SOCIAL ASPECTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICE BY KAZAKHSTANI SCHOOL GRADUATES: A SOCIOLOGICAL MEASUREMENT

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses educational plans and higher education choices by school graduates from different school types, such as private (fee-based) and public (free of charge) schools. Theoretical analysis of social aspects of higher education choice within categorical and modernist approaches is presented. The research aims to understand how graduates from private and public schools make their decisions about higher education. The results of structured interviews conducted with school graduates are presented. The sample contains school graduates representing different socio-economic groups. Respondents are graduates from urban and rural areas, private (paid) and public, general and advanced schools. The sample size is 150. During the research, it was determined that the decision to choose a higher education institution depends on the family's socio-economic status. The higher the family's socio-economic status, the more ambitious the choice of a school graduate becomes. On the one hand, the process of higher education choice is formed based on the principle of rationality considered in economic theories and, on the other hand, based on social opportunities and limitations defined in sociological theories. Thus, school graduates try to make rational decisions considering social opportunities. The research aims to find out how social opportunities and constraints affect school graduates' higher education choices.

Keywords: School graduates, Social aspects, Higher education choice, Schools, Success in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education choice is a complex process. In studying this process, scholars pay particular attention to social aspects such as class differences in access to higher education programs and opportunities determined or limited by economic and financial resources (Archer et al., 2003). The choice of higher education is affected by parents, their educational level, place of residence, as well as institutional and family habits. School graduates have different attitudes and distances to these factors, which are reflected in the choice of higher education (Maras, 2007). Due to the implementation of the policy of increasing access to higher education in many countries, the issue of higher education choice has become a topical issue in sociological research at the international and local levels.

The relevance of studying the choice of higher education is determined by the fact that a diploma in higher education is mandatory for entering the labour market (Jackson, 2007). The university's rating and reputation positively affect the employment of its graduates in high-ranking positions in the labour market (Shavit et al., 2007). The existence of a relationship between the choice of higher education and social class actualizes the study of social features of opportunities and achievements in the field of education. The influence of the social background on the choice of higher education has been actively studied at the scientific level since the 1970s. According to Hudson and Williams, as society develops, the social classification of the population increases due to the differentiation of access to material resources, education, life opportunities and health care (Hudson et al., 1994). In the framework of sociological studies, the educational system is defined as a central factor in the creation and revival of social class because the educational system plays a special role in the modernization and maintenance of dominance (for the upper and middle classes) and limitations (for the lower class). In educational studies, the issue of social class is often considered based on interrelationships with higher education opportunities and educational attainment.

The conceptualization of "social class" and "higher education" is determined by the reality or artificiality of expanding educational opportunities. The theoretical approaches determining the relationship between social class and higher education institutions can be divided into two groups. The first group includes "categorical", "modernist" and quantitative approaches. The second group includes "processual", postmodernist or "qualitative" approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social aspects of choice within categorical and modernist approaches

Researchers adopting these approaches view social class as a subject of quantitative study and regard it as an immutable constant (Crompton, 1998). American neo-Marxists Bowles and Gintis described education as a class tunnel under the concept of the "principle of conformity". According to them, even though educational institutions aim to create equal opportunities for all, they create the capitalist nature of the division of labour in the labour market by preparing school graduates for class-based professions (Bowles et al., 2002). Such attitudes are related to the fact that the low academic performance of school graduates from the lower class in the higher education system is considered a result of class characteristics of school preparation. In this sense, the class differentiation of

higher education indicators can be identified as an integral component of capitalism. Thus, in order to significantly expand the opportunities for higher education, it is necessary to introduce significant changes in the structure of society. However, such opinions cannot explain the circumstances of school graduates from the lower class getting higher education and enrolling in higher education. Within the framework of these theories, the reasons for the change in the level and indicators of higher education among low-class youth in different historical periods and the differences in the level of higher education among various categories of low-class youth are not explained.

While Marxist and Weberian theorists paid special attention to the formation process of class differences and social inequality, functionalists define the educational institution as an integral part of the process of meritocratic stratification. Within functionalism, the definition of social class is akin to Darwinism: in industrial societies; "natural selection" determines social class. In the context of higher education, functionalists attribute the low academic achievement and low enrolment rates of low-income youth to their low ability levels. In turn, low income determines their general enrolment chances if they are high-ability students. Thus, unequal access to higher education is defined not as a social problem that needs to be solved but as a natural aspect of modern society. The opinions of functionalist theorists have been criticized for their meritocratic determinism despite many factors that prove the existence of structural inequalities by nationality, gender, and social class (Bradley, 1996: 184). Functionalists have also been criticized for emphasizing only individual characteristics, not considering the behaviour patterns characteristic of certain socio-economic groups in the higher education system.

