



# **Turkmen Advisory Council 2012 Report**

## **Turkmen Students Abroad:**

***Goals, Challenges, and Prospects for the Future***

***Report prepared by:***

***The Turkmen Advisory Council***

**December 2012**

## Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>The Turkmen Advisory Council and 2012 Research</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Background on Turkmenistan</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Methods</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Target group</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Findings</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Sample</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Reasons Turkmen Study Abroad &amp; How They Feel About It</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Bribes, Financial Aid & Scholarship Opportunities.....	12
Failure of Entrance Exams in Turkmenistan.....	12
Exploring a New Country & the Quality of an Education in Turkmenistan & Abroad .....	12
Employment Opportunities After Graduation .....	13
<b>Choosing a College Abroad &amp; Preparing for College Abroad</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Career Plans After College</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Does a foreign diploma help?.....	16
While seeking employment in Turkmenistan: English vs. Russian language respondents ..	17
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Appendix I</b> .....	<b>21</b>

## Foreword

From September – December 2012, a group of four Turkmen consultants residing in four different countries worked to answer questions related to Turkmen students' goals and purposes for seeking an education abroad. As a team, we developed a research outline, piloted our research instruments, and collected data. We produced this report that represents all of the work done and summarizes our findings. The research also provides grounds for future projects and allows wider analysis of the collected data.

We would like to thank all those that participated, including the respondents and our advisors who contributed to the implementation of the project. Being Turkmen students ourselves, who studied abroad, helped us to understand the concerns and possible reluctance of Turkmen to participate in a project of this nature. But since the initiation of our research, we were very ambitious and believed this research to be very important; we are able to share this research with you due to all of those that decided to share their experiences. We have worked hard to make this research objective and credible, and have made efforts not to undermine the privacy of our respondents.

We managed to cope with obstacles related to the political situation in Turkmenistan and revealed some trends in the attitude and behavior of Turkmen while staying abroad. We found that Turkmen who have not been exposed to communication with foreigners before are concerned about espionage and conspiracy. At the same time, that group of Turkmen mostly includes first year students who have just arrived abroad. In comparison those Turkmen who have already spent several years abroad express less concern about conspiracy behind the project.

The project also revealed that many Turkmen rely on personal connections and relations with consultants. Therefore, data collection process was most successful in the situations where respondents knew us personally. Thus, the project offers an important insight, first-hand experience and information to at least a small part of the students' experience.

We would like to thank the Arzuw Foundation for the opportunity given to us and also hope to contribute to the development of existing projects and planning of the new activities aimed at promotion of interests of Turkmen students inside the country and abroad.

**-TAC team**

## Executive Summary

The Turkmen Advisory Council (TAC) is a group of Turkmen scholars who work together to answer questions regarding development processes happening in and outside of Turkmenistan. The Arzuw Foundation (the Foundation) created the Turkmen Advisory Council (TAC) in 2010 with a purpose to engage, empower, and train Turkmen as researchers and critical evaluators of societal developments (programs, projects, events, policies, etc.) in Turkmenistan. TAC provides a platform for young Turkmen scholars to engage in research and consulting on various issues related to Turkmenistan as well as issues in the scope of the Foundation's mission, by employing Turkmen scholars as consultants for its projects, TAC provides them with an opportunity to work closely with and get trained by experienced Western researchers in research methodology and survey design and use and apply skills and experiences gained by engaging in a real-issue research. This report reflects findings of the 2012 TAC project and makes several recommendations regarding the goals and strategies of the education of Turkmen students abroad.

- Responses vary depending on the preferred language of survey. Differences were found in students' reasoning for going abroad and attitude towards career development. Students who study in Russian language programs tend to seek jobs with business (71.8%) and intend to go back home immediately after graduation (67.5%); while students in English language programs also see their careers in private sector (78.8%), they tend to stay abroad and continue education after college graduation (64.7%) before going back to Turkmenistan.
- Students' background influences the choice to study abroad. Turkmen students who go to study abroad are mostly from middle-income families, whose parents aren't bound by high state positions, and thus do not become a target of questioning from Turkmen authorities regarding income sources and purposes of education of their children abroad. Previous educational experiences inside the country also impact the choice. Therefore, educational programs (FLEX, visiting ACCELS, and communication with Peace Corps Volunteers) during school years are very important as they shape students' attitude towards education and career perspectives.
- Most of the students do not consider a wide variety of options when applying to schools abroad. Turkmen choose those colleges that are popular among students. 48.5% of English and 36.6% of Russian language respondents indicated that they chose their college based on friend's advice. While another 36.6% of Russian language respondents also indicated that it was their parents' choice.
- Some graduate school students admit that they went to the graduate school to extend their stay abroad as they cannot find a job in Turkmenistan. Since Turkmen is a collectivist society it largely relies on personal connections and ties, and makes job search easier or harder depending on your personal connections.
- Participants indicate awareness of only a few job options: business, state or international organization. Turkmen are not widely aware of the work of non-governmental or non-profit organizations. Oil and gas are seen as the most profitable areas of work. In general, students believe that state positions are paid well; perhaps it is connected with the access to the income from extraction of the national resources and income that Turkmenistan gets from it.
- Participants understand importance of career development, and mostly English respondents said that they had a chance to do an internship or work. However, students are largely not confident about their future employment. Students tend to select majors that are popular and seem to be in demand in Turkmenistan, but many admit that they might work in the field not related to their major.

- In general, students believe that they will have better employment opportunities as education abroad is better; however, they also admit that relying on connections gives better chances. It will be interesting to compare attitude of Turkmen students towards business and state job, and ask if there is a difference in the way people get hired.
- Students say that studying abroad is a challenge as it involves adaptation to the new culture and people, but after comparing educational process in Turkmenistan and their own experience, all interviewed students confidently recommend studying abroad, because universities of Turkmenistan do not provide good education and involve students into multiple extra-curricular events with interruption of educational process.

## **Introduction**

The Turkmen Advisory Council (TAC) is a group of Turkmen scholars who work together to answer questions regarding development processes happening in and outside of Turkmenistan with the greater community of Turkmen abroad. The project is a creation of the Arzuw Foundation.

Four consultants worked under the guidance of an experienced researcher who advised them on conducting research throughout the project. Consultants gained experience and skills on how to formulate research questions, develop research tools, collect data and write a report. Consultants were able to apply their experience in research, as well as receive new knowledge during the webinars organized by research supervisors.

This report reflects findings of the TAC project in 2012 and makes several recommendations regarding the goals and strategies of the education of Turkmen students abroad.

