

Aspirations for Higher Education among Youth in Kazakhstan
Based on Intersection of Gender and Disability

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Abstract

Aspirations for Higher Education of Youth in Kazakhstan based on Intersection of Gender and Disability

Despite legislative action to develop inclusive education in Kazakhstan, the field of higher education has not received sufficient attention so far. This is arguably one of the reasons behind the low number of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education. To determine the factors influencing the decision of students to obtain higher education this qualitative study with phenomenology research design, explored the experience of 10 male and female students with various disabilities such as physical and sensory impairments, and different levels of education ranging from college graduates to PhD candidates. The intersection of participants' gender and their disability, and its effect on educational and career choices of these students present an interesting research case. The outcomes of higher education were also analyzed in this study to identify the areas that require special attention at the current stage of higher education development to increase the number of students with disabilities in higher educational institutions of Kazakhstan. According to study participants gender has no direct influence on their educational and career aspirations. However, analysis of their answers still revealed certain implicit gender restrictions. Gender, along with social and financial barriers, as well as the general inaccessibility of the environment for persons with disabilities, often has a negative impact on the formation of their aspirations. This may further limit students with special needs participation in the social life, as well as their career opportunities and professional development. Thus, higher education plays an important role in building general social justice and equality. This research offers recommendations for improving inclusive practices in higher education institutions of Kazakhstan.

Аңдатпа

Қазақстандағы Жастар Арасында Жоғары Білім Алуды Ынталандыруда Жынысы мен Мүгедектіктің Әсері

Қазақстандағы инклюзивті білім беруді дамыту жөніндегі белсенді заңнамалық шараларға қарамастан, жоғары білім беру саласына әлі күнге дейін жеткілікті көңіл бөлінген жоқ. Өз кезегінде, бұл жоғары оқу орындарында мүмкіндігі шектеулі студенттер санының аздығына себеп болуы мүмкін. Студенттердің жоғары білім алуға ынталануына әсер ететін факторларды анықтау үшін, аталған зерттеулерде мүмкіндігі физикалық және сенсорлық шектеулілігі және білім деңгейі әртүрлі, колледж бітірушілері мен ғылым кандидаттарына дейін, 10 ер және әйел студенттің тәжірибесі зерттелді. Қатысушылардың жынысының және олардың мүгедектігінің білім алу мен мансапта ынталандыруға әсері ерекше қызығушылық тудырады. Сонымен қатар, жоғары инклюзивті білім беруді дамытуда ерекше назар аударуды талап ететін салаларды анықтау мақсатында олардың білім алуының нәтижелеріне талдау жасалды. Зерттеуге қатысушылардың өздері жынысты олардың білім алу және мансаптық ұмтылысына әсер ететін фактор ретінде қарастырмайды. Алайда, олардың жауаптарын талдау, дегенмен де, жасырын гендерлік шектеулердің бар анықтады. Бұл әлеуметтік және қаржылық кедергілермен, сондай-ақ мүмкіндіктері шектеулі адамдар үшін қоршаған ортаның жалпы қолжетімсіздігімен қатар, осындай адамдардың қоғам өміріне араласуына, олардың мансаптық мүмкіндіктеріне және кәсіби дамуына жиі кері әсер етеді. Осылайша, жоғары білім жалпы әлеуметтік әділеттілік пен теңдікті қалыптастыруда маңызды рөл атқарады. Бұл зерттеу Қазақстанның жоғары оқу орындарындағы инклюзивті тәжірибені жетілдіру жөніндегі ұсыныстарды әзірлеу үшін мүмкіндігі шектеулі студенттердің тәжірибесі пайдаланады.

Аннотация

Влияние Гендера и Инвалидности на Мотивацию к Получению Высшего Образования среди Молодых Людей в Казахстане

Несмотря на активные законодательные действия по развитию инклюзивного образования в Казахстане, область высшего образования пока не получила достаточного внимания. В свою очередь, это может быть одной из причин низкого количества студентов с инвалидностью в ВУЗах. Для определения факторов влияющих на мотивацию студентов к получению высшего образования, в данном качественном исследовании был изучен опыт 10 студентов мужского и женского пола имеющих физические и сенсорные нарушения, а также разный уровень образования включая выпускников вузов и кандидатов наук. Особый интерес представляет влияние гендера участников и инвалидности на мотивацию в образовании и в карьере. Также, был проведен анализ результатов их обучения с целью определения сфер требующих особого внимания в развитии высшего инклюзивного образования. Сами участники исследования не рассматривают гендер как фактор, влияющий на их образовательные и карьерные устремления. Однако, анализ их ответов все же выявил скрытые гендерные ограничения. Это, наряду с социальными и финансовыми барьерами, а также общей недоступностью окружающей среды для лиц, имеющих особые потребности, часто оказывает отрицательное влияние на участие этих людей в общественной жизни, их карьерные возможности и профессиональное развитие. Таким образом, высшее образование играет важную роль в построении общей социальной справедливости и равенства. Данное исследование предлагает рекомендации по улучшению инклюзивной практики в ВУЗах Казахстана.

Table of Contents

Author Agreement.....	ii
Declaration	iii
Ethical Approval	iv
CITI Training Certificates	v
Abstract	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Research Question	8
Definition of Central Phenomenon.....	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review	11
Accessibility of Higher Education.....	11
Understanding Aspirations for Higher Education	14
General Factors Shaping Aspirations for Higher Education	16
Financial difficulties. =.....	17
Difficulties caused by social attitudes.....	18
Environmental limitations.....	21
Gender related difficulties.....	22
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	27
Research Design	27

Participants 29

Instrumentation 31

Procedure 32

Data Collection 33

Data Analysis 33

Ethical Issues 34

Chapter 4: Findings37

 Intersection of Gender and Disability 38

 Intersection of Gender, Disability and Aspirations 39

 Intersection of Gender, Disability, Aspirations and Outcomes 42

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings47

 Discussion of Findings for Theme 1 47

 Discussion of Findings for Theme 2 49

 Discussion for Findings for Theme 3: Intersection of Gender, Disability, Aspirations, and
 Outcomes of Higher Education 50

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations53

 Restating Aims and Objectives 53

 Summary of the Study 53

 Introductory orientation.. 54

 Literature review..... 54

 Research methodology..... 55

Data analysis..	55
Recommendations	55
Limitations and Areas for Future Research	57
Conclusions of the Study	58
References	59
Appendix 1. Informed Consent Form	72
Appendix 2. Interview Protocol	76
Appendix 3. Sample Interview Transcripts	80

Chapter 1: Introduction

Signing the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) initiated the movement towards the development of social and educational inclusion in Kazakhstan. It is aimed at the Education for All agenda focused on creating an equal and just society by supporting the diversity of learners in mainstream educational settings regardless their social, cultural, economic or health background (Suleimenova, 2012). However, the studies on the national and international level highlight that despite the government actions, vulnerable populations still tend to be limited in academic and work sectors because inclusive strategies are not properly applied (Gale & Hodge, 2014; Gore, et. al, 2017; Grant, 2017; Ospanov, 2014). Low enrollment rates among young people with disabilities entering higher education and their inadequate representation in mainstream education in Kazakhstan can be considered as a particular example of these limitations (Gazalieva, 2014). Given that the Constitution of Kazakhstan (1995, art. 30) guarantees the right to receive higher education to all citizens and regulates the Law on Education (2007, art. 3) which also ensures equal access to quality education at different levels for everyone, the low enrollment of students with disability in higher education presents an interesting case for research.

Focusing on creating a legislative framework for developing inclusive education to support vulnerable population in receiving equal educational opportunities, Kazakhstan ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) in 2008 and later in 2016 the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960). This initiated more legal actions towards accessibility of education to different social groups by reforming the local educational system and fostering social tolerance to support vulnerable population as a commitment to fundamental human rights (UNESCO, 2008). For example, this resulted in development of the first Concept on Inclusive Education (MES, 2009), which

indicated major stages needed for the successful implementation of inclusive education in the local Kazakhstan's context. However, in 2015 this concept was later recognized as too general and revised with a detailed action plan aimed at changes in the terminology of inclusive education, improvement of school infrastructure, teaching practices and programs preparing teachers for inclusion at mainstream schools, as well as development of individualized learning materials (ANAE, 2015).

Establishment of inclusive framework based on international norms and standards within Kazakhstani legislation was considered a key step in transforming mainstream educational institutions. Therefore, the goal to establish the nationwide inclusive education was set to achieve by 2018 — 2020 (ANAE, 2015) to ensure that all mainstream schools can accept diverse students and positively engage them in the learning process. As evident from the review of government actions, secondary education aimed at students under 18 years old tends to be highly prioritized at the current stage of educational development focused on the transition to K-12 system with action plans targeted at continuity of instruction at primary and secondary level, providing differentiated instructions and individualized learning materials at mainstream secondary schools, as well as improvement of school infrastructure and teaching practices. The field of higher education, however, tends to be overlooked in the normative documents and action plans lacking specific measures aimed at academic and professional development of students above 18 years old. According to the Concept of Inclusive Education at the moment the main state actions taken in this field are the increased quota for students with disabilities in higher education institutions from 0,5% to 1% and their priority in receiving state educational grants (ANAE, 2015).

As indicated in the state statistical report on higher education in Kazakhstan for 2016-2017 (MNE, 2017), out of the total number of 422516 students (aged 18-29) enrolled in

higher educational institutions in 2017, there are only 576 students with disabilities. The total amount of assigned educational grants was 31702. Of them, 252 students have received this grant on the basis of the disability quote in academic year for 2017 (“Prime Minister”, 2016).

Referring to the gender representation of these students, there are 227613 female students in higher education aged 18-29 and 296 of them have disabilities; 194903 students from the total number are male and 280 of them have disabilities (MNE, 2017). Although there is a definite improvement in the numbers of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education in the recent years, students with disabilities are still underrepresented in this level of education. To illustrate, in 2014 there were 310 individuals with disabilities who have completed or had an unfinished degree, in 2015 this number increased to 507 persons (ANAE, 2015; Gazalieva, 2014). These numbers indicate that the assigned state quote is not filled at the moment therefore more informed actions are needed.

According to scholars (Bellew & King, 1993; King & Hill, 1997), higher education plays a major role in the personal and professional development, as well as social positioning of young people and, in the long-term perspective, improves the quality of their life. Higher education also has a significant impact on the country economy with its definite impact on participation in the professional sector. For example, in Russia statistically, up to 90% of university graduates are employed (Gimpelson & Kapelyushnikov, as cited in Smolentseva, 2012). Though it is a common pattern within the Post-Soviet countries that graduates work in occupations different from their specialization, higher education still ensures better working conditions (Smolentseva, 2012). Given this, the field of higher education deserves special attention in the context of inclusive education development due to its particular importance for the young people from vulnerable populations as they tend to face more challenges in these aspects in comparison to their mainstream peers (Gazalieva, 2014).

The difference across student groups calls for the further research on the reasons behind lower participation of youth with disabilities in higher education and prevalence of women in this field. The reversed gender gap is a common tendency in academia due to the overall shift towards a feminist discourse which considers knowledge “a shared intellectual event” (Winter, 1991, p.119) aimed at collaboration and building connections in education (Leathwood & Read, 2008). Scholars argue that this is influenced by the common values of different genders as social groups with women focused on eliminating isolation via cooperation and men avoiding dependence via accomplishments (Winter, 1991). Interestingly though, the difference between enrollment rates of male and female students with disability is smaller than for students overall.