Despite the critical views of functionalist theorists, the basic functionalist concept of meritocracy and the functionalist reasoning vis-à-vis the low academic performance of low-class youth – because of their low or no abilities – are the basis of some views and are discussed in the debates about the issue of increasing access to higher education.

Professional classification within the categorical approach

Despite the widespread use of categorical directions defining social class, critics have argued that "categories of social class" were not considered within these directions (Foster et al., 1996: 53). Modernist/categorical approaches classify social classes according to professions. Within the framework of the categorical direction, 7 categories of social class are classified based on professional classification:

1. Managers and senior specialists
   Managers and entrepreneurs of large organizations
   Highly qualified specialists
2. Specialists and managers with middle-level qualifications
3. Temporary workers
4. Small entrepreneurs and self-employed persons
5. Low-ranking advisers and leaders
6. Semi-skilled workers
7. Unskilled workers

Researchers who use professional classification to determine the social status of school graduates face various difficulties. For example, when assessing a student's social status, questions arise: "Is the professional direction he is studying taken into account, or is the professional activity of his parents taken into account?" The Administrative Center for US Universities and Colleges sets the age limit at 21 to address this issue. In determining the social class representation of school graduates younger than 21 years old, the professional activity of their parents is considered, and for school graduates over 21 years old, their future profession is considered. However, using such a method in the conditions of modern society and non-traditional families, characterized by the possibility of changing professions often, might cause difficulties.

In addition, the classification of professional activity is based on men's standards, and accordingly, additional difficulties may arise in assessing the social status of women. In the context of the family, fathers and mothers may be engaged in different prestigious occupations, which may interfere with determining the family's social status. Bradley suggests that in an ordinary low-class family, the man may be a factory worker, and the wife may work as a secretary, thus representing different professional classifications (Bradley, 1996).

Critical analysis of categorical-positivist approaches

Postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches have severely criticized categorical positivist approaches to describing social status. According to these approaches, social class is not limited to professional activities, class positions are not homogeneous, and its quantitative assessment causes several difficulties. The theorists of the postmodern direction do not consider the influence of social class on inequality but the influence of a person on the process of identifying himself with a certain social group. Issues such as feelings of identification and self-consciousness are not considered within the framework of categorical directions (Williamson, 1981: 19).

Conceptualization of social aspects of choice within postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches

According to postmodernist and poststructuralist directions, the acquisition of higher education by the lower class is carried out based on the influence of a complex set of social, economic, cultural, as well as structural factors including material and discursive inequality. In the framework of postmodernism, the following issues are being conceptualized:

1. Rethinking Inequality: a theoretical analysis of the role of higher education and class identity and inequality in generating unequal access.

2. Risk, habitus and capital: changes in the structure of social-class identity characterized by patterns of consumption and taste.

3. Many unique features: internal interrelationship of social class with social characteristics such as life experience, nationality, and gender.

4. Ambiguous definitions: practical difficulties in defining social class within postmodern trends.

In analyzing social practices in higher education, it is important to consider the role of educational institutions in forming these practices. Higher education in-

stitutions contribute to forming mutual relations between higher education and society. These relations, in turn, are reflected in the strategies of school graduates in choosing higher education. Thus, it is necessary to consider the forms of higher education and social aspects in analyzing the educational opportunities for different social classes (Williamson, 1981: 30).

Postmodernist approaches define not only the social class but also classify class differences in education. Postmodernist theorists argue that there is no clear, unequivocal definition of social-class identity and experience. In the context of contemporary society, determining the characteristics and dimensions of the lower class creates difficulties, and researchers emphasize class differences in higher education, considering the blurred boundaries of class identity and difference.

The amount of social, economic, and cultural capital determines an individual's socio-economic status. In addition to social class and socio-economic status, socio-economic variables such as age, gender, and nationality also affect human behaviour patterns and personality traits (Ostrove and Cole, 2003). They are a person's taste for food and clothes, behaviour style which affects their values and worldview, and even physical and mental health (Kraus and Stephens, 2012). Although the concepts of social class and socio-economic status are used interchangeably, they are separate constructs. The current socio-economic situation determines socio-economic status and, accordingly, is variable, especially in countries with wide opportunities for economic growth. Social class is determined by socio-cultural origin therefore it is stable and it does not change from generation to generation (Jones and Vagle, 2013). Thus, a representative of the lower class may have a relatively high socio-economic status even while working in the "blue-collar" profession. The concept of social class is stable compared to socio-economic status and it is associated with power.

