A scenic view of a valley with a river, mountains, and a small town.

Is the grass greener on the other side?

The impact of studying abroad  
on the well-being of Tajik  
nationals

Emma Sabzalieva

Micro-Level Analysis of Well-Being in Central  
Asia Conference, Berlin, May 2012

# Well-being as an ambition and a vision

(Eraut & Whiting, 2008)

## Ambition

a holistic concern on the part of the individual to make their life better

## Vision

the steps an individual takes to help them achieve their ambition

Key message of this paper:

Study abroad is a means of improving / attaining levels of well-being for the Tajik nationals surveyed.

It is a vision of well-being that helps these individuals achieve their ambition of making their life better.

'Students' study abroad goals, host country experiences, and learning outcomes were interrelated... students are motivated by their goals to actively engage in experiences that are conducive to enhancement of their intercultural, disciplinary/career, and personal competences'

(Yang et al, 2011)

# Background

## Study abroad

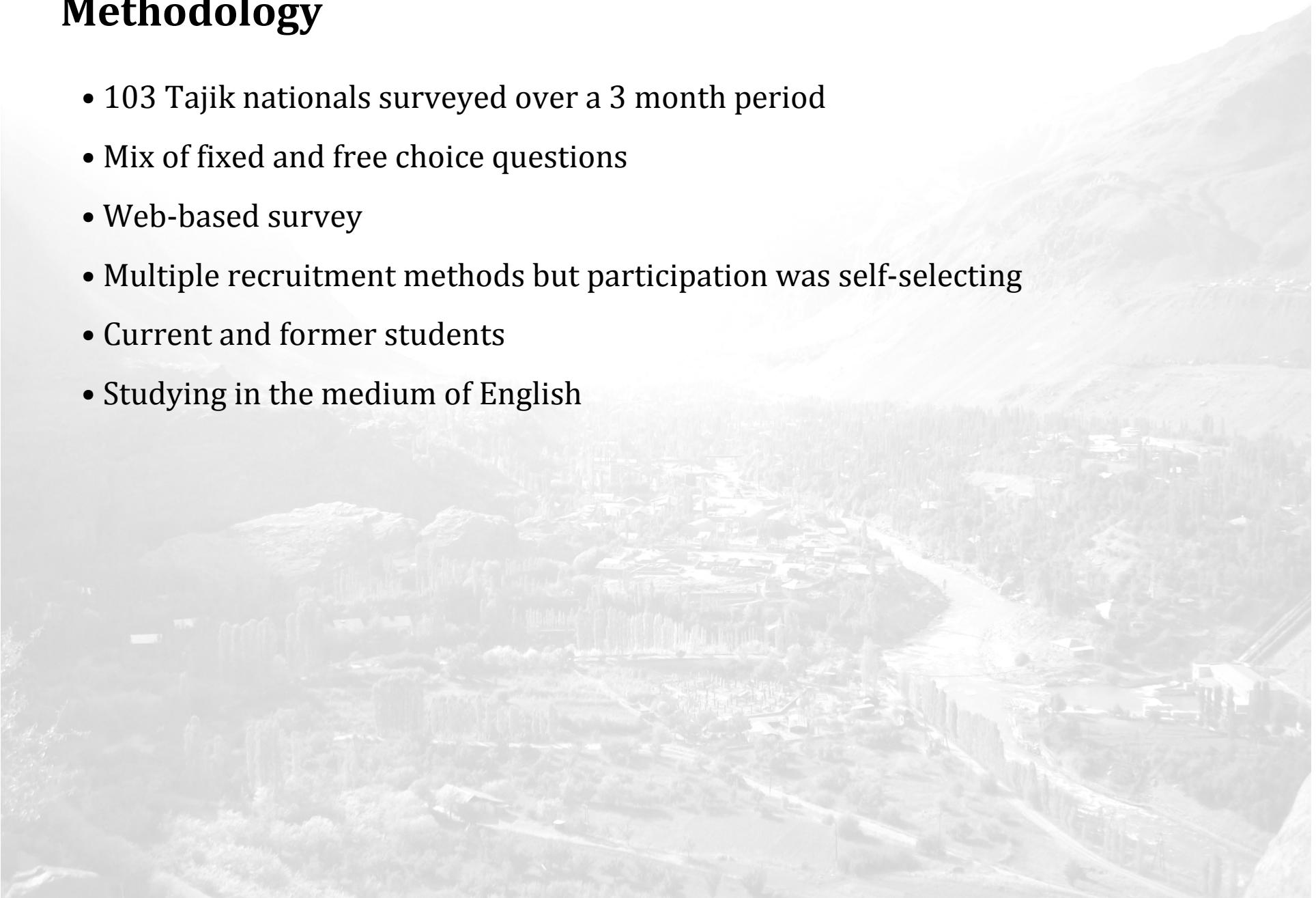
- Very little study abroad during Soviet era
- Post-1991 – small but growing number studying abroad: opening of borders; reduction in state funding for higher education

