Factors of Consumer Choice of Universities: The Case of Kazakhstani Education System

Assel Jumasseitova
Business School, Kazakh-British Technical University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Madina Zhappargaliyeva
Business School, Kazakh-British Technical University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Ayana Zhappargaliyeva
Business School, Kazakh-British Technical University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Aiym Aben
Business School, Kazakh-British Technical University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Nazym Omirali
Business School, Kazakh-British Technical University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Dinara Saduakas
Business School, Kazakh-British Technical University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

ABSTRACT

This study allows to determine consumer preferences in the process of university selection. The research model is based on qualitative methods, primarily in-depth interviews conducted with 70 respondents that represent various regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan. 11 key factors influencing the choice were identified, from which university reputation and career prospects received the highest evaluations. Moreover, applying the expert-factor analysis method, the total score for each criterion was calculated, which reflects the expressiveness of each factor in the case of Kazakhstan. A deep analysis was conducted to examine the dependence of criteria base on the form of payment: scholarship based versus fee paid; and field of study: technical versus social and humanitarian. The validity of the collected data was supported by the concordance and dispersion coefficients calculations. The results of our research can be useful for universities and educational centers, as well as for subsequent research works in the field of consumer behavior.

Keywords: Expert-factor analysis, Factors of consumer choice, Qualitative methods of research, High Education Sphere, Strategy.

INTRODUCTION

In the condition of rising competition among universities, universities must work at their attractiveness to hold strong position in the market. Higher education plays a crucial role in the long-term economic development of the country, forming intellectual communities and preparing qualified specialists for different industries. In Kazakhstan, there are 113 universities as of 2024-2025 academic year, 57% of which private institutions [1]. In the last years, the government of Kazakhstan is actively implementing measures for modernization and improvement of higher education system, including the Bologna process, development of academic mobility programs and updating educational programs, even invalidating the licenses of some universities that do not meet requirements set by the Ministry of Education and Science. In 2019, the Ministry of Education and Science stated that higher education institutes with low education quality, deficit of qualified teaching staff and low employment rate are subject to closure [2]. Since 2020, the number of universities dropped by 9,6%, from 125 to 113, although the number of students grew by 8,5% [1]. In one hand, this situation raises the overall quality of education, in other hand, it exacerbates the competition among universities. Universities that hold the license must strengthen their competitive advantages: improve educational programs' content, form strong teaching staff, improve international relations and contribute to successful employment of students. Indeed, students are facing employment problems after graduation. As stated by Asia Pacific Career Development Association [3], about 60% of graduates in Kazakhstan do not work by their specialties. This high indicator shows a significant discrepancy between the higher education system and the real demand in the labor market. In addition, competition among universities in an international area is increasing. More and more Kazakhstani applicants considering receiving high education degrees abroad, especially in countries such as USA, Turkey, Czech, UK, Germany, the South Korea and so on. Growing competition requires not only a high level of education but also meeting other expectations of applicants and employers.

The expectation of consumers can be derived from the research of consumer choice and behavior, which play a key role in the development and success of any enterprise in various fields of activity. Analysis of consumer patterns helps to form effective marketing strategies, increases customer loyalty and trust, and as a result, sales and competitiveness of the company. In this context, the choice of an applicant for his future university can be considered as a form of consumer choice. After all, a student, as a consumer of educational services, makes a decision on the direction and the appropriate institution based on many social, economic and psychological factors, as well as complex relationships between them. Thus, rising competition between universities in the higher education sector requires forming a development strategy orientated to students' expectations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern business is faced with a frequently changing environment in which the analysis of consumer choice has become the most important area of strategic planning. Study of Prabhu, J. J. [4] concludes that understanding the consumer behavior and factors influencing on their decisions are the key element for successful marketing, as it allows companies attract and retain clients more effectively through strategies adaption to target audience expectations. The research conducted in Indonesia [5] demonstrates, final customer decisions are formed mostly by complex influence of individual, social and technological factors. The results of this research

