

**Equity and Access to Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Experiences of State School
Graduates**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Educational Leadership (Higher Education)

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education

April 2026

Word Count: 15 041

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Date: 24 of October, 2025

Dear Shyngyz,

This letter now confirms that your research project titled **Equity of Access to Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Experiences of State School Graduates** has been approved by the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University.

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

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Zumrad Kataeva,
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On behalf of:

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Abstract

Equity and Access to Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Experiences of State School Graduates

Higher education plays a central role in shaping life opportunities, professional trajectories and social mobility. It is often seen as a pathway to recognition, stable employment and broader participation. However, access and equity in higher education are rarely experienced equally. Students arrive at the point of university admission with different educational backgrounds, resources and forms of social support. Therefore, this study explores how graduates from state schools in Kazakhstan experience and navigate access to higher education. Applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital, the research examines the experiences of state school graduates in accessing higher education institutions, their decisions about university and academic programs and factors that facilitate or constraint their access to higher education. The study employs a qualitative research design based on seven interviews with students from the Kazakhstani universities who graduated from state schools and are currently bachelor students on 1-4 years. Overall, the findings of the study suggest that aspirations for higher education developed through interactions with their families, peers and schoolteachers. At the same time, the path to university involved several challenges, including gaps in school preparation, reliance on supplementary academic courses, difficulties navigating admission information, and language-related barriers. However, support from teachers, family members, and social networks often helped students manage these challenges. The transition to university also revealed differences in academic confidence and communication skills when participants compared themselves with peers from more selective schools. Overall, the study shows that access to higher education is shaped not only by individual academic achievement but also by the distribution of cultural and social capital across family, school, and social contexts.

Keywords: equity in higher education, access to higher education, social capital, cultural capital

Андапта

Қазақстандағы жоғары білімге теңдік пен қолжетімділік: мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің тәжірибесі

Жоғары білім адамның өмірлік мүмкіндіктерін, кәсіби траекториясын және әлеуметтік ұтқырлығын қалыптастыруда маңызды рөл атқарады. Ол көбінесе танылуға, тұрақты жұмыспен қамтылуға және қоғам өміріне кеңірек қатысуға апаратын жол ретінде қарастырылады. Алайда жоғары білімге қолжетімділік пен теңдік іс жүзінде барлық студенттер үшін бірдей деңгейде жүзеге аспайды. Студенттер университетке түсу кезеңіне әртүрлі білім беру тәжірибесімен, ресурстармен және әлеуметтік қолдау түрлерімен келеді. Осыған байланысты, бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің жоғары білімге қол жеткізу үдерісін қалай бастан кешіретінін және оны қалай еңсеретінін қарастырады. Pierre Bourdieu-дің мәдени және әлеуметтік капитал теориясына сүйене отырып, зерттеу мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің жоғары оқу орындарына түсу тәжірибесін, университет пен білім беру бағдарламаларын таңдау үдерісін, сондай-ақ жоғары білімге қолжетімділікті жеңілдететін немесе шектейтін факторларды талдайды. Зерттеу Қазақстан университеттерінде білім алып жатқан, мемлекеттік мектепті бітірген 1–4 курс бакалавриат студенттерімен жүргізілген жеті сұхбатқа негізделген сапалық зерттеу әдіснамасын қолданады. Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, жоғары білімге деген ұмтылыстар көбінесе отбасы, құрдастар және мектеп мұғалімдерімен өзара әрекеттесу барысында қалыптасады. Сонымен қатар, университетке түсу жолы бірқатар қиындықтармен қатар жүреді, оның ішінде мектептегі дайындық деңгейіндегі алшақтықтар, қосымша дайындық курстарына тәуелділік, қабылдау талаптары туралы ақпаратты түсінудегі қиындықтар және тілдік кедергілер бар. Дегенмен, мұғалімдер, отбасы мүшелері және әлеуметтік байланыстар тарапынан көрсетілген қолдау студенттерге бұл қиындықтарды еңсеруге көмектеседі. Университетке бейімделу кезеңі де академиялық сенімділік пен коммуникациялық дағдылардағы айырмашылықтарды

айқындады, әсіресе қатысушылар өздерін неғұрлым таңдаулы мектептердің түлектерімен салыстырған кезде. Жалпы алғанда, зерттеу нәтижелері жоғары білімге қолжетімділік тек жеке академиялық жетістіктермен ғана емес, сонымен қатар отбасы, мектеп және әлеуметтік орта аясында мәдени және әлеуметтік капиталдың бөлінуімен де айқындалатынын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: жоғары білімдегі теңдік, жоғары білімге қол жеткізу, әлеуметтік капитал, мәдени капитал

Аннотация

Равенство и доступ к высшему образованию в Казахстане: опыт выпускников государственных школ

Высшее образование играет ключевую роль в формировании жизненных возможностей, профессиональных траекторий и социальной мобильности. Оно часто рассматривается как путь к признанию, стабильной занятости и более широкому участию в общественной жизни. Однако доступ и равенство в высшем образовании на практике редко реализуются одинаково для всех студентов. К моменту поступления в университет студенты приходят с различным образовательным бэкграундом, ресурсами и формами социальной поддержки. В связи с этим данное исследование направлено на изучение того, как выпускники государственных школ в Казахстане воспринимают и проходят процесс доступа к высшему образованию. Опираясь на теорию культурного и социального капитала Pierre Bourdieu, исследование анализирует опыт поступления выпускников государственных школ в высшие учебные заведения, их решения при выборе университета и образовательных программ, а также факторы, способствующие или ограничивающие их доступ к высшему образованию. Исследование основано на качественном подходе и включает семь интервью со студентами казахстанских университетов, окончившими государственные школы и обучающимися на 1–4 курсах бакалавриата. Результаты исследования показывают, что стремление к получению высшего образования формируется в процессе взаимодействия с семьёй, сверстниками и школьными учителями. В то же время путь к поступлению в университет сопровождается рядом трудностей, включая пробелы в школьной подготовке, зависимость от дополнительных образовательных курсов, сложности в навигации информации о поступлении, а также языковые барьеры. Вместе с тем поддержка со стороны учителей, членов семьи и социальных связей часто помогает студентам справляться с этими вызовами.

Переход к обучению в университете также выявляет различия в уровне академической уверенности и коммуникативных навыков, особенно при сравнении с выпускниками более селективных школ. В целом результаты исследования показывают, что доступ к высшему образованию определяется не только индивидуальными академическими достижениями, но и распределением культурного и социального капитала в рамках семьи, школы и более широкого социального контекста.

Ключевые слова: равенство в высшем образовании, доступ к высшему образованию, социальный капитал, культурный капитал

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the foundational context for the research by presenting an overview of the issues related to equity and access in higher education, both globally and within the national context of Kazakhstan. It begins by outlining the broader international landscape, highlighting persistent challenges in higher education participation among different socioeconomic groups, and then narrows its focus to the local challenges faced by graduates of state schools in Kazakhstan. In doing so, the chapter delineates the key structural and systemic issues that have contributed to the formulation of the research problem. It proceeds to articulate the overarching purpose and specific objectives of the proposed study, thereby clarifying its research focus. In addition, this chapter introduces the three central qualitative research questions that guide the data collection and analysis phases of the study. These questions have been carefully designed to explore experiences of state school graduates who are currently studying in their bachelor's programs, therefore uncovering the factors facilitating their choice-making and the barriers they encounter in accessing higher education.

Furthermore, the chapter discusses the significance of the study by emphasizing its potential to contribute meaningful insights to the existing body of literature, particularly in light of the limited empirical research currently available on this topic within the Kazakhstani context. Finally, the chapter concludes by providing an overview of the structure of the study, thereby offering the reader a roadmap for understanding how the subsequent sections are organized and interconnected in support of the overall research aims.

1.1. Background of the Study

Higher education plays a pivotal role in advancing a nation's economic growth, political stability, socio-cultural development, sustainable progress, and overall competitiveness in the global arena (Wanti et al., 2022). As economies increasingly transition toward knowledge-based systems, higher education becomes a key driver of innovation and a fundamental contributor to

national productivity and competitiveness (OECD, 2017). However, in the current global context, disparities in access to higher education continue to widen the gap between socioeconomic groups, thereby undermining efforts toward inclusive economic development and threatening long-term societal progress (OECD, 2017).

Ensuring equitable access to higher education is therefore essential for promoting upward social mobility, reducing inequality, and fostering inclusive development. According to the United Nations Human Development Report (2019), significant obstacles persist globally in terms of access, academic achievement, and the well-being of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. These challenges are particularly pronounced among students who receive limited institutional support and monitoring from educational institutions and relevant stakeholders (OECD, 2017).

Despite efforts to expand and massify higher education systems worldwide, marginalized and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups continue to face systemic barriers to entry and success in higher education (Chankseliani et al., 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2019). In the context of Kazakhstan, access and equity in higher education remain pressing concerns, especially for graduates of state-run schools. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rapid expansion of public and private higher education institutions led to increased disparities in educational opportunities (Kerimkulova & Kuzhabekova, 2017). Several interrelated challenges have contributed to these persistent inequalities.

For instance, students from underprivileged backgrounds often experience restricted access to information regarding higher education opportunities, such as admission procedures, scholarship availability, and financial aid options (Chankseliani et al., 2020). Moreover, socioeconomic factors such as financial hardship, insufficient family support, and a lack of academic motivation further exacerbate these challenges, making it more difficult for students from state schools to compete on equal footing (Chankseliani et al., 2020).

In response to these disparities, the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan introduced the Unified National Test (UNT) in 2004 as a standardized university admission mechanism aimed at promoting fairness and transparency. Nevertheless, despite these policy interventions, university admissions remain skewed in favor of students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Chankseliani et al., 2020). This outcome highlights persistent inequalities in the quality of secondary education, particularly within state schools, and calls into question the effectiveness of standardized testing as a tool for achieving educational equity (OECD, 2017).

Thus, based on the previous researches, this study examines the experiences of state school graduates and their loved experiences. Existing research in Kazakhstan has primarily addressed reforms and policies from institutional or administrative viewpoints, leaving a lack of qualitative empirical evidence on how equity and access to higher education and challenges are perceived by students themselves (Wanti et al., 2022; Chankseliani et al., 2020).

1.2. Problem Statement

Access to higher education is a pivotal factor in promoting economic growth and social mobility. The research in Kazakhstan shows that the students encounter numerous structural barriers that hinder their aspiration to higher education, preparedness and enrollment process, thereby perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities and limiting opportunities for upward mobility (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024).

Economic barriers, such as structural inequalities in wealth distribution and labor market opportunities, significantly impact students from lower-income backgrounds. At the individual level, financial barriers further exacerbate the problem, as many students struggle to afford preparatory courses, tuition fees, and living expenses (Chankseliani et al., 2020).

In addition, there exists unequal access to information about higher education opportunities such as scholarships, admission requirements and other options (Amankulova,

2018). Students from rural regions, in particular, struggle due to limitations in social capital and the number of available higher education institutions, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts (Amankulova, 2018).

While previous studies mentioned above have examined access to higher education, there is a lack of research that analyzing the experiences of state school graduates in Kazakhstan's higher education system. This study aims to address this gap by using a qualitative research design to explore the factors shaping their decision-making and key barriers these graduates face in equitable access to higher education. By collecting and analyzing qualitative data on social and cultural factors such as access to information, community and family perceptions, academic preparedness, this research will provide empirical evidence on the extent of these challenges. The findings will offer valuable insights for further research and educators, supporting data-driven strategies to enhance equity in higher education.

While a substantial body of international literature has examined access and equity issues in both global and post-Soviet contexts (Turner, 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2019), there remains a notable gap in empirical studies focused specifically on Kazakhstan. In particular, there is a scarcity of research that explores the lived experiences of state school graduates in their pursuit of higher education. A review of existing national studies reveals that while several works have examined educational reforms in Kazakhstan, these have primarily done so through policy, administrative, or general student perspectives (Kerimkulova & Kuzhabekova, 2017; Amankulova, 2018; Amankulova, 2024). However, there is a clear lack of published research that investigates access and equity issues in higher education from the more nuanced standpoint of state school graduates themselves. Furthermore, very few studies have directly surveyed or interviewed state school graduates to understand their pathways to university education and the specific challenges they face.

Given these gaps, the present study aims to address this gap by focusing on the experiences of state school graduates as they transition into higher education in Kazakhstan.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how equity and access to higher education is experienced and negotiated by graduates of state schools in Kazakhstan, and to analyze how differences in social and cultural capital influence their educational trajectories and contribute to the reproduction of inequality.

1.4. Research Questions

The following research questions designed to guide the study:

1. How did students experience and interpret their transition from state school to university enrollment?
2. What factors influenced their aspirations and decision-making?
3. What barriers and enabling factors shaped their access to higher education during the admission process?

1.5. Significance of the Study

Access and equity remain central issues in the pursuit of a fair, inclusive, and socially just higher education system. According to a growing body of literature, significant structural barriers continue to impede graduates of state schools in Kazakhstan from accessing higher education on an equal footing with their peers from elite, private, or urban-based institutions (Chankseliani et al., 2020; Amankulova, 2024). Various factors such as inadequate academic preparation, insufficient access to reliable information regarding higher education opportunities, and family, community perceptions have been consistently identified as major obstacles hindering participation in higher education for these students (Chankseliani et al., 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2019).

The research holds considerable potential not only for addressing the existing research gap, but also for stakeholders working to promote issues of access and equity in the higher

education of Kazakhstan. By documenting and analyzing the experiences of these students, this study will provide evidence-based insights into the systemic and contextual challenges that shape their educational trajectories. In doing so, it will generate actionable findings that can support equity-driven reforms led by the policymakers. Findings will shed light on the structural social and cultural barriers that state school graduates face in accessing higher education. This knowledge can empower students to better understand how the educational system works, prepare for admissions and to develop strategies for building the forms of cultural and social capital valued in universities. Since families are primary transmitters of cultural capital, insights from this study can help parents understand how their emotional, informational, and financial support shapes educational trajectories. Awareness of these dynamics may encourage parents to more actively guide and motivate their children. Teachers play a pivotal role through encouragement, mentorship, and academic preparation. Administrators, in turn, influence how schools provide information and resources about higher education pathways. This research can inform professional development, highlighting how teacher practices and school policies can mitigate inequities. Moreover, the findings may be valuable for public universities, secondary schools, and non-governmental organizations working to develop targeted support programs aimed at reducing structural educational disparities.

Additionally, by centering the voices of state school graduates who have successfully entered university, this study contributes meaningfully to the academic discourse on persistent educational inequalities within Kazakhstan. It also aligns with both national priorities and international commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education), aimed at promoting equal opportunities in education.

Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study explores various dimensions of their experiences, including academic aspirations, perceived and actual preparedness, family and community perceptions, and access to information about university admission and to supplementary knowledge. Through this inquiry, the research intends to contribute valuable

empirical data that may inform future policy initiatives and institutional strategies aimed at building a more inclusive, supportive, and equitable higher education system in Kazakhstan.

1.6. Master Thesis Outline

The Master's thesis consists of six main chapters. Chapter 1 presents the background and context of the study, the problem statement, research objectives, research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 critically examines existing research related to the topic, covering both international and Kazakhstani contexts, and discusses key concepts, major debates, and research gap addressed in the present study. Chapter 3 describes the research design, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, as well as ethical considerations and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 presents the main results of the study and identifies key patterns emerging from the collected data, addressing the research questions based on the analysis of interviews with seven respondents. Chapter 5 provides a thematic analysis of the findings in relation to the literature and theoretical concepts discussed in the study. Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings, discusses the limitations of the research, provides recommendations based on the results of the study and personal reflection of the researcher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines issues of equity and access to higher education through a critical synthesis of existing literature, focusing on how structural, institutional, and social factors shape students' educational trajectories.

The review begins by analyzing global patterns of higher education expansion and the persistence of stratification, highlighting the distinction between vertical and horizontal inequality. It then examines how socioeconomic status and family background influence access through the distribution of economic, cultural, and informational resources.

The chapter further explores the role of schools, teachers, and institutional pathways as mediating structures that shape academic preparation and access to opportunities. Next sections consider importance of social capital, mentoring, and community support in facilitating or constraining access.

The chapter is underpinned by Bourdieu's Cultural and Social Capital Theory, which provides a theoretical framework for understanding how inequality is reproduced through the interaction of social and cultural structures and individual experiences. The review concludes by identifying research gap in the literature, particularly on the experiences of state school graduates in Kazakhstan in accessing higher education, thereby establishing the rationale for the present study.

2.2 Higher Education Expansion and Persistence of Inequality

2.2.1 *Massification and Changing Forms of Inequality*

The global expansion of higher education is often presented as a mechanism for promoting social mobility and reducing inequality. However, research consistently demonstrate that increasing participation does not automatically lead to equitable access to higher education (Araki, 2025; Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Rather than eliminating

inequalities, expansion of higher education tends to reshape forms of inequalities from vertical to horizontal. In higher education systems with high levels of participation, overall access expands, and vertical inequality (i.e., participation versus non-participation) is partially reduced. Expansion is often accompanied by increasing horizontal inequality, whereby students from more privileged social backgrounds are more likely to enter prestigious institutions and high-status programs (Araki, 2025; Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). For example, the case of Ghana by Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013) shows that the expansion of higher education has not led to equitable participation. Although enrolment has increased, access remains strongly stratified by socioeconomic status, region, and gender (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Students from more advantaged families and developed regions continue to be overrepresented in universities, while those from less privileged backgrounds face ongoing financial barriers and limited opportunities due to institutional constraints. Importantly, competition for a limited number of university places tends to reinforce existing advantages, as selection processes favor students who already possess greater resources (Zhang & Wang, 2021).

Furthermore, the research by Czarnecki (2018) on testing Australian reforms in expansion of domestic university places also supports the idea that while vertical inequality decreased, stratification by type of institution persisted and, in some cases, intensified, therefore students from higher social status families (also where parents are university degree holders) emerged as the main beneficiaries of this expansion. Their likelihood of entering Australian elite universities, particularly Group of Eight (Go8), increased significantly, and their overall advantage in educational continuation was reinforced. Although academic performance accounts for part of the observed inequalities, a substantial proportion of the advantage, approximately half in the case of higher social classes, remains unexplained by ability, pointing to the importance of secondary effects of social origin. In addition, geographic location and type of secondary school continue to shape student

allocation across elite and non-elite universities with private school advantages persisting independently of academic achievement (Czarnecki, 2018).

Evidence from China also shows that despite the rapid expansion of higher education, access to elite universities remains strongly stratified by socio-economic background. According to the study by Zhang and Wang (2021), students from higher-status families are disproportionately represented in top-tier institutions, while academic performance alone does not fully account for this disparity, as indicated by substantial differences in entry scores between elite and non-elite universities. Crucially, the allocation process, primarily mediated through the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), interacts with earlier educational inequalities, particularly the type of secondary school attended. Graduates of key high schools are significantly overrepresented in elite universities, highlighting the role of institutional pathways in shaping access (Zhang & Wang, 2021). More importantly, economic and cultural capital influence admission outcomes predominantly through indirect mechanisms, operating via social capital and school trajectories rather than direct effects. This pattern of indirect mediation underscores how advantages accumulate across educational stages, reinforcing stratification (Zhang & Wang, 2021).

2.2.2 Structural Factors Shaping Access and Equity in Higher Education

Socioeconomic background remains one of the strongest predictors of university access even in formally merit-based systems. Access to preparatory resources structure students' readiness to compete. For instance, evidence from Kazakhstan demonstrates that private tutoring functions as a decisive mechanism translating economic capital into admission success, with a majority of students directly attributing their entry into higher education to fee-based preparation (Baikenov & Shamatov, 2025). This finding challenges the assumption of meritocratic selection by showing that performance in standardized tests is itself socially conditioned. Similarly, research on extracurricular participation indicates that access to out-of-school learning

opportunities is unevenly distributed across regions and socio-economic groups, with students from urban and high-income families accumulating additional cultural capital long before entering higher education (Kosaretsky & Ivanov, 2020). This pattern is further reinforced in the context of international higher education. Another evidence from Kazakhstan shows that access is shaped by unequal distribution of cultural and linguistic capital, with students from privileged backgrounds having greater access to preparatory resources, international exposure, and prestigious educational pathways (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024). This suggests that internationalization does not expand equitable access but instead amplifies existing advantages by rewarding those who already possess higher levels of capital.

Beyond material resources, access is also mediated by informational inequalities. Santelicesa et al. (2020) show that even when students report being “informed,” their actual understanding of admission requirements, financial aid, and institutional differences remains limited, particularly among lower socio-economic groups. This indicates that access to information is not simply a matter of availability but of the ability to interpret and use it effectively, reinforcing differences in what Gale and Parker (2015) conceptualize as “navigational capacities”. Importantly, this challenges policy approaches that focus on expanding information provision without addressing underlying inequalities in students’ capacity to act on that information.

Institutional pathways further complicate the notion of equal access. Empirical evidence shows that the type of secondary school attended significantly shapes entry into higher education, with graduates of selective or elite schools disproportionately represented in prestigious institutions (Zhang & Wang, 2021; Bülbül, 2020). Crucially, these patterns persist even when controlling for academic performance, suggesting that institutional trajectories function as mechanisms of stratification rather than neutral channels of merit-based selection. This is reinforced by studies demonstrating that social and cultural capital operate through

indirect pathways, such as school type and peer networks, rather than direct effects on admission outcomes (Zhang & Wang, 2021).

Spatial inequalities add another layer to this stratification. Research in post-Soviet context shows that students from non-capital regions face structural disadvantages due to the concentration of high-quality institutions and academic resources in major cities (Latova & Latov, 2013). In the context of Kazakhstan, according to Ahn et al. (2018), most higher education institutions are also placed in major cities like Astana and Almaty, therefore shaping the geographical constraints for students from remote areas.

2.3 Socioeconomic Status and the Role of Family

2.3.1 Socioeconomic Status

Empirical evidence consistently shows that parental SES strongly predicts university participation, not only through material resources but also through access to social networks and guidance. For example, Raghunath and Chua (2026) find that parental SES is the strongest predictor of higher education access, while mentoring operates as a stratified resource that disproportionately benefits students from higher-status backgrounds, reinforcing rather than compensating for inequality. Similarly, longitudinal evidence indicates that parental educational and cultural capital significantly shape access to selective institutions, primarily through their influence on prior academic performance and educational trajectories (Barsegyan & Maas, 2024). Recent research from China demonstrates that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly more likely to enroll in higher education, particularly in elite institutions. Importantly, social capital enhances both access and entry into prestigious institutions, but its effects are uneven, benefiting high-SES students more strongly (Wang et al., 2026).

2.3.2 Family Influence on Education

Family background shapes not only the distribution of resources but also the conditions under which educational decisions are made. Empirical evidence indicates that students are more

likely to succeed in gaining university admission when they receive emotional support and encouragement from their families, as this fosters confidence and strengthens aspirations to pursue higher education (Whiteford, 2017). At the same time, parental education plays a critical role in structuring access, as students whose parents hold higher educational qualifications are significantly more likely to enroll in university compared to those from less advantaged backgrounds (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015). This influence operates through multiple mechanisms, including differences in self-confidence, access to relevant information, and financial preparedness, which are shaped by family context (Prodan et al., 2015). Beyond these advantages, family support also directly enables preparation for university through investments in resources such as private tutoring, further reinforcing disparities in access (Baikenov & Shamatov, 2025). However, family influence is not uniformly enabling. Qualitative evidence suggests that parents from less advantaged backgrounds often lack the knowledge and experience necessary to guide their children in navigating educational pathways, which can constrain students' aspirations and decision-making (Amankulova, 2024). In this sense, inequality is not only a matter of resource availability but also of informational and experiential limitations embedded within family contexts. Moreover, the influence of the family extends beyond material and informational support to the shaping of aspirations and expectations. Turner (2020) demonstrates that family plays a more direct and consequential role than the broader community in guiding educational choices, actively structuring how students interpret their opportunities.

2.4 School, Teachers and Social Context as Mediating Structures

2.4.1 The Role of Schools in Accessing Higher Education

As mentioned earlier, schools function not merely as sites of instruction but as key institutional mechanisms through which inequality in access to higher education is structured and reproduced. The type of secondary school attended significantly shapes students' educational trajectories, influencing not only academic preparation but also access to information,

confidence, and perceived opportunities. For instance, students from academically oriented or selective schools demonstrate stronger positioning in terms of self-confidence and informational access compared to those from less advantaged school types (Prodan et al., 2015; Bülbül, 2021). Similarly, evidence from China shows that attendance at elite or “key” high schools plays a critical mediating role in access to prestigious universities, reinforcing the effects of social and cultural capital rather than neutralizing them (Zhang & Wang, 2021). These findings suggest that school systems act as institutional filters, channeling students into differentiated pathways that reflect and reproduce prior inequalities rather than providing equalizing opportunities.

2.4.2 The Role of Teachers in Accessing Higher Education

Beyond institutional structures, teachers play an important yet ambivalent role in shaping access to higher education. On the one hand, teacher encouragement has a measurable positive effect on educational outcomes. Empirical evidence indicates that students who receive encouragement from teachers are more likely to continue into advanced study and enroll in higher education, particularly among those from less advantaged backgrounds (Alcott, 2017). However, this support is not distributed evenly. Mentoring and guidance provided by teachers often benefit students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds more strongly, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities rather than compensating for them (Raghunath & Chua, 2026). Adoui (2023) shows that mentorship and role modelling by faculty, especially when based on shared backgrounds, can enhance underrepresented students’ sense of belonging and academic persistence, highlighting the importance of relational support in shaping higher education outcomes. Moreover, qualitative findings suggest that teachers may overlook structural disadvantages, interpreting students’ academic difficulties as individual shortcomings rather than as outcomes of unequal access to resources (Nkansah, 2026). This indicates that teacher practices can unintentionally reproduce inequality by failing to account for differences in students’ starting conditions.

2.4.3 Social and Community Context in Shaping Educational Pathways

Students from rural backgrounds may aspire to higher education but are more likely to choose less prestigious institutions, reflecting socially structured perceptions of what is realistically attainable (Chankseliani et al., 2020). Similarly, community contexts often prioritize local employment or vocational pathways, indirectly shaping students' aspirations and decisions through shared values (Turner, 2020). Importantly, community influence also operates through relational forms of support that shape students' capacity to access and persist in higher education. Family encouragement, mentoring programs, supportive lecturers, and peer networks collectively function as community-based resources that significantly influence students' aspirations, integration, and persistence (Wanti et al., 2022). These forms of support act as mechanisms of social and cultural capital, enabling students to navigate academic environments that might otherwise marginalize them. This perspective is reinforced by Mishra (2020), who demonstrates that social networks and broader forms of social support provide not only emotional and informational resources but also cultural tools that are critical for academic success.

2.5 Access to Higher Education through the Unified National Test in Kazakhstan

Access to higher education in Kazakhstan is primarily regulated through the Unified National Test (UNT), which was first introduced in 2004 (Jumabayeva, 2016). According to the National Testing Center (NTC), it serves as a principal mechanism to assess academic readiness of applicants for entry into higher education. Since its introduction, the system has changed the structure and admission procedures several times and currently allows candidates to take the test four times a year in the following areas: "Applicants take the UNT in the history of Kazakhstan, mathematical literacy, reading literacy (the language of instruction) and two core subjects, with the exception of applicants to a group of educational programs requiring creative training" (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025, para. 6).

Evidence from OECD (2017) demonstrates a persistent relationship between the geographical location, the level of socio-economic status and students' performance in UNT

results. In the context of Kazakhstan, the UNT and the merit-based allocation of government grants appear to reproduce these inequalities, as students from rural areas are more likely to have lower socio-economic status and weaker test outcomes, which reduces their chances of receiving state-funded grants (OECD, 2017).

However, according to recent research in Kazakhstan by Baikenov and Shamatov (2025), UNT is generally perceived as a relatively fair mechanism for access to higher education, although it suggests that increased orientation of the educational process towards UNT preparation in schools has led to a more specialized curriculum, which may, in turn, constrain the broader educational opportunities of other groups of students.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural and Social Capital Theory (1986). Bourdieu's theory emphasizes that social and cultural capitals are equally critical in shaping life chances and educational outcomes. A key contribution of Bourdieu's theory lies in its explanation of how education systems reproduce social inequality. Educational institutions tend to privilege the dominant forms of cultural capital associated with middle- and upper-class groups, including particular linguistic styles, behaviors, and dispositions. As a result, students from less advantaged backgrounds may be systematically disadvantaged, not due to a lack of ability, but because they possess forms of capital that are less recognized or valued within the educational field.

