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Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan, Almaty
e-mail: Meruert.Shnarbekova@kaznu.kz

SOCIO-ECONOMICAL ASPECTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICE OF KAZAKHSTANI SCHOOL GRADUATES

During 30 years of independence, Kazakhstan has transformed the market of educational services institutionally and conducted considerable legislative and financial reforms. The policy of national and state universities in the last decade has become aimed at increasing admission of self-funded graduates. The article presents the main results of the research in the choice of HEI and the access to quality education for children from families with different income level. During research was conducted interview with parents of school graduates. Sample was 100 respondents. The composition of families was varied: large families, divorced, single parents, married etc. The interviewees were representatives of different professions, different levels of education, and socio-economic status. The aim of the research was to study the process of formation socio-economically determined higher education choice by school graduates in Kazakhstan. The study of this problem contributing to understand overall dynamics of the changes taking place in Kazakhstan education system. The obtained scientific results provide relevant and reliable information to reduce and eliminate barriers specific to young people of «underprivileged» groups in Kazakhstan. The conclusions and recommendations presented in this paper are applicable in planning of vocational career guidance among high school graduates and school graduates, the organization of information work of the admission board, preparation of normative legal acts and state programs in the sphere of higher education.

Key words: higher education, access to education, economic barriers, higher educational institutions, professional choice.

М.Қ. Шнарбекова

Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Қазақстан, Алматы қ.
e-mail: Meruert.Shnarbekova@kaznu.kz

Қазақстандық мектеп түлектерінің жоғары білімді таңдауда әлеуметтік-экономикалық ұстанымдары

Тәуелсіздік алғаннан бері 30-жыл ішінде отандық білім беру жүйесі институционалдық тұрғыдан трансформацияланды және бірқатар маңызды заңнамалық және қаржылық реформалар жүргізілді. Жоғары оқу орындарының саясаты соңғы он жылдықта студенттерді ақылы негізде қабылдауға бағытталды. Мақалада Қазақстанда әр түрлі әлеуметтік топқа жататын жастардың жоғары оқу орнын таңдау мен сапалы жоғары білім алу қолжетімділігін зерттеу нәтижелері берілген. Зерттеу барысында мектеп түлектерінің ата-анасымен сұхбат жүргізілді. Іріктеу жиынтығы 100 респондентті құрады. Отбасы құрамы әр түрлі болды: көпбалалы, ажырасқан, жалғызбасты ата-аналар, заңды некеде тұрғандар және т.б. Респонденттер әр түрлі мамандық иелері, білім деңгейі, әлеуметтік-экономикалық дәрежелері әр түрлі деңгейде. Зерттеу мақсаты – қазақстандық жастардың жоғары білімді таңдауда әлеуметтік-экономикалық басымдықтың қалыптасу үдерісін талдау. Бұл мәселені зерттеу Қазақстандағы білім беру жүйесіндегі өзгеріс динамикасын түсіну тұрғысынан маңызды. Алынған ғылыми нәтижелер әлеуметтік «әлсіз» топтарға жататын жастарға тән жоғары білім беру саласындағы қиындықтарды азайту және жоюда қажетті релевантты және сенімді ақпаратты қамтамасыз етеді. Қорытындылар мен ұсыныстар жоғары сынып оқушылары мен мектеп түлектері арасында профориентациялық жұмыстарды жоспарлауда, қабылдау комиссияның ақпараттық жұмысын ұйымдастыруда, білім беру саласында нормативтік және мемлекеттік бағдарламаларды әзірлеуде қолданыс таба алады.

Түйін сөздер: жоғары білім беру, білім беру қолжетімділігі, экономикалық кедергілер, жоғары оқу орнын, мамандық таңдау.