## Tajik context

- Comparatively low enrolment in higher education (20% vs Kazakhstan 41%; Kyrgyzstan 51%)
- Migration as 'key characteristic of the economic and social development' of the country (UNICEF, 2011)
- 'Youth in Central Asia know that they can move, and large numbers do' (Roberts, 2010)
- However, low outbound mobility: only 5,500 Tajik nationals studied abroad in 2009 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011)

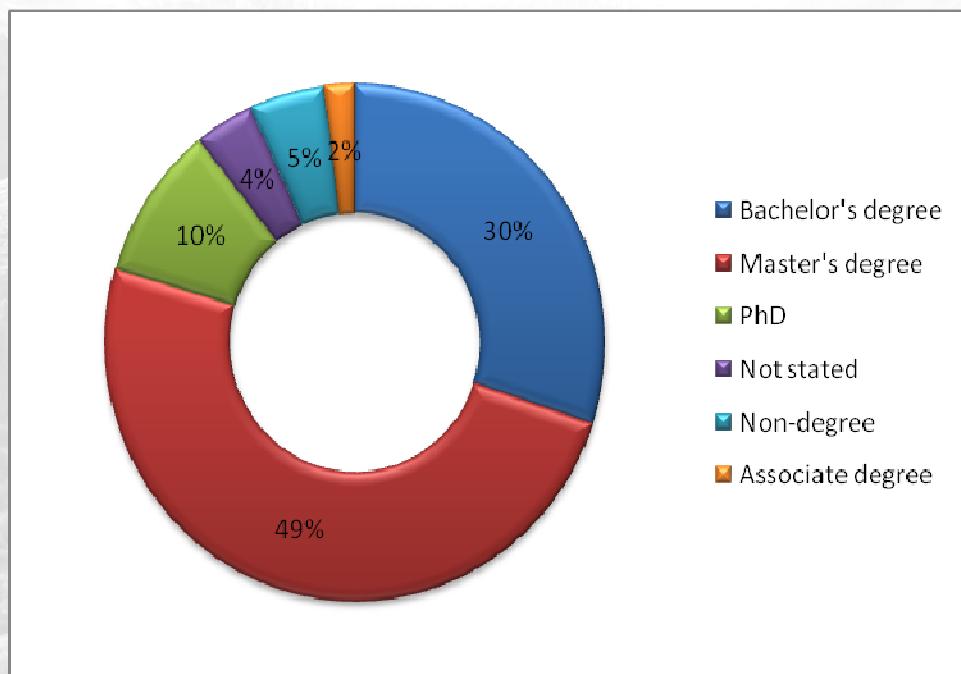
# Methodology

- 103 Tajik nationals surveyed over a 3 month period
- Mix of fixed and free choice questions
- Web-based survey
- Multiple recruitment methods but participation was self-selecting
- Current and former students
- Studying in the medium of English



