

**Exploring the Motivation of Kazakhstani Graduate Students to Pursue a Master's
Degree in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences: A Qualitative Study**

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You may proceed with contacting your preferred research site and commencing your participant recruitment strategy.

Yours sincerely,

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Abstract

Exploring the Motivation of Kazakhstani Graduate Students to Pursue a Master's Degree in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences: A Qualitative Study

This phenomenological study explored the motivations of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (AHSS) students to pursue postgraduate education at a state university in Kazakhstan. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, the study employed semi-structured interviews with seven graduate students and applied both individual experiential and thematic analysis to understand their internal and external motives. Given the unique challenges that AHSS students face in their career pathways, this study explored the essence of navigating labor market demands and personal interests. Findings showed that AHSS students experience a range of motivations from a lack of motivation to strong internal drive. Lack of motivation may result from challenges, such as credential inflation, rigid program structures, and the need to balance work and study. While external motives such as scholarships and job prospects play a role, many students are also driven by internal motives, such as intellectual curiosity, personal interest, and a sense of belonging to their field. This study highlighted the importance of creating more student-centered learning environments and aligning educational programs with both personal and professional goals to better support AHSS students' motivation and engagement.

Keywords: motivation, arts, humanities, social sciences, master's degree

Аңдатпа

Қазақстандық магистранттардың өнер, гуманитарлық және әлеуметтік ғылымдар салаларында магистр дәрежесін алуға ұмтылу мотивациясын зерттеу: сапалы зерттеу

Бұл феноменологиялық зерттеу Қазақстандағы мемлекеттік университетте гуманитарлық, өнер және әлеуметтік ғылымдар (ӨГӘҒ) саласындағы студенттердің магистратурада оқуға деген мотивациясын зерттеді. Өзін-өзі анықтау теориясы негізінде жеті магистрантпен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар жүргізіліп, олардың ішкі және сыртқы түрткілерін түсіну үшін жеке тәжірибелік және тақырыптық талдау әдістері қолданылды. ӨГӘҒ студенттері еңбек нарығының талаптары мен жеке қызығушылықтарының арасында тепе-теңдік табуда ерекше қиындықтарға тап болатынын ескере отырып, бұл зерттеу осы күрделі жағдайдың мәнін ашуға бағытталды. Зерттеу нәтижелері ӨГӘҒ студенттерінің мотивация деңгейі әртүрлі екенін көрсетті — мотивацияның болмауынан бастап күшті ішкі түрткіге дейін. Мотивацияның төмендігі диплом құнсыздануы, оқу бағдарламаларының икемсіздігі және жұмыс пен оқуды қатар алып жүру қажеттілігі сияқты қиындықтармен байланысты болуы мүмкін. Стипендиялар мен жұмысқа орналасу мүмкіндіктері сияқты сыртқы түрткілер маңызды рөл атқарғанымен, көптеген студенттерді интеллектуалдық, жеке қызығушылық және өз саласына тиесілілік сезімі секілді ішкі себептер де алға жетелейді. Бұл зерттеу ӨГӘҒ студенттерінің мотивациясы мен белсенділігін арттыру үшін оқу үдерісін студентке бағдарлау мен білім беру бағдарламаларын олардың жеке және кәсіби мақсаттарымен үйлестірудің маңыздылығын атап көрсетті.

Түйінді сөздер: мотивация, өнер, гуманитарлық ғылымдар, әлеуметтік ғылымдар, магистр дәрежесі

Аннотация

Исследование мотивации казахстанских студентов магистратуры к получению степени магистра в области искусств, гуманитарных и социальных наук: качественное исследование

В данном феноменологическом исследовании рассматривались мотивации студентов направлений Искусств, Гуманитарных и Социальных наук (ИГСН) к продолжению обучения в магистратуре в государственном университете Казахстана. Руководствуясь Теорией самодетерминации, исследование включало проведение полуструктурированных интервью с семью магистрантами и применяло как индивидуальный опытный, так и тематический анализ для изучения их внутренних и внешних мотивов. Учитывая уникальные трудности, с которыми сталкиваются студенты ИГСН на своем профессиональном пути, эта научная работа исследовала суть баланса между требованиями рынка труда и личными интересами. Результаты показали, что у студентов ИГСН существует широкий спектр мотиваций — от отсутствия мотивации до сильной внутренней устремленности. Отсутствие мотивации может быть связано с такими факторами, как обесценивание академических званий, отсутствие гибкости структуры программ и необходимость совмещать работу и учебу. Хотя внешние мотивы, такие как стипендии и перспективы трудоустройства, играют определённую роль, многие студенты также движимы внутренними мотивами, такими как интеллектуальное любопытство, личный интерес и чувство принадлежности к своей профессиональной области. Исследование подчеркивает важность создания более ориентированных на студентов образовательных сред и согласования учебных программ с личными и профессиональными целями для повышения мотивации и вовлеченности студентов ИГСН.

Ключевые слова: мотивация, искусство, гуманитарные науки, социальные науки, степень магистра

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher education in Kazakhstan plays an important role in the nation's development, preparing professionals who can contribute to building of a strong knowledge-based society. Besides the importance on a national level, people in Kazakhstan recognize the positive role that higher education plays in individuals' lives. This chapter introduces the context of higher education in Kazakhstan, focusing on the motivations of students to pursue postgraduate degrees. It begins by discussing the socioeconomic and policy factors influencing these motivations, identifies the central problem of pursuing postgraduate study in arts, humanities, and social sciences in Kazakhstan, and presents the purpose and significance of this study. Finally, the chapter concludes with the research questions and the potential contributions of this research to educational quality and policy.

Background of the Study

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, motivation to pursue higher education among Kazakhstani students has been notably high. From 1999 to 2009, the higher education enrollment in Kazakhstani institutions increased twice (Smolentseva, 2012). Recent trends also reflect the growing demand for higher education in Kazakhstan. Despite a 9.6% decrease in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) between 2019 and 2024, student enrollment has continued to rise (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024). Statistics from 2024 reveal that in comparison to the 2019-2020 academic year, the number of students in public institutions increased by 8.5% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024). The number of postgraduate students is proportionally less in comparison to the undergraduate students – only one fifth of students continue their education at the master's level. Despite this, as the overall student body grows, the number of postgraduate students also increased over the last three years (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024).

Research in Kazakhstan indicates that undergraduate students' choice of higher education specialization is significantly shaped by both external factors, such as parental expectations and socioeconomic factors, and internal factors, such as personal interest (Assanbayeva, 2020; Kasa et al., 2022; Shnarbekova, 2018; Shnarbekova et al., 2022). When proceeding with the choice of further study, students consult more with external motives: the competitive advantage of obtaining a higher degree in the job market, elevating social status and recognition, and engaging with educated peers (Duisenova et al., 2020; Jonbekova, 2019; Roberts, 2010). Intellectual curiosity and genuine interest are less mentioned as factors to continue education, although it is expected that students learn their specializations on a deeper level at "professional education programs of postgraduate study" ("Adilet" LIS, 2007). In comparison to the external factors that are commonly discussed, these intrinsic factors do not seem to be strong, or they are not paid enough attention to on a master's level program.

Many young people in Kazakhstan view postgraduate education as a pathway to financial stability and upward mobility in the competitive labor market. According to Jonbekova (2019), Kazakhstani students perceive a bachelor's degree as an "incomplete degree" (p. 1192) and understand the need of a master's degree for successful employment. Students believe that employers demand and favor master's degrees over bachelor's degrees (Jonbekova, 2019). This has led to a growing trend of students pursuing graduate education, often regardless of their personal or intellectual interests, to meet these heightened expectations.

Kazakhstan's commitment to aligning its higher education system with global standards has also played a significant role in shaping student motivations to pursue postgraduate study. According to Ahn et al. (2018), "on March 12, 2010, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to sign the Lisbon Convention of the Bologna

Process” (p. 212), marking an important step toward international integration. This step was part of national goals presented in strategic documents, such as the 2050 Strategy and the State Program of Education Development for 2011-2020, which aimed to bring all educational levels in Kazakhstan in line with global standards by 2020 (OECD, 2017). The introduction of the Bologna Process standards, including the three-tier degree structure (bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees) (Ahn et al., 2018), has further institutionalized the importance of continuous interdisciplinary education in parallel with global cultural development and influenced perceptions of its value among students.

The emphasis on interdisciplinary education and cultural integration through the Bologna Process has brought renewed recognition to arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS) disciplines for their critical role in addressing societal challenges and fostering creativity. AHSS fields contribute to the development of soft skills, adaptability, and cultural preservation, all of which are highly valued in the modern labor market (Louvel, 2007). However, AHSS students often face unstable career paths and less demanded professional prospects (Næss & Wiers-Jenssen, 2023). It is especially in countries in transition where the rapid expansion of universities outruns the creation of new job places and students, not being able to find employment in their specialization, decide to work in unrelated spheres (Schwartz, 2023) or continue their education at a master’s level to postpone employment search (Duisenova et al., 2020). Such a vulnerable position of AHSS students highlights the importance of understanding their motivations to continue education in the context of the new educational reforms and contemporary job market.

Problem Statement

Kazakhstan’s ambition to develop professionals equipped for dynamic, innovative global environments faces critical challenges: the increasing diploma inflation that raises the standards to acquire employment, the consequent lack of job places that match

students' educational level and the perception of postgraduate education as a mere tool to secure a job placement or postpone job search. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000), motivation that is primarily driven by external factors, such as socioeconomic pressures, may undermine students' commitment to their studies and their ability to master their professions. While external drivers, including financial stability and social status, can encourage enrollment, they often fail to foster genuine engagement with academic and professional growth. AHSS students are especially prone to socioeconomic pressures due to fragmented career pathways and undervalued labor market prospects compared to their STEM counterparts (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023; Næss & Wiers-Jenssen, 2023).

Challenges that AHSS students face in their career pathways can seriously undermine the motivations to study further. Graduate education requires significant commitment, which external motives may not be sufficient to sustain. The increasing academic requirements for master's degrees, driven by labor market expectations, further exacerbates this issue. AHSS students may pursue graduate studies not out of genuine interest or cognitive curiosity but to meet societal and economic pressures, which may significantly affect the quality of their education. As a result, externally motivated specialists may lack creativity and competency to realize the broader goals of Kazakhstan's higher education reforms, which aim to develop creative, skilled professionals capable of navigating a rapidly evolving global landscape.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations of AHSS graduate students to pursue postgraduate education at a public university in Astana, Kazakhstan, through the lens of Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000). By examining the spectrum of individual motivations along the self-determination continuum, this research aims to

understand how AHSS students navigate external and internal motives in their pursuit of graduate education. This exploration seeks to reveal whether the current higher education system supports the development of professionals who are intrinsically motivated to learn and grow, with particular attention to the unique motivations and challenges faced by AHSS students. This study may help to understand how educational policy can better support diverse academic and professional aspirations while fostering innovation and cultural development.

Research Questions

1. What are the external motivations of AHSS graduate students in Kazakhstan in pursuing a master's degree?
2. What are the internal motivations of AHSS graduate students in Kazakhstan in pursuing a master's degree?

Significance of the Study

This study addresses several gaps in existing literature. First, using SDT as its theoretical framework provides a nuanced understanding of AHSS students' motivations to pursue postgraduate study, emphasizing their individual perspectives and motivational profiles. It focuses on the unique experiences of AHSS students, who face greater challenges in transitioning to the labor market due to less structured career paths, highlighting the need for targeted motivational and institutional support (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023).

Second, this research highlights the importance of viewing education not only through its socioeconomic value but also through its ability to foster cognitive and personal development. Such an approach aligns with Kazakhstan's broader goals of cultivating innovative, capable professionals who can contribute to a knowledge-based economy.

Third, the study benefits multiple stakeholders. University students are the primary stakeholders, as this research aims to understand the complexities of their motivations.

AHSS students can benefit from enhancing student autonomy and flexibility in coursework and promoting student-centered teaching. This can foster enjoyment with studies, inherent satisfaction with the programs and intrinsic motivation to pursue further academic career.

Policymakers can get suggestions on aligning graduate programs with labor market needs. Graduate programs should equip students with practical skills and competencies relevant to employment. Additionally, policymakers can assess the necessity of requiring graduate degrees for entry-level positions, as strong focus on credentials pressures students into further education for employment rather than personal or academic interest.

Employers can evaluate candidates based on skills and competencies rather than merely their level of formal education, helping to break the cycle of degree inflation. Furthermore, businesses can play a role in shaping graduate programs by partnering with universities to provide hands-on training, internships, and practical learning opportunities aligned with workforce demands.

Structure of the Study

The first introductory chapter provided the background of the study, from which the problem statement was derived. Next, the purpose of the study was outlined with the research questions following the purpose. After that, the significance of the study to the research area and the stakeholders was presented. Finally, the structure of the entire thesis was outlined chapter by chapter.

The second chapter presented literature review and started with the explanation of the development of higher education in Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Next, the emerging challenges and motivations to pursue further education for students in

general and for AHSS students were discussed in detail. The conceptual framework based on SDT that could explore these motivations was presented in the subsequent section.

The third chapter presented methodology, including research design, researcher's reflexivity, research site and participants, data collection instrument, and data analysis approaches. The chapter concluded with ethical considerations and potential limitations of the methodology.

Chapter four presented findings in the form of seven participants' interpretative phenomenological analysis, based on the preliminary thematic analysis. Each student's narrative was presented in detail to demonstrate the complexity of personal motivation. The thematic reflection followed this, highlighting general themes across participants.

Chapter five discussed these identified themes in relation to the conceptual framework based on SDT and the literature review on Kazakhstani students' challenges and motivations to pursue further education.

The last chapter answered the research questions posed in the introduction of this thesis. This was followed by providing implications to universities and higher education policy in Kazakhstan. The limitations of this study further inspired the recommendation for future research and practice. The chapter concluded with my personal reflection on the research process.

Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, the context of higher education in Kazakhstan was explored, reflecting the effect of socioeconomic pressures, policy reforms, and evolving labor market demands in shaping AHSS students' motivations. The chapter identified the contextual challenges affecting AHSS students' motivation to pursue postgraduate education, outlined the study's purpose to investigate these motives through SDT. The research questions guiding this exploration and focusing on external and internal motivations to pursue a

master's degree were also presented. By addressing the contextual issues and focusing on the motivations of AHSS students, this research aims to provide insights that support the development of a more balanced and meaningful approach to higher education in Kazakhstan, aligning individual aspirations with national goals for professional and personal growth.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the history and current situation of Kazakhstan's higher education system, explores challenges and motivations to pursue postgraduate education among graduate students in general and among AHSS students specifically, and presents the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that explains students' different motivational regulations. By addressing these aspects, the chapter provides a comprehensive background for the study, emphasizing the importance of understanding AHSS students' educational choices within Kazakhstan's unique socio-economic and cultural context.

Post-Soviet Transition and Higher Education Development in Kazakhstan

The development of Kazakhstan's higher education system has been shaped by its Soviet legacy and subsequent reforms. According to Smolentseva et al. (2018), during the Soviet era Kazakhstan had a centrally planned education system, which was focused on a more practical vocational education and aimed at uniting the country socially and culturally through the standardization of curriculum and preparing a highly qualified workforce for factories. In contrast to the current tendency, research and intellectual activity were separated from higher education and were conducted in the institutes and academies linked to specific economic sectors, industries, and ministries (Smolentseva et al., 2018). The preference was given to engineering and technical fields, which boosted industrialization (Smolentseva et al., 2018). However, there was a small percentage of institutions called "comprehensive institutions", which prepared both teachers in humanities and sciences, and specialists for practical work for industrial needs (Chankseliani, 2022; Smolentseva et al., 2018). According to Chankseliani (2022) and Smolentseva et al. (2018), although education was free and available for underrepresented population, such as women, peasants, and people of different nationalities, it was highly ideological, followed the industrial needs, and focused on communist morality. This meant a lack of autonomy and academic freedom for both students and faculty (Chankseliani, 2022).

Over the years, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's higher education system, along with other post-Soviet states, has undergone neoliberal reforms that aimed at new development of education, democratization, and increasing independence from ideology and state control. In comparison with other states, Kazakhstan's higher education system's transformation was relatively successful: previously free education became privatized and partly based on tuition fees, decreasing the burden on state budget, and some institutions acquired new statuses, such as "joint-stock company" or "national research university" (Smolentseva et al., 2018). However, the transition could not promise full democratization and marketization. As described by Shnarbekova (2020), these reforms created a hybrid educational system in Kazakhstan, blending Soviet traditions with modern international standards, creating unique context and challenges in reforming structure and delivery of education. These challenges affected the perception on educational credentials of Kazakhstani students in higher education, and especially postgraduate education.

Challenges and Motivations to Pursue Postgraduate Education

Credential Inflation

Credential inflation is one of the challenges of the hybrid educational system in Kazakhstan. This term is known in educational fields of many countries in transition. To illustrate what it means, it is worth discussing the following case from China, which undergone rapid educational development, but did not manage to produce workplaces for educated youth: "Nearly a third of the 135 newly enrolled production line workers held a master's degree, while the rest were all undergraduates, some from China's high-ranking universities" (Zuo, 2021). From this news article, it can be understood that jobs that were previously occupied by people with only high-school diplomas are now occupied by workers with college diplomas or undergraduate university degrees (Collins, 2011; Encyclopedia.com, 2018). This situation is referred as "credential inflation".

Jonbekova (2019) explored the specific case of “credential inflation,” which is known as “diploma disease” among students in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. She referred to it as “a phenomenon that refers to the disease of societies that rationalize their recruitment processes through the use of educational credentials in the hiring process” (p. 1187). This term refers to the pressure to obtain higher education credentials, often driven by the socially constructed belief that a university degree is vital for securing employment, social growth, and achieving financial stability (Duisenova et al., 2020). This phenomenon was discussed almost twenty years earlier in West Europe, East Asian, and South Asian context, which experienced “diploma disease” during the stage of their development (Dore, 1997). However, the Central Asian context differs from what was already studied due to the countries’ Soviet history.

Jonbekova’s (2019) research indicated that, due to socio-economic pressures of a post-Soviet developing society, students in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan view university education primarily through an economic perspective, associating it with enhanced job prospects and improved financial situation. However, the study also revealed a paradox: while students pursue degrees to gain competitive advantage in the job market, the oversupply of graduates in positions that did not even require a degree forced employers to raise qualification standards, diminishing the perceived value of an undergraduate degree (Jonbekova, 2019). This dynamic contributes to the exacerbation of the “diploma disease” and forces students to consider a strategy of pursuing further education on a master’s level to secure job placements (Duisenova et al., 2020).

Students’ Educational Strategies

Duisenova et al. (2020) identified that after graduation students in Kazakhstani national and state universities were willing to enter a master’s program, which was not normally followed by entering a doctoral program. This tendency may indicate that a master’s degree became a standard for most students, regardless of pursuing an academic career further. The prevailing motives were usually the following: the desire to acquire a high-level education, the belief that a bachelor’s degree is an incomplete

degree, and changing specialization (Duisenova et al., 2020). The influence of their social circle also had a certain effect on the decision to pursue postgraduate study. These students demonstrated the “directed development” strategy, through which students may continue their graduate studies driven by socioeconomic motives such as elevating their social status and securing a prestigious job (Duisenova et al., 2020).

Also, Duisenova et al. (2020) found that there was a small group of students who followed the “eternal student” strategy to reserve some time to decide their professional paths. According to this strategy, students pursue graduate study due to their unwillingness or unpreparedness to enter the job market (Duisenova et al., 2020). However, these students reported the attitude of “I like to study, I do not want to work” (Duisenova et al., 2020, p. 187), which could be an indicator not only of the indecisiveness, but also of the genuine interest in subject matter and academic research. This can be a limitation of the study by Duisenova et al. (2020). Nevertheless, from this article, it can be said that Kazakhstani students’ motivation to pursue a master’s degree is more driven by their socioeconomic motives. These motives could have been shaped by the social and historical background of the country and exacerbated by policies around the degree acquisition.

Balancing Work and Study

Smolentseva et al. (2018) noted that in comparison to other post-Soviet states, higher education in Kazakhstan has been significantly marketized, with the creation of private educational institutions, with the introduction of tuition fees in public educational sector, and with families becoming major financial resources for obtaining higher education. In Central Asia, approximately two-thirds of students at public universities are responsible for paying tuition fees, which can constitute up to 20% of the annual per capita income (World Bank, 2022). Accordingly, “taking tuition fees from the population was essential to the survival of higher education” (Smolentseva et al., 2018, p. 13). This financial burden often forced students to balance work and study to cover their tuition costs.

In Kazakhstan, while the government provides stipends to support students, these amounts are relatively modest. For instance, as of recent data, undergraduate students receive a monthly stipend of approximately 47,135 tenge (about \$94) (Official Information Resource of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). Given the high cost of tuition and living expenses, many students find it essential to seek employment to supplement their income and afford their education. Consequently, many students in Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region choose to work while studying to meet these financial demands (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, according to Smolentseva (2012), seeking employment was essential not only to pay tuition fees, but also to gain work experience and secure employment after graduation: “Motives for working do not solely relate to financial concerns: students need to acquire professional experience in order to improve their chances of gaining employment after graduation” (p. 30). This means that having a bachelor’s degree did not guarantee successful employment, because of credential inflation, as a result of which employers required work experience or higher credentials to hire a candidate.

The situation regarding graduate-level education is similar, but somewhat different. The state stipend on a master’s level is higher and more attractive than on a bachelor’s, comprising 107,061 tenge (about \$212) (Official Information Resource of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). According to Duisenova et al. (2020), a small group of students entering master’s programs indeed reported a stipend as a reason to continuing education: “I want to get state support (scholarship, hostel)” (p. 187). Although it may not cover living expenses, the stipend may be an attractive bonus to the work salary for those who are already employed. When it comes to fresh graduates, many students decide to study and work for different reasons. Duisenova et al. (2020) reported the following: “Kazakhstani youth demonstrated their desire to continue education, searching for a job at the same time, which can be explained by a high percentage of unemployed graduates of previous years” (p. 191). This dynamic

seems like an attempt of fresh graduates to utilize the social status and additional time given by graduate education to secure a stable and well-paid job.

In this way, the constant search for employment has become a normal practice for current full-time undergraduate and graduate students in Kazakhstan. This may affect the quality of their learning, and consequently Kazakhstan's higher educational system's effectiveness (Smolentseva, 2012). According to the OECD (2017), "an inadequately educated workforce was identified as the fifth most problematic factor for doing business in [Kazakhstan]" (p. 66). The constant need to combine work and study for students may be the reason for such reports.

Mandatory Work Obligation

The constant search for jobs is especially relevant for students studying on a state grant. According to the "Law on Education" ("Adilet" LIS, 2007), "Citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan who have studied in other specialties on the basis of the state educational order shall be required to work for at least three years in the manner determined by the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan" (Paragraph 17). This is a formal agreement between universities and students, where universities create an educational financial order from the Ministry of Education to sustain students' educational expenses and stipends (TengriEdu, 2024). The mandatory work obligation is the result of the post-Soviet transition from free education to tuition-based and scholarship-based education in Kazakhstan to ease the pressure on the country's budget (Smolentseva et al., 2018). Overall, in Kazakhstan, 37% of higher education students are receiving state scholarship, while 63% are studying on a fee-paying basis (Kazpravda.kz, 2022). Winning the scholarship for education does not always mean that the education is free – students are obliged to compensate for the educational costs by working for at least three years in Kazakhstan and contributing to the country's economy and development (TengriEdu, 2024).

While these conditions seem clear and many students graduate from the universities on these terms, there are still discussions on how fair or unfair it is to oblige

students to work in the country for three years (TengriEdu, 2024). One of the possible challenges that students may report is the perceived obligation to commence working as soon as possible, by the 1st of September in the year they graduate, without having enough time to decide on a further career. The “eternal student” strategy, which forces students to pursue a master’s degree after graduation instead of employment, may be the result of the perceived legal pressure to decide on the career and perceived dependence on external conditions (Duisenova et al., 2020). As Duisenova et al. (2020) pointed out, “currently, the needs of the labor market and the personal interests do not coincide in any way while the master’s degree is very desirable. The dependent complex of Kazakhstani youth can also explain such distribution” (p. 191).

Challenges and Motivations of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Students

The educational strategies of arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS) students require specific attention due to the unique challenges and opportunities these disciplines present. During the Soviet era, these disciplines were represented mainly through a small number of “comprehensive institutions,” which prepared sciences and humanities teachers and researchers for the industrial needs: “The comprehensive universities were supposed to play an important role in research, and their graduates were expected to make use of their research-oriented education in their professional activities” (Smolentseva et al., 2018, p. 10). Despite the existence of these universities, the focus in Soviet education was given to engineering and technical fields: “The engineering and technical fields dominated in the official list of specialties: 243 out of 381 (64 %) in the ministry list as of 1975” (Smolentseva et al., 2018, p. 10).

The shift from centrally planned to neoliberal system in Kazakhstani higher education after the collapse of the Soviet Union has indirectly elevated the visibility and status of arts, humanities, and social sciences fields by fostering multidisciplinary approaches to problem-solving in various fields (OECD, 2017). The Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area reforms have further professionalized humanities curricula, encouraging better employability through popularizing applied skills and

interdisciplinary approaches (Louvel, 2007). As Louvel (2007) noted, humanities graduates play important roles in knowledge-intensive functions such as communication, marketing, and public administration. However, the challenges that AHSS students face persist due to the similar socioeconomic factors and job market requirements as for all educational fields, but these challenges may manifest themselves more severely than for engineering and technical major students.

AHSS students navigate fragmented labor markets by combining diverse skills. These roles are essential in fostering innovation and addressing complex societal challenges, yet they often remain undervalued in traditional labor market: “The findings indicate that master’s graduates in the humanities are slightly more exposed to unemployment than other graduates and clearly more exposed to over-education” (Næss & Wiers-Jenssen, 2023, p. 558). According to Eimer and Bohndick (2023), humanities students must build individual profiles by combining academic and extracurricular activities, to become and stay relevant in fragmented and diverse labor markets. These students face their own challenges but also demonstrate adaptability in career pathways, shaped by their self-efficacy, perseverance, and ability to navigate labor market effectively (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023). This section underscores the importance of understanding the unique challenges and motivations of AHSS students, especially in Kazakhstani context, where labor market and societal perceptions of these disciplines are on an evolving stage.

Conceptual Framework

Autonomous Motivation

In the pursuit of higher education, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their choices and to manage their career paths independently. This emphasis highlights the importance of students’ self-motivation or autonomous (independent) motivation, with which they experience a sense of choice and self-direction in their academic pursuits (Leenknecht et al., 2020; Xerri et al., 2018). Furthermore, autonomous motivation is essential for individual and societal development. From the

individual perspective, without autonomous motivation, students tend to drop out (Allen, 1999; Jeno et al., 2018) or study only to earn passing grades (Elton, 1996) and attain a diploma at the end (Duisenova et al., 2020; Jonbekova, 2019). This greatly affects the quality of students' acquired knowledge and their ability to apply it in real life and career (Smolentseva, 2012). From the societal perspective, with autonomous motivation, students acknowledge the meaning behind their studies - acquiring professional skills and status, developing as an individual, and contributing to society (Aiylichieva & Mukanova, 2010; Khairullina & Khizbullina, 2018).

