider a career as a librarian. Yet Aidana declined. First, she noted that her parents expect her to work in a career with plenty of well-paid jobs, but libraries don't pay enough for her to rent or buy an apartment in most Kazakhstani cities.

Yet Aidana paused, noting that if other ambitious graduates overlook this career, it might give her a hidden opportunity:

*People in Kazakhstan don't go to become a librarian, which means it's not a very competitive field. Which means I could be very competitive, because I can speak English and I have a [top] degree... That could be nice. But it would take a long time for me to go up in my career and have a decent salary.*

After thinking it over, Aidana rejected librarianship as a career, believing it lacks the intellectual stimulation, social impact, income for her family, and return on investment in education that she needs to stay engaged over a lifetime. Yet ironically, academic library work *can* and does provide these benefits in other countries. This suggests that some challenges in recruitment and retention may come from *choices* that managers and institutions make around the structure of library jobs, rather than any problems inherent in the job itself.

### **Deterred by Negative Coverage of the Career in the Media.**

In her critiques, Aidana echoes media coverage of librarianship in Kazakhstan, suggesting that news sources may discourage some young professionals from entering the field. In 2013, Kazakhstan's then Executive Secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Information, Zhanna Kurmangaliyeva, expressed concern that only 14% of librarians are younger adults (Tengri News, 2013), while Zhanna Shaimukhanbetova

warned that the educational costs and low salaries would deter “qualified, highly professional specialists” from entering the field (2012). In a public speech, Kazakhstani Member of Parliament Nurlan Dulatbekov noted that “the salary of librarians is one of the lowest in the country and is significantly inferior to the salary of teachers and doctors, although the social significance [of the profession] is equivalent” (Aitzhanova, 2018). While such advocacy is aimed to *increase* librarians’ salaries, a public emphasis on low pay and status without immediate action to bring about equality may simply reduce the status of the profession further, and discourage skilled professionals from entering the career.

In another web article, Maral Kurakbaevna counters Kazakhstani stereotypes of a librarian as “a woman in a warm vest, with a cup of tea in her hands,” by stating that modern librarians wear fashionable clothes and heels. Yet she notes that they dress this way on \$100 USD per month, rising to \$150 USD after 30 years’ experience (Abilmazhitova, 2018). This is in Nur-Sultan, a city where a one-bedroom apartment costs \$600 a month—suggesting that Aidana’s perceptions of slow raises and limited opportunities for an urban lifestyle are accurate.<sup>2</sup>

Such discouraging media coverage is compounded by articles predicting the demise of Kazakh libraries more generally. Publisher Boris Kupriyanov states that “search engines compile a bibliography better than libraries” (Mazorenko, 2016), seemingly unaware that most bibliographic indexes in the region are still entered by hand. Journalist Irina Kurbanova lists librarianship as one of “five professions the internet killed,” due to digitization (2016). Yet digitizing the wealth of Central Asia’s print heritage, building and sustaining online repositories, and curating online exhibits will require more technically-skilled librarians than ever before.

Local librarians are aware of this need for advocacy and collaboration. At Library-Connect 2018, the director of the National Library of Uzbekistan suggested developing a union catalog for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which would require investment in new training, standards, and infrastructure. This is an area ripe for legislative support, grant funding, and advocacy across all five countries.

### **Deterred by Experiences of low pay and Status.**

While local media echoes what Fobazi Ettarh calls “vocational awe” (2018) in praising librarians who fulfill a calling despite low pay and respect, these economic realities often scare young librarians away. Library director Gulbadan Madibaeva comments that “we really have a shortage of personnel. The library specialty isn’t considered prestigious, in the sense that it’s a low paid job... for modern youth, it is primarily important how much money is paid for work” (Tukpiyev, 2018).

In this post-Soviet economy, this concern is wise. Without Soviet-era or western European cradle-to-grave social provisioning for families, the responsibility to provide

for children, aging parents, and their own education may fall on the shoulders of the young librarian alone. Young professionals thus need to attract a high salary to support an extended family, meaning that countries which want to retain technically-skilled librarians need to invest in their education and pay them well.

