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ASSESSING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION: INDEX INDICATORS OF RURAL YOUTH

Ensuring equal access to higher education for rural youth is one of the main objectives of the development policy and the regional policy of Kazakhstan. This study aims to assess the accessibility of higher education for rural school graduates by using a set of index indicators that reflect national trends in university admissions and quota use. The study has both scientific and practical relevance, as it offers a quantitative and comparable basis for assessing the continuing inequalities that exist despite ongoing national reforms. Methodologically, the study uses secondary statistical data from the Bureau of National Statistics and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for the period from 2020 to 2025. Three indices were calculated: the rural higher education access index, the rural quota utilisation index and the composite rural accessibility index. Indicators measure overall access, dependence on government quota systems and aggregate affordability using sound weighting approaches. The results show a significant decrease in general access to higher education with little recovery. Moreover, reliance on the rural youth quota has increased as the quality of education index rose from 27.8% to 31.9%, indicating that rural youth are increasingly dependent on state support for access to higher education. An additional analysis of the education level of the rural population reveals the intergenerational gap and the concentration of low levels of education among older rural people, which limits mobility between generations. The study presents a proven system for measuring educational inequality in rural areas. The study broadens the empirical basis for policy evaluation and highlights the need for reforms in rural school education, digital readiness and admission policies taking into account regional differences. In practice, the results can help policymakers to improve quota systems, expand training programmes and better allocate opportunities for higher education across regions.

Keywords: access to higher education, rural youth, index indicators, educational inequality, rural quota.

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Жоғары білімнің қолжетімділігін бағалау: ауыл жастарының индекстік көрсеткіштері

Жоғары білімге тең қолжетімділікті қамтамасыз ету Қазақстанның өңірлік даму саясаты мен адами капиталды нығайту стратегиясындағы басым бағыттардың бірі. Осы зерттеудің мақсаты ауылдық мектеп түлектерінің жоғары білімге қолжетімділігін бағалау, ол ұлттық деңгейдегі университетке қабылдау үрдістерін және квота жүйесінің қолданылуын көрсететін индекстік көрсеткіштер жиынтығы арқылы жүзеге асырылады. Зерттеу ғылыми әрі қолданбалы тұрғыдан маңызды, себебі ол жүргізіліп жатқан ұлттық реформаларға қарамастан сақталып отырған білім беру теңсіздігін бағалауға мүмкіндік беретін сандық және салыстырмалы талдау негізін ұсынады. Әдіснамалық тұрғыда зерттеу 2020-2025 жылдар аралығындағы Ұлттық статистика бюросы мен Қазақстан Республикасының Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігінің екіншілік

деректеріне сүйенеді. Үш негізгі индекс есептелді: ауылдық жерлердегі жоғары білімге қолжетімділік индексі, ауылдық квота қолдану индексі және ауылдық қолжетімділіктің композиттік индексі. Бұл көрсеткіштер жалпы қолжетімділікті, мемлекеттік квота жүйесіне тәуелділікті және жиынтық қолжетімділікті, сондай-ақ теориялық негізделген өлшемдеу тәсілдерін ескере отырып бағалайды. Нәтижелер жоғары білімге жалпы қолжетімділіктің айтарлықтай төмендегенін және тек шағын деңгейде қалпына келгенін көрсетеді. Бұдан бөлек, ауылдық жастардың квотаға тәуелділігі артқан: ауылдық квотаны пайдалану индексі 27,8%-дан 31,9%-ға өсті, бұл ауылдық түлектердің жоғары білім алуға мемлекеттік қолдауға барған сайын көбірек сүйенетінін аңғартады. Ауылдық тұрғындардың білім деңгейін қосымша талдау ұрпақтар арасындағы алшақтықты және төмен білімділік деңгейінің негізінен егде жастағы ауыл тұрғындары арасында шоғырланғанын анықтады, бұл әлеуметтік-экономикалық ұрпақаралық мобильділікті шектейді. Зерттеу ауылдық білім беру теңсіздігін өлшеуге арналған тексерілген әдіснамалық жүйені ұсынады. Эмпирикалық тұрғыдан зерттеу білім беру саясатын бағалау үшін деректер базасын кеңейтеді және ауыл мектептеріндегі сапаны арттыру, цифрлық дайындықты күшейту және өңірлік айырмашылықтарды ескеретін қабылдау саясатын жетілдіру қажеттілігін айқындайды. Қолданбалы деңгейде алынған нәтижелер квота жүйесін жетілдіруге, дайындық бағдарламаларын кеңейтуге және жоғары білім алу мүмкіндіктерін өңірлер бойынша неғұрлым тиімді бөлуге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: жоғары білімге қолжетімділік, ауыл жастары, индекстік көрсеткіштер, білім беру теңсіздігі, ауылдық квота.