External and Internal Motivation

Kazakhstani students' motivations to pursue a master's degree may not always be autonomous. It may be categorized into "external" and "internal" motivation, depending on the level of perceived autonomy. While there is little information on Kazakhstani students, Darkhanova and Portnyagina (2017) classified the motives of graduate students from Russia into external and internal. According to their classification, the external motivations include "career growth (change in one's social status), desire to fulfill a duty or a sense of responsibility to society (family, etc.), to occupy a certain status (the need to belong to some community, to be recognized and accepted by them), the need for safety and security" (Darkhanova & Portnyagina, 2017, pp. 125-126). The internal motivations include:

Orientation towards mastering new knowledge, need for respect, competence, achievement of success, recognition, authority, aesthetic needs (harmony, symmetry, order, beauty), orientation towards mastering new ways of activity, cognitive needs (to know, to be able, to understand, to explore), need for self-actualization, realization of one's goals, abilities, development of one's own personality. (Darkhanova & Portnyagina, 2017, p. 126)

In this way, students with external motivation to pursue a master's degree demonstrate less autonomy in decision-making due to the dependability to external factors such as parental expectations, societal norms, labor market demands, external punishments and

rewards. Students with internal motivation to continue education are driven by self-development and learning, personal values, the sense of perfection, and orientation to success.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

While the research on postgraduate students' motivations in Kazakhstan is scarce, Zhaisanova (2022) studied motivational profiles of high school students in Kazakhstan. Similar to Darkhanova and Portnyagina (2017), the researcher categorized the motivations of school students into external and internal. However, Zhaisanova (2020) employed the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000). According to this theory, "autonomous or intrinsic [internal] motivation means voluntarily engaging in activities based on self-interest for the purpose of obtaining pleasure without coercion and control" (Zhaisanova, 2022, p. 2). This is a somewhat different definition from what Darkhanova and Portnyagina (2017) presented in their study on Russian graduate students' motivation. This means that any motivation that does not stem from inherent enjoyment and pleasure can be categorized as external. Zhaisanova (2022) confirms that, besides parental expectations and societal norms, "self-endorsed [behavior], i.e., personally controlled motivation to attain the desired consequence" (p. 3) also constitute external motivation.

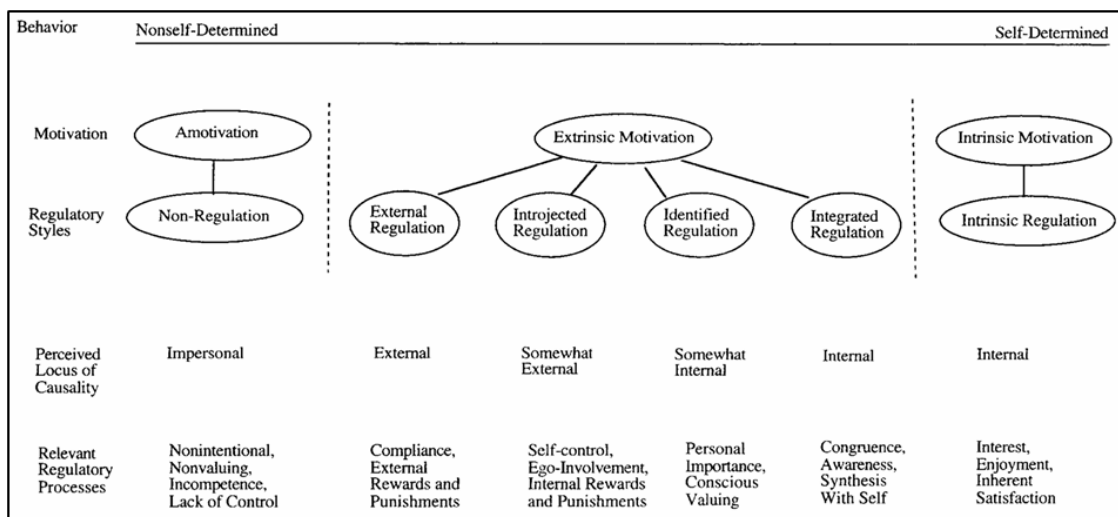
Self-Determination Continuum

To visualize this nuanced difference, Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed that human motivation can be placed on a continuum (Figure 1). This continuum starts with amotivation (no motivation), followed by extrinsic motivation, and ends with intrinsic motivation. Having extrinsic motivation is not as detrimental as being not motivated because individuals still have a certain level of interest, although not as high as when they are intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) admitted that many people are extrinsically motivated because social norms and demands make it more difficult to stay either unmotivated or intrinsically motivated. Often individuals accept external influence and values and appropriate them to themselves. Therefore,

extrinsic motivation is not an absolute notion, and it may vary according to the level of autonomy that individuals perceive during task completion. Consequently, according to the spectrum, some types of extrinsic motivation, such as “identified regulation” and “integrated regulation” (Figure 1), may be considered somewhat internal (on the same level as intrinsic motivation) due to individuals’ conscious internalization of external values, granting them personal importance, and synthesizing them with self (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Figure 1

Self-Determination Continuum



Note. The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation with Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes. Reprinted from “Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being,” by R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, 2000, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), p. 72. Copyright 2024 by the American Psychological Association.

However, based on Darkhanova and Portnyagina’s (2017) study, it is important to consider the historical, social, and economic context of the post-Soviet country in transition, where the personal interests and the social motives may be categorized as internal motivation, despite the clear delineation of them in the theoretical framework of SDT. The Soviet mentality of serving society and family, achieving success and recognition may also be internalized in students’ identity, whose parents and educators grew up during the Soviet period (Chankseliani, 2022). Consequently, students in Kazakhstan may experience internal motivation even if they are not genuinely interested

in their studies. Therefore, in the conceptual framework for this study (Table 1), the self-determination continuum was taken as a basis, but with a broader definition of internal motivation, including “identified regulation” and “integrated motivation”, because, although not inherently internal, they are eventually internalized as internal motives (Figure 1).

Table 1

Conceptual Framework

Behavior	Nonsel- Determined	Self-Determined				
Motivation	Amotivation	Extrinsic Motivation		Intrinsic Motivation		
Regulatory St	<i>Non- Regulation</i>	<i>External Regulation</i>	<i>Introjected Regulation</i>	<i>Identified Regulation</i>	<i>Integrated Regulation</i>	<i>Intrinsic Regulation</i>
Perceived Locus of Causality	Impersonal	External	Somewhat External	Somewhat Internal	Internal	Internal
Relevant Regulatory Processes	Nonintentional, Nonvaluing, Incompetence, Lack of Control	Compliance, External, Rewards and Punishments	Self-Control, Ego- Involvement, Internal Rewards and Punishments	Personal Importance, Conscious Valuing	Congruence, Awareness, Synthesis with Self	Interest, Enjoyment, Inherent Satisfacti on

Note. Adapted from “The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation With Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes.” Reprinted from “Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being,” by R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, 2000, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), p. 72. Copyright 2024 by the American Psychological Association.

Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, I explained that it is worth exploring Kazakhstani AHSS students’ motivation to pursue graduate study in terms of the self-determination continuum. The motivation of AHSS students in Kazakhstan is unique because in addition to experiencing credential inflation, balancing work and study, and work obligation, they face fragmented pathways, the need to build comprehensive personal profiles, and the need to adapt to changing labor market demands. Despite these challenges they demonstrate motivation to acquire a master’s degree, similar to STEM

students with a relatively predetermined career path. Focusing on understanding AHSS students' motives, the study adopts SDT as the conceptual framework, employing the continuum between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, which will guide data collection and analysis. This will allow for a nuanced understanding of the motivational landscape in Kazakhstani non-STEM higher education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology for exploring the academic motivations of postgraduate students using a qualitative approach. It provides the description of the research design, the reason for selecting a public university in Astana as the research site, and the purposeful sampling of 10 to 14 students based on gender and work experience. Semi-structured interviews were the main data collection tool, which helped participants to share their lived experiences in detail. The chapter also explains the analysis process, guided by individual experiential and parallel thematic approach, to analyze the individual experiences and identify significant themes and builds the essence of the phenomenon. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, informed consent, and strategies to mitigate risks, are discussed to ensure the study's integrity.

Research Design

This study aims to investigate what motivates AHSS graduate students to pursue postgraduate education at a public university in Astana, Kazakhstan, using Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000) as a framework. It focuses on analyzing the range of individual motivations along the self-determination continuum to understand how these students balance internal and external driving forces in their academic journey. Accordingly, this study employed qualitative phenomenological design.

First, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), phenomenology is focused on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences. This means that this approach focuses on participants' insider perspectives and meaning making. From the literature on motivation and self-determination theory, it became evident that academic motivation largely depends on the way students perceive and understand their academic journey (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Wertz (2005) argued that phenomenology, by focusing on first-person accounts, provided an in-depth and contextual exploration of psychological

experiences, making it particularly relevant for studies on student motivation, which is directly related to psychological experiences.

Second, as identified in the literature review, motivation can be contextual and influenced by a range of external and internal factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Phenomenology provided a holistic exploration of these dimensions by capturing the interconnectedness of emotions, thoughts, and contextual influences that shaped students' motivations (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, Vagle (2018) noted that phenomenological research offers insights into the ways individuals negotiated meaning in complex social and academic environments, emphasizing the relevance of this approach.

Third, this study aims to explore the meaning behind pursuing graduate study for AHSS students. Researchers pointed out that phenomenology aims to explore the essence of individuals' lived experiences, making it especially useful in understanding motivation to pursue further education (Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2018; Van Manen, 2007). For example, two graduate Sociology students can pursue a master's degree for a set of completely different personal motivations. Such a meaning-making process was challenging to grasp through other methods that prioritized external behavior.

Reflection on the Researcher's Experience

In a qualitative phenomenological design approach, it was essential to acknowledge the researcher's role in interpreting the findings. A qualitative approach relies on and embraces subjectivity from both participants and the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). While this subjectivity was crucial for qualitative exploration, it posed risks such as bias and misinterpretation, which could undermine the reliability of the information generated in this study. To mitigate such risks, Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) explained that "qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity to account for how subjectivity shapes their inquiry" (p. 241). Reflecting on potential biases from both the researcher and participants, as well as understanding how these biases could shape the results and subsequent discussions, was vital. The main task of the researcher was not to

eliminate bias but to recognize how subjectivity influenced the research process and to use this awareness to provide a well-balanced interpretation of the data.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also underscored the importance of bracketing researchers' experiences to prevent distortion in understanding the central phenomenon. This required that before conducting data collection and analysis, the researcher identified their positionality, reflected on their experiences with postgraduate education, assessed how these experiences might have influenced the study, and temporarily set aside personal biases and assumptions.

As a researcher, I was a graduate student with personal interests in pursuing a master's degree. I recognized the importance of education as my own and experienced enjoyment in the process. Enjoyment and comfort were significant in sustaining my motivation. A potential bias I brought to the research was the assumption that externally driven individuals do not try their best to engage with their studies. Such assumptions could have led to a biased interpretation of participants' experiences, particularly those who maintained external or no motivations to pursue a master's degree. To minimize these biases, I prioritized participants' responses and interpretations, posed nuanced questions, and remained conscious to minimize assumptions throughout the research process.

For example, when Alex (Participant 3) shared that education in Kazakhstan has low value and connections are more important, I decided not to engage in the discussion, but to listen carefully and connect their answers with what I was looking for, according to my questions. Although I did not agree with Alex's opinion and felt discouraged, I respected their opinion and understood their perspective on a deeper level. It appeared that their previous educational background abroad, personal experience with group mates and professors, and character traits of perfectionism and devaluation have created such a perspective.

Research Site and Rationale

The research was conducted at a public university in Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan. The capital city was an appropriate choice for the research site to cover diverse populations and to enhance the representativeness of research samples. Additionally, research conducted in capital cities is more likely to influence educational policies due to the proximity to governmental bodies and policymakers (Campante & Do, 2014). This closeness allows for direct engagement with decision-makers, increasing the potential for research to inform and shape educational policy.

Also, the chosen university represents the model of a public university that is common in Kazakhstan (Smolentseva et al., 2018). First, the chosen university accepts graduate students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and regions, based on the Comprehensive Test to enroll into graduate programs. Second, the selected university accepts students from different majors, including STEM and AHSS. It is possible to enroll in a program different from a bachelor's degree specialization (within technical or humanities fields) in cases where students are willing to change their profession or learn something new. Third, the chosen institution provides a blend of teaching and research, which allows recruiting students both aiming to build a career in industry or in research. Fourth, the university allows students to work while studying at graduate programs. Therefore, this site is highly relevant to understanding the diversity of motivations of its students to enroll into master's programs.

Sampling and Participants

This study aimed at exploring and understanding rather than generalizing graduate students' academic motivation. It focused on the master's students in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences on the research site. Convenience sampling, which means that I selected a sample based on the availability of respondents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), was the most viable sampling strategy for this study due to the limited access to the research site and a low interest in participation among the population.

There were no other criteria, and I selected the participants who volunteered to be interviewed.

This sampling strategy helped me recruit seven participants, including five female students, one male student, and one student preferred not to specify their gender (Table 2). Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Six of the participants enrolled in a master's program immediately after graduation from their bachelor's degree and only one student has more than one year of full-time work experience before enrolling into a master's program. However, four students have been balancing part-time work and studies starting from their undergraduate years. Two students changed their majors on a master's level program, while five students continued studying their first major.

Table 2

List of Participants

№	Participant's pseudonym	Bachelor's degree specialization	Master's degree specialization	Gender
Participant 1	Bakhyt	Computer Science	International Relations	Male
Participant 2	Aigerim	Sociology	Sociology	Female
Participant 3	Alex	Philology	Psychology	Not identified
Participant 4	Dana	Sociology	Sociology	Female
Participant 5	Madina	Visual Arts	Design	Female
Participant 6	Asem	Law	Law	Female
Participant 7	Alina	Sociology	Sociology	Female

I managed to recruit seven graduate students from the selected university, which fulfilled Creswell and Poth's (2016) recommendations on the number of participants for a qualitative study. In qualitative research, determining an appropriate sample size is

essential for ensuring the depth and richness of the data. Creswell (2013) suggests that for phenomenological studies, a sample size ranging from 5 to 25 participants is adequate to explore the lived experiences of individuals. Similarly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016), emphasize that the adequacy of a sample size is determined by the data saturation, the moment at which I did not identify any new information. They note that while there are no strict numerical guidelines, achieving saturation is a key indicator of a sufficient sample size (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These guidelines indicate that conducting seven interviews can be considered acceptable for a phenomenological study, provided that the data collected is sufficiently rich and detailed to explore the essence of the participants' experiences. While seven interviews may be sufficient, the quality and depth of the data should ensure satisfactory coverage of the research topic. The subsequent chapter on Findings will demonstrate the richness and quality of the collected data and allow me to discuss the topic in depth.