Gender in research often being discussed in terms of its limitations in social participation. For example, those posed by different expectations that parents have for their daughters and sons (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003) or by representation of genders in policies and practices with its male-dominating nature (Govender & Penn-Kekana, 2008). In this light, gender can also be attributed to a social construct of disability in its broad sense. Therefore, the intersection of gender and disability presents an interesting case for further research.

Statement of the Problem

Literature focused on participation of students from vulnerable backgrounds in higher educational settings highlights the need for more research on student aspirations as the response to the global trend of raising aspirations of disadvantaged social groups and widening their participation in higher education (Gale & Hodge, 2014). This is largely due to simplistic representation of these aspirations when it comes to decision-making and policy consultancy which limits the development of equality initiatives (Gore, et.al, 2017). To illustrate it is often the case that student aspirations towards higher education are perceived as

something that ‘one either has or does not have’ (Prodonovich, Perry, Taggart, 2014, p. 178) without taking into account the complex process of forming those aspirations (Gore, et.al, 2017). The complexity of aspiration implies that it is largely influenced by the social experiences of individuals and the ways they reflect on them (Gorard, See & Davies, 2012).

This understanding of complexity of aspirations can also be a source for informed actions and practices required at higher educational institutions to address the needs of students with disabilities, for instance, provision of support services and this way widen participation of this social group (Clouder et.al, 2016). Raising aspirations of people with disabilities is crucial because in comparison to the mainstream population they are significantly less likely to hold any professional or degree-level qualifications (Clouder et.al, 2016; Neugebauer, Neumeyer & Alesi, 2016). Disability as a social construct is reflected in the feeling of being “different” or “not normal” that people with disabilities might experience based on the particular social attitudes and the level of accessibility of the physical environment around them (Birenbaum, 1979).

Gender of students being another social construct also shapes their aspirations for education in the way that boys and girls are taught from the young age about the acceptable behavior and career choices, for instance, occupations in fields of mathematics and engineering are mainly attributed to boys (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002). Modern scholarship, however, should strive to be equalists (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002). In other words, they should defend educational equality and equity in respect to the differences posed by gender to ultimately empower both, females and males. This study is interested in doing so by exploring the aspirations for higher education across both genders

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore aspirations for higher education of current and former university students in Kazakhstani universities based on the intersection of gender and disability. This focus will allow exploring their aspirations towards higher education in general, the benefits and barriers, as well as the outcomes of this experience to further investigate in what ways the intersection of gender and disability influenced their participation in education at the post-secondary level.

This study is also an opportunity to use voice of students as the source of informed actions and decision-making in education (Miller, 2008). So far it tends to be overlooked in determining the accessibility and quality of instruction and teaching support in the academic institutions for diverse students. It is especially important for students with disabilities because their participation in higher education is directly dependent on accessibility of institutions and attentive educational leadership.

Higher education presents an interesting research case due to being a non-compulsory educational stage in Kazakhstan but rather a personal choice shaped by different external and internal factors. Among these factors is social-economic background, previous academic achievements, quality of the university education, expectations for better employment options, social pressure (Stuart, Lido & Morgan, 2012). In the case of young people with disabilities additional factors like health conditions, physical accessibility of the educational institution, possibility for curriculum adaptations, social attitudes, peer acceptance and support have a significant influence on this decision (Grant, 2017; Purcell, 2011; Walker, 2016).

The intersection of gender and disability can also be included in these factors as they play a significant role in shaping aspirations of young people due to posing limitations from disability and implicit gendered expectations evident in most societies (Riddel, Wilson & Baron, 2001). The number of studies on the how the intersection of disability and gender

affects the experience of individuals is limited, nevertheless, most researchers agree that this intersection can potentially result in further marginalization of vulnerable populations (Goodman, 2015; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003). This is due to barriers in accessing social resources and institutions, as well as interpersonal challenges shaped through communication with the mainstream society (Goodman, 2015). Besides, some studies indicate that women with disabilities are more prone to psychosocial challenges due to widespread explicit and implicit discrimination (Govender & Penn-Kekana, 2008). This includes limited social inclusion, representation in policies and practices, and employment opportunities.

The underlying purpose of this research is promote transformative actions in the field of inclusive higher education to raise the participation of young people with disabilities in higher education based on the lived experience of study participants. According to scholars (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002) the combination of separate notions like gender and disability is a successful strategy for constructing an effective transformational framework which this research aims to achieve. For example, the findings of this study can be used for informed professional orientation for high school students with diverse abilities and needs based on experience of other vulnerable students.

The understanding of student aspirations towards higher education will be helpful in empowering young people with disabilities to take greater control of their lives, raising their participation in education and work, and improving accessibility of higher education in Kazakhstan. As indicated in the Concept of Inclusive Education, more actions towards the improvement of professional orientation and professional education for those with disabilities are needed for the further improvement of their employment opportunities (ANAE, 2015). This can be done by giving voice to students with diverse abilities and needs to raise overall social awareness and promote inclusive educational leadership.

This study is also expected to continue the discussion on the topic of inclusive higher education among the research community, provide suggestions and recommendations for further research on the given topic. Previous studies aimed at exploring participation of students with disabilities in higher education highlight the need for more profound research on student aspirations (Bowl, 2001; Leach, 2013; Madriaga, 2007; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). This research will analyze the impact that intersection of gender and disability has on university students' aspirations to address this need.

Research Question

The central research question of this study is “*How the intersection of gender and disability shapes aspirations and outcomes of higher education among youth in Kazakhstan based on their narratives?*”

In order to further develop the central question and provide a substantial insight into what shapes the aspirations of young people with disabilities in Kazakhstan, the following sub-questions will guide this study:

1. *What are the general aspirations for higher education of young people with disabilities?*
2. *What factors influence the choice of tertiary education and study program among students with disabilities of different gender who entered or obtained university degree?*
3. *What are the outcomes of tertiary education as described by former students with disabilities of both genders?*
4. *How aspirations for higher education differ among female and male individuals with disability?*

Definition of Central Phenomenon

In this research paper, *disability* is understood as “an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions” (WHO, 2002, p.3). This is a social construct which shapes the interaction of the person who has a disability with the surrounding environment in different social contexts (Leonardi, Bickenbach, Ustun, Kostanjsek & Chatterji, 2006).

Gender in this study is presented as a culture-specific social construct that shapes the standards of behavior for men and women, their typical characteristics and roles within the society (Gupta, 2000). Gender along with other factors like race, nation, social class, disability, and occupation is closely connected to the formation of person’s identity and worldview (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012), which have a direct influence on their aspirations.

Within the definition of UNESCO (2008), *inclusive education* is understood as a reorganization of educational institutions with the primary objective to respond to the needs and rights of all students and provide them equally to access, participation, and achievement of their potential, without falling victims of discrimination or marginalization. Inclusive higher education in the context of Kazakhstan is the way to ensure the implementation of human rights of persons with diverse needs and abilities to access opportunities to develop as professionals. This further promotes social justice and cohesion, improves diversity in the academic and working environments, as well as influences the participation of Kazakhstan in the globalization processes aimed at creating an equal and equitable society for all (Makoelle, 2016).

In this paper, *aspiration* is defined as an individual view shaped by lived experience, social circumstances and the imagined place in the world of this individual (Gale & Parker, 2015). Being closely related to culture aspiration is understood as an object influenced by the general society and the culture of each environment, for example, an educational institution as

it presents own culture in a set of standards and norming behaviors for students (Razer & Friedman, 2017).

The complexity of aspiration is of particular interest for this research as it aims to deepen understanding of the ways the intersection of such important factors of a person's identity as gender and disability influence the views of young people regarding higher education. Overall social views towards representatives of a certain group arguably have significant influence over an individual's decision to continue education. Following the established framework on aspirations towards higher education, the next chapter continues the discussion on how the intersection of gender and disability impacts the formation of students' higher education aspirations in more detail. Then, the third chapter justifies the choice of qualitative methodology, particularly phenomenology research design. It also describes in detail sampling techniques, data collection processes and instruments, as well as data analysis procedures and ethical considerations. Subsequent chapters present research findings, their analysis and interpretation focused on answering the main research question. The final chapter summarizes the study and makes reasonable conclusions, provides recommendations for policy makers and university administrators, discusses limitations of the given study and areas for future inquiries in the field.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores relevant literature related to factors which shape aspirations for higher education of youth from vulnerable social groups in Kazakhstan. It provides a lens through which the intersection of disability and gender can be considered. Review of the literature revealed a particular phenomenon in the experience of this social group in Kazakhstan. Though members of this group have more rights in comparison to the mainstream population due to the strong legislative framework on inclusion, they have fewer opportunities to implement their rights.

Accessibility of Higher Education

With the focus on establishing the nationwide inclusive education by 2020 (ANAE, 2015) and increased inclusion of vulnerable populations in mainstream secondary schools, higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan are also expected to successfully enroll students with diverse abilities and needs (Makoelle, 2016). In this light, accessibility of higher education across different social groups receives close attention in the local and international research. The findings signal that it is only possible to achieve inclusive higher education in the Kazakhstani context through major structural changes in terms of funding for higher education, inclusive pedagogy, accessibility of educational institutions and admission practices for students with different needs and abilities (Makoelle, 2016; OECD, 2015) which so far remain unaddressed. Some scholars (Smolentseva, 2012) argue that this is largely due to the massified and centralized education planning and leadership inherited from the Soviet regime in many post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan. The focus on outdated standards aimed at mainstream population limits the opportunity for higher educational institutions to respond to diverse abilities and needs of students proposed by the modern educational reforms aimed at inclusion (Florian, Rouse & Black-Hawkins, 2016).

According to Ainscow (2005) accessibility also refers to the modern inclusive education framework used as the guideline in writing policies and action plans aimed at positive presence, acceptance, participation and achievements of diverse students in mainstream educational settings.

However, there are different approaches to what defines the accessibility of higher education. Some studies have focused on socio-economic factors that limit participation in higher education for students from low-income and working-class families (Basit, 2012; Basit, 2013; Lehmann, 2009). Some have studied participation in higher education across students of different genders based on limitations imposed by certain cultural norms or as the result of gender education shaping the experiences of men and women in higher education differently (Harris & Rainey, 2009). Other scholars have focused on disability, namely, unequal access to higher education for students with disabilities and inadequate care for their needs during the educational process (Gayle, Lambert & Murray, 2009), which further led to their poor participation in higher education. The latter is especially relevant in the case of Kazakhstan with its low enrollment rates of students with disabilities which this research aims to explore.

Although inclusion is not limited to disability, special education with its primary focus on disability and ways to adapt the person to the general society still plays the major role in the discourse of inclusive education (Florian & Becirevic, 2011). The review of state actions and legislative framework for inclusive education in Kazakhstan shows that its development is mainly focused on mainstreaming persons with disabilities (Rouse, Yakavets & Kulakhmetova, 2014) and is largely dominated by the pedagogy of special education or defectology, as well as the medical model of inclusion with its focus on correcting those with special needs and “fixing” the existing defects (Dumbayev & Popova, 2006; Florian &

Becirevic, 2011; Makoelle, 2016). This burdens inclusion at different levels and affects social attitudes and actions of mainstream educational institutions because according to the medical model of inclusion, special needs are best addressed at special schools (Makoelle, 2016; OECD, 2015).