How much librarians are paid relative to other careers does affect how much it is wise for them to invest in their own careers. As Lena comments,

*After graduation everyone gets hired. The town's library will give you a job, they will hire you. But their salary was 12,000 tenge [\$40 USD per month]. You compare with who else is getting the same money: with the small grocery shop you can get the same salary, but in a grocery shop you get some food at a discount or something. Being a librarian you don't get anything [laughs].*

Low starting salaries and limited advancement may lead librarians to retrain for job markets that pay more highly, especially if they possess technical or language skills valued by nonprofits, businesses, or international organizations. One librarian recalled being surprised at an interview where they were asked,

*Hey, why do you want to work in a library? You have English, you could do anything!*

The implication is that her language skills would bring more pay and opportunity elsewhere. Likewise, a library manager reported that it was hard to retain their best librarians, even with a relatively high salary. Librarians left to use their skills in better opportunities in related sectors.

### **Deterred by Career Plateauing.**

Finally, librarians may leave the field or defer a library education if they do not see a way to continue developing their skills, salary, and social impact over time. Zhennat reported feeling discouraged when she saw a friend study abroad and then return to an entry-level library job in Kazakhstan:

*She was excited about her education at a top accredited university... She started to give advice [but] some people didn't like her because she was ambitious, she wanted to do something here.*

When Zhennat saw a local librarian unable to put her international MLS to use, she wondered if she should even continue as a librarian herself. Librarians in Central Asia, then, may be deterred from investing in the developing their own skills by negative popular opinion, low pay and status, a low return on investment, and the

potential of a quick plateau in salary or career opportunities. These concerns are sensible, and until these systemic factors are addressed, greatly expanding graduate education in libraries in Central Asia is unlikely to be successful.

## **Considering the Central Asian Library Degree**

The most common option for library education within Central Asia is the bachelor's degree. Kazakhstan, for instance, has an estimated 9,000 librarians in a country of 18 million people; a quarter of these librarians have a bachelor's in library science and 30% have a technical college certificate (Shaimukhanbetova, 2012). Prime Minister Imangali Tasmagambetov reports that ten universities graduate 193 new librarians a year, with 35 undergraduates and 4 master's students receiving national scholarships (2016). The local curriculum teaches automation, electronic libraries, cataloging, book history, document processing, indexing, marketing, management, regulations, and services for children and adolescents (Tasmagambetov, 2016), and most graduates who continue on in libraries work in one of the 4,000 public libraries in the country (Tengri News, 2014).

## **Perceptions of Local Library Education as Outdated**

Several librarians interviewed for this project see the local bachelors in library science as outdated and needing a revision in order to prepare contemporary librarians. However, they worked in major libraries in urban centers such as Nur-Sultan (Astana), Almaty, and Bishkek, and may have an international orientation differing from the experiences of other librarians in the region. Lena, for instance, was not fond of her local library classes:

*It was a very conservative faculty with lots of theory fundamentals. Most of the program hadn't been changed for years and years... To me it was so boring, I was basically dragging myself through the course. And everybody who knew me knew how I felt. But we had an English course there [brightens up]. It was the same thing in every single class, Gutenberg and how he made his first book, I don't even remember.*

Lena is now passionate and engaged after she encountered a more patron-centered model of librarianship. Bulbul likewise felt that library programs developed in the Soviet era weren't preparing new librarians for high-tech and globally-networked work:

*It's totally from the Soviet Union. Disciplines like library science are the same worldwide. But they are not changing their programs to include information science and IT, and they're not providing information about standards of cataloging from*

*the Library of Congress. They're providing only from the Soviet Union classification. When the students finish this program and come to our library, they will be lost.*

Given the growing importance of interoperable standards and linked metadata, Bulbul was concerned that locally-trained students might not be ready to work at top libraries in the region.