The participants were invited through institutional email, the access to which I negotiated with the institutional gatekeeper. Once permission was granted, I asked the managers of the AHSS departments to distribute the recruitment email to the students on my behalf. Initially, I sent the information about the study's purpose, procedures, ethical considerations, the registration form, and my contact details. The interested participants could fill out the registration form to provide their contact details and major specialization. After that, the details of the conduct of the interviews were discussed personally with each participant via messengers.

Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection for this study. Sources on qualitative research suggested that interviews are effective for phenomenological research as they allow for exploring participants' personal experiences in depth (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2018; Van Manen, 2007). Semi-structured interviews provided structure for the conversation while also allowing participants freedom to express their experiences. Since academic motivation was a complex

phenomenon for both the researcher and the participants, this flexibility was crucial. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) emphasized that semi-structured interviews were particularly valuable in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which will be discussed further, as they enable researchers to deeper explore participants' lived experiences while maintaining a conversational flow.

The interviews consisted of eight questions (Appendix B). Each question was created by me and designed to ask participants about the factors that motivated them to enroll into their master's programs. The interviews were conducted in Russian due to the participants' preference. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 30-40 minutes. Six interviews were conducted online, and one interview was conducted offline at a venue outside the university due to participants' preferences. The conversations were recorded with the participants' consent. None of the participants declined recording.

All audio recordings were securely stored on my password-protected laptop and phone to ensure the security of the data. Only I had access to the data. To maintain ethical research practices, Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) stressed the importance of ensuring confidentiality in qualitative research, particularly when sensitive personal experiences were shared during interviews. This study adhered to these ethical considerations by limiting data access and securely storing participant information.

Data Analysis

Iterative Approach

I started data collection after the first few interviews and continued in parallel with data collection. This iterative process allowed for adjusting interview questions and exploring emerging themes in greater depth. According to Miles et al. (2014), such an approach to the analysis of information helps to better understand the data and ensures that emerging themes are thoroughly explored. For example, the first participants of my research mentioned the way their master's program is designed and whether they are satisfied with the design or not: "Now I am completely satisfied with what we cover in

class” (Participant 1). The consequent two participants implicitly reported their attitude to their program: “...in the master's degree, it was interesting, firstly, how the university works in Kazakhstan, since I didn't go through this socialization in my bachelor's degree” (Participant 2), “But I would like to have more skills and for education to be more effective, ergonomic, and rationally useful” (Participant 3). I decided to include the additional question “To what extent are you satisfied with your program?”, because this was emerging theme across the first three interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a qualitative study rarely has predetermined variables, and it is important to be prepared to identify them during the data collection process. As it was mentioned before, the purpose of this study is to understand the different academic motivations of students. The emergence of some factors could be unexpected, and I had to capture them during the data collection.

Individual Experiential Approach

In the first stage, the individual experiential approach, often associated with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), provided detailed exploration of each participant’s unique experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), IPA is “about understanding people’s everyday experience of reality, in great detail, so as to gain an understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 8). This method ensured that the details of the personal, subjective nature of continuing education were fully captured before exploring the common essence of pursuing graduate study. An individual approach is essential in this study because motivation may be a deeply individual and contextual phenomenon (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, despite being personal, individual motivations may share patterns and commonalities and even be categorized into a finite set of regulations. Therefore, a thematic approach was used here in parallel.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis provides a structured framework for identifying shared patterns across participants. Clarke and Braun (2017) defined thematic analysis as “a

method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ([‘codes’] and ‘themes’) within qualitative data” (p. 297). As a researcher and data analyst, my task is to capture meaningful information from the data, label it as a code, and then integrate several codes into a broader theme. However, this approach requires more than capturing phrases and integrating them into groups. According to Guest et al. (2012), thematic analysis involves understanding both what was stated explicitly and what was written between the lines.

Coding

Guest et al. (2012) also admitted that reliability is a major concern when using thematic analysis because the researcher defines the data items (i.e., codes) as well as applies the codes to chunks of text. Codes are the units of analysis that represent significant elements of the data, which are potentially relevant to answering the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). For example, the following piece of information – “The first is the scholarship. And the second is that after the bachelor’s degree, the stage of working off the grant begins” (Dana) – can be coded as an “external reward”. Another example: “But I felt pressured by the obligation to work off my grant, by uncertainty about the future, by not really wanting to continue studying, yet feeling as if everyone was pushing me to do it” (Dana) can be coded as “compliance”. These codes are the basis for themes, which are broader patterns of meaning unified by a central broad concept or idea (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In this manner, the codes “external rewards” and “compliance” are integrated into a sub-theme “external regulation”, which is the part of the broader theme “external motivation” originating from the theoretical framework of the study – Self-Determination Theory – and guided by the research questions (Appendix C). According to Clarke and Braun (2017), the research questions in thematic analysis are flexible and can adapt during the coding and theme development stages. The primary goal is to ensure comprehensive and high-quality analysis.

Overall, the data analysis included identifying codes which represented six sub-themes or different regulatory styles: “non-regulation” (“nonintentional”, “nonvaluing”, “incompetence”, “lack of control”), “external regulation” (“compliance”, “external rewards”, “external punishments”), “introjected regulation” (“self-control”, “ego-involvement”, “internal rewards”, “internal punishments”), “identified regulation” (“personal importance”, “conscious valuing”), “integrated regulation” (“congruence”, “awareness”, “synthesis with self”), and “intrinsic regulation” (“interest”, “enjoyment”, “inherent satisfaction”), which are in line with the Self-Determination Continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000) selected as the framework for this study (Appendix C). The analysis proceeded with integrating the themes into broader themes: the sub-theme “non-regulation” was integrated into a broader theme “amotivation”; the sub-themes “external regulation” and “introjected regulation” were integrated into a broader theme “extrinsic motivation” (or “external motivation”); the sub-themes “identified regulation”, “integrated regulation”, and “intrinsic regulation” were integrated into a broader theme “intrinsic motivation” (or “internal motivation”). As it was discussed in the section on conceptual framework, due to the lasting communist mentality of “compliance” and “ego-involvement” (Chankseliani, 2022), Kazakhstani people may perceive certain activities as personally important even if they do not experience “enjoyment” or “inherent satisfaction”. Therefore, the original self-determination continuum should be shifted to a broader definition of internal motivation, including “identified regulation” and “integrated motivation”, because although not inherently internal, but they eventually transform into internal motives (Figure 1).

In this way, the theoretical framework was adjusted to fit the Kazakhstani context. The analysis revealed the frequency of certain codes and categorized participants’ motivational profiles into distinct regulatory styles and further broader themes.

Combining Individual Experiential Approach and Thematic Analysis

The integration of the individual experiential approach and the thematic approach in the current qualitative study contributed to both depth and breadth of the analysis, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences. By combining these methods, I managed to maintain the richness of individual narratives while also generating themes that could be generalized, making the findings both meaningful at an individual level and applicable in broader contexts.

Such a combination is particularly valuable in phenomenological research, where the goal is to understand how people make sense of their experiences. While focusing solely on thematic analysis might risk oversimplifying personal narratives into broad categories, IPA alone may reduce comparability and general applicability of findings. Braun and Clarke (2006) admitted that despite the differences that the two approaches represent in qualitative data analysis, they both are relevant for phenomenological research and can be combined and thoroughly explained: "...there are no hard-and-fast rules in relation to this, and different combinations are possible. What is important is that the finished product contains an account – not necessarily that detailed – of what was done, and why" (p. 15). I proceeded by first exploring each experience in depth, applying thematic coding to identify individual motivational regulations, and then I identified common themes across cases. This was done to ensure that findings are both idiographic (focused on individual cases) and nomothetic (oriented to identifying general patterns) (Smith & Osborn, 2009). Furthermore, this methodology strengthens validity and reliability, as the findings are supported by both rich individual descriptions and patterns identified across cases, enhancing the study's overall credibility.

Ethical Considerations

Since this was a qualitative study, the identities of the participants were known to me. I took the following measures to ensure anonymity and protect the participants' identity. First, I selected the participants myself. The staff and faculty of the research site were not involved in the selection process. Second, the transcribed interviews were

sent to the participants for member-checking (Birt et al., 2016), allowing them to remove any information that could reveal their identities and verify the accuracy of the data before it was used for analysis. Third, I made sure to present information on the participants' background in a vague form not to reveal any specific details about them. Finally, I used pseudonyms to anonymize the participants' real names and for convenience to refer to them.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stressed that informed consent in qualitative research is critical to ensuring ethical integrity, as participants needed a clear understanding of their rights, the design of the study, and their ability to withdraw at any time. Creswell and Poth (2018) also emphasized the importance of transparency in qualitative research, particularly in studies involving personal experiences, to maintain trust and voluntary participation. Therefore, participants received an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, its procedures, potential risks and benefits to participants. They could ask questions before signing the form. The interviews were conducted online or offline at the participants' convenience. The setting of the offline interviews was agreed upon beforehand to ensure privacy and comfort for participants. With the participant's consent, the interview was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. None of the participants declined being audio recorded; however, I took notes for my further consideration.

Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed how pseudonyms are important for anonymity in phenomenological research and highlighted that researchers must take active measures to safeguard sensitive information, ensuring that participants maintain control over how their data is presented and interpreted. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, such as "Bakhyt" or "Asem" to ensure their real names were not associated with any data. The pseudonyms represented the participants' genders, except for the cases when participants refused to indicate their gender – gender-neutral pseudonyms were used instead. Additionally, pseudonyms such as "Participant 1" were used for citations and ensure formal organization. This practice was applied consistently

across all documentation, including interview transcripts, recordings, and notes. Any information that could identify the participants was removed from the transcripts.

Moustakas (1994) noted that qualitative researchers must be especially careful due to balancing ethical responsibility and the depth of the research, ensuring that data security is maintained throughout the research process. Similarly, Van Manen (2016) argued that ensuring confidentiality should be considered in every step of data collection and analysis to protect the identity and integrity of participants' lived experiences. Accordingly, I took the following measures to safeguard the confidentiality of the data. Audio recordings of the interviews were securely stored on my password-protected laptop and phone. A recording was deleted immediately after it was transcribed. The recordings were stored in the secure devices for the whole duration of the study to prevent access by third parties. All the data will be deleted two years after the completion of the thesis.

Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, warning researchers to remain aware of potential emotional distress participants may experience and to provide avenues for participants to voice concerns. In this study on academic motivation, participants could have experienced emotional or psychological discomfort, such as feelings of inadequacy, stress, or self-consciousness, particularly when reflecting on personal challenges. They could also have felt pressured to provide socially desirable answers or share sensitive information, which could have heightened discomfort. To minimize these risks, I reminded the participants that their participation was voluntary, and they had rights to withdraw at any time without consequences. However, none of the participants reported any discomfort.

Participating in research on academic motivation offered students a chance for self-discovery and growth. Reflecting on their motivations often led to greater self-awareness, helping them identify what drove or hindered their academic engagement. For many, this reflection served as a turning point, empowering them to take control of their learning journey. Beyond personal insights, students contributed to larger

educational improvements, knowing their experiences could help shape better educational policies and support systems. The process also provided emotional benefits, offering validation and relief from academic and societal pressures. Additionally, participants may have discovered valuable resources to enhance their motivation and success. The potential benefits for the research site include a deeper understanding of its students' motivations, the efficient ways to sustain it and avoid the emergence of amotivation among them.

Limitations

The first limitation was brought by the methodology for this study. Convenience sampling strategy could have collected “information-poor” data and present low credibility of my findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, I predicted those risks and tried to ask as many follow-up and related questions as possible, to collect more information from the participants. Fortunately, the participants were willing to share their experiences and contribute to my research.

The second limitation was representativeness of the sample of the participants. Most of the volunteered participants were females. Males were less represented in the study. This limitation might be significant, as Participant 3 supposed that one of the motivations to pursue graduate study could be avoiding military service, which only male participants could experience and confirm. This limitation should be brought into consideration in further research and male perspective on continuing education after undergraduate studies should be paid closer attention.

Third, the qualitative nature of this study was both a benefit and a limitation. The research population was less willing to participate in the interviews, rather than questionnaires. The reason for this could be time constraints and the inconvenience or distrust to interact with the researcher directly. However, despite this limitation, I managed to build trust with the participants and manage their time effectively by providing comfortable options such as remote online conversation or conducting the interview at their convenient location.

Finally, even though the chosen university was selected as the representative of universities in Kazakhstan, conducting the study at a single site limits the generalizability and transferability of the findings. The results remain context-specific and may reflect institutional norms, policies, or cultures that differ from other universities. This may also lead to reduced diversity in participant experiences. I tried to reduce this effect by providing rich contextual details.

