

**Academic Autonomy in Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Beliefs and Experiences of  
Faculty Members in a National Higher Education Institution**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Educational Leadership

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education

June, 2018

Word Count: 19 937

## ACADEMIC AUTONOMY: BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCES

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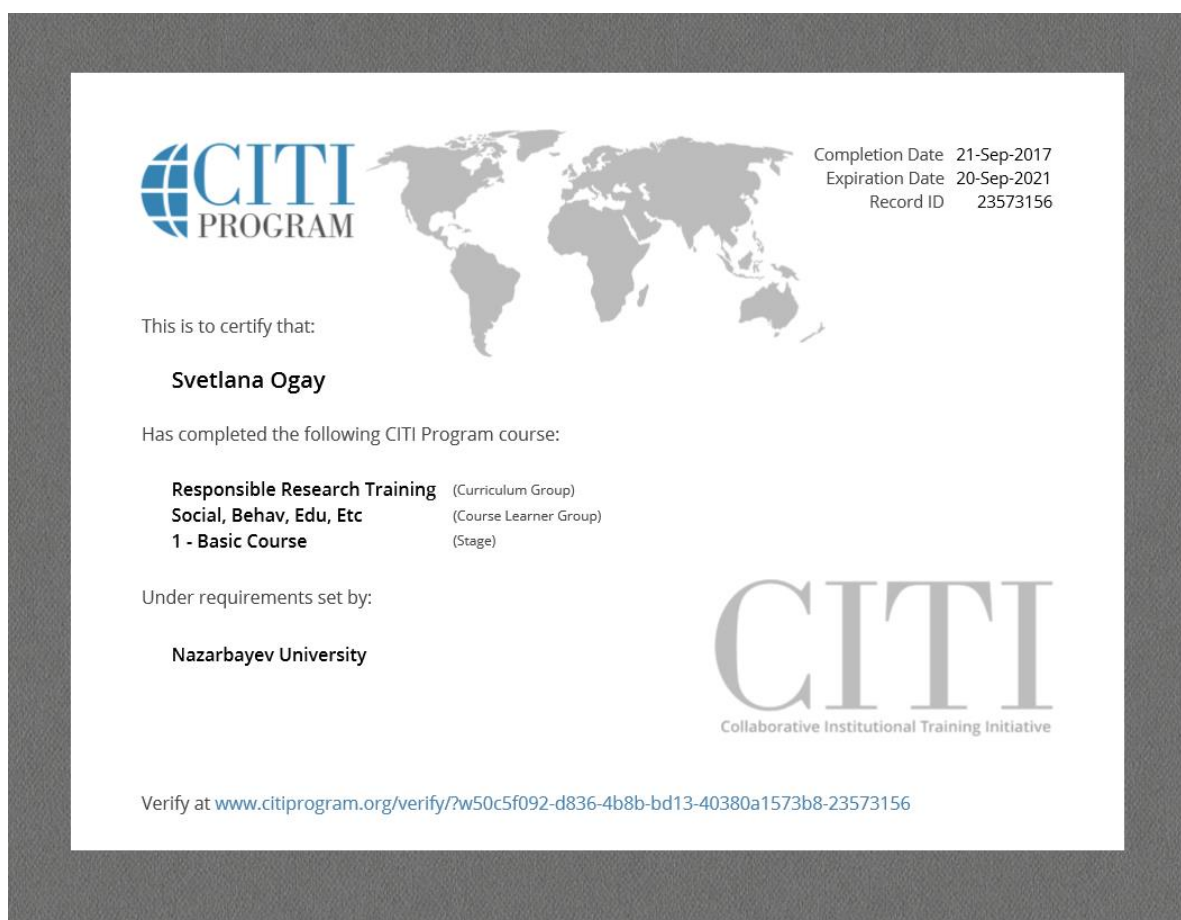
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**Academic Autonomy in Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Beliefs and Experiences of  
Faculty Members in a National Higher Education Institution**

**Abstract**

In the rapidly changing and knowledge-driven 21 century higher education has become even more prominent across the globe. This has resulted in the increased role of higher education institutions in society and the need for the institutions to be adaptive and innovative, aligning to the demands of the labor market and responding to the needs of the variety of the stakeholders. Given this, higher education entities require environment conducive to such endeavors. As a solution, governments worldwide have given universities increased institutional autonomy, including the capacity to decide upon academic affairs. While Kazakhstan has also pursued this route, granting national universities more flexibility in the decisions on academic issues, there is lack of understanding of academic dimension of institutional autonomy. Therefore, this non-experimental quantitative case-study research explores the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy from four schools in a national university in Kazakhstan. Overall 77 faculty members were surveyed. Data analysis revealed obscured understandings of academic autonomy in relation to the notions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, considerable generation gap in the awareness of institutional autonomy and academic autonomy components, challenges faculty members face, and a range of factors that predict certain faculty members' beliefs and experiences of academic

autonomy, such as work experience in higher education, satisfaction with the job, and attitude to change. Thus, this research fills in the gap in the previous literature on institutional autonomy, focusing particularly on its academic dimension and bringing the perspective that of the faculty members.

*Key words: institutional autonomy, academic autonomy, academic freedom.*

**Академическая автономия в высшем образовании Казахстана: понимание и  
опыт профессорско-преподавательского состава национального высшего  
учебного заведения**

**Абстракт**

В быстро меняющемся и сконцентрированном на знаниях 21 веке высшее образование приобрело еще большую значимость. Как следствие, повысилась и роль высших учебных заведений в обществе и возникла необходимость университетов быть адаптивными и инновационными, отвечая потребностям рынка труда и заинтересованных сторон. Принимая это во внимание, высшие учебные заведения нуждаются в среде, которая бы способствовала достижению поставленных целей. Для создания необходимых условий государства во всем мире предоставили университетам институциональную автономию, в том числе самостоятельность в принятии решений по академическим вопросам. В то время как Казахстан также встал на данный путь, предоставляя национальным университетам большую гибкость в принятии решений по академическим вопросам, академический аспект институциональной автономии понимается в недостаточной мере. Так, данное не экспериментальное количественное кейс-стади исследование направлено на изучение понимания и практических знаний профессорско-преподавательского состава четырех факультетов национального университета Казахстана о академической автономии. Всего в опросе приняли участие 77 преподавателей вуза.

Анализ данных выявил недостаточное понимание термина академическая автономия, которое соотносят с понятиями институциональной автономии и академической свободы. Вместе с тем, было выявлено, что на понимание институциональной автономии, а также компонентов академической автономии существенно влияет разница поколений. Другие факторы такие как, опыт работы в сфере высшего образования, удовлетворенность условиями труда и восприятие изменений являются определяющими в формировании понимания академической автономии и практический знаний о ее применении среди преподавателей. Также исследование показало, что существует ряд проблем, с которыми сталкиваются преподаватели рассматриваемого вуза на практике касательно академической автономии. Таким образом, данное исследование восполняет пробел в литературе об институциональной автономии, уделяя особое внимание его академической составляющей с перспективы профессорско-преподавательского состава.

*Ключевые слова: институциональная автономия, академическая автономия, академическая свобода.*



**Қазақстандағы жоғары білімінің академиялық автономиясы: ұлттық жоғары оқу орындары кафедрасының профессор-оқытушылар құрамының түсіну және тәжірибесі.**

**Абстракт**

Тез өзгертін және концентрацияланған 21 ғасырдағы жоғары білім, білімнің маңыздылығы өте зор. Соның салдарынан, қоғамда жоғары оқу орындарының рөлі өсіп, университеттер адаптивтік және инновациялық қажеттіліктерге, еңбек нарығының қажеттілігіне және мүдделі тараптарына жауап беру керек. Осыны назарға ала отырып, жоғары оқу орындары алға қойылған мақсаттарға қол жеткізуіге ықпалын тигізетін ортаға мұқтаж етеді. Бүкіл әлемнің университеттерінде институционалдық автономия, оның ішінде дербестік, академиялық мәселелер бойынша шешімдер қабылдау үшін қажетті жағдайлар жасады. Ал Қазақстан сондай-ақ, бұл жолды ұсына отырып, ұлттық университеттерге академиялық мәселелер жөніндегі шешімдер қабылдауға үлкен икемділік беріді, бірақ академиялық аспект институционалдық автономиясын түсінуі жеткілікті емес. Осылайша, бұл эксперименттік сандық кейс-сатысында бағытталған зерттеу, профессор-оқытушылар құрамының Қазақстанның ұлттық университетінің төрт факультеттің академиялық автономия түсіну және практикалық білімдерін анықтау. Сауалнамаға 77 оқытушы қатысты. Талдау, академиялық автономия терминін жеткіліксіз түсінуін анықтады, ол институционалдық автономия және академиялық еркіндік түсінігіне теңелді. Сонымен қатар, институционалдық автономия, сондай-ақ

академиялық автономия компоненттерін түсінуі ұрпақ айырмашылықтары айтарлықтай әсер ететіні анықталды. Жоғары білім беру саласында жұмыс тәжірибесі, еңбек қалыптастыруына қанағаттанушылығы, өзгерістер қабылдау және академиялық автономия түсінуін қалыптастыру, оқытушылар арасында практикалық білімдерін айқындаушы, оны қолдану сияқты басқа да факторлар болып табылады. Сондай-ақ, зерттеу көрсеткендей, академиялық автономияға қатысты ЖОО-ның бетпе-оқытушыларының қаралып отырған тәжірибиесінде бірқатар қиындықтар бар. Осылайша, профессор-оқытушылар құрамы және оның академиялық құрамына ерекше назар аудара отырып, аталған зерттеу әдебиетте институционалдық автономия туралы бос орнын толтырып отыр.

*Түйін сөздер: институционалдық автономия, академиялық автономия, академиялық еркіндік.*

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In order to explore the beliefs and experiences of faculty members of academic autonomy at one of the national universities in Kazakhstan, it is crucial to understand why academic autonomy is important and what are the underlying reasons of such a reform. Thus, elucidating the Kazakhstani context under which the need for autonomy has emerged, this chapter depicts the problem under investigation, introduces the purpose of the research and its research questions, highlights the significance of this study, and concludes with the thesis structure, providing a precise outline of the subsequent chapters.

### **Background of the study**

Triggered by the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90-s the country had to initiate major transformations in all domains of societal life, including higher education (Ahn, Dixon, & Chekmareva, 2018) that has been recognized as a primary driving force for Kazakhstani economic, social, and political development. In the transition to the market economy in the post-Soviet Central Asian countries Heyneman (as cited in Anderson & Heyneman, 2005) discerns four groups of challenges faced in higher education: structural changes, governance, academic, and finance related issues. Although some of the aspects still pertain to the Kazakhstani higher education sector today, including heavy financial dependence of universities on the government (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015) and weak curriculum flexibility (Hartley, Gopaul, Sagintayeva, & Apergenova, 2015), Kazakhstan has considerably progressed on its higher education modernization endeavors, gradually moving away from the highly centralized system (OECD, 2017).

According to Salmi (2007), “universities need the capacity to react swiftly by establishing new programs, reconfiguring existing ones, and eliminating outdated courses without being hampered by a conservative mindset and bureaucratic practices” (p. 231).

Admittedly, given that there is a wide array of demands from the society, state, employers, professors, and students that universities are struggling to satisfy (Bladh, 2007; Salmi, 2007), in today's volatile world the reduced state control over higher education institutions (hereinafter – HEIs) is one of those positive developments that can provide universities with a room for manoeuvre. To understand the rationale, standing behind the emergent need for institutional autonomy in Kazakhstan, and academic dimension in particular, the context is provided first.

**The seeds of autonomous education institutions: Early 90-s.** The shift from a planned economy inherent to the Soviet system triggered a series of amendments (OECD & The World Bank, 2007; Brunner & Tillett as cited in Hartley et al., 2015), including modernization of both the content and the organization of the educational process (Kuvanysheva, 2013) as well as alterations in the HEIs' operation, calling for more autonomy and accountability given to all stakeholders (OECD & The World Bank, 2007). The first steps towards decentralization of higher education, particularly, the creation of the legislative base made in the early 1990s (Kuvanysheva, 2013; Yeseyeva & Anarbek, 2015) preceded the current long-term ambitious goal of granting greater autonomy to universities. As an example of the earliest efforts, in 1993 Al-Farabi Kazakh State University was announced to be granted autonomous status (Mutanov, 2014; Anarbek & Gumerova, 2015). The same year regulations on HEIs accreditation and autonomy were enforced by the Cabinet of Ministers, yet, interestingly, in 1996 it was eliminated (Yeseyeva & Anarbek, 2015). Although the reasons for such an immediate change are not clear, it is an apparent indication of the state's commitment towards granting greater independence to HEIs.

**Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area.** A critical alteration that gave an impulse to institutional autonomy implementation was the accession of



Kazakhstan to the Bologna Process and its integration into the European Higher Education Area in 2010 (Hartley et al., 2015; Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015). This accentuated an urgent need for providing universities with greater autonomy, paving the way for higher education institutions to enhanced institutional flexibility. Obviously, the integration into the Bologna Process has had an immediate effect on “the transition to new decentralization policies of higher education governance geared to the market economy and accountability” (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2014, p. 200).

Referring to the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988), the Bologna Declaration is considered as one of the key documents underpinning the Bologna Process (Tomusk, 2011) that emphasizes the main principles of institutional autonomy (Hartley et al., 2015, p. 282). Signed by the rectors of the European universities the Magna Charta served “as a re-statement and as a reassertion of the traditional values and rights that had been attached to higher learning and very particularly to the freedoms to teach and to learn” (Thorens as cited in Neave, 2012). As of 2017, 66 Kazakhstani HEIs have become the signatories of the Charta (OECD, 2017).