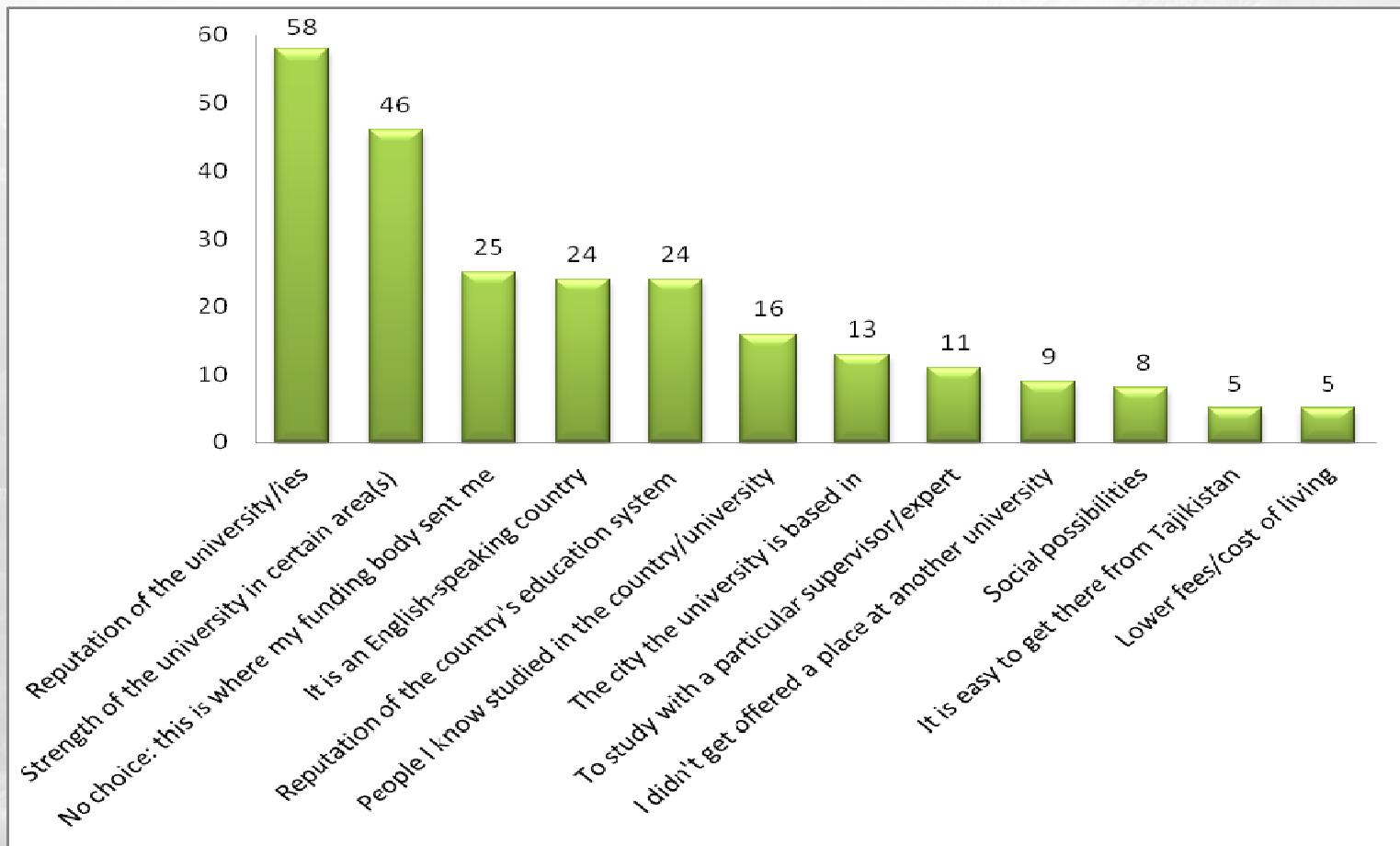
# Who studies abroad?