The social model of inclusion, on the other hand, separates the person from the impairment and instead of trying to adapt the person with disability to the general society, aims at adapting the society to the diverse needs of its representatives (Oliver, 2013). Within the social model, it is the social attitudes and unprepared environments that construct the disability and not the impairment (Barnes, 1996; Finkelstein, 2001).

According to Birenbaum (1979), the accessibility of physical environments for persons with disabilities is a somewhat a reflection of the general social attitudes towards them. This limits the participation of people with disabilities in the everyday life and is even likely to make the latter feel unworthy to demand the adaptations and modifications in the certain services they need leaving these people marginalized as the result. Current unpreparedness of Kazakhstani universities to accommodate diverse needs of students, especially of those with disabilities is arguably an example of such embedded social marginalization (Gazalieva, 2014).

This and the fact that inclusive higher education is overlooked in the current process of education development in Kazakhstan presents an interesting case for further research on the experience of students with disabilities in entering and obtaining higher education. The area of student aspiration has not been researched in this context. Thus, the author of this study aims to explore the aspirations towards higher education of youth in Kazakhstan based on the intersection of gender and disability to find what shapes these higher education aspirations. This way the given study will address the current knowledge gap.

Understanding Aspirations for Higher Education

Based on the review of the literature the term “aspiration” appears to be a complex notion to define. Some researchers state it is an individual view informed by the lived experience of the person or “individualist psychological register” (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale, 2015, p.3), one’s personal goals, achievements and expectations (Oymak & Hudson, 2018). Most researchers argue that this is a view formed as a result of social attitudes and expectations towards a certain group of people (Gale & Parker, 2015; Grant, 2017; Walker, 2016). In this light, aspiration can be defined as an individual view based on the experiences caused by social attitudes towards a certain social group, in this case, students with disabilities of both genders.

There is also evidence which claims that in any society there is a dominant group that explicitly or implicitly dictates the norms and goals of other minority groups (Appadurai, 2004; Burke, 2009). For example, in the recent study by Grant (2017), it was found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have lower career expectations of themselves in the future because this is what the general society expects from them. By contrast, students from wealthy families on the opposite rarely see themselves working middle-class jobs. Thus, the wealthy group forms the lists of desired occupations for others, in other words – prestige jobs. However, practice shows that people from other groups, especially vulnerable ones tend to not see themselves as suitable for these commonly desired jobs (McMillan et al., as cited in Gale & Parker, 2015). If connected to the medical model of disability which focuses on person’s limitations and the ways to treat those to adapt the person to the standards of the mainstream society (Brisenden, 1986), students with disabilities are likely to consider themselves incapable of vying for prestige jobs due to their lack of qualities held by mainstream peers.

Contextual factors play a significant role in shaping individual's aspirations either explicitly or implicitly. Some scholars argue that the external expectations, social support and barriers are the main factors in students' decision-making processes about continuing education (Oymak & Hudson, 2018). For example, this can be attributed to the gendered education in families with differing values imposed on girls and boys (Kelly & Elliott, 1982) or varying academic interests across genders with females giving preference to social sciences and males preferring engineering or technology (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002). Those with disabilities often see themselves unable to do certain things, however, it is often solely due to the social norms and standards of certain cultures or within the medical model of inclusion, which reinforces this thinking by focusing on one's limitations.

In her study Purcell (2011) links aspirations for higher education with academic performance, which is also relevant to the purpose of this research paper as it aims to develop recommendations for the improvement of educational services offered at the higher education level. According to Purcell (2011), higher academic standards are likely to break the culture of low aspirations, especially among vulnerable groups allowing more opportunities for their upward social mobility. The ability to receive quality higher education creates a certain level of satisfaction with one's abilities, along with the acquired professional knowledge which further forms the individual's confidence to strive for more successes in life (Abbas, as cited in Basit, 2012). Therefore, higher education promotes social justice through the academic and professional participation of vulnerable populations by creating better career options and economic stability. The same is true for students of different genders. For instance, studies show that even within cultures limiting women in career perspectives and social mobility, the pursuit of higher education is not compromised and even supported by families given that cultural norms are respected and followed (Abbas, 2007; Abbas, 2010; Ahmad, as cited in Basit, 2012).

In many post-Soviet countries including Kazakhstan there is a shared perception of higher education as a key to a guaranteed employment and better income opportunities (Smolentseva, 2012). In this contexts, most students' aspirations for higher education are linked to the expected upward social mobility. Although advantages in employment are not guaranteed in these modern days, young people from post-Soviet countries still strive to receive higher education before starting their career considering university experience as a facilitator in achieving their social goals (Smolentseva, 2012).

It is clear that aspirations are usually contextual and highly depend on an individual's social situation, for instance, limited financial resources or a need to look after family members can lower aspirations. However, studies prove that aspirations of vulnerable or minority students can be changed upwards (Walker, 2016). Higher education plays a significant role in ensuring the inclusion of vulnerable populations and minority groups into general society by providing professional educational opportunities, which facilitate their further employment and participation in the economic development of the whole country (Lehmann, 2009).

Due to differences in the social experience of every student with disability aspiring higher education, it is very important to give these students voice and collect their unique stories to understand the impact of inequality (Gray, 2013; Finnegan, Fleming & Thunborg, 2014). This insight will be the source for developing informed and meaningful actions which will potentially reduce marginalization of vulnerable students in higher education and provide them with better social opportunities via increased participation in the academic and work spheres.

General Factors Shaping Aspirations for Higher Education

Financial difficulties. Based on the experience of many non-traditional students including those with disabilities trying to enroll in higher education it is clear that financial complications are a significant barrier to continuing education (Bowl, 2001). In Kazakhstan, there is a number of state scholarships offered to students with disabilities and some may argue that this barrier is not relevant in this context. However, other scholars (Hästbacka et al., 2016) argue that the full social integration of students with diverse needs and abilities is considerably more costly than the general tuition.

As indicated in the State Program of Education Development (2010) at the current stage of inclusive education implementation, not all higher educational institutions are adequately equipped with special technology and educational materials suitable for students with diverse needs. Currently in higher education development, this still presents a big issue for the educational institutions in local and international contexts (Butler, Holloway, Marriott & Goncu, 2017; Fuller, Bradley & Healey, 2004). This creates additional disadvantages for students who need assistive technologies, accessible study materials or other support for equal participation in the study process.

The lack of inclusive education policies in Kazakhstani universities with set descriptions of the support to be provided to students with special needs (Rouse, Yakavets & Kulakhmetova, 2014), results in students being responsible for providing necessary resources and support materials for themselves. This is time- and effort-consuming, and also creates additional expenses that not all families can afford.

Overall, according to the study on participation in higher education of students with special educational needs in the context of Western universities, there is a tendency towards an elitist education (Leach, 2013). In other words, education becomes non-equal in terms of

the financial matters that primarily affect students with disabilities who often come from lower-income families.

Difficulties caused by social attitudes. Attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities present an important case, because they play a major role in forming the aspirations of vulnerable youth through interactions with people around them in different social environments. These interactions and social attitudes often based on the unjust treatment of those with disabilities further influence the assumptions of young people about themselves and their abilities to participate in academic or professional settings (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Byrne, 2014).

Some authors analyze the phenomenon of disablism. For instance, Madriaga (2007) argues that it is not necessarily the educators themselves, but the stereotypical and often discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities in society and in educational institutions, which reflect general social insensitivity and lack of awareness about the needs of students with disabilities. Thus, it is often the case that even when institutions include these students, there is mass skepticism about their performance which creates an additional obstacle for them (Clouder, Adefila, Jackson, Opie & Odedra, 2016), because it results in fewer opportunities to express their potential, lower expectations, and demands for their performance and lenient attitudes of teachers.

The phenomenon of students with disabilities getting a higher education is not a general tendency, but rather a contingency depending on particular circumstances in different parts of the world (Herath, 2014) and there are two main reasons behind this. The first reason is due to the lack of educational facilities caused by identification of disabled people as lacking any capability. The second one is exclusion embedded in the environment of the students with "cultural norms of stigma, segregation, and devaluation" (Herath, 2014, p. 229).

Another issue evident in the literature is that people with disabilities are often treated as "a singular, albeit heterogeneous entity" (Hästbacka, Nygård & Nyqvist, 2016, p. 212), which is true for people with different disabilities, as well as across different genders. The authors argue, however, that even though the disabilities are all different and quite vast, the obstacles and facilitators in many ways are quite alike across different student groups (Hästbacka, Nygård & Nyqvist, 2016).

Thus, all young people need sufficient socialization to be able to interact with others, participate in social, cultural, economic, and religious events in everyday life. In order to be able to do that, young people need quality education, professional development, and successful employment. However, to receive this social engagement and career opportunities on an equal basis youth with diverse needs and abilities requires special adaptations and modifications which are often overlooked leaving this student group far behind (Gazalieva, 2014). Nevertheless, the recognition of differences is likely to facilitate the process of developing the necessary changes for students with special needs, which will further facilitate educational equality and equity (UNICEF, 2013).

Based on the study on motivation of students with disabilities in higher education (Reed, Kennett & Emond, 2015) these students usually have higher internal grounds and tend to take more initiative in academic participation, believe in the success of their goals and reveal more of their potential in the first year of higher education. In light of this, the authors think that first-year students with disabilities might take advantage of the "internal benefits of the education" (Reed, Kennett & Emond, 2015, p. 232), such as the "value of learning or the enjoyment of the challenge" (Reed, Kennett & Emond, 2015, p. 232). However, senior year students with disabilities less often attend classes to improve their future job opportunities due to pressure from other people. This might reflect their motivation, or lack thereof, of finding a

job in a market that usually presents many obstacles to them (Lehmann, 2009; Maureen et al., 2015).

In the current reality of Kazakhstan with the dominance of the medical model of disability, people with disabilities are often considered to be the recipients of service, namely, having low social mobility and expecting constant support from others being unable to serve and provide for themselves due to the limitations caused by their impairments (Gazalieva, 2014). In other words, a person with disability is an object of social and government support, but not a subject of action. These social perceptions of disability have a potential influence on students with disabilities within higher education. This might be the factor behind the low enrollment rates in higher educational institutions - about 3,7% among students with disabilities aged 18-29, as well as their poor employment perspective afterward - 18,5% of the total number of young people with disabilities in Kazakhstan (Gazalieva, 2014).

According to several studies, the ineffective hiring of people with disabilities is also the result of restricted aspirations due to stereotypical perceptions of these individuals as being less effective in their job positions, having a lower quality of academic and professional development in comparison to mainstream colleagues, as well as general inaccessibility of the working environment for people with special needs (Gazalieva, 2014; Lindsay, 2011; Lindstrom, Kahn & Lindsey, 2013). The findings conclude that the change in the current state is only possible by advocating for structural changes in work environments to allow more diversity and avoid prejudice and discrimination.