In the context of this study, given the interpretivist orientation of the research with its problem statement and designed research questions focusing on students' lived experiences, Cultural and Social Capital Theory (1986) provides an analytical lens to explore how inequality is reproduced among state school graduates in accessing higher education in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Bourdieusian theory (1986) provides its analytical attention to how students perceive higher education, make decisions and what factors were challenging, therefore how these perceptions are shaped by the distribution of cultural resources. In this regard, students'

choices are not viewed as purely individual or merit-based, but as structured by the unequal distribution of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of cultural capital. Furthermore, Bourdieusian theory (1986) conceptualizes social capital as the aggregate of actual and potential resources embedded within social environments, which can be mobilized to support educational trajectories. Given that state schools operate within a more regulated and formalized institutional system, where interactions are often shaped by administrative accountability rather than relational support, the development and mobilization of social capital may be comparatively restricted, thereby influencing students' capacity to access higher education on equal terms.

2.7 Research Gap

While issues of access and equity in higher education have been widely discussed in the literature, much of the existing research is based on empirical evidence from Europe and the United States. In contrast, there is a limited number of empirical studies examining access and equity among youth in Central Asian contexts, particularly in Kazakhstan. This geographical imbalance in the literature highlights an important research gap, indicating the need for context-specific investigation of how structural and cultural factors shape access to higher education in this region.

2.8 Summary of the Literature Review

The literature shows that while the expansion of higher education has increased overall participation, it has not eliminated inequality. Instead, inequality has shifted toward stratification within the system, particularly in access to prestigious institutions and high-status programs. Socioeconomic status and family background remain key determinants, influencing access to academic preparation, information, and support. Institutional factors, including the type of secondary school and regional disparities, further shape students' readiness and opportunities, reinforcing unequal starting positions.

Beyond structural conditions, access is also influenced by students' perceptions, aspirations, and ability to navigate the education system. Differences in cultural, social, and

symbolic capital affect how students interpret their opportunities and make educational choices.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that access to higher education is a socially structured process shaped by the interaction of multiple forms of capital. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to examine these processes in the context of this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The aim of this chapter is to describe the chosen methodology for the study. This chapter begins by outlining the research design and the rationale for its selection. It then presents details about sampling strategies. Following this, the chapter provides an overview of the data collection instruments and procedures used to gather and analyze the data. Lastly, it discusses the ethical considerations and the steps taken to ensure the study adhered to ethical research standards.

3.1. Research Design

The following section discusses research design implemented for this study. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is an approach that involves collecting data in natural settings, analyzing it inductively and deductively to identify themes, and presenting findings that reflect participants' voices. Also, Creswell (2013) states that "We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue" (p. 48). Since this study seeks to explore the narratives and lived experiences of state school graduates in relation to access and equity in higher education, a qualitative research approach was considered the most appropriate.

A phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study because it focuses on exploring the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they assign to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design enables a deep understanding of experiences how state school graduates in Kazakhstan perceived and navigated access to higher education. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology allows the researcher to uncover the meaning, emotions, and insights behind their challenges and successes. This is particularly relevant for exploring issues of access and equity, which are not only structural but also experienced and interpreted differently by

individuals depending on their social, and cultural contexts. Phenomenology, rooted in philosophical traditions established by Edmund Husserl, emphasizes intentionality the idea that consciousness is always directed toward something, and that human experience is inherently subjective and meaningful. In this study, the phenomenological design provides a participant-centered lens, ensuring that students' voices are at the forefront of the research process. This aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) emphasis on qualitative research as a tool for giving voice to different kinds of population.

3.2 Sampling Strategies

To recruit participants for this study, a purposeful criterion-based sampling strategy was employed, as it allows to intentionally select individuals who possess relevant, first-hand experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yilmaz, 2013). Given the study's focus on experiences of students in accessing higher education, a criterion-based purposeful sampling approach was adopted to ensure that all participants met specific characteristics directly aligned with research's objectives.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Students from both rural and urban state schools with different languages of instruction (Kazakh-medium schools and Russian-medium schools).
2. Undergraduate students (years 1-4) currently enrolled in private and/or state university in Astana.
3. Students with different forms of higher education financing (state grants, self-paid).

These criteria were established to ensure that all participants had direct and relevant experience of the higher education access process in Kazakhstan. The inclusion of participants from both rural and urban state schools aimed to ensure representation of diverse geographical backgrounds across the country. In addition, the sample encompassed all major types of state schools by including both Kazakh and Russian medium schools, reflecting the bilingual structure of state schools in Kazakhstan. Focusing on current

undergraduates ensured that participants had recent experience of the transition from state school to higher education institution, while the inclusion of students from both state and private universities ensured that the sample reflected the full range of higher education institutions. Finally, selecting students with different sources of financing their higher education, was important as access to state-funded education is largely determined by performance in the UNT.

Furthermore, snowball sampling was used as supplementary recruiting process. Snowball sampling allows to identify additional participants through referrals from initial respondents who meet the selection criteria (Creswell, 2013). This approach was useful in accessing participants with relevant experiences who may not been easily reachable, however, to minimize potential bias associated with participant referrals all recommended participants were checked against the criteria for the participants for this study.

3.3 Recruitment of Participants

The recruitment of participants organized once ethical approval was granted by the Graduate School of Education Ethical Committee. Access to the research sites – state and private universities in Astana city initially was requested through formal communication channel with higher education institutions (see Appendices B and H). The choice of universities in Astana is because it is a capital of Kazakhstan with more competitiveness to enroll and possible challenges to move to Astana city. However, this approach resulted in limited response, and therefore alternative recruitment strategies were employed.

Subsequently, recruitment materials, including invitation messages and participant information, were distributed through social media platforms and professional network (see Appendix E). This approach proved more effective in reaching potential participants, as interested students either contacted the researcher directly or were referred through peer networks. In some cases, individuals who received the information shared it further within their networks, facilitating additional recruitment.

Overall, 10 students were initially contacted the researcher, nonetheless 7 participants finally participated, where 3 students were recruited through the social media platforms and professional network and 4 students were recruited by snowball sampling.

Interested participants were then provided with detailed information about the objectives of the study and invited to take part voluntarily. Participants were required to meet the predefined inclusion criteria. Prior to participation, all interested individuals were provided with consent form and asked to sign it before the interview (see Appendix K).

3.4 Sample and Participants' Profile

The sample for this study consists of seven first- to fourth-year undergraduate students currently enrolled in higher education institutions, including both public and private universities in Astana. Six participants graduated from state schools and one participant, however, transitioned from a state school to a private school during the final two years of secondary education in order to access better conditions for academic preparation. This experience provides an additional perspective within the dataset, allowing the study to capture potential differences in educational opportunities and preparation that may emerge during the analysis of the interview findings.

The participants were purposefully selected to reflect variation in socio-educational characteristics. More detailed description of socio-educational characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Socio-Educational Characteristics of the Participants

ID	Gender	Year of Study	Region of Origin	School Type	Funding Status
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P1	Male	Year 3	Regional	State → Private (From Grade 10)	State Grant
P2	Female	Year 1	Regional	Lyceum (State)	State Grant
P3	Female	Year 1	Regional	Gymnasium (State)	Rector's Grant
P4	Female	Year 2	Regional	State Grant	State Grant
P5	Male	Year 4	Regional	State	State Grant
P6	Male	Year 4	Regional	State	Tuition
P7	Female	Year 2	Regional	State	Tuition

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Following sampling and recruiting strategies, this part outlines data collection procedures employed in the study. Data for this study were collected using online semi-structured interviews (25-30 min) conducted via Zoom (see Appendix N). The use of semi-structured interviews is justified as it captures lived experiences of students, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in depth and enabling the researcher to explore the central point of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Specifically, semi-structured interviews are well-suited for this phenomenological research, as they allowed participants to express their thoughts and experiences in depth, particularly in relation to preparation to university admission, choice-making, and challenges in accessing higher education in Kazakhstan, while giving the researcher the flexibility to probe further (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Patton, 2015).

This method facilitates the collection of rich, contextualized data of how state school graduates navigate the transition from state school to higher education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also aligns with the study's aim to center students' voices and uncover shared patterns and meanings across diverse contexts.

One-on-one, open-ended interviews further ensure a confidential setting in which participants can discuss freely and reflectively their experiences in educational inequality and competition for university entry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Taken together, the use of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews is methodologically appropriate for the purpose of this study, which is to explore the experiences of state school graduates transitioning into higher education in Kazakhstan. This method centers students' voices and is well-aligned with the study's objectives of uncovering commonalities and variations across diverse educational backgrounds.³⁵

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data collected in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method widely used for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed manually to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data. During the transcription process, the researcher maintained analytical notes to capture initial observations, contextual details, and emerging ideas related to participants' experiences.

Following transcription, the researcher engaged in familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts. This step allowed for deeper immersion in the narratives and facilitated the identification of initial insights relevant to the research questions (Creswell, 2013). Initial codes were then generated by systematically examining the transcripts and organizing meaningful segments of data into preliminary categories (see Appendix Q).

After the initial coding stage, the codes were reviewed and compared in order to identify recurring patterns across participants' responses (Merriam and Tisdell's, 2016). These patterns

were subsequently grouped into broader themes that captured key dimensions of students' experiences in accessing higher education. The development of themes was conducted iteratively, with the researcher continuously revisiting the transcripts to refine the thematic structure and ensure that the emerging themes accurately reflected participants' narratives.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive notes were maintained to reflect on the researcher's interpretations and to remain attentive to potential assumptions influencing the analytical process. This reflexive approach helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than being shaped by preconceived expectations.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, the identified themes were repeatedly cross-checked against the original transcripts to confirm their consistency and coherence. This iterative review process ensured that the thematic interpretation remained closely aligned with the participants' experiences and perspectives.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to key ethical principles to ensure that the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants who involved in the study are protected throughout the research.

1. Informed Consent

Participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the research. Clear and accessible information was provided prior to data collection to ensure that participants understood the scope of the study and were able to make an informed decision about their participation. Prior to interview, the designed for this research informed consent forms were signed by participants and received by the researcher (see Appendix K).

2. Confidentiality and Privacy

Given that participants shared personal experiences related to accessing higher education, particular attention was paid to protecting confidentiality. Participants from smaller communities or institutions may feel hesitant to disclose their experiences. To address this concern, all data

were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms or unique identifiers, and any identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports.

3. Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were clearly informed that there would be no consequences for declining or withdrawing from the study at any stage. They were also reassured that their participation would not affect their academic standing or their relationship with the institution.

4. Minimization of Risks

Although the study did not involve significant physical risks, discussing personal experiences related to educational access could potentially cause emotional discomfort. To minimize this possibility, participants were informed in advance about the nature of the interview questions and their right to skip any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time.

3.8 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach adopted in this study. A qualitative research design was used to explore the experiences of state school graduates in accessing higher education in Kazakhstan. The chapter presented the rationale for choosing qualitative in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection and described the research setting, participant selection, sampling strategy, and data collection procedures.

In addition, the chapter explained the analytical approach used to interpret the interview data and discussed the ethical considerations guiding the research process. Together, these methodological choices provide the foundation for examining students' experiences of access and equity in higher education, and the following chapter presents the findings that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis based on seven semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students from Kazakhstani universities located in Astana. The analysis explored how students experienced and navigated access to higher education, with particular attention to equity and access as well as the role of social and cultural capital in shaping these trajectories. The study's findings are reported in relation to the three research questions.

The findings are organized into four main thematic areas. The chapter begins from section examining the role of family influence in shaping students' aspirations and educational decision-making. The second section explores how social networks facilitated or constrained access to higher education. The third considers the challenges encountered during the admission process, as well as variations in access to resources that shaped students' opportunities to enter university. The final section analyses how students' social and cultural backgrounds influenced their transition to university and their early academic experiences.

Throughout the chapter, illustrative quotations are provided to ground the analysis in participants' accounts. The interpretation remains closely tied to the empirical material, while broader theoretical implications are addressed in the subsequent discussion chapter.

4.2 The Role of Family

4.2.1 *Higher Education as a Normative Expectation*

A prominent pattern across all interviews with students was normalization of higher education as an expected life trajectory rather than an optional pathway.

This pattern is particularly significant given that all participants came from families in which at least one parent held a higher education degree. The presence of tertiary-educated

parents appears to have contributed to the normalization of university enrollment as an expected life course transition.

Across all seven interviews, participants described pursuing higher education not as a deliberate or contested decision, but as a natural and expected progression following secondary school. University enrollment was framed less as a choice and more as a continuation of a socially established life trajectory.

A recurring theme in the data was the central role of family influence in shaping this expectation. Participants consistently referred not only to their parents but also to older siblings as key figures in normalizing university education. Higher education was frequently presented within the family as a pathway to stability, professional success, and improved life chances, encompassing both financial security and broader social mobility.

One participant highlighted an additional dimension of this expectation, noting a desire not to place financial strain on parents in the event of failing to secure a state-funded grant. This suggests that educational aspiration was intertwined with a sense of responsibility and accountability toward the family.

The taken-for-granted nature of university enrollment was captured vividly in Participant 5 reflection: “I knew my whole life that I would enter university... You’re not told when to eat, you just know it’s something you have to do.”

Similarly, several participants described regular discussions about higher education within the family context, often beginning in early adolescence. As Participant 5 explained: “Yes, education was always discussed. Not once, not once a year. When the time approached, we talked about it probably from around eighth grade.”

These accounts indicate that higher education functioned as a deeply embedded family norm rather than a newly formed aspiration during the final years of schooling.

Notably, participants rarely articulated alternative pathways beyond university enrollment, further underscoring the taken-for-granted nature of higher education within their family contexts.

4.2.2 Family's Guidance and Directions

Family influence emerged as a decisive factor in shaping both university selection and program choice. Six out of seven participants reported that their family played a primary role in guiding these decisions.

In several cases, parents and older siblings provided direct recommendations regarding specific institutions and fields of study while also offering emotional and practical support throughout the application process. As one participant explained, their parents and older brother suggested a particular university and remained involved at each stage of preparation. Participant 1 also described how family experiences and observations shaped his perceptions of the importance of higher education and influenced their educational aspirations:

My brother enrolled in college but later faced difficulties finding employment. After that experience, he realized that obtaining a university degree was necessary. At the same time, my mother has two higher education degrees. Seeing this, I came to understand that the system works in such a way that if you want recognition, you need to obtain higher education.

Even in instances where there was some disagreement regarding university or program choice, participants described continued support from their families. Disagreement did not translate into withdrawal of encouragement or assistance.

Three participants explicitly stated that their professional choice was influenced by observing family members' career paths. Although two were ultimately unable to enroll in those specific program, one participant entered a field directly aligned with her mother's profession. As Participant 3 explained:

When I decided to study economics, partly because my mother is an economist, she actually tried to discourage me from choosing this field. However, I still decided to pursue a degree in economics and follow in my mother's footsteps.