## Studying for a Second Degree Abroad

Given these differences in pedagogy and content, some librarians complete a BLS, currently the local terminal degree for a professional librarian, but then move into more international circles and go on to study for an international master's in library science. Cholpan believed the Kyrgyz curriculum lacked training on digital methods, so looked for an American MLS:

*The education is not so comprehensive in Kyrgyzstan. When I reviewed their curriculum and syllabi, I realized that it's outdated Soviet style teaching... Their syllabus had nothing about databases, e-resources, or digital humanities. That was why I applied to the American library schools: because of the lack of opportunities to get this degree in Kyrgyzstan.*

In addition, Cholpan wanted a master's rather than a bachelor's, reflecting the worldwide shift to the master's as the gold standard in library education (Swigger, 2010). Yet if employers require a masters, it can represent a poor return on investment, especially for workers who anticipate low future wages. It can also marginalize working-class students without the means to pay for six years of higher education in order to work in a provincial library.

## Gaining an MLS through Distance Education from Russia

Some Kazakhstani librarians working in the northern capital of Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) have chosen to take distance education courses from Chelyabinsk State University in Russia. This program allows Kazakhstani citizens to take one or two years of master's courses at a distance, interspersed with exams in person. Diana received an MLS this way, taught in Russian, for less than \$2000 USD:

*I already have my master's degree for library science through Chelyabinsk. They have a branch in another city of Kazakhstan, so every six months we went there to pass all the exams. It was two and a half years of study, and at the end I wrote a*

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*thesis. They raise the cost every year but for me it was 50,000 rubles per year. I was studying two and a half years, so that was 125,000 rubles [\$1914] total.*

This is 2-10% of the cost of an American MLS, yet still a significant investment for a Kazakhstani librarians earning \$100-400 a month. Yet after Diana met colleagues with European and Asian MLS degrees, she's now questioning the value of her Russian education, which focused on "the old-fashioned library, what is a library in general, and cataloging." She is now thinking of a *second* international MLS, this time from a country further abroad. This reframing of her experience resembles the process of religious conversion (a professional-values conversion?), as social connections lead her to rethink and change how she values her own past experience.

Mira is another Kazakhstani librarian who is studying at Chelyabinsk but has begun to doubt its value, perhaps due to conversation circulating among her colleagues:

*Now I'm studying at Chelyabinsk University for a masters of librarianship. But our professors, they don't talk about data management, don't talk about e-resources, about databases. They just taught us traditional Soviet library, about history of libraries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example.*

Yet not everyone thinks regional degrees are of lesser quality. Lena, a Kazakhstani citizen who grew up near the Russian border, respects the deep heritage of library education in Russia:

*Lots of librarians in Uralsk are like my mom's generation. They got their education in St. Petersburg, which has a library faculty with a long history. And there's one in Moscow as well. Another of my mom's friends worked in a library in Russia for many years. Russia does prepare lots of specialties.*

Yet even Lena chose to study for her MLS in North America rather than Russia. That may have less to do with how she personally values each country's education system, though, and more with how the culture around her overvalues Anglophone education—a discussion to which we now turn.

## **Benefits of Pursuing the International MLS**

Rather than seek a high-quality education within the region, many Central Asian librarians with strong language skills look further abroad for a library education. This allows them to travel, learn rare skills, and prepare to assume leadership roles when they return—if they have the right connections. Yet the benefits of these

foreign degrees are distributed unequally, with western recipients benefiting more than Central Asians from the same coursework. These themes are outlined below.

### The Benefit of Travel.

Zhennat hoped to study abroad in order to show her children a different world, while Bulbul was studying English in order to apply for scholarships in America and Europe. When I asked why she hoped to attend a European instead of an Asian library school, she laughed and said she'd applied to schools across Asia, America, and Europe, including China and Thailand. Her broad geographic interests suggest that part of the value of an international MLS is in the chance to travel and experience the world, both for the librarian and her family.

### The Benefit of Building a Network.

Bulbul also hopes to build a strong network by studying abroad in person, meeting a wide range of librarians and gaining their friendship. Aizhan found such networks helpful when she returned from an MLS abroad and encountered what I call *passport discrimination*. When she was offered lower wages for the same training and experience that foreign librarians also bring from abroad, due to holding a local passport, her network of mentors coached her on how to stay professional during a period of professional frustration.

