

# Higher Education in Kazakhstan: New Opportunities and Problems of Crystallization of the Middle Strata Status

G.S. Abdiraimova, D.K. Burkhanova, and G.A. Kenzhakimova

**Abstract**—Education in the modern world provides the socio-economic progress of society. In today's society, where the presence of large middle class ensures its stability and is a symbol of resolution of hidden economic problems, education is an integral part of formation and reproduction of the middle class. This article presents part of results of the sociological study conducted under the project "Kazakhstan model of education: international experience and national traditions" supported by the Foundation of the First President of Republic of Kazakhstan - Leader of the Nation to determine the ratio of students to the transformations of the educational system. The authors conclude that the Kazakhstani system of education, passing through the transformation processes, improving the quality of educational programs and trying to correspond to the international standards, not yet in full range, but begins to perform important functions in the formation of the middle class.

**Keywords**—Higher education, middle class, reforms, students, transformation processes.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE urgency and importance of education in modern society can hardly be overestimated. First, it is education as a priority value that provides a socio-economic progress of society and is an important source of motivation of human behavior. Second, it becomes a mainstay in solving many social problems, by creating the best opportunities to achieve quality education for each citizen. Third, it is the guarantee of cultural development, economic prosperity and political stability. At the same time in contemporary society, where the presence of large middle class ensures its stability and symbolizes the resolution of a whole chain of hidden economic problems, education is an integral part of the formation and reproduction of the middle class.

Thus, higher education is one of the most important factors in the formation and reproduction of the middle class, and students, as direct participants of the educational process, are potential members of the mass middle stratum. Its presence is an indicator of positivity of ongoing economic,

social and educational reforms.

At present, the process of intensive reforming Kazakhstan's educational system is being carried out, aimed primarily at achieving international standards of education and integration into the global educational and informational space. Education is recognized as one of the most important long-term priorities of the Strategy "Kazakhstan - 2030". The government relies on the predominance of middle class in society, which is regarded as a "comfort class" and undoubtedly the improvement of education system plays an important role in achieving this goal.

In this article will be presented and analyzed part of the results of the sociological research, conducted under the project "Kazakhstan model of education: international experience and national traditions" (grant #108, 2011) [1] and supported by the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - Leader of the Nation, to determine the ratio of young scientists and students to the ongoing transformations of the educational system of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

## II. HIGHER EDUCATION AND MIDDLE CLASS

For today problem of formation of middle class in contemporary society is at the center of attention of political figures and scientists (sociologists, political scientists and economists) that is connected with the need to evaluate the effectiveness of transformational processes. However in the Kazakhstani science there is no clear idea of the selection criteria for the middle class, and therefore remain disputable questions about its presence in the area of social society, the size, its composition, education, and life strategies. Therefore, to give a specific definition of the boundaries of the middle class or description of its representatives is not an easy process. There are a myriad of different approaches and angles of viewing. Although, to date, single standard of definition of the middle class is not developed, however, the fundamental elements of its identity do not cause serious disputes. These are: a sustainable economic position, a certain level of education and actually self-identification as the middle class. Thus, assuming that belonging to the middle class is not inherited, but is achieved in the course of life, it is easy to assume that the most important factor of belonging to middle class is education [2].

These two phenomena are closely related. Educational qualification for the middle class is the most important stratification criterion for selection, a fundamental prerequisite

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for upward mobility. In turn, the middle class is almost the only ground for the development of education as a social institution [3].

The values and norms of behavior of the middle class are reflected in educational programs and allow creating a base for the "production stream" of its representatives. Middle class is directed by the constant striving for new, applied knowledge, which is able to provide with a worthy place in the modern world. At the same time the middle class itself has a significant influence on the development of education. In this social group not only businessmen and entrepreneurs, not professors and teachers that are directly related to the educational environment are united. They can be named as the main carriers of value and behavioral ideals of the middle class - precisely because of their work, students can obtain the necessary knowledge base and norms that will allow them to either retain their middle status in society, or to increase their chances of upward social mobility. Thus, higher education is the source of the formation and the main guarantor of the preservation and reproduction of the middle class. And the better and more diversified the system is, the more high-quality, diverse and stable will be the middle class [4].