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Оценка доступности высшего образования: индексные показатели сельской молодежи

Обеспечение равного доступа к высшему образованию для сельской молодежи является одной из основных задач политики развития и региональной политики Казахстана. Целью данного исследования является оценка доступности высшего образования для выпускников сельских школ, что достигается путем использования набора индексных показателей, отражающих национальные тенденции в поступлении в университеты, использовании квот. Исследование имеет как научную, так и практическую значимость, так как предлагает количественную и сопоставимую основу для оценки сохраняющегося неравенства, существующего, несмотря на проводимые национальные реформы. Методологически в исследовании используются вторичные статистические данные Бюро национальной статистики и Министерства науки и высшего образования за период с 2020 по 2025 год. Были рассчитаны три индекса: индекс доступа к высшему образованию в сельской местности, индекс использования квот в сельской местности и композитный индекс доступности в сельской местности. Показатели измеряют общий доступ, зависимость от систем государственных квот и совокупную доступность, используя обоснованные подходы к взвешиванию. Результаты демонстрируют значительное снижение общей доступности высшего образования с небольшим восстановлением. Более того, возросла зависимость от квоты для сельской молодежи, ведь индекс качества образования (RQI) увеличился с 27,8% до 31,9%, что свидетельствует о том, что сельская молодежь все больше зависит от государственной поддержки в доступе к высшему образованию. Дополнительный анализ уровня образования сельского населения выявляет разрыв между поколениями и концентрацию низкого уровня образования среди пожилых сельских жителей, что ограничивает мобильность между поколениями. В исследовании представлена проверенная система для измерения образовательного неравенства в сельской местности. Исследование расширяет эмпирическую базу для оценки политики и подчеркивает необходимость реформ в сфере сельского школьного образования, цифровой готовности и политики приёма в вузы с учётом региональных различий. На практике полученные результаты могут помочь политикам усовершенствовать системы квот, расширить подготовительные программы и более эффективно распределять возможности получения высшего образования по регионам.

Ключевые слова: доступность высшего образования, сельская молодежь, индексные показатели, образовательное неравенство, сельская квота.

Introduction

The issue of equitable access to higher education has become a key topic in discussions on social justice, regional development and human capital formation. In Kazakhstan, almost 40% of the population lives in rural areas (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). Differences in educational opportunities between rural and urban youth continue to affect social mobility and labour market integration (World Bank, 2023). Despite national reforms aimed at increasing participation, such as quotas for rural residents and targeted grants, data show that graduates of rural universities still make up a small proportion of graduates of higher education institutions compared to urban ones (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). Studies consistently show that unequal conditions, such as school infrastructure, quality of teaching, socio-economic problems and limited access to preparatory resources, hinder the education of rural youth (Trahar, 2020; Prakhov, 2025). Such problems create long-term structural barriers that support unequal access to higher education opportunities. Bourdieu's (1986) idea of cultural capital explains that differences in educational attainment are deeply rooted in broader social frameworks and institutional structures. In Kazakhstan, the lack of clear quantitative tools to measure access to higher education for rural graduates limits the ability to assess policies on the basis of convincing data. Given the strategic goals of Kazakhstan, such as reducing regional inequality and increasing human capital productivity to ensure balanced social development, the need for reliable, comparable and dynamic indicators is particularly important (Nurbayev, 2021). This study will fill in the gaps by analysing five-year indicators of access to education for rural youth. The results will be used in national policy debates and broader sociological discussions on educational inequalities in post-Soviet and developing countries.

The object of research is the process of access to higher education of rural youth in Kazakhstan within the broader system of educational transitions from secondary to higher education. The study focuses on quantitative indicators of access to higher education for rural school leavers, estimated by means of index-based statistical measurements derived from official national data.

The aim of the study is to assess the accessibility of higher education for rural youth in Kazakhstan. The objective of the study will be achieved by calculating and explaining indices based on national

statistics. The objective is also linked to the thesis that accessibility varies significantly across regions, indicating structural inequalities in education. To achieve this goal, the study aims at:

- collect and systematize official statistical data on graduates of rural universities and their enrolment in higher education institutions in different regions of Kazakhstan during the last five years.
- calculate accessibility indices using existing national statistics;
- compare regional differences in index values to identify regions with the highest and lowest availability.

Based on previous studies and raw data of national statistics, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H₁: Access to higher education for rural youth in Kazakhstan is uneven across regions, and the index shows significant territorial differences that persist despite government efforts to support rural graduates.

H₂: Rural quota helps to reduce but does not completely eliminate the access gap.

The study is further based on several combined approaches that provide a clear picture of access to higher education for rural youth. First, it uses a sociological approach to educational inequality that highlights territorial and social differences as important factors influencing educational trajectories. The approach helps to consider statistical indicators in the context of broader conditions affecting access to higher education. Secondly, the study includes a structural-demographic analysis to examine the characteristics and educational path of rural youth and the approach helps to understand how population structure and regional demographic profiles relate to access to higher education. Third, the study uses the concept of human capital, which assumes that inequalities of educational opportunity affect a country's individual growth and economic progress in the long term. Finally, a comparative regional approach is used to identify the differences between regions, allowing for a detailed assessment of the differences in access to education in different areas of Kazakhstan. Taken together, these approaches provide a solid basis for the analysis of statistical indicators from national databases. The importance of this study lies in its ability to provide a sound assessment of access to higher education for rural youth using official national data. Applying sequential index measurements to existing datasets, the study provides a reliable method of comparing availability across regions and over time without creating

new methods. The results support evidence-based assessment of policies, including how government measures such as rural quotas work in practice. The study also improves understanding of educational inequality by highlighting territorial gaps and identifying factors that limit the educational mobility of rural populations. In addition, the calculated indicators serve as a diagnostic tool to identify the most vulnerable regions where barriers to higher education are most significant. Through this work, the study creates a more solid empirical basis for decision-making at the national level and enriches the academic discussion on educational inequality between rural and urban areas in Kazakhstan and similar situations.