Summary of the Chapter

This study applied qualitative phenomenological methodology, focusing on exploring graduate students' motivations to continue education at the master's programs. For these purposes, the study selected seven participants from a public university in Astana. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather in-depth data, with an iterative analysis process identifying key themes. Ethical considerations, especially anonymity and confidentiality, were addressed to ensure the protection of participant identities, reliability and validity of the study's findings. Together, these elements provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of AHSS students' motivation to pursue postgraduate education.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and parallel Thematic Analysis, aligning with the phenomenological framework. Each participant's narrative is presented holistically, capturing their personal motivations, experiences, and meaning making behind pursuing a master's degree. Parallel thematic analysis helped to identify each participant's motivational profile. After presenting the individual profiles, a thematic reflection highlighted commonalities and general themes across participants while preserving their unique perspectives. These themes reflected the patterns of the general picture of the Kazakhstani graduate students' motivation and experience in pursuing master's degrees in arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Participant 1: Bakhyt – The Scholar with a Passion for International Relations

Background

Bakhyt transitioned from bachelor's in information technology (IT) to master's in international relations (IR), driven by personal interest and social motives in global politics. His family encouraged him to pursue IT in his undergraduate study, when he was also working in his specialization. However, he always wanted to study international affairs, which resulted in his pursuit of a master's degree in this field.

Internal Motivation

Identified Regulation

Personal Importance

Initially, Bakhyt emphasized personal importance in choosing IR as a master's degree specialization:

A master's degree is not the final goal for me, it is a small transition to doctoral studies, that is, I am not going to stop at the master's degree. I would like to thoroughly study the science of international relations...The initial goal of entering the master's degree was to change my specialization in the direction of my dream, so to speak. (Participant 1)

This quote referred to how much this program mattered to Bakhyt on a personal level, because it connected with his dreams and goals. His dream was to explore international policy and law, and his goal was to pursue a doctoral study in this area.

Integrated Regulation

Awareness

Bakhyt also had a clear understanding and conscious knowledge of his own thoughts, emotions, and needs: “Completing my bachelor’s degree was what was required of me, but I wanted to continue studying what I had originally planned....inside I had this feeling: it’s better to do what you want, not what is necessary” (Participant 1).

Congruence

He acknowledged that he may not be successful if he decides to change his specialization from IT to IR: “Even if I can’t find a job in the future, it won’t be the end of the world for me, because I have a background in IT, and it won’t be a problem for me to work as an IT specialist” (Participant 1). However, despite those risks, Bakhyt had a strong alignment with his thoughts, feelings, values, and actions: “Sometimes it can happen that a person is very diligent, and he will find some work in this field. I think I will succeed” (Participant 1).

Synthesis with Self

He talks about himself as an internationalist. This means that Bakhyt had fully integrated an identity of a specialist in international relations into his sense of who he is — it feels natural, authentic, and aligned with his identity: “...there are still countries that do not adhere to international law, and this is very important for us, internationalists. For us, the main law is the Charter of the United Nations. This is what attracted me to this specialty” (Participant 1).

Intrinsic Regulation

Inherent Satisfaction

Despite the challenges that he experienced while preparing for the enrollment and further lessons, he was satisfied with what he was learning all this time:

When classes are held, I understand that my choice was right, even though it was difficult for me to prepare, because I devoted the whole day to preparation for two months while I was preparing for the comprehensive testing. I understand that all these efforts were not in vain. Now I am completely satisfied with what we study in classes. (Participant 1).

Enjoyment

It appeared that pursuing a master's degree in international relations was associated with what he loved to do as a child. Bakhyt mentioned how politics was once his hobby which he shared with his grandfather: "Yes, since childhood I have loved discussing foreign policy with my grandfather – what is happening in other countries, and domestic policy – what is happening in Kazakhstan" (Participant 1).

Summary

Bakhyt developed internal motivation, meaning that he recognized personal importance and demonstrated conscious valuing of the master's program that he enrolled in. The reason for that was his independent decision to study what was aligned with his values and interests. He also exhibited awareness of his emotions and needs, and some risks regarding unemployment. Despite those risks, he exhibited congruence and confidence with his plans and did not hesitate to follow them. Finally, Bakhyt managed to synthesize his new specialization with himself because of his genuine interest, inherent satisfaction, and enjoyment with what he studied.

Participant 2: Aigerim – The Analytical Sociologist

Background

Aigerim came from a family of scholars and finished her Bachelor in Sociology abroad. Due to Covid-19, she had to return to Kazakhstan. First, she enrolled in a graduate program in a different field of humanity. However, online education and new specialization did not satisfy Aigerim. As a result, she decided to drop out and work in a related field in Kazakhstan. After a year of working experience, she decided to enroll in the Master in Sociology at the research site.

External Motivation

Introjected Regulation

Self-Control

Aigerim had a dilemma in terms of choosing the university for her postgraduate education. She was choosing between a prestigious university and a public university in Kazakhstan. The first university did not have a graduate program for sociology, while the second one had a specific Master in Sociology program: “After my ‘rebellions’ I realized that sociology was closest to me... That is why I chose my university, where I am currently studying, because it has a specialty in which I specialize very well” (Participant 2). She demonstrated the ability to regulate her thoughts and actions. It is especially seen in her mentioning the prestigious university that she was seriously thinking about it, but she resisted the temptations and recommendations of her relatives and made a responsible choice.

Ego-Involvement

Aigerim admitted that she decided to pursue further education on the recommendation of her colleagues:

My decision to continue my master’s degree was influenced by my colleagues, and most of them were also sociologists, they advised me to continue my education, firstly, due to my status, since in scientific circles a degree is important. Plus, they insisted that this status would bring prestige and a calculation for an increase in the salary range. Well, plus they motivated me by the fact that I already had knowledge that I could show in the master’s degree, and this was simply confirmation for other people, who didn’t work with me personally. (Participant 2)

It was important for Aigerim to understand how her colleagues and potential employers view her. This could be a sign of ego-involvement. In other words, she could pursue the master’s program not just for the program itself, but to protect or boost her status as an analyst-sociologist.

Internal Motivation

Integrated Regulation

Awareness

Despite the significant influence of Aigerim's colleagues in her motivation to pursue a graduate program, she exhibited awareness about her own thoughts and emotions towards further studies in sociology, because this discipline had always been her natural interest: "All these near-humanity topics were the norm in our family: to discuss, to debate, to argue. That is, there was no forced education in the humanities in my life. Everything happened to me naturally, like breathing" (Participant 2.)

Congruence

By continuing further studies in Master in Sociology program, Aigerim demonstrated alignment between her thoughts and actions, even though she could choose a broader specialty in a prestigious university: "A master's degree usually implies, on the contrary, a narrowing of focus. That's why I thought that yes, it is more prestigious, but at the same time broader and less interesting to me" (Participant 2). She believed that a graduate program should be a specialized program, where students narrow down their professional focus. Therefore, by choosing sociology further, she stayed aligned with her values and beliefs.

Synthesis with Self

As a result of the natural upbringing with humanity parents and Aigerim's interest in sociology, her specialty gradually became a part of her identity. Aigerim explained that all sociologists have this "sociological imagination" within themselves:

I can't look at religion differently, because for me it doesn't carry anything sacred; rather, it performs an important social function. Well, to see how it works, how people react to it. So, sociology is probably the habit that I have developed... Well, that is, it's already in my head. (Participant 2)

This meant that she had fully integrated sociology into her sense of who she was — it felt natural, authentic, and aligned with their identity.

Intrinsic Regulation

Interest

Finally, Aigerim explained how her interest in sociology sparked when she was at high school: “in the 9th grade I read what sociology was and said to myself: “Well, that’s cool!” – and started reading something after that” (Participant 2). Sociology drew Aigerim’s attention and made her want to explore more. She was also curious about other sociologists in her country, how education works in Kazakhstan, because she lacked this experience in her undergraduate studies:

Networking was also important to me in the master’s program, because I wanted not only to get to know some sociologists at work, but also in the master’s program it was interesting, firstly, how the university works in Kazakhstan, because I did not go through this socialization in the bachelor’s program.

(Participant 2)

Summary

Aigerim’s academic journey towards a master’s degree was shaped by both external and internal motivations. She demonstrated self-control and ego-involvement in her decisions to pursue graduate study, because she acknowledged the importance of these decisions for her future career and reputation. She admitted how her colleagues encouraged to pursue a master’s degree due to future financial benefits and higher education credentials that may boost her academic status. However, Aigerim was also genuinely interested in her specialization, the program, and her colleagues-sociologists. She exhibited awareness of the origins of her interest and managed to synthesize “sociological imagination” with her identity.

Participant 3: Alex – The Critical Psychologist

Background

Alex initially pursued philology abroad but later realized a deeper passion for psychology. However, no one from their social circle supported them in their interests.

Their journey reflected a struggle between desire to help people and obstacles of the system that they studied in.

Amotivation

Non-Regulation

Nonvaluing

Alex's motivation stems from a lack of appreciation for credentialism in contemporary society:

Education is not a priority for society, a credential is a priority. And education as such, academic literacy, everything else, is not valued...Roughly speaking, a piece of paper and appearance are needed, but actual competencies...

Connections decide, so I do not think that this gives some kind of social boost.

(Participant 3)

Lack of Control

They were also convinced that their motivation or other students' motivation cannot change the quality of education:

I don't really believe in the story that everything depends on the student's motivation, because student motivation alone is not enough to get a quality education... And this did not motivate me to enroll in a master's program.

(Participant 3)

Incompetence

Also, Alex was not satisfied with the program and their skills. They believed that their knowledge is not enough to do something effectively or successfully:

I would like to have more skills so that education would be more effective, rational and useful. So that the time spent on it, all these classes, all these assignments, would be more focused on obtaining specific competencies and knowledge. (Participant 3)

External Motivation

Introjected Regulation

Self-Control

Alex continued doing what they believed is worth doing - staying focused on education and making responsible choices:

It's probably hard to say, because I have my own personal characteristics – devaluation, impostor syndrome, perfectionism... Although, I invest a lot, as people tell me, I invest too much in all this, and the load is quite high if I really do everything as it should be. (Participant 3)

Internal Punishments

However, still Alex experienced negative feelings because they acted against their standards and expectations from education:

Probably, if it were some kind of “education-education” in some, I don't know, university, everything would be in a spherical vacuum, everything would be wonderful, then, probably, there would be no feeling of “thorns”. But since we live in the realities in which we live, the feelings are so powerful, very sharp, very deeply cutting, tearing, traumatic. (Participant 3)

Internal Motivation

Identified Regulation

Personal Importance

What made Alex persist with their postgraduate education was acknowledgment of the importance of psychology for themselves and other people: “I think that psychological help is in great demand not only in Kazakhstan, but all over the world. Now there is a shortage of specialists not just ‘on paper’, but those who can do something and help” (Participant 3).

Conscious Valuing

Alex was actively recognizing and understanding the importance of this education, and choosing to do it because they believed it was right to do it and had personal value for themselves.

I was interested in psychology as a teenager. I wanted to pursue it, but no one supported the idea. Now I'm trying to get this education to change specialization. It seems to me that it is necessary to have some knowledge, higher education, to work as a psychologist, and not to engage in charlatanism. (Participant 3)

Intrinsic Regulation

Interest

The more Alex dived deeper into the field of psychology, the more they wanted to explore and learn more:

Again, it relates to people, the human being is at the center of everything... there is a psychology that is based on specific research, on the analysis of MRI data and other objective methods. This is also very interesting, and there is still a huge field for study here. I think psychology has great potential. There are sciences that are older, already well studied, but a certain "novelty" of psychology attracts me very much. (Participant 3)

Inherent Satisfaction

Finally, despite the strict requirements and pressure from their studies, Alex exhibits fulfillment from the knowledge they acquire from the process of studying:

There is a high bar, and to meet it, you need to put in a lot of effort, you need to master all of this. Probably you don't have to do this, but I try, I seem to be doing well, and therefore, in terms of research, I will have the skills to study, write papers, prepare materials, articles, dissertations, and so on, and design all of this. (Participant 3)

Summary

Alex struggled between amotivation, external motivation, and internal motivation, making their motivational profile unique and diverse. Some parts of their identity were discouraged by society's devaluation of education and knowledge. Despite these moments of amotivation, Alex continued exhibiting self-control to make responsible choices. They demonstrated perfectionism and tendency to devaluation,

which may have been resulted in experiencing internal punishments – completing tasks that go contrary to their expectations of a good education. All these were done due to Alex’s personal importance that they assigned to psychology and conscious valuing of the degree that they worked for. The degree could become an indicator of their professionalism and approval to help people struggling with mental health. Alex’s interest in the field of psychology helped them to persist despite their frustration with the system and even let them experience inherent satisfaction while acquiring knowledge.

Participant 4: Dana – The Pragmatic Sociologist

Background

Dana has always been balancing work and study and decided to continue her education in sociology with a master’s degree due to pragmatic reasons and to comply with the state regulations.

Amotivation

Non-regulation

Nonintentional

Dana admitted that she enrolled into a master’s program without deliberate planning, purpose, or conscious decision: “I am not going to apply for a doctorate...I want to continue my career...And a master’s degree... well, I think it is just good to have a master’s degree” (Participant 4).

Nonvaluing

Because she pursued her studies unintentionally and that the studies provided a mere repetition of what she already studied at her undergrad, Dana exhibited a lack of appreciation to the theoretical part of the program: “I like practice more, I don’t really like studying, it’s theory, because it’s constantly repeated” (Participant 4).

Lack of control

Dana’s dissatisfaction was exacerbated by the lack of autonomy that she felt when choosing a topic for her master’s thesis: “On the second day we were told to

choose a dissertation topic. This was very alarming. It was such a choice without a choice, that it was necessary to immediately decide on a scientific supervisor”

(Participant 4).

External Motivation

External Regulation

External Rewards and Punishments

One of the positive motives to pursue a master’s program for Dana was the stipend, and a negative one, the threat of mandatory work obligation:

Most likely, I entered the master’s program for two reasons. The first is the scholarship. And the second is that after the bachelor’s degree, the stage of working off the grant begins (I also studied for the bachelor’s degree on a grant).

It turns out that in September I already needed to find a job and receive pension contributions, but by September time was running out: I only graduated in July, and only two months remained to find an official job and start working off the grant. This seemed too short a period to me. In addition, I was worried that in September they would already be checking whether you were working off the grant or not, and I still had not found myself and my path. So, I decided that the best thing was to enter the master’s program and still receive a scholarship.

