

Sociological Analysis of Educational Strategies in the System of Higher Education in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the educational strategies in higher education based on an analysis of students' motives. The sociological study was conducted using a complex of quantitative and qualitative methods employing a questionnaire survey participated by students, graduate and doctoral students of national and state universities of Kazakhstan. The in-depth interviews were attended only by graduate and doctoral students.

The findings unravelled that the leading motive for education was the desire of students to obtain a diploma. The acquisition of a formal university graduation certificate is important in the opinion of students. However, neither the content or qualifications nor the mastery of the future speciality, which they are going to acquire in the course of study, are not significant motives for the young generation. In the view of modern Kazakhstan youth, to be an educated person means to offer oneself in the labour market profitably.

The existence of a link between the requirements for the future profession and goals in the higher education system was also confirmed in the course of study. The results obtained in the course of research make it possible to head over to a new level of substantiation of educational strategies and create prerequisites for the improvement of the efficiency of the educatory process.

Keywords: Student Motivation; Educational Strategies; Higher Education, Professional Development; Sociological Analysis; Kazakhstan

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Introduction

The research interest in educational strategies is quite high among scientists from different countries involved in the explanation of the ongoing changes in the behaviour of students (Bergsmann et al., 2015). Such changes in the behaviour of students show how the choice of a future profession is made; the reasons for choosing a particular university; the attitude to the educational process; the motivation for obtaining a higher education— all are still relevant for researchers and society.

The study of features in the field of higher education in Kazakhstan contributes to the identification of the problems in the national system of specialist training at universities. At the same time, an important component of research is the study of the value orientations of modern Kazakhstani youth (Biyekenova et al., 2016) and the refinement of its social profile (Abdiraiymova et al., 2016).

The relevance of the study of educational strategies is explained by the fact that currently, the field of education has become an area of strategic behaviour for social groups.

First, in post-industrial societies, education is considered not only as a criterion of social inequality and social differentiation but also as a channel of social growth and mobility. To reproduce their own position in the space of society, the representatives of different social groups refer to education as an objective factor in achieving social success. According to Bourdieu, educational strategies are “long-term investments that are not necessarily perceived as such and are not limited, as the economy of ‘human capital’ suggests, to an economic or monetary dimension. In fact, they are primarily aimed at the production of social agents who are worthy and capable of inheriting the properties of a group” (Bourdieu, 2005: 103).

Secondly, modern education is continuous, and throughout life; a person is engaged in the development of new knowledge and the formation of his or her professional competencies. Public consciousness undertook

an inevitable transformation in terms of the practice and timing of education, the choice of level and direction of training.

Thirdly, the modern education system is characterised by flexibility and variability. Current students choose not only the trajectories and modules of education but also the faculty.

Taking into account the expansion of the scope of application of the “strategy” category (Karlöf, 1991; Radaev, 2002; Kharchenko, 2007), the concept of “educational strategy” is actively used by sociological scientists both at the state level and at the personal level. However, despite its popularity, this concept has not received an unambiguous interpretation in the scientific community.

In this study, the researchers have proceeded from the following definition: an educational strategy is a motivated choice of the method of obtaining higher education implemented at the cognitive and behavioural levels.

In the course of the study, it was found that the motivation of students is aimed at obtaining documents proving education for further employment on certain jobs. For this, we, on the basis of empirical studies, proposed an original classification of motives for students' behaviour in the university educational process. The education strategy should be aimed at increasing students' motivation for obtaining knowledge and developing students' interest in new specialities. Therefore, state education policy should be aimed at improving the competitiveness of specialists. Changing the stereotypes of behaviour among the students will increase the efficiency of the learning process and prepare specialists who meet the requirements of the modern labour market.

The introduction shows the problem of student behaviour in higher education. In particular, we tried to reveal the motivational structure of educational actions when studying at a university. We conducted a survey of students of large universities in Kazakhstan. The study begins with a literature review. This follows a

brief description of the research methodology including basic hypotheses. The results obtained from the study helped us to identify several strategies of motives for obtaining an education from students, as well as build a hierarchy of these motives. The findings of the study confirm the proposed hypotheses.

Literature Review

The analysis of the researchers' approaches (Kolesnikova, 2006; Fursov, 2006; 2007) to the concept of "educational strategy" suggests that the formation of a strategy is carried out at two levels: cognitive, implying the ability of social actors to set goals and plan including two factors— professionalism and pragmatism, and behavioural, consisting of factors of dependence and indifference, which is the implementation of the strategy in practice.

At the same time, according to Kharchenko (2007) and Maksimova (2007), the difference of strategic behaviour in the field of education from fragmentary situational practices of behaviour is that the educational strategy is a coherent line of conduct and is a consequence of strategic decision making (choice).