The transformation process of Kazakhstan's education traces its origins to the period of independence. The first bachelor and master programs have been implemented in institutions of the republic in 1992 and 1996, respectively; during this period state educational standards based on a two-stage model of learning were approved.

The next stage of modernization of education in RK dates back to 2004 when, after a preliminary examination and approbation of certain professions, leading Kazakh universities moved to the credit system of education. During the years 2004-2008 changes were made in the standards of education of the bachelor and master degrees, that gradually brought closer national educational model with international standards and, above all, to the objectives of the Bologna process. Since 2010 in Kazakhstan models of postgraduate education became completely consistent. PhD doctorate comes to replace the traditional postgraduate study and doctoral study [5].

All the positive trends at the same time do not relieve the reformation process in Kazakhstan's education from the problems and difficulties. On their own, the reforms being caused by changes in society, and in turn require the reliance on a system of parameters or indicators pointing out the effectiveness/ineffectiveness of the results and, accordingly, enabling to make timely coordination of them.

The study, part of the results of which, is used in this article was conducted in May-June 2011 in 8 regions of Kazakhstan; there were more than 1,500 students at 12 universities. In preparation for the study was used a multistage sampling quota, where as the main criteria socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, nationality) and regional location of the university were used.

There are three main aspects of the given study, which seemed to us very important - the perception of changes, evaluation of the quality of higher education and the

importance of higher education in modern Kazakhstan.

### III. REFORMING THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Considering process of transformation of higher education, it should be noted that the overall goal of the educational reforms in Kazakhstan is an adaptation of the education system to the new socio-economic conditions and challenges. The main aspect of the reform of higher education in Kazakhstan at present is a further development of multilevel education system. For the situation in 2011 major changes in this area are related to the levels of education that has been already introduced - PhD doctorate.

Bologna priorities of transformation processes in the Kazakh educational environment may include the following activities:

- The introduction of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- The formation of research-type universities based on the integration of applied and fundamental sciences and the educational process;
- The application of European Diploma Supplement (Diploma Supplement), which should provide employment for graduates of universities in all European countries;
- The introduction of a unified system of academic credits, similar to the system ECTS (European Credit Transfer System);
- The development of joint educational and research programs within the mobility.

*What is the perception the changes taking place?*

During the survey students were asked "Do you think the reforms in higher education in Kazakhstan is moving in the right direction or are they went down the wrong path?" (See diagram in Fig. 1).

Evaluation of the nature of changes in the educational process by students shows positive dynamics in transformations that take place.

In the diagram in Fig. 1 are shown the summary estimates of direction of the reforms, which show that over 60% of respondents, are confident in the correctness and adequacy of the changes taking place.

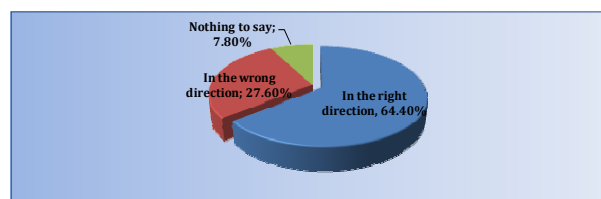


Fig. 1 Diagram "Public opinion on the direction of reforms in education"

As shown by data in Table I: 51.2% of the total number of students surveyed in general are convinced in the correctness of the reforms, and another 13.2% are absolutely sure. The total negative score was - 27.6%. Including 19.8% of students surveyed believe that the direction of the reforms in general is wrong, and therefore completely negative evaluation of ongoing processes gave - 7.8% of respondents.

TABLE I

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS' ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU THINK THE REFORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN IS MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION OR ARE THEY WENT DOWN THE WRONG PATH?" (IN % OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS)

№ Response options	%
1. In the right direction, it is confident	13.2%
2. In the right direction	51.2%
3. In the wrong direction	19.8%
4. In the wrong direction, it is confident	7.8%
5. Nothing to say	7.8%

These data allow us to conclude that the overall assessment of the nature of changes in the educational process caused by the reforms of education says about endorsing and supporting the ongoing processes. But we should not overlook the fact that in students' public opinion quite critical assessment was pronounced. More than a quarter of respondents in different regions of Kazakhstan (see Fig. 1) suppose that the content of the reforms does not meet the needs of Kazakhstan's education system.

