

People and Place Research for People and Place Based Policies. A Study of Professional Well-Being of Alumni of North Kazakhstan with Generalized Q Analysis.

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Extended Abstract

This paper argues that both people and place-based policies should be grounded in integrated research on people and places. While policy frameworks are often organized by sectors of governance—thereby implying a distinction between people-oriented and place-oriented interventions—an expanding body of empirical evidence suggests that this dichotomy is analytically misleading. People’s life trajectories are deeply embedded in environmental, technological, socioeconomic, and institutional spatial contexts (Barca et al., 2012). As such, policies that artificially separate “people” from “place” risk overlooking the complex interdependencies that shape development outcomes.

Human or people’s capital is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of places economic development (Heckman, 2006). Some scholars argue that the spatial concentration of people fosters agglomeration economies, thereby enhancing productivity and innovation (Glaeser & Gottlieb, 2008; Moretti, 2012). However, the capacity to relocate in pursuit of opportunity is unevenly distributed. Low-income families often face substantial barriers to mobility, including high housing costs in more prosperous regions (Chetty et al., 2014), as well as social and institutional obstacles to integration. These constraints, jointly with other changes in the relative competitiveness of people and places, contribute to the persistence of “left-behind” populations (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; McCann, 2020), shaped not only by economically declining places (Dorn, & Hanson, 2013; Chetty & Hendren, 2018) but also by the enduring influence of resilient institutional structures (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015; Neumark, D., & Simpson, H. (2015).

Most existing approaches seek to identify the factors that influence the development of people and places. On the side of people, these typically include capabilities related to education (Sen, 1999; Alkire, 2002), as well as skills, health, and social capital (Heckman & Corbin, 2016). On the side of places, relevant contextual factors include housing conditions infrastructure (Dissart & Ricaurte, 2023), industrial structure, agglomeration economies, labour market dynamics, and institutional dimensions are also emphasized, particularly the capacities of local governments, the quality of governance, and the degree of policy coordination (Rodríguez-Pose, 2015). Additional attention is given to spatial constraints, such as housing market pressures, geographic proximity and connectivity (Torre, 2008), processes of leftbehindness (Perancho et. al., 2025) and access to knowledge and information (Chetty et al., 2014). Finally, policy reach—through transfers, incentives, and targeted development programmes—is commonly examined as a determinant of places and people’s outcomes (Barca et. al., 2012).

The approach adopted in this paper shares the broader objective of advancing understanding of people and place development. However, rather than concentrating primarily on isolated factors or attributes that may be stimulated through people or place-based policies, it examines people and places as consistent entities, characterized by their complementary features. From this perspective the objective is not necessarily to adjust policy tools to people and places, but rather to generate knowledge that may inform how people and places understand and shape their own development trajectories if needed, requiring suitable policies.

For the present illustrating study “people and places” are the university recent alumni of North Kazakhstan and “people and place-based policies” are the programs of English proficiency, international mobility provided by the University North Kazakhstan. Professional well-being refers to the state of optimal human functioning in the context of professional activity and encompasses an individual’s perception of possessing the qualities needed for professional tasks (Pakhol, 2017, Read et al., 2015). It expresses the experience of positive and negative emotions and feelings associated with the profession (Borodkina, 2012). Today there are quite a lot of publications that consider the well-being of an individual in terms of professional activity (including at the workplace or in an organizational context). At the same time, there is a significant variety of terminological apparatus that clarifies this term (Seedhouse, 1995). It comprises “occupational employee well-being”, “well-being at workplace”, “well-being”, “work/job-related well-being”, “well-being at work” etc. (Pakhol, 2017). Such aspects as alumni’s characteristics which could include physiological, psychological and social dimensions are considered important in defining this phenomenon. “It can be measured using a global single-item or a scale covering different domains” (Read et al., 2015) like lifestyles, types of behavior and interests are of great importance (Rattanamethawong et al., 2018, Shepherd et al., 2023, Lavi et al., 2021, Dachner et al., 2022). Professional well-being is multidimensional, involving psychological stability, career satisfaction, and institutional support structures and understanding the factors that contribute to their well-being is essential for ensuring sustainable professional engagement. (Zaimoğlu & Dağtaş, 2025).

Professional well-being is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing career satisfaction, and professional integration. Individuals must possess skills that enable them to rapidly adapt to various situations and changes (Maggiori et al., 2013). In this context, the potential of young graduates gains particular significance; it combines the process of receiving a qualified education with the development of skills to conduct professional activities in English, the global language (Goodman et al., 2024). Participation in academic exchange programs and student mobility (Wu et al., 2024) can further broaden the

horizons of young professionals, influencing their future professional sentiments, expectations, and adaptability.