### ***The Turkmen Advisory Council and 2012 Research***

The Turkmen Advisory Council (TAC) was created in 2010 by Arzuw Foundation with a purpose to engage, empower, and train Turkmen as researchers and critical evaluators of societal developments (programs, projects, events, policies, etc.) in Turkmenistan. TAC provides a platform for young Turkmen scholars to engage in research and consulting on various issues related to Turkmenistan as well as issues in the scope of the Foundation's interests. By employing Turkmen scholars as consultants for its projects, TAC provides them with an opportunity to work closely with and get trained by experienced Western researchers in research methodology and survey design and use and apply gained skills and experience by engaging in real-issue research.

In 2012, TAC consists of four consultants including one student who is new to the Western model of research, which allows training of new people and their introduction to the area of research. Consultants are based in four countries: Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Ukraine, and hold regular correspondence and online calls.

The project consists of two parts: practical (research making) and educational (learning and gaining research skills). While tackling the key issue of the research, whether foreign education will help Turkmen students to secure employment at home, consultants undertook various steps of research development, ranging from brainstorming methods for data collection, ideas for surveys, methodology, interview questions to getting hands-on-experience in conducting survey and interviews and writing reports. As part of the educational component consultants were provided professional support and training by two experienced and professional researchers.

### ***Background on Turkmenistan***

Education in Turkmenistan remains an important part for the country's development that underwent significant changes since 1991 in search for a system that is best suited for country's internal and external policies. The First Law on Education was adopted in 1993, which guaranteed free access to all state educational institutions. The 1993 law specifies that general education is compulsory and provided free of charge in state educational establishments. However, the country still preserved the curriculum established during the Soviet period. In 2002 the secondary school term was shortened from 10 to 9 years. Moreover, secondary school graduates desiring to continue their studies were required to do

a two-year internship prior to applying to state higher educational institutions. Assumingly, the internship would help school graduates understand what major they would like to have and what field of employment they prefer. This requirement involved school graduates into a job search immediately after receiving secondary education and made young people unable to enter local colleges until the requirement was fulfilled. A nine-year secondary education and a compulsory two-year work experience brought a series of challenges to recent graduates of secondary schools. Graduates had difficulty finding jobs due to high rates of unemployment and absence of needed skills for technical jobs. Due to the enforcement of these educational laws, many young people were deprived of the opportunity to enter a higher educational institution, which put them at a disadvantage in terms of employment. As a result, many turned to foreign countries as an option for pursuing higher education. However, the Turkmen nine-year secondary education also limited the chances of recent graduates to study abroad as the international standard of secondary education ranges from 11 to 13<sup>1</sup> years.

There is no official (or unofficial) record on how many Turkmen students left to pursue their education abroad since 2002; however the report of the European Commission on "Higher Education in Turkmenistan" mentions the following:

*During the academic year 2008-2009, over 2,200 Turkmen students studied abroad, this number includes some 500 students chosen and funded for studies abroad by Turkmen ministries and various organizations. Over 170 Turkmen citizens went to the Russian Federation, 65 to Malaysia, 160 to Turkey, 35 to the People's Republic of China.<sup>2</sup>*

The numbers presented in the report do not include thousands of Turkmen students who were influenced by the decree of 2002 and left to pursue their higher education in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, European states and the United States. According to unofficial data and observations of educational institutions that enroll Turkmen students, the real number should be significantly higher than stated in the official report. As an example, the newspaper "Vecherni Bishkek" (Kyrgyzstan) held a poll among foreign students studying in Kyrgyzstan and revealed that in 2010 about 1,500 young people from Turkmenistan arrived to study in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup>

Further development of the educational system of Turkmenistan should be considered with the election of the new president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and the reforms that he has instituted. The second (new) Law on Education was introduced in 2009 and guarantees free delivery of state educational services and extended secondary education from nine to ten years and higher education from five to six years. In the summer of 2012, the President gave an order to study international practices and to extend current ten-year secondary education to 11-12 years (from September 2013 a 12-year system at secondary schools will officially begin). Another order given by the President is to consider establishing a new university with international economics, international journalism, and international law and management departments. The future university would offer courses solely in English and prepare specialists with Bachelor's and Master's Degrees.

Despite all of the above mentioned academic reforms and developments, free education is not equally enjoyed by everyone. Many secondary school graduates cannot enter higher educational institutions due to deep seeded corruption. One has to have either influential connections or money in order to secure a place at a university in Turkmenistan. In general,

---

<sup>1</sup> "International Standard Classification of Education," UNESCO, accessed December 15, 2012, [http://www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/doc/isced\\_1997.htm](http://www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/doc/isced_1997.htm)

<sup>2</sup> "Higher Education in Turkmenistan," TEMPUS European Commission, accessed December 15, 2012, [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/tempus/participating\\_countries/reviews/turkmenistan\\_review\\_of\\_higher\\_education.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/tempus/participating_countries/reviews/turkmenistan_review_of_higher_education.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Vechernii Bishkek, accessed December 15, 2012, [http://members.vb.kg/2012/07/24/socopr/1\\_print.html](http://members.vb.kg/2012/07/24/socopr/1_print.html)

the quality of education does not meet international standards and degrees obtained at Turkmen universities are hardly recognized internationally.<sup>4</sup>

The real educational situation in Turkmenistan contradicts all current laws and regulations. The challenges with the educational system are rooted in the three key issues:

- 1) **A lack of qualified specialists in the field of education:** Not only does Turkmenistan lack teachers with a strong educational and professional background, but it also lacks specialists in the field of curriculum development. As a result, both secondary educational institutions and higher educational institutions use curriculum, books and materials that date back to Soviet times. Additionally, innovative approaches to class instruction and teaching are not only discouraged, but restricted by the Ministry of Education.
- 2) **Institutions of higher education require students to attend all government-sponsored activities**(parades, holiday celebrations), taking valuable time and energy away from their studies.
- 3) **Corruption within Turkmenistan's education system** is another well-known reason and problem why all students cannot enter Turkmen state universities. This is also a primary reason for students going abroad to study.

While the Arzuw Foundation has learned a great deal about the education system in Turkmenistan and educational opportunities for Turkmen students inside and outside of Turkmenistan, very little is known about the educational and professional goals Turkmen students have when pursuing an education abroad and what they feel awaits them when they return to Turkmenistan. With that in mind, consultants of the Turkmen Advisory Council designed a mixed methods study to better understand Turkmen students' goals in pursuing an education abroad and to explore the opportunities available to Turkmen after graduation.

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to better understand Turkmen students' goals in pursuing an education abroad and to explore the opportunities available to students after graduation. With this purpose in mind, the following research questions were developed:

- 1) What goals [professional and educational] do Turkmen students have in pursuing a higher education abroad?
  - a. How their goals to study abroad related to their plans for after college?
- 2) What employment and/or advanced educational opportunities are available in Turkmenistan to students with a college education from abroad?
  - a. What differences exists between their professional goals and the opportunities available to them?
  - b. How do Turkmen college graduates feel about the opportunities available to them in Turkmenistan after college?