### The Benefit of Absorbing Library Values.

Bota praised Russia's libraries for their progressive meeting of social needs through community-centered programming (Mikhnova, 2018)—but librarians like Cholpan still sought out western degrees because of a perception that western countries are more community-focused:

*LIS in Russia is maybe a little better than in Kyrgyzstan because they have more financial support from the government, but how they serve communities is not as good as Europe or the US. For me, the good public and academic libraries are in the US, Canada, the UK, and European countries. I had a clear intention of which countries I would like to go based on how they serve communities and what feedback they have from the people they are serving.*

This seems to be a matter of perception, yet the fact that multiple respondents believed western countries had more patron-centered values is notable. This belief that the West had better *values* was linked to the belief that library schools in the

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US and UK offered the highest *value* (cf. Graeber, 2002). Curiously, no librarian considered MLS programs in Australia, even though the country offers similar training and high-prestige English language practice as the United States, Canada, and England.

### **The Benefit of Gaining Technical or Language Knowledge.**

Bulbul hoped to gain technical knowledge from an international MLS, learning digital skills that she can take back to her home community. Cholpan likewise selected technical courses in her international coursework, including digital humanities, e-resources, data analysis, and research methods. And Samal recalled that when she studied in America,

*It was a different way to study... You should find a way to solve problems from your head. The western style of education makes you think more logically and solve different problems.*

This challenged her, and she now wants her staff to go abroad and learn to think in similar ways. Finally, studying abroad lets librarians deepen their language knowledge. Cholpan is open to learning any language, but applied to an English-speaking country in part to practice her skills in an “English curriculum.”

### **The International MLS as a Step into Management.**

In addition to learning critical thinking, and technical and language skills, Central Asian librarians saw an MLS from select English-speaking countries as a path to library management. As Cholpan commented:

*I started seeing that I have a lack of knowledge in library management. And we don't have many professional development opportunities in Kyrgyzstan. I wanted something really well planned. Getting a degree wasn't my main desire, but knowledge which will help me to perform my duties.*

While Cholpan said she didn't need a degree, gaining a high-status degree from the US will help her to stand out. One manager reflected on which librarians could move up by saying,

*I think [Librarian A] can be a good library director, she's finishing her library degree abroad. And [Librarian B], she's very good, she has a bachelor's in IT and a master's in library science.*



Having an international degree made both of these librarians notable. Another librarian shared the gossip that a Kyrgyz university was hiring librarians bilingual in English and Russian, who had an American or British MLS—a specific set of qualifications that would exclude most local librarians.

Yet even if local candidates do acquire an American or British MLS, it is unclear whether local employers will evaluate them equitably—a concern we consider below.

## The Quest for Status, Ratings, and an Anglophone Bias

Given that librarians could study for an excellent library degree in East Asia or Eastern Europe, part of the drive to study in imperial centers like the US and UK seems to be the prestige attached to colonist countries. These countries and their companies still maintain a linguistic and economic domination worldwide—including in libraries and library services. Bermet, for instance, looked for an MLS in North America or England but would not consider Asia, while Diana said she was open to any country, but believed the US and UK were best.

Some Kazakhstani librarians in Nur-Sultan (Astana) learned these values from Aliya Sarsembinova, a dynamic library director who mentored a generation of librarians. One recalled how Aliya pushed her staff to study English,

*When I came here, Aliya Nurahimovna said, “You should get a master’s degree in librarianship first, and then you should read articles about libraries and librarianship, yes, read books in English.”*

And another noted that Aliya wanted her protégés to study abroad, specifically in America:

*The difference of why not Asia? [half smile] Ah, because of the ratings, I guess. The US library schools have good ratings, and Canada and England. I’m looking to get a good knowledge of best practices. And Aliya also wanted everyone to go to the US. I’ve heard a lot from her that it doesn’t make sense to study in Kazakhstan for a masters.*

As discussed below, Aliya advocated for local professional development, while also sending her librarians abroad for training that would result in high levels of knowledge and social capital. These interviews suggest that even after she has passed away, her influence continues.

## **Disadvantages of the International MLS**

Libraries benefit from sending their employees abroad to learn, and librarians can gain a new perspective—yet there are also disadvantages to focusing only on master's degrees from outside the region as a signal of quality education. These include high costs, language barriers, and limited return on investment, especially for librarians who encounter stagnant pay and organization charts, as well as bureaucratic barriers to implementing the skills they gained. This is made worse by the *passport penalty* regional librarians experience when they receive a lower salary for a foreign degree than an international librarian with the same training and experience. We consider each in turn.