The researchers recognise the quality of services, student satisfaction and their behavioural intentions as important aspects of an educational strategy (Zaborova & Ozerova, 2013; Gibbs, 2015; Giroux, 2015; Mestrovic, 2017). In this context, Russian sociologists note the transformation in the choice of educational strategies and motivation systems (Konstantinovskiy et al., 2015). Kazakhstani researchers also note that there is a change in attitudes towards education in a society that influences the choice of a speciality, a university, and a country of study (Kukubaeva, 2017; Burkhanova et al., 2017).

Contribution to Literature

In the course of the study, the structure was determined and the hierarchy of motivations for higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan was substantiated.

In the framework of the study, confirmation was obtained about the existence of a link between

the requirements for the future profession and goals in the higher education system. It was shown that students were guided in their actions by different ideas about higher education and future employment, in connection with which to achieve their goals they used different strategies: professional development, directed development, and the "eternal student".

It was determined that the choice of a particular educational strategy was associated with the influence of the following factors: labour market conditions and transformation in the education system; university status and rating, demand for the speciality; the resource potential of the family, the individual actions of the individual in the course of training.

The goal of the current research is to identify educational strategies in higher education based on an analysis of the motives of students. In the framework of the goal, the following tasks were solved:

- The identification of the motives for the educational choice of modern youth;
- The analysis of the impact of the existing system of higher education in Kazakhstan on the educational strategies of students;
- The study of student behaviour patterns in education and science.

The following section discusses the methods deployed in this research.

Methods

Data collection was carried out using a complex of quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis was carried out based on a questionnaire survey (1,200 questionnaires), in which students, graduate and doctoral students from national and state universities of Kazakhstan participated. The in-depth interviews and focus group research were conducted among graduate and doctoral (postgraduate) students. The respondents were distributed in the general section of the sample, which are as follows: students – 60%, graduates – 30%, doctoral students – 10%. This proportion reflects the characteristics of the general population of this social group.

The time frame of this research was December – March 2015 and 2016.

The questionnaire survey was conducted in large universities (L.N. Gumilyov ENU, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, K.I. Satpayev Kazakh National Research Technical University, KarSU named after Academician E.A. Buketov) in three large cities of Kazakhstan (Astana, Almaty, Karaganda).

The choice of these cities is justified by the fact that Astana and Almaty are the largest metropolitan areas of Kazakhstan, in which the national universities of the country are located, while the choice of KarSU named after E.A. Buketov is explained by the fact that it is a regional authoritative classical university. These universities have got their own fully established scientific traditions and research schools. These cities provide thousands of young people with the opportunity to obtain education and achieve their life goals.

The following assumptions have been made as basic hypotheses limiting the field of study:

- The motivational structure of educational activities consists of spatial-temporal, behavioural, professional and business factors, which are expressed in the prestige of work, the prospects for career and professional growth, the possibility of self-realisation, interest in work.
- The actions of students are guided by certain ideas about higher education and future work, and therefore different strategies are used by them to achieve the goals set.
- The existing direct link between the requirements for the future profession and goals in the higher education system motivates young people to different ways of obtaining higher education.
- The choice of a specific educational strategy is due to the influence of the following factors—conditions at the macro-, meso- and micro- levels: the situation in the labour market and transformation in the education system; university status and rating, demand for

the speciality; the resource potential of the family, the individual actions of the person in the course of training.

Results

According to the results of a sociological study, the following groups of motivations for obtaining higher education were identified (Table 1).

In addition to the descriptive statistics of the data obtained, the authors conducted factor analysis, which made it possible to determine the following groups of factors (Table 2).

The formation of the educational strategy begins from the moment of the decision to enter the university. It is determined by choice of a particular university. Therefore, it is important to analyse the option of a university as a way of obtaining higher education. In the study, the researchers tried to identify how students and their parents adapt to changes in the system of higher education in Kazakhstan and choose educational institutions, based on their priorities. The distribution of the responses of the study participants is presented in Figure 1.

The labour market is transforming according to the principles of the Bologna process. It should be noted that the Bologna process has been understood as the movement aimed at harmonisation of education systems. First of all, the process concerns the higher education transformation based on the principles of the Bologna Declaration signed by the Education Ministers from 29 European states (1999). One of the principles of the Bologna process supposes separation of higher education into two parts: bachelor's and master's degree. Therefore, in the study, the competitiveness of graduates was evaluated taking into account their level of education (bachelor's and master's level).

More and more employers prefer to employ graduates rather than bachelors. Graduates are given preference to due to their higher qualifications compared to bachelors. This has a significant effect on behavioural models in higher education regarding further education (Figure 2).