Consultants decided to utilize a mixed methods research approach to get a bigger and clearer picture on the goals and purposes of education of the Turkmen students abroad, and to learn more about what motivates Turkmen students to leave the country and pursue a degree in foreign educational institutions.

---

<sup>4</sup> "Developments in Central Asian Higher Education," World Education Service, accessed December 15, 2012, <http://www.wes.org/ewenr/07june/feature.htm>

The research included collection of data using *surveys*, which allowed the consultants to gather quantitative data and *interviews* to clarify open-ended questions and get more of qualitative responses.

Survey development was the first stage of the research. It started in early September 2012 and lasted until the beginning of October 2012. The draft survey was piloted among five Turkmen students similar to the target group; and after that the data was collected until mid-November. During the pilot phase, consultants discovered that Turkmen students had preferences in language of the survey; therefore, using an online survey service the data was collected in three languages –English, Russian and Turkmen. Given various geographical locations of consultants, accessibility of Turkmen students abroad and their openness to participate in a project of this type, TAC aimed for 100 responses in total from four different countries (see Appendix I “Survey”).

Interviews were held throughout November 2012 after the collection of survey responses was completed. Interview questions covered parts of the survey where respondents did not articulate their answers clearly enough. TAC aimed for about 12 interviews, at least 3 in each country. Considering the number of survey responses (86), it was decided that 12 interviews would provide a rich, in-depth understanding of key research questions. Interviews were confidential, and consultants made detailed notes instead of recording the conversation. The interview notes were then translated into a word document and are incorporated throughout the findings.

### ***Target group***

The target group of the research included two groups of Turkmen students studying abroad: undergraduate and graduate students. It was decided to collect data in the four countries of the TAC consultants’ residence, as it would provide a bigger picture on the reasons why Turkmen students decide to study abroad. Targeting both graduate and undergraduate students allows understanding of career expectations of Turkmen at different levels of education. Thus, it was assumed that graduate students would have a clearer picture of their career perspectives, as they should have started searching for a job. With undergraduate students, consultants expected to get more abstract and general understanding of the employment opportunities, and perhaps more optimistic responses.

### ***Data Analysis***

For data analysis consultants used several tools. One of the first data analyses was compiling a comparative table that allowed searching for the differences and similarities in samples and responses depending on respondents’ locations. The comparative table also allowed the consultants to make preliminary analysis of the data and to compare respondents’ backgrounds and career expectations. Looking at the table, consultants raised issues that required more consideration and analysis. Those issues were then highlighted in the interview questions. The final data analysis was made using descriptive statistics. The data was grouped into three categories: background, why respondents go to study abroad, and career expectations. Consultants looked at the number of responses on key survey questions and summarized results around the over-arching research questions. Some of the answers were interpreted by combining several findings of the research and the current situation in Turkmenistan; others were interpreted using responses collected via interviews. Consultants were instructed to abstain from their personal experience and not bring descriptive data based on their personal backgrounds.

## Findings

Research findings were divided into three main sections and the questions were distributed under each section according to their focus and intent. The findings are organized as follows: sample, why Turkmen study abroad and how they feel about it, how students chose their current college of study, and their career opportunities.

### Sample

The sample, as well as the rest of data was divided by language preferences. As a result of the present research, it appears that a student's preferred language reflects the respondents' background and career choice. For the ease of analysis, Turkmen responses were added to the Russian responses.

**Table 1: Participant Summary**

Survey Language	N	Male / Female %	Average Age	Top 3 Cities of Origin in Turkmenistan	Top Countries of Study	Most Common Year of Study	Top 3 Areas of Study	Top 3 Most Preferred Programs Before College
English	36	29% / 71%	23	Ashgabat Dashguz Mary	Bulgaria Turkey Kyrgyzstan	Senior	Business Administration Political Science Economics / Engineering *	International Relations/Political Science Economics Business Administration
Russian	46	63% / 37%	21	Ashgabat Balkanabat Turkmenbashy	Ukraine Bulgaria Turkey	Junior	Economics Finance Business Management	Economics International Relations Design and Architecture
Turkmen	5	20% / 80%	23	Mary	Kyrgyzstan	Junior	International Relations English	Medicine International Relations IT

We received 86 responses in total; 35 in English, 46 in Russian and 5 in Turkmen. For the convenience of the data analysis, Turkmen responses were merged with Russian responses. The language of the responses is stressed, because it reflects several differences among the sample: age, gender, and country of study.

There is a clear gender and age divisions between those who responded in Russian and English languages. In the English sample the gender ratio is 29% of male students to 71% of female students with an average age of 23; while in Russian it is opposite - 63% of male respondents versus 37% of female respondents with an average age of 21. This is an area for future research that could be investigated further if certain countries and programs are preferred by one of the genders.

The top three countries of study of the respondents who preferred English are Bulgaria, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan; with 13 respondents in Bulgaria, 12 in Turkey and 4 in Kyrgyzstan. It can be assumed that English was selected due to the language of the program that respondents are in. The top three universities among respondents in English language are AUBG, AUCA and a few different schools in Ankara, Turkey. Whereas for Russian language respondents the most preferred countries of study are Ukraine, Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Russia, with 24 in Ukraine, 6 in Kyrgyzstan and 6 in Bulgaria, 5 in Turkey and 4 in Russia. The most popular colleges vary in Turkey and Kyrgyzstan, while in Ukraine almost all of the respondents study in Kharkov National Economic University.

A limitation of the present research can be described as follows. Turkmen students tend to be more open and ready to talk about their background with people they know. It can be

assumed that depending on the country and university of study of the consultants conducting the research, we see certain trends in the selection of colleges. Given the provided sample (86), it is hard to evaluate the country of choice of Turkmen students, and this is a potential topic for another research. However, the responses that we received did allow us to better understand the rationale and motivation of Turkmen students to go to study abroad. In particular, this research allows looking at the background of respondents and analyzing how it may impact their reasoning for going abroad.

There are several similarities between the two language groups. For both languages, the most favored majors are business, economics and finance; international relations, law and a few technical majors such as engineering are the second most popular choice. It can be assumed that Turkmen students select business as it allows individual employment in Turkmenistan and does not require relying on personal connections in the government. Business also tends to be paid better than governmental positions.

Taking a closer look at the background of the respondents, we see that Ashgabat is the top city of origin for both languages, with 10 respondents in English and 31 in Russian. The second largest group of students in English is from Dashoguz (10) and Mary (6), and in Russian the majority of students are from Balkan welayat (9). Mostly students who study abroad come from the large cities of welayats, as their income level tends to allow covering tuition and accommodation expenses abroad. Those students also have access to foreign funded educational facilities, language courses, and are able to apply for colleges with programs in English.

