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Strengthening Human Capital: How Ukraine and Moldova Can Retain and Reconnect Their Students

As more young people from Ukraine and Moldova choose to study abroad, the question of whether internationally educated youth return home has significant implications for demographic sustainability and economic growth. This policy brief presents findings from a survey of young people from Ukraine and Moldova. It outlines their motivations and considerations when deciding whether to study in their home countries or abroad, as well as what it would take for states to transform potential “brain drain” into “brain gain”. The survey data reveal a generation of young people facing constraints and uncertainty, yet still willing to invest in their societies. The analysis highlights a dual task facing both states: They need to offer high-quality education for students who choose to study domestically, while also maintaining meaningful ties with students and graduates educated abroad. Meeting these challenges means contributing to national resilience and human capital development.

Introduction

Across Ukraine and Moldova, an increasing number of young people are choosing to pursue their studies abroad in search of high-quality education, international experiences, and stronger career prospects. The challenge for the two states is to encourage the return of the internationally educated youth to halt the loss of much-needed human capital. Two countries already face labour shortages and ageing populations. One-way student emigration risks weakening their innovation potential and slowing economic development, just as EU integration efforts intensify. Yet, with the right policies, this mobility can be turned from a “brain drain” into a “brain gain”.

This policy brief addresses two questions. First, how do individual, structural, political, and security-related factors shape the decisions of young people from Ukraine and Moldova to study at home or abroad? And second, under what conditions are students studying abroad willing to return, and what would it take for states to transform potential “brain drain” into “brain gain”?

To answer these questions, the analysis draws on a survey of young people from Ukraine and Moldova who studied domestically and/or abroad. The survey, which included multiple-choice and open-ended questions, collected responses from 118 individuals originally from either country (N = 236). These findings, complemented by several in-depth interviews with students and academics (conducted separately from the survey), provide insight into how young people from Ukraine and Moldova chose their study destination countries

and how their states can better support and engage them at home and abroad.

Ukraine: Educational Choices and Emigration Under Wartime Conditions

Background: By October 2025, Russian attacks had damaged or destroyed 38% of Ukraine’s university facilities (Mykhailova, 2025). Despite the war, universities continue to expand student opportunities, strengthen institutions, and align with EU standards. To mitigate brain drain and performance risks, they draw on government, private-sector, and international support. Participation in Erasmus+, European Universities Alliances, and Horizon Europe helps build institutional capacity and sustain research funding (ERUA, 2025; European Commission, 2024).

In almost four years of full-scale war, the young generation in Ukraine had to adapt to new realities, where war became a backdrop to their formative years. For many, student life now means managing a “war-life balance”: attending classes in shelters, studying through power outages, fundraising for their friends and lecturers in the armed forces, and helping clean campuses after nighttime attacks.

Following the Russian invasion in 2022, the number of Ukrainian students enrolled in Western universities (EU, UK, USA, Canada) increased by 47% in the 2022/2023 academic year compared to the previous one, with Poland being the country with the largest share of Ukrainian students, accounting for 40% of the 115,000 Ukrainian students enrolled in Western higher education institutions in 2023/2024 (Stadnyi, 2025). This number is likely to rise further, given that 350,990

Ukrainian refugees aged 14–17 were living in Europe in September 2025 (Eurostat, 2025).

Survey responses: Students who chose to study in Ukraine highlighted the balance of education quality and affordability, as well as the convenience of staying close to family. Many also felt a strong patriotic commitment to contributing to Ukraine’s future and believed their chosen fields offered good opportunities at home.

Interviewees who had studied both in Ukraine and, at another stage of their education, abroad, noted that international experience broadened their expertise. They valued mobility programmes, double degrees, multicultural cohorts, and Erasmus exchanges. When reflecting on what could be improved in Ukrainian higher education, students prioritised more student-centred and practice-oriented teaching, such as interactive methods, discussion-based seminars, and case-based learning. They stressed the need for better access to international research databases, electronic libraries, and up-to-date literature, which remains limited in many universities. Interviewees also called for stronger career centres, internship programmes, company-based thesis projects, and mentorship.

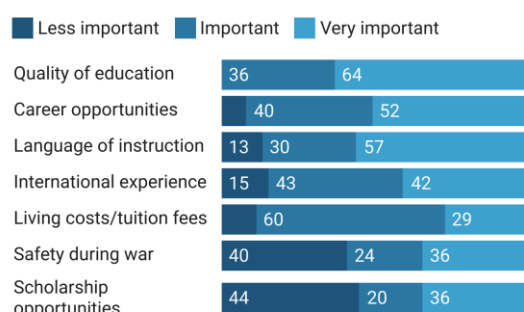
More broadly, respondents argued that improving Ukrainian higher education requires increased investment in research, modernised infrastructure, deeper links with the private sector, and a stronger emphasis on critical thinking, analytical skills, and interdisciplinarity.