- No noticeable gender differential (48% M; 52% F)
- Age range 18-40+; majority aged between 25-34
- More than half had been abroad before, mainly for study purposes
- Higher social class?
- Majority studying for first or second degree:



# Location and subject choice

- Quality and reputation as major drivers
- Majority in English medium countries (especially UK/US)
- However, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan most popular: geography is important
- Tendency towards practically/vocationally oriented subjects



# Why do they go?

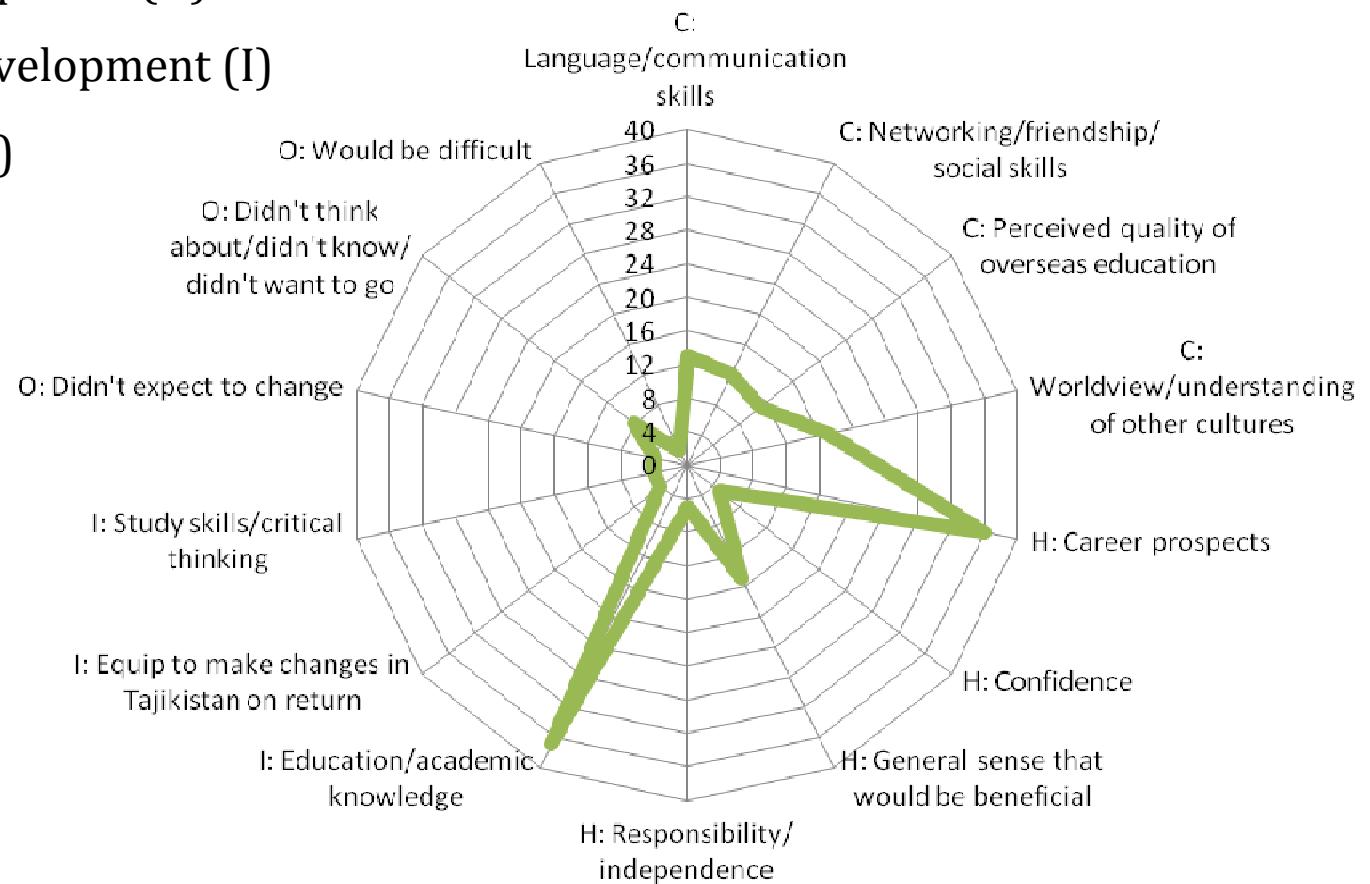
Push factors	Pull factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Availability of subjects not offered in Tajikistan</li><li>• Desire to remain overseas temporarily/permanently</li><li>• Corruption in Tajik higher education system</li></ul> <p><i>“...in Tajikistan the educational system is so corrupt that you would never ever be able to tell whether you are making progress or not.” – female, 26</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Desire to improve academic knowledge</li><li>• Desire to improve career prospects</li><li>• ‘Vertical mobility’ (Richters and Teichler in De Wit et al., 2008)</li></ul> <p><i>“I chose to study abroad primarily thinking that better education allows getting [a] better job in the future internationally...” – male, 32</i></p>

For Tajik nationals, the pull factors of academic and career improvement were substantially more compelling motivations.