Across interviews, mothers were most frequently mentioned as central figures in helping to search for universities and evaluate program options. In one case, however, a participant described her father as the primary driving force behind the application process. Drawing on the experience of a close friend whose son had successfully enrolled in university, he actively researched institutions and admission procedures and encouraged his daughter to consider specific options. As participant 7 described:

My father, in particular, watched many videos on YouTube and tried to learn more about studying abroad. He also had an acquaintance whose son had been admitted to a university in Hungary, and he wanted me to apply there as well. We even communicated with them and had several conversations about it.

Overall, university choice appeared to be shaped within family discussions rather than as an entirely individual decision.

These findings suggest that higher education decisions were deeply embedded in family contexts, where expectations and guidance shaped both aspiration and choice.

4.3 School-Based Influences on Higher Education

4.3.1 Career Guidance

As school represents one of the primary social environments beyond the family, participants were asked to reflect on the role their schools played in preparing them for higher education decisions. A clear contrast emerged between one participant's experience in a private school and the accounts provided by those who remained in state schools.

One participant transferred from a public secondary school to a private school in Grade 10 in search of better preparation for university admission. Within this school, a designated career guidance specialist provided structured support. The participant described the opportunity

to book online consultations, complete aptitude assessments, and engage in individual discussions about career options. Following these consultations and test results, a specific field of study was identified, and a preparation plan was developed. Participant 1 reported this as follow:

We had career guidance lessons in the 10th and 11th grades. Our teacher, Bigzat agai, provided counseling and even gave us access to a professional orientation test called Gallup. The test helped identify our strengths and weaknesses and suggested suitable career paths. After discussing the results with my mother and my teacher, I also consulted with the career counselor. He suggested several creative professions such as design and architecture. Considering my interests and circumstances, I eventually decided to pursue a program that required creative entrance exams.

In contrast, the remaining six participants who completed their education in state schools, including one lyceum and one gymnasium, did not report similarly structured guidance. One participant recalled completing a career test but never receiving the results, describing the process as formal rather than meaningful. The Participant 3 explained: “The school’s psychologist organized once the career guiding test, but we never got back the results of the test”. Two other students stated that no organized career guidance was offered at their schools.

Overall, formal career guidance within state schools appeared limited and inconsistently implemented across participants’ accounts.

4.3.2 Teacher Encouragement and Academic Support

In addition to formal career guidance structures, participants reflected on the role of teachers in shaping their educational aspirations and decisions. Unlike institutionalized counselling, teacher influence appeared to operate through informal encouragement, academic mentorship, and personal interaction.

Teacher influence was present but not uniformly experienced across participants. Four out of seven respondents described teachers who encouraged their academic interests and

supported their preparation for university admission. In discussing career guidance, one participant indicated that formal counseling structures did not play a significant role in shaping his educational decisions. However, he highlighted the importance of individual teacher support. Specifically, he described a chemistry teacher who provided consistent encouragement and offered additional one-to-one academic assistance. The participant expressed appreciation for this support, noting that it significantly contributed to his development and confidence in the subject area. This support was framed primarily in terms of motivation and strengthening subject knowledge rather than direct guidance on university or program selection. Participant 5 reported:

I believe teachers play a very important role in developing students' interest in a subject and, consequently, in influencing their future profession and life choices. When I was studying in another school, I became very interested in biology, and I was also initially drawn to chemistry, largely because the teachers were engaging and inspiring.

Participant 1 who transferred from a state school to a private school described a notable difference in institutional accessibility. In his former state school, approaching teachers or school leadership was perceived as difficult, whereas in the private school environment communication was described as more open and approachable. He explained:

The atmosphere felt more open and approachable in the private school. It was easier to communicate even with the director. You could simply greet him and talk about how things were going or how your studies were progressing. In a state school, approaching the director usually happened only when there was a serious issue or when you were called in for a problem.

By contrast, the remaining three participants did not identify teachers as playing a significant role in shaping their higher education aspirations or decisions. Where present, teacher support appeared to complement existing motivations rather than define them.

4.3.3 Peer Influence and Collective Educational Norms

Peer influence played a notable role in shaping higher education aspirations for five out of seven participants. Most of these respondents described an environment in which continuing to Grade 10–11 and subsequently enrolling in university was the dominant pathway among classmates.

Several participants emphasized that the vast majority of their peers chose to remain in school after Grade 9 and pursue higher education. As Participant 2 reflected:

About 90–95% of my peers and friends chose to continue to Grade 10–11 and apply to university. Only a few left after Grade 9 to go to college. I think that influenced me as well, because I didn't want to change my environment so quickly or leave my friends. I wanted to stay with them. (Participant 2)

This account suggests that the decision to pursue higher education was shaped not only by academic considerations but also by the desire to maintain social continuity within peer groups.

In addition to normative influence, participants also described emotional and academic support among classmates during the preparation period. Respondent 4 explained:

“From Grade 10 until the end of Grade 11, we supported each other and helped one another, especially with subjects like history and mathematics. These were the closest people who understood the pressure of preparing for the UNT.”

Peer networks therefore functioned not only as a source of shared aspiration but also as practical and emotional support during the transition to university.

In some cases, peers also served as informal channels of information. One participant reported learning about his current university from a friend who had actively researched the institution and shared detailed insights. Similarly, a student enrolled on a rector's grant explained that she became aware of this funding opportunity through acquaintances whose social circles included individuals who had received similar financial support.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that peer environments contributed both to the normalization of university pathways and to the circulation of information about specific institutions and funding opportunities.

4.4 Challenges in Preparation to University Entry

4.4.1 Gaps in School-Based Academic Preparation

Preparation for university admission requires mastery of both general and subject-specific disciplines assessed through the Unified National Testing (UNT). However, several participants described gaps in school-based academic preparation for their chosen examination subjects.

Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4 reported insufficient preparation in the disciplines relevant to their intended fields of study. Participant 1, who transferred to a private school in Grade 10, noted the absence of structured preparation for creative specializations in his previous state school. Similarly, Participants 2, 3, and 4 described limited academic support in the subjects they had selected for the UNT, characterizing school preparation as inadequate for competitive admission.

Participant 7 highlighted a structural constraint related to subject streaming after Grade 9. Although the school offered a division between humanities and mathematics tracks, the participant enrolled in the mathematics stream due to peer majority rather than personal academic intention. As the Participant 7 explained: “In Grade 10 or 11 we had a division into humanities and mathematics, but everyone in my class chose mathematics, so I had to choose it as well.”

4.4.2 Reliance on Supplementary Academic Courses

All seven participants reported enrolling in supplementary preparatory courses during Grades 10–11 to strengthen both compulsory subjects and discipline-specific areas required for

the Unified National Testing (UNT). Supplementary preparation was not described as optional enrichment, but as a necessary response to perceived gaps in school-based provision.

Participant 1 transferred to a private school specifically to obtain more focused preparation aligned with examination requirements. He described the private school curriculum as structured around selected UNT subjects, allowing students to concentrate exclusively on their chosen academic track:

That's exactly why I transferred. The program was built specifically around UNT preparation. If you choose the physics-mathematics track, you study only those subjects relevant for the exam. You don't study biology or chemistry if you don't need them. You focus entirely on physics, mathematics, and the required core subjects. (Participant 1)

Participant 2 began examination preparation immediately after completing Grade 10, enrolling first in an online chemistry course during the summer and subsequently in in-person preparatory classes for additional subjects.

Participant 3 also relied on supplementary courses but questioned their effectiveness due to limited proficiency in the state language. Language-related challenges were similarly raised by Participant 6, who had studied in a Russian-medium school. He linked this educational background to broader linguistic barriers experienced by some classmates.

Overall, supplementary preparation emerges as a normalized and often as a necessary support for navigating university admission among participants.

4.4.3 Preparatory Resources and Supplementary Materials

Access to preparatory resources was described by participants in varied but generally non-scarce terms. Only one participant explicitly reported a shortage of textbooks. Most respondents did not identify material access as a primary barrier; however, differences emerged in terms of quality, organization, and modes of access.

Several participants described relying on supplementary materials beyond standard school provision. In some cases, individual teachers played an active role in facilitating access.

One respondent noted that his chemistry teacher regularly shared learning materials and additional sources for preparation. She also contacted former students who had successfully enrolled in chemistry-related programs to obtain relevant materials and guidance: “My chemistry teacher would send me different learning materials and books, as well as sources where I could prepare. She also contacted her former students who had already enrolled in chemistry-biology programs to ask them for materials and advice.”

In other instances, participants relied on independent online resources. One respondent indicated that official UNT preparation websites were perceived as the most reliable source of practice materials, as they closely resembled the format and structure of the actual examination. In contrast, printed test booklets distributed at school which students were required to purchase were described as poorly aligned with the real UNT:

I mainly prepared using the official UNT websites. I think those tests were the most accurate because they were closest to the real exam. The booklets we were given at school which we had to pay for were not similar to the actual UNT at all. (Participant 3)

Beyond issues of alignment, one participant raised concerns regarding the excessive volume of available materials. She described experiencing an overabundance of information, particularly within supplementary courses, where the breadth of content and the annual changes to UNT topics contributed to difficulty in filtering and structuring relevant knowledge:

Sometimes there was even an excess of materials. Each year the UNT topics change, and the amount of information keeps increasing. Even in additional courses there can be too much information. It becomes overwhelming, and without properly structured or organized materials, it can actually make preparation more difficult. (Participant 2)

Taken together, participants’ accounts indicate that challenges were less frequently associated with absolute scarcity of resources and more often related to variation in quality, relevance, organization, and the channels through which materials were accessed.

4.5 Academic and Social Adjustment to University

At the end of interviews participants also reflected on their current experiences in universities. For example, Participant 1 linked his transfer to a private school in Grade 10 to a more socially engaging and interactive school environment. He described the presence of extracurricular activities and a communicative atmosphere that encouraged openness and interaction. According to his account, these conditions contributed to the development of communication skills, which he later found beneficial during the transition to university. Reflecting on his early university experience, he noted that communicative competence facilitated adaptation, particularly in comparison to peers whom he perceived as more reserved or less prepared for academic interaction.

Perceptions of differential preparedness were also echoed by Participants 3–7. Several respondents observed that graduates of private and selective schools in Kazakhstan, including Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums (KTL), appeared more confident in self-expression and public presentation. One participant reflected on her own difficulty with public speaking and contrasted this with the ease demonstrated by some of her classmates:

I still have difficulties with public speaking. But when I look at my classmates, for them it doesn't seem difficult at all. I wonder where they developed those skills. There are many students from schools like NIS and KTL, and it seems like they have always had conditions that helped them adapt more easily. In my school, everything was quite simple and narrowly focused. Even basic presentations did not require high standards from us.
(Participant 7)

Respondent 4 similarly described noticeable differences in language proficiency and academic preparedness among peers from selective schools: “There are several classmates from NIS. They are very strong in English and in many subjects. Their presentation skills and overall preparation are highly developed.”

Across these accounts, participants described observable differences in communicative and academic preparedness among students from different secondary school backgrounds, particularly in relation to confidence, language proficiency, and presentation skills.

4.7 Summary

This chapter has outlined the key findings emerging from the interviews with seven undergraduate students from predominantly state school backgrounds. The analysis showed that aspirations for higher education were rarely formed in isolation; rather, they were shaped within family expectations and peer environments, while formal school guidance played a comparatively limited role.

During the admission process, participants described navigating gaps in academic preparation, often relying on supplementary courses and informal networks to compensate for perceived shortcomings in school provision. Although access to learning materials was generally available, differences in quality, alignment, and language proficiency influenced preparation experiences. Finally, participants reflected on their early university experiences, noting differences in communicative confidence and academic readiness, particularly when comparing themselves with graduates of selective schools.

These findings provide the foundation for the next chapter, which engages more directly with research questions, reviewed literature and theoretical framework.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the empirical findings of the study, interpreting the results in relation to the three research questions, as well as in connection with the reviewed literature and the theoretical framework of cultural and social capital of Bourdieu. The discussion is organized around the three research questions, with subsections structured according to the following themes: factors influencing students' aspirations to pursue higher education and their choice of academic program. It then examines the factors that shaped equitable access during the admission process and considers students' experience following their enrollment in higher education. Finally, the chapter concludes with the reflection of applied theory. The following research questions guided the study:

4. How did students experience and interpret their transition from state school to university enrollment?
5. What factors influenced their aspirations and decision-making?
6. What barriers and enabling factors shaped their access to higher education during the admission process?

5.2 Higher Education Aspiration and Decision-Making: the Role of Family

The findings suggest that students' higher education aspiration was shaped by family values that were transmitted not only from parents, but also from other family members who played a significant role in understanding how the higher education system functions, as well as through the early and sustained impact of family expectations. Across all interviews, higher education was consistently framed as taken-for-granted pathway rather than an optional. The importance and value of higher education were conveyed "by word of mouth", thereby forming embedded cultural capital among students, as reflected in Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social

capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The role of the family is clearly illustrated by the fact that thinking about higher education and pursuing higher education is not a deliberate choice, but rather a natural continuation of the life trajectory. Contrary to the assumptions that aspirations appear only in high school, they appear to normalize through constant discussions and observations of the educational background of their family members. These findings supported by Whiteford (2017) and Turner (2020), who emphasize the emotional support and encouragement from families as a driver of major influence rather than the broader community in shaping educational decisions.

An important factor influencing the formation of cultural capital is parental higher educational attainment. The findings show that parents' higher education degrees, across all students, is the decisive factor influencing the decision to pursue higher education. This mainly in line with the results of previous studies (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015; Barsegyan & Maas, 2024), which emphasize that parental education plays a critical role in structuring access, as students whose parents have higher education are significantly more likely to enroll in university in comparison with those from less advantaged backgrounds.

In addition to the family's influence on the formation of higher education aspirations, the family also played a significant role in university and educational program selection, thereby providing both emotional and informational support throughout the entire process from decision-making to enrollment. In some cases, despite disagreements regarding the choice of educational program, the influence of a family member remained a consistently significant deciding factor. This indicates that decision-making took place within a supportive family context. This pattern suggests that access to higher education is determined not only by individual academic performance, but also by the presence of a role model or mentoring in students' lives, which is consistent with Raghunath and Chua (2026), which highlights mentoring as a stratified resource that shapes access to educational opportunities. In this sense, the results can be interpreted through the lens of cultural capital, where students from families with higher education are better

prepared to navigate the system. This is consistent with the concept of “navigational capacities” by Gale and Parker (2015), which emphasizes that informed decision-making depends not only on the availability of information, but also on the ability to apply it effectively. However, this advantage is not distributed uniformly. As evidence by Amankulova (2024) shows, parents from less advantaged backgrounds often lack the knowledge and experience necessary to navigate their children in educational pathways.