Safety has become one of the key determinants in the educational choices of Ukrainian adolescents, as parents encourage their children to seek safety abroad. However, a decisive factor for student migration is development and opportunities,

rather than safety, according to the conducted survey (Figure 1). This finding is also consistent with the Index of the Future: Professional Expectations and Development of Adolescents in Ukraine (Shymanskyi et al., 2025, p.16).

Figure 1. Importance of different factors for Ukrainian students who chose to study abroad

How important were these factors in your decision to study abroad?

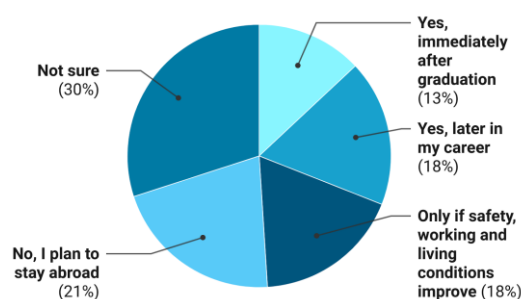


Source: Primary survey data collected for this policy brief.

Speaking about the conditions under which they would be willing to return, respondents mentioned broader structural factors, including security and better career prospects in Ukraine after graduation (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Long-term return intentions of Ukrainian students studying abroad

Do you plan to return to Ukraine in the future?



Source: Primary survey data collected for this policy brief.

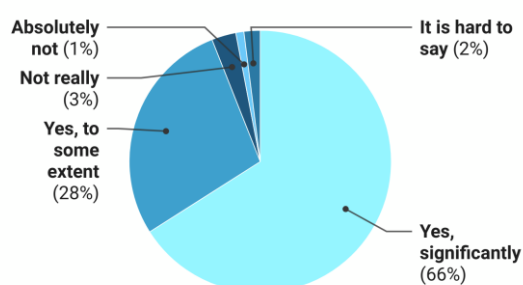
For many, Ukraine’s accession to the EU would signal long-term stability and opportunity (Figure 3). One interviewee described their participation in



the **Create Ukraine** initiative, which brings internationally trained Ukrainians to work in government advisory teams on twelve-month placements. This example illustrates how targeted return schemes can channel international expertise into the public sector.

Figure 3. Perceptions of how Ukraine's potential EU accession would affect opportunities for young people

Do you think Ukraine's integration into the European Union would improve opportunities for young people in the country?



Source: Primary survey data collected for this policy brief.

Student Mobility in Moldova

Background. Moldova faces an acute challenge of emigration, which results in a shrinking labour force, demographic imbalance, and growing pressure on the country's social and economic systems. Emigration also affects the education sector, as universities operate with shrinking student cohorts and a shortage of qualified staff. While over 60,000 students are enrolled in 16 higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, approximately 14,000 Moldovan students pursue their education in the EU, and four out of five of them are in Romania (Munteanu, 2024; Moldpres, 2025). Economic challenges drive the emigration of young people, who leave in

search of more stable career prospects and higher wages (Cațus, 2025).

Moldova undertakes a variety of education reforms aimed at reducing incentives for students to leave in search of better-quality studies. Recent measures include simplifying the recognition of foreign degrees, increasing scholarships, expanding dual-education programmes, and launching a national online admissions platform (Eurydice, 2025). EU support reinforces these efforts by modernising university governance, improving labour-market relevance, expanding international cooperation, and strengthening research and innovation (Council of Europe, 2025).

Over the past decade, Moldova has also expanded its engagement with the diaspora, particularly in higher education, to promote knowledge exchange and professional networks (Baltaș, Bostan & Plamadeala, 2023). Initiatives include short-term skills-transfer schemes that bring diaspora professionals into Moldovan universities for teaching, mentoring, or consultancy (Bureau for Relations with Diaspora, 2022). These efforts acknowledge that full return migration is unlikely in the near future, but circular mobility and diaspora engagement offer alternatives.