Overall, research indicates that there is a clear disablist pattern imposed on people with disabilities entering academic and working sectors by the general society in Kazakhstan (Tokhtahunov, 2018). As a result, the majority of people with disabilities are left behind in

their social participation due to the lower quality of educational opportunities and limitations in accessing the work environment.

Environmental limitations. Another important factor closely connected to the attitudes and financial implications in research on students with disabilities in higher education is the physical accessibility of educational institutions and work environments. This also includes the availability of study resources and materials, as well as opportunities for their adaptation and modification as necessary for diverse students interested in the experience of this social group in continuing education (Fuller, Bradley & Healey, 2004). Studies on the accessibility of educational institutions signal that these environments are usually designed without regard for students who have special needs and disabilities (Lourens & Swartz, 2016), which disadvantages participation of these students in events on campus.

Current higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan (MES, 2010), lack opportunities to improve their physical environments due to insufficient allocation of resources and inadequate funding. As a result students with disabilities remain limited in their participation in higher education due to the lack of specialized educational resources and assistive technologies which further affects their motivation to continue education after the secondary school. Overall, this leads to their negative social mobility due to the lower participation in the social life as compared to the mainstream population (Tokhtahunov, 2018).

Gender related difficulties. Considering the general tendency to view people with disabilities as a collective heterogeneous unity, it is expected that most literature resources on students with disabilities in higher education are not gender-based (Hästbacka, Nygård & Nyqvist, 2016). Gender itself, however, appears in a vast number of studies following the work of Ann Oakley in 1972 (Dillabough, 2006) and the main feminist movements of 1970-1980s, which viewed gender as a social construction that impacts basic social arrangements. Radical feminism of that time inspired academics to explore education and its influence on forming gender relations, socialization patterns and individual identity formation. The feminist research projects were moved by the concerns of low engagement and underachievement of women in the academic field leading to their overall marginalization (Francis & Skelton, 2001).

The feminist movement in educational research is still quite strong at the moment and scholars argue that the intersection of gender and disability presents more challenges for females with disabilities as they are prone to stress and depression at least twice more than men with disabilities (Nosek & Hughes, 2003). Such psychosocial challenges can limit participation of women with disabilities in education and work spheres. Even though the proportions of male and female students in Kazakhstan are currently rather comparable, specific challenges of women joining workforce deserve more attention. There is a disproportionate use of resources and bias in research on the needs of men with disabilities in comparison to studies of women with disabilities (Nosek & Hughes, 2003). Therefore, there seems to be a significant deficit to resolve, and moreover, to examine the requirements and problems of women with disabilities and their psychological well-being as in comparison to men they are more prone to stress and depression (Eccles, 1994).

Other concerns for female participation in the academic field include lower expectations and subsequently lower academic demands towards unveiling the potential of female students (Preece, 1995). A study of 44 cases of female students with disabilities in higher educational institutions in England revealed discriminative expectations to be a rather frequent pattern (Preece, 1995). In many cases these low academic and professional expectations from women can be attributed to the traditional norms and cultural perceptions of certain societies (Sachs & Schreurer, 2011). For instance, in some rural areas, the role of education is downplayed in exchange for the traditional position of women as homemakers and housewives, in contrast to men as breadwinners (Don, Salami & Ghajarieh, 2015).

Among other concerns for the participation of women with disabilities in higher education can be identified five different categories of factors which have a substantially harmful effect on the motivation and overall performance of female students with disabilities. These factors include “poverty, sexual abuse, harassment, discrimination, lack of sufficient learning resources and a constraining physical environment” (Opini, 2012, p.76). The core problem identified by the researcher is viewing disability as a general inability for women, which resulted in different forms of discrimination towards them (Opini, 2012). These marginalizing attitudes are what should be changed first to allow more positive tendencies towards females with disabilities.

Although there are females with disabilities who succeed in education in spite of low expectations and a lack of motivation, psychological influences of feeling inadequate still negatively affect their performance. These feelings along with the masculinist values and expectations dominant in the university curriculum tend to impose more inequalities on female students with disabilities in the educational process (Schomer & Monteaguado, 2013) based on a case study with nontraditional students. One of them was Rosa, a female student

with disabilities from Germany. In her interview, she shared about having feelings of not belonging to higher education, dissatisfaction with her performance as a student and low self-esteem (Schomer & Monteaguado, 2013), that had matured prior to entering university and had affected her academic performance.

Feminist movements in general and education research focused on female experiences raised another research and advocacy movement stating that in the modern world the perspective changed towards underrepresentation of men. This inspired further educational research inquiries, particularly on classroom behavior, feminization and the gendered nature of the curriculum, as well as the underachievement of male students. The scholars come to the conclusion that masculine interests and behaviors tend to be undervalued and even marginalized in the modern educational system and society in general (Dillabough, 2006; Francis & Skelton, 2001). The direct influence of gendered education and social values on an individual's identity further affects their aspirations to higher education and future career perspectives.

In this regard, the scholars claim that it is crucial to stop accepting males and females as opposing forces to avoid contrasting their natural skills and qualities; instead, their differences in perceiving the world should be appreciated in order to achieve maximum inclusion of both genders (Ghail, 1994). Overall, the recognition of gender in the educational process, namely, curriculum and teaching methods leads to the development of transformative educational practices aimed at the success of all students with respect to their diverse interests and needs (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002).

In Kazakhstan nondiscrimination and gender equality are priorities in all state sectors, including education (Kushnir & Kiling-Schneider, 2013). This is highlighted and described in the Constitution of Kazakhstan (1995, art.14), in the developed and implemented Strategy for

Gender Equality (MJ, 2005), as well as in the Law “On State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women” (2009) and the Law “On Education” (2007).

The consistent positive experience of Kazakhstan in ensuring gender equality in education is recognized as exemplary for other Central Asian countries, but the access of women to economic opportunities and their political empowerment are still quite limited (ADB, 2013). According to the Country Gender Assessment (2013) and National Human Development Report (2016) women are underrepresented in political office and have little influence over policy and decision making; they are less involved in the formal economy and are mainly engaged in the public sector, self-employment or in domestic care. Men, on the contrary, are employed in the technical fields and managerial positions which offer the highest salaries (UNDP, 2016).

Reports also highlight a similar gender pattern in higher education enrollment and aspirations with female students mostly engaged in social sciences and healthcare, while most male students enter technical training or technology (ADB, 2013; UNDP, 2016). Due to the gender segregation in the academic and work environment along with a wage gap, there might be a significant decrease in the enrollment of women in higher education. The situation is even more problematic for women with disabilities entering higher education with additional concerns for the accessibility of educational institutions and availability of necessary support for their needs (ADB, 2013).

Thus, the literature analysis revealed that the scope of barriers and challenges for students with disabilities in higher education is extensive. The impact of attitudinal barriers for vulnerable students especially when it concerns gender and disability perceptions of mainstream population towards this social group in the field of education presents an interesting case for further research. In Kazakhstani academia research on inclusive higher

education is rare and centered on qualitative data. Therefore, a qualitative approach will provide a deeper insight into the situation based on the narratives of university students from vulnerable population. The findings of this study will provide the informative basis for improvement of inclusive educational services to make higher education more accessible and desirable to vulnerable students such as people with sensory and physical impairments.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter explains and justifies the choice of qualitative methodology given the purpose, research problem and questions of this study. This research follows specifically a phenomenology research design to form the understanding of the ways in which the intersection of gender and disability affects the aspirations for higher education among young people in Kazakhstani post-secondary institutions. This chapter also provides the reasoning behind purposeful and snowballing sampling methods applied in this research. Ethical considerations are covered within this chapter to ensure that all potential risks for participants are eliminated in this study.

Research Design

Qualitative methodology is best suited in research that focuses on participants and requires interpretation of the meaning people bring to a certain event or phenomena (Creswell, 2013). This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of student experiences in entering and obtaining higher education based on the intersection of gender and disability. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis this study is expected to describe the meaning behind lived experience of vulnerable students in mainstream educational settings to explore the issue of their low enrollment in higher education in more detail. According to scholars phenomenological research methods allows describing and interpreting a certain lived experience of individuals and challenging existing normative assumptions in this field simultaneously (Lester, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2004). Phenomenology seeks to eliminate any misconceptions and make meaning of the experience grounded on the direct perspective of the research participants. Such descriptive and interpretive practices also have a strong potential for further practical application in the form of informed actions and meaningful policies (Lester, 1999).

Aspiration is the complex notion that needs exploration and deeper understanding, therefore it is presented as the central phenomenon in this research (Creswell, 2002). Phenomenological methodology focused on interpreting personal perspectives and reasoning motivations and actions of participants therefore allows developing a comprehensive understanding of how the higher education aspirations of vulnerable students are formed and how intersections of gender and disability affects this process (Lester, 1999).

This research employed phenomenology applying critical perspective to examine the experiences of young people representing both genders (male, female) and different disabilities (sensory, physical) within Kazakhstani higher education system to interpret motivations for receiving or not receiving a post-secondary degree based on the narratives of participants. The critical perspective in this context allowed using lived experience of individuals from vulnerable and marginalized social groups to empower others. For instance, experience of students with disabilities in higher education advocates for elimination of inequalities towards this social group (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Thomas, 2006). Analysis of student aspirations through the lens of intersection addressed low higher education enrollment among young males and females with disabilities to promote changes towards inclusion in the current educational system.

According to Creswell (2013) phenomenological research is aimed at describing the perceptions of different participants as they face the same phenomenon, in this case - low higher education enrollment among students with disabilities, to explore the nature of this phenomenon and develop its composite interpretation. Following the work Moustakas (as cited in Creswell, 2013) for writing an effective phenomenon description this study explored the narratives of students to understand their aspirations and further made interpretations of their experience in entering university.

Participants

This study recruited a heterogeneous group of 10 young male and female adults over 18 years old with different disabilities including visual, hearing and mobility impairments (Table 1). These participants were recognized as vulnerable population because in addition to their impairments which limit their participation in different areas of social life, some of them are also economically disadvantaged.

Among the participants were students currently enrolled in universities, students who have graduated from universities and those who obtained a vocational education but have not continued education on the university level recruited via purposeful sampling. Such approach was chosen because the participants of this study possess the traits of hard-to-reach population given there is only a small number of students with disabilities within university education in Kazakhstan. In the context of working with the hard-to-reach population, snowballing or respondent-driven sampling was the most suitable strategy as described by Goodman (2011), to give this research a decent grounding for comparable analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher asked male and female students with disabilities to provide the contact information of two or three potential participants who fit the sample criteria. Given the peculiar characteristics of participants, it was expected that students with disabilities are likely to be associated or know other students exposed to similar circumstances. Having received the contact information the researcher formed the sample out of this list without informing the recruiters who of their contacts participated in the interview.

The participants were interviewed on a voluntary basis to identify their aspirations for higher education as well as the outcomes of receiving post-secondary degree in Kazakhstani higher educational institutions based on the intersection of gender and disability. The researcher avoided insisting or persuading any participant to engage in this research (Piano

Clark & Creswell, 2014) by any means other than explaining the essence and purpose of this study, its direct benefits to the participant and to other stakeholders.