(Participant 4)

Despite her lack of motivation to study further, Dana decided to pursue postgraduate study due to the lack of time to choose where she wanted to work and the legal authorities that required her to start working in September, the year she graduated. Otherwise, she would have been obliged to reimburse the cost of her undergraduate education.

Compliance

As a result, Dana went with the rules without questioning them, even if she was not enthusiastic about this, but she felt this could be the most comfortable option:

“Morally, yes, it was difficult, because I didn’t want to enroll, but this was putting

pressure on me” (Participant 4). Additionally, she followed expectations of her relative who had more experience in Dana’s field and who insisted on the importance of a master’s degree for her career, even though she was not initially interested in the field: “[they] always say, ‘It’s better to do to a master’s degree, at least so that you have a higher degree” (Participant 4).

Introjected Regulation

Ego-Involvement

It seemed that Dana’s relatives, who did not study at a master’s program, affected her perception of the higher degree and how it may affect her status later in her career: “[They] always said: ‘Enroll in a master’s degree, at least something, so that in the future you will not be treated like [we were treated] at work’ (Participant 4). It may be the case that Dana pursued a master’s degree to protect her ego and avoid her relatives’ mistakes in terms of acquiring educational credentials.

Internal Rewards

After some time, in the middle of her first year at the graduate program, Dana recognized the value of sociology and how universal and useful this degree can be:

What I like about sociology is that it is a kind of mixed discipline, that it touches on psychology, political science, and the ability to process big data. I think that this is the most necessary skill for me, because in the future, perhaps, if I want, I can become a data analyst thanks to sociology. (Participant 4)

Summary

In this way, Dana’s motivational profile started with amotivation, because she admitted how her enrollment was nonintentional, and she experienced lack of autonomy and control when she studied at the program. However, due to external rewards such as scholarship and external punishments such as mandatory work obligation, she exhibited compliance with the rules and expectations. Due to the influence and threats of her relatives, Dana decided to boost her professional status through pursuing a master’s

program in sociology. Finally, she started noticing internal rewards that she gained from the program in the pursuit of her professional goals.

Participant 5: Madina – The Creative Educator

Background

Madina is an enthusiastic practitioner and educator in design. She was interested in design from an early age and decided to enroll in a bachelor's in visual arts, after which she found herself enrolling for a master's in design.

Amotivation

Non-regulation

Nonvaluing

Madina admitted that due to the growth in credentialism and societal expectations, she found it hard to appreciate having a master's degree: "Now every second bachelor's degree graduate gets a master's degree. I think there are a lot of master's degree students, to be honest. So, in general, it depends more on the person" (Participant 5).

External Motivation

External Regulation

External Rewards

With the understanding of society's view of a master's diploma and growing credentialism, Madina shared that external rewards, such as an opportunity to expand her sources of income, played a role in her decision to pursue a master's degree in design:

For me, this is more like a desirable thing, because in the future I will be able to use it as an additional source of income. I can come to the university to teach, if I don't want, for example, to practice design, I can be a theorist. To be a theorist, you need to have a degree slightly higher than a bachelor's degree. (Participant 5)

Internal Motivation

Identified Regulation

Conscious Valuing

Despite the strong awareness of the external factors, Madina recognized the importance of continuous education because she believed it had personal value for her: “I like my studies, everything is going well. I like to receive, so to speak, continuous education” (Participant 5).

Integrated Regulation

Congruence

Madina shared that initially pursuing a master’s degree was not in her plans: “This was a completely unexpected decision for me. I thought I would work, but then I just thought about it and the teachers also told us that while there is a ‘vein’ to study, it is better to enroll” (Participant 5). Gradually she realized that everything turned out natural for her and her close friends that she studied with. The work obligation requirements did not affect their decisions much: “We plan to stay in Kazakhstan, so the work obligation is not a problem for us” (Participant 5). Madina also realized that despite her long journey of searching for her purpose in career, she came back to what she enjoyed doing in her childhood: “I decided to try myself in art. I had to pass creative exams. I received a grant to become a designer. In general, my story turned out that way, as if it was supposed to be that way” (Participant 5). Therefore, everything started to fit together and felt authentic for Madina.

Awareness

Madina demonstrated a clear understanding of her thoughts and actions when she decided to enroll into a master’s program: “Me and my friends from the bachelor’s decided to apply together. We thought if we get in, then it will be great, and we all were accepted together” (Participant 5). She was also aware of the design of the program and was conscious about its advantages and disadvantages: “Here are some topics, yes, we

went through them again, the same ones as in the bachelor's degree, but in general it's not a problem – it's never a bad thing to repeat some topics" (Participant 5).

Intrinsic Regulation

Interest

Madina also reported that she was curious and enthusiastic about learning different directions of design during her graduate study: "We cover all of this: motion design, web design, all of this was included in our training program, so I am interested in, well, such related fields... I like this change of activity" (Participant 5).

Enjoyment

She even reported a feeling of pleasure from doing something she liked and was proud of the fact that she and her groupmates work in the industries related to their fields of study:

I wasn't an excellent student at school, I was an average student. Then I came to university, and I started to like everything there, we also had such a healthy competition among group mates...And we don't have anyone who doesn't work in their specialty. Interesting statistics: everyone works as a designer here. Well, those who graduated with me are all designers, or in related fields... Basically, we are all creative people. (Participant 5)

Inherent Satisfaction

Finally, Madina realized that she felt fulfillment from teaching design and becoming a theorist. From her reports it can be said that the practice of teaching was not just a task to complete, but a satisfactory activity for her:

I love it, I think I realized that I like sharing knowledge, especially with students. I also got such a good group, they just absorb everything like a sponge, then, when I give them practical tasks, they try to do it exactly as I asked them...Each time they surprise me more and more, in a good way. Therefore, I am very glad that students can get good knowledge from me. (Participant 5)

Summary

Madina's unique motivation to pursue a master's degree stems from her initial amotivation to continue her education due to devaluation of credentials in modern society. She considered the benefits of the degree only in terms of expanding her income sources. Madina wanted to assess her chances and enroll into a program with her friends and, as soon as she managed to do so, she realized how engaging and interesting it is. Madina exhibited awareness of the conditions and her abilities, her thoughts and actions, and consciously chose to continue and enjoy her studies. She even realized how inherently satisfying it was for her to be a theorist and teach students in design.

Participant 6: Asem – The Legal Strategist

Background

Asem came from a family of master's degree holders, and she demonstrated a strong motivation to develop professionally. She was more interested in practical knowledge rather than theoretical, that is why she plans to pursue a career in the practical field of law.

External Motivation

External Regulation

External Rewards

Asem admitted that a scholarship was a very strong incentive for her to enroll into a master's program: "I'm currently on an internship, and the salary isn't very big, and then there's the diploma, and you also get a scholarship. In general, the conditions are good" (Participant 6).

Internal Motivation

Identified Regulation

Conscious Valuing

Asem recognized and understood the importance of a master's degree and chose to do it because she believed it had personal meaning and value:

My [relatives] always said that if you want to become a professional worker, it is important to have a master's degree, that studying for a master's degree is a must. And it is like a small part of the family tradition. All our relatives studied for a master's degree, so for me, a master's degree is not just a continuation of education, but a step that confirms my serious attitude and readiness for work.

(Participant 6)

Integrated Regulation

Congruence

From her reports, it can be seen that the decision to pursue a master's degree in law aligned strongly with her identity and felt as a natural step: "This is a continuation of my bachelor's degree, a logical step, because I have a family of [professionals], and in my family, a master's degree is considered a necessary step to become a professional in the field" (Participant 6). Asem even decided on her thesis topic, that was linked with her interests and stemmed from what she was already familiar: "Probably something in the field of family law, even at university I liked family law more, protecting women, yes, that's what I like" (Participant 6).

Intrinsic Regulation

Interest

Asem shared that the master's program sparked more interest in her due to the in-depth nature of the studies: "Here we go more in-depth than what we studied at the university during our undergraduate degree. Our teachers are more open to dialogue, and I can discuss with them questions that interest me" (Participant 6).

Inherent Satisfaction

She was enthusiastic talking about how helpful studying law was in her everyday life and the pleasure she experienced from using her knowledge:

I realized that I really like working with law. This field gives the opportunity to demonstrate analytical skills... This will even be needed in real life: you can speak confidently, defend yourself. I had such an experience when I was still a

student at the university, my employers did not give me a salary. I solved this with the help of laws: I said that I am a future lawyer, so you better be afraid. I like that I know more laws. (Participant 6)

Summary

Even though Asem was attracted by the scholarship and earning a diploma of a master's degree, these were only hygiene external factors that let her develop herself as a professional lawyer at a graduate program. Due to her upbringing in the family of humanity professionals, she strongly identified herself with her profession and understood the value and responsibility behind earning a higher degree in law. This path felt natural and aligned with her identity. Asem also realized that the master's program sparked her interest in law even more and allowed her to explore this field in-depth. As a result of applying her knowledge in her life, she started feeling inherent satisfaction from what she was doing.

Participant 7: Alina – The Social Researcher

Background

Alina decided to move to another city and pursue a master's in sociology, which was her specialization during her undergraduate studies. She was planning to become a sociology teacher at a university. Alina did not plan to go to PhD, but she wanted to build a career in teaching.

Internal Motivation

Identified Regulation

Personal Importance

Pursuing a master's degree had a personal value for Alina. She shared that if she was not accepted now, she would keep trying to apply until she would be accepted: "I would still try for the winter semester, if it didn't work out then, then next year. Well, I would still strive for it" (Participant 7). She also shared an interesting story that demonstrated the symbolism that Alina assigned to her acceptance to the master's program: "God saw what I was sacrificing for the sake of my master's degree. I thought

a lot about whether to postpone the exam or to postpone my [plans]. I decided to take the exam” (Participant 7). This showed how much meaning Alina put into her acceptance into the program.

Integrated Regulation

Synthesis with Self

Alina’s thesis topic was also related to her personal experience and aligned with her sense of who she was:

We studied Durkheim in the first year, he has a book “Suicide”. And since then, the topic of suicide has always been interesting to me. Kazakhstan is in third or fourth place in the world in suicide. This is a big problem. As a teenager, I had thoughts about suicide...Looking at myself and society, I was always interested in studying this, but I did not think that I would choose this for the topic of my master’s degree. (Participant 7)

Intrinsic Regulation

Interest

She shared about how the world drew her attention, about her curiosity to explore social problems, understand people and herself:

What is interesting is that you study society and can solve your problems through social theories, and this helps you understand people. You can simply look at a picture and understand what is happening there. For example, you look at others on the bus and understand a situation. It just comes with experience, if you study theories. You see a problem and want to study it, find out if you have such a problem, how it was studied before. (Participant 7)

Inherent Satisfaction

Finally, Alina talked about the natural pleasure she experienced from studying and how she never forced herself to study at the master’s program: “In my bachelor’s degree I had the syndrome of an excellent student, and in my master’s degree I don’t

work hard, but I'm doing well. In general, I like to study, and I don't force myself' (Participant 7).

Summary

Acceptance into a master's program in sociology had a personal importance for Alina, because she put a lot of symbolic meaning into this. She demonstrated synthesis with self by linking her personal experiences to her studies to understand herself, the people around her, and society. She was inherently satisfied by what she was doing and studied sociology for its own sake, without thinking about grades and stipend.

Thematic Reflection

Introduction

By analyzing the interviews in more depth, the themes of social influence, combining work and study, credential inflation, and mandatory work obligation also emerged across participants. The following sections presented these findings in detail.

Social Influence

Influence of Close Circle

It could be noticed that the participants' parents and relatives played a significant role in their educational decisions. In some cases, family influenced participants' choice of the undergraduate study. It turned out that the families of Bakhyt, Aigerim, and Asem were significant contributors to the choice of their first profession and university. While Bakhyt was forced to study computer science by the recommendation of relatives based on the popularity of this profession, Aigerim and Asem were genuinely interested in their first professions due to their relatives' background in these and related AHSS fields.

When it came to further education, some parents and relatives did not put pressure on students and did not express strong opinion about the students' master's degree specializations. After the completion of undergraduate study, Bakhyt and Madina's families were supportive in terms of their pursuit of further education based

on their interests. Their parents and relatives did not interfere with their decisions after the completion of the bachelor's degree.

There were cases when family forced or insisted on enrollment into a master's program, regardless of students' interests. These families were closely related to the fields that students were specializing in. Aigerim and Asem's parents and relatives even completed graduate degrees in the corresponding and other humanity specializations. Also, while Dana's relatives did not pursue a master's degree, they completed the bachelor's degree in sociology and insisted on the importance of having a higher graduate diploma for her career.

Other students followed their groupmates and friends in their pursuit of a master's degree. It happened that Madina and Alina were more motivated by their peers, rather than family, in their decision to continue their education. They tried their chances to enroll with their group mates and managed to do that without difficulties.

Influence of Professional Circle

The participants' professional circle emphasized different benefits of pursuing a master's degree. Aigerim reported that her colleagues recommended her to pursue graduate education, because it could be a good complement to the salary. Also, Asem's colleagues emphasized professional growth as a motivation for her to pursue a master's in law. In comparison to Aigerim and Asem's colleagues who acquired master's diplomas, Dana's colleagues wanted to continue education and combine it with work but failed to do so. Despite this, they acknowledged that having a master's degree is more beneficial for career growth and salary.

In Alex's case, their colleagues provided a negative example by not pursuing higher education in psychology. They emphasized that some professionals not only lack credentials, but also empathy and acceptance of people's experiences. Furthermore, Alex and Madina's acquaintances shared negative reviews on postgraduate education in general, reporting that it does not provide any additional benefits and promotion.

In this way, the participants' colleagues and experienced acquaintances reported different views on the importance of having a master's degree. While positive recommendations positively motivated Aigerim, Asem, and Dana, negative reviews did not affect Alex and Madina's motivation to continue education, because they realized personal importance of it.