# Expectations of change

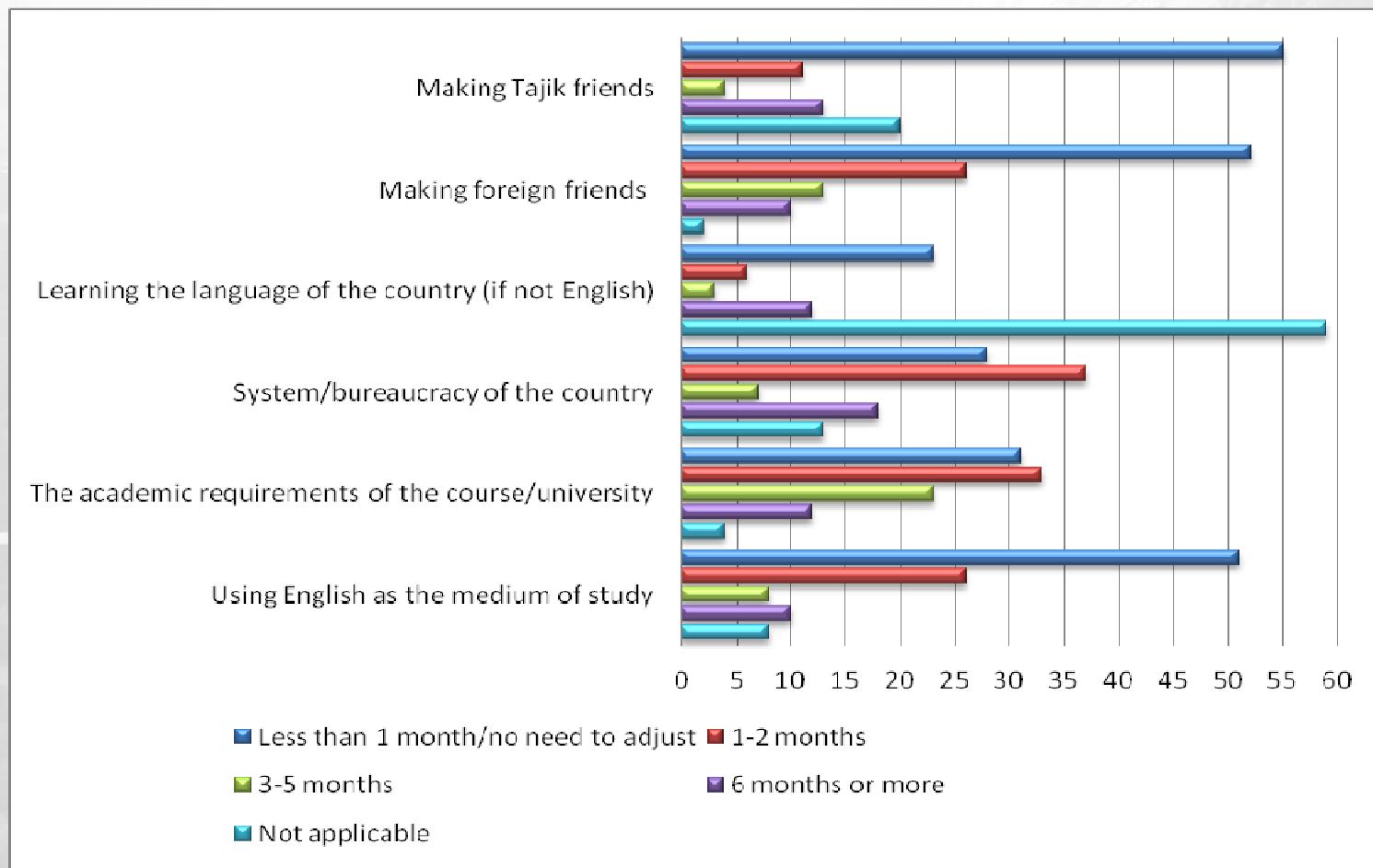
- Schweisfurth and Gu's (2009) analysis of international students in the UK adapted to analyse perceived and actual change

