

The Student-As-Consumer (SAC) Approach in Higher Education in Kazakhstan: Theory and Practice

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Abstract. After joining the Bologna process in 2010 the Kazakhstani system of education has transformed into 3 cycle training: Bachelor – Master – PhD. The process of integration of Kazakhstani universities into the international educational space has also begun. One of the main points of transformation was the attitude towards a student, which is declared by the student-based approach of the Bologna process, humanistic bases of modern theories of education and «student-as-consumer» approach (SAC). The article is aimed at detailing the features of a modern trend of promoting the concept of SAC (student-as-consumer) in the Kazakhstan, and the existing contradictions, or pressure, to grip the students' view in a time frame of 30 years of a new system of higher education, to propose recommendations for overcoming them in line with global trends and experience. Research methods: literature analysis and a survey of teachers and students. The article offers an overview of the «student-as-consumer» approach, which is associated with the emergence of market relations and the increase in personal financial contribution of students to their higher education. The focus of the study is to identify how students perceive current higher education and whether universities are in line with the «student-as-consumer» approach. The survey indicates that the attitude of a student as a consumer of educational services is still at the stage of formation. It also discusses the consequences of the «student-as-consumer» approach for both universities and students.

Keywords: higher education, student-as-consumer approach, educational experience, quality of education, teaching methods, student-centered learning.

Introduction

The transition of Kazakhstan to a market economy inevitably led to the transformation of higher education, the emergence of the private sector and its' intervention to the public sector. To a large extent, this became possible due to the students enrolling the universities at their own expenses. For many Kazakhstani higher education institutions, the transition to the market economy and market of educational services was not easy or smooth, but rather the opposite. This led to the need for an adequate response and fast adaptation of education to rapid social changes, which was the main reason for the development of fundamentally new approaches to the participants of the educational process.

The changes that have taken place in higher education have much in common with changes in public services in frames of «modernization» and «personalization» of services [1, p. 554]. The merging elements of the reform focused on an increasing role for markets and large-scale marketing of public services; larger competition spirit among institutions; weakening role of the State as a core resource unit; and new

scheme of service response that meets the needs of service consumers [2, p. 543]. Introduction of market models to higher education institutions and subsequent legal imperatives that educational institutions face contributed to the positioning of students as consumers of their universities [3].

In such conditions, Kazakhstani higher education institutions were ought to strive for a new look at the management of the educational process, and were obliged to obey market laws such as: (1) consumer orientation, (2) product/service quality orientation and (3) ability to compete. Using the feedback when implementing the «consumer orientation» principle, universities can observe the information about the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of their internal and external customers. Applicants, students, parents, the state, employers, and society are generally considered as the consumers of higher education [4], Bachelor, Master, and PhD students are considered as internal consumers. In this article we discuss the case of a leading Kazakhstani university upon generalization of experience, literary review of the milestones of the issue and a survey of Kazakhstani students.

Problem statement: how does the transition of a «student-as-consumer» approach take place; how students evaluate its effectiveness. In the scientific context, approaching this issue of a student-consumer approach in higher education is at the initial stage of scientific research. This article discusses the issues of analyzing consumer orientation of student-consumers based on specific sociological study.

Literature review. The Profound change of the students' attitude towards higher education is evident, in the market conditions. The students are defined as «customers» in higher educational institutions (universities) of the UK, since the first payment of the tuition fee [5], thus the universities are exposed to commercial pressure and to take their actions in conditions of marketization, that also requires competitiveness, efficiency and consumer satisfaction [6]. A number of HEIs position themselves as customer-oriented academic institutions, stressing the flexibility and convenience of attendance in order to attract potential students [7, p. 129].

Current market discourse of higher education (HEIs) promotes the concept of existence, where students seek to «have a degree» rather than «be a students» [8, p. 287]. According to Molesworth M., etc., this links pedagogical theory to the criticism of consumer culture. It is also argued that a «market» university responds to consumer demands by focusing on the content that students want at market rates. Therefore, the university is a business structure now, that promotes services through its brand [8, p. 287].

«The undercutting of professional knowledge and virtues by consumer demand and satisfaction may, perversely, also have the effect of undermining, rather than enhancing, pedagogical relationships» [9, p. 274]. Moreover, the impersonality that characterises the consumer subjectivity breeds antagonism, which is emphasized by institutional documentation that exacerbates the opposing interests of undergraduates and academics and «creates a pervasive sense that lecturers and students have opposing interests which require external regulation» [10, p. 217].