highlight the need for a systematic analysis of customer preferences, as integrating these factors into a marketing strategy increases loyalty and competitiveness. Similar conclusions can be found in another work of researcher Duralia O. [6], which examines the relationship between the level of competition in the market and consumer behavior, the work emphasizes that consumers' perception of a competitive environment affects the development of a company's market strategies. The author argues that companies which understand and analyze changes in consumer behavior are able to adapt faster to market changes and strengthen customer relationships. Another research from Indonesia [7] which considers the application of the customer relationship management system in the companies, shows that collecting and analyzing customer behavioral data helps companies adapt offers, build personalized customer relationships, and launch repeat sales. Implementation of this system demonstrated the decrease in client outflow and dramatic revenue increase due to the emotional attachment of consumers. A study from Morocco [8] examines the dependence of success of marketing strategies and competitiveness of Moroccan companies on an in-depth analysis of consumer behavior. Using examples of various companies, the authors have proved that the key factors are cultural characteristics, technological trends and psychological motives of customers. Another research from China [9] explored how consumer behavior affects market demand and economic trends. The author of research emphasizes that consumer decisions directly shape demand and economic trends, especially with the impact of social media and the internet.

According to an article by UK researchers [10], the service sector requires a special approach to consumer analysis. Traditional models that have been developed for product markets are not always applicable to services, and the author emphasize that specialized analysis methods need to be developed in order to understand consumer behavior specifically in the service industry. An empirical study [11] was conducted using the data collected the Pars hotel chain in Iran, in which more than 300 customers were surveyed. Based on the survey results, it was determined that satisfaction and positive customer experience directly enhance loyalty, while their integration reinforces the brand strength. Researchers from India employed the case study method using Panasonic Corporation [12] as the example to examine the impact of consumer behavior on brand success. The customer survey results indicated that over 70% of respondents associate loyalty with the quality of service and product. Drawing on these data, Panasonic has adapted its marketing strategy, by placing greater emphasis on communication and customer experience. Another study [13] conducted a quantitative study among representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises in Indonesia, to examine how consumer behavior affects firm performance. Structural modeling has demonstrated that consumer expectations are directly linked to the effectiveness of business strategy implementation in companies. A study conducted in Pakistan [14] presents a meta-analysis of behavioral research in the service industry. The authors conclude that the service industry requires more flexible, context specific approaches that are responsive to technological changes, and they propose the TCM (theory–context–method) model for further research of consumer behavior in across various service sectors.

In the field of education, the behavioral approach is gaining increasing significance. In qualitative research [15], Cook-Sather explored the concept of the "student voice" and its influence on educators, curricula, and power dynamics within educational settings.

Including the "student voice" in educational reforms changes traditional hierarchies and increases student motivation, but the author emphasized the risks of tokenism and teacher resistance and the need for systemic changes in school culture. This is also confirmed by a similar study of universities in the United States, Ireland, and Scotland [16], which examined how student involvement in curriculum development impacts the educational process. Consideration of student opinion when creating courses and methodologies leads to deeper learning, engagement, and stronger relationships between teachers and students, but requires a redesign of traditional approaches. Another study from the Netherlands [17] examined how student satisfaction scores influence freshman admissions to university programs. Increasing program satisfaction scores increase enrollment by 1.7–3.5% in the following year, indicating that applicants actively use published data to compare programs. Also, a study from Australia [18] showed, using focus groups, that prospective students expect technological flexibility from the university, keeping the face-to-face format and social environment. These expectations formed the basis of the IT strategy of Griffith University, confirming the importance of using student opinion as a factor in strategic planning. The work of Simonson et al. [19], where using a survey of students with cognitive and mobility impairments, demonstrated that even at an ADA-compliant university, accessibility issues remain inconvenient entrances, layout and lack of assistive devices. All groups associated improved accessibility with the quality of education and the educational experience of students with various forms of disabilities. However, a review of the practices of Australian universities [20] revealed that student feedback is often used ineffectively, formally and rarely integrated into the strategic management of universities. The authors conclude that there is a need to create institutionally embedded, ethically justified and sustainable assessment systems with student participation.

If we consider the feedback of students on the admission process and their criteria for consumer choice, then in one study conducted in the USA [21], where they studied various factors influencing the choice of university among applicants, they found that the influence of personal contacts such as family, university students, school friends and teachers are key factors in choosing a university. And in the work of the Kyiv National University of Technology and Design, Ukraine [22], they found that in addition to the influence of advice from parents and adults, the main factors in choosing a university are career prospects and the university rating, with personal interest in the specialty dominating over the factor. And in a similar study from Indonesia [23], using a questionnaire of 426 high school students from Surabaya (Indonesia) and descriptive statistics, they found that the main factors of choice are personal interest in the program, advice from parents and self-confidence. However, at the same time, the most important attributes of the university are reputation, success of graduates, and values of the university. The latter is confirmed in another study from Indonesia with a focus on a private university in Bandung [24]. The study considers both the image of the university and the qualifications of the teachers to influence students' choice. University image, which includes reputation, career prospects of graduates, religious orientation, is the main factor and has the strongest influence on choice, while the presence of degrees (Master's/Doctoral) of teachers, depth of knowledge, and preparation for classes are also significant, but less than image. Also in the study, Agrey and Lampadan [25] conducted a two-stage data collection including in-depth interviews and a quantitative survey and factor analysis to determine the main influence on the choice of university in the context of private international educational institutions in