Literature review

Studies show that despite the global growth of higher education, rural youth still face difficulties in academic training, university selection and entry outcomes (Chankseliani et al., 2020). In systems with centralized university admissions, such as Kazakhstan, inequality becomes more evident, because standardized national exams do not address existing shortcomings in school education and social conditions.

Rural-urban inequality and academic readiness.

Growing evidence suggests that rural schools in Kazakhstan tend to have fewer resources, a weaker digital infrastructure and lower quality of education than urban schools. Utemissova (2020) notes that even despite recent efforts to modernize, rural schools still face difficulties in developing functional literacy. Significant gaps in reading and cognitive skills can be seen already in primary school, and academic gaps accumulate over time, putting rural graduates at a disadvantage when entering university. Studies on the adaptation of rural youth show that educational unpreparedness is closely linked to socio-economic vulnerability. Grabelnykh (2023) emphasize that rural students entering universities face material, informational and psychological difficulties, with adaptation to the academic and urban environment being the most difficult stage. The results are consistent with previous studies showing that young people from rural families have fewer cultural and information resources when choosing an educational path (Shnarbekova, 2017). Kemelbayeva (2020) shows a long-term decline in educational returns during the post-Soviet period and argues that structural inequalities in school quality have created unequal pathways to higher education.

The author also shows that stricter reception standards without improving the quality of education in rural areas increase the gap between well-trained urban entrants and rural school graduates (Kemelbayeva, 2020; Chankseliani 2020). The policy states equal treatment for all students, these systems ignore inequality in initial educational conditions. Rural students often score lower on standardized tests and tend to choose less prestigious or selective programs.

Economic, social and political dimensions of inequality

In Kazakhstan, it is shown that the economic conditions of the regions have a significant influence on the quality of education and the level of enrolment in higher education. Karabayev et al. (2023) show that regions with higher economic performance and higher level of innovation have more developed educational infrastructure, while economically weak regions have less perspective, and these differences directly affect the chances of rural youth to enter universities. More targeted studies conducted in selected regions confirm these findings. Zhanbyrbayeva et al. (2023) reveal a significant gap between rural and urban school graduates in the Almaty region. Their results show that material resources, the level of digitalization and local funding have a significant impact on educational opportunities. Their analysis of the regions shows that the disadvantages in education in rural areas have a geographical structure and are constantly reproduced in regional economic structures. Digitalization has also become a significant factor of inequality. Bakirbekova et al. (2025) found that rural students are less likely to use digital tools and learn than their urban counterparts, limiting their participation in online training courses, digital tutoring, and blended learning. As digital platforms are increasingly used in higher education, this inequality reduces the competitiveness of rural students even before they apply.

Educational choice, cultural capital and aspirations

Based on Bourdier's (1986) idea of cultural capital, explains that access to higher education is determined not only by financial constraints, but also by cultural and information inequalities. Shnarbekova (2017) shows that educational practices and decision-making processes in rural families differ from urban ones. Limited knowledge of university programs, less awareness of financial assistance and limited access to preparatory courses narrow the range of options considered by rural students. Rural youth often tend to favour less selective or nearby

educational institutions (Chankseliani 2020). Financial considerations often motivate rural students to prefer programs that minimize the cost of moving or guarantee immediate employment, even if such a choice limits long-term opportunities. Also, experts from Balmagambetova (2020), Kemelbayeva's (2020) stress that inequality in access to education has a long-term impact on the development of the labor market and human capital. Jonbekova (2023) considers how university graduates contribute to national development and innovation. Access to strong institutions of higher education is necessary for social mobility and the training of skilled workers, and unequal access reinforces wider regional inequalities in human capital. Analysis of graduate data conducted by Kemelbayeva's (2020) also shows that the quality of programs has a significant impact on outcomes as rural youth enter quality or elite universities, inequalities in access to education have a long-term impact on earnings, job stability and career prospects.