### **High Cost Relative to Local Salaries**

International library programs cost much more than regional degrees, yet offer few scholarships to Central Asian applicants—despite their limited ability to invest in the training they will use to develop information infrastructure in the region. Bermet, for instance, applied for the Chevening scholarship from Britain as well as an American Fulbright grant, and was waiting on results as we spoke. She could not otherwise afford to pay international tuition while also providing for a family. Valeria, on the other hand, left libraries entirely when she could find no funding for an MLS and limited prospects for advancement:

*I was ambivalent on, should I get an international MLS or not? When I started seriously considering it, I saw that since it wasn't a PhD program, there was no scholarship. I would pay all of it from my pocket.*

Diana hopes to study abroad but needs funding for tuition as well as a means to support her spouse and children if she has to leave her job behind. She met with officers of an MLS program in East Asia, but learned she'd need fluency in a new Asian language to get a scholarship, and that the program offered no family housing.

When Central Asian librarians can complete a master's from Chelyabinsk for two thousand dollars, the twenty to fifty thousand dollars required to move and study abroad is hard to justify. Yet most competitive national or international grants do not cover a full masters, don't include librarianship as a priority course of study, or place librarians in competition with engineers and science PhDs for a limited number of national grants. These librarians apply repeatedly to scholarships for European and American programs, until they find an international MLS they can afford. Given the local hiring bias towards American and UK MLS degrees, the fact

that applicants hold off on studying until they win grants to study in high prestige countries is sensible—but can put the date of study years in the future.

## Passport Penalties and Passport Dividends

Compounding the higher cost of an international MLS is the lower rate of return it offers a Central Asian citizen. At present, North American and Southeast Asian MLS holders can earn \$3000 per month at some of the top regional libraries, while Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani librarians who were trained in the same roles will make much less as a virtue of the passport they hold. Such a multi-tiered system discourages librarians from pursuing top-tier education. It also creates a management challenge for library managers, who face pressure from administrators above to control costs, while hearing frustrations from below from regional librarians who find this *distributive* or *procedural injustice* to be demotivating (cf. Bonanche, 2006). Nargiza spoke to this sense of injustice by saying,

*You remember that they promoted the MLIS for every librarian? But our librarian went to the US and spent two years of her life and earned this diploma and came back. And they said, we can't give you a high salary. So what is the purpose of spending two years of your life, kerek emes bolyp kaldy [it wasn't necessary]? It was unfair. So it was a freak idea—they didn't need these specialists. I wanted this MLS, but I don't see myself in librarianship now. What is your suggestion—should I stay?*

Nargiza was discouraged when one of her friends was told she could work on “things that matter” if only she gained a foreign degree—but then returned with the top-tier degree to work in a low-level local position, while foreign students just out of an MLS gained a large salary by virtue of holding a better passport. This is what I call the *passport penalty*, where one librarian receives lower wages than another, based not on education and experience, but on their country of citizenship. This observed inequity was so discouraging that Nargiza began to question whether she should even stay in librarianship.

I believe a brief reflexive note is methodologically appropriate here. The author of this chapter is an American who worked as a librarian in Kazakhstan *before* studying for the MLS. She started at local wages, but was offered an expatriate job at another institution within a year—one where her housing stipend alone was enough to cover an online American MLS degree. She was then offered \$45,000 a year to manage a school library, although her only experience was working in a local library and she had not yet finished the MLS. After completing her MLS, she had even higher salary offers in America. This *passport dividend*, where the author's American passport greatly boosted the benefits of her MLS and local library work

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experience, is the flip side of the passport penalty. Due to the higher average income of American academic librarians, the author gained greater benefits from her work and studies than her local colleagues did, even as they made similar educational and career moves. Addressing this will require structural attention to the work available to Central Asian citizens both locally and globally, as well as to the economic value we place on people as the result of the passports they hold.

Comparing her colleague, the interviewer, and her own position, Nargiza now wonders if an international MLS is worth it, if Central Asian citizens study abroad only to return to a second-class status, pay, and autonomy in their own countries. Even if she studied abroad, she would see lower benefits than an expatriate trained within her own country.