Thailand. Five main factors were identified: learning environment and career prospects, supporting infrastructure, sports facilities, student life and a safe and friendly environment.

Based on a deep analysis of numerous studies on consumer behavior it can be concluded that taking into account consumer opinions and behavior is a critical success factor in both business and education. In the commercial sector, behavioral analysis of customer preferences, desires, and needs helps companies develop effective marketing strategies, strengthen customer trust, and with it, competitiveness. Customer behavior is especially important in the service sector, because they play a decisive role in the development of the company. In the educational sphere, this principle plays a special role. Acting as consumers of educational services, students and applicants form their preferences based on a range of factors - from the academic reputation of the university to career prospects and the quality of infrastructure. Based on research, we can conclude that active involvement of students in the feedback and decision-making process not only contributes to the improvement of educational programs and learning conditions but also increases satisfaction. It is important to note that the effective use of student feedback requires the creation of well-thought-out systems for collecting and analyzing data, as well as the readiness of educational institutions to make real changes based on the results obtained.

Thus, a comprehensive and systematic approach to studying, analyzing and taking into account consumer opinion, whether in business or education, is becoming a prerequisite for adapting to changing market conditions and ensuring sustainable development in the face of growing competition.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This research aims to identify the main factors in consumer choice of universities among Kazakhstani students and determine its significance in Kazakhstan. In line with the research objective, the qualitative empirical approach using primary data was applied.

Data Collection

The data were collected using qualitative semi-structured interview with 70 experts who are studying in different education year, specialties and from various universities across Kazakhstan. The diversity of participants enhances the validity of the findings and representing the whole population of Kazakhstan. The snowball method of sampling was used, and the data collection process was conducted over a period of two months.

Factor Identification

During the interview, participants were asked to indicate up to three primary factors affecting university selection. Based on interview results, the repeated responses of the experts allowed us to identify eleven key factors reflecting students' consumer choice:

- X1 – Reputation of university: In the context of the research, the reputation of university refers to the public and professional perception of educational institution, its prestige, recognition, and level of trust from students, employers, and the academic community. This factor reflects how much the university is associated with high-quality education, successful graduates and a strong teaching staff.
- X2 – Scholarship availability: This factor implies the availability and accessibility of scholarships that the government provides to students to fully cover the cost of tuition.

X3 – Location of campus: Within the scope of the research, the location of campus is understood as geographical and infrastructural comfort of the university's location including accessibility of transport, the level of security, the cost of living and the development of the region.

- X4 – International opportunities: International opportunities should be considered as the set of programs and initiatives provided by universities for students to participate in academic mobility, international internships, double degrees programs, and other forms of international cooperations.
X5 – Word of mouth: Word of mouth in the context associated with the dissemination of information about the university through personal recommendations, opinions and experiences of friends, relatives or graduates.

- X6 – Infrastructure of university: Infrastructure of university is understood as the material and technical base of the educational institution, including great quality classrooms, availability of libraries, laboratory as well as good student living conditions.

- X7 – Price policy: Price policy means the set of financial conditions of university such as tuition fees, possible additional expenses, a system of discounts and flexibility in payment.
X8 – Career growth: Career growth in this context is the opportunities created by the university for the professional development of students and graduates, in the form of employment support, internships, career development consultations and the formation of competencies for employers.

- X9 – System of education: The system of education is understood as the structure and organization of the educational process at the university which means the content of curricula, teaching methods, assessment system, flexibility of educational programs, as well as the ratio of theoretical and practical components of learning.

- X10 – Social activity: Social activity is considered as the availability of opportunities and conditions within the university that enable students to engage in student clubs, organizations, cultural, sports and volunteer activities which enrich the overall student experience.