Index approaches to measuring access to higher education for rural youth

Studies by Triventi (2014), Paterson, (2019) and Malish (2020) show that index methods are among the best tools for assessing inequalities in access to higher education, especially when multiple structural barriers exist. In countries with significant spatial differences, such as Kazakhstan, composite indices provide a deeper understanding of accessibility than single-factor indicators. Malish (2020) argues that financial accessibility, geographic location, institutional selectivity and sociocultural expectations intersect, forming inequalities in participation. These factors affect the ability of students as a whole rather than individually, and composite indicators are crucial in identifying these combined shortcomings because they identify structural mechanisms, which seem to be hidden when using isolated indicators such as exam results or enrollment rates, and this conclusion is relevant for Kazakhstan where rural youth face simultaneous problems related to the quality of school education, digital infrastructure, household income and distance to universities. At the same time, comparative studies of higher education systems show how institutional structures affect accessibility models. Triventi (2014) shows that the cost of higher education, institutional autonomy and labour market profitability together influence the level of participation of rural youth in higher education. His classification of higher education systems shows that systems with strong stratification and limited student support often contribute to maintain-

ing existing inequalities. On the contrary, more inclusive systems provide for greater participation and equality. Although Kazakhstan is not included in its data set, the theoretical rationale still applies because the centralized reception system in the country, along with uneven regional development, creates conditions that are unfavourable to rural students and this reinforces the arguments in favor of the index. Taking into account multiple institutional factors affecting accessibility. Paterson, (2019) identifies the risk of «false positive» and «false negative» results where students from dysfunctional families living in economically heterogeneous rural areas may not be classified as non-eligible, while some students from non-designated areas are incorrectly reflected in the spatial indicators. The problem is acute for Kazakhstan, where in rural areas there are often both relatively well-off and extremely poorly off families. Therefore, the assessment of accessibility should go beyond geography and be based on a multidimensional index that combines social, educational and institutional factors.

Materials and methods

This study uses a quantitative method to assess the accessibility of higher education for rural youth based on secondary data from the National Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for five school years from 2020 to 2025. The calculation of accessibility indicators is carried out in accordance with OECD standards (2025) for participation and transition indicators, and a composite index based on recognized approaches in higher education studies (Usher, 2005; Triventi, 2014). Data include the following annual figures for rural school leavers:

- total number of rural school graduates;
- number of rural school graduates entering higher education institutions;
- number of rural school leavers admitted to the quota for rural residents;
- the number of rural school leavers who have completed higher education and data on the availability of higher education.

The aim is to assess the trend in rural students' access to higher education by means of index indicators that reflect general accessibility and dependence on state support systems for rural quota. The indices were based on internationally recognized standards for assessing access to education, namely the *rural higher education access index* (R-HEAI). The index measures the percentage of rural second-

ary school leavers who have successfully entered higher education.

$$R\text{-}HEAI_t = \frac{\text{Number of rural students admitted to HEIs}_t}{\text{Number of rural secondary school graduates}_t} \times 100$$

In this index, higher values indicate greater overall accessibility for rural youth, reflecting both supply and demand factors of readiness. Next, the rural quota utilisation index (RQI).

$$RQI_t = \frac{\text{Number of rural students admitted under the rural quota}_t}{\text{Total rural students admitted to HEIs}_t} \times 100$$

The index reflects the extent to which rural students rely on a special government quota for admission to higher education. High values indicate a strong reliance on quota mechanisms, suggesting that common entry routes may be less accessible to rural entrants. The latest composite rural accessibility index (CRAI) is shown below. It has been applied to obtain an integrated indicator reflecting both availability and dependence on state mechanisms, where a composite index is formed by combining R-HEAI and RQI using theoretically justified weighting factors.

$$CRAI_t = w_1 \cdot R\text{-}HEAI_t + w_2 \cdot RQI_t$$

Given that general availability is the main result and quota use a secondary mechanism, the following weight factors apply:

- 1) $w_1 = 0.7$ access to higher education
- 2) $w_2 = 0.3$ quota dependency

The final version was obtained:

$$CRAI_t = 0.7 \cdot R\text{-}HEAI_t + 0.3 \cdot RQI_t$$

As seen in the final calculation, the index combines absolute accessibility and structural dependence on rural quota, where CRAI growth can occur either by increasing the total number of arrivals to the countryside or by using more active state support mechanisms.

Ratio justification. The choice of weighting factors corresponds to three main methodological principles widely applied in international studies on access to higher education (Usher, 2005; Triventi, 2014; Malish, 2020). First, the result dominance principle establishes that the main indicator of accessibility is the actual transition of rural school leavers to higher education. R-HEAI reflects the proportion of rural school leavers en-

tering higher education and thus represents the end result of educational transition. RQI reflects the dependence on a specific rural quota mechanism and is therefore a secondary rather than a universal indicator of accessibility. For this reason, R-HEAI has a higher weight ($w = 0.7$), while RQI has an additional but lower weight ($w = 0.3$). Second, the principle of partial compensability implies that an increase in quota intake cannot fully compensate for a decrease in overall availability. In systems with structural inequalities, such as Kazakhstan, dependence on quotas may increase even when overall access is reduced. As a result, R-HEAI and RQI can only partially compensate for each other. The 70/30 weight ratio maintains this methodological logic, preventing the index from being artificially inflated in years when quota use is increasing despite a decrease in overall intake. Third, the principle of structural priority recognizes that general accessibility reflects systemic aspects of educational inequality: quality of schools, gaps in test scores, regional structure of opportunities, whereas quotas are a policy tool, Designed to mitigate inequality, not eliminate it. Thus, the weight factor scheme ensures that the structural indicator (R-HEAI) maintains analytical priority over the compensation indicator (RQI). The choice of weighting factors is also due to the institutional context of the higher education system in Kazakhstan. The rural quota is about 35% of all public education grants, which is a significant but not dominant share of the total number of entrants and the share confirms moderate weighting RQI ($w = 0.3$): the quota is large enough to influence the models of accessibility, but not so great as to outweigh the central role of general reception. Thus, the 70/30 ratio is conceptually consistent with the structural distribution of opportunities in the national grant system. As a result, CRAI provides a balanced and theoretically consistent assessment of rural youth's access to higher education over time.