Mills states that ironically universities have adapted the concept of students as customers more consistently than those in government, claiming that the contradiction of maintaining both academic standards and customer satisfaction puts «unbearable demands» to the universities [11].

«The student-as-consumer» (SAC) approach was consolidated with the involvement of students and universities in accordance with the Consumer Rights Act [8]. SAC may have advantages for a student, since it suggests the transfer of authority from the supplier to the consumer [7]. Therefore, the demand for the quality of training is expected to increase, since customers can control their expectations and evaluate services based on their ability to meet their requirements. For example, teachers will be more accessible to students and will respond more quickly to the students' questions.

At the same time, the SAC approach worries uni-

versities that do not consider education as a product or service [6] and jeopardizes academic standards [12] because students may rate popular lecturers higher than the strict ones, so pressure is exerted on strict lecturers, forcing them to reduce academic content for the sake of obtaining high ratings of customer 'satisfaction' [13]. Also, the SAC approach can contribute to the formation of a culture in which students strive to «get a degree» rather than «be students» [8] because it promotes a passive instrumental attitude towards training [9]. For instance, students who identify themselves as consumers may show little interest in what is actually being taught and show less responsibility for producing their own knowledge.

Maringe notes that «the metaphor [of student-as-consumer] distances students from the educational process by viewing students as consumers, their role as co-producers of knowledge and understanding is minimized» [14, p. 150].

They also point to the self-actualizing nature of the learner as a consumer: if learners assimilate the foremost ideas of their consumer skills, this will determine their learning behavior. This further distracts from the more liberal concepts of students as academic learners or critical learners or critical agents on the path to self-education. In our opinion, we can say that such a situation manifests itself in the modern education of the post-Soviet republics, this indicates a contradiction in reforms between the market nature of modern education in Kazakhstan and «world standards in the field of education and human development» [15, p. 4321].

However, there is not enough research on the extent to which today's students display consumer orientation [5]. It should be noted that consumerism is considered as one of the theories of education in Kazakhstani pedagogy textbooks. After conducting a literary review and analysis, we were interested in studying how these problems are understood and formulated by modern students of Kazakhstani higher education institutions, and therefore in our research we sought to study them.

Methods of research.

The following research methods were used to solve the tasks posed in the article:

- scientific literature review on the «student-as-consumer» approach, resulting from the increase in the personal financial contribution of students to their higher education.

- Analysis of the survey among students conducted to determine the levels of consumer orientation and personal identity of students at a multidisciplinary university, as well as their academic performance.

Survey was conducted on the students from 16 faculties of the university, in total 422 respondents 62% of them natural sciences faculties and 38% of them from humanities faculties, 74% female and 26% male. The survey was conducted the students of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU).

Results and discussion. Our research is, firstly,

aimed at students-consumers because we believe that they are direct, but not always protected consumers. Secondly, for managers of education and researchers of higher education. The training in KazNU is carried out in three languages, 67% of respondents are trained in the Kazakh language, 22% in Russian and 11% in English. This indicates that the linguistic diversity of independent Kazakhstan has always been a priority.

The vast majority of respondents (93%) are undergraduate level students enrolled with a state educational grant and only 7% study with a tuition fee. The educational demand clearly shows the desire of consumers of educational services to receive a scholarship for training, i.e. training at the expense of the state. This factor also affects the choice of educational program. One of the motives for admission is the lowest passing score, and in this regard, admission to higher education in any profession. In this regard, it is necessary to study the motives for choosing a profession of student-consumer to use it in the development of the system. Those who study on a commercial basis pay in full for their studies at the expense of their own finances, and those who study on a scholarship basis pay only if they have debts due to «fails» or for summer semesters.

There is an opinion that applicants from urban schools differ from applicants from rural schools in terms of their educational level. Consumer demand and value orientations of urban and rural consumers also differ. International comparative studies show that there is still a large gap in the quality of education between urban and rural education in Kazakh schools. For example, Kazakhstan has participated four times in the OECD International program on the assessment of 15-year-old students PISA (2009, 2012, 2015, 2018) and in the IEA international study on school quality assessment TIMSS on reading, science and mathematics literacy (2007, 2011, 2015, 2019). The results of the study revealed significant gaps in learning achievement by region, territory (urban-rural), language of study and socio-economic status of the family. Thus, in terms of regions, the difference between the lowest and highest PISA scores corresponds to 3 years of studying (State Program, 2019).

While working with consumer students from rural areas it is necessary to consider their level of education, socialization, and social adaptation. Among the respondents who participated in our survey, 63% are urban and 37% are graduated from rural schools, and further we would like to draw attention to their academic performance.