Yet there are also benefits to having international colleagues. If expatriates are paid more, one library manager said, she wished it would be for their *experience* abroad, which even a local resident could in theory gain and be paid equitably for:

*It shouldn't be based on their affiliation to the country. It should be based on the work they do, on the experience, maybe education.*

Yet such equity issues are challenging when administrators are unwilling to pay local residents with international experience at rates equal to expatriates. One local librarian recalled a social media posting by expat librarians in Central Asia, who were recruiting friends to work for \$3000 a month in a role that paid locals \$400. The person was upset but urged not to speak up lest it affect their career.

Yet this passport penalty has lasting effects, leading some librarians to leave the profession, and resulting in a deskilling of libraries in the region. Valeria left libraries when she couldn't see the MLS adding value to her career, or her career having a growth trajectory at all:

*So if I return to Kazakhstan, what exactly does the MLS give me in terms of my job prospects? Maybe I switch to head of department, but that's not much of a career development money-wise or in any sense, really.*

Both Bota and Valeria noted the challenge of working in the post-colonial system that Central Asian universities find themselves in, where they seek to increase the value of local education by hiring in foreign experts from high-status countries. Bota was disappointed when a colleague wanted to hire foreign librarians because locals were “lazy,” commenting that these beliefs are a national internalization of colonial oppression at an individual level. She hoped that foreign librarians would stop thinking they deserve higher salaries than local peers, noting of a local colleague:

*[She] wasn't paid as much, despite the fact she had all the qualifications and was doing the same level of responsibilities. It broke my heart, because your citizenship is a deciding factor in how people see your worth. If librarians in the US or Europe found out about that, maybe they wouldn't be as willing to join libraries abroad.*

And perhaps international librarians seeking a traveling career do need to advocate for equitable pay for local colleagues, so that regional librarians can see the same benefits from an international education. Without meaningful and well-paid work, librarians like Valeria will plateau and leave. As she said,

*I just reached a glass ceiling because I didn't have an MLIS. I just felt bored. And then the opportunity came to work for an international company. I know this MLS is the standard in the industry, but I feel I've gotten the same amount of knowledge during my work time... you can take a couple of courses, talk with colleagues, visit libraries in another part of the world, see how they work with things, and apply it right away. It doesn't have to be an MLS program.*

Valeria experienced the MLS requirement as a roadblock to continuing in libraries, given that it seemed unlikely more education would result in more challenging work or better pay. In the end, she rejected the degree and the career, moving into another role that would pay internationally competitive rates for her tremendous drive and skills. Yet her departure was a loss for Central Asian libraries, as Valeria and her peers are needed to develop the information networks and services that Central Asian universities, governments, and scholars will use to flourish in the coming years.

## MLS Degrees Don't Consider Family Constraints

Finally, MLS degrees may at times be inaccessible to those with care responsibilities for children or elders, especially if it involves visas, leaving current work, scholarships, and international moves. Because librarianship is a female-led career, most library professionals navigate their professional opportunities in the context of expectations that adult women provide much of the childcare, eldercare, and household management in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

Given these family responsibilities, librarians need to steward their time, income, and resources in ways that attend to family needs. One interviewee switched careers in anticipation of the gendered family work she would be expected to perform—something she now regrets:

*In my second or third year of [college], we went to South Korea to an internship in a plant. I saw all the workers were male, and I thought that engineering jobs are*

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*located in specific places like in western Kazakhstan. And if I got married I wouldn't be able to move like that. I would have to follow my husband.*

Seeing that the hours and location of a STEM career would make fulfilling family expectations hard, she switched careers. But after an early divorce, she now intends to prioritize her own career.