Table 1: Students' Motives for Getting a Higher Education (In percentage)

Students' motives	Responses (in %)
I do not want to work	3
I will not find a job without higher education	4
The status of a person with higher education is highly valued in society	5
My parents want me to get higher education	7
Respect for a person with higher education	8
All members of my family have got higher education	12
Opportunity to join high society	19
I have no other plans besides entering the university	27
Live an interesting and fulfilling life surrounded by people with higher education	32
Actualise own abilities	38
Become a qualified specialist	41
To live a student life	43
Opportunity to get a good job	45
Career prospects	47
A chance to get high wages	51
Become an educated citizen	72
Higher education diploma	79

Source: Compiled by the Authors in 2015

Table 2: Factor Data Analysis

Groups of Factors in Favour of the Choice of Higher Education

Professional Factors	Pragmatism Factors	Dependency Factors	Indifference Factors
Higher education diploma – 79%	A chance to get high wages – 51%	All members of my family have got higher education – 12%	To live a student life – 43%
Become an educated citizen – 72%	Career prospects – 47%	My parents want me to get a higher education – 7%;	I have no other plans besides entering the university – 27%
Become a qualified specialist – 41%	Opportunity to get a good job – 45%	The status of a person with higher education is highly valued in society – 5%	I do not want to work – 3%
Actualise own abilities – 38%	Opportunity to join high society – 19%		I will not find a job without higher education – 4%
Live an interesting and fulfilling life surrounded by people with higher education – 32%	Respect for a person with higher education, 8%		