- Cross-intercultural experiences (C)
- Human development (H)
- Intellectual development (I)
- Plus 'Other' (O)



# Adaptation (1)

- Appears that Tajik nationals are quick to adapt – Furnham's theory of 'expectancy-value' (1997)
- Compare to other studies: 'a significant transitional event that brings with it a considerable amount of accompanying stress...' (Cushner and Karim, 2004)



## Adaptation (2)

- Hofstede (2001) on culture: are nationals of a country more likely to be predisposed to particular tendencies? i.e. how similar or different are the Tajik nationals who responded to this survey and what does this tell us about the ability to successfully adapt?

	Albania	Caucasus	China	Malaysia	Russia	Tajikistan?
High power distant	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Highly collectivist	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
'Masculine'	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
Uncertainty avoidance	X	X	✓	✓	X	✓

- Positive factors outweighed negative by 7:3
- Importance of academic improvement as both a challenge and an opportunity

## Where are they now?

- 44/103 still studying; 59/103 completed studies
- 42/59 in employment; 12/59 started a new course; 3/59 full-time parents; 2/59 looking for work
- Of these 59:
  - 31% back in Tajikistan
  - 44% in another country
  - 25% did not state location
- Respondents in employment showed the highest tendency to return to Tajikistan (50% of those who stated their current country)
- Contradicts popular perception in Tajikistan that once abroad, an individual will stay outside the country in pursuit of better opportunities