- X11 – Integration of sustainability: Integration of sustainability in this research reflects the availability of sustainability courses, environmental initiatives, sustainable infrastructure, and the involvement of students and faculty in sustainable practices.

Analytical Procedures

After the factors were established, subsequently, an expert factor analysis was conducted, which made it possible to detect the most significant factors from the expert's point of view.
For the analysis, additional information was collected from the same experts and two tables were constructed. In the first table, experts assessed the significance of eleven factors of university selection based on their opinion and perspective, using a scale from one to five points. In the second table, experts assessed the manifestation level of the same factors in the universities where they study, using a scale from one to ten points.

To determine which factors had the greatest and the smallest effect on the consumer choice of university, the indicators of the mean value, dispersion, and concordance coefficient of each factor were calculated. In this analysis, mean value made it possible to identify the overall level of significance for each factor, while the dispersion indicated the degree of divergence in expert

evaluations. Using the dispersion indicators, the concordance coefficient was determined, which reveals the level of agreement of opinions among respondents.

To quantify the relative influence of each factor on students' university choice, the weight was calculated by multiplying the mean value with the concordance coefficient. Then, for the second table, the significance of each factor in the universities of Kazakhstan was conducted in the same way. This approach enabled a comparison between the initial expectations of respondents with the reality of the university environment and determine the significance of these 11 factors in Kazakhstani universities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Due to expert-factor analysis, results were obtained indicating high agreement of opinion among experts on all 11 factors of consumer choice.

The weight values shown in Table 1 are illustrated using a funnel chart in Figure 3. Funnel chart allows to visually see the importance and significance of criteria in descending order. The top of each funnel shows the most important or significant criteria, while the bottom shows the least important or significant criteria. This presentation makes it easier to understand and quickly determine which factors play a key role in choosing a university and which factors are most significant in universities in reality.

Table 1: Importance of weight, dispersion, and concordance of factors considered by experts when choosing a university.

№	Table 1 (1-5)	dispersion	concordance	weight
X1	Reputation	0,38	0,999	4,62
X2	Scholarship availability	0,95	0,998	4,21
X3	Location of campus	0,97	0,998	3,55
X4	International opportunities	0,87	0,998	3,97
X5	Word of mouth	1,06	0,998	3,66
X6	Infrastructure	0,84	0,998	3,67
X7	Price policy	1,45	0,997	3,63
X8	Career growth	0,63	0,999	4,42
X9	System of education	0,88	0,998	4,04
X10	Social activity	1,07	0,998	3,58
X11	Integration of sustainability	0,89	0,998	2,91

Note: Compiled by authors.

The concordance coefficient for all criteria is higher than 0.5, which indicates a high consistency of opinions among experts. The dispersion ranges from 0.38 to 1.45, which confirms the reliability of the data. The findings presented in Table 1, based on dispersion analysis, indicate the most significant factor - Price policy factor (X7) indicates sensitivity to opinion diversity.
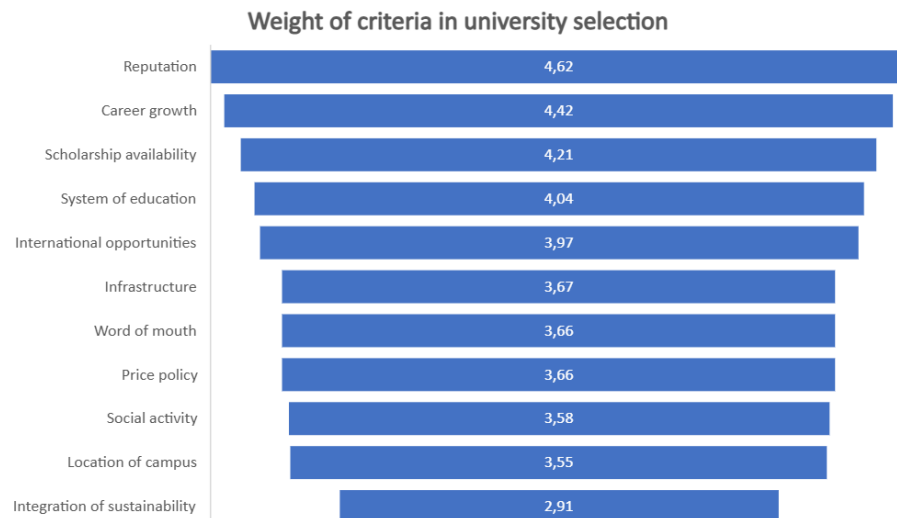
Weight of criteria in university selection

Criteria	Value
Reputation	4,62
Career growth	4,42
Scholarship availability	4,21
System of education	4,04
International opportunities	3,97
Infrastructure	3,67
Word of mouth	3,66
Price policy	3,66
Social activity	3,58
Location of campus	3,55
Integration of sustainability	2,91

Figure 1: Funnel chart of weight of criteria in university selection.
Note: Compiled by authors.