In order to better understand the background of the respondents and their motivation for applying to college abroad, the survey included questions on preferred majors before getting into a college abroad and also preferred colleges in Turkmenistan. The respondents were also asked if they attempted to enter a college in Turkmenistan and why. Finding out if students applied for a college in Turkmenistan and why, allowed us to learn more about the social status of the family and the students' career expectations.

The results to the questions stated above are as follows:

Among the 35 respondents in English, 27 (77%) applied for the college in Turkmenistan. The most popular colleges among English language respondents are International Turkmen-Turkish University (11), and the Turkmen State University. **Students indicated that the main reason for applying for a college in Turkmenistan is that it would give them an advantage after college when they began their job search. Studying in Turkmenistan would also allow them to remain closer to their parents.** Students who gave responses in English indicated that their preferred majors prior to entering a college abroad were economics (10), international relations (11) and engineering (7)

**Among the reasons for applying to college in Turkmenistan, Russian language respondents indicated free tuition, easier to find a job and a general unwillingness to go abroad.** 33 of the total 46 respondents or 71.7% have applied for a college in Turkmenistan. The most popular colleges in Turkmenistan among Russian language respondents were the Turkmen Polytechnic (8), and the Turkmen State University (7), followed by the International Turkmen-Turkish school (4).

## ***Reasons Turkmen Study Abroad & How They Feel About It***

Students were asked several questions about why they chose to study abroad and what influenced their decision to study abroad. They were given a range of answer choices as well as an opportunity to provide additional comments throughout the survey and an opportunity to provide more in-depth responses during the follow-up interview. Reasons for studying abroad could be categorized in four general areas:

- 1.) Inability to afford bribes, financial aid & scholarship opportunities available abroad;
- 2.) Failure of entrance exams in Turkmenistan;
- 3.) Exploring a new country and the quality of an education in Turkmenistan and abroad and;
- 4.) Employment opportunities after graduation.

### **Bribes, Financial Aid & Scholarship Opportunities**

During the interviews, participants indicated a scholarship served as motivation to go study abroad. Although tuition to attend Turkmen college is free, due to corruption within the education system, students often have to pay a large bribe and that is what prevents many Turkmen from entering colleges inside the country. Among the reasons mentioned for an unwillingness to even apply for college in Turkmenistan, English, Russian, and Turkmen language respondents mentioned bribes. A small percentage (17.4%) of Russian language respondents indicated they did not apply for college in Turkmenistan, explaining that “it was impossible to enter college without bribing someone” and they were confident they would not be able to find enough money to pay the necessary bribes to attend college. Another interview participant also mentioned that he “didn’t have enough money [to pay for the bribes] to study in Turkmenistan, otherwise [he]would have entered college there.”

Of the reasons why students chose to study abroad, a greater number (22) of English than Russian respondents (5) indicated financial aid and scholarships as a reason they chose to study abroad. Interviews also indicated that many students are also influenced by exchange programs and their primary school curriculum. Students of Turkmen-Turkish schools indicated that they had always been motivated to apply and study abroad. Those students who became finalists of American run high school exchange programs were eager to enter AUBG, AUCA, KIMEP and other colleges that offered foreign funded scholarship programs.

### **Failure of Entrance Exams in Turkmenistan**

Prior to entering college in Turkmenistan, students are required to take and pass an entrance exam, similar, but not equivalent to the SAT or ACT. When asked about why they chose to study abroad, a greater number of Russian respondents (13), compared to English respondents (6) indicated they failed the entrance exam required to attend college in Turkmenistan. The exam includes a test for the knowledge of Rukhnama and a test related to the major. Comments provided by respondents indicated that a lack of Turkmen language skills either contributed to their failure to pass the Turkmen entrance exam or their lack of confidence that they would even pass, or prevented them all together from applying to a Turkmen college; thus they turned to studying abroad where they could study in their native language (Russian) or English.

### **Exploring a New Country & the Quality of an Education in Turkmenistan & Abroad**

Of the reasons why students chose to study abroad (see Figure 1), a large percentage of both Russian (54.3%) and English (63.9%) respondents indicated ‘exploring a new country.’ Interestingly, the next most popular answer among English respondents was better or prestigious school (24) abroad. In contrast, only 12 Russian respondents indicated

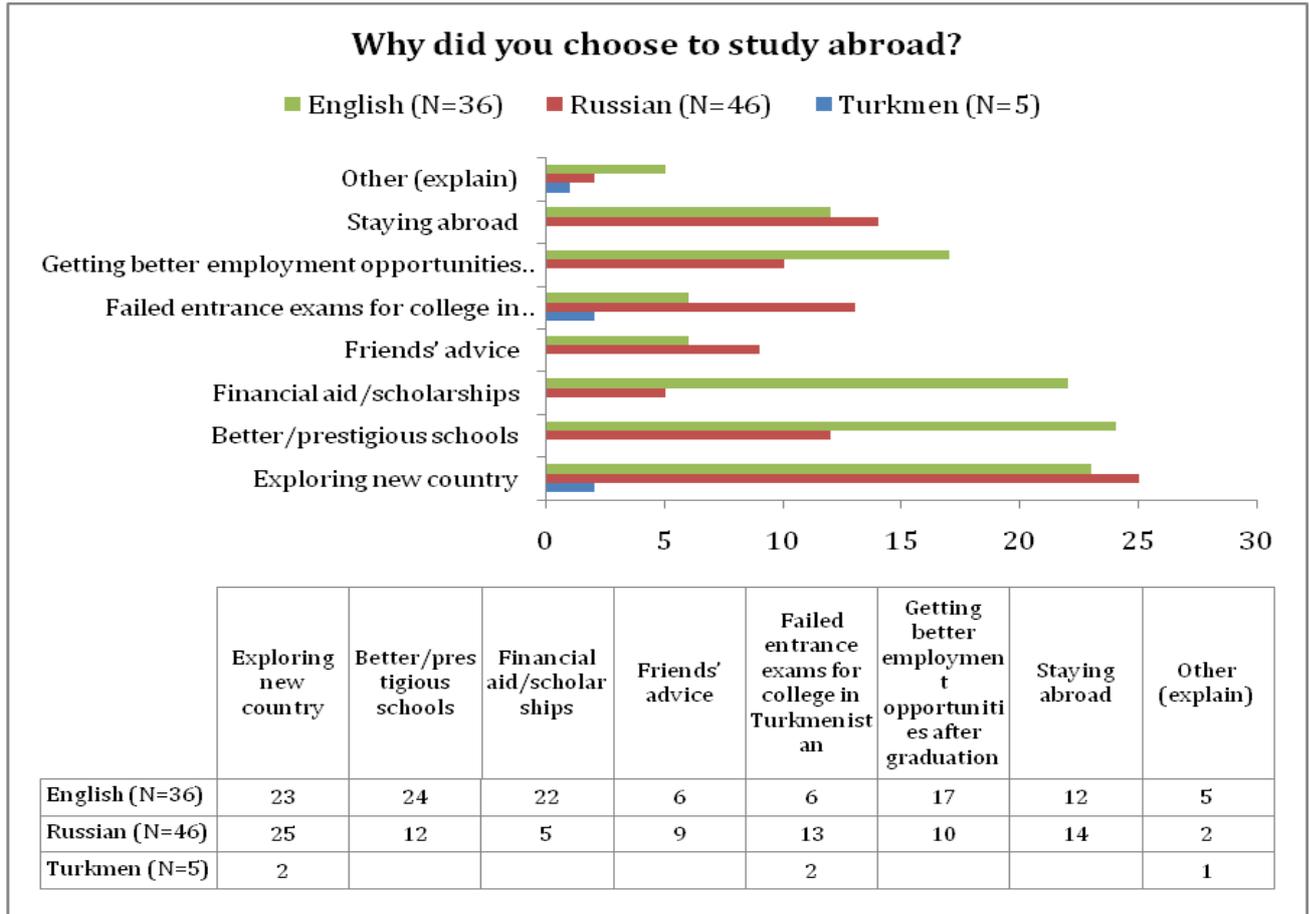
better/prestigious schools as a rational for their choice to study abroad. Participants were also asked to rate, in the context of why they chose to study abroad, the extent to which they agreed with several statements including one about the quality of education in and out of Turkmenistan on a scale five-point scale (strongly disagree =1, strongly agree =5) (see Table 1). Mean ratings for both Russian and English language responses are higher on the statement 'I would receive a better education OUTSIDE of Turkmenistan' than the same statement for IN Turkmenistan. However, on both statements the standard deviation is less than or equal to 1, meaning that there was greater variation of agreement among respondents. At first glance, it seems that the students are concerned with the quality of education and are challenged by absence of funds to enter the college in Turkmenistan. However, in the interview one of the participants stated, "in fact it doesn't matter what kind of diploma Turkmens get [from Turkmenistan or abroad], what matters is how many connections and how much knowledge you have."