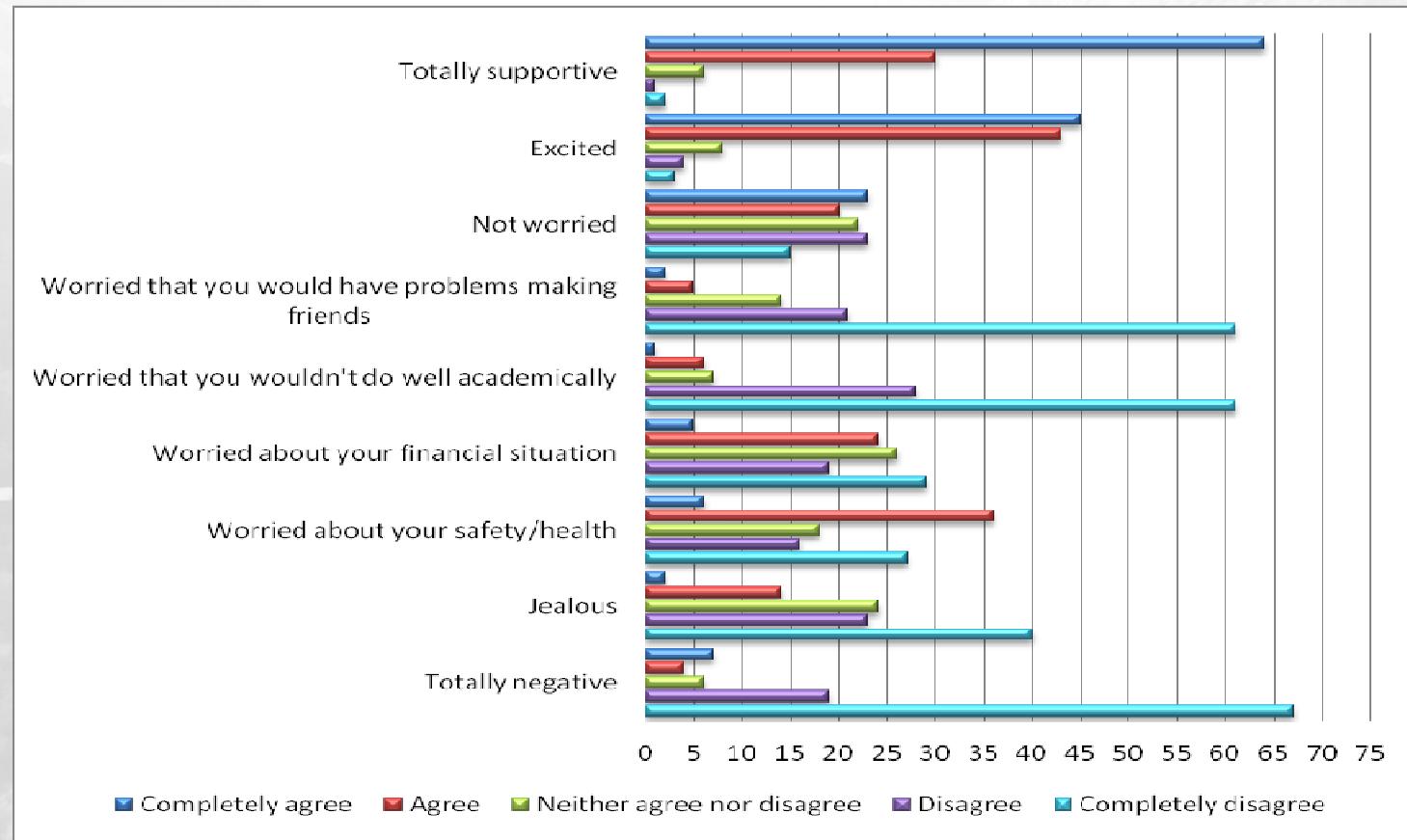
# Employment prospects

- High employment rate of 95% (compares extremely well to national rates)
- 3 main employment sectors:
  - International organisations
  - Private sector
  - Education (school/university)
- Not unexpected: 'graduates/alumni of the international scholarships programmes... the most talented youth, prefer to find work with international organisations or in the private sector' (National Tempus Office Tajikistan, 2010)
- Private sector employees less positive about study abroad: "*I am working in Tajikistan now. I am an entrepreneur. To be honest I expected that studying abroad would help more with finding a good job. But so far it has turned out that it was not as helpful as I thought it would be.*" – male, 24 "
- NGO/education workers assigned greater value to study abroad: "*I work as a development specialist at the United Nations. My studies definitely enabled me to take this path.*" – female, 29

## Impact on family and friends

*“My family and friends think my decision was the best one and if I stayed here in Tajikistan then I would never [have] been able to achieve what I have achieved so far. Now my parents think that I should go on to [do a] PhD and finish up what I have started.” – male, 25*