Typical causes of negative perceptions are the following factors:

- The progress and content of the reforms are not explained by the organizational structures of higher education institutions to the direct subjects of the educational process;
- Inappropriate material and technical base of higher educational institutions;
- Formal or an inconsistent character of the changes, leading to the realization of the objectives in relation to particular segments of the education system.

Reforms in higher education, aimed at solving a number of strategic objectives. Students who participated in the survey were asked to note which of the priority objectives are realized in the education system, and which of them are not.

The data presented in Table II shows that there the consistent implementation of strategic objectives of all designated areas. None of position presented, is not scored less than 50% of positive responses. Students awarded the highest degree of realization in the introduction of new educational programs and education models and international cooperation. Students point out some defects in the formation of personal skills and civic education, where the total negative score was - 27%.

Specifying the results can be noted that the greatest by the degree of realization are the following areas:

- ✓ Creating the conditions for the development of educational programs – 68.5%
- ✓ Implementation of new educational technologies – 63.8%
- ✓ Expansion of International Relations – 62.8%
- ✓ Informatization of education – 61.3%.

TABLE II

EVALUATION OF THE DEGREE OF REALIZATION OF PRIORITY OBJECTIVES IN REFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION RK (IN% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS)

1. Creating the conditions for the development of educational programs	Yes- 68.5% No - 15.4% Nothing to say - 15.9%
2. The development of creative, spiritual and physical capabilities of personality	Yes - 54.7% No - 26.7% Nothing to say - 18.6%
3. Upbringing of civicism and patriotism	Yes - 52.5% No - 29.8% Nothing to say - 17.7%
4. An introduction to the achievements of cultures	Yes - 54.1% No - 24.6% Nothing to say - 21.3%
5. Expansion of International Relations	Yes - 62.8% No - 17.7% Nothing to say - 19.5%
6. Implementation of new educational technologies	Yes - 63.8% No - 18.6% Nothing to say - 17.9%
7. Informatization of education	Yes - 61.3% No - 18.2% Nothing to say - 20.5%
8. Preparation of qualified specialists	Yes - 55.5% No - 23.2% Nothing to say - 21.3%
9. Re-training of personnel	Yes - 55.5% No - 25.5% Nothing to say - 31.4%

The largest negative response – 29.8% indicates that, according to Kazakhstani students, upbringing civicism and patriotism should be given special attention. Thus, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. It is legitimate to conclude that innovation processes occurring today in Kazakhstan in the sphere of education, in spite of some difficulties and contradictions, are gaining strength, which is stimulated by the changing of the nature of socio-economic relations, labor market requirements and international standards in education and human development.

2. Significant part of students - more than 60% approve reforms, stating the nature of the positive changes and correspondence of the directions of reforms to the structural and substantive requirements for the preparation of highly qualified professionals.

3. Realization of key strategic goals of education is consistent and empirically confirmed by the conformity of quantitative data on the issues considered. The degree of implementation of specific educational objectives is ranged from 52% to 68%. More than two thirds of surveyed students are mostly satisfied with the general conditions of the development of educational programs. At the same time, according to the opinion of the students the objectives of upbringing civicism and patriotism are realized only by 50%.

4. Control over the processes of social changes associated with the transformations in the field of education cannot be episodic, indicating the need to apply monitoring methods,

based on a system of standardized indicators and providing feedback.

#### IV. QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Speaking of qualification of future specialists, produced by Kazakh universities is important to note that the need to improve the quality of education is a major cause and at the same time a consequence of ongoing reforms.

With the development of a modern economy - the nature of received knowledge in the higher and professional education institutions is not only an internal criterion for evaluating the education, but also an important factor in the formation of the middle class and economic development, and of the presence or absence in it of the future innovation potential. For an individual - it is also important, since the discrepancy of acquired knowledge with the latest professional standards, makes the person non-competitive at labor market, which is especially important for young professionals.