Although the professional well-being of employees has been widely examined, the role of university experiences in shaping graduation professional well-being remains underexplored. Previous research has addressed the role of the modern educator as a trainer in the formation of future employees' professional skills and competencies, leading to successful professional well-being (Baroncelli et al., 2022). Other studies have focused on the development of secondary education (Carey et al., 2024) and interaction with stakeholders (Shen et al., 2020). This process involves the complex and highly relational nature of the educator's roles, the aims and objectives of practice requiring the provision of support and education to students, and the similarity of responsibilities regarding youth communication (Hine et al., 2022; Pryor et al., 2024). Specifically related to English proficiency (Kim et al., 2024) and Hooli et al. (2023) show that English language proficiency beyond mere linguistic ability; it contributes to professional well-being. English language proficiency is closely associated with global academic mobility—recognized by Philip Altbach (2009) as essential to academic innovation and intercultural exchange, both vital for developing a globally relevant professional identity.

This study examines what factors including English proficiency and academic mobility influence professional well-being among early-career academics in Kazakhstan. Situated within the literature on higher education and human capital, the article tries to explain how globalizing academic structures intersect with professional well-being.

Academic mobility is considered as a mechanism of human and social capital accumulation, enabling exposure to international academic norms, research networks, and labor markets. However, the benefits of mobility are contingent upon English proficiency, which facilitates meaningful participation in transnational academic spaces. Institutional support for English-medium instruction (EMI) and mobility is therefore treated as a key moderating condition.

By focusing on Kazakhstan—a post-Soviet system integrated into the Bologna Process—this study extends higher education research beyond dominant Western contexts and highlights the structural conditions under which internationalization enhances or constrains professional well-being. Specifically analyzing North Kazakhstan the paper looks at a region located in the centre north of the country, close to the Russian Federation, that has GDP levels and growth similar to the country, exactly in the divide between those provinces that are becoming rich due to internationalization and the ones that are staying behind (Rodriguez-Pose, et. al., 2025). Clearly a good case study where the scrutiny of local alumni can clarify the people's and places paths in an emerging country of Central Asia.

In this vein, the current study aims to evaluate the factors that influence professional perceived well-being of university alumni of North Kazakhstan with a special focus on the role of two external factors: English proficiency and the expansion of academic mobility, international contacts, and exchanges. The research takes two sequential approaches: 1) First, trying to find what factors influence declared professional wellbeing including Students Mobility and English Proficiency; 2) Second, using the Generalized Q Analysis (Dentinho et.al., 2023; Nijkamp et. al., 2025; Ramazanova et. al. 2025) to define consistent groups of people and places related them with Professional Wellbeing.

To achieve this objective, the research is guided by the following research questions:

(1) What factors, including English Proficiency and Academic Mobility, influence Professional Wellbeing of recent alumni?

(2) What people and places, combined with English proficiency and academic mobility are associated to Professional Wellbeing of recent alumni?

Overall, by addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of professional well-being as an integral indicator of the professional development of young employees. In this regard, the findings are expected to provide insights that could inform improvements in higher education systems and professional wellbeing, particularly by promoting English language acquisition and academic mobility opportunities.

To respond to these two research questions the article presents a literature review on professional wellbeing and on the role of universities to promote it (Point 2). Then the methodology presents the conceptual framework of the paper, linking mobility, English proficiency, and people and places with professional well-being (Point 3). Collected data from the alumni database and from questionnaires is synthesized in Point 4. Point 5 shows the results using regression analysis and Generalized Q Analysis to address the two questions. The discussion of the results appears in Point 6 and Point 7 propose conclusions and recommendations.

Classifications of types of professional well-being of various socio-demographic groups, including students, are widely presented and justified in the literature. Well-being can be categorized into passion for work, job satisfaction, burnout, and workaholism (Bakker et al., 2011). Transition from the student role to the professional academic role for PhD studies well-being is closely related to employee productivity and efficiency (Schmidt et al., 2018; Laudel et al., 2008). Semi-structured interviews led by Haynes et al. (2012) to composition of well-being as realistic social, economic and personal expectations of PhD associated during their studies with the best personal balance in private life. These studies demonstrate that, in addition to reflecting working conditions, professional well-being arises because of an individual's expectations, attitudes, and socio-economic situation.