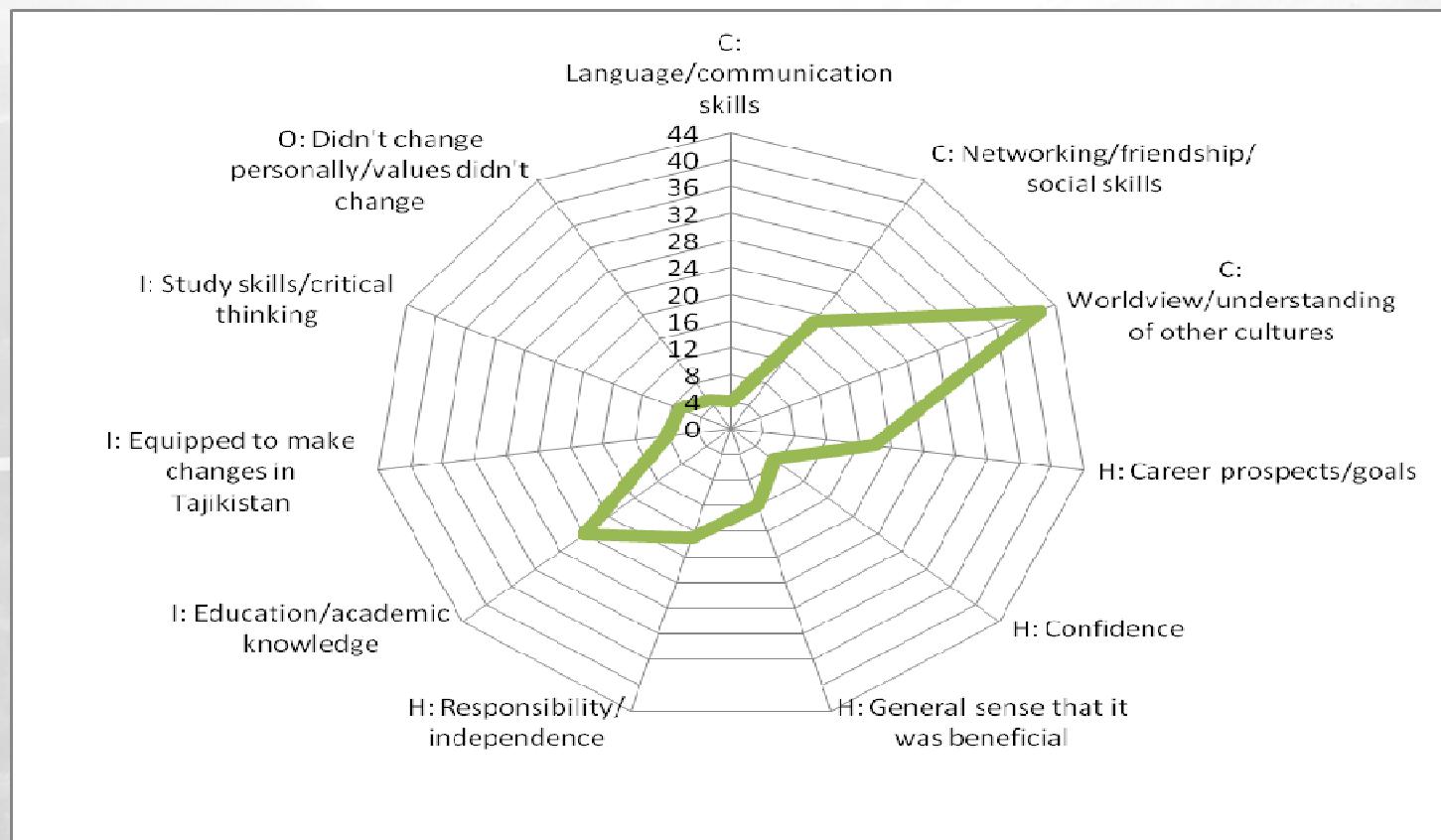
*“I am proud that my family walk with high heads because of me” – female, 29*



# Impact on self (1)

*"I used to idealize foreign specialists before going abroad myself... Today, however, after having studied so many years abroad, I think that Tajik specialists and professionals are highly underestimated and underpaid." – female, 31*

*"The knowledge and experience of studying and living in the UK... will certainly have an impact on [a] person's life and worldview..." – male, 38*



## Impact on self (2)

- At its deepest, studying abroad can be 'a profound transformational experience' (Gu, 2012)
- Many Tajik nationals changed across all three categories
  - Cross-intercultural experiences (C)
  - Human development (H)
  - Intellectual development (I)

*"I am so much [a] different person now than I was back then. Education here has broadened my mind to the things that I had no idea of their existence and as I grow in possessing my knowledge I see the opportunities that I can get, and the things that I can do in my life and with my life. I am [a] much happier person now than I was before." – female, 26*

# Conclusions

- Key motivational drivers: academic and career improvement
- Brain drain? Or temporary migration? Altbach: 'while brains may no longer be permanently drained, they are nonetheless siphoned' (2012)
- Strong connections between motivations for study abroad, the actual experience of being a temporary migrant overseas, and the impact that this has on individuals after the study abroad is complete (as per Yang et al, 2011)
- Main area of divergence from other groups (particularly groups from western/more developed countries) was the relatively low occurrence of culture shock issues
- Study abroad has a major impact on the well-being of the individual Tajik nationals surveyed, and for the most part this is a strongly positive experience