Overall, direct engagement via snowball sampling was the most convenient and confidential technique for the purpose of this study since only the researcher and participant were involved in the data collection. This eliminated the tension and allowed participants to speak openly as they felt confident and secure knowing that no official organizations or other people are informed about their participation. This definitely helped to build trust between the researcher and participant, which are crucial in phenomenological research aiming to explore first-hand experience of participants with a certain phenomenon. This view is supported by Piano Clark and Creswell (2014), who also highlight that studies with a critical approach should aim to establish a positive and trustworthy relationship between the researcher and the participant during the study to collect valuable data and allow researcher advocate for the marginalized social group. Research participants can also be engaged in data collection, help establish a clear focus of the study and assists in formulating research questions (Creswell, 2012). In this study, participants were active recruiters of the research sample.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants in the Study

Name	Age	Disability type	Education level	Employment
Female participants				
Dariga	26	Visual impairment	VET and Bachelor degree	Entrepreneur
Sabina	26	Visual	VET and Bachelor degree	Self-employed as a

		impairment		masseuse
Medina	25	Visual impairment	VET, Bachelor's and Master's degree	Works in education
Olga	24	Mobility impairment	Bachelor's degree	Self-employed as a tutor
Zarina	20	Mobility impairment	Bachelor's degree	Works as a sales manager
Male participants				
Damir	26	Blind	VET and Bachelor's degree	Unemployed
Samat	24	Visual impairment	VET	Unemployed
Andrey	32	Blind	Bachelor's, Master's and unfinished Phd degree	Self-employed as a tutor
Adil	30	Blind	Bachelor's and Master's degree	Works in education
Sergey	26	Hearing impairment	VET	Works in entertainment

Instrumentation

For data collection this research employed semi-structured one-on-one interviews in order to avoid distractions, peer pressure and allow deeper personal discussion about the lived experience of students entering and perceiving higher education the lens of gender and disability. The semi-structured interviews imply the use of a set list of questions, however, the researcher is not limited and can ask follow up questions when there is a need for it to obtain informative and valuable data from the emerged themes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2012). In this research semi-structured interviews were chosen to gain a more detailed insight into the aspirations young adults with disabilities towards higher education in the context of Kazakhstan.

Procedure

Interview protocols for this research were designed with the focus on the central research question to understand the effect that intersection of gender and disability has on the decision of young men and women with disabilities to receive or not receive higher education in Kazakhstan. In total there were 15 questions focused on collecting information about educational and work experience of participants based on gender and disability, their civic and cultural engagement in the context of higher education. For those participants who have obtained university degree there were additional questions about barriers and challenges as well as opportunities for this educational experience. Participation in this study was grounded on individual interests of individuals from vulnerable social groups to make a contribution for developing informed policies and practices in higher education by sharing narratives about their first-hand experience. Every participant had a right to stop the interview at any moment or refuse to answer any question, but no one decided to do that. Prior the interview all participants were offered to familiarize with the interview protocol. Some of them reviewed the questions and asked questions about the procedure to eliminate the stress factor of not

knowing what the researcher is planning to ask. However, most participants preferred to continue without reading the list of questions.

Data Collection

Once gained the permission from the NUGSE Research Committee, as well as contacted and received voluntary consent from participants, a series of dates were arranged to conduct interviews. All interviews took about 60 minutes and were conducted in Russian language. During the interview, the researcher took notes and recorded the conversation upon the consent of participants. The interviews took place in the setting that allowed participants to feel comfortable and secure and to speak freely; some interviews were conducted via Skype.

The use of semi-structured interviews in the qualitative research as an effective instrument of data collection and sensible ethical considerations assured that the rights and confidentiality of participants who represent the vulnerable population were guaranteed. As was described above the participants of this study face quite sensitive issues therefore having this security established more open conversations with the researcher.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection via interviews, all information was analyzed using inductive reasoning method based on the principles of the hermeneutical phenomenology. Namely, the narratives of participants about their general educational aspirations and experience of entering and obtaining higher education were carefully analyzed through the intersectional lens of gender and disability. Having distinguished significant statements of participants and developed the description of their lived experience, the analysis proceeded to broader meaning units. This process revealed three main themes including the intersection of gender and disability; intersection of gender, disability and higher education aspirations; as

well as intersection of gender, disability, aspirations and outcomes of higher education.

Following the work of Creswell (2013) these themes were further used to identify common patterns in the ways different participants experienced the same phenomenon, combining their subjective and objective experiences. These findings were further used for developing the interpretation of the essence of the central phenomenon of this study - low enrolment of students with disabilities in Kazakhstani higher educational institutions.

Ethical Issues

At all times, the participants were treated with respect, integrity, and confidentiality. Upon participants' agreement, the interviews were audio recorded on researcher's phone protected by password. All the essential information about the nature of this research, its central purpose, potential benefits and risks were provided prior the interview. The interview summary notes were also shown to the participants to ensure that the obtained information was presented carefully without deviations from their words. The participants were also asked for permission to cite their direct quotes to include those in the research publication.

Due to the low number of students with disabilities enrolled in university education in Kazakhstan, there was a potential risk of revealing the identity of participants in spite of guarantees of anonymity. The researcher recognized this possibility and was careful to hide the information that could reveal participant identity even if this meant not using some of the gathered data. The researcher did not include the detailed participant characteristics in the findings focusing instead on the themes and patterns in the obtained data. The contact information used to reach the participants was used only for the purpose of this study and not given to any other person, organization or institution to secure the full confidentiality of participants. No information deemed personal, such as names, contacts, and occupations were used in the presentation of this research as the author used codes instead.

Vulnerability characteristics of this population could result in the sensitive context for data collection as the participants could feel sad, angry or embarrassed when asked about their impairments or when reflecting on their experience. To minimize this risk the researcher ensured non-judgmental attitude and tried to rephrase questions when needed.

The interview summary notes collected in hard copies were destroyed after their analysis. Audio interview recordings were transferred to a USB device and now stored in a locked cabinet for the period of five years. This time period was chosen due to the possible need for justification of the published findings. After this time, the electronic data will be permanently deleted.

Participation in this research did not cause more discomfort than the daily activity of participants and did not cause them any harm. The direct benefits for the participants of this research included the opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences, share their stories and express their opinion about university experience in the atmosphere where their voices are respected and valued. As for other benefits, this study is expected to initiate a discussion on the topic of inclusive higher education within the academic community and provide suggestions for further research on the given topic. The understanding of the aspirations for higher education of students with disabilities can be used to improve the school professional orientation work, particularly at special schools. In the long term, these findings will help to improve the quality, standards, and accessibility of higher education in Kazakhstan to empower people from vulnerable social groups to continue education.

This chapter described the choice of phenomenological methodology employed in this research aiming to understand how intersection of gender and disability influences aspirations of young people in Kazakhstan to pursue higher education and outcomes of this experience. Moreover, it justifies the use of interview-based data collection in qualitative study. The

chapter finishes by covering the ethical considerations that ensure the confidentiality of all participants to allow them to share their stories freely. All information presented in this chapter ensures that the findings discussed in the next chapter answer the main research question.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter describes the findings that were discovered in this study on aspirations towards higher education among young people with disabilities in Kazakhstan. All of the findings relate to the main research question: How the intersection of gender and disability shapes aspirations and outcomes of higher education among youth in Kazakhstan based on their narratives?

According to the structure of the interview protocol used in the data collection, there are three main theme blocks in this study. First one relates directly to the intersection of gender and disability. This section focuses on building the understanding on how the participants view themselves and assess their personal development within the general society in order to build a backbone for the further discussion on their experience following the principles of semi-structured interviews. The second section reviews what influence the intersection of gender and disability has on the participants' aspirations towards higher education. The third section combines the intersection of disability and gender, aspirations for higher education and the outcomes of this experience with the purpose of exploring its benefits and drawbacks on the life of students with respect to their professional or further academic development, namely, receiving Master's degree based on the narratives of students. This section also discussed the differences and similarities between female and male participants.

In total there were ten participants, of them five are male students and five are females with different disabilities and special needs including sensory and physical impairments ranging in their academic backgrounds from students with a vocational education or a college diploma to students with a Bachelor's and Master's degree. They also range from personal, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds.

Intersection of Gender and Disability

This section explores the differences and similarities in the way female and male participants talked about their disability during the interviews. Thus, most male participants avoided saying the word “disability” and especially applying it to themselves. Instead they used such expression as “*people with the same conditions*” or “*people with the vision as bad as mine*”. In the very beginning of the interviews when they were unsure as of what the researcher wants or expects to hear from them, all male participants tried to showcase their masculinity and independence, when asked about their disability or special needs some softly tried to move to another topic and others made jokes about it. As the conversation proceeded they felt more open and then, though still avoiding talking about disability, they shared the challenges in their life and academic development caused by their conditions.

Women were different in this aspect during the interviews as they were quite open with the researcher and were comfortable discussing their disabilities or special conditions from the beginning of the interviews. Talking about their disabilities most female participants were also generally focused on justifying their independence within the mainstream society. However, unlike men they were mainly focused on the skills they have developed with time due to their health limitations. Besides, during the interviews women were often referring to the application of these skills in different social situations to justify their independence. They also actively reflected on their interactions with other people and the ways their disability shaped these experiences. For instance, some of them noted that these interactions were complicated and often negative if other people could not recognize their disability at once.

However, all participants highlighted that living with disabilities is same difficult for men and women due to the health challenges and social participation barriers. Overall, the participants were quite confused when asked any questions about gender. As some of them

reflected later during the interview probing, this is because gender is not something they usually discuss, generally focusing on people with disabilities as a whole.

Intersection of Gender, Disability and Aspirations for Education

In this section participants reflected on the role of gender, either implicit or explicit, in their decisions to receive higher education and what were their expectations for this life experience. The role of family was also highlighted in the interview questions based on this section. The results show that gender does play its role in making a decision about education by presenting different set of values for man being responsible for family provision and women being mainly associated with knowledge transition in the family. Personal development, however, was highlighted the core value of higher education regardless of gender. For example, during the interview Damir stated:

Education is important for everyone, everyone should have it. It does not depend on being a man or a woman. Maybe our education does not give us much professionalism or experience, but it develops us personally. In our family, we have matriarchy and I know that women should have education themselves to give it to children. As for the man, we should earn money, and education helps to start a career.

As mentioned earlier, the participants in this study were not familiar with talking about gender and its influence on their life. Most of them expressed that education is of high importance for all young people, as one of them said “*education sets the basis of life*”. Some of them said that they see the need in higher education because the university diploma is typically required for the better employment opportunities but themselves they do not put much value in it. One of the female participants also mentioned that women need higher education more than men do to start their career or in building the family; this makes women with and without disabilities more motivated to study. Dariga said:

I think women usually need higher education more than men, because men can just finish school or maybe college and then find a decent job, but it is not the same for women. This is why we have so many women in higher education and they are very motivated to get a degree unlike most men in my experience.

Some of the male participants also reflected on the theme of male employment. They highlighted that male usually expected to earn money in their family models, therefore, despite the disability it is also expected from them which puts them under high pressure. Higher education is not the first priority for men in this context. Samat, who has not continued education after completion of VET institution, mentioned:

Well, higher education is important and I want to get it one day, but I just do not have time for that. My family wants me to find a job and work there, not waste time preparing and studying.