The effect of cultural values on higher education choice of school graduates

Cultural values are also one of the important factors influencing the choice of higher education for school graduates. Culture is the collective consciousness that distinguishes one group of people from another. Assessing countries based on cultural characteristics allows us to determine their inclination toward collectivism or individualism (Hofstede, 2011). Western countries, such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, adhere to the values of individualism, emphasizing independence, self-confidence, personal freedom, and autonomy. In contrast, Asian and African countries are more oriented toward collectivism, where people see themselves as part of interdependent social connections and strive for the common good (Sinha, 2014). Differences in cultural orientations toward individualism and collectivism can explain differences in the choice of higher education among school graduates (Amit and Gati, 2013).

In individualistic societies, it is customary for school graduates to choose higher education based on personal preferences and competencies. In collectivist societies, however, school graduates are expected to adhere to family and societal norms, and they often follow a pre-determined higher education choice that aligns with the expectations of parents or society (Oettingen and Zosuls, 2006).

In the past twenty years, globalization has increased the interaction between individualistic and collectivist cultures. Higher education choice by school grad-

uates from different cultural contexts—collectivist (where the emphasis is on kinship) and individualistic (where the focus is on autonomy)—involves different standards. Thus, making a decision about higher education can be quite challenging.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the framework of this study, a wide range of indicators was used to describe the socio-economic situation, which includes the professional activities of school graduates' parents, their level of education, place of residence etc. Given that most school graduates do not have a stable income, work and a certain educational level, the socio-economic characteristics of the family were considered instead. The article presents the results of structured interviews conducted with school graduates. Structured interviews were conducted with graduates of urban and rural, private (fee-based) and public, general and advanced schools representing different socio-economic groups. The research sample was purposefully formed. The sample included 150 respondents. A certified SPSS program analysed the obtained data and conducted statistical tests. Structured interviews contain 30 questions divided into 3 sections. The first section of questions was related to socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, place of residence, school type where she/he studies, their parents' education level, and their occupations. The second section of questions was about their educational plan, such as which universities they wanted to study, which major they were considering, which country they had in mind, which factors were most vital for choosing a university to study, and their personal interests. The final section was about the main constraints in making educational choices, the role of parents in this process, the goal of having education, and the source of funding. The questions were semi-structured, which allowed us to get more comprehensive answers. The study was conducted in 2023 in three cities, such as Almaty, Astana Taraz and surrounding rural regions. All participants provided informed consent to take part in the study and were assured of their anonymity throughout the research process. Using structured interviews to study educational choice among school graduates is justified as they provided consistent, reliable data. They allow for a focused exploration of key factors like family influence, career goals, and personal interests. The method is efficient, ensures comparability, and facilitates easy analysis while maintaining ethical standards like anonymity and participant comfort. Information about school graduates who participated in the study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Information about School Graduates who Participated in the Study*

| Variables	Values	N	%
		150	**100%**
Gender	Male	80	53%
	Female	70	47%
School type	Secondary school	36	24.1%
	Gymnasium/lyceum	87	58.2%
	Private school	27	17.7%
Place of residence	Big city	68	45.3%
	Small city	22	14.7%
	Rural areas	60	40%
Nationality	Kazakhs	85	56.7%
	Russians	40	26.7%
	Other nationalities	25	16.6%
Parental education	Both parents do not have higher education	20	13.3%
	One of the parents has higher education	51	34%
	Both parents have higher education	79	52.7%
Marital status of family	Married (including civil marriage)	129	86%
	Divorced	10	6.7%
	Widowed	11	7.3%