Study of quality parameters of education affects, first of all, the content of educational programs and technology of education. Students in the survey were asked a series of questions consistently revealing the qualitative parameters of the educational process:

1. *How satisfied are you with the level of education in an educational institution where you study?*

2. *Please, evaluate the level of education in Kazakhstan compared with international standards.*

TABLE III  
DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION "HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION IN AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION WHERE YOU STUDY?" (IN% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS)

№	Response options	%
1.	Completely satisfied	21.1%
2.	Rather satisfied	39.0%
3.	Somewhat satisfied	23.6%
4.	Rather not satisfied	9.2%
5.	Completely not satisfied	4.2%
6.	Nothing to say	3.0%
7.	Total	100%

The results obtained testify to the fact that more than every tenth student is not satisfied in general and in particular, with the process of professional education.

It may be noted that the students of regional universities have expressed less critical and therefore a greater degree of satisfaction by level of the education.

Further consideration of the problem shows that the overall level of education in Kazakhstan has grown steadily, for example, lack of educational materials in the official language is overcome, that was characteristic to the period of development of Kazakhstan's education system. Technical equipment of universities, information and communication technologies, including access to the international databases and electronic libraries underwent significant modernization.

Currently, a tendency of the formation of educational models implying a significant degree of academic freedom of

universities and academic mobility of students and young professionals more clearly manifests itself.

Describing trends in development of Kazakhstan's education, should also be noted that Kazakhstan is a party to the program of education Tempus - a program of the European Union aimed at facilitating the conduct of social and economic reforms and development of higher education systems in partner countries of the European Union and acting in accordance with the priorities of the Bologna process.

The main task of the present day is training of competitive, highly skilled specialists corresponding modern intellectual requirements, international standards and development strategies of Kazakhstan. The main criterion for quality of specialist training should be a high level of professionalism, ensuring the competitiveness of the graduates and their relevance to the labor market, which is particularly topical in connection with integration of Kazakh personnel training system in the world educational space. (See Fig. 2)

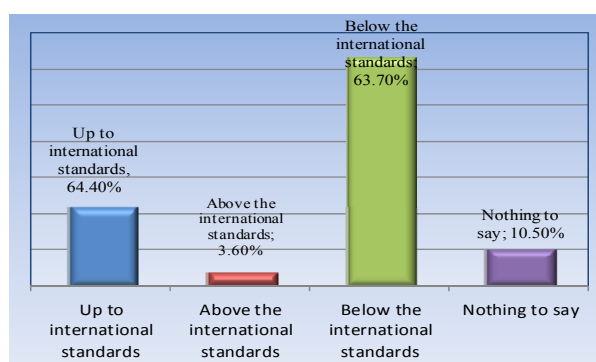


Fig. 2 diagram "Public opinion on compliance of education of Kazakhstan with international standards"

Respondents were given the opportunity to express their opinion on the compliance of Kazakh education to international standards.

63.7% of the students of Kazakh universities surveyed chose the answer "Below the international standards". About a quarter of respondents believe that at this stage the Kazakhstan education is comparable to international standards. Only 3.6% of respondents felt that the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan is above the international standards.

TABLE IV  
EVALUATION OF KAZAKH EDUCATION COMPARED TO INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS (IN% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS)

№	Response options	%
1.	Up to international standards	22.1%
2.	Above the international standards	3.6%
3.	Below the international standards	63.7%
4.	Nothing to say	10.5%
5.	Total	100%

Summing up the results of the evaluation of the quality of the Kazakh education, can be noted that at this stage, on the main criteria for the implementation of the structural components of the Bologna process Kazakhstan has already achieved tangible results, which in turn is reflected in public

opinion of Kazakhstani students - the most active, critical and concerned social group. As a result of the study 60% of the students surveyed were satisfied with the education received, despite the fact that almost the same number of respondents is confident in its lack of compliance with international standards.

Regarding the main components of the implementation of programs of the Bologna Process the following achievements in Kazakhstan can be noted.

- ✓ The Bologna three cycle structure - according to international experts, the first two levels almost in full are implemented in Kazakhstan, model 240 + 120 credits (4 +2 years) is used. At the doctoral level most of the things begins to be developed.

- ✓ The system of credits (ECTS) - a tool that allows students to receive credit units for the successful development of courses at university. "In Kazakhstan, a national credit system is similar to the ECTS, and steps are being taken to ensure their compatibility. At the moment, a table of equivalence used for the mobility of students"[6].