The female participants, on the other hand, mainly reflected on the impact of higher education on their personal development and the ability to be in charge of their life by being more independent in the future. On the contrary to men, they did not talk about earning money and providing for the family. Instead they talked about what impact university will have on the upbringing and development of their future children. This reflects the implicit gender norms set in their families as it was revealed during the interviews.

Overall, women are not expected to get higher education to provide for the family, but their desire to pursue a professional degree is appreciated and supported in participants' families, and they have freedom in choosing the specialization themselves. Men are also supported in pursuing higher education based on the participants' narratives but in their case the decision to enter university is reviewed from the position of what results it will give in the future for their career and usually the focus is on vocational education rather than on their academic development.

The disability has also played a significant role in forming the aspirations for higher education of both male and female participants. All of them mentioned that they were choosing the profession based on their abilities. For example, those who have visual impairments were looking for a profession that does not require a lot of writing and working on computer, something involved in working with other people like tourism or teaching. Some participants, particularly those with a completed higher education degree were also quite skeptical about their employment perspectives due to their health. For instance, Adil shared:

Of course, I never expected to work in any physically demanding position, I could never do that. But I figured that with my health conditions and my personal interest in history, I can become a school history teacher. But now having tried to find such job, I see this is not realistic. In few years, I will probably work in a call center or as a shoe repair. This is what people like me do.

When participants shared their educational background as well as their general aspirations, hopes and concerns about pursuing higher education, those participants who studied at special or boarding schools at the secondary level, first highlighted the environmental barriers of the new educational settings, including inaccessible environments, lack of educational material suitable for diverse needs and ineffective teaching practices.

Andrey said:

I think more people like me would be interested in university education if there were services available for their needs. But, you know, in our society, we do not have that. Then, after the boarding school with its “greenhouse conditions” and services, it is a huge stress that not many agree to deal with.

But those who studied at mainstream schools and needed special provisions there were not so much concerned about the limitation of the environment. Nevertheless, they also mentioned the lack of teacher support as a significant barrier in their decision to continue

higher education. Scholars also consider teachers as the main actors of developing and implementing inclusive practices at all educational levels (Smith & Smith, 2000). During the interview, Zarina, who has mild mobility impairment, highlighted that:

University teachers do not know what to do with us, this is why most just try to avoid dealing with us or put their responsibilities on our peers instead. Only some teachers are willing to accommodate my needs and do this without me constantly asking for it, but they are the exception.

Intersection of Gender, Disability, Aspirations and Outcomes of Higher Education

In general there were no differences in the way this study participants reflected on the outcomes of receiving vocational or higher education depending on their gender. All of them state that this was a beneficial experience for their socialization, developing their personal and professional qualities, but only a few of the participants see themselves working in their field of study in the future. Some say that this is because they did not made the right choice, others say are concerned that they will not be able to fulfill the requirements due to their disability or special needs. But men are again under more pressure from their families as now being professionals they are expected to find a decent job with a good salary.

The views on outcomes of educational experience tend to differ opportunities among participants with only a vocational education or a Bachelor's degree and those who continued education at the Master's or PhD level in the way they reflect on their future. The aspirations that participants had before entering the university education play an important part in this reflective process as well. In this context, male participants are more often appear to be disappointed in their studies at VET or Bachelor's level and do not continue education further being confident that their higher education is unlikely to be linked to their career. Knowing this even before entering post-secondary education, male participants note that they did not have high expectations from this experience. They also often referred to the quality of

education highlighting that it is not fully capable of making them skilled professionals to compete for a job within the mainstream society. For instance, Damir said:

University education was a hope for me to become a professional in the field and to be able to compete for a job. Now I see that our universities cannot prepare good professionals and I do not feel ready to enter any job, I simply lack competence. Most students know this and lose interest in studying as well, it is just whatever. You just get the diploma and then maybe get a job.

Some male participants and most females, on the contrary, do highlight the professional development within higher education as the most important part of their experience. This is largely due to the opportunity to secure their future social positioning. As this experience allowed them getting a job where they could apply acquired skills and continue growing professionally. Overall, those participants who reflected positively on their first university experience tend to continue education further even if it is possible only on the self-funded basis. This is especially true for women as based on their narratives they think it is not the profession itself that is important in university education, but the skills it develops which they can further apply in other spheres of life. As Olga mentioned:

Education means a lot for my social status, people treat you differently if you have higher education, and they respect you more, especially for your courage to study with a disability. This is probably why some people are willing to hire me because they want to give me the opportunity to do more. This is true only for some people. I had to try hard to get a job, but I got it.

Besides, as it was noted by several participants of both genders, the success in education also gives a sense of achievement and improves one's self-confidence. This has a big importance for people with disabilities who are generally seen as passive and dependent within the mainstream society. Educational achievements appear to be a quite effective way for these students to fight such stereotypical attitudes in their surroundings. Thus, according to Medina:

When you have a disability and have a higher education, I think people treat you differently; they sort of respect you more for being able to do this. This is why I decided that after school I should go to college and then to university.

There were several observations shared among the male participants when they were talking about their disability or special needs, their educational aspirations and further employment. For example, most of the male participants felt unsure about their future and they also did not have much control over the decision for their academic program being concerned about the profitability of their choice. Their decisions to continue education were mainly shaped by the family attitudes. Thus, the family focus on potential employability and certain limitations caused by their disabilities rather their personal interests were guiding these students in choosing professions. However, as a result they were choosing fields in which they could not or did not want to continue working. As Samat expressed:

I did not choose my specialty; it was difficult to be enrolled for any position in general. You know, my family had to find ways and use connections [to enter university education]. I just got to study administration, but I never expected to work in this position, especially with my poor vision.

Women participants, on the opposite, shared that even if their families advised to pursue a certain profession being concerned with their future employment opportunities; they still had a certain level of autonomy in making the choice on future specialty. Such opportunity to choose profession based on their interests overall turned out to be a satisfying and beneficial experience for them. Medina said:

My mother wanted me to study economics like her, and I was good with numbers. But I always liked studying English, so this was my choice for future career and my family had to agree. Now that I succeed in my field they see that it was good.

Apart from that, all participants highlighted the lenient attitudes from professors towards them over the course of study mainly due to their special needs. This was a quite

discouraging experience for most of them as they felt limited in the opportunity to reveal and develop their potential. Others tend to not view this experience negatively and attribute such attitudes to the lack of professors' experience in working with students who have special educational needs. Nevertheless, all of them were confident that their educational experience as well as its outcomes would be different for them given that the universities would be properly equipped to respond to the diverse needs of students.

In their answers most participants also mentioned that socialization, namely their interactions and connections with peers and professors, is something that has really made their university experience valuable and important. This was especially evident among those participants who used to study in boarding schools at the secondary level. Sabina reflected on this experience in the following way:

I was very shy before coming college, but three years here taught me how to behave around normal people. I knew they had own judgments about me and it was very stressful to stand out for myself and my needs. But then it was easy to go to university because I already knew how to act and explained my conditions to everyone on the first day. This created an open atmosphere in my group.

Nevertheless, the special needs of participants played a big role in shaping the student peer interactions. Thus, according to most female participants, their conditions made them constantly dependent on other people in different aspects of student life. Even though they see this condition as something expectable in the mainstream educational settings, still it was not always easy to communicate their needs to others making this a very stressful experience.

Thus, Zarina said:

My friends helped me a lot during my studies. I would not be able to move around the campus by myself in my position. They also are my emotional support. But...I do feel like a burden at times, because they do not have to do some things, like reading for me or navigating, yet they do this.

Overall, this chapter reviewed the main research findings and described the influence that the intersection of disability and gender has on the participants' decisions to receive higher education or to continue studying for a higher academic degree. The impact of attitudinal and environmental barriers on the higher education aspirations is also presented. Next chapter will focus on analysis and discussion of these research findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

To answer the main research question and investigate in depth the aspirations of vulnerable student groups in entering higher educational institutions, the interview questions were divided into several theme blocks including aspirations for higher education as related to gender and disability, as well as the outcomes of this experience. These themes helped to structure interviews in the way that allowed participants to reflect on their experience in a logical manner, share their perceptions towards higher education experience to collect their stories. Following the principles of phenomenological analysis the answers of participants were further analyzed and structured into the main themes, including the intersection of gender and disability; the intersection of gender, disability, and aspirations; the intersection of gender, disability, aspirations, and outcomes of higher education for Kazakhstani youth. These themes were further used for analysis, synthesis and interpretation of findings to answer the research question: How the intersection of gender and disability shapes aspirations and outcomes of higher education among youth in Kazakhstan based on their narratives?

Discussion of Findings for Theme 1: Intersection of Gender and Disability

In this section participant reflected on their place as the part of the general society. It also explored the differences in the way that male and female participants view their disability or special needs. One of the most evident things in the discussion of gender with all participants was that they were confused to talk about gender at all. This relates to the studies which highlight that people with disabilities are often seen as a heterogeneous unity (Hästbacka, Nygård & Nyqvist, 2016), therefore, specific issues of different genders continue to be overlooked.

To illustrate, these could be the issues of self-identity and masculinity for males, which is evident from the way they avoid talking about their disability as it is often associated

with being dependent and contradicts the general perceptions of them as providers. In this context, education is not perceived as a priority, especially to men from disadvantaged backgrounds due the opportunity for them to join the workforce in manual or service-type jobs without receiving higher education first (Weaver-Hightower, 2010). Research shows that this option appears to be less attractive to females due to the significant wage gaps in this work sector (Weaver-Hightower, 2010).

As for the females, there are less evident issues with self-identity because they find a great sense of achievement in higher education which as they describe will further make them good and effective parents. This also connects to studies which discuss implicit lower expectations for female participation in the society overall. Thus, despite the success of women in education they are generally not expected to actively work and contribute to family provision being responsible for caregiving and upbringing of children instead (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Such perceptions affect educational choices of women which are often in humanities and social sciences that are less paid in comparison to fields of engineering and technology commonly dominated by men (Eccles, 1994). Besides, women tend to underestimate their occupational aspirations which limit opportunities for them to fully develop their potential (Eccles, 1994).

Current demographics of university enrollment among students with and without disabilities indicate the prevalence of women which relates to the discussions on the overall feminization of higher education (Dillabough, 2006; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Leathwood & Read, 2008). This feminization significantly affects student positioning and their aspirations by diminishing masculine values in education such as competition, expertise and individual accomplishments over collaboration, personal reflections and sharing (Winter, 1991). Inclusive higher education, however, with its focus on cooperation and socialization of

minorities benefits from this feminist discourse and has potential to raise participation in higher education across both genders. To illustrate, research shows that numbers of men with disabilities in higher education are rising at a good rate (Weaver-Hightower, 2010).

Overall, most participants noted that discussions on gender are not that relevant for people with disabilities, because it is the disability that makes things hard for everyone regardless their gender and limits overall socialization of this social group due to different social barriers and stereotypes. As indicated in the study by Herath (2014) the environmental and attitudinal barriers are indeed of major importance for people with disabilities entering higher education. However, specific issues of gender being part of the overall process of the formation of one's self-identity should also receive substantial attention in order to raise participation of this social group in higher education and reduce marginalization of people with disabilities (Herath, 2015).