М.К. Шнарбекова

Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Казахстан, г. Алматы
e-mail: Meruert.Shnarbekova@kaznu.kz

Социально-экономические аспекты выбора высшего образования выпускниками казахстанских школ

В период 30-летней независимости Казахстан не только институционально трансформировал рынок образовательных услуг, но и провел значительные законодательные и финансовые реформы. Политика национальных и государственных вузов в последнее десятилетие стала направлена на расширение приема студентов на платной основе. В статье представлены основные результаты исследования выбора вуза и доступности получения качественного образования для разных социальных групп молодежи в Казахстане. В процессе исследования было проведено интервью с родителями выпускников школ. Выборка составляет 100 респондентов. Состав семей был разнообразным: многодетные, разведенные, одинокие родители, состоящие в браке и др. Респонденты были представителями разных профессий, имели разный уровень образования и социально-экономический статус. Целью исследования – является анализ процесса формирования социально-экономически детерминированных стратегий выбора высшего образования выпускниками школ в Казахстане. Изучение данной проблемы представляет интерес с точки зрения понимания общей динамики изменений, которые происходят в казахстанском образовании. Полученные научные результаты обеспечивают релевантной и надежной информацией для уменьшения или ликвидации барьеров, характерных для молодежи «непривилегированных» групп. Выводы и рекомендации, представленные в статье применимы в планировании профориентационной работы среди старшеклассников и выпускников школ, организации информационной работы приёмных комиссий, подготовке нормативных актов и государственных программ в сфере высшего образования.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, доступность образования, экономические барьеры, высшее учебное заведение, выбор специальности.

Introduction

During 30 years of independence, Kazakhstan has not only institutionally transformed the market of educational services, but also conducted considerable legislative and financial reforms, including expansion of the range of paid education. The policy of national and state universities especially in the last years has been aimed at increasing admission of self-funded graduates. Considering the modern education system in Kazakhstan in the economic section it is impossible not to notice its two important features. On the one hand, remaining the area of the strategic interests of the state, it is subject to fairly strict regulation and order. Education is an area of considerable subsidies, and budgetary money is always a state control area. On the other hand, against the background of strict control in the higher education a market in a traditional «capitalist» understanding is developing.

There is an obvious dissonance: on the one hand, education is traditionally looks like a strict and regulated system controlled by the state, and on the other – as an area of free competition and active commercialization. From the very beginning here the conflict of commercial and strategic interests was inevitable, and one of the most difficult tasks

– to bring them to a common denominator. In Kazakhstan reforms aimed at ensuring the integration of Kazakhstani higher education in the European area are intensively carried out. However, mechanical borrowing of European standards has complicated the internal substantial system of university education. At this time new opportunities are only developing, and old ones are rapidly declining.

The country has seen an increase in HEIs and accordingly in the number of graduates, which shows high accessibility of education. If in 1990, there were only 55 HEIs, in 2020 its number reached 127 HEIs (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020). The number of graduates enrolled on a tuition-fee payment basis is growing all the time. It seems clear that education on a tuition-fee payment basis increases its accessibility for graduates from high and middle-income families but decreases its accessibility for graduates from low-income families.

To ensure equal access of all groups of population to higher education, every year, the government provides grant funding for higher education. Admission to universities is implemented on a competitive basis through results of test examination. When the demand outnumbers the places offered, as it is the case for most university and especially the

prestigious ones, only the applicants with the higher marks are admitted. This leads to strong competition in the national examinations for entrance to HEIs. As a result, the majority of high school students need to receive out-of-school support to prepare for the university entrance examinations (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). Preparatory race exhausts family budgets. Average cost of an hour of tutoring is \$20-25 in Kazakhstan. In this aspect, high and middle-income families have more opportunities to pay for private tutoring of their children for preparation for the university entrance examination. This greatly increases their chances to study in prestigious university.

The aim of the research is to study social practices in the field of higher education and the process of formation socio-economically determined higher education choice by youth in Kazakhstan.

The study of this problem represents the interest from several positions. Firstly, to understand overall dynamics of the changes taking place in the formation of Kazakhstan. Second, in the article the significance of economic capital of the family in the market of higher education and the social consequences of the choice of «affordable» vocational education are analyzed. The main results of the research in the choice of HEI and the access to education for children from families with higher and lower income in Kazakhstan are presented.