In addition to the desire to explore a new country and a concern over the quality of education, both Russian and English respondents indicated they chose to study abroad as a means to stay abroad (i.e., graduate students).

### **Employment Opportunities after Graduation**

Respondents also chose to study abroad based on employment opportunities after graduation. Roughly 47% (17) of English respondents believed that an education abroad would lead to better employment opportunities after graduation and 37.0% (10) of Russian respondents shared the same opinion (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Why Study Abroad



After graduation, Turkmen students tend to return back home and seek employment. They also need to confirm their diplomas with the Ministry of Education and pass several exams to confirm their knowledge and be able to apply for state positions. The exams include subjects of Ruhknama, Turkmen history and a major related test. All the exams should be taken in Turkmen language. In this regard, respondents were asked to rate, in the context of why they chose to study abroad, the extent to which they agreed with statements about employment opportunities, networking opportunities and opportunities in general, in and out of Turkmenistan on a scale five-point scale (strongly disagree =1, strongly agree =5) (see Table 2).

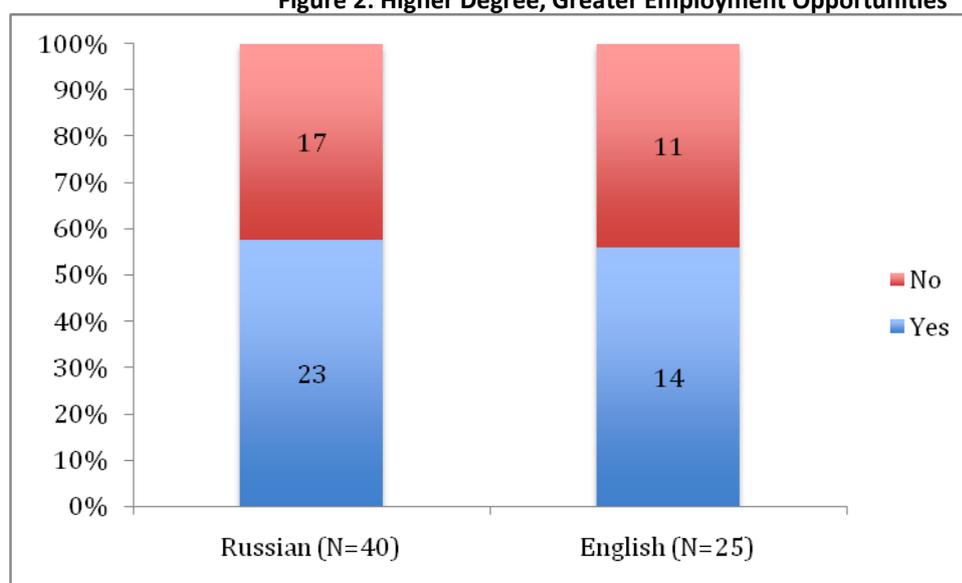
Table 2: Opportunities in and out of Turkmenistan

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:	N	Mean Russian	s.d.	N	Mean English	s.d.
I would have better employment opportunities after graduation IN Turkmenistan.	39	3.28	0.71	32	3.31	0.93
I would have better employment opportunities after graduation OUTSIDE of Turkmenistan.	37	3.00	1.23	32	3.22	1.16
I would receive a better education IN Turkmenistan.	38	2.39	0.99	32	2.09	1.03
I would receive a better education OUTSIDE of Turkmenistan.	36	3.97	1.01	32	4.22	0.97
I would have more networking opportunities after graduation IN Turkmenistan.	37	3.30	0.90	32	3.19	1.06
I would have more networking opportunities after graduation OUTSIDE of Turkmenistan.	36	3.53	0.87	33	3.45	1.12
I would have more opportunities in general after graduation, IN Turkmenistan.	37	2.89	1.06	33	3.00	0.87

I would have more opportunities in general after graduation, OUTSIDE of Turkmenistan.	34	3.76	1.06	33	3.91	0.95
---	----	------	------	----	------	------

Mean ratings of agreement for both Russian and English language respondents were slightly higher on the statement 'I would have more networking opportunities outside of Turkmenistan'. Mean ratings of agreement were also higher for both groups of respondents on the statement, 'I would have more opportunities in general after graduation, outside of Turkmenistan' (as opposed to inside of Turkmenistan). Respondents were also asked if they felt the higher degree one has, the better employment opportunities they would have. A greater percentage of respondents felt that a higher degree would lead to better job opportunities; however overall responses were mixed (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Higher Degree, Greater Employment Opportunities**



7 out of 10 graduate students felt that their graduate degree would give better employment opportunities in Turkmenistan. In fact, most graduate students (8 out of 10) indicated that the main reason to continue education was a better degree and consequently better career opportunities. 4 students indicated that it was an attempt to stay abroad.