**Kazakhstani legislation.** Since joining the Bologna Process, the state has gradually started developing new policies and strategies in granting universities more independence. University autonomy has been underlined in the “State program of education development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020” (hereinafter – SPED for 2011-2020) (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan [MoES], 2010) as one of the priorities in bringing higher education in compliance with the Bologna Process. One of the most recent legal documents, underpinning the reform initiative, is the Draft Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On introduction of the amendments and additions to some legislative acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the issues of higher education institutions’ academic and administrative autonomy enhancement” (MoES, 2017).

Although the document is still under development and has only recently been presented to the consideration of the deputies of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Davydova, 2018), it clearly points out the state's strategy towards enhancing universities' independence from the state. This document is underpinned by the 78<sup>th</sup> step of the National Plan "100 Concrete Steps" (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015) and the Presidents' Annual Address to the People of Kazakhstan "Kazakhstani path - 2050: Common aim, common interests, common future" (Annual Address of the President Nursultan Nazarbayev, 2014). Thus, the phased expansion of academic and administrative autonomy of HEIs has become one of the central concerns in the higher education transformation agenda.

Referring to the "Law on education of the Republic of Kazakhstan" (MoES, 2016), national HEIs are defined as HEIs that are considered as the leading research and methodological centers of the country that have the special status. The operation of such universities is further reinforced by the "Regulations on the special status of higher education institutions" (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). Thus, having the special status, national universities in Kazakhstan guarantee the provision of a high quality education, conducive conditions for educational and moral development of individuals, and monitors international trends in higher education and research (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). Moreover, national universities have the rights to decide upon the rules on attestation, to determine faculty-student ratio, to make decisions on the academic load, to design and introduce degree programs, and to determine student admission criteria (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). Whereas the latter two aspects are not accentuated as academic autonomy characteristics, the depicted 'powers' national universities are provided with imply that these universities

have already been granted the opportunity to exercise greater independence from the state on academic matters.

### **Problem statement**

As Kazakhstan has only recently embarked on the university autonomy expansion, discussions on the pathways to institutional autonomy and relevant legislative basis for the reform have not been yet properly elaborated (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2014, p. 200), nor have the studies addressed academic dimension of institutional autonomy in-detail within the local context. While this transition of universities to institutional autonomy is a step towards “greater innovation” (Hartley et al., 2015, p. 70) that will enable them to efficiently respond to the labor market needs, hardly prior studies separately examined academic autonomy, or specifically looked at academic autonomy from the faculty’s perspective. Instead, previous research has focused on financial sustainability of universities (Chiang, 2004; Kohtamäki, 2011), took more comprehensive approach, investigating all autonomy dimensions at once (Turcan, Reilly, & Bugaian, 2017), or dwelled on new governance models within the autonomy conditions (Shattock, 2012; Sagintayeva, 2013; Varghese & Martin, 2014). Additionally, the perspective that of the faculty members, who are among the key stakeholders, has scarcely been addressed. It was rather the lens that of university leadership or policy makers through which autonomy was studied. Finally, what is important is that academic autonomy is being misunderstood on the state level, being confused with academic freedom (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015). This might, in turn, negatively affect academic autonomy implementation in Kazakhstan. Thus, the delineated issues point out the need for academic autonomy to be investigated and to give the prominence to the faculty members’ perspective.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this non-experimental quantitative case study was to explore the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of a national university in Kazakhstan of academic autonomy during the gradual transition of HEIs to institutional autonomy with an aim to provide insights into how much has been captured by the faculty members.

**Research questions**

An overarching research question for the study was as follows: “What are the beliefs and experiences of the national university’s faculty of academic autonomy?”

Within the broader research question the following sub-questions were addressed:

- What are the beliefs of the faculty members of academic autonomy in relation to institutional autonomy and academic freedom?
- How do these beliefs vary between the schools within the university?
- What are the experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy?
- What factors do influence faculty members’ beliefs and experiences of the academic dimension of institutional autonomy?

**Significance of the study**

The present study fills in the existing gap in the literature on academic autonomy, unveiling the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy. Furthermore, the findings of this research might be beneficial for the stakeholders on both institutional and national levels. Thus, taking part in this study, it is likely that the participated faculty will benefit from the findings of the research, as it will allow them to reflect on their practices at the university. Within the broader institutional autonomy reform initiative the research has significant implications for the development of the relevant trajectory for the reform, providing valuable and opportune insights into the current on-site issues of academic autonomy, as experienced by the faculty. Policy makers

are likely to profit from the results of this study, as better understanding of the beliefs of faculty and their experiences of academic autonomy might point out the areas for further improvement, specifically, in terms of communicating autonomy reforms to the stakeholders, as “reform is not simply a matter of establishing new policies; it is a negotiated process in which participants must establish new understandings about how they should conduct their work” (Christensen as cited in Hartley et al., 2015).

### **Thesis structure**

This thesis comprises five chapters, each focusing on the specific area of the research. Followed by the introductory chapter that depicts background of the research, its research problem and purpose, research questions, and significance of the study, the second chapter dwells on the existing Kazakhstani and international literature in the field of institutional autonomy, and academic autonomy in particular, critically analyzing the notion of academic autonomy in relation to the overlapping concepts of substantive autonomy, policy autonomy, individual autonomy, and academic freedom. The chapter is concluded with the conceptual framework that this research followed. The third chapter scrutinizes the methodology of the study, elaborating on the research paradigm, research design, research site, sample, instrument, data collection and analysis procedures, ethics, and entailed limitations. The findings of the research are reported in the fourth chapter and depict the revealed beliefs and experiences of the participated faculty members of academic autonomy at the Kazakhstani national university. These results are further interpreted and discussed in the fifth chapter of the thesis, emphasizing the significance of the findings in relation to the previous literature. The concluding chapter of the thesis summarizes the results of the study, referring to the research questions posed in the beginning of the study, stresses the benefits of the conducted research, and provides implications for further research in the field.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

As this study explored the beliefs and experiences of faculty members of academic autonomy, it was rational to scrutiny academic autonomy notion and examine prior literature on the topic. Thus, this chapter unravels the diverse approaches to academic autonomy, drawing the precise line between the interrelated notions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom and coming up with academic autonomy interpretation as conceptualized in this study. Moreover, previous research conducted both on international and local contexts, depicting academic autonomy implementation in Kazakhstan at its initial stage, is also introduced. Finally, this chapter of the thesis delineates the conceptual framework that guided the research throughout.

### **Understanding institutional autonomy**

Before proceeding to academic autonomy, it is pivotal to set the scene and understand the broader concept of institutional autonomy that embraces a range of dimensions, including its academic constituent. Whereas it is true that autonomy is not a new concept in academia, the way it is interpreted nowadays has radically changed since the Magna Charta Universitatum was adopted back in 1988. Following significant reforms in higher education systems worldwide that were related to the changes on the national level, the alteration in the discourse on autonomy mainly lies in the shift of rhetoric from individual to institutional level (Neave, 2012). Thus, institutional autonomy as a phenomenon which emergence in higher education today is often associated with the adoption of countries of a “market-like behavior” (The World Bank, 2012, p. 128) has only recently become extensively investigated (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015). Most recent research on institutional autonomy both on the international and local levels is predominantly concerned with the relationship between the state and the university (Raza, 2009), the balance between autonomy and accountability (Berdahl, 1990; The World Bank,

2012), or the definition of the concept (Cotelnic et al., 2015; Wermke & Salokangas, 2015). The latter is explored in this section of the chapter.

Gaining in importance, the issue of autonomy has become a focus of abundant studies that boosted a number of definitions of the concept (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). Thus, diverse interpretations of institutional autonomy have emerged in education (Estermann, Nokkala, & Steinell, 2011; Wermke & Salokangas, 2015), and given its multifaceted nature, resulted in the absence of a single definition (Salter & Tapper, as cited in Yokoyama, 2007). Following Raza (2009), institutional autonomy can be referred to as the reduced state control over higher education sector that allows universities to make their own decisions regarding its operation. In a similar vein Nokkala (2010) in defining the term highlights that institutional autonomy exempts universities from economic and political forces as well (as cited in Gül, H., Gül, S., Kaya, & Alican, 2010).

A relatively traditional approach to the phenomenon is that of Berdahl (1990) who defines institutional autonomy as a synthesis of substantive and procedural branches of institutional autonomy. While the former constituent denotes the ability of university to determine “its own goals and programmes” (Berdahl, 1990, p. 172), the latter is considered as the way through which these are to be accomplished (Berdahl, 1990). Contrary to the views of autonomy as institutional right (Raza, 2009; Meek, 2010), personal liberty (Dworkin, 2015), or procedural in nature (Berdahl, 1990), Neave and van Vugh (1994) suggest to move away from such narratives and describe autonomy as “the condition under which academia determines how its work is carried out” (as cited in Bladh, 2007, p. 244). Similarly to the one proposed by Nokkala (as cited in Gül, H. et al., 2010), such an approach considers operation of universities in relation to the external forces and actors.

An interesting perspective on institutional autonomy present Turcan, Reilly, and Bugaian (2017), as they take a holistic approach in defining the term, examining university

autonomy within the government-university, university management-academic staff, academic staff-student, university-business, university-internationalization interfaces. It is argued that by isolating institutional autonomy into academic, organizational, financial, and staffing dimensions, the concept cannot be fully grasped. Instead, it can only be understood when the complex interrelations within which autonomy is realized are taken into account. Just the opposite position take Estermann and Nokkala (2009), as they assert that “systematic mapping” (p. 6) is required to allow reliable measurement of institutional autonomy. Thus, to elucidate how institutional autonomy is exercised it is important to look at each dimension separately.

Within the Kazakhstani context, in the “State program of education development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020” institutional autonomy is understood in terms of a university’s independence in “carrying out its educational, scientific, financial, international and other activity, on the model of the Nazarbayev University” (MoES, 2010). In this research it is argued that this interpretation is narrowed down to the specific experiences of Nazarbayev University which operation is regulated by the special law that is distinct from the regulations under which other Kazakhstani universities have to operate. Hence, such a definition seems to be very limited to the specific practices of a quite distinct institution.

While institutional autonomy as a complex phenomenon deserves a separate scrutiny, it seems that no unified definition of university autonomy can be developed, so that is could be universally applied, as different nature of higher education institutions and their legal status cannot be ignored. Despite, obviously, it would be precipitate to propose institutional autonomy definition within the local context, as rigorous study on the very concept is required, this study followed the definition proposed by Raza (2009) for it provides more flexible explanation that seems to fit in the Kazakhstani realities.



**Academic autonomy reshaped**

Falling within the institutional autonomy notion, academic autonomy on its own evokes great interest. Academic autonomy is certainly characterized by some degree of obscurity, especially lacking explicit differentiation from academic freedom (Thorens, 2006). Thus, associated with academic autonomy terms are explicated first to elaborate on the distinctions between the seemingly synonymous concepts.

**Substantive autonomy.** Proposed by Berdahl (1990) differentiation of autonomy into substantive and procedural types goes back to the beginning of 90-s. Being heavily influenced by the ideas of Ashby (1966), Berdahl (1990) defined substantive autonomy as “the what of academe” (p. 172). Specifically, substantive autonomy was meant to denote the power of an institution to set goals and programs. Giving an account to the time when it was suggested, this definition seems to be out of the contemporary discourse, as it does not take into consideration the outside controls, such as the government, universities have to comply to. Moreover, the provided definition of substantive autonomy barely touches upon the decisions on academic affairs made by universities, except for the programs. Therefore, while apparently substantive autonomy cover academic and research areas (Raza, 2009; Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015), similarly to academic autonomy notion, it seems that it lacks comprehensive approach that would specifically outline which academic aspects it refers to.

**Policy autonomy.** Scrutinizing institutional autonomy from the ‘New Public Management’ standpoint, de Boer and Enders (2017) distinguish between formal autonomy and autonomy-in-use within which they highlight 5 dimensions: managerial, structural, financial, interventional, and policy autonomy. The latter dimension is the one that seems to denote academic autonomy delineated in the Lisbon Declaration (European University Association, 2007), as it also incorporates the capacity of university to make

decisions on student intake, new programs introduction, and student selection criteria (de Boer & Enders, 2017, p. 67). At the same time, compared to the academic autonomy proposed by the European University Association (2007) that incorporates the capacity to decide on overall student numbers, select students, introduce and terminate programs, choose the language of instruction, select quality assurance mechanisms and providers, and design content of academic programs, it encompasses a wider range of components, including determining research programs and themes as well as university leadership impact on teaching (de Boer & Enders, 2017). Thus, de Boer and Enders (2017) especially stress the importance of research within academic autonomy conditions.

**Individual autonomy.** Autonomy is a multidimensional construct that is quite arduous to embrace. Given the academic profession of the faculty members, academic autonomy is also associated with individual autonomy (Schmidt & Langberg, 2007). Thorens (2006) raises the issue of ambiguity between university autonomy, academic freedom, and fundamental freedoms of human beings and questions whether autonomy and liberties have to be limited to universities or they should be scrutinized in a broader fashion. Delving deeper into the issue, Dworkin (2015) brings philosophical moral into the discussion. According to Dworkin (2015), autonomy is “a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes and so do forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values” (p. 14). Whereas autonomy might be considered from diverse perspectives, including the basic human rights, as far as the liberties of academic personnel is concerned, it seems that the distinction between academic autonomy and autonomy in a broader sense is obvious. Nevertheless, it is here when the interrelated notion of academic freedom comes into play. Henkel (2007), for instance, highlights that within Anglo-Saxon tradition academic autonomy is connected to individual freedom of the scholars. This is

further discussed in the chapter, as it is crucial to understand how academic autonomy is exactly differs from academic freedom.

**Academic freedom.** Widely contested and tightly linked to the individual autonomy academic freedom is another concept that adds to the blurred understandings of academic autonomy (Warnock, 1992). Given that historically autonomy was rooted in the ability of universities to self-govern, its meaning was closely related to the autonomy of individual academics (Enders, as cited in Enders, de Boyer, & Weyer, 2013) as well as their rights to teach and research, while pursuing the scientific truth (Berdahl, 1990). Therefore, overlapping with academic autonomy, this tight interconnection remains to present challenges in setting the precise distinctions.