The obtained scientific data and results provide relevant and reliable information to reduce or eliminate barriers specific to young people of «underprivileged» groups in Kazakhstan. The conclusions and recommendations presented in this paper are applicable in planning of vocational career guidance among high school graduates and school graduates, the organization of information work of the admission board, preparation of normative legal acts and state programs in the sphere of higher education.

Literature Review

There is an abundant international literature relating to the relationship between social class, educational performance and higher education. According to these studies, although the policies concerning the widening of participation in higher education, class effects remain over the decades, they just have transformed to be indirect and hidden. Families of different class differently assess similar costs, expenses and the risks of educational choices of their children (Jack, 2016). It is these differences that become a source of inequality in education. Economic capital allows families «investing» in the edu-

cation of children (Ou and Reynolds, 2014), as well as expanding opportunities for school graduates to choose the desired higher education (Binder, 2016). High social background helps parents provide their children a quality education, which in turn allows them to occupy higher social position in the future (Zhimin and Yao, 2015). Middle class graduates receiving a quality higher education is often a way of preserving the social status of the family (Stocké, 2007). Middle class parents pass their social position and status on to children through education (Blau and Duncan, 1967). Thus, education contributes to the preservation of the social order in society (Kaiser, 2019).

The theory of cultural capital determines the importance of socialization through cultural practices, such as an interest in art and classical music, visiting theaters and museums, reading books. The youth who are not familiar with this type of socialization will consider the university as a «hostile» environment. As a consequence, they do not aspire to higher education (own choice), and if they decide to get it, they do not achieve the expected results (indirect exception) (Shiner and Noden, 2015) may not be acknowledged by teachers (teacher's choice) (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 1996). Another explanation of social class inequality in educational achievements is the social distribution of «cultural capital». Bourdieu argued that owning of cultural capital depends on a social class, but the education system requires a certain level of cultural capital (Dumais, 2002). Thus, the youth from the working class encounter certain difficulties in achieving academic success.

Raymond Boudon distinguished primary and secondary effects of social class in education (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2007). The primary effect is determined by the influence of the economic capital of a family on academic success of student (Goldthorpe, 1996). Graduates from higher-income families study better than their peers from low-income families. Since wealthy families provide their children with the best conditions for mental development (Dhesi, 2001). As a result, high academic results determine their furthermore ambitious educational choice (Van de Werfhorst, 2009). A secondary effect is determined by the influence of the economic capital of a family on the educational choice of school graduates regardless of their academic success. Even if graduates have the same performance, graduates from a wealthy family is committed to a higher level of education than their peers from lower social class (Jackson, 2007).

The international debate about class effects on student higher education choice has been an issue of growing concern since the 1970s (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). In Kazakhstan, as well as in many developing countries, however it has been a matter of concern only during the last years. Due to the lack of empirical studies on this issue in context of developing countries with special focus on Kazakhstan, findings of the research are going to be interesting. This issue is becoming particularly significant in Kazakhstan due to:

1) Reduction of vocational schools (colleges), which led to a sharp transition of Kazakhstani secondary schools' graduates to the higher education unit, thus increasing its demand;

2) The rise of private universities and the growth of enrollment of graduates to state universities on tuition and fee payment basis;

3) The decline in the level of HEIs graduates' employment by obtained specialties.

At the core of the construction used during this study is the model of educational choice including

the determinants (personal characteristics of the child and the socio-economic, cultural capital of the parents) and dependent factors (choice of education level, profession and educational institution).

Materials and Methods

The sample of the study consisted of one hundred parents of school graduates. The composition of families was varied: large families, divorced, single parents, married etc. The interviewees were representatives of different professions, different levels of education, social status and economic well-being: representatives of the upper class – 30, middle class – 30, working class – 40 respondents. Parental education has been recorded in terms of national qualifications and formed such groups: Low education, medium education and high education following existing practice (Ermisch, 2012; Jackson, 2013). Parents' occupations were divided to the upper, middle, semi-skilled and unskilled occupations based on education and professions.