### ***Choosing a College Abroad & Preparing for College Abroad***

In addition to understanding why Turkmen study abroad, there was also a desire to learn more about how they choose a college abroad and how they prepare for the college experience abroad. Participants were asked how they chose their college. Both Russian (36.6%) and English (48.5%) respondents relied heavily on their friends' advice when choosing their college. The rest of the results indicate a difference in how Russian and English respondents chose their universities. Over 35% (15) of Russian respondents indicated they relied on their parents' choice of a university, while only 1 English respondent indicated it as an influence on their choice. A smaller percentage of both response groups relied on advertisements when choosing their college abroad and a greater percentage of English respondents (39%), compared to Russian respondents (10%) indicated they chose their college because it was popular among Turkmen students. Additionally, none of the Russian respondents relied on college recruitment programs in Turkmenistan, while over a third of English respondents indicated that attending college recruitment events influenced their choice in colleges. Interestingly, among Russian respondents 34% (15) and 22% (8) of English respondents paid attention to well-developed programs/departments in their areas of interest when choosing a college. These findings strongly suggest Turkmen students rely heavily on recommendations of friends and experience of other people they know. This

could be due to a lack of information sources or access to them, obstacles from the government created to prevent students from studying abroad, or lack of well-advertised programs.

In general, the situation with preparation for college in Turkmenistan is challenging. Students are not readily provided an opportunity to receive advice from college alumni, nor are they able to meet representatives of colleges who could tell about the program and expectations. Also, given the educational system in Turkmenistan, many Turkmen students have to undertake additional classes to prepare for college after they complete their high school educations. Some students do not have sufficient language proficiency; others need to get higher math scores to enter the college. Some universities abroad offer preparatory programs that involve students for a year before they begin actual college classes. Participants were asked if they engaged in any preparatory activities prior to entering college. Only 5 English and 13 Russian respondents indicated that they did not engage in any preparatory activities. Over 47% (22) of Russian and 53% (19) of English respondents engaged in additional language courses. Just under a third (13) of Russian respondents and less than 17% of English respondents took additional math classes in order to prepare for college. Turkmen tend to choose programs offered by the school, as they believe it is a reliable way to get into the college. Only 2 English respondents used mentoring services. None of the Russian respondents relied on current students to help prepare them for college, while just fewer than 20% (7) of English respondents used such help. Other activities that students engaged in to prepare for college included: taking biology and chemistry courses, additional TOEFL preparation, attending classes at American Corners, and improving language skills with native speakers and experienced people in the field of the college application process. A few students relied on books and self-preparation in order to prepare for college.

### ***Career Plans after College***

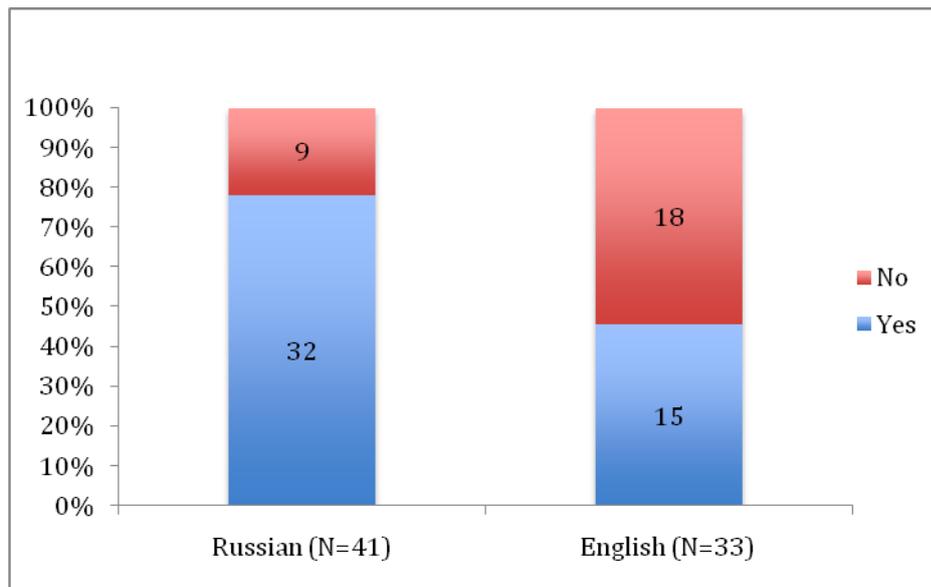
#### **Does a foreign diploma help?**

The respondents were asked to evaluate the advantage of having a diploma from a foreign university. 67.6% of English and 57.5% of Russian language respondents agree that they will have an advantage while looking for a job in Turkmenistan.

Although all respondents are quite positive about their job opportunities, English language respondents put more trust in their education abroad than respondents in Russian language. Almost all the interview participants in English language confirmed that an education abroad gives better employment opportunities, as the quality of education is higher, universities are more trustworthy and students obtain language and professional skills in their majors. One interviewee explained his college selection abroad: "When you study abroad it gives you international experience and makes you distinguished from others." Another respondent explained that people divide students into 2 categories "those who study in local schools and abroad. If you want to get a job yourself, not the one that your father finds for you, then AUCA will be a success." This is an area that requires further research on *why* Turkmen students who are enrolled in English language programs over Russian programs tend to see their education as more promising and how it is related to their potential employment.

Considering the reasons for applying to college abroad and employment expectations of students in Turkmenistan, it is important to see what plans they have for after college.