Schmidt and Langber (2007) consider individual professional freedom of academics as an autonomy dimension, defining it as scholars' freedom of determining their own research and publication. Contrary to Schmidt and Langber (2007), Nybom (2008) contends that university autonomy is aimed at reinforcing their ability to be responsive to the "short-term demands coming from society" (p. 136), and it does not intersect with academic freedom. Likewise, Thorens (2006) precisely states that academic freedom, being "the necessary freedom" (p. 97), pertains to members of university, but not the institution. Contesting with such a straightforward understandings of academic freedom, Altbach (2001) points out that it cannot be that easily grasped and, being at the core of the academia, it remains lacking universally accepted definition. Interestingly, whereas the majority of the authors either seek to distinguish between academic autonomy and academic freedom or emphasize their complex interrelations, both Ordorika (as cited in Yang, Vidovich, & Currie, 2007) and Wang (2010) assert that academic freedom falls into academic autonomy of universities. Meek (2010), on the other hand, declares that universities might have academic autonomy, but that does not necessarily leads to

academic freedom. While this seems reasonable, enhanced academic autonomy might still allow universities to put academic freedom in practice (Fielden, 2008). Whereas the tight links between academic autonomy and academic freedom cannot be denied, these two do not coincide in the meanings (Bladh, 2007). Thus, whereas this study is not intended to define academic freedom, as it would require a deeper analysis, it argues that academic freedom is a freedom of the academia to pursue the truth in their research and teaching endeavors that can be either individual or institutional right, whereas academic autonomy concerns with institutional capacities of universities described in the next sub-section of the thesis.

**Towards a comprehensive academic autonomy definition.** Whereas various authors address academic autonomy differently, probably the most comprehensive definition of academic autonomy seems to be the one provided by Chekmareva, Dixon, and Ahn (2016). They define academic autonomy as the ability of a university “to manage its academic affairs, by being able to determine its degree profile, degree titles, and degree program objectives, content, teaching and learning methods, and assessment methods and standards” (Chekmareva, Dixon, & Ahn, 2016 p. 43). Such a description precisely outlines each aspect a university with academic autonomy can decide upon and draws on its ability to do so. Nevertheless, the proposed definition only takes the perspective of university as an actor, failing to encounter its relation with external forces. Additionally, referring to the academic autonomy-academic freedom tension, it can be argued that teaching and learning methods as well as assessment should be under academic autonomy umbrella. What should be included instead are the components delineated in the study conducted by Estermann, Nokkala, and Steinel (2011), such as the capacity to determine student intake, select students, choose the language of instruction, and decide on quality assurance mechanisms and providers.

All things considered, it seems that in order to grasp all the nuances of academic autonomy and highlight its distinctive nature from other notions, the definition should incorporate broader spectrum of characteristics than it was proposed in the earlier works. Thus, based on the literature review academic autonomy is conceptualized in this study in the following way: “Academic autonomy refers to as the reduced external control over university’s decisions on internal academic affairs, including determining student intake, setting admission criteria, introducing and terminating programs, designing content of degree programs, choosing the language of instruction, and selecting quality assurance mechanisms and providers supported on the legislative level.”

**Academic autonomy: international outlook**

While rarely have the researchers delved into academic autonomy on its own, a number of studies that have previously studied academic dimension within broader institutional autonomy provided some insights into the academic autonomy practices globally. In particular, the experiences from 4 developing countries are discussed. Worth to mention is that only a few studies have investigated academic autonomy specifically from the faculty’s perspective; instead, they examine it on the policy level.

Having similar to Kazakhstan Soviet background, Russian higher education has also undergone some changes stipulated by joining the Bologna Process (Gushchin & Gureev, 2011). While Kazakhstan has been systematically implementing the Bologna principles in its higher education (Ahn, Dixon, & Chekmareva, 2018), Gushchin & Gureev (2011) question whether Russian higher education should have followed European pathway, as they contend that it would be more legitimate to determine their own trajectory for higher education development. The extent to which academic autonomy is exercised in the Russian universities is institution-specific, but generally is concerned with the decisions on programs, curriculum, methodological support, and assessment of academic

progress of students (Guschin & Gureev, 2011). In Moldova, however, according to Cotelnic et al. (2015), academic autonomy undergoes several problems when it comes to the decisions made on the areas for granting autonomy. Normally though, universities in Moldova have the right to introduce bachelor programs, admissions criteria for international students, and design content of programs (Cotelnic et al., 2015).

In the case of Vietnam, the challenges in implementing academic autonomy were found to be rooted in the poor planning on both governmental and institutional levels (Nguyen, Hamid, & Moni, 2016). Investigating academic autonomy practices from the perspective of university leadership and lecturers, in particular looking at how admission criteria were set by universities and what decisions were made on the curriculum, Nguyen, Hamid, and Moni (2016) found that despite some positive changes, universities faced quality assurance issues. Additionally, despite the granted academic autonomy, universities could not manage their programs properly, as the regulations on academic content were continued to be exposed (Nguyen et al., 2016). Indeed, while autonomy is the flexibility that can enable universities to be more responsive and adaptive to the societal needs, rigorous planning as well as evaluation and monitoring are crucial not only on the state level, but also within institutions.

A slightly of a different focus study was conducted by Okai and Worlu (2014) who examined the awareness of the faculty of autonomy and academic autonomy and the extent to which they were practiced at three Nigerian institutions. Following the definition of substantive autonomy and quantitative method, Okai and Worlu (2014) found significant awareness among the participants of substantive autonomy; however, autonomy was practiced to a lesser extent than it was expected. As one of the recommendations to further develop academic autonomy awareness, Okai and Worlu (2014) suggested that universities

should conduct workshops on autonomy and create conducive to autonomy implementation conditions.

Whilst Kazakhstan has quite a different context and follows different autonomy implementation procedures, international experiences in academic autonomy realization might provide valuable insights into the potential threats and challenges academic autonomy entails. Having briefly outlined how academic autonomy is being granted and how universities react to its implementation internationally, the following sub-section draws on the domestic reports and studies that examined academic autonomy in the Kazakhstani HEIs.

### **Autonomous institutions in Kazakhstan: A dream or reality?**

As the decision to grant Kazakhstani HEIs autonomy on the legislation level has only relatively recently become at the forefront of the policy discussions, quite limited research on institutional autonomy, and particularly academic autonomy, has been conducted. Nevertheless, this study draws on the existing literature that has been published in the last four years.

Following the analytic report on the level of preparedness of universities to operate under the autonomy regime conducted by the Information Analytical Center (2014), based on the sociological study 260 out of 500 participants, including 190 administrative staff and 310 faculty members, from 7 national and 18 state Kazakhstani universities expressed their unpreparedness to institutional autonomy implementation. Moreover, 72.4% of the respondents reported that Kazakhstani universities are ready for academic autonomy; however, only 48.4% stated that universities are capable of designing their own degree programs (Information Analytical Center, 2014). Given this, it was revealed that the participants tend to think that academic autonomy has nothing to do with program

introduction (Information Analytical Center, 2014), which showed that the respondents lack academic autonomy understanding.

Taking into account the perceived readiness of university staff to be granted institutional autonomy, the Diagnostic Report on the Development of Strategic Directions for Education Reforms in Kazakhstan for 2015-2020 (Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, 2014) studied institutional autonomy at universities, as progressed since the first steps of weakening the state control. The report highlighted that Kazakhstani universities continue to face legal constraints in exercising their autonomy, specifically, in the decisions on curriculum and academic programs development (Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, 2014; Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015). According to Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev (2015), to introduce new degree program universities are still required to obtain the license from MoES. Likewise, the OECD report (2017) points out that although the State Standards have become more lenient, providing national research and national universities with the right to determine programs' content for 70% and 55% correspondingly, Kazakhstani HEIs still have limited academic autonomy, which is in turn, "discourages faculty and institutional creativity, initiative and responsibility" (p. 17). Therefore, in the light of expanding academic autonomy of HEIs in Kazakhstan, Chekmareva, Dixon, and Ahn (2016) emphasize the strong need for capacity building to innovate and lead the change. It is also suggested that as one of the ways to enhance academic autonomy student admission criteria at universities should be diversified, moving away from the nationwide university entrance standardized testing system - Unified National Test.

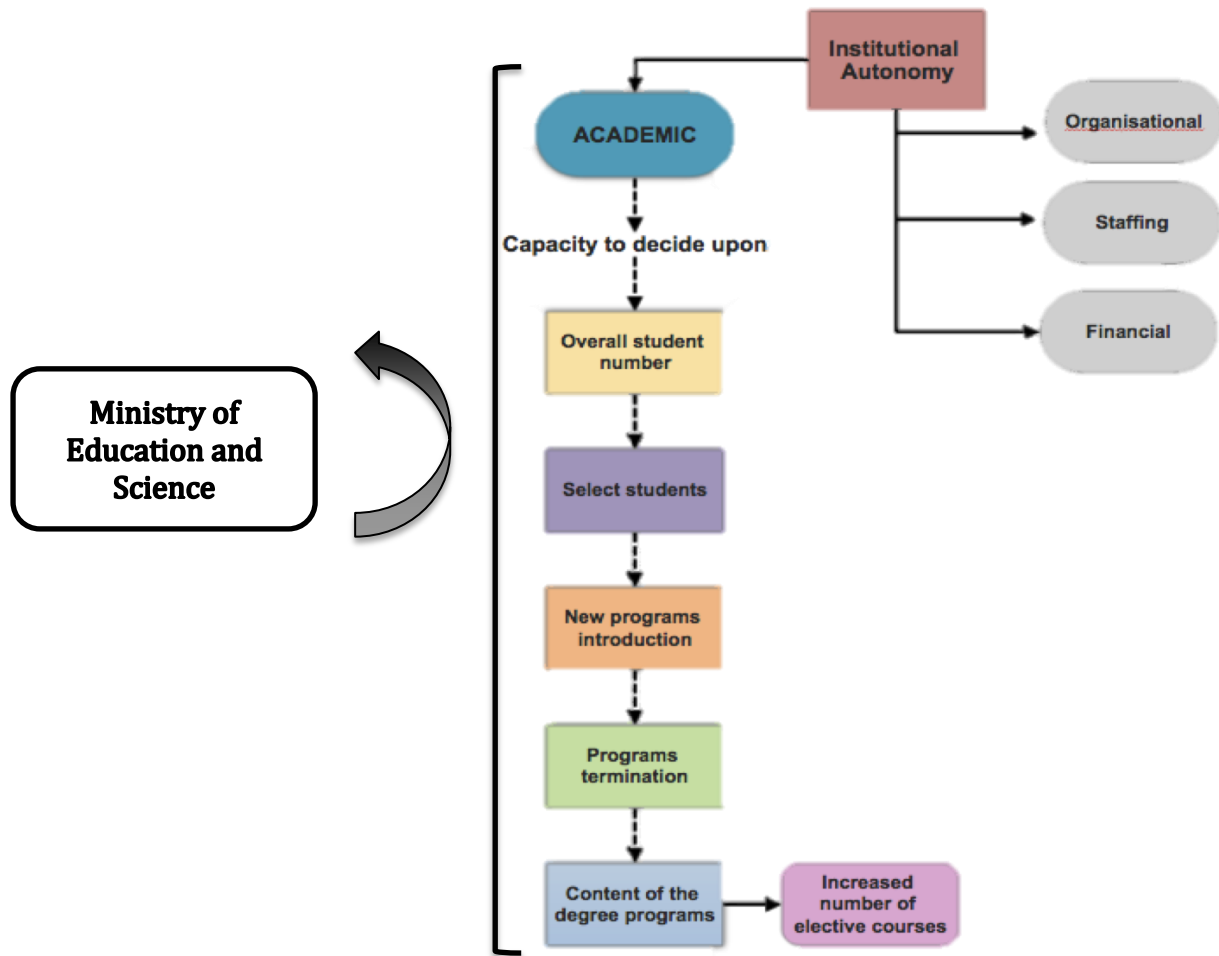
In sum, the need to comply with the list of specialties prescribed by MoES (Sarinzhipov, 2013; Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015), lack of academic autonomy understanding among university staff and faculty members (Information Analytical Center,



2014), and overall centralized regulatory academic mechanisms (OECD, 2017) considerably restrain Kazakhstani universities in exercising greater academic autonomy.

### **Conceptual framework**

Having conceptualized academic autonomy for this research and explored the existing literature on academic autonomy, in order to explore the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of the national university of academic autonomy an appropriate conceptual framework that would guide this research was required. Thus, this study adopted the framework designed by the Estermann, Nokkala, and Steinel (2011) that outlines that academic autonomy rests on the capacity to decide on student numbers, select students, introduce programs, terminate programs, design content of degree programs, choose the language of instruction, select quality assurance mechanisms and providers. To take into account the peculiarities of the Kazakhstani realities, the framework was further adapted, as illustrated in the Figure 1. Specifically, when looking at the experiences of faculty members, this study was not intended to explore the ability of universities to choose the language of instruction and select quality assurance mechanisms as well as providers. Moreover, as according to the “Regulations of academic process organization based on the credit technology of education” (MoES, 2011), the content of elective courses can be determined at the discretion of universities, increased number of elective courses was added to the academic autonomy component ‘capacity to decide upon the content of the degree programs’. Additionally, according to Enders, de Boer, and Wyer (2013), autonomy can be explored from two perspectives. It can be seen from the object’s self, pointing out object’s capacity or ability, and can be explored within the object-subject relationship that is independence of the object from external influence. Hence, the relationship of universities, operating under academic autonomy, with MoES, as the primary controlling body, is also depicted in the Figure 1.