A student's level of education before entering university has a strong correlation with academic performance. According to the survey, 76% of respondents do not feel difference in knowledge among the rural or urban school graduates, while 24% feel the difference. This is also due to the fact that urban youth (63%) initially prevailed among the university population, although according to statistics for 2018, the proportion of urban school students in Kazakhstan is

55.15%. (<https://bala.stat.gov.kz/obscheobrazovatelnye-shkoly-po-tipu-mestnosti/>). Still, the university needs to pay attention to the fact that 24% of respondents see the difference in knowledge between urban and rural areas, which is reflected in the lag between rural youth in ICT discipline and basic subjects. In order to eliminate such difference, it is necessary to provide additional consultations with such students, to apply an individual approach when performing independent work, to conduct additional classes, etc.

It was also interesting to know the respondents' opinion on whether they feel that there is a difference in the knowledge of the student population studying on scholarships and on a paid basis. According to respondents 58% do not feel it, yet 42% state they feel it.

Students were equally involved in different subject areas such as humanitarian, natural, technical, technological and social. Answering the question: «Weren't you mistaken in choosing a specialty/educational program?» the respondents' answers were as follows: 45% are sure that they were not mistaken, 25% do not know and 30% believe that they were wrong. 17% of respondents said they do not want to study at the university, 14% found it difficult to answer and 69% said they like to study at university. The survey results show that not all students are satisfied with the chosen educational program. This may be the result both of a student's non-serious attitude towards career choice and of a student's search for his or her life path. From the point of view of the state, this situation is not quite satisfactory for the Ministry of sciences and high education RK, as there are systemic problems related to the retraining of personnel. It is necessary to work on changing the attitude of applicants (or even schoolchildren) to the future profession. This may also have to do with the way teachers are taught and their attitude towards students as future professionals.

When asked: «What exactly do you like about the university?», the respondents' answers were arranged in this way: university facilities (24%), student life at the university (20%), advisers (14%), teachers (9%), classmates (8.7%), Almaty (5%), the opportunity to prove themselves (3%), the university campus, KazNU campus (2.3%), the opportunity to do science (2%), also 12% of students replied that they like other opportunities (Figure). The data show that the visual characteristics of the university are more important for students than the opportunity to engage in science or to prove themselves. Nowadays, the status of the university and the city is very important for the students. The desire of engaging in science among students is at the lowest level. The university should create conditions and motivate students to engage in research.

Among the respondents 43% of students are familiar with the principle of universal quality management «student as a consumer orientation», 57% are not familiar with it. Respondents' answers to the question «Do you consider yourself a consumer of the educational process» were as follows: 41% agree,

59%, that is the majority of students do not consider themselves as consumers of educational services. Those who consider themselves consumers explain it by the fact that they do: «get deep knowledge», «learn everything», «do scientific work, starting from the basics», «gain experience», etc., that is, their consumer demand is satisfied. The majority of students (59%) assess their attitude to the teachers as satisfactory, 24% of students – as high and only 17% of students are not satisfied (figure 2).

The attitude of students to the dean of the faculty was assessed as follows: 25% high, 43% satisfactory, 14% unsatisfactory and 18% wrote that they did not know the dean. As evidenced by the answers, the respondents' attitude towards the advisers is much better compared to the attitude towards the dean: 41% rated the attitude of the advisers as high, 39% as satisfactory, 16% as unsatisfactory and 4% as not knowing them.

According to 53% of students at the university, they are given the opportunity to form an individual educational program, while 47% believe that they have not been given such an opportunity. At the same time, most of the students > 60% claim that they have

the opportunity to choose a teacher, a scientific supervisor, educational programs, academic disciplines and a foreign university to get a double degree diploma. Also, the diversity of the student population is considered when forming individual tasks (Assignments – student's independent work, student's independent work with a lecture). Hence, 37% fully agree with it, 28% partially agree, and 7% partially and 11% completely disagree, and 17% of respondents answered that it is difficult to assert.

The credit system of education satisfies the most part of respondents (48%), 3% are partially satisfied and a little less (41%) respondents are sure that their credit system does not satisfy them and at the same time indicated different reasons: the fee for credits is high (3%), organization of educational process by credit system requires improvement (2%), and 3% of respondents do not know the answer. The results of the research show the necessity of improving the credit system, considering the wishes of consumers of educational services.