Source: Compiled by the Authors

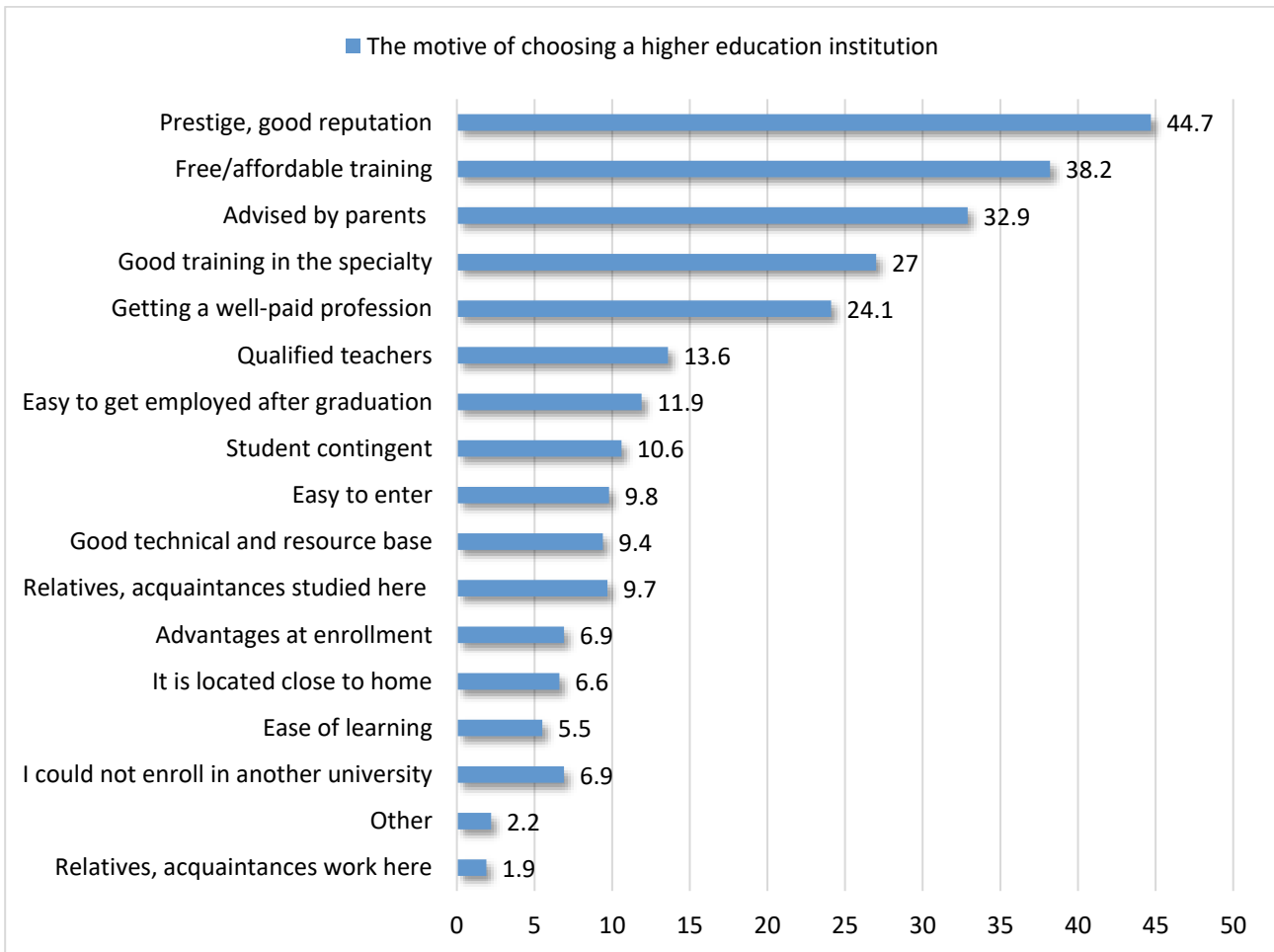


Figure 1: The Motive of Choosing a Higher Education Institution (the number of choices is unlimited)

Source: Compiled by the Authors

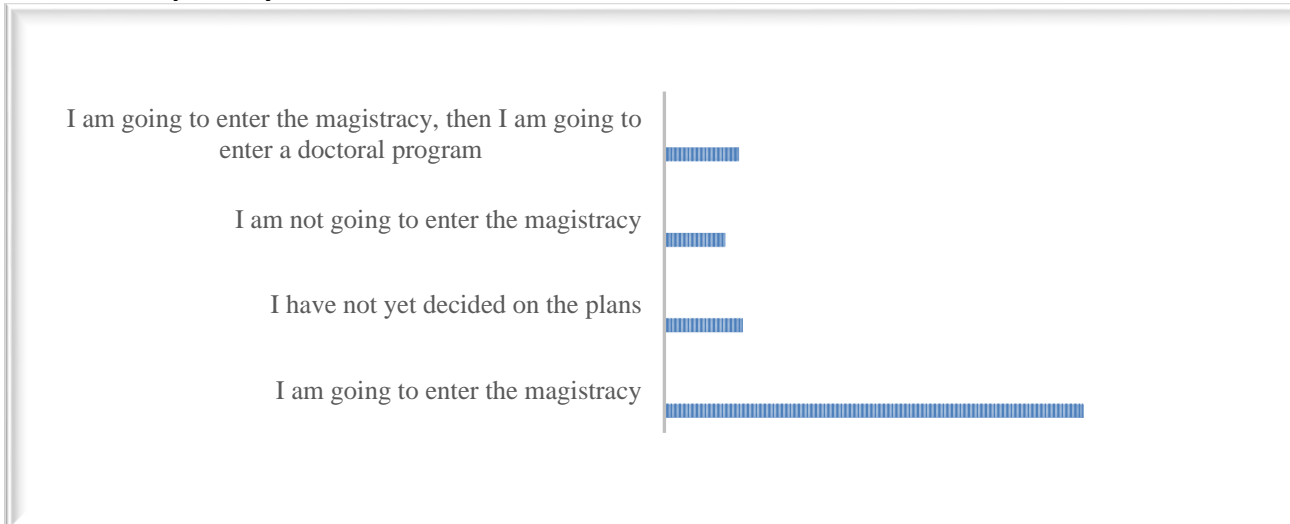


Figure 2: The Strategy of Further Education of Students

Source: Compiled by the Authors

The distribution of opinions of the bachelor respondents regarding the motives for admission to the magistracy is shown in Figure 3. Moreover, the graduate and doctoral students

were interviewed about the factors that influenced the admission to doctoral (postgraduate) studies (Figure 4).