*Figure 1. Institutional Autonomy Dimensions, Academic Autonomy Components*

Guided by the proposed framework, this study followed precise methodology underpinned by the post-positivist research paradigm in order to explore the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of one of the national universities in Kazakhstan. The research design, research site, sample, instrument, data collection and analysis employed are described in-detail the next chapter.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology of the research. Specifically, it delineates the paradigm that underpinned the study, design of the research, the instrument used to collect the data, the research site, and sample. Procedures for data collection and data analysis, including ethics protocol followed to ensure participants' protection and confidentiality, are also depicted in this chapter.

**Research paradigm**

Epistemology of the research is described first, as it manifests “how educational researchers can know the reality that they wish to describe” (Scott & Morrison, 2006, p. 85). Philosophical worldviews hold by researchers drive the study conducted and affect the research practice (Creswell, 2014, p. 57), as often hidden assumptions of the researcher have “very real and practical implications” (Slife & Williams, 1995, p. 2) for a study. Therefore, it is vital that the worldview that this research is grounded in is clearly stated and articulated.

This research was driven by the post-positivist research paradigm that disputes the static idea of the absolute truth that of the positivists (Creswell, 2014). Instead, knowledge is viewed as “practically adequate” (Sousa, 2010, p. 485) that “informs and guides practice in the world” (Sousa, 2010, p. 485). Through a post-positivism lens numeric data and measures are critical in examining the problem and looking at the interested relationships. Given this, beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy were explored and understood primarily based on the evidence derived from the numeric measures. At the same time data was not limited to quantitative data only, as the designed survey also incorporated open-ended questions. The instrument is elaborated further in this section.

**Research design**

In order to understand and shed the light on the faculty members’ beliefs and experiences of alterations in the academic affairs of the university under study during the transitional stage of the Kazakhstani universities to institutional autonomy, quantitative non-experimental research method was opted for. Compared to experimental studies that manipulate the environment, non-experimental research allows examining the variables within the real circumstances, in the way they occur in practice (Muijs, 2004, p. 13). In

particular, the study followed survey design to explore the relationships between dependent and independent variables, “occurring in particular real-life contexts” (Muijs, 2004, p. 49). Cross-sectional survey that is administration of the survey at one point in time (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 135) was preferred, as it is beneficial when measuring present beliefs and opinions and examining “actual behaviors” (Creswell, 2011, p. 377). Additionally, for the inquiry case study research design was chosen, as it helped to investigate the national university in-detail, enabling “to probe, drill down and get at its complexity” (Arthur, Waring, Coe, & Hedges, 2012, p. 102). As Yin (as cited in Arthur et al., 2012) argues, case studies offer options of evaluating and explaining certain phenomenon (p. 102). Thus, this research primarily scrutinized academic autonomy as understood and practiced at one national university.

### **Research site**

The research dwelled on a single case – a national university in Kazakhstan. The institution with a status of the national university was chosen due to its peculiarities that make it distinct from other types of HEIs in Kazakhstan. Specifically, according to the Government Decree of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Enactment of the Provisions of the Special Status of the Higher Education Institutions (2017), national universities unlike other types of HEIs, receive greater public funding, have the capacity to design and implement their own Bachelor, Master’s, and Doctoral programs. They also have the capacity to set their own admission criteria to select their students. The latter two traits particularly highlight certain degree of academic autonomy provided by the state.

Having the special status, the chosen university has approximately 2000 faculty members across 10 schools and around 15000 students. The university has been enjoying its accreditation status by both national and international accreditation agencies, such as Independent Quality Assurance Agency (IQAA), Accreditation, Certification and Quality

Assurance Institute (ACQUIN), Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR) to name some. The university is also considered as among the leading HEIs that have increased the number of students who hold the merit-based state education scholarship. This mainly speaks for the quality of students being selected into the university and their academic standing which in turn speaks for the quality of education attained in the university.

### **Sample**

The participants for the survey were selected based on cluster sampling that simplified the process of identifying and locating participants (Creswell, 2011), as this study attempted to explore the beliefs and experiences of academic autonomy of diverse representatives, particularly, in terms of the area of expertise of the faculty members: hard sciences, humanities, and social sciences. The chosen schools were School of Mechanics and Mathematics, School of Philology, School of Social Sciences, and School of Physics and Technical Sciences. The participants from these schools were selected through convenience sampling that rests on the availability of the participants (Scott & Morrison, 2006) owing to the limited access to the e-mails of the faculty members and their availability at the research site while administering paper-based surveys. Random sampling instead would allow generalization (Creswell, 2009). The convenience sampling as a threat for external validity is further explicated in the limitations of the study.

The survey was disseminated to the faculty members in four selected schools of a target population of approximately 600 faculty members. Following the general rule of thumb, 150 faculty members were targeted to be surveyed; however, only 77 faculty expressed willingness to be involved in the research and participated in the study that is 51.3% response rate. Whereas Edmonds & Kennedy (2017) suggest that the researchers should reach at least 80% response rate in order to allow generalization to the entire

population, they admit that such numbers are unrealistic for students conducting studies for theses (p. 134).

Among the respondents for the period of conducting the research some of the faculty members were not only engaged in teaching, but also fulfilled administrative work, holding such positions as a department chair and dean of school. This has added more value to this research study because, not only are all participants faculty members, but also as those who are administrators (in addition to their position as faculty members) has enriched data collected to provide a thorough understanding of the issue of academic autonomy and its implementation around the specified university.

### **Instrument**

The survey was chosen for it could provide a numeric representation of the concepts studied and reach greater number of faculty members. A survey was developed from scratch specifically to answer the research questions of this study. As suggested by Benson and Clark (as cited in Creswell, 2011), in designing the survey there are certain steps that need to be maintained. Thus, in the planning phase the literature on academic autonomy was reviewed and analyzed, conceptual framework developed, and objectives identified. Based on this the survey was constructed and divided into sections, corresponding to the constructs the research focused on, namely, beliefs and experiences.

Background information section items depict general information about the participants, including work experience in higher education and at the case institution, their satisfaction with the job at the university, and overall attitude to change. Whereas beliefs and experiences are the latent variables that cannot be directly measured, the questions constituting the survey were used as manifest variables to “tease out an underlying latent concept” (Muijs, 2011, p. 57). Thus, the designed survey incorporated both close-ended, using Likert-scale for responses from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ as well as

multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. Whereas close-ended questions allow unequivocal answers and prevent from the leading questions (Scott & Morrison, 2006), open-ended questions allow more individualized and deeper answers on certain items. Thus, the following items were included into the section devoted to the beliefs of the faculty members of the case university:

- Have you ever heard and/or read of institutional autonomy?
- Institutional autonomy is the same as academic freedom.
- Academic autonomy has the same meaning as academic freedom.
- Academic autonomy means individual independence of the faculty members in designing the curriculum.
- Please indicate the dimensions you think academic autonomy includes.
- The increased number of elective courses is related to academic autonomy.
- Following academic autonomy principles, the number of students admitted to the bachelor degree programs at university should be determined by.
- Following academic autonomy principles, the number of students admitted to the master's degree programs at university should be determined by.
- Following academic autonomy principles, the number of students admitted to the doctoral studies at university should be determined by.
- If the university has academic autonomy, the Ministry of Education and Science cannot exert any influence on academic affairs of that university.

To measure the experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy, the following items constituted another section of the survey:

- Academic autonomy is outlined in our university's strategy and/or policies.
- Student admission criteria are set and regulated by the university.

- To my knowledge the content of some of the bachelor degree programs at our school is created by the faculty members of our school.
- As far as I know, the content of some of the master's degree programs at our school is created by the faculty members of our school.
- Are there any constraints in designing the content for the programs at the university?
- New programs at our school can be introduced only through obtaining the permission from the Ministry of Education and Science.
- The decisions on the student intake are made by the university.
- If one of the degree programs is no longer in demand among students, the university has the right to terminate this program without getting approval from the Ministry of Education and Science.

As the research was underpinned by the post-positivist epistemology, it was important to ensure validity and reliability of the instrument to ensure that the survey had a valid measure. In designing the questions Scott and Morrison (2006) caution about the word choice in the questions, "appearance, length, and layout" (p. 192). Thus, the survey was carefully developed, taking into account these nuances. The survey was piloted twice to ensure construct and content validity. In the first piloted survey 4 peers from the M.Sc. in Educational Leadership program, higher education track, were involved to review the questions. Having received the feedback, in 3 questions wording was changed.

Specifically, the question 'Institutional autonomy is synonymous to academic freedom' was changed to 'Institutional autonomy is the same as academic freedom', as the word 'synonymous' could be unclear for the participants. Furthermore, in the item 'The increased number of elective courses is an important component of academic autonomy' was changed into 'The increased number of elective courses is related to academic



autonomy', as it was crucial how the respondents would perceive the meaning of the question. For instance, they could consider increased number of electives as not as important to academic autonomy. So, instead, the question focused on whether the faculty members related increased number of electives to academic autonomy of the university. The third question on the decisions made on the content of the bachelor, master's, and doctoral programs was advised to be separated into three questions, each corresponding to the education level, as all three combined in one question could be misleading and confusing. Moreover, the question on the changes in the content of courses was excluded after deeper literature analysis, as it was overlapping with academic freedom.

The revised survey was piloted for the second time to six people, including the same four peers, one more student from the M.Sc. in Educational Leadership program, higher education track, and thesis supervisor. As was advised by the thesis supervisor, an item 'How do you cope with change in general?' was added to the background information section, as academic autonomy being granted to universities is a significant reform that affects established practices at the universities. Additionally, the question on satisfaction with the job at the university was recommended to be included and categories for multiple-choice questions on years of work experience in higher education and at the case university adjusted. In the question on academic autonomy components it was advised to enable the participants also to comment on their answers. The final revised version of the instrument was used.

## **Procedures**

After obtaining ethical approval from the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education Research to conduct this research, data collection process was conducted in a few stages. As the Research Committee granted approval to this study with minor changes to be discussed with the thesis supervisor, relevant amendments were considered with the

supervisor. Following the revision, having decided upon the schools of the university to be examined in this research, cover letters with request for conducting this research at the case university addressed to the deans of the schools were obtained from the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. Then the deans of the four selected schools were contacted and requested to administer the survey among the faculty members.

As Scott and Morrison (2006) assert, depending on the contexts, the conditions under which surveys are administrated considerably vary. Within the Kazakhstani realities, where many processes are not yet digitized, disseminating the survey online only could maximize to the risk of low response rate. Thus, to avoid such an issue those participants who are not used to the use of new technologies were taken into account. Additionally, not all schools were willing to provide access to the e-mails of the faculty members; rather schools' leadership only allowed to administer paper-based surveys through personal communication with the faculty members. Given this, quantitative data was decided to be gathered through both online and paper-based means.

As the instrument was properly developed and validated, consent forms were prepared and incorporated into the surveys as the first page for the participants to learn and understand the nature of the research, its implications, and confidentiality considerations. Ethics protocol followed is described further in detail under a separate sub-section. The deans of the School of Mechanics and Mathematics, School of Philology, and School of Physics and Technical Sciences provided access to the corporate e-mails of the faculty members to disseminate the survey through the Qualtrics survey software platform, which Nazarbayev University has subscription to. To the faculty members from the School of Social Sciences printed out copies of the survey were administered. The surveys were prepared and disseminated in both Russian and Kazakh languages based on the preferences

of the participants. Out of the 77 responses, 42 surveys were completed online and 35 on paper.

### **Data analysis**

Given the quantitative nature of the study, data obtained from the survey administration was predominantly entered and coded in a numeric representation. At the same time, some of the data was also obtained from the open-ended questions and comments provided by those faculty members who filled the survey using pen and paper method.

The obtained quantitative data results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (hereinafter – SPSS) supported by the Windows operating system. Although a wide variety of statistical analysis software packages are being exploited by researchers, SPSS allows all kinds of tests and is largely being utilized for educational research (Muijs, 2011). Thus, SPSS availability at Nazarbayev University and its relevance to data analysis in educational research were the reasons it was selected.

A number of analysis methods were conducted in SPSS in order to answer the research questions of this study which explores the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy. Specifically, to look at the individual variables, univariate analysis was conducted. It enabled to gain general descriptive statistics on frequencies, missing values, and percentages. Further bivariate analysis was applied. Cross-tabulation method was utilized to compare a nominal variable and an ordinal variable as well as two ordinal variables (Muijs, 2011, p. 99). In particular, in the cross-tabulation output Pearson Chi square test was of interest, as it shows whether the differences found arouse “due to chance sample fluctuations” (Muijs, 2011, p. 108). For the purpose of exploring the relationships between the variables correlation coefficient was calculated. As most of the variables were ordinal in nature, Spearman’s rho correlation

analysis was used (Muijs, 2011, p.131). Finally, multivariate analysis was applied to explore the factors that are likely to predict the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy. Particularly, Polytomous Universal Model (hereinafter – PLUM) or otherwise known as ordinal regression that is “based on probabilities of reaching thresholds of the dependent depending on the response to the independent variable” (Muijs, 2011, p. 166) was conducted.

While the survey included two open-ended questions, participants responded only to one of these questions. Although a limited number of answers were obtained from this question, the responses qualitative in nature present valuable results that are scrutinized in the findings chapter. Additionally, unexpectedly, some of the faculty members who completed the survey on the printed copies also added comments to the items in the margins. Such commentaries were also included into the analysis and are explicated in the findings chapter. The answers on the open-ended question and comments were analyzed as qualitative data following descriptive coding procedures, assigning “labels to data to summarize in a ... short phrase” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 80) the major themes of the responses and comments provided.