Results and discussion

The results of the study are based on regional demographic models and calculations of a national index to assess access to higher education for rural youth in Kazakhstan.

Regional demographic dynamics of rural school graduates. The analysis shows the spatial distribution and growth of rural school leavers. Figure 1 shows the regional dynamics of rural school leavers over five years.

	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025
Republic of Kazakhstan	65,362	74,257	74,632	74,218	76,936
Turkestan	20,003	22,723	23,580	23,638	24,370
Almaty	11,221	13,634	10,624	11,289	12,708
Zhambyl	5,821	6,716	6,729	6,836	6,783
Kyzylorda	3,739	4,328	4,618	4,890	4,947
East Kazakhstan	3,645	3,969	1,608	1,456	1,388
Mangistau	3,488	3,896	4,191	3,893	4,191
West Kazakhstan	2,501	2,808	2,619	2,470	2,676
Atyrau	2,478	2,787	2,667	2,658	2,456
Akmola	2,477	2,710	2,222	2,087	2,320
Kostanay	2,401	2,369	1,941	1,694	1,806
Aktobe	2,288	2,396	2,454	2,379	2,523
Karaganda	2,125	2,421	1,837	1,673	1,583
North Kazakhstan	1,923	2,016	1,948	1,950	1,780
Pavlodar	1,252	1,484	1,319	1,188	1,264
Abai	0	0	2,311	2,108	2,194
Zhetysu	0	0	3,507	3,589	3,547
Ulytau	0	0	457	420	400

Figure 1 – Dynamics of rural school graduates in Kazakhstan by region

As shown in figure 1, there are regional differences due to demographic, socio-economic and geographical factors. In the country as a whole, the total number of rural school graduates is steadily increasing, rising from 65,362 in the 2020-2021 academic year to 76,936 in the 2024-2025 academic year. Growth of 17.7% reflects population growth in the southern regions, changes in school groups after the pandemic and an overall increase in the number of children of school age in rural areas. A notable jump occurred in the period from 2020-2021 to 2021-2022 school year, when the number of rural school graduates increased by almost nine thousand people, which indicates both demographic dynamics and strengthening stability in school groups after the COVID-19 pandemic. The distribution of rural graduates by region is uneven, with a strong concentration in the southern regions of the country. The Turkestan region has consistently had the largest number of graduates from rural universities, increasing from 20,003 to 24,370 in five years. Annually, it accounts for about one third of all rural graduates in Kazakhstan and this dominance is mainly due to the high birth rate in the region and its predominantly rural population. Other southern

regions, such as Zhambyl, Kyzylorda and parts of the reorganized Almaty region, also show significant growth, with growth ranging from 12% to more than 30% during this period. The above regions are the demographic center of rural youth in Kazakhstan and are expected to continue to put pressure on the national education system due to growing population. In the northern and eastern regions, such as North Kazakhstan, Pavlodar, Kostanay and East Kazakhstan, there is a low or even declining number of rural graduates. As shown in the figure, the figures for Northern Kazakhstan range from 1,800 to 1,900 people and show a slight downward trend, which reflects long-term population reduction, aging of residents and population outflow from rural areas. In the western and central regions, such as Atyrau, Aktobe and Mangistau, moderate and stable growth has been observed, largely in line with local demographic trends and economic conditions. The creation of new administrative regions of Abai, Ulytau and Zhetysu from 2022-2023 academic year leads to the formation of smaller but clearly expressed groups of rural graduates, which reflects changes in organization rather than new demographic shifts. Overall, this indicates a growing regional imbalance

in the south with strong population growth while in the north and some parts of the east there is a decline in rural youth. The difference affects access to higher education, distribution of state grants and rural quota, which promotes equal opportunities for students from rural areas. The growth of rural graduates, especially in densely populated southern regions, increases competition for limited budget places, housing in major cities and training programmes. Thus, the gap between regions with the largest number of graduates from rural areas and the location of universities in large urban centers (Almaty, Astana, Shymkent) exacerbates existing inequalities in access to higher education.