**Figure 3: Plans to Return Home to Turkmenistan**



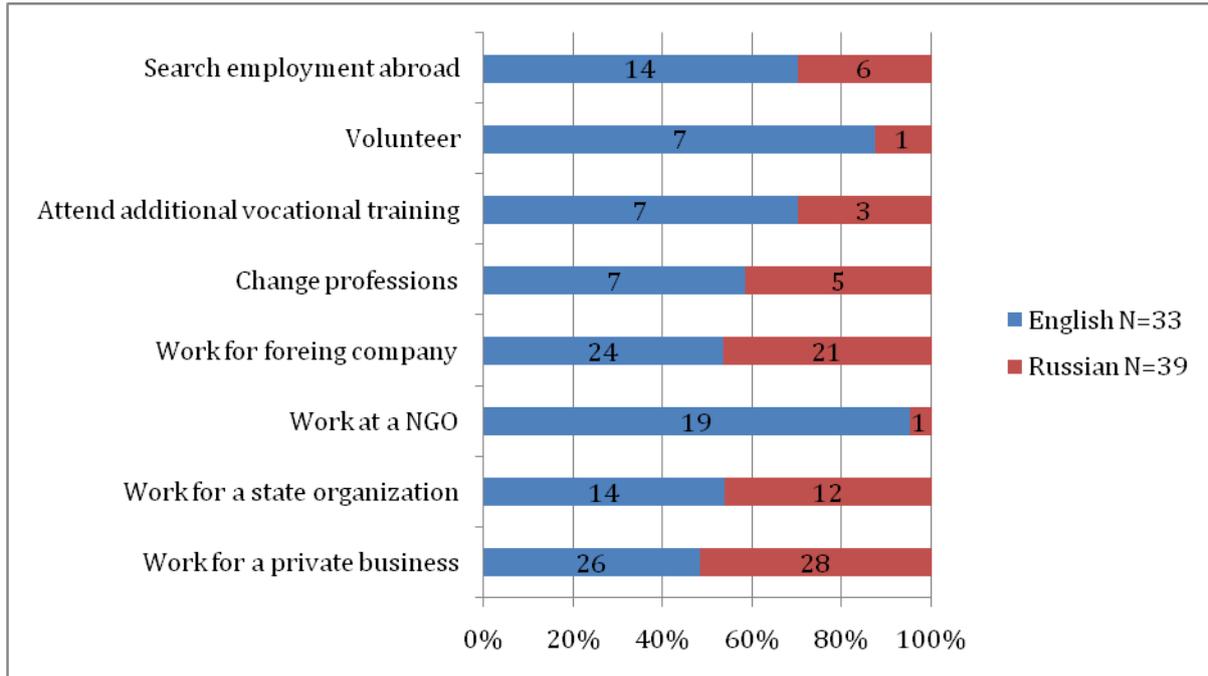
Although the majority of English language respondents believe that their foreign diplomas will give them an advantage in employment in Turkmenistan, a greater percentage (54.5%) of English language respondents said that they do not plan to return home after graduation, while 78% of Russian language respondents indicated they do plan to return home. Students indicated that they are willing to go back home, but they are considering going abroad again if it is impossible to find a job in Turkmenistan. Most of the respondents find themselves attached to Turkmenistan and do not want to emigrate. The scope of this research did not allow exploration of why there is a difference in plans to go back to Turkmenistan between English and Russian language respondents and this is another potential sphere for future research.

### **Seeking employment in Turkmenistan: English vs. Russian language respondents**

Plans to return to Turkmenistan were considered in light of the students' employment expectations. Respondents were asked where they plan to work and what employment options they see. This question was important to track how Turkmen students who are returning home after graduation feel about their career opportunities.

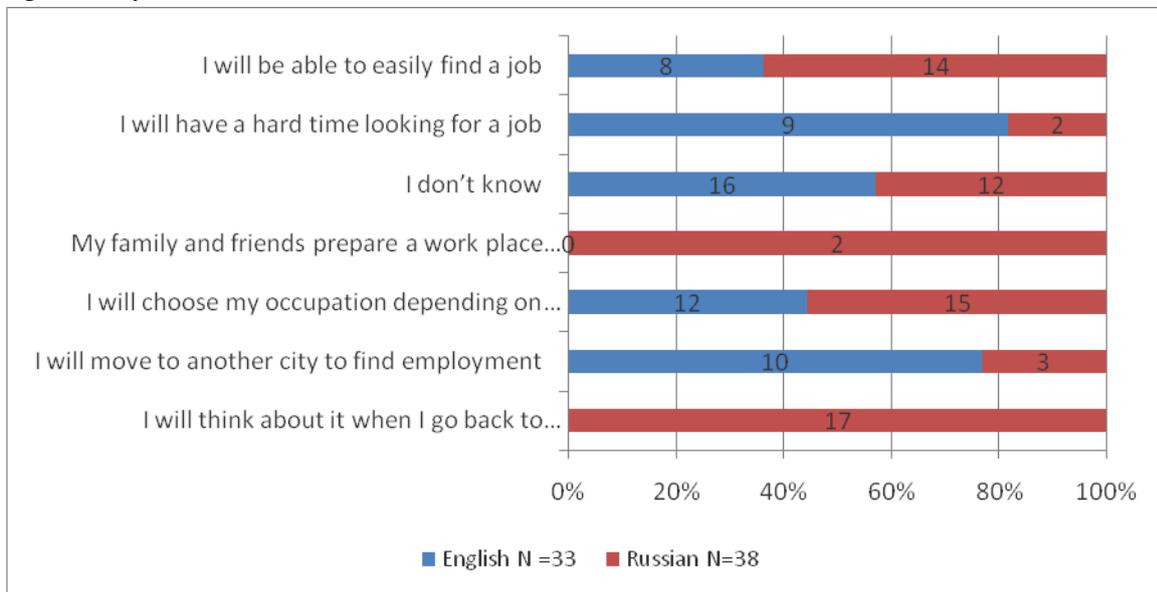
There is a sense that English language respondents see more employment opportunities in the fields related to foreign funding, such as foreign companies, NGOs or employment abroad. While a significant number of Russian language respondents (30.8%) indicated that they would like to work for an NGO, this number is almost twice less than among English (57.8%). At the same time, respondents in both languages put much hope on private business and state organizations for future employment.

**Figure 4: Employment Expectations After Graduation**



Respondents were also asked to evaluate their employment chances and talk about the methods and strategies they plan to use to find a job after graduation. The present research however, does not indicate the level of employment that graduates from universities abroad expect to obtain, which is another potential area for future research.

**Figure 6: Expectations for Job Search**



The mismatch within responses of English language responses continues in this question as well. From one side, respondents believe that a diploma from abroad gives them advantage in employment. The majority of them (48.5%) are not sure how the job search will go for them and leave open the option of moving from their home towns to other places (30.3%). It is also a significant observation that none of the English language respondents indicated he/she is going to rely on parents for a job.