Another librarian, Merey, is single and found it easier to move abroad. Yet even she needed to end her travels when an elderly family member had surgery and needed her back home:

*It all happened when I was offered a job in Europe, and I had to decline. Because I was already out of the country, and I didn't want to miss anything more, God forbid. That's why I'm staying—I want to look out for my parents who are here.*

In Kyrgyzstan, Bermet worked as a translator until she got married, at which point it was no longer appropriate for her to drive far out from the capital city with foreign visitors. At this point, she transitioned into library work:

*My translator work started at 6am and ended at midnight. It was fine work as a single woman, but when I got married it was not fine. So I started to search for another job. I had to be home most of the time, so I needed something with a stable schedule, like from 8-4. I should get home when my husband is home from work. And the first month after marriage there was a lot of guests. So it's mostly about household, I would say.*

Bermet shifted her career to accommodate gendered household and family responsibilities as a Central Asian spouse. And after having her first child, she moved departments within her library, seeking to balance her ambitious management goals with increased family responsibilities at home:

*Before I worked at the circulation desk. And when I had my first child, and I returned after my maternity leave, I was offered the head of the cataloging department. Again, I was thinking about my child, because at the circulation desk you don't have any time to go home during the lunch, because you have to be right there all day. But in the cataloging department it was more flexible.*

In our conversations, another librarian reported that she was pregnant and pausing her search for an international MLS until she completed her three-year maternity leave and returned to work. Libraries and MLS programs, then, need to provide professional development for ambitious future managers that allows librarians

to balance exposure to libraries abroad with the care and economic needs of a family at home; they cannot assume every professional is free to travel, leave their breadwinning job, or spend their family resources on an MLS degree. An appropriate librarian education system will train Central Asian librarians to take on complex information work for a good wage, while respecting their whole-life commitments to their communities and families.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Create a Local Library MLS in Central Asia**

Central Asian library leaders regularly discuss the possibility of creating an international-style MLS degree within the region, either within or across the five post-Soviet countries. This degree could operate in Russian or English, and be hosted by institutions such as the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek, Nazarbayev University in Nur-Sultan, or other institutions that attempt to provide a local option for a global education. Champeny & Bergalieva (2006) explored options for an MLS at KIMEP in Kazakhstan, while Aliya Sarsembinova and Rosa Imangaliyeva tried professional training programs in collaboration with Eurasian National University in Astana. These projects are in addition to established BLS degrees at regional universities that could be consolidated or adapted to offer an international-style MLS.

Yet for many Central Asian residents, language is a barrier. Instruction in English allows for visiting instructors as well as for increased career possibilities through fluency in English, but teaching in Russian and regional languages like Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, or Turkmen would offer greater accessibility to less privileged and provincial librarians. Current librarians like Zere have even won scholarships by promising to study for an MLS abroad and then return to teach others in the region:

*I went to [Europe on a local scholarship] and when I had an interview, they asked, why we should give you this scholarship? I told her that we don't have a prestigious library school in Kazakhstan. So I would like to make a better librarians' life, a big salary. And she said, why not, we can open a librarianship program.*

A regional MLS with graduate coursework in pedagogy, the social sciences, and technology could effectively educate librarians in the region, with optional internships abroad. Yet unlike other professional degrees, this degree is unlikely to profit universities. Because the salaries for individual libraries in the region are low, this degree will not be a “cash cow” masters that can profit universities. Instead,

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governments, NGOs, and universities would need to invest in high-quality regional library education for the public good, rather than expect it to be cost-sustaining. As Samal recalled,

*I remember when Roza Imangaliyevna was alive, she launched a local master's degree for librarianship, but they didn't have anyone attend. So it was closed. It was very expensive for local people and... you know, if I were a person who came to study library science here, what perspective would I gain?*

Samal wonders if a local MLS can be useful, given the lack of global perspective. Without an investment in high-quality, contemporary skills development at an affordable price relative to local wages, and a commitment to hiring graduates at equal wages to international degree holders, such programs may indeed not have enough applicants to be sustainable.

## **Create Regional Online Short Courses**

Another option for regional education is to offer library education certificates that are more focused than an MLS. These could include in-person intensive courses in urban areas and massive open online courses (MOOCs). Existing free online courses are often inaccessible to regional librarians who do not speak English, so even investing in translating existing digital courses into Russian would open up contemporary library education at an affordable price. (Such complex projects speak to the importance of local, national, and regional librarians' associations for coordinated advocacy and fundraising.)