Survey responses. Moldovan students said they chose to study at home because of affordability, accessibility, and the relevance of local programmes. They valued learning in a familiar language and culture, and many hoped to build their futures in Moldova because of family ties and a desire to contribute to the country's development. However, their educational decisions are shaped by political stability and economic prospects. Those who stay or return form a highly engaged group, actively involved in

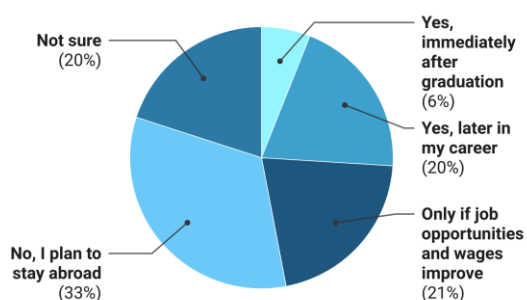


volunteer work, community projects, and local NGOs. By contrast, students open to leaving cited a weak job market, low wages, and limited opportunities, seeing study or work abroad as offering better prospects.

Students with experience in both systems emphasised the need for more practical learning, internships, company partnerships, real-world projects, and a wider range of electives, as well as stronger career guidance and mobility opportunities. Moldovan students studying abroad said they would be more attracted to domestic universities if curricula were modernised, programmes diversified, and links to the labour market strengthened. Many students abroad remain unsure about returning or plan to stay abroad due to low salaries, limited career prospects, weak institutions, and broader political and economic uncertainty in Moldova (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Long-term return intentions of Moldovan students studying abroad

Do you plan to return to Moldova in the future?



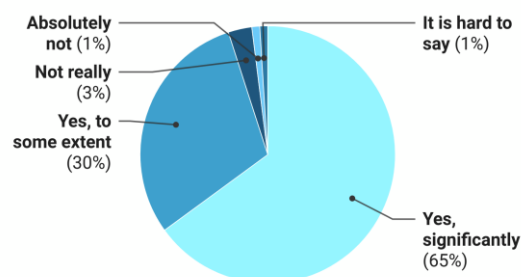
Source: Primary survey data collected for this policy brief.

Similarly to Ukraine, the young population views the prospect of Moldova's EU accession as a sign of economic growth, political stability, and improved business and career opportunities, which may motivate them to return and confidently build their future in Moldova. The majority of

respondents agree that Moldova's EU membership will improve opportunities for young people in the country (Figure 5). One of the interviewees shared, "Over time, if we reach that standard of living, I wouldn't need to look for it elsewhere, because I would have it at home." EU membership could help reverse the "brain drain," depending on the pace of domestic economic transformation and the government's ability to leverage integration to grow high-value industries that retain talent and boost economic growth (Gherasim, 2024).

Figure 5. Perceptions of how Moldova's potential EU accession would affect opportunities for young people

Do you think Moldova's integration into the European Union would improve opportunities for young people in the country?



Source: Primary survey data collected for this policy brief.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In Ukraine, young people make their educational choices amid war and uncertainty. In Moldova, their decisions whether to study domestically or abroad are shaped by structural conditions. But in both countries, youth demonstrate a strong sense of identity, civic commitment, and desire to contribute to their countries' future. Therefore, supporting these students requires a dual strategy: strengthening domestic higher education systems



while maintaining close ties with those who pursue opportunities abroad.

For students who choose to remain in Ukraine or Moldova, the priority is ensuring that higher education institutions provide quality and relevance. At the same time, students abroad should be viewed as a community whose expertise, networks, and global experiences can play an important role in national development. Diaspora-engagement programmes implemented in Moldova are increasingly relevant to Ukraine to help maintain meaningful connections with human capital abroad.

The survey and interview data presented above suggest the following policy recommendations, relevant for both countries and reflecting the needs and expectations of young people.

Key recommendations:

1. Keep strengthening the quality and relevance of higher education at home:
 - a. Modernise curricula and enhance teaching quality by shifting toward methods that prioritise critical thinking and applied skills.
 - b. Strengthen institutional capacity through international partnerships and expand the variety of courses and programmes to better match labour-market needs, including the development of joint courses that enhance relevance and quality.
 - c. Promote career services through university-employer partnerships, internship programmes, company-based thesis projects and mentorship schemes that help students transition into the labour market.

2. Maintain meaningful connections with students and young professionals abroad:

- a. Develop diaspora networks connecting students abroad with universities and employers at home.
- b. Promote public sector and private sector programmes that integrate internationally trained young professionals.
- c. Expand short-term exchanges: visiting fellowships, research collaborations, consultancy roles.

Mobilising the potential of young people in Ukraine and Moldova is essential for long-term resilience, EU integration, and economic growth. In turn, investing in education quality, labour market development, and diaspora engagement is a strategic investment in national development and human capital. Ultimately, retaining and reconnecting talent depends on broader security, political, and economic developments, especially progress on EU integration and successful reforms.

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