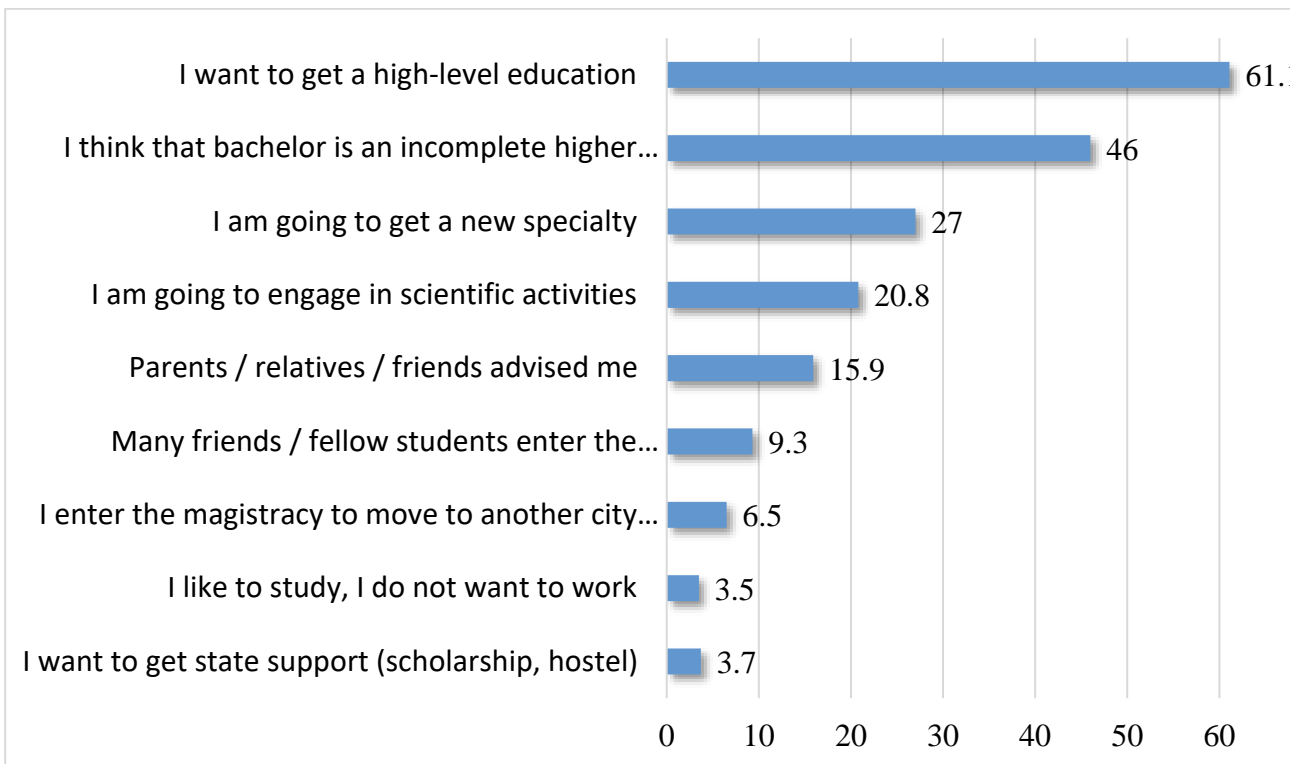


Figure 3: The Motive for Admission of Undergraduate Students to the Magistracy

Source: Compiled by the Authors

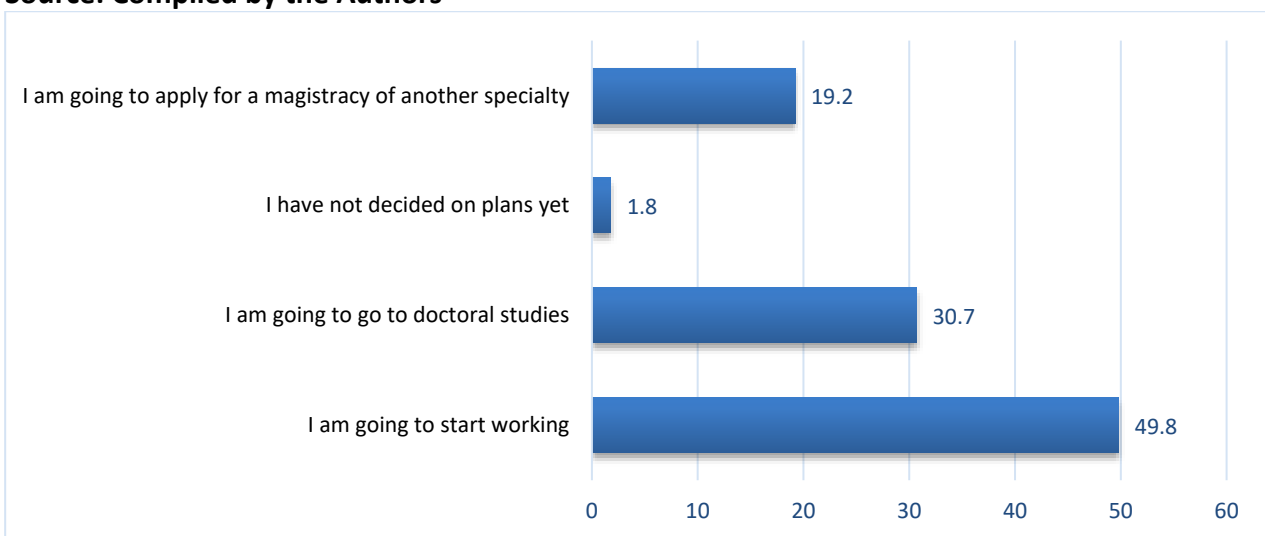


Figure 4: Continuation of the Educational Strategy after the Magistracy

Source: Compiled by the Authors

Discussion

Based on the results of the study, the formation of the following groups of motivations can be indicated: formal education, namely the obtaining of an education certificate. This attitude to education can be explained by the fact that today students face double standards after they enrol themselves in the university graduates programme. On the one hand, the employers require the applicant to have first and