## **Ethics**

Since the research involved gathering information about individuals (Punch, as cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 87), ethics were strictly pursued and maintained throughout the study. Anonymity as well as confidentiality of participants’ identities and personal information was ensured. The survey questions required limited personal information through which neither the researcher nor other people involved in the research are able to identify the person. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate the school they work at, years of professional experience in higher education and at the university under study. As in the analysis the data was aggregated, none of the respondents were put at risk to be

identified through their responses. All the data was kept on the researcher's personal laptop secured with the password known to the researcher only. The rights of the participants were ensured and preserved and in no case violated. Every participant was treated with respect and beneficence. Participants were also informed that the obtained information in the study would only be used for the purposes of the present research.

To ensure protection of the participants involved in this study informed consent forms that conveyed: indication of the researcher and supervisor, the purpose of the study, associated risks and benefits, voluntary-based participation, the right to withdraw at any time, guarantee of confidentiality, and researcher's contact details, were developed and incorporated into the survey. Completion of the survey implied consent of the participants to be involved in this research.

### **Limitations**

This study aimed at exploring faculty member's beliefs and experiences of academic autonomy has a number of limitations. First, due to the time and accessibility constraints, the research rested on the convenience sampling. This presents challenges to the external validity, which referred to as "ability to draw correct inferences from the sample data to other persons" (Creswell, 2011, p. 306). This implies that the results of this study are not likely to be generalized to the population; rather the findings revealed in this research are applicable to the sample only.

Second, there are limitations of this study that point out the areas for further research to be conducted. When exploring faculty members' experiences of academic autonomy at the national university this research focused on certain academic autonomy components. Particularly, capacity to decide upon the language of instruction and quality assurance mechanisms and providers were out of the scope of this study.

Finally, from 10 schools of the case institution only 4 were involved in the research. This research focused primarily on the faculty members from the School of Mechanics and Mathematics, School of Philology, School of Social Sciences, and School of Physics and Technical Sciences. These limitations are addressed in the form of implications for further studies at the conclusion chapter of this thesis.

#### **Chapter Four: Findings**

Aimed at revealing academic autonomy beliefs and experiences of the national university's faculty members, the survey that was disseminated across 4 schools of the university elicited a number of comprehensive and intriguing results presented in this section of the thesis. Specifically, participants' background information, their awareness of institutional autonomy as well as understandings of academic autonomy, and the experiences of academic autonomy at the university as perceived by the faculty members are described.

Addressing the research questions of the study, SPSS was used to conduct descriptive analysis, cross tabulation Chi square test, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient, and ordinal regression. The overarching research question of the study was: "What are the beliefs and experiences of the national university's faculty of academic autonomy?" Sub-questions of the study were as follows:

- What are the beliefs of faculty members of academic autonomy?
- How do these beliefs vary between the schools within the institution?
- What are the practices of faculty members of academic autonomy?
- What factors do influence faculty members' beliefs and practices of the reforms aimed at academic dimension of institutional autonomy?

**Background of the participants**

The results of the descriptive statistics on the background information about the sample are illustrated in the Table 1. Overall number of faculty members who participated in the study was 77 from which 41.6% were from the School of Physics and Technical Sciences, 32.5% from the Faculty of Philology, 19.5% and 6.5% from Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Mechanics and Mathematics respectively. Descriptive analysis showed that among 77 respondents more than half 71.4% were female faculty members with only 28.6% male representatives. Whereas the age of the participants was not requested in the survey and was outside of the scope of the research, what was assumed to be critical for the purpose of the research, when looking at understandings of institutional autonomy and its academic dimension in particular, were the years of work experience in higher education as well as years spent working at the university under investigation. Thus, 54.5% of the participants reported to have more than 10 years of experience, equal number of faculty members indicated that they have been working in higher education for less than 3 years, more than 3 years, and 6-10 years, and 6.5% of the participants appeared to have 5 years of work experience in tertiary education. Moreover, among the participants 10 and 11 faculty members indicated that they have been a part of that university for less than or 2 years respectively, 15 and 18 have been working at the case institution correspondingly for 3-5 and 6-10 years, and 23 faculty members have been employees of that university for more than a decade.

In terms of the overall satisfaction with the job at the university, over half of the participants (52%) reported that they are satisfied with their job and around 30% of the faculty members preferred to abstain from answering the question. The rest 18.2% of the participants reported their dissatisfaction with their current work at the university. Another variable the survey looked at was faculty members' general attitude to change. Whereas

around one third (28.6%) of the faculty members expressed their positive attitude towards change, more than half (53.2%) of the respondents agreed that change is a positive thing only if it is clear how to deal with it. The rest 21.2% of the faculty members regarded change as a negative practice (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Demographics of the Sample*

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	22	28.6
	Female	55	71.4
School	School of Mechanics and Mathematics	5	6.5
	School of Philology	25	32.5
	School of Social Sciences	15	19.5
	School of Physics and Technical Sciences	32	41.6
Yrs of work experience in HE	Less than 3 yrs	10	13
	More than 3 yrs	10	13
	5 yrs	5	6.5
	6-10 yrs	10	13
	More than 10 yrs	42	54.5
Yrs of work experience at the case university	Less than 2 yrs	10	13
	2 yrs	11	14.3
	3-5 yrs	15	19.5
	6-10 yrs	18	23.4
	More than 10 yrs	23	29.9
Satisfaction with the job at the case university	Not satisfied	2	2.6
	Less satisfied	12	15.6
	Neutral	23	29.9
	Satisfied	30	39
	Very satisfied	10	13
Attitude to change	I like change	22	28.6
	I don't like change	5	9.5
	Change distracts good practices	9	11.7
	Change is a good thing if you know how to cope with it	41	53.2

**Academic autonomy beliefs**

**Institutional autonomy.** Before looking at the understandings of faculty members of academic autonomy, it was crucial to see whether the participants faced institutional autonomy notion before and in what ways it is related to other variables, if this is the case.



Descriptive analysis showed slight difference in the number of the participants who either heard of institutional autonomy – 32.5%, did not come across this concept – 29.9%, or heard of it to some extent – 37.7%. Along with this, almost one third of the faculty members regarded institutional autonomy as the same as academic freedom.

Following these results, correlation with other variables was tested. Given that both of the variables are ordinal, Spearman's rho rank-order correlation coefficient was calculated. Significant relationship was found between faculty members' awareness of institutional autonomy and years of work experience in higher education. The Spearman rank order correlation coefficient identified negative modest relationship. Although the coefficient appeared modest in strength, it was highly significant (p-value = .007). Likewise, as shown in the Table 2, significant relationship (p-value = .037) with negative modest correlation was revealed between the awareness of institutional autonomy and years of work experience at the case university.

Table 2

*Spearman's rho Correlations on Academic Autonomy Beliefs*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1-School	1							
2-Yrs of work experience in HE	-	1						
3-Yrs of work at the case university	-	-	1					
4-Awareness of institutional autonomy	.269*	-.303**	-.238*	1				
5-Institutional autonomy is a synonym to academic freedom	-	-	-	-	1			
6-Academic autonomy is the same as academic freedom	-	-	-	-	.459**	1		

7- Academic autonomy components	-	-	-.245*	-	-	-	1	
8-MoES influence	-	-	-.276*	-	-	-	-	1

\*\*p<.01

\* p<.05

These results show that those faculty members who have higher work experience not only in higher education sphere, but also at the institution under study tend to be less exposed to institutional autonomy notion. Given the significant relationship found between the schools faculty members work at and their awareness of institutional autonomy (p-value=.018), chi square test revealed significant difference in the responses of the faculty members across the schools on their awareness of institutional autonomy (chi square = 88.69, df = 15, p = .000). Thus, whereas among the participants insignificant discrepancy was found in the numbers of those who were aware, happened to hear about, or did not know about institutional autonomy notion before, the results suggest that within 4 different schools of the same institution participants' awareness of institutional autonomy considerably differed.

To test whether the responses on the variable 'Institutional autonomy is the same as academic freedom' can be predicted by the faculty members' awareness of institutional autonomy and their years of work experience in higher education and at the case university, PLUM procedure was conducted. Whereas our model was quite good at predicting perception of faculty members of institutional autonomy as academic freedom (Cox and Snell  $R^2=.198$ ), contrary to what was expected, none of the relationships between the predictors and dependent variable appeared significant. This implies that interpretation of faculty members of institutional autonomy as academic freedom is not related to neither participants' years of work experience in higher education and at the institution, nor their general awareness of institutional autonomy.

**Academic autonomy.** A set of the survey questions specifically targeted the understandings of the faculty members of academic dimension of institutional autonomy. The analysis of the responses revealed the complexity of the faculty members' comprehension of the interrelated notions of academic autonomy and academic freedom, obscured understandings of academic autonomy components, and the ingrained tradition of the Ministry of Education and Science being the primary controlling body. These are further explicated in-detail.

*Academic autonomy and academic freedom.* Following the descriptive statistics, only 15.4% faculty members appeared not to confuse academic autonomy with academic freedom, disagreeing with the statement that academic autonomy implies essentially the same as academic freedom. Among those participants, the highest percentages 5.39% and 6.93% were found among the faculty members from the School of Philology and the School of Physics and Technical Sciences correspondingly. Regrettably, however, a bit less than half of the participants (45.5%) remained neutral towards this question. Whereas those faculty members who indicated that academic autonomy and academic freedom notions do not entail the same meaning, 32.5% of the participants adhered to the opinion that academic autonomy means individual independence of faculty members in designing the curriculum, which is worth to note, considering the fact that academic freedom generally is defined as one's ability to decide what to teach and research (Aberbach & Christensen, 2017). Thus, it is clear that there is certain ambiguity in the faculty members' understandings of academic autonomy and how it is different from academic freedom. What should also be accentuated is that given this finding, 12.9% of the faculty members associated academic autonomy with academic freedom, interpreting academic autonomy as freedom not on individual level, compared to academic freedom, but rather on the institutional level. For instance, as a commentary to the item 'academic autonomy has the

same meaning as academic freedom', one of the faculty members from the School of Social Sciences added that "academic autonomy does not mean academic freedom; however, it is the institutional form of academic freedom."

To see if there was a relationship between the schools faculty members work at and their understanding of academic autonomy as academic freedom correlation between these two variables was tested. While the relationship appeared insignificant in that case ( $p > .05$ ), this demonstrated that it is unlikely that there is any connection between the area faculty members specialize at and their perception of academic autonomy as academic freedom. At the same time significant correlation, positive and moderate in strength, was revealed between the understandings of the respondents of institutional autonomy as academic freedom and thinking that academic autonomy has the same meaning as academic freedom (Table 2). In other words, those faculty members who interpret institutional autonomy as academic freedom also tend to think that academic autonomy implies academic freedom. Thus, although it is clear that the faculty members confuse academic freedom with academic autonomy, it seems that some of the faculty members understand academic autonomy as institutional autonomy, which is less contradictory, as academic autonomy is one of the dimensions of institutional autonomy.

What was particularly interesting is that despite no relationship was found between the schools faculty members work at and their interpretation of academic autonomy as academic freedom, across the schools the responses on the item 'academic autonomy has the same meaning as academic freedom' varied greatly, as significant difference was identified in the responses, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, among the faculty members from all 4 schools (chi square = 88.06,  $df = 25$ ,  $p = .000$ ). To unveil whether independent variables, such as years of work experience in tertiary education, and specifically at the case institution, and interpretation of institutional autonomy as academic

freedom, could predict the outcome variable that is understanding of academic autonomy as academic freedom, regression was calculated. Although the model fitted better than the baseline model with no predictors ( $p\text{-value}=.000$ ) and moderately fitted the data (Nagelkerke  $R^2=.483$ ), the parameter estimates showed that not all of the relationships between the predictors and the dependent variable (i.e. “academic autonomy has the same meaning as academic freedom”) were significant. Referring to the significance of the predictors tested, years of work experience in higher education as well as years working at the case institution, association of the respondents of academic autonomy as faculty members’ individual freedom in designing curriculum appeared to be insignificant ( $p>.05$ ), which implies that there is no relationship between these variables and interpretation of academic autonomy as academic freedom. Interestingly, however, as illustrated in the Table 3, responses on the item of understanding of the faculty members of institutional autonomy as synonymous to academic freedom were found significantly related to the responses on the dependent variable (i.e. academic autonomy has the same meaning as academic freedom), specifically, these were the categories 2 and 3 of the responses that were ‘disagree’ ( $p\text{-value}=.009$ ) and ‘neither agree nor disagree’ ( $p\text{-value}=.038$ ).

Table 3

*Factors Predicting Understanding of Academic Autonomy as Academic Freedom*

Factors/independent variables	Estimates	Sig.
Institutional autonomy is a synonym to academic freedom=2	-5.124	.009
Institutional autonomy is a synonym to academic freedom=3	-3.995	.038

Looking at the estimates for the variable ‘institutional autonomy is synonymous to academic freedom’ shown with the separate categories, the coefficient of the category 5 that corresponded to the faculty members response ‘strongly agree’ was found 0, so it was used as the reference category. The coefficient for the category 2 ‘disagree’ was -5.124,

which implies that the faculty members who disagree that institutional autonomy is synonymous to academic freedom are less likely to agree that academic autonomy has the same meaning as academic freedom than those faculty members who strongly agree that institutional autonomy is synonymous to academic freedom. The coefficient for the category 3 'neither agree nor disagree' was -3.995, which means that those respondents who neither agree nor disagree with the statement that institutional autonomy is synonymous to academic freedom are less likely to agree that academic autonomy and academic freedom mean the same than those faculty members who strongly agree that institutional autonomy is synonymous to academic freedom. Overall, the calculated regression showed that there is relationship between understanding of the faculty members of institutional autonomy as academic freedom and thinking that academic autonomy has the same meaning as academic freedom, though the difference lied mainly between the categories of 'disagree' as well as 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'agree' category for the independent variable.

Overall, the responses and comments on the synonymity of academic autonomy and academic freedom seem to demonstrate that the notions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in contrast with academic autonomy are more or less, but familiar and understandable terms to the faculty members.