Overall, higher education aspirations and decision-making are socially structured within the family and shaped by unequal distribution of cultural capital, contributing to the reproduction of educational inequalities through family-based support and prior knowledge of the educational systems.

5.3 School-based Influences on Access to Higher Education

The second decisive factor in the aspiration and decisions to pursue higher education is the influence and the role of schools as the primary environment for school students. In the context of schools, this study examines, in particular, the mechanisms of support and guidance provided to students within school-based career guidance programs, the influence of teachers, since they are part of the social environment prior the university entry, as well as the peer environment: classmates and acquaintances.

One respondent, who transferred from a public to a private school in the Grade 10, particularly played a role in interpreting questions related to career guidance in the study. The experience of this student revealed a significant difference compared to students from state schools. Therefore, the type of school attended shapes students’ trajectories, influencing not only academic preparedness but also confidence and perceived opportunities. This aligns with studies by Zhang and Wang, (2021) and Bülbül (2020), reflecting that type of school attended impact the enrollment to university, where students from selective or private schools have more chances to be enrolled in prestigious institutions. Thus, based on the results of an interview with a student who changed the type of school from state to private, it was found that in a private school, the

mechanism of career guidance functioned in a more structured and accountable manner for students. Career guidance, as well as interaction with an instructor, played a significant role in understanding how the higher education system organized, which universities exist, which programs are available, and how to prepare for them. This finding is consistent with Prodan, (2015), who argues that students from selective or academically oriented schools are more likely to positioning themselves more confident and have better access to information than those from less advantaged schools. Together with family support, this contributed to how cultural capital operates within the context of Bourdieu (1986), that cultural capitals one of the main determinants of shaping life chances and educational performance.

However, rather than serving as cultural institutional capital, career guidance serves as a mechanism that reproduces knowledge about the system and how to navigate it. Compared to students from state schools, access to career guidance was unequal, so the distribution of opportunities to gain knowledge about the system, what actions can be taken for students from state schools seems limited, despite the formal provision of career guidance in state schools, which most likely has a more formal and bureaucratic approach of working with students without practical feedback. This supports the Zhang and Wang, (2021), who argue that schools function as institutional filters, allocating students into unequal pathways rather than reduce existing inequalities.

In addition to career guidance, the role of teachers was also discussed, and the following patterns were identified. For most of the participants, teachers played more of an informal, minor role in deciding and choosing higher education. Teachers manifested themselves in more individual emotional support, motivation at the subject level, and personal interaction with students. In some cases, where such support from teachers took place, it increased interest in the subject and developed educational attitudes. This aligns with Alcott, (2017) and Adoui, (2023), who argue that mentoring and support from teachers encourage students to continue their education and play as a role model for them. However, this support did not influence the

decision-making in university or educational program. Nkansah (2026) highlights that teachers may overlook structural inequalities and interpret students' difficulties as individual shortcomings. Moreover, teacher support was not presented in the same way, indicating a more individual rather than an institutional nature. These findings supported in Raghunath and Chua, (2026), who suggest that guiding from teachers tend to prioritize advantage students more, reinforcing existing inequalities rather than mitigating it. In some cases, the teacher played the role of a guide to better resources. Teacher support in the form of providing high-quality learning resources can be interpreted as a mechanism for the transfer of cultural capital, in which institutional knowledge is transformed into accessible learning materials that students can use in their educational practice.

The findings suggest that peer influence operates as a reinforcing rather than initiating mechanism in shaping higher education aspirations. While majority of participants were already situated within educational trajectories oriented towards university entry, peer environments contributed to the normalization of this pathway by establishing it as the dominant and socially expected option within their immediate social groups. This aligns with Turner (2020), who argues that community contexts shape educational decisions through shared values and indirectly influence students' aspirations by defining what is considered socially appropriate or desirable. At the same time, peer influence also reflects broader patterns of stratification in educational choices. As highlighted by Chankseliani et al. (2020), students may aspire to higher education but are often guided towards different types of institutions based on socially structured perceptions of what is realistically attainable, suggesting that even within a shared aspiration for university education, differentiation in perceived status and opportunity persists.

In addition to shaping norms, peer networks provided important emotional and academic support during the preparation period. Participants described collective engagement in exam preparation, mutual assistance in difficult subjects, and shared coping strategies during the high-pressure transition to university. These forms of support illustrate how peer groups function as a

form of social capital that facilitates both academic persistence and emotional resilience. This is consistent with Wanti et al. (2022), who emphasize that family encouragement, peer networks, and broader relational support systems collectively operate as community-based resources that significantly shape students' aspirations and educational integration.

Furthermore, peer groups also functioned as informal channels for the circulation of educational information, including knowledge about universities and financial opportunities. Such exchanges demonstrate that social networks extend beyond emotional support to include informational and strategic resources that are critical for navigating higher education pathways. This is supported by Mishra (2020), who argues that social networks provide not only emotional and informational resources but also cultural tools that are essential for academic success and institutional navigation.

5.4 Higher Education Preparation Challenges

Equality and access to higher education cannot be considered without accounting for university entrance examination requirements. In Kazakhstan, the UNT serves as the primary mechanism for university admission, as well as the sole criterion influencing the allocation of state-funded grants. In this study, four out of seven participants are funded through state grants, while the remaining students finance their studies independently, and one participant studies on a rector's grant. Within the context of this research, this distribution suggests a relatively equitable competition in UNT outcomes. This is supported by Baikenov and Shamatov (2025), who describe the UNT as a fair examination system. However, the findings of this study also indicate that students faced certain challenges in preparing for the UNT. One of the main difficulties relates to the unequal emphasis on disciplines selected by students for examination purposes.

The allocation of students into academic tracks in the final years of secondary education also serves as a factor limiting access to high-quality UNT preparation. This is further reflected in Baikenov and Shamatov's (2025) study, which shows that subject streaming and the creation

of specialized educational tracks contribute to the reproduction of inequality for students whose learning pathways do not align with their chosen examination subjects.

In terms of geographical distribution, all respondents in this study come from regional areas. According to OECD (2017), students from regional backgrounds have lower chances of obtaining state-funded grants. Although participants did not report explicit barriers linked to their regional origin, this nonetheless indicates a broader structural pattern in access to educational opportunities.

The findings suggest that preparation for the UNT is strongly supplemented by additional forms of academic support outside regular school provision. All participants reported attending preparatory courses during Grades 10–11, which were not perceived as optional enrichment but as a necessary response to gaps in school-based academic preparation. This indicates that school instruction alone was not considered sufficient for competitive university admission. This aligns with Baikenov and Shamatov (2025), showing that private tutoring plays a key role in converting economic resources into successful university admission, with most students linking their entry into higher education to paid preparatory support

In addition, one participant's transfer to a private school highlights differences in the structure and focus of examination preparation across school types. In this case, preparation was organized in a more specialized and subject-focused manner, allowing students to concentrate only on relevant UNT disciplines. This contrasts with the experience of participants in state schools, where preparation was described as less structured and more general. Research by Kosaretsky and Ivanov (2020) argue that access to extracurricular learning opportunities is uneven, with students from urban and higher-income backgrounds gaining additional cultural capital before entering higher education.

Furthermore, access to supplementary resources played an important role in preparation practices. While most participants did not report a lack of materials, differences were observed in how resources were obtained and used. In some cases, teachers facilitated access to additional

learning materials and external sources, while in other students relied on online platforms or independently identified preparation tools. At the same time, discrepancies were noted in the quality and relevance of available materials, particularly between official online resources and school-provided test booklets. This is also supported by evidence showing that access to preparatory resources is uneven, as students from more privileged backgrounds benefit from greater access to learning materials, international exposure, and higher-quality educational pathways. (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024).

5.5 The Transition Experience from School to University

Participants also reflected on how they experienced the transition into university and how their school background shaped this process. A clear pattern emerged showing that differences in secondary education were reflected not only in academic readiness, but also in how comfortably students were able to communicate and present themselves in an academic setting. This aligns with evidence that students from academically oriented or selective schools tend to demonstrate higher levels of confidence and stronger informational and skill-based preparation compared to those from less advantaged school types (Prodan et al., 2015; Bülbül, 2021).

Following this, one participant connected his earlier transfer to a private school with a more interactive environment, where open communication and extracurricular activities helped him become more confident in interacting with others. He felt that these experiences made it easier for him to adjust to university life, especially when comparing himself to peers who seemed less prepared for active participation in class discussions and academic interaction.

Similar views were shared by participants from different schools, who pointed out noticeable differences between graduates of selective institutions such as NIS and KTL and those from regular state schools. Students from selective schools were often described as more confident when speaking, more comfortable presenting ideas, and generally better prepared for academic demands. These patterns reflect broader evidence that school systems operate as

institutional filters, channeling students into differentiated trajectories that reproduce rather than reduce existing inequalities (Zhang & Wang, 2021). In contrast, some participants admitted that they personally struggled with public speaking and felt that such skills had not been strongly developed in their previous schooling.

5.6 Interpretation of the Findings through Cultural and Social Capital

Overall, the findings make a considerable case for interpreting equity and access to higher through Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital (1986). Cultural capital is visible in participants' dispositions toward higher education, their familiarity with university as a logic continuation of their life after school graduating, confidence in communication and preparation and their access to valued academic practices. Social capital is visible in the networks through which students received advice, information, emotional support, and practical help. Neither form of capital operated in isolation, as students interacted with family, school, and peers to shape their aspirations and preparation.

Furthermore, the findings also demonstrate that these forms of capital were convertible. Family support could be converted into educational confidence; peer networks could be converted into knowledge about grants and universities; supplementary courses could convert economic resources into exam performance; and better school environments could convert institutional opportunity into communicative ease and stronger navigational capacity. This interpretation is consistent with Zhang and Wang (2021), who show that economic and cultural capital often influence access indirectly through school trajectories and social connections rather than as simple direct effects. It is also consistent with Baikenov and Shamatov (2025), whose work in Kazakhstan demonstrates how private preparation translates family resources into admissions success.

Most importantly, the findings reinforce Bourdieu's broader insight that educational systems reproduce inequality not only by excluding some students, but by rewarding the forms of capital that some students are more likely to possess in advance. In the present study,

university entry was formally open to all participants, but the terms of competition were unequal. Some participants reached university through stronger support, better information, more targeted preparation, and school environments that cultivated skills later valued in higher education. Others reached the same destination through more fragmented pathways and with a greater need for compensation, adaptation, and self-correction. This does not mean that state school graduates lacked aspiration or ability, however they were required to navigate the same system from different starting positions.

5.6 Summary

This chapter has discussed the findings in relation to the research questions and to literature on access and equity in higher education. Overall, the discussion supports the central claim that access to higher education for graduates of state schools in Kazakhstan is a socially structured process. The participants' narratives show that equity cannot be understood only in terms of formal admission rules or overall participation rates. It must also be understood in terms of the unequal distribution of cultural and social capital that shapes aspiration, decision-making, preparation, and transition. The significance of this study, therefore, lies in showing how the experiences of state school graduates reveal the subtle but persistent ways in which inequality is reproduced within apparently open educational systems. The following section provide the final conclusion to the thesis, as well as the limitations and recommendations emerged in this research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study aimed to examine equity and access to higher education with a focus on state school graduates. As the previous chapter presented the main themes from the findings of this study in relation to the three research questions, literature and theory, this chapter is organized in 4 sections to provide the final conclusion to the thesis with further limitations, recommendations and researcher's personal reflections.

6.2 The Main Results of the Study

This study set out to understand how graduates of state schools in Kazakhstan experience equity and access to higher education. It looked at how their aspirations to pursue higher education were shaped, how they chose universities and their academic programs, what helped or complicated the admission process, and how they experience the transition into university life. Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital provided a useful lens situating these experiences within a broader analytical framework.

The findings of this study demonstrate that access to higher education is shaped by a number of interrelated social and institutional mechanisms rather than by academic achievement alone. Therefore, this result challenges the assumption that access to higher education functions as a meritocratic process primarily on academic performance. However, it suggests that academic achievement is shaped by unequal access to resources and support before the university entry. From this perspective, the admission process reflects not only on differences in abilities, but also the differences are in students' capacities to navigate the system, information access and mobilize available support into actions. Across all stages, starting from aspiration formation to university transition, students' trajectories were influenced by the uneven distribution of social support, academic and school resources and knowledge.

A key result is that higher education aspirations were embedded within family contexts and formed through early and continuous exposure to expectations, rather than emerging as independent decisions during the final years of schooling. Family environments provided not only encouragement, but also access to knowledge about the higher education system, shaping how students understood their options and navigated decision-making processes. These findings may be understood through the Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1986), particularly in its embodied and institutionalized forms. Early exposure to expectations about higher education, as well as familiarity with the structure of the education system, reflects the transmission of cultural capital within families. Students who possess this knowledge are better positioned to make informed decisions and navigate the admission process, while those without such exposure face additional barriers despite similar academic potential.

Together with the family influence, school environments played a differentiating role in shaping access to higher education. Variation between school types influenced students' access to career guidance, quality of preparation, and awareness of educational opportunities. Essentially, rather than compensating the differences in family background, schools often reinforced them by providing uneven access to institutional support and information. This suggests that schools do not function as a supportive institution for equal accessing, but more as spaces where existing inequalities are also reproduced. Differences in access to guidance, information, and preparation indicate that institutional support is unevenly distributed, often benefiting students who are already advantaged through their family context background. Finally, the role of schools shifts from compensating for inequality to reinforcing it, particularly in contexts where resources and support structures are not standardized.

Further, the results of the study also show that preparation for university admission extended beyond formal schooling and relied heavily on supplementary support. The reliance on supplementary preparatory courses highlights the growing importance of what is often described as shadow education. Access to these resources is not distributed equally for students and is

closely linked to students' socio-economic backgrounds. In the context of Unified National Testing on Kazakhstan, this creates a constrain, where performance in university entry exam is partially dependent on the ability to access additional support outside the formal school system. As a result, what expected to be a standardized and fair selection mechanism, finally reflect underlying inequalities in test preparation of students.

Finally, differences in educational background continued to shape students' experiences after enrollment to university. Variations in confidence, communication and presentations skills and academic preparedness in linguistic subject especially suggest that inequalities are not resolved at the point of admission, but persist into the university environment, influencing students' ability to adapt and participate in academic life in university.