foremost work experience (which in principle is impossible with a full-time study) and a diploma that presupposes mastering professional competencies. However, as demonstrated in Kazakhstan practice, the presence of a diploma does not imply a lot of knowledge. The acquisition of a formal certificate of graduation from the university is essential in the opinion of students; neither the content and qualifications nor the mastery of the future speciality, which they acquire in the course of study, are

significant for the younger generation. In the view of young people, to be an educated person means to offer oneself in the labour market profitably.

The next group of motives combines social and professional incentives for education, which implies the need for knowledge and professional skills in future work activities and to the opportunity for career growth.

At the same time, the respondents express a desire to get acquainted with student life, which can be attributed to the factors of pragmatism. Life, full of exciting and different events, the expansion of the circle of acquaintances and relationships with people, constitute an important component for students. This proves that a university is not only a procedural but also a meaningful channel of socialisation for students.

The next level of motivation is represented by cognitive-professional needs that unite the desire to become a qualified specialist, the realisation of professional abilities, as well as the formation of skills, abilities, and potential. However, it should be noted that, according to the respondents, education is not the most crucial channel of social mobility. It follows that the link between social growth and social reputation of university graduation decreases among students.

The final level of motivation includes the careless behaviour of the respondents, which refers to the indifference factor of the behavioural strategy. The modern youth, due to the lack of life experience and interest in the educational process, shows a consumer attitude to everything, including education. The educational process of the university itself acquires content due to the efforts of the faculty, rather than the student body.

Thus, it can be concluded that currently, vital factors for obtaining higher education are: a diploma, high income and career achievement, professional growth, a desire to become a highly qualified specialist, etc.

Based on the factor data analysis, it can be concluded that higher education strategies that

focus on feasibility, development of skills that can provide employment in the labour market have both their advantages and disadvantages, which can affect the degree of self-satisfaction and openness to society (Kolesnikova, 2006). When making a decision on getting higher education, the opinion of close people is not particularly crucial for students. They consciously accept the fact that higher education is a necessity and condition of modern society.

Following the derived factors, the researchers grouped the data on the basis of cognitive and behavioural strategies. The following responses can be attributed to the factors of "professionalism", the cognitive level of the strategy: prestige and good reputation of the university; good education in the speciality; qualified teaching staff; good technical and resource base.

The following responses can be attributed to the factors of "pragmatism" describing the behavioural level of the strategy: free/affordable training; secure employment after graduation; discounts/benefits on admission; location close to home. The factor of the dependence of the strategy shows the dependence of the position of young people on their environment, conditions when choosing a speciality: parental advice; high wages; inability to enrol in another educational institution; relatives or acquaintances work at the university. The responses attributed to the last "neutrality" factor are as follows: a good contingent of students; easy to enrol; relatives and acquaintances studied there; easy to study. It can be predicted that the decision to enter a university was taken due to internal uncertainty and attention to external influence.

In modern conditions, a parallelisation of educational and professional strategies in the process of achieving life plans, which was not typical in societies with the traditional orientation of education, can be observed. Thus, according to K.Yu. Terentyev, in the "traditional" model the explicit function of the transfer of professional knowledge dominates, while in the modern model the status function begins to dominate to a greater extent (at least, within the

framework of formal educational institutions for obtaining the first professional education) (requires citations). A university is required only to get legally a diploma confirming the educational status, while knowledge and competence can be obtained as the needs arise through the system of additional education. The transition from education to work is transformed into a long process of interconnected alternating or parallel obtaining and resuming studies and work, accumulation, on the one hand, of professional knowledge and competencies, and on the other hand, certificates confirming their existence (starting from the university diploma and the certificate of specialised courses and ending with records in employment records of work experience). An important initial principle of the concept of such a transition is the principle of continuity of educational and professional trajectories (Terentyev, 2014). This trend is vividly confirmed by CVs of young successful people, especially government officials, where the obtaining of universal education is indicated.