Yet any courses brought into the region would need localization. Cholpan noted this, saying,

*There are not so many online courses in Russian about librarianship. And online courses could be about copyright, but copyright in Russia and Kyrgyzstan are different.*

And another librarian adds that,

*My university uses an American-based curriculum, so I have to know about copyright in the US in order to help students and professors to do their research.*

Regional education thus needs to acquaint librarians with international standards, as well as adapt these for local needs. There is a demand for this, as librarians like Safia report looking for online degree or certificate programs they can study for while



working. Yet Safia earns less than \$1000 per month, and so finds few affordable options in her price range:

*I'm searching for a masters... I'm looking for an online program, because of finance. In these two years, I tried to collect some money, because I can't take it from my parents. Now I'm ready, not only in my financial aspects and from mental and from psychology, just ready.*

Lena notes that library staff can already study for a second bachelors in library science in Kazakhstan, taken through self-study and evening classes if they already have a first degree. A local option, then, would carefully balance language of instruction; pedagogical, technical and social coursework; local and internationally-trained teachers; and international with locally adapted coursework. Intensive courses could be offered in capital cities, with online courses for wider distribution. Yet the cost remains an issue, with public subsidy a necessity for a high-quality local library education.

## **Address Recruitment and Retention in Central Asian Libraries**

The future of libraries in Central Asia depends upon an educated, technically skilled, and multilingual workforce engaged in building networked library services for an entire region. Yet recruiting and retaining that talent comes at a cost. Regional librarians have access to local education, distance courses, some study abroad courses, and the language learning necessary to compete for international scholarships. Yet regional library schools will need updates to support contemporary librarianship, and state investment is necessary to support the training of professionals who build these countries' scientific and cultural infrastructure.

At the local level, libraries can increase recruitment and retention by highlighting opportunity across the lifecycle. Aidana declined to enter librarianship given its low salaries and advancement prospects, yet still fondly recalled a supervisor who challenged her, remembering,

*She communicated with us a lot, and it made us feel valuable, like we weren't at the very low level of the job, and like we were somehow important.*

Had there been a way to train under this manager into a challenging and well-paid librarian role, Aidana might well have stayed. Another library manager regretted losing an excellent MLS librarian due to administrative constraints on pay, saying, "it's really hard to get our local people to get an MLS," and noting that inflexibility with pay wasn't helping.

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And Valeria, who now enjoys the challenge and pay her library could not provide, still regrets the loss to her profession when she walked away.

*There's the possibility of me returning to the library. It's a shame to lose all that experience and knowledge, especially since there aren't that many librarians in the region who have all that knowledge.*

Giving librarians the chance to study for a high-quality education, receive competitive pay, and advance in their field will make the MLS more desirable and increase retention in libraries. As governments and employers address these systemic issues, they can incentivize talented professionals to join libraries, educate themselves, and stay for the long run.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This chapter highlights the perspective of English-speaking librarians from urban Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic. There is a need for further ethnographic study of librarians from older generations, librarians who only speak regional languages, and librarians from rural areas of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. LIS scholars need to test workable solutions for a scalable library education in the region and for sustainable salaries. Once librarians are recruited and educated, we need to evaluate how best to cultivate the next generation of Central Asian library managers, so that they can combine the best of the Soviet model with organizational development models from abroad. Future research could also address the experiences of public and school librarians, as well as of local LIS professors, which this study was unable to address.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has highlighted how librarians enter the profession in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, whether through university scholarships or an unexpected job opportunity. When deciding where to study for a library education, perceived quality, the change to travel, and prestige draw Central Asian applicants to British and American MLIS degrees. Yet cost, family constraints, and limited salaries constraint the pursuit of international MLS degrees. Central Asian librarians need a contemporary local library education, which suggests an opportunity for collaboration across governments, library associations, and universities in the region. A library program that could provide training at an affordable cost would be highly valued.

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## **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.
- <sup>2</sup> Local news articles cite average wages at \$100 to \$150 per month in Astana; Lena reported starting wages in public libraries of \$40 per month in western Kazakhstan; local librarians at Kazakhstan's top government university, Nazarbayev University, can make \$400 per month; and expatriates may earn \$2000-3000, per advertised rates. Expatriate librarians at certain international school libraries can earn \$2000-4000 per month, although educational institutions may bring in an international librarian to start and then move to hiring local residents to reduce costs.