According to students, during the classes their teachers often use group work (50%), learning by themselves or «upside down» type of class, and

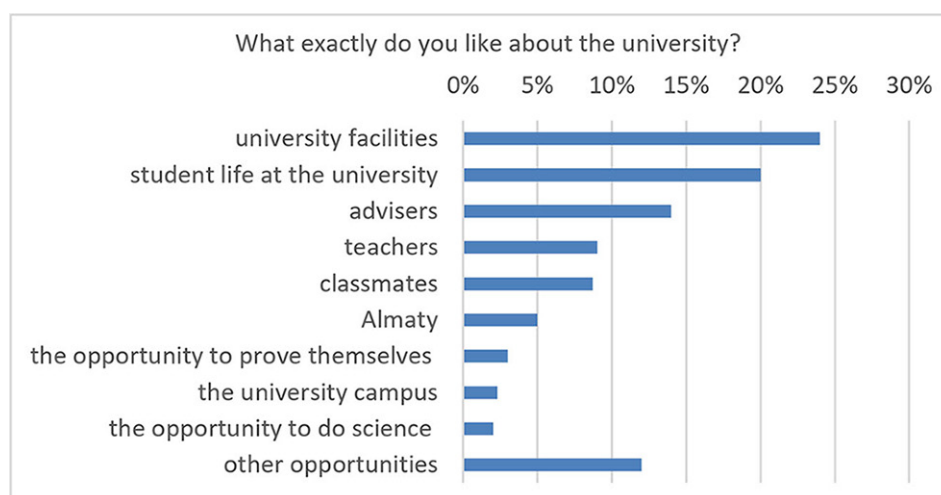


Figure 1 – The respondents' answers

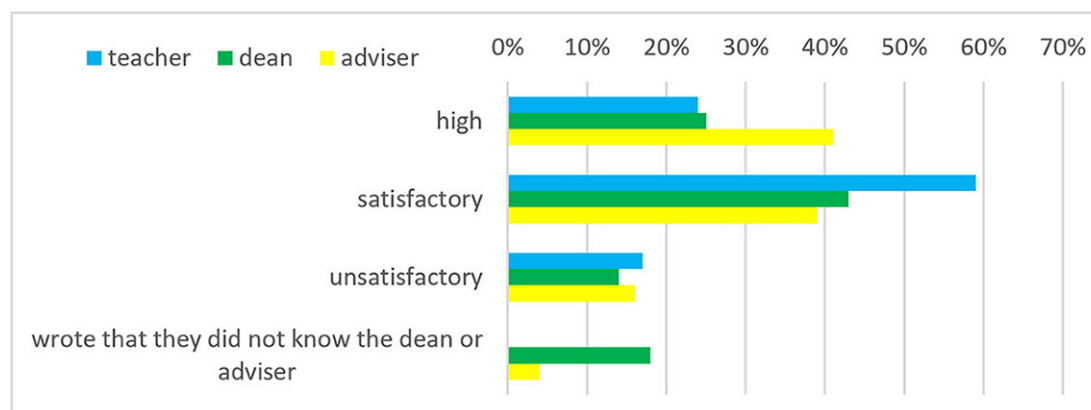


Figure 2 – The attitude of the students to the teachers/dean/adviser

updating of feedback, peer evaluation (21%); projects (15%); active method of teaching (9%); through MOOC (3%) and lectures (2%). Lecturers allow discussion with students about teaching methods during and at the end of classes, as well as online, this is confirmed by a majority vote of respondents (46%). On the contrary, 23% of respondents do not agree with this and 31% find it difficult to answer. With the changing digital literacy of students, there is a need to move to different methods of distance learning.

The university creates the most favorable conditions for studying. Students have access to appropriate research and teaching equipment within and outside of the university campus, as evidenced by the answers of 52% of respondents, 19% disagree (of which 10% completely disagree and 9% partially disagree) and 29% have difficulty in replying. One of the main tasks of the educational process is the development of personal skills and abilities, 39% of respondents fully agree and 27% partially agree with it. On the contrary, 6% completely disagree with it, 9% partially disagree and 19% find it difficult to answer. It turns out that students do not yet fully use the practical opportunities offered by the university.

Credits by discipline are measured based on student workload regardless of class hours and this is confirmed by respondents (57%), i.e. they consider the workload at the university moderate. But there are also those who do not think so (11% partially disagree and 8% completely disagree) and 24% find it difficult to answer.

The university provides students with an opportunity to access new database of information, such as electronic subscription to Springer, Elsevier, IPR books, Polpred, Epigraph, Scopus, Lan and Oxford. When carrying out SIW (Students independent work) it is necessary to use material-technical, innovative possibilities of educational and scientific laboratories.