Table 1 – Subsample details of school graduates' parents

INTVW #	Father's education	Mother's education	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation	Level of income
1	Higher	Higher	Businessman	Housewife	High
2	Higher	Higher	Rector of HEI	Businesswoman	High
4	Higher	Secondary	Deputy head of Department	Housewife	High
10	Higher	Higher	Businessman	Housewife	High
11	Higher	Higher	Diplomat	Director	High
12	Higher	Higher	Financier	Manager	High
66	Higher	Higher	Trainman	Housewife	Low
110	Higher	Secondary	Electrician	Housewife	Low
120	Secondary	Higher	Electrician	Kindergartener	Low
121	Higher	Higher	Small businessman	Housewife	High

The interviews were conducted in Russian and Kazakh languages according to the request of interviewees. In average, each interview lasted about an hour. The interviewees were informed about confidentiality of conducted sociological research. The names listed in the article are replaced with analogues.

Results and Discussion

The education fees

The cost of higher education is often defined as the greatest barrier to increasing working-class participation. Considering accessibility of higher education in the economic context, it is impossible not

to notice two parameters: the possibility of paying tuition fee and the possibility of using paid forms of preparation for receiving education grant. Widening of participation in higher education conceals many ambiguous differentiation processes occurring in the system of higher education. Opportunities for obtaining «quality» or high level of education are significantly unequal for youth from different backgrounds (Shnarbekova, 2021). According to the data of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, average expenditure on education in national HEIs is two times higher than in other public and private HEIs. Tuition fees in national HEIs are \$3000, in other HEIs – about \$1,500. Policies aimed at increasing relative mobility need to begin from the fact that individual achievements are not judged in isolation, but in a positional competition that typically privileges those from higher social classes, due to their superior material and cultural assets (Bourdieu, 1984). Inequalities in class, status and power are a defining feature of the struggle for «positional goods» including credentials, incomes and high-status jobs (Brown, 2013).

Due to the limited financial capabilities for working-class families, range of choice of educational institutions is dramatically narrowed. Most of them agree with the fact that higher education requires material investments. However, they are forced to consider low-cost options, such as education in less prestigious universities. The reasonable cost of tuition fee for them is around \$1000, but it is not enough for study at national universities and especially prestigious ones. Mostly, working-class families orient their children to state grants and the choice of future profession is not related to competitive advantage and high motivation of their children:

– *We understand the importance of higher education but cannot afford to allocate money from the family budget on the education of the child. I do not work, although I have a degree, my husband, too, despite having a higher education, he is small businessman. Therefore, the monthly income is not constant. We have not chosen yet a HEI (Working class, interview #121).*

– *We have not decided what university will apply to. Of course, it is desirable that our son gets a degree, but if not – we'll see what we do next. We will try to apply based on the state grant (Working class, interview #120).*

– *It is desirable that our son gets a bachelor degree, however we are not considering post-graduate education (master degree). We have chosen the trajectory «Ecology» but have not made a decision about exact specialty yet. Having looked through the marks of last year's university entrance exam, we noted that in this educational trajectory the competition is low. Timur (son – the authors' note)*

wishes to study in the Kazakh National Agrarian University (Working class, interview #66).

Access to the prestigious education to a large extent is determined not only by the abilities of young people but also by family background. The allocated differences in the resource potential of families stipulate significant inequality in access to higher education. Along with the income, social (social status, family ties), and cultural capital (availability of cultural and educational resources) become an important factor in obtaining prestigious education.

Parents are aware of the need to pay for their children's education. Payment is both discriminatory and a levelling tool at the same time. Both working-class and middle-class families are willing to pay tuition fees, since education plays a central role in getting good job. However, higher social classes are more likely to apply for more prestigious HEIs. The upper class shows a strong aspiration to study abroad, while middle class has postgraduate educational aspiration (Master and PhD).