Discussion of Findings for Theme 2: Intersection of Gender, Disability, and Aspirations

When talking about higher education all participants highlighted that it is a commonly accepted norm in the Kazakhstani society to have a university degree. They mentioned that this is mainly important for socialization skills it provides for students from vulnerable backgrounds, namely, those with disabilities. This socialization for them is further linked to the hope for opportunities of upward social mobility and better employment. The nowadays labor market situation is complicated for people with disabilities and as data shows especially for males which is perhaps is linked to the general expectations for men to be able to earn money which puts them under more pressure in comparison to women (Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2017). This also relates to the discussion on the post-Soviet higher education legacy with its guaranteed employment of university graduates (Smolentseva, 2012). Such perception, however, is often the result of family upbringing, as some of the participants

noted, for their families higher education is often seen as the opportunity to fit the norms of the general society (Florian & Becirevic, 2011; Makoelle, 2016). Nevertheless, given that higher educational institutions nowadays are not equipped to meet diverse student needs (Florian, Rouse & Black-Hawkins, 2016), for most young people with disabilities higher education is mainly important due to the opportunities for their personal rather than professional development.

Discussions on student aspirations revealed another interesting observation as most participants mentioned that education is more important for females being responsible for the further education of their children or siblings. As for the males, they noted that higher education is of less importance because they can start working and making some money for themselves and the family straight after finishing school or vocational education.

Disability of students also played a central part in making the decision of continuing higher education and most participants agreed that they have to think carefully whether they can compete with the high university standards. In this case, entering VET first was a test for their abilities. However, not only their abilities but also a lack of special support in the form of inclusive teaching and accessible study materials at educational institutions were the key factors in the decision to continue education. All participants agreed that there would be significantly more students with disabilities if the institutional conditions would be respectful for the diverse student needs for providing equal educational opportunities for everyone (Birenbaum, 1979).

Discussion for Findings for Theme 3: Intersection of Gender, Disability, Aspirations, and Outcomes of Higher Education

Reflections on the outcomes of university education showed additional differences in how men and women perceive and evaluate this experience. Thus, women were generally

satisfied with the university education and highlighted the profound development of their skills. Additionally, study successes and positive achievements were significant factors in improving their self-confidence in inspiring them to continue education further (Abbas, as cited in Basit, 2012). This was true for them even regardless of the educational barriers imposed by the inaccessible environment or insufficient teacher support. Having experienced less pressure to earn money for the family and overall having lower occupational aspirations, women with disabilities, however, were more likely to join the workforce having received the Bachelor's degree (Eccles, 1994).

As for the male participants, most of them expected strong professional development upon completing higher education but were quite disappointed in the quality of the instruction they received. This is largely due to the lack of study resources available to students with special needs in higher educational institutions, which limited their opportunity to study and develop in comparison to their mainstream peers. Lenient attitudes of teachers and administration towards them also affected their motivation to study given that the academic expectations for students with disabilities were set low. According to Purcell (2011) such attitudes promote lower social expectations of people with disabilities in general which further continues their marginalization (Purcell, 2011).

Overall male participants showed the tendency to estimate university experience as a waste of time which they could spend working and supporting their family. They do highlight the socialization benefits of this experience but still think that it could be achieved via different means, for example, extracurricular activities with their mainstream peers at the secondary school level. Nevertheless, some male participants enjoyed university experience due to the career opportunities it enabled for them and they are the ones who continued education further. There is also an evident pattern of shared characteristics among them

including their socioeconomic background - upper middle class members, employment according to their higher education specialty and general satisfaction with the quality of university education. In this regard, it can be concluded that employment prospects and stability in future (Shuttleworth, Wedgwood & Wilson, 2012), along with the quality of university instruction are the key factors in making the decision to receive higher education among men (Reed, Kennett & Emond, 2015). The socioeconomic background of participants also plays an important role in raising participation of students in higher education due to upward aspirations for this experience also linked to the hopes for stability in future (Gray, 2013; Weaver-Hightower, 2010).

Interpretation of research findings indicates that intersection of disability and gender does affect students' educational aspirations and outcomes of this experience. These aspirations are generally shaped by the different gendered expectations for young people within their families and society overall with men being expected to earn money and women being responsible for family's upbringing. Talking about their disability students admitted that key aspirations for postsecondary education were reducing stigma around people with disabilities as being the recipients of service and improving their socialization. Nevertheless, gender also played an important part in this process with women being focused on self-development and men being aimed at professional development. This further led to differences in the outcomes of higher education for male and female participants. Thus, women were quite satisfied with this experience having obtained positive academic achievements over the course of study. Men, on the other hand, were commonly disappointed with the quality of higher education having not received the expected level of proficiency due to inability of educational institutions to accommodate their needs. However, given that higher education improved their occupational perspectives men were also satisfied with this experience and willing to continue education.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter presents a summary and the general outline of the thesis. It also provides recommendations for future research in the field of inclusive higher education, as well as recommendations for improvement of the current practices in higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan to motivate more students from vulnerable backgrounds to receive higher education as the means of developing social justice.

Restating Aims and Objectives

This study explored the aspirations that young people from vulnerable populations have towards post-secondary education in the context of Kazakhstan. Their experiences were perceived through the lens of the intersection of gender and disability. The narratives of current university students with disabilities of both genders, as well as of those who have already obtained higher education at the VET institution or university gave an insight into what factors form their aspiration towards this experience. This further allowed making conclusions about the benefits of higher education for this student group, about barriers and difficulties in entering the academic field and the outcomes of this experience within Kazakhstani society. The understanding of the impact that the intersection of gender and disability has on shaping these students' aspirations is expected to further promote informed actions aimed at increasing participation of vulnerable students in higher educational institutions.

Summary of the Study

Introductory orientation. The study begins with the outline of inclusive higher education development in Kazakhstani context relating this process to the international experience. It discussed the positive and strong sides of current initiatives in the field and draws attention to the problematic areas. This includes the lack of informed actions and discrepancies between policies and practices during the implementation of the educational reforms and low engagement of students with disabilities in higher education. It covers the aspiration as the central concept of the study and also justifies the choice of intersectional approach for research on students' aspirations.

Literature review. The second chapter established a comprehensive literature review dedicated to the various factors which affect the aspirations of students towards higher education in general, and especially of those from vulnerable social backgrounds. The review covered such themes as accessibility of higher education for students from vulnerable backgrounds and how the accessibility influences general aspirations of this student group. This included the lack of attention to inclusion at the higher education level due to the focus on the medical model of disability and its correction of students.

This chapter also offered a detailed discussion of the ways that gender and disability alone, as well as their intersection, affect the process of forming aspirations among the vulnerable young people. The studies show that aspirations are mainly formed as the social construct affected by the external factors, but also depend on individuals perceptions. Additionally, it highlighted that access to higher education has a strong potential for achieving social justice. Overall the literature review indicated a substantial need for a qualitative study as the research problem requires exploration and interpretation of students' lived experience in Kazakhstani universities.

Research methodology. The third chapter described phenomenology as the main research method followed in this study. Namely, it justified the use of phenomenology for the purpose of exploring the experience of students with disabilities in higher educational institutions to form the understanding on how the intersection of such factors as gender and disability plays its role in this experience. The chapter also reasoned the use of semi-structured interviews in the phenomenological study as the way to fully focus on participants and provide a deeper understanding of their experience. Additionally, this chapter discusses study implications.

Data analysis. Following the principles of hermeneutical phenomenology, this research initially explored the particular phenomena of interest - enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education. Then, based on the narratives of participants about their lived experience with this phenomena there were distinguished main themes which included different aspects of the intersection of gender, disability, aspirations and outcomes of entering and receiving higher educations for students. These themes further guided the analysis of student responses with the purpose of exploring common patterns in their experiences which were then used for developing the interpretation of the phenomena overall.

Recommendations

Recommendation on how to address the areas of concern for youth with disabilities entering higher education in the context of Kazakhstan was developed on the basis of the findings from the narratives of study participants.

According to the overview of general student aspirations, in order to increase participation of students from vulnerable backgrounds in higher educational institutions, universities should pay more attention to developing study conditions responding to diverse student needs. This can be done by promoting inclusive teaching in university settings,

providing assistive technology support for students, working on peer support strategies to build overall inclusive atmosphere in educational settings. As highlighted by study participants, this is likely to have a strong positive influence on enrollment of students with disabilities due to enabling them to choose an educational institution based on their interests rather than needs.

It is also highly important to engage students from vulnerable backgrounds into profound informational work on postsecondary education options available to them based on their interests and abilities within secondary education. This will further facilitate the process for entering work sphere for them given that they will be prepared for working in the field in the fields that interest them and therefore motivate to improve their practices. This is likely to engage them in education and inspire them to continue education further constantly improving their knowledge in the field. Besides, it has a strong potential to reduce gendered patterns in choosing educational programs among students by changing their perceptions of what they can and cannot do focusing on their interests instead. In other words, this approach is the way to change aspirations of students with disabilities upwards and in the long-term improve their quality of life.

Another important recommendation closely related to the matters of environmental and attitudinal barriers concerns strategies for policy development in higher educational institutions. The findings often showed that at the current stage of inclusive higher education development it is unclear what support should be available for students with diverse abilities and need, as well as who should be responsible for its provision. As a result, this is the students themselves who have to find ways for addressing their needs in the educational process often being only slightly supported by the institutions. Taking into account nationwide shift towards inclusion in education, this should not be the case if institutions set

clear policies informed by the student's voice. Thus, these policies can highlight what support universities can provide to all students, and for those who need special assistance to improve their educational outcomes having raised the quality of instruction that they receive by accommodating their diverse needs. These institutional policies should also divide responsibility for this support provision among the working staff, as well as allocate funding. This recommendation is also connected to the need of informed action development when student voice and their needs will guide the transformational process instead of imposing the changes which are unnatural or even unnecessary.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The focus of this phenomenological research was particularly on the lived experiences of students from vulnerable backgrounds entering higher education to further evaluate the influence of intersection of gender and disability in this process. This study used the narratives of students to develop a comprehensive description and interpretation of their interaction with the same phenomena - the process of entering higher education. However, due to the peculiarities of the phenomenological research, the participants might not have fully shared their experience due to possible embarrassment or confusion. Besides, the findings being mainly the researcher's interpretations of the particular phenomena might be driven by personal perceptions or biases which are difficult to avoid or detect. Consulting with participants on possible interpretations behind their attitudes and behavior, as well as relying these interpretations on academic sources helped to eliminate any bias in this research.

Therefore, to ensure the reliability of this study and given that this was a small-scale research, it is suggested that quantitative studies can be conducted to estimate the overall aspirations of students in Kazakhstani higher education based on specific topics. Besides, future research might compare the aspirations for higher education among vulnerable and

mainstream students to determine whether the aspirations are affected by their background or not.

Another suggestion is to study the perceptions of high school professors and university administration towards the inclusion of students with diverse needs and abilities to establish a deep and comprehensive understanding of the state of inclusion at this educational level.

More attention should as well be given to research of the gender issues as many of them are presented implicitly across different social groups and might limit their participation in some social events. Discussions and research in this field are likely to raise the awareness of society in general and reduce the existing barriers for both males and females with disabilities entering work or education.