Speaking about the choice of a particular university by a student, it should be noted that today the Kazakhstan market of educational services is extensive and is represented by various educational institutions, both with a ten-year history of development and newly opened universities. The determination of the future place of study takes place based on its long historical development, alongside the reputation of the already well-known people who have achieved social success and recognition; the location of the university; the availability of a government order; the connection of generations (one of the parents studied there); the competitiveness of the university and its specialists and future graduates in the labour market; the possibility of academic mobility and scientific internships and; of course, continuing education at the master's and doctoral levels (the enrolment of the "cronies" is more likely and easier than of the graduates of other universities).

The motives for getting a higher education and choosing a higher educational institution further influence the activity of students at the

university. Thus, the high activity of students in research projects affects the further continuation of education. The reasons for the low interest of students in research work are: the lack of scientific institutions and research institutions or the low involvement of students in research projects, compared with business or commercial institutions; low prestige of scientific works in the field of education; lack of scientific communities, university clubs; students are not informed about the activities of scientific communities. According to the students, only a small part of the scientific work can help their future career, which is evidenced by the materials of in-depth interviews, for example:

- 1st-year student: *During the first year, I am just starting to get used to the university; to the teachers of our department. I did not even think about science. Perhaps in the future, I will have an interest. Now I have neither interest nor time for this;*
- 3rd-year student: *It is the first time I hear about scientific communities or clubs. If I had been provided with the correct information and announcement, I would have participated in clubs, scientific events.*
- 4th-year student: *I deliberately do research. I plan to go to the magistracy, further to the doctoral program. With the help of teachers, I participate in various student research projects and win prizes.*

The findings from the in-depth interviews make it possible to conclude that research and future pursuit of science may become an attractive area for the younger generation. For this purpose, it is necessary to attract students to scientific research contests of any kind, to conduct research, to motivate them to engage in research projects, thereby laying the foundations for the formation of national scientific personnel of the country.

On the basis of identification of the motives for obtaining an education by the students of the universities, the following educational strategies have been derived:

- *Strategy 1. Professional self-development and self-improvement* (Figure 5). According to this strategy, young people intend to acquire professional skills, a sound theoretical base and self-organisation skills. A vital characteristic of this strategy is the

indicators of professionalism. This means that the priority is meaningful components of the work. In the future, professional development will come first, and income levels and career prospects will be less important.

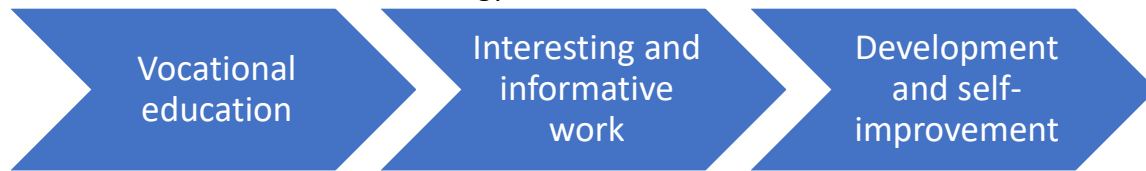


Figure 5: Professional Self-Development and Self-Improvement Strategy

Source: Compiled by the Authors

In the framework of this strategy, the key goal and plans of students are based on the following postulates: higher education is compulsory, a job should be interesting and important (a job should make a person feel comfortable), and there should be the possibility of continuous self-improvement.

- *Strategy 2. Directed development.* This type of strategy unites people aimed at status development (Figure 6). The

representatives of this strategy have a low level of skills and knowledge (knowledge of a foreign language and experience in the speciality), but a strong desire to obtain high status. While they are not ready to go to a permanent job, they are already investing resources in the search for useful acquaintances and connections. The main goal is a good diploma and (or) continuing education.

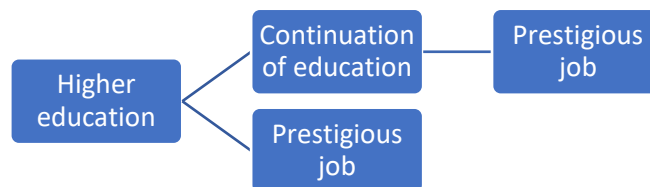


Figure 6: Directed Development Strategy

Source: Compiled by the Authors

In accordance with the second strategy, it is essential for students to get a Master’s or Doctoral or diploma to get a prestigious and highly paid job.

- *Strategy 3. Disinclination for work (eternal student).* Students who adhere to this strategy consider it necessary to continue receiving an education; the level of aspiration for future work is very low (Figure 7). These people are

characterised by the fact that they are not ready to enter the labour market or consciously avoid it. It should be noted that one cannot equate representatives of this type of strategy with truth-seekers because they lack the desire for development and personal growth. These people can be defined as “eternal students” who have no special interest in receiving education in the future, but who are still not ready to work.