***Academic autonomy components.*** A number of survey questions looked into the beliefs of the faculty members about the essence of academic autonomy and its constituent parts. Surprisingly, whilst only 32.5% of the faculty members indicated that they generally heard of a more comprehensive notion of institutional autonomy, descriptive statistics showed that approximately a quarter of them answered correctly on the academic autonomy components question, pointing out that academic autonomy comprises ability to introduce and terminate degree programs and choose language of instruction, capacity to

decide upon student intake, and capacity to select quality assurance mechanisms and providers. 32.5% of the faculty members pointed out that academic autonomy comprises only 1 of the constituents: ability of a university to introduce degree programs, ability to choose language of instruction, or capacity to select quality assurance mechanisms. Surprisingly, none of the respondents chose capacity to decide upon student intake as a single component of academic autonomy. Less proportion of the faculty members opted for 2 of the components (18.2%) and 3 components (10.4%) to denote academic autonomy.

Interestingly, referring to the question on academic autonomy components, 30% of the faculty members perceived university's ability to decide upon student intake as an integral part of academic autonomy. On the other hand, on the separate question on the student intake decision at all levels (bachelor, master's, and doctoral studies) very few of the participants (12%) agreed that on the condition of having academic autonomy student intake should be determined by the university only. 32% of the faculty members expressed the belief that while university can decide on its student intake, this decision should go along with the state regulations, so this was perceived as not a purely university's prerogative. The most remarkable was that 36% of the respondents adhered to the opinion that even if university is granted academic autonomy, student intake should be decided by the MoES. This can suggest that faculty members tend to believe that even with academic autonomy the decision on student intake should be detached from the university's responsibilities and should still be dictated by the relevant state authority. Additionally, the increased number of elective courses currently being provided to the universities was considered as a characteristic of the flexibility in academic affairs of the university. Admittedly, among the respondents around half (46%) agreed that the enhancement in the number of electives is an aspect that enables certain degree of academic autonomy.

Nevertheless, 13% of the faculty members believed that university's right to build more electives is not connected to academic autonomy.

Correlation coefficient was calculated to see whether the responses on academic autonomy components question are related to the school faculty members work at, faculty members' years of work in higher education sphere, years spent working at the case university. As such, significant relationship ( $p$ -value = .031) was identified between the responses on academic autonomy components and faculty members' years of working at the case university. The Spearman rank order correlation coefficient constituted -.245 that is a negative modest relationship (Table 2). Specifically, this entails that the longer faculty members work at the case institution, the less they know about the components that academic autonomy incorporates. Chi square was also calculated to see whether the responses of the faculty members from various schools could differ on the academic autonomy components. Thus, significant difference was found in the responses of the faculty members from 4 schools on the academic autonomy components (chi square = 51.408,  $df = 36$ ,  $p = .046$ ).

Further, PLUM was performed to calculate regression and reveal what factors affect the responses on academic autonomy components question. School faculty members work at, years of work experience in higher education as well as at the case institution, interpretation of academic autonomy as academic freedom, and understanding of academic autonomy as individual freedom of faculty members in designing the curriculum were tested as factors. According to the analysis, the model fitted better than the baseline model with no predictors ( $p$ -value=.001) and had moderate level of fit (Nagelkerke  $R^2$  =.477). The insignificant ( $p$ -value>.05) difference between the expected and actual results showed that the model fitted the data quite well. The parameter estimates and significance level for each of the variables revealed that not all of the predictors considered had significant



relationship with the dependent variable that is academic autonomy components.

Specifically, no relationship was found between association of academic autonomy with academic freedom as well as understanding of academic autonomy as individual independence in designing the curriculum and academic autonomy components.

Nonetheless, other categories of the independent variables appeared significant. Across the tested independent variables, as shown in the Table 4, ‘school’, ‘years of work experience in HE’, and ‘years of work at the case institution’ appeared significant.

Table 4

*Factors Predicting Faculty Members' Knowledge of Academic Autonomy Components*

Factors/independent variables	Estimates	Sig.
School=2	1.458	.021
Yrs of work experience in HE=3	-4.091	.001
Yrs of work at the case university=2	1.962	.043

For the variable ‘school’ the category 4 that corresponded to the faculty members who work at the School of Physics and Technical Sciences had coefficient 0 and was used as the reference category. Thus, the category 2 of the ‘school’ variable that corresponded to the faculty members from the School of Philology, compared to the faculty members from the School of Physics and Technical Sciences, were found to be significantly related to the responses on academic autonomy components (p-value=.021). Moreover, the coefficient 1.458 showed that the faculty members from the School of Philology are more likely to know about the components of academic autonomy than faculty members from the School of Physics and Technical Sciences. Additionally, for the variable ‘years of work experience in HE’ the category 5 that corresponded to the faculty members with more than 10 years of working in higher education coefficient was found 0, so it was used as the reference category. Significant relationship was highlighted between the category 3 of the ‘years of work experience in HE’ variable that corresponded to the participants with 5 years of work experience in higher education and responses on academic autonomy components (p-

value=.001). The coefficient for this category was -4.091, which implies that those faculty members who have worked in higher education sphere for 5 years are less likely to know about academic autonomy constituents, than more experienced faculty members who have worked in higher education for more than a decade. Remarkably, comparing these results with the finding that experienced in higher education faculty members are less exposed to institutional autonomy notion, it appears that they are more likely to know about academic autonomy components. For the variable 'years of work experience in HE' the category 5 that corresponded to the faculty members with more than 10 years of working at the institution under the study coefficient was found 0, so it was used as the reference category. Meanwhile, the category 2 of the 'years of work at the case institution' variable that corresponded to the faculty members with 2 years of work at the case university was found to have significant relationship with the responses on academic autonomy components (p-value=.043). The identified coefficient of 1.962 showed that these faculty members are more likely to know about academic autonomy components than those who have worked for this institution for more than 10 years. Overall, from the initially tested factors only 3 were identified to predict the responses on academic autonomy components, namely, the responses of those faculty members who work at the School of Philology, those who have worked at the case university for 2 years, and those respondents who have overall 5 years of work experience in higher education.

The revealed beliefs of the faculty members about academic autonomy underlined the complex nature of the notion and gave an account to the nuances in its discrepancy from the associated terms of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Apparently, faculty members appeared to be more familiar with academic freedom term, though impressive proportion of the faculty members (40%) was found to be aware of the components of academic autonomy. Furthermore, while it could be expected that the

faculty members with greater work experience in higher education would be more exposed to institutional autonomy notion, the results proved quite the opposite. Those faculty members who are comparatively new to higher education, with work experience in higher education and at the case institution for an average of 3 years, demonstrated that they are more articulate in terms of institutional autonomy. Nonetheless, faculty members with rich experience in higher education were found to have better understanding of academic autonomy components. The school faculty members work at also was found to be a crucial factor, and understandings of the faculty members from various schools on academic autonomy differed. PLUM showed that faculty members from the School of Philology are more likely to understand academic autonomy components than those from the School of Physics and Technical Sciences. Given this, however, those who worked for the case university only 2 years showed that they are more likely to know academic autonomy components. Finally, the striking finding about the faculty members' beliefs about academic autonomy that emerged from the data analysis was the role accounted to the Ministry of Education and Science as a regulatory state body. Linked to the beliefs of the faculty members about academic autonomy such a result is further elaborated under the separate sub-section.

**The role of the Ministry of Education and Science.** A group of findings revealed the disposition of the faculty members towards the role of the MoES within academic autonomy conditions. Following descriptive statistics, 33.7% of the participants indicated that if university is granted academic autonomy, MoES still can exert influence on academic affairs of that institution. 31.2% reported that MoES cannot affect university's academic affairs, and 35.1% abstained from answering this question. Thus, it is clear that among the participated in this study faculty members academic autonomy implementation is not purely seen as an independence of a university from the outside actors that will allow

it to steer on its own on the academic matters. In this light MoES is seen as an authority that will likely to continue exerting certain degree of influence on universities' academic affairs.

A closer look at the role of MoES specifically in the decisions on student intake showed that on average around 20% of the faculty members think that it is MoES that should decide upon the number of students admitted to the bachelor, master's, and doctoral programs of the university. What is interesting is that compared to the responses on the student intake on the first two levels of higher education (i.e. bachelor and master's levels), the greater percentage of the faculty members (28.6%) believe that MoES should control the number of students admitted to the doctoral studies at the university.

Bivariate analysis was also conducted to explore the relationships between independent and dependent variables, such as those concerning MoES. Spearman's rho correlation revealed significant relationship ( $p\text{-value}=0.015$ ) between the years of work at the case university and responses on the item that if university is given academic autonomy, MoES cannot intervene into the academic affairs of that university (Table 2). The negative modest coefficient ( $-0.276$ ) implies that the longer faculty members work at this university, the less they believe that MoES can interfere in the university's academic affairs.

An unexpected finding was that some of the participants in the open-ended questions repeatedly referred to two themes: the extent to which universities should possess academic autonomy and autonomy implementation issues in Kazakhstan. Although very few faculty members (5) referred to these topics, such findings seem to be critical in understanding faculty members' beliefs about academic autonomy. Thus, 3 of the faculty members commented on the balance between the state regulations imposed on universities and universities' autonomy. As one of the faculty members from the School of Social

Sciences explicated: “Academic autonomy is independence of the university, but it should be in compliance with the university bylaws and Ministry regulations.” In contrast, 3 respondents expressed somewhat negative attitude to the role of MoES, referring to the issues in implementation of the reforms in higher education, and in particular academic autonomy. A faculty member from the same school provocatively questioned the implementation of the autonomy reform initiative: “How can we even discuss giving academic autonomy to universities if the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan works on paper only?” Such commentaries from the participated faculty members, certainly, add on the beliefs hold by the faculty members about academic autonomy in terms of theoretical conceptualization, extending it to its real practical implications.

### **Academic autonomy experiences**

Referring to the conceptual framework of academic autonomy and its constituents described earlier in the literature review section, besides looking at the beliefs of the faculty members about academic autonomy, this study also attempted to unveil which of academic autonomy aspects, namely, admissions, student intake, content of the degree programs, as well as introduction and termination of programs, faculty members, as one of the central stakeholders, experience at the case university. The awareness of the faculty members of academic autonomy components being outlined in the institution’s internal documents is explored first and each academic autonomy aspect as experienced by the faculty members at the case university is described further.

**Academic autonomy principles in the internal university documents.** Following the revealed beliefs of the faculty members about academic autonomy, their experiences of the academic autonomy practices were explored. Descriptive statistics showed that around a half of the faculty members (50.7%) surveyed believes that academic autonomy is outlined in their university’s policies. At the same time approximately 12% of the

participants disagreed with the statement that academic autonomy is delineated in the strategy or regulating documents of the university, and almost 40% of the faculty members appeared unaware of academic autonomy being written in the university's strategical documents/policies.

Correlations with years working at this institution and satisfaction with the job were conducted to see whether there are any relationships of these variables with such a dubious response on this question. The results revealed that these relationships were insignificant that demonstrates that none of these variables are related to the faculty members' awareness of academic autonomy being outlined in the internal policy documents of the university. Along with these results Chi square test showed that there is a significant difference in the responses of the faculty members who are either satisfied or dissatisfied with their job at the university to a different extent on the item 'Academic autonomy is outlined in our university's strategy/policies' (chi square = 37.745, df = 16, p = .002).

Ordinal regression was calculated to identify the factors, predicting faculty member's awareness of academic autonomy being outlined in the internal university's policies. The model fitted the data well, as the difference between the expected and actual results was found to be insignificant. A significant chi square (p-value=.000) indicated that the model fitted better than the baseline model with no predictors. The Cox and Snell  $R^2$  was found to be .913 that showed the strong fit. The multivariate analysis showed that certain independent variables predict awareness of the faculty members of academic autonomy being outlined in the university's internal documents (see Table 5).

Table 5

*Factors Predicting Awareness of Academic Autonomy in the Internal Documents*

Factors/independent variables	Estimates	Sig.
Academic autonomy components=2	20.142	.042
Academic autonomy components=4	40.297	.020
Academic autonomy components=10	23.728	.020

Academic autonomy components=14	28.276	.007
Increased number of electives points out academic autonomy=3	-13.874	.016
Following academic autonomy, number of student admitted to bachelor programs should be determined by=1	-36.556	.031
Following academic autonomy, number of student admitted to bachelor programs should be determined by=3	-30.207	.036

The category 2 of the item ‘academic autonomy components’ that corresponded to the ability of a university to introduce new degree programs was identified significant with coefficient of 20.142. This implies that those faculty members who regard the ability of the university to introduce new programs as an academic autonomy component are more likely to know that academic autonomy is depicted in the internal documents of the case university. Similarly, the subsequent categories 4, 10, and 14 of the item ‘academic autonomy components’ that corresponded to the capacity to select quality assurance mechanisms and providers, ability to introduce degree programs and ability to choose language of instruction, and capacity to decide upon student intake and introduce degree programs and select quality assurance mechanisms and providers are more likely to be aware of those components being outlined in the university’s documents. Moreover, the next significant factor with coefficient-13.874 means that faculty members who were uncertain whether increased number of electives is related to academic autonomy or nor are less likely to know that academic autonomy is written in the internal policies. The last factor that appeared to predict faculty members’ awareness of academic autonomy being depicted in the internal policies of the university were the categories 1 and 3 on the student intake at the bachelor level with coefficients -36.556 and -30.207 correspondingly. Thus, those faculty members who think that it is university who should decide on the student intake to the bachelor programs are less likely to know that academic autonomy is outlined in the university’s policies. Likewise, those faculty members who believe that not only

university, but also the state should be involved in the decisions on student intake to undergraduate studies are less likely to be aware of academic autonomy being delineated in the university's policies.