Source: Data collected by the author in 2023

FINDINGS

Educational plans of school graduates

Most school graduates plan to get higher education, among them: 70.2% consider Kazakhstani higher educational institutions, and 23.6% said they planned to study in foreign higher educational institutions. Only 2.8% of school graduates are considering receiving special secondary education, and 3.4% do not yet have specific plans. Details are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Educational Plans of School Graduates*
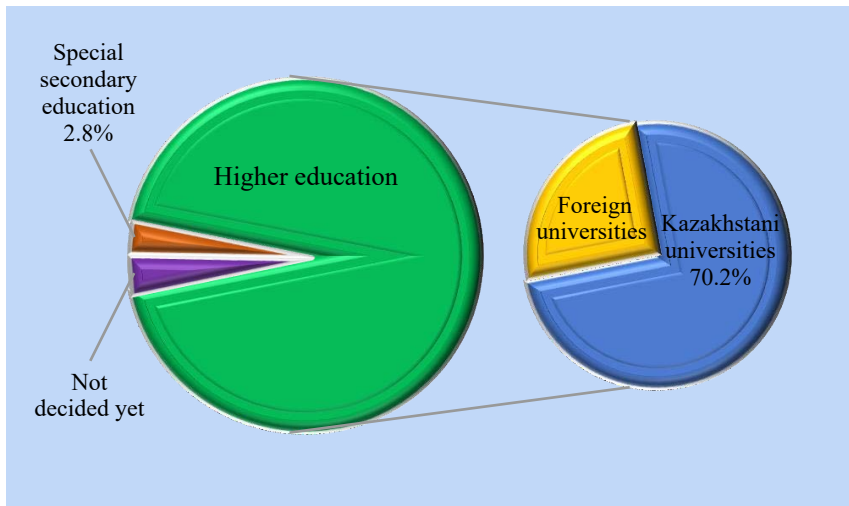
Source: Data compiled and analysed by the author based on primary data collected in 2023

Goals of obtaining higher education

Such research results show that the process of obtaining higher education is considered a standard, even mandatory, period after graduation by school graduates. Therefore, there is a need to understand the motives of their desire to obtain higher education. "For what purpose do you want to get higher education after finishing school?" – the question was asked to school graduates planning to get higher education. Analysing the answers to this question allows us to create a hierarchy of motives for seeking higher education. The top three goals of obtaining higher education include the aims of "getting an education in an interesting profession", "becoming a specialist in demand", and "finding a well-paid job". These goals were identified as the primary motivation for continuing education after school for more than half of school graduates. For example, 59% of school graduates aspire to pursue higher education in a profession they are interested in, 56.8% view it as a means to increase competitiveness in the labor market, 56.6% see it as essential for engaging in successful work, 50.5% aim to advance in a professional career, and 48.7% seek to engage in interesting work. Additionally, 43.6% of school graduates aimed to pursue higher education primarily to obtain a diploma. This indicates that the institutionalized form of cultural capital, defined as educational competencies, i.e., higher education diplomas, has become increasingly important in modern society. 34.6% of school graduates define higher education as necessary for everyone, which indicates that education is highly important among school graduates. However, there are also school graduates who see higher education as an opportunity to gain public respect (29.0%), establish useful contacts, and expand acquaintances (24.4%). The share of school graduates who are interested in the professional activities of their parents and intend to continue their professional path is low, only 2.5%. The results of the study are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Goals of Obtaining Higher Education*

№	Goals to get higher education	Share in %
1	to increase their competitiveness in the labour market	56.8%
2	to engage in successful work	56.6%
3	to advance in a professional career	50,5%
4	to engage in interesting work	48.7%
5	to get a diploma	43,6%
6	higher education is necessary for everyone	34,6%
7	to gain public respect	29.0%
8	to establish useful contacts and expand acquaintances	24.4%
9	to continue parents' professional path	2.5%

Source: Data compiled and analysed by the author based on primary data collected in 2023

School types and choice of university

When choosing a higher education, school graduates begin to think about an educational institution after deciding to continue their studies after graduation. Choosing a higher education institution is socially based because it is carried out in a social space characterized by various material and symbolic conditions. In the process of differentiating the strategies of school graduates from different social groups in choosing a higher education institution, the universities were grouped into four groups: "leading", "medium", "low" and "foreign". Initial educational capital is formed at school and is often determined by the type of school. In this regard, it is important to analyse the higher education choice of school graduates based on the type of school they are studying at. The results of differentiating the relationship between the choice of a higher education institution and the type of school attended by graduates (general secondary and advanced private schools) showed the presence of several statistically significant differences. The majority of public secondary school graduates do not have high aspirations to study abroad. Private school graduates tend to study at foreign and prestigious national universities and do not consider studying at lower-ranked universities as an option. The details of the study are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Higher Education Choice Based on the Type of School of Graduates Studied*
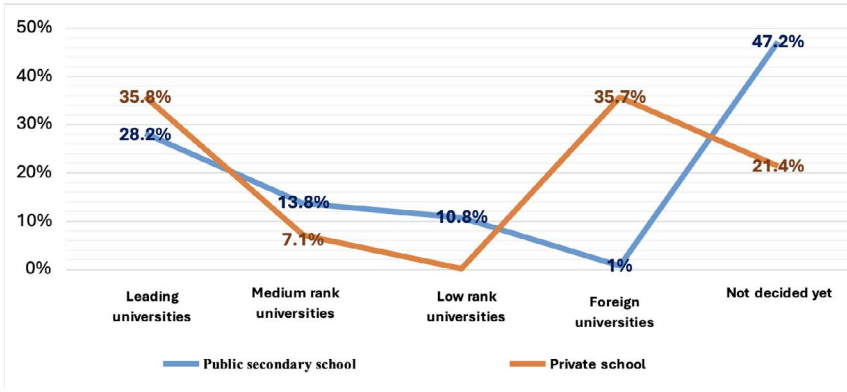
Source: Data compiled and analysed by the author based on primary data collected in 2023