- ✓ Bologna Diploma Supplement (DS) - a document that is attached to the diploma of higher education whose purpose is to increase the international transparency and facilitate academic and professional recognition of qualifications. In Kazakhstan there is a gradual introduction of it - the application is issued automatically, free of charge in English and/or in the language of education.

- ✓ National Qualifications Framework (NQF) - a tool of classification of qualifications, based on key criteria that describe the level of education received. This program is also in the stage of initial implementation.

- ✓ National Quality Assurance (NQA). Currently, Kazakhstan has a single independent national agency ensuring the quality of education, which aims to develop recommendations to improve the quality of education in certain areas.

- ✓ The Lisbon Convention on recognition of qualifications - is an international convention for the qualifications issued in one country to be recognized in other countries, based on certain standards. The Lisbon Convention has been ratified and in Kazakhstan.

#### V. HIGHER EDUCATION AS A BASIS FOR PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

At all times, university education was aimed at the development of ideas and significant values of civil society and at the satisfaction of inquiries of the individual and the interests of society as a whole. Therefore, the main task of universities is to become centers of science, education and culture, where educational activities and scientific innovation can be harmoniously united.

Respondents were asked a separate question about the importance of higher education in the modern world, the answers to this question should have been indirectly indicate the nature of students' attitudes to the education they receive in the range of conscious, intentional to formal mechanical (as a tribute to tradition and the demands of parents and etc.)

TABLE V  
DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION "HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO YOU TO HAVE HIGHER EDUCATION?" (IN% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS)

№ Response options	%
1. Very important	74.6%
2. Important	18.9%
3. Somewhat important	4.1%
4. Not important	0.6%
5. Not important at all	0.4%
6. Nothing to say	1.3%
7. Total	100%

This result has shown that for the absolute majority of the students of Kazakh universities having a higher education is extremely important (74.6%) and important (18.9%). The overall positive response was - 93.5%.

In other words, it may be noted that the functional division of labor in the modern Kazakh society points to a priority of higher and special professional education, while the segment that has only middle level of education has continued a downward trend. It is very important that Kazakh students understand this.

Regarding issues of labor sociology, this property of economic development is extremely important, because it assumes in the economy as a whole and in its separate sectors the need for continuous self-education, professional development, and sometimes the retraining of specialists. These processes raise problems of labor mobility, the demand and competitiveness of professionals in the labor market.

Summarizing the findings may be noted that, first, among the youth of Kazakhstan there is a fairly high level of awareness of the need for higher education, based on an awareness of the importance of professional knowledge to achieve professional success and future career growth. Second, most of them indicate their position in structure a given by researchers as the middle between the "upper classes" and "lower classes." And third, the high "educational qualification" of modern youth, intergenerational continuity of the value of higher education leads to the perception by respondents of education as a professional potential to implement a their life plans.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

In general, innovation processes taking place today in Kazakh education sphere, despite some difficulties and contradictions, are gaining strength. Evaluation of the nature of changes in general indicates the positive dynamics of occurring transformations: more than 60% of respondents are confident in the correctness and adequacy of the changes. Obviously, they do not occur in one day, so it is too early to say that Kazakhstan's education system fully corresponds with international standards. Also the fact that today's young people attaches great significance for higher education is important, understanding by this conscious development of the core professional competencies, and not the fact of obtaining a "diploma", clearly recognizing that higher education is one of the keys to the material well-being and successful career.

Implementation of key strategic objectives of education is consistent. At the same time, although the development of patriotism and civicism are key in determining the success of the country and the formation of middle-class values [7], according to students tasks and key directions in the education of civicism and patriotism are realized by only 50%, which is undeniably disturbing fact and one of the weak points of the education system in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's middle class, despite its fairly rapid economic growth, unfortunately, is not a factor of social stability and economic basis of society, due to the absence of formed values, mindset, and all those basic features that are necessary for its actual existence in the social space. But in our society today there is an interest in creating conditions for the successful formation of the middle class on the model of Western countries [8]. And Kazakhstan's education system going through transformation processes, improving the quality of educational programs and trying to start to correspond to the international standards, not yet fully, but begins to perform its part of important functions in forming middle class.

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