Conclusions of the Study

This study showed that the process of forming aspirations for higher education among young people is quite complex and largely influenced by such contextual factors as accessibility of educational settings, study materials, and attentive teaching, as well as the gendered perceptions about education within the family and the general society. The intersectional approach of this study allowed exploring different educational tendencies among male and female participants. With males being largely aimed at developing their professional skills for better employment opportunities, and females being mainly concerned with educational achievement and personal development not so much targeted at career development afterward. Overall, this research presents a substantial ground for future research inquiries in the field of intersectional and transformational studies. Aspirations of vulnerable populations are the source of the overall improvement of social justice and the way to improve the quality of their life, therefore, more attention should be given to actions aimed at raising and supporting those aspirations.

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Appendix 1. Informed Consent Form

Consent Form for the Research Study Entitled Aspirations for Higher Education of Youth in Kazakhstan Based on Intersection of Gender and Disability

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to participate in this MSc research study on aspirations of young adults towards receiving higher education based on the intersection of gender and disability. You will be asked to participate in an individual one-on-one interview to reflect on your personal experience in higher education. The interview will be audio recorded upon your agreement. The tape, as well as any of your identifiable characteristics will be available only for the researcher and will not be published or given to other people or organizations. The researcher will use codes to protect your personal information in conducting data analysis. The audio recordings will be stored on compact disks in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher for 5 years to be used as justification for the published findings. Upon this time, all hard data will be destroyed.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are no significant risks associate with this study, because the researcher will make sure that no personal or identifiable information will be accessible to other people or organizations. Neither specific names of participants nor the research site will be shared in the resulting thesis. You might only have some individual discomfort when being asked about your personal experience in higher educational institutions.

The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are long term. Inclusive higher education is understudied in Kazakhstan, the findings of this research will inform members of academic community about the aspirations and outcomes of higher education for students with disabilities to improve the quality, standards, and accessibility of higher education in Kazakhstan and empower young people from vulnerable social groups to continue education. Your decision whether or not participate in this study will not affect your grades in university or your employment.

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 conferences or professional meetings or published in research journals.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Researcher: You can contact the NU student conducting this study, Natalya Manuilova, phone number: +7 702 2466618, email address: natalya.manuilova@nu.edu.kz

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, Rita Kasa, phone number: +7 771 2974735, email address: rita.kasa@nu.edu.kz.

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 speak to someone independent of the research team. You can write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@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 researcher and his supervisor 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: _____

Форма информированного согласия для участия в исследовании на тему**Влияние пола и инвалидности на мотивы получения высшего образования среди молодых людей в Казахстане**

ОПИСАНИЕ: Вы приглашены принять участие в магистерском исследовании мотивов молодых людей имеющих ограниченные возможности к получению высшего образования в казахстанских университетах. Вам будет предложено принять участие в индивидуальном интервью для того, чтобы обсудить Ваш личный опыт в образовании. Если Вы не против, данное интервью будет записано на диктофон. Эта запись, а также любая личная и опознаваемая информация будет доступна только автору данного исследования и не будет опубликована или передана третьим лицам и организациям. Для использования личной информации в анализе, автор будет использовать специальные коды. Вся собранная информация, а также записи будут храниться в запгертом шкафчике в течении 5 лет, доступ к которому есть только у автора данного исследования. Данная процедура нужна для подтверждения результатов исследования при необходимости. По прошествии 5 лет, вся информация будет уничтожена.

ВРЕМЯ УЧАСТИЯ: Ваше участие потребует около 60 минут.

РИСКИ И ПРЕИМУЩЕСТВА: Риски, связанные с исследованием минимальны, так как автор гарантирует что Ваша личная и опознаваемая информация не будет опубликована или доступна третьим лицам. Ваше имя и место проведения интервью не будет использоваться в опубликованном исследовании. Однако, возможно, что некоторые вопросы в интервью могут вызвать у Вас небольшой дискомфорт. В качестве ожидаемых преимуществ в результате исследования можно рассматривать привлечение большего внимания к проблемам инклюзивного высшего образования в Казахстане. В долгосрочной перспективе, результаты данного исследования приведут к улучшению качества, стандартов и доступности высшего образования для людей с ограниченными возможностями, а также других социально уязвимых групп, чтобы мотивировать их получить высшее образование. Ваше решение о согласии либо отказе в участии никаким образом не повлияет на Вашу работу или успеваемость.

ПРАВА УЧАСТНИКОВ: Если Вы прочитали данную форму и решили принять участие в данном исследовании, Вы должны понимать, что Ваше участие является добровольным и что у Вас есть право отозвать свое согласие или прекратить участие в любое время без штрафных санкций и без потери социального пакета, который Вам предоставляли. В качестве альтернативы можно не участвовать в исследовании. Также Вы имеете право не отвечать на какие-либо вопросы. Результаты данного исследования могут быть

представлены или опубликованы в научных или профессиональных целях.

КОНТАКТНАЯ ИНФОРМАЦИЯ:

Исследователь: Вы можете связаться с автором исследования, используя следующие данные: Наталья Мануилова, контактный телефон: +7 702 2466618, электронный адрес: natalya.manuilova@nu.edu.kz

Вопросы: Если у Вас есть вопросы, замечания или жалобы по поводу данного исследования, процедуры его проведения, рисков и преимуществ, Вы можете связаться с координатором данного исследования, используя следующие данные: Рита Каша, контактный телефон: +7 771 29747385, электронный адрес: rita.kasa@nu.edu.kz.

Независимые контакты: Если Вы не удовлетворены проведением данного исследования, если у Вас возникли какие-либо проблемы, жалобы или вопросы, Вы можете связаться с Комитетом Исследований Высшей Школы Образования Назарбаев Университета отправив письмо на электронный адрес: gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz

Пожалуйста, подпишите данную форму, если Вы согласны участвовать в исследовании.

- Я внимательно изучил представленную информацию;
- Мне предоставили полную информацию о целях и процедуре исследования;
- Я понимаю, как будут использованы собранные данные, и что доступ к любой конфиденциальной информации будет иметь только исследователь;
- Я понимаю, что вправе в любой момент отказаться от участия в данном исследовании без объяснения причин;
- С полным осознанием всего вышеизложенного я согласен принять участие в исследовании по собственной воле.

Подпись: _____

Дата: _____

Appendix 2. Interview Protocol

Aspirations for higher education

a. Education experience

Could you tell me about yourself, your current education and work experience? Where did you get your secondary education?

What was the type of this school?

What are your thoughts about receiving a higher education degree?

Do you have to pay tuition fee or pay for some special services? Do you have money for that? Do your family members support your decision to receive higher education and how?

What are/were your general expectations for the university experience? What are/were your concerns about this experience, if any?

b. Disability as relate to education

What type of disability you have?

How the visibility/ invisibility of your disability affect your life, your education?

How your disability influences your academic development and engagement in social life?

What kind of support do you need from people around you?

To what extent has your disability affected your choice to receive higher education?

c. Gender as relate to education

To what extent has your gender affected your choice to receive higher education and the choice of your degree?

What does/did your family think about your decision to receive higher education?

Outcomes of higher education

Could you tell me more about your higher education experience?

Could you tell me about your relations with people at the university (professors, administration, peers)?

How satisfied are you with university experience and the choice of your degree? What are/were your plans after graduation?

How higher education changed your life? How do you see your future?

Conclusion

What suggestions would you give to improve the experience of students with disabilities in higher education?

Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience in education?

Demographic information

Age

Gender

Ethnicity

Socioeconomic background

Level of education

Thank you for your time and contribution!

Протокол интервью

Мотивы к получению высшего образования

а. Опыт в образовании

Расскажите мне о себе, вашем образовании и опыте работы? Где Вы получили среднее образование?

Какой тип школы Вы посещали?

Что Вы думаете о получении высшего образования?

Нужно ли Вам платить за обучение или специальные услуги? У Вас достаточно средств для этого?

Поддерживают ли члены Вашей семьи Ваше решение получить высшее образование? Как они это делают?

Какие общие ожидания Вы имеете/имели от обучения в университете?

Есть/Были ли у Вас сомнения или переживания по поводу обучения в университете? Какие?

б. Инвалидность в отношении к образованию

Какой у Вас тип инвалидности?

Как влияет видимость/невидимость Вашей инвалидности на Вашу жизнь в целом, на образование?

Каким образом Ваша инвалидность влияет на Ваше академическое развитие и участие в социальной жизни?

Какая помощь Вам требуется от окружающих людей?

На сколько Ваша инвалидность повлияла на Ваш выбор университета и специальности?

с. Пол в отношении к образованию

На сколько и как Ваш пол повлиял на Ваше решение получить высшее образование и выбор специальности?

Как Ваша семья приняла Ваше решение о получении высшего образования? Что члены Вашей семьи подумали об этом?

Результаты высшего образования

Расскажите мне больше о Вашем опыте получения высшего образования?

Расскажите мне о Ваших отношениях с людьми в университете (профессора, администрация, другие студенты)?

Насколько Вы довольны своим опытом в университете и специальностью, которую Вы получили?

Какие у Вас планы после получения высшего образования? Насколько высшее образование изменило Вашу жизнь?

Как Вы видите свое будущее?

Заключение

Какие предложения по улучшению опыта студентов с ограниченными возможностями в получении высшего образования у Вас есть?

Есть ли что-то еще, что Вы бы хотели добавить о Вашем образовательном опыте?

Демографическая информация

Возраст

Пол

Национальность

Социальный статус

Уровень образования

Спасибо за Ваше время и участие!

Appendix 3. Sample Interview Transcripts

Participant 1 - Dariga, female

Researcher: What is your educational background?

Dariga: I used to attend a regular state school from the first till third year in elementary school. Then, my doctors advised that I should be educated in a special school for children with visual impairments. I studied there till 10th grade and then went to college. A bit later, I continued my education at university.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on higher education in general?

Dariga: I got education because this is a common norm and everybody should get a diploma, it helps. But higher education is getting more expensive, I think it would be good to receive some additional support to pay for tuition if you did not receive a state grant. Usually regular students can work in their free time but it is not the case for people with disabilities. This is the reason why I chose to study part-time, it was not too expensive.

Researcher: What makes higher education so important for everyone in your opinion?

Dariga: To be honest, now that I think about it, maybe it is not that important. For example, I did not gain anything particular from studying in university or at college, I mean professionally. But I think education still gives you a certain higher status. But nowadays there are many great opportunities in life and you do not really need higher education. However, what else can you do after finishing school, higher education is a logical path.

Participant 2 - Samat, male

Researcher: What is your educational and professional background?

Samat: I got professional certificate at college. Now, I do not work or study. I have never worked in my professional field. Actually I notice that many students even after university do not work in their specialty. This is true for most people I know, majority of them have a Bachelor's degree. For example, I do not have professional education, but I enjoy working in music.

Researcher: How did you choose your profession at college?

Samat: Well, it is complicated. I finished a special school after grade 9 and because of that I could only enroll in a college. The thing is people who worked in state educational organizations when my family consulted with them, they did not know what can a person with disability do after special school with its simplified education and isolated conditions. Neither did I, at that age I really did not know what I want to do in life, just like many other people. That is why I approved one of not many suggestions to get vocational education at college.