Overall, the research suggests that access to higher education is a socially structured process, shaped by the interaction of family influence, peers and teachers, school-based support, and access to supplementary resources. These factors collectively reinforce Bourdieu's argument that education systems tend to reproduce social inequalities by valuing and rewarding specific forms of capital. In this study, this reproduction is evident not only in who gains access to higher education, but also in how students experience and adapt to university environments after admission.

6.3 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study relied on a relatively small number of participants. This allowed for detailed conversations and deeper insight into individual experiences, however it also means that the findings cannot represent all state school graduates in Kazakhstan.

Another limitation concerns the focus of the study itself. Although the study focused on graduates of state schools, one student transferred to a private school during the final year of secondary education. This experience appeared to influence the participant's perspective and

access to resources in ways that differed from the other participants' experiences. In several parts of the analysis, this student's experience stood out from those who had remained in state schools throughout their education before the university transition. While this difference provided an interesting point of comparison, it also introduces a degree of variation within the sample that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Finally, the study primarily captured students' viewpoints. Other stakeholders in the educational system such as family members, school-teachers, university admissions staff, university representatives, policymakers were not included in this study. However, their perspectives might provide additional context for understanding how institutional practices influence equity and access for state school graduates to higher education in Kazakhstan.

6.4 Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest several practical implications for educational institutions, including schools and universities, as well as for the policymakers and future research, which can be broadly grouped into four key areas.

First, access to information about the educational system for state school students: as students repeatedly described the admission process as complex, especially when reliable guidance was not available in schools, strengthening for more practical mechanism of career guidance in state schools could help address this gap. Even relatively simple forms of support as clear explanations of admission procedures or discussions about universities, academic programs choices enable the process easier to navigate. Schools themselves can also play a more active role in bridging equity and access for state school students. Structured guidance sessions, workshops on application procedures, developing digital or artificial intelligence platforms in forecasting students needs in university and academic program decision-making, or strengthening the meetings with university representatives could provide students with clearer

pathways into higher education. Teachers and counselors often serve as key sources of advice for students who do not have access to university knowledge within their families.

Second, universities may also benefit from thinking about how students experience the first months after enrollment. Orientation programs, mentoring initiatives, and early academic support can help ease the transition from school to university. For students encountering this environment for the first time, such support can make the difference between feeling lost and feeling capable of adapting.

Thirdly, at a broader policy level, these findings raise questions about the extent to which current admission systems fully account for inequalities in preparation. While standardized testing provides a structured mechanism for selection, it may not adequately address disparities in access to resources prior to the test. Addressing these gaps may require not only improvements in school-level support, but also a reconsideration of how fairness is conceptualized within the admission system itself. In this regard, the findings of this study may also inform the development of policies aimed at promoting more equitable access to higher education, including the establishment of clearer indicators to monitor participation and inclusion. Such indicators could help track the extent to which students from state schools and those facing unequal conditions of access are represented in higher education, thereby supporting more targeted and evidence-based policy interventions.

The fourth implication relates to future research, which could build on this study by expanding the sample and including students from different school backgrounds and regions across Kazakhstan, thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of contextual variations in access to higher education. Comparative work may help clarify how structural inequalities operate within the broader education system and how to navigate the preventive mechanisms. Including perspectives from teachers, administrators, and policymakers would also deepen the understanding of how institutional structures shape access to higher education.

Overall, these implications are particularly important in the context of improving equity in access to higher education, as they highlight the need to address not only individual student preparedness but also systemic differences in educational opportunities across schools and regions. Strengthening these areas may contribute to a more balanced and transparent admission process that better reflects diverse student backgrounds in Kazakhstan.

6.5 Personal Reflection

Conducting this research was largely shaped by my own experience of studying in a state school. Although I graduated from school and successfully entered university immediately after finishing the 11th grade, at that time I did not reflect deeply on many of the questions that later became central to this study.

During my years of study, and especially after completing my degree and beginning my professional career, I gradually started to notice differences among people around me. These observations became even more visible after I enrolled in a master's program at Nazarbayev University. One of the most noticeable differences was between those who had graduated from state schools and those who had studied in more competitive or specialized schools.

These differences seemed to extend beyond academic preparation alone. They were also connected to where a person came from, their family background, their values, and what could broadly be described as their cultural and social environment. Over time, these observations led me to look at these patterns more carefully and eventually shaped the direction of this research.

Throughout the research process, I repeatedly found that successful admission to university is rarely the result of academic performance alone. Behind each admission outcome there are often a number of underlying factors and circumstances that influence how students navigate the path toward higher education.

The research process itself did not present significant difficulties. However, as mentioned earlier in the limitations section, the study could have benefited from a larger number of

participants and broader regional representation across Kazakhstan. A wider sample might allow for a deeper understanding of how these dynamics unfold in different social and educational contexts.

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Appendix A

Declaration if the Use of Generative AI

Thesis Title: Equity of Access to Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Experiences of State School Graduates

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 ChatGPT 4 to organize the structure, paraphrase into academic English, edit written text of my own ideas for grammar and alignment between certain chapters.

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 appropriate AI use.

Name: Shyngys Karibayev

Signature:



Date: April 25, 2026

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate in Research on Higher Education Access

Shyngys Karibayev

Nazarbayev University

Graduate School of Education

53 Kabanbay Batyr Avenue

Astana

010000

Dear Student,

My name is Shyngys, and I am a second-year master's student in Educational Leadership (Higher Education) at the Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University. I am conducting a research project on access and equity in higher education in Kazakhstan, with a focus on the experiences of state school graduates entering universities.

The study explores challenges such as academic preparation, the admission process, aspirations, and the role of family, school, and community in students' decisions to pursue higher education. By sharing your story, you will help shed light on the opportunities and barriers faced by state school graduates. This research aims not only to give graduates a platform to express their experiences, but also to inform policies and support programs that make higher education fairer and more inclusive.

If you choose to participate, you will be invited to take part in a one-time interview (approximately 60–90 minutes), either online (via Zoom or Microsoft Teams) or in person in Astana, at a time and place convenient for you. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy.

Participation is completely voluntary. You may skip any question, pause the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time. All information you share will remain confidential. Your name will not appear in the thesis or any publications. I also want to assure you that the information collected will be handled strictly in line with the **NUGSE Research Ethics Guidelines for the Protection of Human Participants**. Only the researcher will have access to the raw data, all identifying details will be removed, and the data will be used solely for academic purposes.

If you are interested or would like to learn more, please contact me directly at shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz or via WhatsApp (+7 705 296 48 33). I will be happy to provide additional details.

If you have any concerns and complaints regarding my conduct during this research, you are advised to contact my research supervisor:

Dr Zumrad Kataeva

Email: zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz, +7 (7192) 704967

Thank you very much for considering this invitation. I would greatly appreciate your contribution to this important study.

Best regards,

Shyngys Karibayev

Master's Student, Graduate School of Education

Nazarbayev University

Appendix C

Приглашение к участию в исследовании о доступе к высшему образованию Шынгыс Карибаев

Назарбаев Университет
Высшая школа образования
пр. Кабанбай батыра, 53
г. Астана
010000

Уважаемый студент,

Меня зовут Шынгыс, я студент второго курса магистратуры по программе «Управление в образовании: высшее образование» в Высшей школе образования Назарбаев Университета. Я провожу исследование, посвящённое вопросам доступа и равенства в сфере высшего образования в Казахстане, с особым вниманием к опыту выпускников государственных школ, поступивших в ВУЗы РК.

В рамках исследования рассматриваются такие вопросы, как академическая подготовка, процесс поступления, образовательные устремления, а также роль семьи, школы и сообщества в решении студентов продолжить обучение в вузе. Поделившись своим опытом, вы можете выявить возможности и барьеры, с которыми сталкиваются выпускники государственных школ. Это исследование призвано не только дать выпускникам возможность поделиться своим опытом, но и содействовать разработке политик и программ, направленных на то, чтобы сделать высшее образование более справедливым и доступным.

Если вы согласитесь принять участие, вам будет предложено пройти одно интервью (примерно 60–90 минут) в онлайн-формате (через Zoom или Microsoft Teams) либо очно в Астане, в удобное для вас время и месте. С вашего разрешения интервью будет записано на аудио для обеспечения точности.

Ваше участие полностью добровольное. Вы можете пропустить любой вопрос, приостановить интервью или отказаться от участия в исследовании в любой момент. Вся предоставленная вами информация будет строго конфиденциальной. Ваше имя не будет упомянуто в диссертации или других публикациях. Я также хочу заверить вас, что собранная информация будет обрабатываться строго в соответствии с **Этическими принципами NUGSE по защите участников исследования**. Доступ к исходным данным будет иметь только исследователь; все идентифицирующие сведения будут удалены, а данные будут использоваться исключительно в академических целях.

Если вы заинтересованы и готовы дать интервью или хотите узнать больше, пожалуйста, свяжитесь со мной напрямую по адресу shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz или через WhatsApp (+7 705 296 48 33). Я буду рад предоставить дополнительную информацию.

Если у вас возникнут вопросы или жалобы, связанные с моими действиями в рамках исследования, вы можете обратиться к моему научному руководителю:

д-р Зумрад Катаева

Е-mail: zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz, тел. +7 (7192) 704967

Благодарю вас за рассмотрение этого приглашения. Я буду признателен за ваш вклад в это важное исследование.

С уважением,

Шынгыс Карибаев

Магистрант, Высшая школа образования
Назарбаев Университет

Appendix D

Жоғары білімге қолжетімділік бойынша зерттеуге қатысуға шақыру

Шыңғыс Қарибаев

Назарбаев Университеті

Жоғары білім беру мектебі

Қабанбай батыр даңғылы, 53

Астана қ.

010000

Құрметті студент,

Менің атым Шыңғыс, мен Назарбаев Университетінің Жоғары білім беру мектебінде «Білім беру көшбасшылығы (Жоғары білім)» магистратурасының 2-курс студентімін. Мен Қазақстандағы жоғары білімге қолжетімділік пен теңдік мәселелеріне арналған зерттеу жүргізіп жатырмын. Зерттеу мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің университетке түсу тәжірибесіне бағытталған.

Зерттеу барысында академиялық дайындық, қабылдау процесі, білім алуға деген ұмтылыс, сондай-ақ студенттің жоғары білім алуға шешім қабылдауында отбасының, мектептің және қауымдастықтың рөлі қарастырылады. Өз тәжірибеңізбен бөлісе отырып, сіз мемлекеттік мектеп түлектері кездесетін мүмкіндіктер мен кедергілерді айқындауға көмектесесіз. Бұл зерттеу түлектерге өз тәжірибесін жеткізуге мүмкіндік беріп қана қоймай, жоғары білімді әділ әрі инклюзивті етуге бағытталған саясат пен бағдарламаларды дамытуға да ықпал етеді.

Егер сіз қатысуға келіссеңіз, сізге бір реттік сұхбатқа (шамамен 60–90 минут) қатысу ұсынылады. Сұхбат онлайн форматта (Zoom немесе Microsoft Teams арқылы) немесе Астана қаласында, сізге ыңғайлы уақытта және жерде өтеді. Дәлдікті қамтамасыз ету үшін сұхбат сіздің рұқсатыңызбен аудиожазбаға түсіріледі.

Қатысу толықтай ерікті. Сіз кез келген сұраққа жауап бермей қоюға, сұхбатты тоқтатуға немесе зерттеуге қатысудан кез келген уақытта бас тартуға құқылысыз. Сіз берген барлық ақпарат құпия сақталады. Сіздің атыңыз диссертацияда немесе басқа жарияланымдарда көрсетілмейді. Сондай-ақ мен сізге жиналған ақпараттың **NUGSE зерттеу этикасының адам қатысушыларын қорғау жөніндегі қағидаларына** толық сәйкес өңделетінін кепілдеймін. Бастапқы деректерге тек зерттеуші ғана қол жеткізе алады; барлық жеке мәліметтер алынып тасталады, ал деректер тек академиялық мақсаттарда қолданылады.

Егер сіз қызығушылық танытсаңыз немесе қосымша ақпарат алғыңыз келсе, маған **shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz** электрондық поштасы арқылы немесе WhatsApp (+7 705 296 48 33) арқылы тікелей хабарласа аласыз. Мен қосымша ақпарат беруге қуаныштымын. Егер зерттеу барысында менің іс-әрекеттеріме қатысты сұрақтарыңыз немесе шағымдарыңыз туындаса, менің ғылыми жетекшіме хабарласуыңызға болады:

д-р Зумрад Катаева

E-mail: **zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz**, тел. +7 (7192) 704967

Бұл шақыруды қарастырғаныңыз үшін алғыс айтамын. Осы маңызды зерттеуге қосқан үлесіңіз үшін риза боламын.

Құрметпен,

Шыңғыс Қарибаев

Магистрант, Жоғары білім беру мектебі

Назарбаев Университеті

Appendix E

Research Participants Needed!

Are you a **state school graduate** currently studying in your 1st – 4th year at a university in Astana, Kazakhstan?

I'd love to hear about your journey!

I am conducting a Master's research project at Nazarbayev University on **access and equity in higher education**, focusing on the experiences of state school graduates.

What's involved?

- A one-time interview (60–90 minutes)
- Online (Zoom/Teams) or in-person in Astana
- Flexible schedule — you choose the time and place
- With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy

Your voice matters!

- Share your story and experiences
- Help improve understanding of barriers and opportunities for state school graduates
- Contribute to future policies and support programs for students like you

Participation is **voluntary and confidential**. You can withdraw at any time, and your name will never appear in reports.

Interested?

Contact me at: shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz or directly WhatsApp (+7 705 296 4833)

Thank you for considering being part of this important study!

— Shyngys, Master's Student

Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University

Appendix F

Требуются участники исследования!

Вы выпускник **государственной школы** и сейчас учитесь на 1 или 2 курсе университета в Казахстане?

Мне важно услышать вашу историю!

Я провожу магистерское исследование в Назарбаев Университете о **доступе и равенстве в высшем образовании**, сосредоточенное на опыте выпускников государственных школ.

Что нужно сделать?

- Одно интервью (60–90 минут)
- Онлайн (Zoom/Teams) или очно в Астане
- Удобное для вас время и место
- Аудиозапись с вашего разрешения

Почему это важно?

- Поделитесь своей историей и опытом
- Помогите понять барьеры и возможности для выпускников госшкол
- Внесите вклад в разработку более справедливой системы высшего образования

Участие **добровольное и конфиденциальное**. Вы можете отказаться в любой момент.

Заинтересованы?

Свяжитесь со мной: shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz or directly WhatsApp (+7 705 296 4833)

Спасибо за ваш вклад в исследование!

— Шынгыс, магистрант

Высшая школа образования, Назарбаев Университет

Appendix G

Зерттеуге қатысушылар қажет!