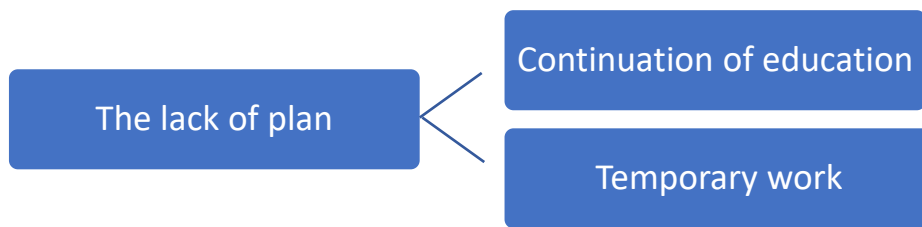


Figure 7: Eternal Student Strategy
Source: Compiled by the Authors

According to the above, it can be noted that students do not see themselves in the labour market or are afraid to work. They have no clear and sound plans for the future. This is the category of students who, due to the lack of plans for the future, enter the Master's or Doctoral studies and work additionally.

Scientific strategy can be identified as one of the varieties. Based on the analysis of data on the continuation of education at the university, Kazakhstani youth demonstrated their desire to continue education, searching for a job at the same time, which can be explained by a high percentage of unemployed graduates of previous years. It should be noted that, according to the authors' respondents and informants, the bachelor's degree cannot ensure their competitiveness in the labour market. This fact can be one of the reasons for the demand for education at the Master's and Doctoral levels.

The results of the study of the motivation of the undergraduates to continue studying at the university have also demonstrated that currently, the needs of the labour market and the personal interests do not coincide in any way while the master's degree is very desirable. The dependent complex of Kazakhstani youth can also explain such distribution.

While the study by Mendez-Cadena et al. reveals numerous practices, forms and behaviour when gender is perceived as oppression or abuse, expressed in social inequality (Mendez-Cadena et al., 2016), in this study gender differences are manifested in motivations. 43.1% of the females want to go to doctoral studies, and engage in science and teaching; at the same time, the proportion of males with such intentions is 37.8%. Males tend to study in doctoral studies,

get a degree to build a future professional career, not necessarily related to education and science (33.7% of males, 28.2% of females). According to the respondents, females assess doctoral studies more from a "scientific" position, while males are focused on careers and advantages, such as reputation and recognition, connected with scientific affairs.

Conclusion

The key aim of the study is to explore educational strategies in the system of higher education in Kazakhstan. In the course of the study, the researchers' determined the structure and substantiated the hierarchy of motives for higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The factors of pragmatism occupy a leading position, followed by the motives of professionalism, which are expressed in the possibility of self-actualisation, interest in work; the factors of dependency and independency follow them. Thus, this study confirms that space-time factors, prestige factors are significant when making decisions about obtaining higher education.

Most students have a clear understanding of higher education and future job prospects; they implement various ways of obtaining higher education. Only a smaller percentage of students do not have specific goals in the process of study, change their plans.

In the course of study, the reseachers' also received confirmation of the existence of a link between the requirements for the future profession and goals in the higher education system. The obtaining of high-quality higher education, the formation of professional skills, abilities, and knowledge will make it possible to get a good well-paid job. Moreover, the students

are guided in their actions by different ideas about higher education and future work, based on which they use different strategies to achieve their goals. These are the strategies of professional development, directed development, and the eternal student strategy.

The choice of a particular educational strategy is associated with the influence of such factors as labour market conditions and transformation in the education system; university status and rating, speciality demand; the resource potential of the family, individual actions of the individual in the course of training.

In the context of the professional development strategy, the students are guided by market conditions and choose a speciality, where they could become true professionals. Few of them choose the magistracy.

In the context of the directed development strategy, the students focused on prestige, status and wealth mostly choose the formal indicators of higher education – a diploma.

The eternal student strategy is connected with the situation of uncertainty, “deferred decision”. For these purposes, students use the years of study at the magistracy, thus prolonging the period of “searching for themselves”.

In the future, educational strategies can be explored in two ways: first, regarding the subject of systematisation of the proposed opportunities of a higher educational institution for the purposes of changing or reproduction of the social positions of the students. The accessibility of specific educational institutions is determined by the family’s resources and the student’s initial abilities for the implementation of education plans. Secondly, regarding the analysis of problems in the field of education which is associated with the organisation of training at specific universities. Therefore, the organisation of the educatory process in them must meet the interests and requirements of the students.

Thus, the results obtained in the course of the study make it possible to move to a new level of substantiation of educational strategies and create the prerequisites for the improvement of

the educatory process efficiency. They will also be useful for reforming the higher education system since they contribute to a more accurate selection of candidates for the Master's and Doctoral studies.

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