Criteria for choosing a university

To understand what criteria are essential in choosing a higher education institution for school graduates, the following question was asked: "What do you pay attention to when choosing a higher education institution?" Analysis of the results demonstrates that 62.8% of school graduates focus on the possibility of obtaining quality education, 50% on the availability of an interesting profession, 38.4% on the university rating, and 29.6% on its reputation when choosing a higher educational institution. Based on such answers, it can be stated that school graduates determine quality education by certain higher educational institutions and their rank.

DISCUSSION

This study investigates the process behind higher education choices among school graduates, with a focus on socio-economic status, school type, family influence, and cultural values. The results align with previous research (Archer et al., 2003; Shavit et al., 2007), reinforcing the idea that these factors significantly shape school graduates' higher education aspirations and decisions.

The findings show that most school graduates intend to pursue higher education. Graduates from private and specialized schools were more likely to aim for prestigious institutions, supporting the notion that educational trajectories are often shaped by the type of school attended (Maras, 2007). The differentiation in educational aspirations between students from rural and urban areas also mirrors earlier research that emphasizes how place of residence and access to resources impact higher education choice (Hudson et al., 1994).

Cultural values, particularly individualism versus collectivism, are also crucial in understanding educational choices. In individualistic societies, where autonomy is valued, students tend to prioritize personal interests and career aspirations in their university selection. Conversely, in more collectivist societies, family expectations and societal norms often heavily influence decisions (Sinha,

2014). The study confirms this pattern, as school graduates from collectivist backgrounds are more likely to align their educational choices with family and societal expectations. Meanwhile, those from individualistic backgrounds tend to prioritize personal goals, as highlighted by Amit and Gati (2013).

The study's findings regarding goals of obtaining higher education demonstrate that securing a well-paying job, increasing competitiveness, and pursuing a personally meaningful profession reflect broader socio-economic realities. Additionally, the role of institutional reputation and quality of education emerged as key criteria for university selection. School graduates mentioned these factors, alongside career opportunities, as determining aspects of their choice, which echoes the findings of Shavit et al. (2007).

CONCLUSION

During the process of choosing a higher education place, several factors should be considered, including socio-economic constraints, social acceptance and various forms of self-exclusion. One of our essential goals is to understand the differences in the choice process of high school graduates from different social groups when choosing higher education and their subsequent results. It is necessary to pay special attention to the choice of a higher education institution because it is related to the lifestyle choice and the tastes and aspirations formed in a particular social environment. The share of school graduates who plan to get higher education is quite high. Youths have a massive tendency to acquire higher education. Various higher education institutions and professions are leading to the complexity of higher education choices. School graduates emphasize the possibility of "high income" and "career growth" when evaluating the profession, which indicates the dominance of pragmatic motives. However, factors such as "social importance of the profession" and "possibility of developing one's potential" are among the top five important criteria for school graduates. This indicates that "interest orientation" has increased career choices by graduates. The majority of school graduates plan to get an education but are not sure which specialty they are going to study. The uncertainty of school graduates about their future profession shows that the importance of choosing a profession has been slightly displaced by the desire to obtain higher education. School graduates make educational and professional choices based on the principle of rationality considered in economic theories, on the other hand, based on values and attitudes, social possibilities and limitations defined in sociological directions. That is, school graduates make rational decisions based on their goals and interests, considering the possibilities of their families, their own abilities, and other social factors. Findings contribute to a broader understanding of how the school type that graduates attend impacts their educational plans and university choice process.

The study provides valuable insights into the complex decision-making process of school graduates during higher education choices. It reinforces the significance of socio-economic background, family, and cultural values, as well as institutional factors such as reputation and quality of education. Future research should aim to expand this understanding by exploring these variables in different global contexts, considering new educational trends, and incorporating a broader range of demographic factors.

Ethical Commission Approval

This study involving human participants has completed and fulfilled the ethical guidelines requirements. The participants provided written informed consent before taking part in the study and were informed about its objectives.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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