– *We expect that our daughter will enroll a foreign university. Aizhan (daughter – authors' note) wants to study at Seoul National University (Seoul, Korea). We are ready to pay up to \$20,000-25,000. (Upper class, interview #10).*

– *We have not decided in which country our son will study. We want our son to have higher degrees. Elnur (son – authors' note) wants to study at Kazakh-British Technical University (prestigious university in Kazakhstan – authors' note) (Middle class, interview #1).*

– *We want Aslan (son – authors' note) most importantly, to get a quality education in a prestigious university, regardless of the tuition fee price. Then we plan to enroll in master degree program. When choosing a HEI, we pay special attention to the prestige of the university, access to quality knowledge. As for now our choice is KIMEP University (prestigious university in Kazakhstan – authors' note) (Middle class, interview #4).*

Where go to study: the choice of university

There are direct and indirect impacts of social class on the choice of university. Direct impact is seen in the range of available higher education institutions. The youth from low social class have limited options related to difficulties in paying for college tuition. While indirect influence is latent, it manifests in the differentiation of the level of a starting educational capital by social class (Shnarbekova, 2018). Starter educational capital of the graduate along with general knowledge includes knowledge of a foreign language and a scientific language, which to some extent facilitate the further education.

High social class parents increase the possibilities of their children's turn to the out-of-school support and especially to the most expensive and effective forms of it, as it can ensure high performance and access to high academic status universities (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008).

According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, explanation of social classes' inequality in educational achievements is the social distribution of «cultural capital». Bourdieu argues that owning of cultural capital depends on a social class, but the education system requires a certain level of cultural capital (Gaddis, 2013). Thus, graduates from the working class encounter certain difficulties in achieving academic success (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). According to the national youth survey, the top three most important factors of HEI choice are:

1) Opportunities of getting a high-quality education (89.7%). This criterion is essential for the majority of graduates from upper and middle-class families (99.8%) in the evaluation and selection of the university. This criterion is also important for working-class graduates, but to a lesser extent than for the upper and middle-class graduates and equals 65.3%. It is indicative that a certain university and its status project high-quality education in the public opinion of graduates.

2) Low tuition fees and opportunities for tuition fee-free education (87.1%). Competition for educational grants requires a strong starter educational capital to obtain high results in the university entrance exams. Differences between knowledge required to successfully pass the university entrance exams and school knowledge, determined active development of paid services to prepare for the entrance exams. In this aspect, low income of families becomes a barrier to admission to HEIs. Since preparatory race (private tutor services, additional courses etc.) exhausts family budgets. For example, the price of one hour of private tutoring in the regions and cities varied from \$15 until \$30.

3) The importance of prestige and rankings of HEI (83.7%). The third criterion is equally important for both upper- and middle-class graduates.

In interviews, along with parents of private urban schools are graduates and state school graduates. Implementation of the strategy of entering HEI starts much earlier for city graduates than for rural graduates. In cities, this process starts from the moment of school choice and time of immediate preparation for university entrance exam, while there is not so much type of school in rural areas. The analysis of their educational aspirations shows that

graduates of paid private schools from upper class want to apply and study in prestigious and foreign universities. The high educational capital and the advantage of knowledge of foreign languages give them the opportunity to study in foreign universities too. Parents are willing to allocate money from the family budget to study abroad.

– *Our daughter wants to get a degree in “Engineering”. We plan to apply to the Technical University of Vienna (Vienna, Austria). Aloï (daughter – authors’ note) has made decision on her own, we fully agree with it. Particular attention is paid to the authority of the university, the position in the world rankings of universities, the prestige of the chosen specialty. We do not suffer financial difficulties and we can pay up to \$ 40,000. (Upper class, interview #11).*

We want our son to receive high-quality education. After graduating from school, we plan to continue education and to receive a master degree and then enroll in a doctorate program. We are willing to pay to \$30,000. We think to study in a foreign university, but firstly Alibek (son – authors’ note) will have a six-month internship in University of Lancaster (Lancaster, Lancashire, England). Alibek is fluent in English and knows German too (Upper class, interview #12).