**Admission.** Another component of academic autonomy this study dwelled on was the ability of the university to set own admission criteria, as perceived by the surveyed faculty members. Descriptive statistics demonstrated that almost half of the respondents (49.4%) believe that at the university student admission criteria are set and regulated by the university itself. Interestingly, only 2.6% of the faculty members strongly agreed that this is true, according to their experiences at the university. 23.4% of the participants denied the capacity of the university to decide on the admission criteria, within which 14.3% expressed strong disagreement with the claim that student admission criteria are set and regulated by the university.

Multivariate analysis of PLUM was performed to reveal the factors that potentially could predict such diverse experiences of the faculty members. Significant chi square was found ( $p\text{-value}=.000$ ), pointing out that the model fitted the data, with Cox and Snell  $R^2$  of .923 that is a strong fit. The table 6 demonstrates the factors that were found to be significantly related to the experiences of the faculty members of setting admission criteria.

Table 6

*Factors Predicting Perceived Experiences of Setting Admission Criteria*

Factors/independent variables	Estimates	Sig.
School=3	-10.560	.000
Yrs of work experience in HE=3	30.691	.000
Yrs of work at the case university=3	-10.348	.002
Yrs of work at the case university=4	-7.443	.001
Awareness of institutional autonomy=1	6.004	.004
Awareness of institutional autonomy=2	3.790	.041
Attitude to change=1	11.104	.000
Attitude to change=3	10.724	.001
Academic autonomy components=3	-13.477	.014
Academic autonomy components=14	12.553	.033
MoES intervention=2	43.883	.000



Overall 11 factors were found to predict faculty's experiences of deciding on the student admissions criteria at the case university. Category 3 of the school item that corresponded to those respondents who are the faculty members of the School of Social Sciences had the coefficient of -10.560. This implies that faculty of this school are less likely to experience admission criteria being set by the university they work at. Interestingly, the coefficient of 30.691 for the category 3 of years of work in higher education was found. In other words, faculty members who have been working in higher education for 5 years are more likely to have experience of the admission criteria being regulated by the university. On the contrary, the coefficients of -10.348 and -7.443 of the categories 3 and 4 for years of work at particularly the case university imply that those faculty members who have been working at this university for 3-5 and 6-10 years correspondingly are less likely to have such an experience.

Awareness of the faculty members of institutional autonomy was also found to significantly predict the experiences of setting admission criteria at the given university. PLUM showed that categories 1 (coefficient=6.004) and 2 (coefficient=3.790) of the awareness of the faculty of institutional autonomy notion that corresponded to those respondents who have heard or read about institutional autonomy to some extent appeared significant. This means that these faculty members are more likely to have experience in deciding upon admissions criteria to the programs at their university. Attitudes of the faculty members to change were also identified as factors predicting their experiences on this item. The coefficients of 11.104 and 10.724, corresponding to the categories 1 and 3 of the attitudes to change, imply that those faculty members who are positive towards change and those who consider that changes distract good practices at the university are more likely to have come across the experience of setting admissions criteria at the case university.

As demonstrated in the Table 6 categories 3 (coefficient=-13.477) and 14 (coefficient=12.553) of the academic components item that corresponded to those faculty members' beliefs about academic autonomy components to be the 'ability to choose the language of instruction' as well as 'capacity to decide upon student intake and introduce degree programs and select quality assurance mechanisms and providers' were found to be significantly related to the experiences of setting admission criteria. Hence, faculty members who believe that the choice of language of instruction is an academic autonomy component are less likely to have experienced setting admission criteria, compared to those faculty members who think that academic autonomy includes 3 components: capacity to decide upon student intake and introduce degree programs and select quality assurance mechanisms and providers. Finally, the last few factors on MoES intervention in the Table 6 imply that the faculty members who disagree despite having academic autonomy, MoES can still influence university's academic affairs are all more likely to have experienced setting admission criteria at the university.

**Student intake.** Next, being one of the constituents of academic autonomy, the capacity of the university to decide on the number of students admitted to the degree programs, as experienced by the faculty members, was examined. While approximately 40% of the faculty members reported that it is the university that decides on student intake to its programs, 27.3% of the participants had obviously a different experience, disagreeing that at the given university decision on the number of students admitted to the programs is made by the university. Other 33.8% of the respondents expressed neutral position, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the item 'The decision on the student intake is made by the university'.

Ordinal regression was conducted to reveal the factors that can predict the experiences of the faculty members of the university's decisions on the student intake.

The model fitted the data well (chi square p-value=.000) with a strong fit (Cox and Snell  $R^2=.932$ ). Among the initially tested factors, not all appeared significant, which means no relationship was found between them and the dependent variable. The Table 7 delineates those factors that were identified to predict faculty member's experiences on student intake.

Table 7

*Factors Predicting Perceived Experiences of Student Intake*

Factors/independent variables	Estimates	Sig.
School=3	36.014	.007
Yrs of work experience in HE=2	-29.848	.010
Satisfaction with the job at the case university=2	56.906	.013
Attitude to change=1	-20.830	.028
Academic autonomy is the same as academic freedom=2	-98.935	.006
Academic autonomy components=7	56.984	.027
Increased number of electives points out academic autonomy=3	43.605	.007
MoES intervention=1	90.105	.016
MoES intervention=2	105.364	.015
Awareness of academic autonomy being outlined in the internal documents of the university =4	57.975	.008

The category 3 that corresponded to the faculty members from the School of Social Sciences had a coefficient of 36.014, which means that this school's faculty are more likely to have experienced the decisions on student intake made by the university. Considering the years of work experience in higher education sphere, those faculty members who have overall work experience in higher education of 3 years are less likely to have an experience of deciding on student intake, compared to those who have been working in this sphere for more than 10 years. Interestingly, those faculty members who are positive about changes appeared to be less likely to have experienced that it is the university who decides on the student intake to the programs, compared to those who believe that change is good only when it is known how to cope with it.

As seen from the Table 7, category 2 of the ‘academic autonomy is the same as academic freedom’ item responses of the faculty members on academic autonomy as academic freedom are significantly related to their experiences of making decisions on the number of students admitted to the programs. Thus, those faculty members, who supposedly know academic autonomy well, denying its coincidence in the meaning with academic freedom, were found to experience setting admission criteria at the university less than those faculty members who believe that academic autonomy and academic freedom imply the same. From the following factor on academic autonomy components, it can be concluded that the faculty members who believe that academic autonomy includes 2 components, namely, capacity to decide on student intake and ability to introduce programs, are more likely to have experience at the university of deciding on the student intake.

The categories 1 and 2 on the item ‘MoES intervention’ were found to have coefficients of 90.105 and 105.364 correspondingly. What it means is that those faculty members who think that when university has academic autonomy MoES should not intervene into the academic affairs of that university, are more likely to experience that at the case university student intake is decided by the university. Likewise, PLUM showed that those faculty members who know that academic autonomy is outlined in the university’s internal documents and policies are also more likely to experience that at their university number of student admitted is decided by the university.

**Content of the degree programs.** Descriptive statistics, reflecting the experiences of the faculty members of the decisions on the content of the bachelor and master’s degree programs, illustrated similar experiences on both education levels, as equal percentages of the faculty members agreed, disagreed, and abstained from answering these questions of the survey. Thus, only 2.6% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that

they as faculty members have had the experience of creating the content for some of the bachelor and master's programs at their schools. Those were mainly faculty members from the School of Mechanics and Mathematics (2) and School of Physics and Technical Sciences (2). Contrary to around 23% of the faculty members who have reported that they have not experienced designing the programs at their schools, 57% of the respondents have had quite the opposite experience.

Having conducted Chi square test, significant difference was identified in the responses of the faculty members who are satisfied or dissatisfied with their job to a different extent on their experiences of the university's capacity to decide on the content of the bachelor degree programs (chi square = 22.519, df = 12, p = .032). Ordinal regression was also conducted to explore the factors, predicting experiences of the faculty members of the university deciding upon the content of the degree programs (p-value=.000, Cox and Snell  $R^2$ =.863). Surprisingly, the analysis showed that none of the factors, including the school, years of work experience, and beliefs of the faculty members about academic autonomy, are likely to predict the experiences of the faculty members of deciding on the degree programs' content.

**New programs introduction.** Descriptive statistics were derived from SPSS on the experiences of the surveyed faculty members of introducing new programs at their schools without permission of MoES. The analysis revealed that 26% of the faculty members have not experienced program introduction, avoiding MoES approval. 35% of the respondents, however, reported to have experience of the programs being launched without obtaining the MoES permission. The rest 39% of the faculty members remained neutral and neither agreed nor disagreed with such practices taking place at their workplace.

To see whether the responses of the faculty members from different schools on the new programs introduction experience would vary or not, Chi square was conducted. As

correlation analysis showed that there is no relationship between the school faculty work at and their experiences of new program introduction. Further, multivariate analysis was performed to reveal the predicting factors. The model fitted the data well ( $p\text{-value}=.012$ ) with a string fit identified (Nagelkerke  $R^2=.523$ ). The Table 8 delineates the revealed factors.

Table 8

*Factors Predicting Perceived Experiences of New Programs Introduction*

Factors/independent variables	Estimates	Sig.
Yrs of work experience in HE=4	-2.063	.036
Yrs of work at the case university=1	3.851	.002
Yrs of work at the case university=4	2.679	.003
Satisfaction with the job at the case university=2	2.807	.020
Attitude to change=2	-4.051	.004
Academic autonomy in the internal documents of the university=2	-5.555	.003

Referring to the estimates and significance level depicted in the Table 8, PLUM showed that those faculty members who have 6-10 years of work experience in the higher education sphere are less likely to have experience of new programs introduction without MoES approval, as practiced at the case university. Nevertheless, those faculty members who either have been working at the case university for less than 2 years or 6-10 years are more likely to have such an experience. Thus, it is clear that the university faculty members have been working at appears to be a crucial factor, predicting new programs introduction experience. Interestingly, those faculty members who are less satisfied with their job at the case university were found to be more likely experiencing new programs introduction at the studied university than those who are very satisfied with their job.

Negative attitude to change was also found to predict the experiences of new programs introduction at the university without getting permission from MoES, as those faculty members who are not inclined to the changes were identified to experience new

programs introduction without MoES approval less likely than those faculty members who tend to think that change is a good thing only if its known how to deal with it. The last factor that was found to predict new programs introduction experiences is the awareness of the faculty members of academic autonomy being outlined in the policies of the university. Thus, those faculty members who do not think that academic autonomy is outlined in the university's policies are less likely to have experience of the university introducing new programs without prior permission obtained from MoES.

**Program termination.** The last component of academic autonomy, as experienced by the faculty members, this study aimed at investigating was the capacity of the university to terminate programs. Overall, compared to those faculty members who reported to have experienced program termination without an approval from MoES (32.5%), a bit lesser (27,3%) number of the faculty members have not accounted program termination without obtaining approval from MoES, disagreeing that the university has the right to terminate its programs without the consideration of MoES.

Likewise on the previous aspects of academic autonomy, PLUM was performed to scrutinize the factors that could predict faculty members' experiences of programs termination without MoES consideration. The model fitted the data well ( $p\text{-value}=.002$ ) and had a moderate fit (Nagelkerke  $R^2=.559$ ). As demonstrated in the Table 9, among the tested factors 4 appeared to be significant.

Table 9

*Factors Predicting Perceived Experiences of Program Termination*

Factors/independent variables	Estimates	Sig.
School=2	-2.081	.008
School=3	-2.024	.008
Academic autonomy components=7	5.326	.022
Academic autonomy components=10	6.792	.001

Only five factors appeared to predict faculty's experiences of the university terminating its programs without obtaining approval from MoES. As depicted in the Table 9, faculty members from the School of Philology and School of Social Sciences were found to be less likely experiencing programs termination without MoES permission, than faculty members from the School of Physics and Technical Sciences. What is interesting is that the beliefs of the faculty members about academic autonomy also might predict experiences on program termination. Although none of the faculty members considered program termination as an academic autonomy component, those faculty members who think that program introduction is related to academic autonomy appeared to experience program termination at the case university without MoES approval more likely.

**Academic autonomy implementation constraints.** Descriptive analysis showed that the predominant number of faculty members (62.3%) faced no constraints in designing programs and elective courses. Nevertheless, the rest 37.7% of the faculty members from across 3 schools, namely, School of Philology, School of Social Sciences, and School of Physics and Technical Sciences, reported to have come across some challenges. Thus, calculated Spearman's rho showed significant negative and modest in strength ( $-.240$ ) relationship between the school faculty members work at and the constraints they face in designing the content for their elective courses ( $p\text{-value}=.036$ ).

All of these respondents, who faced some constraints in elective courses designation, came to the consensus that the regulations prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Science is the main stumbling block in building electives. As one of the faculty members from the School of Philology commented: "The content of the course still needs to be designed in compliance with the education policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, although it is an elective." Another participant referred to the inability to offer students elective courses from another department and school due to the existing



restrictions in the choice of students of the elective courses. Some of the faculty members referred to their experiences in designing the content for the compulsory courses. As one of the participants put it: “We cannot teach what we want and express our own philosophy while teaching.” Although decisions on course content and delivery are related to academic freedom of the faculty members on the individual level or of the whole university on the institutional level, as academic freedom is tightly connected to academic autonomy, the constraints in building electives also presents challenges to academic autonomy implementation. The enhanced academic autonomy might enable greater academic freedom, allowing the decisions on academic affairs to be made by the university.

Having dug into the experiences of the participated faculty members of academic autonomy at the case university, the analysis revealed different experiences of academic autonomy together with the factors that appear important in predicting those experiences. Overall, faculty members reported to have experiences of each aspect of academic autonomy at the case university, though those practices differed, depending on the number of factors. The recurrent factors that appeared to predict academic autonomy experiences of the faculty were the school faculty members work, years of work in the higher education sphere as well as at the case university, beliefs about academic autonomy components, satisfaction with job, and attitudes to change. These results are elucidated and interpreted further in the paper, interlacing with the previous research findings and providing new insights into the academic autonomy understandings, as perceived by the faculty members of the national university, in the light of the broader concepts and contexts.