Influence of Social Figures

Among the participants, only Bakhyt and Alex reported that social figures inspired them to pursue postgraduate education. Bakhyt was driven by the professionalism and deep knowledge of the field demonstrated by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the current President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Alex was inspired by the research-oriented approach of one of the female scientists from Kazakhstan, who was popularizing science in social media.

Thus, while Bakhyt and Alex were motivated by different social figures, the common characteristics that they were inspired by were their professionalism, knowledge, and constant self-development. Interestingly, both participants considered graduate education diplomas essential to demonstrate professionalism and credibility in their fields – international relations and psychology.

Combining work and study

Most of the participants – six out of seven– combined part-time or full-time work with their graduate studies. Dana, Madina, and Bakhyt were working starting from their undergraduate years. Asem and Aigerim started their working experience after they graduated. Alina was the one who started working during her master's program.

Role of Scholarship

While most of the participants were working, they had different perspectives on the amount of scholarship that they received for studying on a grant. Dana and Asem strongly emphasized the importance of having a stipend. They admitted that scholarships were a significant incentive for them to ease the pressure from enrolling

into their master's program. In contrast, Alina stated directly that a stipend was a good incentive, but it was not significant and substantial to accommodate her in a new city.

Amount of Workload

Students chose their priorities when combining different kinds of work with their study. For example, Dana prioritized work over studies. Because many topics she already studied in her undergraduate years, she realized she could prioritize work more and not attend some lectures. In contrast, for Asem, her internship is a convenient way to gain some experience without compromising her studies. Alina also reported that her work was convenient for having time for studies and allowed her to earn her subsistence far from home. Madina even switched from part-time work to freelance to be able to study in parallel.

Despite a relatively flexible schedule, students acknowledged the difficulties they faced during combining their work and studies. Madina shared that working part-time and studying was not as convenient as it might seem, especially when she attempted to accomplish her tasks with high quality and when exam periods started and interfered with the work processes. For Asem, the repetitions of the content between her bachelor's and master's programs were overwhelming, but she accepted this as a good opportunity to learn the content that she knew more in-depth. At times, the evening classes were not as convenient as Alina thought they could be. Constant time management and brain stimulation sometimes affected her mental well-being.

Therefore, although students could manage their time between work and study, this was still considered a challenge for them. Furthermore, the question of whether work interferes with their studies was still unanswered in a clear way, because balancing work and study was considered a norm among Kazakhstani students. Dana, Asem, and Madina seemed to benefit from gaining experience working in their field. However, Alina worked in an unrelated field and reported difficulties managing her time and regulating her mental state.

Struggles with Changing Profession

Several students mentioned the repetitions in the content of their bachelor's and master's programs. These were the students who continued studying their initial specializations. However, there were two students who changed their professions, and they reported different perceptions. For example, as was stated in his individual experiential analysis, Bakhyt felt inherent satisfaction, despite the challenges of preparing himself for the new specialization. Alex was also working hard completing their assignments for their new specialization and investing a lot of energy to accomplish their tasks in the right way. Both Bakhyt and Alex approached their studies responsibly due to the absence of the foundation in their fields.

Therefore, a curriculum, that was designed for beginners or students from other majors, benefited Bakhyt and Alex, but may seem not as in-depth as other experienced students might expect it to be.

Credential Inflation

Impact on Social Status

The views on the credential significance of a master's degree were divided among the participants. Bakhyt, Aigerim, Dana, and Asem believed in the high value of the master's diploma to increase social status. Alex, Madina, and Alina were neutral or did not recognize the importance of the master's degree. Madina stated that a master's degree is an optional degree that is more socially constructed, and it depends on a person whether he needs it or not. Alina was also neutral about the significance of the master's degree due to her understanding that currently a graduate diploma is a standard among employees. In comparison to Madina and Alina, Alex was radical in their opinion and believed that in contemporary society education is not enough and only social connections may boost social status.

In this way, the credential inflation in the Kazakhstani labor market created doubts about the importance of a master's degree for social mobility. Some participants claimed that it depends on an individual's goals, while others believed that regardless of

career aspirations, a graduate diploma was a must-have, but still not a significant achievement.

Mandatory Work Obligation

Some students shared that the mandatory work obligation also affected their motivation to pursue further studies. For Dana, for example, the work obligation was perceived as a threat and pressure to decide on her career path. In contrast, Madina did not find the obligation a problem. While other students did not share their view on work obligation, Alex stated directly that many students pursue master's degree to avoid working off the grant and allocate some time to decide on further career.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented each participant's individual experiential narrative, preserving the essence of their lived experiences while identifying broader themes. The thematic analysis provided insights into shared motivations and distinct personal journeys. It revealed that students' motivational regulations for pursuing a master's degree vary significantly, from external rewards and compliance to inherent satisfaction and genuine interests. While many participants demonstrated internal motivation, some were also driven by external motives. Additionally, amotivation emerged among students who felt disengaged due to structural inefficiencies in the educational system, however, they persisted in their studies due to personal importance and interest in the profession. The next chapter will discuss these findings in relation to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and existing literature on Kazakhstani students.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

As it was written by Shnarbekova (2020), the hybrid educational system in Kazakhstan, that now represents the mixture of Soviet principles with contemporary international standards, created both opportunities and challenges for graduate students, and especially for AHSS graduate students. Despite these challenges, the findings of this study demonstrated that AHSS students were highly motivated to acquire a master's diploma. These motivations were either externally or internally driven, depending on the level of perceived autonomy in students' choice, but the fact of the presence of their motivation was evident from their responses. When identifying the sources of their motivation, themes such as professional boost, changing specialization, securing job prospects, following social influences, combining work and study, securing time for job search, dealing with mandatory work obligation, and structural challenges emerged. The study managed to collect rich data and, according to the participants' responses, identify motivational regulations among participants in relation to these emerging themes.

Internal Motivation

Impact on Professional Status

Most participating students admitted the personal importance and conscious valuing of the master's degree for social mobility, especially in scientific humanity fields. The higher degree was identified as important for academic positions such as instructors and professors. Besides academia, a master's credential was known as demonstrating professionalism and experience among specialists in a particular field. The perceived importance of a master's degree for both academia and industry reflected Eimer and Bohndick's (2023) point about the need of humanities students to create individual profiles with both academic and professional experience, to become and stay relevant in fragmented and diverse labor markets. Ryan and Deci (2000) may also explain this motivation as a desire to fulfill individuals' competence needs through accomplishing tasks such as studying on a master's level. Therefore, AHSS students can

be motivated to continue education to boost their professional status and competence in the field.

Following Social Influences

As it was considered in earlier chapters, Kazakhstani youth may tend to internalize the values of their close social circles due to the Soviet-style upbringing of conformity (Chankseliani, 2022). Many participants admitted the influence of parents, friends, and colleagues working in the same specialization field in their motivation to pursue graduate education in this field. Such a tendency may also be explained by SDT: individuals tend to be more motivated to accomplish certain tasks when they feel related to this task through social connections (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Duisenova et al. (2020) talked about this as “the dependent complex of Kazakhstani youth” (p. 191), which makes them follow the values of their close social circle and internalize them as their own, especially when parents usually influence students’ educational choices starting from young age. Therefore, continuing education may be imposed by social circle and internalized among students in Kazakhstan.

Changing Profession

According to Duisenova et al. (2020) changing specialization was also considered a motivation among students to pursue a master’s degree. It appeared that some participants of this study decided to change their profession after receiving a bachelor’s degree. They realized that on a master’s level they could follow the path that they were always thinking about but did not allow themselves due to societal pressures and parental expectations. This finding is in line with Eimer and Bohndick’s (2023) point that despite challenges with enrollment into a different specialization program, these students exhibited adaptability in career pathways, self-efficacy, and perseverance (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023). This also demonstrated that some students may perceive graduate education as a time for experimentation and following personal interest after undergraduate studies that were mainly imposed by their parents and relatives.

External Motivation

Combining Work and Study

Most of the participants in the study were combining their studies and work starting from their undergraduate years. Many were studying on an educational scholarship and did not need to pay tuition fees. However, as Smolentseva (2012) noted, most students decided to combine work and study not only to sustain themselves financially, but also to gain professional experience and increase their chances to be employed after graduation. However, after graduation with working experience, the students not only found employment, but also decided to pursue further higher degree.

Besides earning a diploma, graduate students with working experience consider a master's scholarship as an external reward, in addition to their salaries. Others who only started to work reported state support as a strong reason to continue education, which echoes findings by Duisenova et al. (2020). Reflecting another finding by Duisenova et al. (2020), some students decided to continue education and search for a suitable job at the same time. This dynamic seems like an attempt to avoid unemployment and over-education, that were mentioned as risks for humanities students by Næss and Wiers-Jenssen (2023). This also may demonstrate that further education was considered important to undergo among some students, but only as a complement to their main work, which was a priority to attain.

However, there were also students who prioritized graduate studies over their work. They resorted to low demanding work and internship or freelance work to accommodate their study schedules and workload. Some even worked on temporary work not related to their profession only to sustain themselves financially and be able to study further. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of AHSS majors (Louvel, 2007), working on an unrelated job is a widespread situation for AHSS students trying to support themselves financially. Despite this, students prioritize their studies due to conscious valuing and personal importance to gain knowledge.

Dealing with Mandatory Work Obligation

Avoiding working-off the educational grant appeared not to be a problem for students, because they acknowledged the obligations that they have in terms of receiving free education and paying back to the national budget by working for at least three years in Kazakhstan. Contrary to the discussions in the media (TengriEdu, 2024), many students demonstrated compliance with the rules by planning to stay in their country and contribute to its economy. However, the only problem that students faced and that was indicated in findings is a short period between graduation and commencement of working-off. Students usually have a maximum of three months to find employment. As Duisenova et al. (2020) wrote, students' personal interests sometimes cannot be in line with labor market demands. Such a situation may motivate students to pursue further education instead of deciding on their career and create a supply of "eternal students" who are not ready for work (Duisenova et al., 2020)

Amotivation

Credential Inflation

The more AHSS students valued the master's degrees, the more they became aware that this degree became a widespread standard in Kazakhstan. As Jonbekova (2019) wrote in her article, students started to pursue master's degrees to gain competitive advantage in the job market because of the constant oversupply of graduates, which decreased the value of a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, the supply of graduates with master's degrees created the belief that this degree was not a significant achievement and is not recognized and rewarded. This situation may result in the devaluation of a master's degree, similar to China's case, where a master's degree became a minimum level of education with which a candidate could secure a position in the job market (Zuo, 2021). The credential inflation exacerbated to the point when some students did not recognize the importance of credentials due to the perception of living in a capitalistic system, where only networks and financial security work as a social boost. In their opinion, not only the value of credentials, but also the value of education

in general was decreased in contemporary society. This perception of education was opposite to the findings presented by Duisenova et al. (2020), who stressed the importance of education for socioeconomic boost.

Structural Challenges

Among the other things that did not motivate students to study further was the lack of autonomy in education. They reported limitations in terms of topics that they may cover in their master's theses. Limitations included lack of time to select topics and lack of choice. Ryan and Deci (2000) stressed the importance of perceived autonomy when assessing individual motivation – the more people feel in control of their decisions and have opportunity to exercise their choices freely, the more motivated they are to engage with the tasks. Students perceived that the mentioned limitations stem from the academic faculty and program requirements. Academic faculty offered a limited number of topics that did not coincide with students' professional or personal interests.

Another factor that discouraged students was the high perceived workload due to the repetitive nature of the program content. Students, who continued studying their specialization expressed frustration with repetitions and the desire to cover new materials instead. Such conditions may have affected their competence needs, which according to Ryan and Deci (2000) are other needs that have to be fulfilled for the development of intrinsic motivation. Students who changed their specializations expressed satisfaction with the basic knowledge they covered during lectures, because they could enhance their competencies in their new specializations. The fact that these master's programs were designed not only for specialists but also for those who are new in the field was beneficial for those students.

Finally, infrastructural problems were also reported among students. The lack of space for graduate students forced the research site to conduct evening classes for them. Many participants did not report problems with these conditions, while some students found them moderately frustrating.

Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, I demonstrated the complexity of academic motivation among Kazakhstani master's students in AHSS, illustrating how extrinsic and intrinsic factors interact within a unique socio-economic and institutional context. While economic and job market pressures drive many students externally toward graduate education, internal motivations such as professional development, family traditions, and learning interesting subjects also play a significant role in shaping their decisions to continue education. However, structural barriers within the country's higher education system and the infrastructure of the research site may limit student autonomy, comfort, and engagement, posing potential challenges to the development of self-determined motivation and risks of amotivation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

In my thesis, by using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework, I explored the motivations of the students in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (AHSS) to pursue postgraduate education in one state university in Kazakhstan. Particularly, this study examined how AHSS students' external and internal motivations manifest themselves, given the challenges that they may face related to the contemporary educational policy and labor market in Kazakhstan. In this study, I asked seven AHSS graduate students from a state university to reflect on their external and internal motives and understand the essence of being a graduate AHSS student in Kazakhstan. The investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the external motivations of AHSS graduate students in Kazakhstan in pursuing a master's degree?
2. What are the internal motivations of AHSS graduate students in Kazakhstan in pursuing a master's degree?

Key Findings

Research Question 1

The findings demonstrated that external motivation such as receiving a stipend as an addition to their salaries and as financial support played a role in students' decisions to continue their studies. Better salary ranges in the future and increased employment options due to the opportunity to pursue both an academic and industrial career with a master's degree were also motivating factors. Besides, avoiding working off the grant appeared to be important for some students. Additionally, it was identified that professional circles of the participants often imposed those external motives.

Research Question 2

The participants' external motivations were often accompanied by a more complex set of internal motives. These included the sense of personal importance and conscious valuing of the specialization. Besides, an internalized value of specialization

imposed by the close social circle of parents, friends and relatives also played a crucial role due to students' sense of familial belonging to their field. Finally, intellectual curiosity was evident as well in AHSS students' motivation to pursue graduate study.