Their integration with existing knowledge and experience is confirmed by respondents' answers: 35% – fully and 34% – partially agree, 6% – partially and 6% completely disagree with it, also 19% – answered that it is difficult to confirm. In order to determine the quality of the educational process with students, feedback has been established at the level of department and faculty, which is confirmed by the respondents' answers: 24% completely and 31% partially agree, 6% partially and 10% completely disagree, and 29% find it difficult to answer.

Conclusion. The study has revealed various issues that students of university and that the attitude of a student as consumer of educational services is still forming. It also indicates that students as consumers of educational services differ by gender, region, language of instruction, status of a high schools they graduated from, social and economic status of the family, and fairly it affects their needs and motives. Their academic performance at school reflects the diversity of their consumer demand. Particularly, in language training and social and humanitarian fields. The study has shown that foreign languages in the needs of students from urban and rural areas differ from one another in the level of language proficiency. Higher education institutions not always can divide the students into groups by their level of language proficiency. This leads to difficulties in training and reflects the changes of the student's attitude towards the university, specialty/educational program. Non-satisfaction of the demand of students' leads to negative results. Teaching methods and willingness of instructors to assist the students to eliminate their knowledge gaps are also the factors that influence the results. The improvement of social relations and communication between faculty members and student has a positive impact on the consumer values of students.

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Қазақстандағы жоғары білім берудегі студент-тұтынушы ретінде (ТҰБТ) тәсілдер: теория мен тәжірибе

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Аңдатпа. 2010 жылы Болон үдерісіне қосылғаннан кейін қазақстандық білім беру жүйесі 3 оқыту цикліне ауыстырылды: бакалавр – магистр – доктор (PhD). Осы уақыттан бастап қазақстандық университеттердің халықаралық білім кеңістігіне интеграциялануының қарқынды процесі басталды. Болон үдерісін өзгертудегі маңызды сәттердің бірі студентке бағытталған көзқарасқа бағдарлану, қазіргі білім беру теорияларының гуманистік негіздерін енгізу және «студент тұтынушы ретінде» көзқарасын енгізу болды. Мақалада нарықтық қатынастардың пайда болуымен және студенттердің жоғары білім алудағы жеке қаржылық үлесін арттырумен байланысты «студент тұтынушы ретінде» тәсіліне шолу жасалады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – студенттердің заманауи жоғары білімді қалай қабылдайтынын және университеттердің «студент ретінде тұтынушы» көзқарасына сәйкестігін анықтау. Сауалнама студенттің білім беру қызметін тұтынушы ретіндегі көзқарасы әлі қалыптасу сатысында екенін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар студент-тұтынушы ретіндегі көзқарастың университеттер мен студенттер үшін салдары қарастырылады. Мақалада Қазақстандағы CAS (студент ретінде тұтынушы) тұжырымдамасын ілгерілетудің заманауи тенденциясының ерекшеліктері егжей-тегжейлі қарастырылған және бар қарама-қайшылықтар ашылған.

Кілт сөздер: жоғары білім, студент-тұтынушы, білім беру тәжірибесі, білім беру сапасы, оқыту әдістер, тұлғаға бағытталған оқыту.

Подход «студент как потребитель» (SAC) в высшем образовании Казахстана: теория и практика

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Аннотация. После присоединения к Болонскому процессу в 2010 году казахстанская система образования была трансформирована в 3 цикла обучения: бакалавр – магистр – доктор (PhD). С этого времени начался интенсивный процесс интеграции казахстанских вузов в международное образовательное пространство. Одним из важных моментов трансформации Болонского процесса стала ориентация на студент-центрированный подход, внедрение гуманистических основ современных теорий образования и внедрение подхода «студент как потребитель». В статье предлагается обзор подхода «студент как потребитель», который связан с появлением рыночных отношений и увеличением личного финансового вклада студентов в свое высшее образование. Целью исследования является определение того, как студенты воспринимают современное высшее образование и соответствуют ли университеты подходу «студент как потребитель». Опрос свидетельствует о том, что отношение студента как потребителя образовательных услуг еще находится на стадии формирования. Также рассматриваются последствия подхода «студент как потребитель» как для университетов, так и для студентов. Статья детализирует особенности современной тенденции продвижения концепции CAS (студент как потребитель) в Казахстане и раскрывает существующие противоречия.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, студент-потребитель, образовательный опыт, качество образования, методы обучения, личностно-ориентированное обучение.

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