#### **Chapter Four: Discussion**

In this chapter of the thesis the findings of the study aimed at discovering the beliefs and experiences of the faculty of academic autonomy at one of the national

universities in Kazakhstan are brought to the discussion within the emerged themes. With the reference to the prior literature, these results provide new insights into the academic autonomy understandings. As was revealed the Soviet legacy has affected the way academic autonomy is understood and practiced at the national university. Moreover, the issues of formal versus real autonomy as well as accountability were found to be prominent. Finally, as this study focused on the faculty members' experiences, the role that faculty play in the decisions on internal academic affairs at the studied national university as well as within the broader academia in Kazakhstan is discussed.

### **A matter of the Soviet past?**

Although reference to the Soviet legacy might seem to be a 'buzz word' in the Kazakhstani higher education, centralized planning and authoritarian governance inherited from the Soviet past remain pertinent to the discourse of the higher education system in Kazakhstan (Svyatov, Adambekova, & Amankeldi, 2015; OECD, 2017). This is evident from the findings of this study, as according to a faculty member from the School of Philology of the investigated national university elective courses need "to be designed in compliance with the education policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan." Thus, despite the relaxed control over the academic affairs of universities (OECD, 2017), at this particular university the surveyed faculty members continue to face challenges. This is supported by both the results of the Diagnostic Report on the Development of Strategic Directions for Education Reforms in Kazakhstan for 2015-2020 (Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, 2014) and prior research findings of Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev (2015) that highlighted that legal constraints in the decisions on curriculum still exist. Moreover, the findings of this study point out that some faculty members, supposedly being used to the imposed control of MoES, regard MoES as an authority which not simply regulates, but to some extent creates barriers to the universities in becoming more independent. For

instance, approximately 40% of the participants expressed the belief that even if university is granted academic autonomy, MoES still can exert influence on academic affairs of that institution. Indeed, “powerful educational legacy” (Johnson, 2004, p. 23) of the Soviet time still can be echoed in the mindsets of the senior faculty members.

A striking finding that has emerged from this study is that awareness of institutional autonomy and beliefs about academic autonomy heavily depend on the years of work experience of the surveyed faculty members in the higher education sphere. The analysis showed that those faculty members who are quite new to higher education and have an average of three years of work experience in the field are more aware of the institutional autonomy concept, than those faculty members who have been working in higher education for more than a decade. On the other hand, more experienced faculty members with more than 10 years of work experience in higher education appeared to be more articulate in terms of their beliefs about academic autonomy. Thus, this research suggests that greater awareness of institutional autonomy among the novice faculty members can be attributed to the long-standing tradition of the centralized control that senior faculty members might have used to. According to Salmi (2007), “flexibility requires an open mindset with respect to the possibility of harnessing outside expertise in order to introduce new programs or upgrade existing ones” (p. 232), which, obviously, older generation who have experienced the centralized system during the Soviet period is lacking. Nonetheless, given the greater work experience in the higher education sphere, and apparently, having larger baggage of knowledge in higher education, senior faculty members, as this study showed, tend to be more well up in interpreting academic autonomy.

At the same time this study revealed some positive changes in the way academic autonomy is understood and experienced. Contrary to the results of the Information Analytical Center (2014) which reported that academic autonomy is largely being

misunderstood among faculty, this study found that 15.4% of the faculty members surveyed does not think that academic autonomy implies the same as academic freedom and 40% of the participated faculty know what exactly constituents academic autonomy comprises. Furthermore, while previous literature (Sarinzhipov, 2013; Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev, 2015; Ahn et al., 2018) showed that in order to introduce new degree programs universities need to have these programs get licensed by MoES, 35% of the participated faculty members indicated that at their national university they have the capacity to launch new academic programs, avoiding MoES approval.

All things considered, based on the findings of the research, this study suggests that certainly the Soviet legacy in the higher education system of Kazakhstan coupled with the existing generation gap have presented some challenges to the faculty members in adapting to the emerged autonomy conditions and contributed to the diversified beliefs and experiences of academic autonomy during the transitional stage of Kazakhstani HEIs to autonomous operation.

### **Formal-real autonomy tension**

Another theme deduced from the findings raises the issue of the ‘autonomy on paper’ and autonomy that takes place in the real life. Whereas, referring to the current legislation (MoES, 2016; Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017), de facto national universities that have the special status, compared to other types of HEIs, have enough room for maneuver to exercise greater autonomy in their academic affairs, as they have been provided with the rights of making their own decisions in designing and introducing degree programs as well as determining student admission criteria, this study showed that not all of the surveyed faculty members have had experienced those aspects of academic autonomy. 23.4% of the involved in the study faculty members reported that the decisions on the student admission criteria are not made by the university and 26% of the

respondents admitted that the degree programs at the studied university cannot be introduced without the permission from MoES.

The delineated discrepancy between the national universities' rights depicted in the legislative documents and the identified experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy brings two issues into the discussion: formal-real autonomy tension (Christensen, 2011; Aberbach & Christensen, 2017; Maassen, Gornitzka, & Fumasoli, 2017) and institutional implementation of autonomy (Nguyen et al., 2016). Christensen (2011) emphasizes that formal autonomy in its general sense refers to the changes that are documented in the laws, "increasing formal leeway for universities" (p. 505). Actual or as called by Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli (2017) living autonomy, on contrary, is considered as autonomy operated within universities. Thus, drawing on the obtained findings, this study would seem to suggest that there is inconsistency between the formal and real academic autonomy within the examined national university. One of the possible explanations of such a discrepancy might be that within the university academic autonomy is understood differently than it is comprehended by MoES, as interpretation of academic autonomy depends on "how universities relate to their environment, to state authorities, their constituents and the wider society" (Maassen et al., p. 4). Given this, Nguyen et al. (2016) fairly note that while the practice of granting universities autonomy has become widely applied, little research has been done on how universities deal with autonomy and the repercussions it brings at the institutional level. Admittedly, this research, for instance, revealed that those faculty who are aware of academic autonomy principles being written in the university's policies are more likely to report that it is the university that decides on the student intake and programs introduction. Therefore, this study tends to support the idea that of Christensen and Aberbach (2017) that formal autonomy does not guarantee living autonomy.

**Academic autonomy: Independence from the state or increased accountability?**

While autonomy within the educational setting might be misleadingly regarded as total independence from the forces imposed outside, particularly MoES, this study would likely challenge such a misconception. Universities, whether operating autonomously or not, are not isolated entities that can exist within a bubble (Crowther, Joris, Otten, Nilsson, Teekens, & Wachter, 2000), especially, when heavily relying on the source of funding (Aberbach & Christensen, 2017). In this study three faculty members referred to the issue of the balance kept between the academic autonomy of the university and the regulation of MoES, thus, extending the discussion of academic autonomy of a single university to a broader dilemma of accountability of autonomy. Moses (2007) asserts that in order to empower universities to respond effectively to the societal needs and enable faculty “to contribute to a democratic, civilized society and promote the tolerance and debate that underpins it” (p. 265) state intervention should be reduced to the utmost extent possible. While this seems to be reasonable, universities are not bound to the government only, as they are also accountable to the society and most importantly to the future generation (Prakash, 2011). As de Boer and Enders (2017) emphasize providing universities with more independence is not as much a matter of the reduced control on the part of government, but the issue of emergence of the new mechanisms of influence. Thus, being provided academic autonomy universities do not detach themselves from the external powers, at least on the decisions on academic matters, but rather become bound to accountability (Prakash, 2011). According to Benjamin (1994), accreditation, which is one of the accountability tools, compared to the state regulation, does not entail the loss of academic autonomy. At the same time, whereas in the international practice there are good examples of the balance between autonomy and accountability, such as the one found in Ireland, generally most of the countries struggle with finding this balance (Salmi, 2009).

The questions that remain for the Kazakhstani higher education is that to what extent universities, being granted academic and administrative autonomy, will still be restricted to the state regulations, what would be the role of MoES with the adoption of the Law “On amendments and additions to some legislative acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on HEIs academic and administrative autonomy expansion issues”, and whether enactment of this document would bring the tension between accreditation agencies, MoES, and autonomous universities. The results of this research can only suggest that at the initial stage of this law introduction accountability issues are likely to emerge, as there is relatively low understanding of the universities of institutional autonomy (Information Analytical Center, 2014) and particularly academic autonomy which entails assurance of the quality of the education provided.

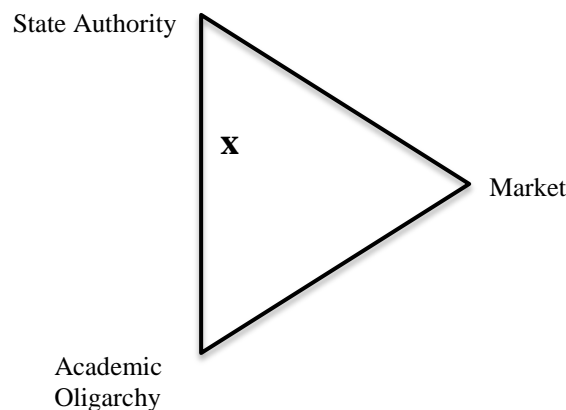
#### **University faculty: Empowered or powerless?**

This study found that while the concept of academic autonomy might be distortedly understood by the faculty who participated in this research, generally, there is a positive trend towards greater academic autonomy operation at the case university. Referring to the experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy, the results showed that 57% of the faculty members have experienced that the content of the degree programs is designed by the university, almost 50% believe that at this university student admission criteria are set and regulated by the university, and 40% have experienced that the student intake is also decided upon by the university. On the other hand, faculty members complained about the inability to transfer credits for elective courses across the schools and departments of the university and the restrictions in the decisions they make on the content for the courses they teach. This research suggests that such a problem might be related to the limited power of the faculty members who reported these challenges within the university. Thus, this research posits the question whether academic autonomy indeed empowers faculty

members or faculty are likely to remain powerless, while university leadership (rectors) will continue to exercise greater influence at universities (Sarinzhipov, 2013).

While looking at the opportunities of the faculty to make decisions on the academic affairs at the two national universities in Kazakhstan, Sarinzhipov (2013) refers to the hierarchical organizational structures of the institutions and ministerial control as to the restraints faculty face. Indeed, the extent to which universities are able to take advantage of autonomy extremely rests on the governance and leadership of universities (Turcan et al., 2017). In such a discussion Burton Clark's ideas (as cited in Brennan, 2010) of power distribution and authority deserve special attention. The proposed triangle of co-ordination distinguishes three sources of authority, namely, state authority, market, and academic oligarchy (Brennan, 2010).

*Figure 2.* Burton Clark's triangle of co-ordination, three powers of authority



Thus, this study's findings might suggest that at the investigated national university faculty, at least those who participated in this research, would more likely to be found in the powerless position, rather than being empowered within the current academic autonomy circumstances. Although in this research other sources of authority were not explored, as the primary perspective that it looked at was the one of the faculty members, if to locate the concentration of power at the given university in the Burton Clark's triangle,



it would possibly resemble the one demonstrated in the Figure 2 due to the control imposed by MoES, as experienced by the faculty members.

Having explored the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy at the case national university, the findings of the study were discussed within the broader topics of the Soviet legacy influence, formal and real autonomy, autonomy-accountability dilemma, and the role faculty play in the decisions made on academic affairs of universities. The findings of the study are further summarized in the concluding chapter of this thesis, referring to the purpose of the research and the posed research questions.

### **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications**

This concluding chapter of the thesis summarizes major findings of the study in relation to its purpose and the research questions that the inquiry aimed to address. The ways in which universities' academic and administrative staff, policy makers, and researchers would likely to benefit from the results' of this study are explicated. Limitations of this research are also delineated, pointing out the implications for further research on academic autonomy.

With the purpose to explore the beliefs and experiences of the faculty members of the Kazakhstani national university of academic autonomy this study followed non-experimental quantitative methodology and survey case-study research design. Based on the univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses performed this study found that the participated faculty members from across four schools of the national university, specifically, School of Mechanics and Mathematics, School of Philology, School of Social Sciences, and School of Physics and Technical Sciences are relatively articulate in terms of interpreting academic autonomy. Nonetheless, there is certain confusion in the understandings of the faculty members of academic autonomy, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. Interestingly, the striking generation gap in the awareness of

institutional autonomy and interpretation of academic autonomy, which is supposedly attributed to the Soviet legacy in the higher education system of Kazakhstan, was revealed. Based on these findings academic autonomy practices could be improved within institutions, as relevant strategy for academic autonomy enhancement could be developed at the university and trainings on raising awareness about academic autonomy organized.

At the same time, descriptive statistics, Chi Square test, and ordinal regression showed diversified experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy that were found to be mainly connected to the years of work experience in higher education and at the case university, school faculty members work at, satisfaction with the job, and their general attitudes to change. The constraints faculty members face, regarding academic autonomy implementation, were also depicted, raising the issues of power distribution at the university and the tension between formal and living academic autonomy. Taking this into account, at the state level evaluation and monitoring procedures for the academic autonomy reform initiative implementation could be established.

Having provided insights into the academic autonomy beliefs and experiences of the faculty members at one of the national universities in Kazakhstan, this study is admittedly limited in scope in terms of the academic components explored and sampling procedures. Thus, these limitations point out the areas for further research. Referring to the experiences of the faculty members of academic autonomy components, the capacity to decide upon the language of instruction and quality assurance mechanisms and providers were out of the scope of this study. By addressing this limitation, researchers could acquire a more comprehensive picture of academic autonomy, as practiced at universities. Additionally, future research could expand across all of the schools of an institution in order to grasp the diversity of the faculty and areas they specialize at. Research findings

also suggest that deeper understandings of the faculty members of academic autonomy are desired, which in-depth interviews and/or focus groups could possibly provide.

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