Index-based assessment of rural youth accessibility to higher education. Rural students' access to higher education is further examined using a set of indices, where the indices reflect national trends in university enrolment, quota use and completion rates. Access to higher education in rural areas shows a significant decrease in the number of students entering higher education (see Table 1)

Table 1 – Rural higher education access index

Academic year	Rural school graduates	Admitted to HEIs	R-HEAI (%)
2020–2021	65,362	59,134	90.5
2021–2022	74,257	51,856	69.8
2022–2023	74,632	34,401	46.1
2023–2024	74,218	19,285	26.0
2024–2025	76,936	29,381	38.2

Access to education has fallen from a very high level of 90.5% in 2020 to only 26% by 2024, which means more than three times less. Despite some recovery in 2025, the level of education is still much lower than before. The decrease in R-HEAI may partly reflect the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural education. Although the number of rural school leavers has continued to grow, access to higher education has declined, indicating that structural barriers have increased in the post-pandemic period. The downward trend may be related to increased competition for limited university places, interruptions in academic training and examinations due to pandemics, changes in admission policy or more general economic problems, which have affected rural families the most. Overall, this trend indicates that rural youth face a more difficult

transition from school to higher education. Although the rural access to higher education index (table 1) shows a significant decrease in the number of rural graduates entering higher education institutions, it does not provide a clear explanation for how rural students enter universities. The rural quota index is therefore considered to understand the changes in the supply routes during this period (table 2). The indicator shows how much rural applicants depend on the government quota system. It allows a better understanding of changes in the reception system and highlights the growing importance of targeted support systems.

Table 2 – Rural Quota Utilisation Index

Academic Year	Admitted to HEIs	Admitted via Rural Quota	RQI (%)
2020–2021	59,134	16,412	27.8
2021–2022	51,856	13,794	26.6
2022–2023	34,401	7,964	23.2
2023–2024	19,285	5,665	29.4
2024–2025	29,381	9,380	31.9

The rural quota utilization index shows a clear shift towards greater reliance on the rural youth quota system as a key pathway to higher education. Although the total number of students admitted under the rural quota has been declining in the middle of the period under review, the proportion of rural enrolments benefiting from the quota has increased from 27.8% in 2020 to 31.9% in 2025, indicating that more rural youth gain access to higher education through public programs rather than competitive selection. In this case, the trend reflects two significant structural changes. First, the decrease in values of the broader access index (table 1) indicates that common entry paths for rural applicants have become more difficult, which may be due to increased competition, reduced academic readiness due to pandemics or changing intake criteria. As a result, an increasing number of rural students have to rely on quotas for university places. Second, rural quota has become an important policy tool for maintaining the representation of rural youth in higher education. Overall, the RQI results highlight the growing importance of targeted state support to ensure equity in education. In a situation where general access to higher education is declining, rural quota acts not only as an additional opportunity

but also as a vital support system. Despite increasing reliance on rural quotas as shown in Table 2, the use of quotas reflects only one aspect of accessibility. It does not fully reflect how these changes affect the overall opportunities available to rural students. Quota-based admission may help to address some of the drawbacks, but this is only part of the general picture of accessibility, and to understand how common access paths and quota systems interact over time, the analysis looks at a composite index of accessibility for rural dwellers (Table 3), where the combined indicator combines trends in overall acceptance and use of quotas.

Table 3 – Composite Rural Accessibility Index

Year	R-HEAI (Prop.)	RQI (Prop.)	CRAI (%)
2020–2021	0.905	0.278	71.69
2021–2022	0.698	0.266	56.84
2022–2023	0.461	0.232	39.23
2023–2024	0.260	0.294	27.02
2024–2025	0.382	0.319	36.31

The index shows a noticeable decline from 71.69% in 2020 to 27.02% in 2023, which indicates a significant decrease in overall availability over five years and this decline coincides with the sharp drop in R-HEAI share, which fell from 0.905

to 0.260, meaning Fewer rural graduates enter universities on common paths. The share of RQI shows an upward trend, increasing from 0.278 in 2020 to 0.319 in 2025. This increased reliance on quota-based admission indicates that rural students are increasingly dependent on specific government support to enrol in higher education. However, the modest increase in RQI is insufficient to compensate for the significant reduction in overall access, which results in a low composite index. A slight recovery of the CRAI to 36.31% in 2025 due to a partial recovery of the R-HEAI ratio from 0.260 to 0.382 does not change the overall downward trend and suggests that although availability may stabilize after the peak of decline, Deep-rooted inequalities persist. In general, CRAI values indicate that rural youth face increasingly limited access to higher education despite their increasing reliance on quota mechanisms. The composite index highlights the correlation between declining general access and growing dependence on government-supported programs, showing that current policy measures are insufficient to reverse the continuing decline in educational availability.

Educational structure of the rural population.

The level of basic education has a significant impact on the ability of rural youth to enrol in universities. Information on the education level of rural residents provides valuable information about long-term differences and specific characteristics of different groups. Table 4 shows the educational profile of the rural population aged 10 years and over.