Psychological well-being has been conceptualized as consisting of six key components: autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989; Espinoza et al., 2024). Ryff (1989) proposed a model of professional well-being, according to which the well-being of a person is considered in the context of professional activity, as determined by its conditions and the content of this activity. At the same time, the following primary components are formed in the structure of professional well-being: emotional well-being, the desire for growth and development, autonomy and competence which are then generalized into one integral indicator "general functioning" that characterizes the personality of a professional (Warr, 1990; Hockham et al., 2024). Thus, professional well-being can be referred to as a multidimensional concept, encompassing emotional states, development aspirations, and the capacity to function effectively within the labor market.

Universities are an essential part of the entrepreneurship and innovation system on both the local and global scale. As such, understanding the impact of university alumni is important (Breznitz et al., 2019; Martini, 2024; Algos et al., 2023; Gaier, 2005; Politis et al., 2004). Programs to improve professional well-being, especially for young people in the process of their labor adaptation, can be based on various strategies of psycho-physiological recovery after

work, which are highlighted by a number of researchers based on the analysis and study of the role of recreation and various types of leisure activity in maintaining professional health (Fritz et al., 2006; Ambrosino et al., 2022; Mannerström et al., 2024). Previous studies also highlight that well-being during the transition to professional life is shaped by optimism, self-care, emotional commitment, and concerns regarding future career uncertainty, which can subsequently influence professional adaptation (Steuber et al., 2022; Diaz et al., 2024; Kara et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings indicate that university environments and early career support mechanisms play a crucial role in maintaining professional health, facilitating adaptation to new working conditions, and strengthening professional well-being among young professionals.

A key element shaping professional well-being is the introduction of training programs for employees, mainly for university graduates, aimed at improving the well-being and job satisfaction of employees through changes in work-related thoughts, attitudes, and behavioral strategies (Proudfoot et al., 2009; Watts et al., 2024; Haza et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2021). Some studies posit that professional well-being is contingent upon coaching utilized by modern organizations, in addition to traditional mentoring practices (Passmore et al., 2009; Teixeira et al., 2019; Bai et al., 2024; Stromholt et al., 2024; Briody et al., 2022). Consequently, support mechanisms and opportunities for personal development play a crucial role in shaping early professional experiences.

On the other hand, English language proficiency becomes a central requirement for accessing global scientific knowledge and international communication, which is crucial for alumni who have recently completed their studies (Goodman et al., 2024). Therefore, English proficiency facilitates early career adaptation, participation in international activities, and access to broader employment opportunities. Similarly, academic mobility broadens the horizons of young professionals by enabling knowledge exchange, strengthening international ties, and developing professional competencies in diverse environments (Wu et al., 2024) critical thinking and digital literacy (Li, 2025). Mobility opportunities can enhance optimism, adaptability, and confidence in future professional development by providing exposure to various educational and professional settings (Nasa & Legutko, 2022).

Despite these recognized influences, the effect of university internationalization practices on the professional well-being of alumni remains insufficiently explored, particularly in Kazakhstan, where the higher education system is experiencing rapid transformation aimed at integrating into the global scientific and educational space. This scarcity of research highlights a critical need for empirical evidence to understand how English language proficiency and academic mobility can tangibly contribute to graduates' well-being and career development.

In this study, a multi-stage data analysis process is followed to identify the factors affecting the professional well-being of university graduates and to reveal the relationships between variables.

The Conceptual Framework presented in Figure 1 explains the logic of the approach to address the two questions highlighted in the introduction.

(1) To better understand (Question 1) a linear regression is estimated relating professional wellbeing with English proficiency, students' mobility and other control variables (grade, age, gender, and urban or rural origin; and employment sector).

(2) To investigate who perceives higher professional well-being (Question 2) a Generalized Q Analysis is applied to data along the following steps: i) Transposing the data set so that observations become variables, and variables become observations, normalized and expanded to all possible combinations of 10 dummies (10 variables leads to $2^{10} = 1024$ transposed observations); ii) Second, a Principal Component Analysis is undertaken to collapse the 1250 respondents into 10 components with eigen values higher than 1; iii) Third, the standardized coefficients regression of the extracted scores with the 10 dummies is used to characterization of the 10 components, or 10 virtual alumni with exaggerated features; iv) Fourth, using the varimax rotated scores that relate the 10 components (or the virtual exaggerated alumni) with 1250 alumni it is possible to cluster the respondents in to 12 clusters of people and places, connected with gender, place and employment; v) Finally, using a differences in differences regression, it is possible to understand how, for each one of these 12 groups of people and place, professional wellbeing relates to English proficiency, students' mobility, students marks and age.