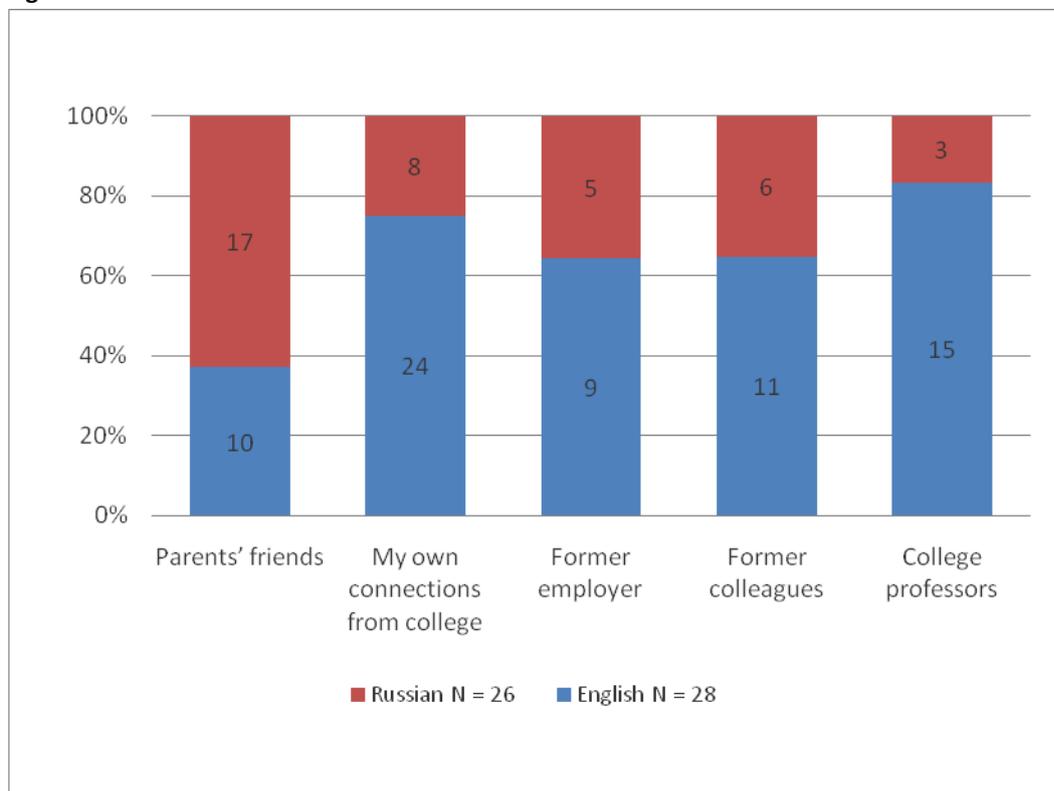
About an equal number of respondents in both languages indicated that they will take jobs available and will not strive to become employed in the field of their educations. About 37% of Russian language respondents believe that it is going to be easier for them to find employment and do not intend to move to a different city.

Considering the above presented charts and findings, a few things can be suggested about Russian language respondents; in particular they might:

- Come from cities with high employment rates
- Come from families and/or acquaintances that can guarantee them employment
- Have a major or a college that has high rate of employment

The next findings help clarify what connections students are going to rely on while searching for a job and also allow us to better understand where respondents are coming from. 84.8% of English language respondents and 71.1% of Russian respondents said that they plan to rely on connections in general when searching for a job after graduation. The chart below gives a detailed description of the types of connections students are going to use.

**Figure 7: Connections**



For other job search tools in both languages, respondents indicated filling out applications, sending resumes, going door to door, opening a private business and using the services of employment agencies.

An interesting finding was that the priority connection for English language respondents is their personal ties from college whereas Russian language respondents indicated that their parents' friends were going to help them in their employment search. This difference could indicate variations on the respondents' backgrounds and family situations. English respondents either lack the "friends of parents" who can help, or had an educational experience that allows them to be ambitious about finding a job in Turkmenistan. Suggestions for the background of Russian language respondents were listed above.

## Conclusions

The findings of the current research and their interpretations provide a picture for understanding of the goals and purposes of education of Turkmen students abroad as well as some of their expectations for return home with diplomas from foreign institutions. The recommendations made in this report are based on the findings, as well as interview results and consultants' experience of working with Turkmen. Given the limitations of the current research, several topics are outlined under Appendix III for further research in the field of education of Turkmen abroad.

## Recommendations

- One of the findings suggests that Turkmen take a risk of going abroad while speculating over their career opportunities after they return home. Family background of Turkmen students influences their choice of university and the decision to go abroad. **Therefore, creating more educational opportunities and opening information sources for Turkmen inside the country influences students' attitude towards selection of the university, educational process abroad, as well as career preferences.**
- During the interviews students indicated that they are concerned with educational and social issues in Turkmenistan and want to see the situation improved. Respondents also said that they are willing to contribute to the process of change. Considering the political situation inside the country Turkmen students abroad are very reluctant to get involved in community development projects. However, it does not prevent them from wishing for a better situation in Turkmenistan, as all young people face the same problems while searching for employment after graduation. **Thus, improving the quality of education for Turkmen students allows better understanding of the social and political process happening inside the state, opens new job opportunities for them and creates a generation of people who can visualize the change that they want to see.**
- Although the attitude of Turkmen government towards foreign educational projects operating inside the country remains negative, the community of Turkmen students abroad is somewhat open to the innovations. Collectivist nature of Turkmen makes it easier to access the community of students abroad if there are several people who have participated in the foreign-funded projects and it did not result into troubles for them after they return home. **Thus, proper selection of the topics, as well as unobtrusive approach to the implementation of innovations allows conduct of the projects aimed at development of certain skills and knowledge among Turkmen.**
- No matter what language of education is preferred, Turkmen students are concerned with career development after graduation. Majority of respondents indicated that connections matter in finding employment in Turkmenistan; however, they admit that even when using ties there is a high possibility that the employment will not match the major selected for education. It is not clear if that is due to lack of positions or knowledge in the sphere of desired employment. **Therefore, creating internship and part-time employment opportunities inside and outside the country will allow students to obtain work experience and necessary skills that will contribute to their career development.**
- Since most of the undergraduate students believe that the best employment opportunities are in the business sector, **it is necessary to teach Turkmen about alternative employment opportunities. This can be done through internships, as well as guest lectures at universities, job shadow days and networking of students with professionals from various spheres.** Considering the impossibility

to access Turkmen students inside the country by foreign organizations and donors, **it is necessary to build capacity for cooperation between young Turkmen scholars and the national experts in Turkmenistan.** Those can be owners of private business, employees of foreign companies and international organizations, embassies, NGOs and state organizations. Since the Turkmen community abroad is very large and students have unlimited access to information, **it is suggested to improve educational sources (websites that target Turkmen, exchange programs information and the programs, etc) and create new learning opportunities while students are outside the country that would not compromise their safety at home.**

## **Appendix I**

### **“Suggested areas of further research”**

Given the provided sample and the scope of the research, following questions have been raised as possible topics for further exploration:

- Why there is a difference in plans to go back to Turkmenistan between English and Russian language respondents?
- Why do Turkmen students who are enrolled into English language programs see their education as more promising and how is it related to their potential employment?
- What is the expected level of employment of Turkmen students graduating with diplomas from universities outside Turkmenistan?
- What criteria do Turkmen students use when choosing a university or country abroad?
- Is there any preference in program, universities or countries of study based on gender of Turkmen students?