Table 4 – Distribution of the rural population of Kazakhstan by educational level

Educational Level	Total Population (persons)	Share of Total (%)	Men (persons / % of men)	Women (persons / % of women)
Postgraduate (Master's, Doctoral)	35,459	0.6	18,428 (0.6)	17,031 (0.6)
Higher Education	1,373,832	23.3	703,246 (23.6)	670,586 (22.9)
Incomplete Higher Education	90,432	1.5	47,315 (1.6)	43,117 (1.5)
Technical and Vocational Education	424,647	7.2	224,332 (7.5)	200,315 (6.9)
Specialised Secondary Education	1,041,355	17.7	517,587 (17.4)	523,768 (17.9)
Initial Vocational Education	146,098	2.5	72,798 (2.4)	73,300 (2.5)
General Secondary	1,316,555	22.3	657,776 (22.1)	658,779 (22.5)
Basic Secondary	526,465	8.9	259,519 (8.7)	266,946 (9.1)
Primary Education	858,172	14.6	430,811 (14.5)	427,361 (14.6)

The educational profile of the rural population shows a generally high level of education with very low levels of illiteracy. Almost a quarter of the rural population, some 24 per cent, has a higher or post-graduate education. Among them, 1.37 million people have a higher education, and 35.5 thousand people have a master's degree or doctorate of sciences. The differences between the sexes in these categories are not significant as 23.6% of men and 22.9% of women have higher education. Another 1.5% of the rural population has incomplete higher education, which indicates that access to higher education is improving even if not all students complete their studies. The largest group of rural dwellers has a full secondary and special secondary education, making up about 40% of the population. In particular, 1.32 million rural dwellers, or 22.3 per cent, have a general secondary education and 1.04 million, or 17.7 per cent, have a special secondary education certificate. Completion rates at these levels are almost the same for men and women. Some 9.7 per cent of the rural population receive technical and initial vocational education. Men are slightly more likely to choose technical occupations 7.5% compared with 6.9% of women and this reflects the traditional model of skilled work and technical occupations. At the same time 8.9% have only basic secondary education, 14.6% have primary education.

The results of the study show a complex picture of access of rural youth to higher education in Kazakhstan. Structural, demographic and institutional inequalities continue to affect educational trajectories, even as national reforms continue. The decline in access to higher education in rural areas suggests that graduates of rural universities face increasing barriers to entry into higher education. Trends reflect previous studies which show that rural schools are still significantly worse off than urban ones due to weaker infrastructure, lower quality of teaching and continuing resource constraints (Utemissova, 2020; Trahar et al., 2020). Like the results obtained in post-socialist and developing countries, this study shows that structural inequalities increase over time, especially at key points of transition to the education system (Prakhov, 2025). The sharp decline in access to education is consistent with international data indicating that standardized intake procedures, such as nationwide testing, often exacerbate existing inequalities, when the level of schooling differs significantly in different regions (Chankseliani et al., 2020; Kemelbayeva, 2020). According to Bourdier's (1986) theory of cultural capital, unequal access to academic, information and sociocultural

resources limits the competitiveness of rural youth in systems that are generally favorable to urban students. The data obtained here confirms this idea, although the number of rural school leavers has increased by 17.7% in five years, this increase has led to a decrease rather than an increase in the enrolment rate at higher education institutions, indicating that structural barriers are more important than growth in demand. The rise in rural quota utilization rate confirms this view. Growing reliance on government quota programmes indicates that common entry routes are becoming less accessible to rural students and is consistent with the findings of Malish (2020) which show that when overall access is reduced, targeted support mechanisms often become substitutes rather than complements. Nor can these compensatory measures alone address deep-rooted structural inequalities, especially in stratified higher education systems (Triventi, 2014; Paterson et al., 2019). The contrast between the declining Education Quality Index (R-HEAI) and the rising Education Quality Index (RQI) in Kazakhstan highlights this structural tension. The composite results of the Education Quality Index (CRAI) provide additional context for this dynamic and even with a temporary increase in intake by quotas cannot compensate for a significant decrease in overall access. Similar situations have been observed in various countries where socio-economic, territorial and institutional barriers intersect, creating numerous obstacles for students from disadvantaged families (Usher, 2005; Malish, 2020). Thus, the case of Kazakhstan fits into broader global trends where rural students increasingly depend on government support but struggle to overcome systemic barriers only through these measures. The demographic and educational composition of the rural population helps to explain the trends identified in the index analysis. Although almost 24% of the rural population has a relatively strong higher education, more than a quarter remain in lower educational categories. Trends reflect the effects of generational change revealed in earlier studies where older rural groups carry the legacy of limited access to education, which over time increases territorial inequality (Nurbayev, 2021; Zhanbyrbayeva et al., 2023). In addition, rural population growth in southern regions where educational resources are limited and the quality of school education differs is consistent with studies showing that demographic pressure exacerbates existing inequalities in access to higher education (Karabayev et al., 2023; World Bank, 2023).