Сіз мемлекеттік мектептің түлегі болып, қазір Қазақстандағы университеттің 1 немесе 2 курсына оқып жүрсіз бе?

Сіздің тарихыңызды тыңдау мен үшін маңызды!

Мен Назарбаев Университетінде магистратурада оқып жүріп, **жоғары білімге қолжетімділік пен теңдік** тақырыбында зерттеу жүргізіп жатырмын. Зерттеу мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің тәжірибесіне бағытталған.

Не істеу керек?

- Бір сұхбат (60–90 минут)
- Онлайн (Zoom/Teams) немесе Астанада офлайн
- Уақыты мен орны сізге ыңғайлы
- Сұхбат тек сіздің рұқсатыңызбен жазылады

Неліктен маңызды?

- Өзіңіздің тарихыңызбен бөлісіңіз
- Мемлекеттік мектеп түлектері үшін бар мүмкіндіктер мен кедергілерді анықтауға көмектесіңіз
- Қазақстанда әділ әрі қолжетімді жоғары білімге үлес қосыңыз

Қатысу **ерікті, құпия және анонимді**. Кез келген уақытта бас тартуға болады.

Қатысуға қызығушылық бар ма?

Маған хабарласыңыз: shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz or directly WhatsApp (+7 705 296 4833)

Зерттеуге қосқан үлесіңіз үшін рақмет!

— Шыңғыс, магистрант

Жоғары білім беру мектебі, Назарбаев Университеті

Appendix H

Shyngys Karibayev

Master's Student, Graduate School of Education

Nazarbayev University

53 Kabanbay Batyr Avenue

Astana, 010000

Email: shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz

Phone: +7 705 296 4833

Date:

To:

Subject: Request for Permission to Distribute Research Recruitment Materials

Dear Sir/Madame,

I am writing to kindly request your assistance in facilitating student recruitment for my Master's thesis research at Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Education, titled "*Equity and Access to Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Experiences of State School Graduates.*"

The study focuses on the experiences of state school graduates currently enrolled in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan, examining issues of access, equity, and the factors shaping their educational trajectories. To collect data, I intend to conduct semi-structured interviews with 10–15 first- fourth-year undergraduate students.

For recruitment, I would greatly appreciate your permission to:

1. Share my email to the institutional mailing list of students and
2. Have my recruitment letter and poster shared through your official internal communication channels (e.g., student emails, academic advising offices, student affairs platforms, or official student chats).

All research procedures have been designed in accordance with the NUGSE Research Ethics Guidelines for the Protection of Human Participants. Participation is strictly voluntary, and all collected information will remain anonymous and confidential. Students will be fully informed about their rights prior to participation.

Your support in enabling access to students through secure and ethical communication channels will be invaluable for the successful completion of this project. Please let me know if any additional documents (e.g., my ethics approval letter, recruitment materials, or consent forms) are required to process this request.

Thank you very much for considering my application. I look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,

Shyngys Karibayev

Master's Student, Graduate School of Education

Nazarbayev University

Appendix I

Шынгыс Карибаев

Магистрант, Высшая школа образования

Назарбаев Университет

пр. Кабанбай батыра, 53

г. Астана, 010000

Email: shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz

Тел.: +7 705 296 4833

Дата

Кому:

Письмо-запрос о разрешении распространить материалы для набора участников исследования

Уважаемый(ая),

Я обращаюсь с просьбой оказать содействие в наборе студентов для моего магистерского исследования в Высшей школе образования Назарбаев Университета на тему: *«Равенство доступа к высшему образованию в Казахстане: опыт выпускников государственных школ»*.

Моё исследование направлено на изучение опыта выпускников государственных школ, обучающихся в вузах Казахстана, а также вопросов доступности, равенства и факторов, влияющих на их образовательную траекторию. Для сбора данных я планирую провести полуструктурированные интервью с 10–15 студентами 1–2 курсов.

В этой связи прошу Вас:

1. Поделиться моей электронной почтой по рассылке на корпоративные электронные адреса студентов и
2. Направить моё приглашение и постер для набора участников через официальные внутренние каналы университета (студенческие рассылки, чаты, платформы студенческих дел).

Все процедуры исследования разработаны в соответствии с **Этическими принципами NUGSE по защите участников исследования**. Участие полностью добровольное, информация будет обезличена и использована исключительно в академических целях.

Буду признателен за содействие и готов предоставить при необходимости копии документов (этическое одобрение, информационные письма и формы согласия).

Заранее благодарю за внимание и поддержку.

С уважением,

Шынгыс Карибаев

Магистрант, Высшая школа образования

Назарбаев Университет

Appendix J

Шынгыс Қарибаев

Магистрант, Жоғары білім беру мектебі

Назарбаев Университеті

Қабанбай батыр даңғылы, 53

Астана қ., 010000

Email: shyngys.karibayev@nu.edu.kz

Тел.: +7 705 296 4833

Күні

Кімге:

Зерттеу қатысушыларын тарту материалдарын таратуға рұқсат беру туралы өтініш

Құрметті,

Мен Назарбаев Университетінің Жоғары білім беру мектебінде магистратурада оқимын және *«Қазақстанда жоғары білімге тең қолжетімділік: мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің тәжірибесі»* тақырыбында диссертациялық зерттеу жүргізіп жатырмын. Бұл зерттеу мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің Қазақстандағы жоғары оқу орындарында білім алу тәжірибесін, қолжетімділік пен теңдік мәселелерін және олардың білім траекториясына әсер ететін факторларды қарастырады. Деректерді жинау үшін мен 1–2 курс студенттері арасынан 10–15 қатысушымен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбат өткізуді жоспарлап отырмын.

Осыған байланысты Сізден сұраймын:

1. Менің электрондық поштамен студенттермен бөлесуге немесе
2. Менің шақыру хатымды және постерімді университеттің ресми ішкі арналары (студенттік пошта, чатты, студенттік істер платформалары) арқылы жеткізуіңізді.

Зерттеу процедуралары **NUGSE зерттеу этикасының адам қатысушыларын қорғау қағидаларына** сәйкес жасалған. Қатысу толықтай ерікті, ақпарат құпия түрде сақталады және тек академиялық мақсатта қолданылады.

Қажет болған жағдайда мен этикалық рұқсат қағазын, ақпараттық хаттар мен келісім формаларын ұсынуға дайынмын.

Алдын ала қолдау білдіргеніңіз үшін алғыс айтамын.

Құрметпен,

Шынгыс Қарибаев

Магистрант, Жоғары білім беру мектебі

Назарбаев Университеті

Appendix K Informed Consent Form

Equity and Access to Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Experiences of State School

Graduates

Description: You are invited to participate in research about issues on access and equity to higher education among state school graduates. You will be asked to answer questions online (Zoom or Microsoft Teams Platform) or offline in Astana city on a day, time and venue convenient and comfortable for you. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time of the interview. All the data collected will be kept private and confidential. There are no academic or institutional consequences. In the process of the interview, you will be asked about your personal background and questions concerning your experience entering higher education institution. Our conversation will be audio recorded with your permission only. All the obtained data will be available only to the researcher. After three years following data analysis and submission of the thesis's final version, all interview related materials such as notes and audio recordings will be deleted. The results of the current paper will be used for academic purposes only.

Time involvement: Your participation will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

Risks and Benefits: The risks associated with this study are no more than minimal. The data will be saved on a reliable technology with a secure password with no access to others. I will not indicate the participants' names; I will code their names or their names will be replaced with pseudonyms. All the information received from the participants will be confidential.

This study will give state school graduates a platform to share their experiences, which may enhance self-awareness and empower them in their educational journeys. Findings will also provide practical insights to help future students, families, and teachers better understand the cultural, social, and financial factors that shape access to higher education. At the institutional and policy level, the research will inform equity-driven reforms and support programs aimed at reducing disparities.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor for this student work, *Zumrad Kataeva*, zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz, +7 (7192) 704967

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee to at gse.irec@nu.edu.kz
Please sign this consent form if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;

- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix L

Форма информированного согласия

Равенство и доступ к высшему образованию в Казахстане: опыт выпускников государственных школ

Описание исследования:

Вас приглашают принять участие в исследовании, посвящённом вопросам доступа и равенства получения высшего образования среди выпускников государственных школ. Вам будет предложено ответить на вопросы в онлайн-формате (платформы Zoom или Microsoft Teams) либо офлайн в городе Астана в день, время и месте, удобных для вас. Участие в исследовании является добровольным, и вы можете прекратить участие в любой момент во время интервью. Все собранные данные будут храниться в конфиденциальности и не будут разглашены. Участие в исследовании не повлечёт за собой никаких академических или институциональных последствий. В процессе интервью вам будут заданы вопросы о вашем личном опыте, связанном с поступлением в высшее учебное заведение. Наша беседа будет записана на аудио только с вашего согласия. Все полученные данные будут доступны исключительно исследователю. По истечении трех лет после завершения анализа данных и сдачи итоговой версии диссертации все материалы, связанные с интервью, включая заметки и аудиозаписи, будут удалены. Результаты данного исследования будут использованы только в академических целях.

Продолжительность участия:

Ваше участие займёт примерно 60–90 минут.

Риски и преимущества:

Риски, связанные с данным исследованием, минимальны. Данные будут храниться на надёжных устройствах, защищённых паролем, с исключительным доступом исследователя. Имена участников указаны не будут: они будут закодированы или заменены псевдонимами. Вся информация, полученная от участников, будет конфиденциальной.

Данное исследование предоставит выпускникам государственных школ возможность поделиться своим опытом, что может повысить их самосознание и укрепить уверенность на образовательном пути. Результаты исследования также помогут будущим студентам, семьям и преподавателям лучше понять культурные, социальные и финансовые факторы, влияющие на доступ к высшему образованию. На институциональном и политическом уровнях исследование предоставит рекомендации для проведения реформ, направленных на повышение справедливости и сокращение неравенства.

Права участников:

Если вы прочитали данную форму и приняли решение участвовать в проекте, пожалуйста, помните, что ваше участие является добровольным. Вы имеете право в любой момент отозвать своё согласие или прекратить участие без каких-либо последствий или утраты прав на иные положенные вам выгоды. Альтернативой является отказ от участия. Вы имеете право не отвечать на отдельные вопросы. Результаты данного исследования могут быть представлены на научных или профессиональных конференциях, а также опубликованы в научных журналах.

Контактная информация:

Вопросы: Если у вас возникнут вопросы, сомнения или жалобы, связанные с данным исследованием, его процедурами, рисками или преимуществами, свяжитесь с научным руководителем магистерской диссертации — Зумрад Катаева, zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz, +7 (7192) 704967.

Независимый контакт: Если вас не устраивает, как проводится исследование, или у вас есть жалобы, вопросы о ваших правах как участника, пожалуйста, свяжитесь с Исследовательским комитетом NUGSE по адресу gse.irec@nu.edu.kz

Пожалуйста, подпишите эту форму согласия, если вы согласны принять участие в исследовании.

- Я внимательно прочитал(а) предоставленную информацию;
- Я получил(а) полную информацию о целях и процедурах исследования;
- Я понимаю, как будут использоваться собранные данные, и что любая конфиденциальная информация будет доступна только исследователям и не будет разглашена;
- Я понимаю, что могу прекратить участие в исследовании в любой момент без объяснения причин;
- Осознавая всё вышеизложенное, я добровольно соглашаюсь участвовать в данном исследовании.

Подпись: _____ Дата: _____

Дополнительный экземпляр подписанной и датированной формы согласия остаётся у вас.

Appendix M

Ақпараттандырылған келісім формасы

Қазақстандағы жоғары білімге теңдік пен қолжетімділік: мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің тәжірибесі

Зерттеудің сипаттамасы:

Сізді мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің жоғары білімге қолжетімділігі мен теңдігі мәселелеріне арналған зерттеуге қатысуға шақырамыз. Сізге сұрақтарға онлайн форматта (Zoom немесе Microsoft Teams платформалары арқылы) немесе офлайн форматта Астана қаласында, сізге ыңғайлы күнде, уақытта және жерде жауап беру ұсынылады. Зерттеуге қатысу ерікті болып табылады, және сіз сұхбат кезінде кез келген уақытта қатысуды тоқтата аласыз. Жиналған барлық деректер құпия түрде сақталады және жарияланбайды. Зерттеуге қатысу сіз үшін ешқандай академиялық немесе институционалдық салдарға әкелмейді.

Сұхбат барысында сіздің жоғары оқу орнына түсу тәжірибеңізге байланысты жеке тәжірибеңіз туралы сұрақтар қойылады. Әңгімеміз тек сіздің рұқсатыңызбен аудиоға жазылады. Барлық алынған деректер тек зерттеушіге ғана қолжетімді болады. Деректерді талдау аяқталғаннан және диссертацияның соңғы нұсқасы тапсырылғаннан кейін үш жыл ішінде сұхбатқа қатысты барлық материалдар, соның ішінде жазбалар мен аудио жазбалар жойылады. Осы зерттеудің нәтижелері тек академиялық мақсаттарда қолданылады.

Қатысу ұзақтығы:

Сіздің қатысуыңыз шамамен 60–90 минутты алады.

Тәуекелдер мен артықшылықтар:

Бұл зерттеуге байланысты тәуекелдер минималды. Деректер сенімді құрылғыларда, құпия сөзбен қорғалған күйде сақталады және тек зерттеушіге ғана қолжетімді болады.

Қатысушылардың есімдері көрсетілмейді: олар кодталады немесе бүркеншік аттармен ауыстырылады. Қатысушылардан алынған барлық ақпарат құпия болып қалады.

Бұл зерттеу мемлекеттік мектеп түлектеріне өз тәжірибелерімен бөлісуге мүмкіндік береді, бұл олардың өзін-өзі тануын арттырып, білім алу жолында сенімділігін нығайтуы мүмкін. Зерттеу нәтижелері болашақ студенттерге, отбасыларға және мұғалімдерге жоғары білімге қолжетімділікке әсер ететін мәдени, әлеуметтік және қаржылық факторларды жақсы түсінуге көмектеседі. Институционалдық және саяси деңгейде зерттеу теңдікті арттыруға және теңсіздікті азайтуға бағытталған реформалар жүргізу үшін ұсыныстар береді.

Қатысушылардың құқықтары:

Егер сіз осы форманы оқып шығып, жобаға қатысуға шешім қабылдасаңыз, қатысуыңыз ерікті екенін есте сақтаңыз. Сіз кез келген уақытта келісіміңізді қайтарып ала аласыз немесе ешқандай салдарсыз қатысуды тоқтата аласыз. Альтернативті нұсқа — қатыспау. Сіз жекелеген сұрақтарға жауап бермеуге құқылысыз. Осы зерттеу нәтижелері ғылыми немесе кәсіби конференцияларда ұсынылуы немесе ғылыми журналдарда жариялануы мүмкін.