Implications

This study's findings carry several important implications for research, policy, and practice. First, by using Self-Determination Theory as the framework, the study demonstrated the importance of analyzing AHSS students' individual motivational profiles to understand their motivations to pursue postgraduate education. The results suggest that future research in Kazakhstan should continue to employ student-centered approaches, filling the gap of the limited focus on students' personal motives for continuing higher education.

Second, the findings imply the need to reassess the perception of higher education's role in Kazakhstan. While the socioeconomic benefits of acquiring a degree remain important, this study implies that cognitive and personal development brought by education are also important for AHSS students. Recognizing this importance aligns with Kazakhstan's national priorities to cultivate innovative and capable professionals for a knowledge-based economy.

Finally, the unique experiences and challenges of AHSS students in their career paths point to the need to develop more targeted motivational and institutional support mechanisms. Addressing the specific challenges faced by AHSS graduates may help in their transition to the labor market and foster long-term engagement with their specialization fields.

Limitations

This study faced several limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling posed a risk of collecting less informative data and reducing credibility. Second, in this study, female participants were overrepresented, while male participants were underrepresented. This may have limited understanding of possible male-specific motivations. Third, while qualitative interviews offered depth, they also discouraged

participation compared to surveys. Time constraints and discomfort with direct interaction could contribute to this. Finally, the selection of only one university as a research site could not allow for transferability of the findings and diversity of participant experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

There are several recommendations for future research. First, researchers should consider employing more purposeful or stratified sampling strategies to improve the credibility and depth of the data. This would help reduce the risks related to convenience sampling and ensure representation of diverse students' motivations. Second, multiple research sites from different regions of Kazakhstan can be considered for future research to ensure transferability of the findings, diversity in participant experience, institutional norms and cultures. Third, future research must ensure greater gender balance among participants, particularly including more male voices. This is especially important, because certain motivations might be relevant only to male students and were underrepresented in the current sample. Additionally, future studies could benefit from employing mixed data collection methods, such as combining interviews with anonymous online surveys, to increase engagement and preserve participants' time. Finally, it is worth conducting comparisons of AHSS students with STEM students that could demonstrate the similarities and differences in their labor market conditions and motivational patterns that can be specific to these disciplines.

Regarding the recommendations for practice, while it is difficult to make changes on the systemic level, it is possible to make them on the institutional level and benefit students. Starting from the undergraduate years, universities should focus on enhancing student autonomy by providing academic choices and creating meaningful learning experiences. Fostering intrinsic motivation requires mentorship and faculty training in student-centered approaches. By doing so, institutions can better support students in achieving self-determined academic and professional goals. Given the strong economic and career motivations among students, educational policymakers must design

programs with a focus on practical skills and industry connections. There is also a possible need for educational policies that support not only employability but also intrinsic engagement and long-term professional fulfillment. This is also relevant for employers and businesses: candidates can be accepted based on skills and competencies rather than merely their level of formal education. Furthermore, businesses can partner with universities to provide practical learning opportunities aligned with workforce demands, especially in AHSS fields. As a result, self-determined motivation and professional preparation may lead to more conscious decision-making in the future and ease the pressure of credential inflation, which is influenced not only by the employers, but by the potential employees as well.

Personal Reflection

The process of conducting my research was engaging and challenging at the same time. Initially I encountered the low participation rate among the research population. It appeared that arts and social sciences students were more willing to participate. I overcame these challenges by broadening my sample population to non-STEM major students – arts, humanities, and social sciences students. Fortunately, this did not have a significant impact on my thesis, because the focus of my work was to explore motivations of non-STEM major students in general, not limited to humanities major. Furthermore, I think this change positively affected my findings in terms of presenting diversity of participants' backgrounds.

Although I planned to select at least ten participants, I managed to recruit seven participants. This could seriously affect my findings. However, I tried to collect as much information as possible to reach data saturation. Consequently, I realized that with the lower number of participants I could analyze each interview in-depth and present individual experiential narrative of each participant. This helped me to emphasize the personal nature of everyone's motivation and demonstrate the complexity of factors constituting their motivations.

By conducting the fieldwork, I have learnt to actively listen to the participants and be flexible during the interviews. By active listening I mean perceiving information and reflecting on it in the moment. At first, it was difficult to follow conversation and think about the structure of the interview simultaneously. Flexibility helped me with this aspect – I asked questions not only related to the interview protocol, but also those that I thought could let me explore more about the participants. With active listening and flexibility, I managed to collect rich data that became the basis of my thesis.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter answered the two research questions proposed at the beginning of this study. Despite the challenges that may result in students' demotivation to pursue further education in AHSS fields in Kazakhstan, the findings revealed strong motivation among the participants. Their motives ranged from external pressures to strong intrinsic interest. While economic and career-related goals were common, many students also expressed deep personal engagement, intellectual curiosity, and a desire for meaningful academic development.

The study highlighted the need for more student-centered approaches in higher education, including flexible academic choices, career-relevant curricula, and supportive teaching approaches. It also acknowledged several limitations, such as the use of convenience sampling, gender imbalance among participants, and challenges in recruiting students for qualitative interviews. These limitations helped to draw key recommendations for future research, including more representative sampling strategies, greater inclusion of male perspectives, and the use of mixed methods to increase participation.

Overall, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of AHSS students' motivations and offered insights into institutional policies to develop more meaningful and autonomous learning experiences.

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Appendix A: AI Declaration



Thesis Title: Exploring the Motivation of Kazakhstani Graduate Students to Pursue a Master's Degree in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences: A Qualitative Study

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

- with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or
 without the use of artificial intelligence tools.

(If you have used AI tools as defined in the GSE policy document, please complete the rest of this form.)

During the preparation of this thesis/examination, I used Grammarly, Chat GPT, and Scribbr. I used Grammarly to edit the text for clarity and grammar. Chat GPT was used to identify prominent researchers in the field of motivation. I also used it to provide nuanced definitions for themes, that I used for thematic analysis. Finally, Scribbr helped me to create citations.

I also declare that I

- am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),
 have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,
 am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,
 have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and
 acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding AI appropriate use.

Name: Anel Kemeshova

Signature:

Date: April 28, 2025

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Title of the Research: Exploring the Motivation of Kazakhstani Graduate Students to Pursue a Master's Degree in Humanities: A Qualitative Study.

Date of the interview: _____

Start time of the interview: _____

End time of the interview: _____

Place of the interview: _____

Participant: _____

Interviewer: _____

Introduction to a participant

Good afternoon! You are invited to take part in a study titled *"Exploring the Motivation of Kazakhstani Graduate Students to Pursue a Master's Degree in Humanities: A Qualitative Study"*.

This is a research study on understanding academic motivation of Kazakhstani students to pursue a graduate education. The aim is to understand the external and internal motivations when it comes to the participants' graduate study.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences for you.

If you agree to participate in this study, please read and sign the consent form. (Explain the purpose of the consent form, give the participants time to review it, and sign).

Starting the interview

Do you agree to have the interview recorded digitally? (Turn on the recording device after the participant's consent). If not, the interviewer will take notes.

General research questions

Research Question 1: What are the external motivations of graduate students in pursuing a master's degree in humanities?

Economic motivations:

1. What is your educational and/or professional background?
2. How important was the potential for financial or career advancement in your decision to pursue a master's degree in humanities?

Social motivations:

3. To what extent did your family or peers influence your decision to pursue this degree?
4. How do you think obtaining this degree will affect your social status or standing in the community?

Research Question 2: What are the internal motivations of graduate students in pursuing a master's degree in humanities?

Interest in learning:

1. What aspects of the humanities interest you the most, and how did that influence your decision to pursue a master's degree?
2. How does personal fulfillment from learning drive your motivation to continue your education?

Interest in profession:

3. In what ways do you think this program will enhance your skills or knowledge for your desired profession?
4. Do you have a specific career path in mind, and how do you think a master's degree in humanities will help you achieve it?

Concluding questions:

I have asked all my questions. Would you like to add anything to what has already been said? Is there any aspect I didn't ask about, but you would like to discuss? Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

Appendix C: List of Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Code name (shortened name)	Definition	Example of a segment of text from study
Amotivation	Non-regulation	Nonintentional	Something that happens without deliberate planning, purpose, or conscious decision.	“I am not going to apply for a doctorate...I want to continue my career...And a master’s degree... well, I think it is just good to have a master’s degree” (Dana).
		Nonvaluing	A lack of interest in, appreciation for, or personal importance attached to something.	“Roughly speaking, a piece of paper and appearance are needed, but actual competencies... Connections decide, so I do not think that this gives some kind of social boost” (Alex).
		Lack of control	Not having the power or ability to influence or manage a situation, outcome, or behavior.	“On the second day we were told to choose a dissertation topic. This was very alarming. It was such a choice without a choice, that it was necessary to immediately decide on a scientific supervisor” (Dana).
		Incompetence	A lack of ability, skill, or knowledge needed to do something effectively or successfully.	“I would like to have more skills so that education would be more effective, rational and useful. So that the time spent on it, all these classes, all these assignments, would be more focused on obtaining specific competencies, knowledge, and so on” (Alex).
External motivation	External regulation	Compliance	Going along with a request, rule, or expectation, often without questioning it — even if you don’t fully agree with it.	“But I felt pressured by the obligation to work off my grant, by uncertainty about the future, by not really wanting to continue studying, yet feeling as if everyone was pushing me to do it” (Dana).
		External	Positive outcomes given	“I’m currently on an internship, and the salary isn’t very big, and then there’s the

	rewards	after someone does something, to encourage that behavior.	diploma, and you also get a scholarship. In general, the conditions are good” (Asem).
	External punishments	Negative outcomes or threats given to discourage behavior.	“I was worried that in September they would already be checking whether you were working off the grant or not, and I still had not found myself and my path” (Dana).
Introjected regulation	Self-control	The ability to regulate your thoughts, emotions, and actions — especially when you're trying to resist temptations, stay focused, or make responsible choices	“After my ‘rebellions’ I realized that sociology was closest to me... That is why I chose my university, where I am currently studying, because it has a specialty in which I specialize very well” (Aigerim).
	Ego-involvement	Means that a person’s self-worth or identity is tied to how well they perform a task or how others view them because of it. In other words, they’re doing something not just for the task itself, but to protect or boost their ego.	“Well, plus they motivated me by the fact that I already had knowledge that I could show in the master’s degree, and this was simply confirmation for other people, who didn’t work with me personally: ‘She already has a master's degree, which means she is not just a bachelor, she has more academic experience,’ so to speak” (Aigerim).
	Internal rewards	Positive feelings you experience after doing something that aligns with your values or goals.	“What I like about sociology is that it is a kind of mixed discipline, that it touches on psychology, political science, and the ability to process big data. I think that this is the most necessary skill for me, because in the future, perhaps, if I want, I can become a data analyst thanks to sociology” (Dana).
	Internal	Negative feelings that arise	“Probably, if it were some kind of ‘education-education’ in some, I don’t know,

		punishments	when you act against your values or expectations.	university, everything would be in a spherical vacuum, everything would be wonderful, then, probably, there would be no feeling of ‘thorns’. But since we live in the realities in which we live, the feelings are so powerful, very sharp, very deeply cutting, tearing, traumatic” (Alex).
Internal motivation	Identified regulation	Personal importance	Refers to how much something truly matters to you on a deeper, personal level — because it connects with your values, goals, or identity.	“A master’s degree is not the final goal for me, it is a small transition to doctoral studies, that is, I am not going to stop at the master's degree. But in principle, I would like to thoroughly study the science of international relations...The initial goal of entering the master’s degree was to change my specialization in the direction of my dream, so to speak” (Bakhyt).
		Conscious valuing	Actively recognizing and understanding the importance of something and choosing to do it because you believe it has personal meaning or value.	“All our relatives are mostly lawyers, they all studied for a master's degree, so for me, a master's degree is not just a continuation of education, but a step that confirms my serious attitude, readiness for work” (Asem).
	Integrated regulation	Congruence	Alignment or harmony between your thoughts, feelings, values, and actions — everything fits together and feels authentic.	“I decided to try myself in art. I had to pass creative exams. I received a grant to become a designer. In general, my story turned out that way, as if it was supposed to be that way” (Madina).
		Awareness	Having a clear understanding or conscious knowledge of something — whether it’s your own thoughts, emotions, actions, or what’s happening around	“A master’s degree usually implies, on the contrary, a narrowing of focus. That’s why I thought that yes, it is more prestigious, but at the same time broader and less interesting to me” (Aigerim).

		you.	
	Synthesis with self	Means that a person has fully integrated a behavior, goal, or belief into their sense of who they are — it feels natural, authentic, and aligned with their identity.	“As a teenager, I had thoughts about suicide, looking at myself and society, I was always interested in studying this, but I did not think that I would choose this for the topic of my master’s degree” (Alina).
Intrinsic regulation	Interest	A feeling of curiosity, enthusiasm, or personal engagement with something — it draws your attention and makes you want to explore or learn more.	“For example, you look at others on the bus and understand this picture, this situation. It just comes with experience, if you study theories. You see a problem and want to study it, find out if you have such a problem, how it was studied before” (Alina).
	Enjoyment	A feeling of pleasure, satisfaction, or happiness you get when you're doing something you like or find fulfilling.	“Then I came to university, and I started to like everything there, we also had such a healthy competition among classmates...And we don’t have anyone who doesn’t work in their specialty. Interesting statistics: everyone works as a designer here” (Madina).
	Inherent satisfaction	The natural pleasure or fulfillment you get from doing an activity for its own sake, not because of rewards, recognition, or pressure.	“I had such an experience when I was still a student at the university, my employers did not give me a salary. I solved this with the help of laws: I said that I am a future lawyer, so you better be afraid. I like that I know more laws” (Asem).