The empirical results of the study confirm the validity of the discussions on information and cultural restrictions. Research has consistently shown that rural students have more limited access to university orientation, preparatory courses and digital learning tools by factors that significantly influence university choice and competitiveness (Shnarbekova, 2017; Bakirbekova et al., 2025). The results confirm these findings, where the decline in R-HEAI, despite an increase in the number of graduates, indicates that the improvement in access to digital technologies and training has not kept pace with demographic growth. This is especially important because digital platforms, online exam preparation and information systems are increasingly being used when entering universities in Kazakhstan, which increases the gap between rural and urban students. Taken together, these results confirm several key points:

1. Structural inequalities are more important than demographic and political improvements, which is consistent with the results of studies on rural education (Trahar et al., 2020; Kemelbayeva, 2020).

2. Targeted measures such as quotas help, but cannot completely eliminate territorial inequality, which reflects the global experience of applying quota and equality systems (Paterson et al., 2019; Malish, 2020).

3. Educational inequality is a complex issue requiring different indicators. This is confirmed by data showing that composite access indices reveal deeper differences not observed when using one-dimensional indicators (Malish, 2020; Bakari et al., 2017).

4. Cultural and information resources significantly influence the path of access to education, which is consistent with sociological views on choice and aspiration for education (Bourdieu, 1986; Shnarbekova, 2017).

5. Economic differences between regions affect both the quality of school education and the results of higher education, as confirmed by empirical studies conducted in Kazakhstan and other post-socialist countries (Karabayev et al., 2023; Prakhov & Gadzaonov, 2025).

This study confirms the growing number of evidence that rural youth in Kazakhstan face increasing challenges in education due to demographic pressure, structural inequality and institutional barriers. Despite policy measures such as rural quotas, access to education continues to decline, indicating that more fundamental changes are needed to improve the educational readiness of rural populations, Di-

versification of access options and reduction of spatial disparities.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that the objective of the study was achieved, since the analyzed indices allowed to assess both general access routes and structural dependence on state support mechanisms. Taken together, the indicators showed clear trends over time and revealed persistent disparities faced by rural school leavers. The results strongly support H_1 , which suggests that access to higher education for rural youth is uneven over time and reflects structural inequalities. The decline in R-HEAI indicates that pathways to higher education have become significantly less accessible, despite the continued growth of rural school leavers. The CRAI results also confirm a decline in general access to education, which indicates that rural youth have difficulty passing fair selection. The results also partially confirm H_2 , according to which rural quotas help reduce but not eliminate inequalities in access. The Quality of Education Index (RQI) shows that the share of rural students using the quota has increased from 27.8% to 31.9%, indicating that the quota remains an important mechanism for supporting rural participation. However, the growing dependence on quotas is accompanied by a decline in general access, which means that although quota policies address some inequalities, they are not sufficient to overcome systemic shortcomings in academic training, the quality of regional education and socioeconomic conditions. Thus, the quota is an auxiliary tool rather than a transformative solution. Overall, the analysis shows that rural youth in Kazakhstan face numerous barriers due to demographic pressure, uneven regional development and institutional constraints. Despite efforts to promote participation, access to higher education has declined and reliance on targeted government support has increased. The results highlight the need for broader systemic reforms aimed at improving the quality of education in rural areas, expanding opportunities for higher education in different regions, increasing digital readiness and ensuring that reception policies take into account contextual shortcomings, rather than aggravating them.

Limitations of the index approach

The index system (R-HEAI, RQI and CRAI) offers a structured and understandable way of assessing access to higher education. However, it has a number of methodological limitations that affect

both the analysis and the limits of its application. First, the indices do not measure inequality at the individual level. All calculations are based on aggregated national data. As a result, socio-economic, cultural and academic differences between individual rural students remain hidden, which means that vulnerable groups cannot be identified. Therefore, the index cannot explain why two students from the same region have different educational trajectories. Second, the indices do not reveal inequalities within regions. They work with common indicators by region and do not take into account the significant differences between remote villages, suburbs and areas with different socio-economic conditions. Therefore, the descriptive analysis by regions was initially included separately, and inequality was identified. Third, the indices do not measure the quality of education. The formulas include only quantitative indicators, such as the number of graduates who have received and completed training. They do not take into account school infrastructure, teachers' qualifications, the availability of training courses or access to digital resources. Therefore, the method cannot explain the reasons for reduced access, especially if the reason is a decrease in the quality of education. Fourth, the approach involves a direct transi-

tion from school to university, although many rural school leavers delay entry, take academic leave, work or receive vocational education before entering higher education, which means that the model does not take into account non-linear educational trajectories. Fifth, the indices do not take into account financial barriers. They do not take into account household income, cost of living. The Quality of Learning Index (RQI) only takes into account the number of students who took advantage of the rural quota, but does not assess whether it is fairly distributed and benefits the most vulnerable. The CRAI index is based on a theoretically justified system of weight factors, it must be recognized that the assigned weights (0.7 and 0.3) are still theoretical and not supported by comparative empirical data, therefore restriction means, The current form of CRAI should be seen as an early analytical model, not as a final measurement tool. Further research will focus on testing and improving the weightings structure, including comparing it with urban youth groups and assessing its relevance. The authors plan to further test and possibly adjust the formula and publish the results, ensuring that the index reflects strong theory and real coherence in the higher education system of Kazakhstan.

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