Regional differences in choice of profession

Every year, there is the displacement of the flow of rural school graduates to the large cities of Kazakhstan such as Almaty and Nur-Sultan. 80% of graduates enrolled in universities are provided with a dormitory with a nominal fee (cost per year is \$200-250), 10% rent apartments, and 10% live with relatives and friends, thus saving money on accommodation. In recent years, there have been changes in the settlement differences. A clear shift in favor of accessibility of higher education in the major metropolitan areas Almaty, Nur-Sultan, Shymkent and others become noticeable. Almaty occupies the first place among other cities by the number of graduates and their number reached 133 736, which is two times more than in South Kazakhstan region, which occupies the 2nd position by the number of graduates in the Bachelor and Master educational programs. Rural school graduates from working class express strong aspirations for big cities. For them, the main goal is to enroll in universities in big cities. They choose affordable and achievable universities. In most cases, they try to study on a tuition fee free in non-prestigious universities, where competition was not high:

– *Our son will be a machinist. We are considering the option of paid education. For us acceptable price is \$600-700, looking for the appropriate railway college or*

institute. We have been recommended this profession by relatives and we agree with them. We believe that it is the most viable option for our son. Aidar (son – authors' note) wants to get specialty "Railway specialist" and to study at Kazakh Academy of Transport and Communications named after M. Tynyshpayev (Almaty), but for our family it will not be acceptable – tuition fee is very high. It is desirable that he graduates from college in Almaty, works for a while, and then we will see (working class, interview #110).

Conclusion

The development of new forms of organization of educational services (state and private schools, vocational schools, state and private universities) has increased differentiation of educational services according to its academic reputation and cost. The reasons of the differentiation by social groups, based on accessibility of a higher education, do not always coincide with the usual representations of the poor – rich, capable – incapable. Family income significantly affects the accessibility of higher education and, consequently, the likelihood of enrollment. In general, awareness of the necessity to pay for education is quite firmly rooted among the population of Kazakhstan. Social differences are mainly related to the quality of the education received that is measured by level of university academic status, and not by economic conditions of education (tuition fee free or paid).

Both working-class and middle-class families pay tuition fee at the university. However, working-class families choose cheaper options for education: less prestigious HEIs and specialties, less costly forms of education. Middle class has a strong commitment to post-graduate education (Master and PhD programs). Study demonstrates that family background significantly influences on participation

patterns. High-class families are ready to «invest» in their child's education. They begin to «invest» in their children's education from an early age: children study in good private schools. Consequently, they have formed a high start-up capital, which gives them the opportunity to make ambitious educational plans and increases the competitiveness on the education market. Upper class graduates show a strong desire to study in foreign universities.

Among rural graduates of working class there are strong aspirations for big cities in search of "a better life" and obtaining "affordable education", while city schools of middle class aimed at obtaining the "elite" education in Kazakhstan and upper class aimed at obtaining the education abroad. Rural graduates of working-class experience extra expenses (accommodation, transportation), that make them work during study. Therefore, their target is education grants and the choice of the university and/or specialty with low competition. Such differentiation increases the stratification of higher education institutions and the concentration of working-class graduates in non-prestigious educational institutions with low tuition fee. Therefore, in higher education system, in addition to general and vocational education, there are quite pronounced elite and mass components.

Thus, in Kazakhstan's higher education sphere an ambiguous situation is formed where on the one hand, the prestigious specialties in the leading Kazakhstani HEIs are not accessible for school graduates of the rural schools and graduates from lower social class. On the other hand, school graduates of the big cities and from upper class for whom education at the leading universities of Kazakhstan is affordable, but their aspirations are aimed at getting education in foreign universities.

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