Байланыс ақпараты:

Сұрақтар: Егер сізде осы зерттеуге, оның рәсімдеріне, тәуекелдері мен артықшылықтарына байланысты сұрақтар, күмәндер немесе шағымдар туындаса, магистрлік диссертацияның ғылыми жетекшісі — Зумрад Катаеваға хабарласыңыз:

zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz, +7 (7192) 704967.

Тәуелсіз байланыс: Егер сізді зерттеудің жүргізілуі қанағаттандырмаса немесе шағымдарыңыз, сондай-ақ қатысушы ретіндегі құқықтарыңызға қатысты сұрақтарыңыз болса, NUGSE Ғылыми-зерттеу комитетіне хабарласыңыз: gse.irec@nu.edu.kz

Егер сіз зерттеуге қатысуға келіссеңіз, осы келісім формасына қол қоюыңызды сұраймыз.

- Мен берілген ақпаратты мұқият оқып шықтым;

- Мен зерттеудің мақсаты мен рәсімдері туралы толық ақпарат алдым;
- Жиналған деректердің қалай пайдаланылатынын түсінемін және кез келген құпия ақпарат тек зерттеушілерге қолжетімді болатынын және ешкімге жарияланбайтынын білемін;
- Мен зерттеуге кез келген уақытта ешқандай себепсіз қатысудан бас тарта алатынымды түсінемін;
- Жоғарыда айтылғандардың барлығын толық түсініп, мен бұл зерттеуге өз еркіммен қатысуға келісемін.

Қолы: _____ Күні: _____

Қол қойылған және күні көрсетілген келісім формасының қосымша данасы сізде қалады.

Appendix N

Interview Protocol for Students

Project: Equity and Access to Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Experiences of State School Graduates

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Geographic Origin:

Language of Instruction:

Modes of Financing:

Hello, dear participant and thank you for your time,

My name is Shyngys, I am the 2nd year master student at Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education.

This interview is conducted as part of my research about access and equity issues in higher education in Kazakhstan specifically discussing experiences of state school graduates and their challenges in academic preparedness, admission, aspiration and connection between school, family, community and students' decision to pursue higher education. During the interview I will ask you to answer open-ended questions to know your experience better, and please feel free to refuse answer the question, pause or withdraw. After two years following data analysis and submission of the thesis's final version, all interview related materials such as notes and audio recordings will be deleted. If you permit, the interview will be recorded.

Do you agree and reconfirm your participation?

Questions:

1. Could you please tell a little about yourself?
2. Please describe your pathway to entering university. What stands out most in your memory from this process?
3. When did you first decide that you wanted to enter university? What influenced this decision the most?
4. Was there a person who played a key role in your decision to apply to university? Who first told you about the possibility of entering university? Were there people who helped you understand how to apply, what documents were required, what the procedures were, or how to choose a program?
5. How did your family influence your aspirations to pursue higher education? Do your parents or other family members have higher education?

6. How does your family generally view reading and higher education? Was it common in your family to discuss higher education, possible educational pathways, or different options for entering university?
7. What role did your school play in your pathway to university? Did your school influence your decision to apply to university or your choice of university? Was it common to discuss university admissions at school? Was there someone at school who could guide students in this process?
8. Do you think your social environment (peers, friends, classmates) influenced your decision to apply to university, choose a program, or consider different options? For example, did they share information about tuition costs or financial opportunities?
9. What difficulties did you encounter, or might have encountered, while preparing for the Unified National Testing (UNT) or other entrance examinations?
10. Did you receive any support during the admission process (for example, preparatory courses or private tutors)?
11. Did you experience limited access to resources, information, or technologies that could affect your preparation?
12. Shortly after entering university, did you experience any difficulties related to your previous educational experience? For example, academic language proficiency, confidence in presentations, or background knowledge.
13. In your opinion, what helps students adapt quickly and successfully to university life?
14. Did you have language certificates, Olympiad diplomas, or other achievements that might have been important for admission?
15. In your view, which students have a greater chance of entering university?
16. In your opinion, which students are more likely to adapt well and perform successfully at university? What qualities or skills distinguish them?
17. Based on your experience, how could access to higher education be made more equal and fairer?

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix O

Интервью-протокол для студентов

Проект: Равенство и доступ к высшему образованию в Казахстане: опыт выпускников государственных школ

Время интервью:

Дата:

Место:

Интервьюер:

Интервьюируемый:

Географическое происхождение:

Язык обучения:

Форма финансирования обучения:

Здравствуйте, уважаемый участник, и спасибо за уделённое время.

Меня зовут Шынғыс, я студент второго курса магистратуры Назарбаев Университета, Высшей школы образования.

Данное интервью проводится в рамках исследования, посвящённого вопросам доступа и справедливости в сфере высшего образования в Казахстане. В частности, обсуждаются опыт выпускников государственных школ и их трудности, связанные с академической подготовкой, поступлением, образовательными устремлениями, а также с влиянием школы, семьи и сообщества на решение продолжить обучение в вузе. В ходе интервью я буду задавать открытые вопросы, чтобы лучше понять ваш опыт. Пожалуйста, не стесняйтесь отказаться от ответа на заданный вопрос, делать паузы или при необходимости отказаться от участия. С вашего разрешения интервью будет записано. Через два года после завершения анализа данных и сдачи итоговой версии диссертации все материалы, связанные с интервью, включая заметки и аудиозаписи, будут удалены. Вы подтверждаете своё согласие на участие? Если да, прошу подписать форму информированного согласия.

Вопросы:

1. Расскажите, пожалуйста, немного о себе.
2. Опишите, пожалуйста, ваш путь поступления в ВУЗ. Что больше всего запомнилось из этого процесса?
3. Когда вы решили впервые поступать в ВУЗ? Что оказало наибольшее влияние на ваше решение?
4. Есть ли у вас человек, который сыграл ключевую роль в поступлении в ВУЗ? Кто первым рассказал вам о возможности? Были ли у вас люди, которые помогли вам разобраться, как поступать, какие нужны документы, каковы процедуры, как выбрать направление?
5. Как ваша семья повлияла на ваши устремления поступать в ВУЗ? Имеют ли высшее образование ваши родители или кто-то еще?
6. Как в вашей семье относятся к чтению, высшему образованию, его роли? Было ли принято обсуждать высшее образование, путь к получению высшего образования, поиск вариантов и тд?
7. Какую роль сыграла школа в поступлении в ВУЗ? Повлияла ли школа на решение поступать в ВУЗ, в выборе самого университета? Было ли принято в школе обсуждать поступление, ВУЗы? Был ли в школе человек, который мог бы направить?
8. Как вы считаете, ваше окружение (сверстники, друзья, одноклассники) оказало влияние на решение поступать в ВУЗ, выборе, программе и тд? Возможно, вам рассказывали про варианты оплаты, возможностях?

9. С какими трудностями вы могли столкнуться или столкнулись в процессе подготовки к ЕНТ? или другим вступительным экзаменам?
10. Получали ли вы помощь при поступлении (дополнительные курсы, репетиторы)?
11. Возникал ли ограниченный доступ к ресурсам, информации, технологиям, которые влияют на подготовку?
12. Вскоре после поступления, какие трудности вы могли испытать, связанные с опытом до момента зачисления? (владение академическим языком, уверенность презентации, какие-либо фоновые знания)?
13. Как вы думаете, что помогает легко и быстро адаптироваться в ВУЗе?
14. Были ли у вас языковые сертификаты, дипломы олимпиад, другие достижения, которые могли иметь значение при поступлении?
15. На ваш взгляд, какие студенты имеют больше шансов на поступление в ВУЗ?
16. Как вы считаете, какие студенты имеют больше шансов на хорошую адаптацию, успеваемость? Какие качества и навыки их отличают?
17. Основываясь на вашем опыте, как сделать доступ к высшему образованию более равным и справедливым?

Спасибо за участие!

Appendix P

Студенттерге арналған сұхбат хаттамасы

Жоба: Қазақстандағы жоғары білімге қолжетімділік пен теңдік: мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің тәжірибесі

Сұхбат уақыты:

Күні:

Өтетін орны:

Сұхбат алушы:

Сұхбат беруші:

Географиялық шыққан жері:

Оқыту тілі:

Оқуды қаржыландыру түрі:

Құрметті қатысушы, уақытыңызды бөлгеніңіз үшін рақмет!

Менің атым Шыңғыс, мен Назарбаев Университеті Жоғары білім беру мектебінің магистратурасының 2-курс студентімін.

Бұл сұхбат Қазақстандағы жоғары білімдегі қолжетімділік пен теңдік мәселелеріне арналған зерттеу аясында өткізіледі. Атап айтқанда, ол мемлекеттік мектеп түлектерінің тәжірибесін және олардың академиялық дайындық, университетке түсу, білім алу ниеттері, сондай-ақ мектеп, отбасы және қауымдастықтың жоғары білімді жалғастыру шешіміне ықпалын талқылайды. Сұхбат барысында сіздің тәжірибеңізді жақсырақ түсіну үшін ашық сұрақтар қойылады. Қажет болған жағдайда жауап беруге бас тартуға, тоқтатуға немесе қатысудан бас тартуға құқығыңыз бар. Рұқсатыңызбен сұхбат аудиожазбаға түсіріледі. Деректерді талдау аяқталғаннан және диссертацияның соңғы нұсқасы тапсырылғаннан кейін екі жыл ішінде сұхбатқа қатысты барлық материалдар, оның ішінде жазбалар мен аудио жазбалар жойылады.

Сіз қатысуға келісіміңізді растайсыз ба? Егер келіссеңіз, өтінемін, ақпараттандырылған келісім формасына қол қойыңыз.

Сұрақтар:

1. Өзіңіз туралы қысқаша айтып берсеңіз.
2. Жоғары оқу орнына түсу жолыңызды сипаттап беріңізші. Осы үдерістен сізге ең көп не есте қалды?
3. Жоғары оқу орнына түсу туралы алғаш қашан ойладыңыз? Бұл шешімге ең көп қандай фактор әсер етті?
4. Жоғары оқу орнына түсуіңізге маңызды рөл атқарған адам болды ма? Сізге алғаш рет жоғары оқу орнына түсу мүмкіндігі туралы кім айтты? Қалай түсу керектігін, қандай құжаттар қажет екенін, қандай рәсімдер бар екенін, қандай мамандықты таңдау керектігін түсінуге көмектескен адамдар болды ма?
5. Сіздің отбасыңыздың жоғары оқу орнына түсуге деген ұмтылысыңызға әсері қандай болды? Ата-анаңыздың немесе басқа туыстарыңыздың жоғары білімі бар ма?
6. Сіздің отбасыңызда кітап оқуға, жоғары білімге және оның маңыздылығына қалай қарайды? Отбасыңызда жоғары білім, оған жету жолдары немесе мүмкін болатын оқу нұсқалары туралы әңгімелер болды ма?
7. Жоғары оқу орнына түсу процесінде мектеп қандай рөл атқарды? Мектеп сіздің университетке түсу туралы шешіміңізге немесе университет таңдауыңызға әсер етті ме? Мектепте университетке түсу, оқу орындары туралы талқылау болды ма? Осы бағытта бағыт-бағдар бере алатын адам болды ма?

8. Сіздің ойыңызша, сіздің ортаңыз (кұрдастар, достар, сыныптастар) университетке түсу туралы шешіміңізге немесе мамандық таңдауыңызға әсер етті ме? Мысалы, олар оқу ақысы немесе қаржыландыру мүмкіндіктері туралы айтып берді ме?
9. ҰБТ-ға немесе басқа да қабылдау емтихандарына дайындық барысында қандай қиындықтарға тап болдыңыз немесе тап болуыңыз мүмкін болды?
10. Университетке түсу кезінде сіз қандай да бір көмек алдыңыз ба (қосымша курстар, репетиторлар)?
11. Дайындық барысында ресурстарға, ақпаратқа немесе технологияларға қолжетімділіктің шектеулі болуы байқалды ма?
12. Университетке түскеннен кейін, бұрынғы дайындыққа байланысты қандай қиындықтарды сезіндіңіз? Мысалы, академиялық тілде сөйлеу, презентация жасауға сенімділік, белгілі бір бастапқы білімнің жетіспеуі сияқты.
13. Сіздің ойыңызша, студенттердің университетке тез әрі оңай бейімделуіне не көмектеседі?
14. Университетке түсу кезінде маңызды болуы мүмкін тілдік сертификаттар, олимпиада дипломдары немесе басқа да жетістіктеріңіз болды ма?
15. Сіздің ойыңызша, қандай студенттердің жоғары оқу орнына түсу мүмкіндігі көбірек?
16. Сіздің пікіріңізше, қандай студенттер университетке жақсы бейімделіп, жақсы оқу нәтижелеріне қол жеткізе алады? Оларды қандай қасиеттер мен дағдылар ерекшелейді?
17. Сіздің тәжірибеңізге сүйене отырып, жоғары білімге қолжетімділікті қалайша тең әрі әділ етуге болады деп ойлайсыз?

Қатысқаныңыз үшін рақмет!

Appendix Q
Coding Example

Initial Ideas from Transcription	Coding	Pattern/Themes Emerged
Additional preparation in chemistry for the Unified National Testing. There was no formal career guidance teacher as such. In Grade 10, only one career-related test was conducted. The class tutor organized meetings where information was mainly explained from the perspective of earnings and income, no concrete mechanisms for guiding students' educational pathways. The school did not play a significant role in structured career guidance. Main influence came from the family. Parents and older brother advised pursuing higher education. All family members have higher education qualifications (father, mother, and brother, who recently completed university). The influence of friends and peer environment on the decision to pursue higher education. No perceived lack of access to resources; rather, the issue was an abundance of information, making it difficult to understand which sources were actually useful. Self-learning in this area was considered important for achieving successful admission outcomes. Differences in academic performance and adaptation between graduates of different school types (state schools, private schools, and lyceums).	Supplementary courses needed Additional support Career guidance limitations in state schools Just formal career guidance in school without feedback No strong influence from school on decision-making Strong family support and navigating the system Whole family with higher education degrees Peers impact on aspiration No limited resource accesses Need in quality More self-learning through additional resource	Reliance on additional academic support No career guidance mechanism No career guidance mechanism Strong family's role Strong family's role Positive peers' influence Access to preparatory resources Self-learning

	University adaptation differ	Selective – state school differences
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