Figure 1 represents the highest score, which is 5 points, with the following factors having the greatest weight: Reputation of the university (X1) - 4.6 points, Career growth (X8) - 4.4 points and Scholarship availability (X2) - 4.2 points. This confirms that for experts, the university reputation is an important factor when choosing a higher education institution, successful employment in the future and the possibility of receiving funding from the government have a fairly high influence. In contrast, Location of campus (X3) and Integration of sustainability (X11) are the factors that had the least impact on the choice of a university with weights of 3.55 and 2.91, respectively. Sustainable development is the least decisive criterion for university and is not well expressed in Kazakhstani universities. Because most respondents do not feel the value of sustainable development, due to the lack of direct influence on their studies and future career prospects. The results of the second assessment are shown in Table 2, where it can be seen that the experts' expectations from the university and the real conditions in their university slightly differ.

Table 2: Perceived significance, dispersion, and concordance of university-related factors based on experts' experience.

№	Table 2 (1-10)	dispersion	concordance	significance
X1	Reputation	1,25	0,998	8,75
X2	Scholarship availability	1,81	0,997	8,16
X3	Location of campus	1,92	0,996	7,87
X4	International opportunities	1,64	0,997	7,41
X5	Word of mouth	1,58	0,997	8,18
X6	Infrastructure	1,47	0,997	6,82
X7	Price policy	1,67	0,997	7,43
X8	Career growth	1,36	0,997	8,34
X9	System of education	1,72	0,997	7,28
X10	Social activity	1,64	0,997	7,41
X11	Integration of sustainability	1,81	0,997	5,79

Note: Compiled by authors.

The concordance coefficient for all criteria is higher than 0.5, which indicates a high consistency of opinions among experts. The dispersion ranges from 1.25 to 1.92, which confirms the reliability of the data. The findings presented in Table 2, based on dispersion analysis, indicate the most significant factor - Location of campus factor (X3) indicates sensitivity to opinion diversity.
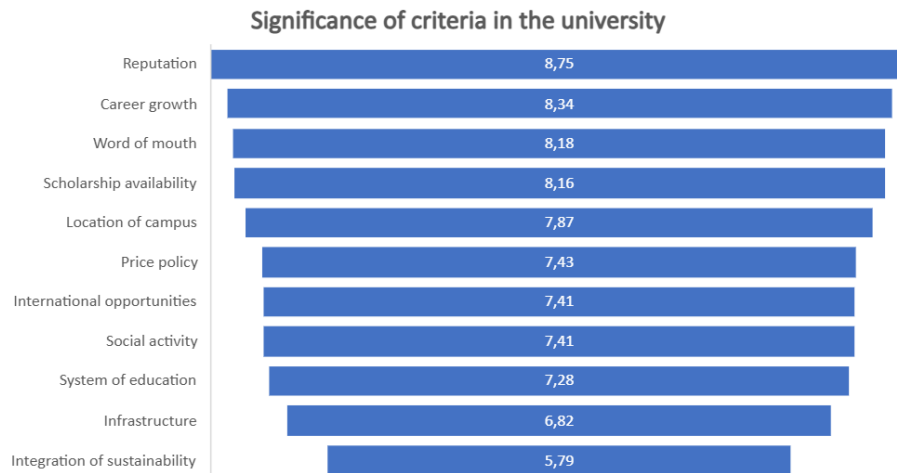
Significance of criteria in the university

Criteria	Value
Reputation	8,75
Career growth	8,34
Word of mouth	8,18
Scholarship availability	8,16
Location of campus	7,87
Price policy	7,43
International opportunities	7,41
Social activity	7,41
System of education	7,28
Infrastructure	6,82
Integration of sustainability	5,79

Figure 2: Funnel chart of significance of criteria in the university.
Note: Compiled by authors.

Figure 2 illustrates Reputation of the university (X1) and Career growth (X8) are the most expressed factors in their university. This means that the experts' expectations regarding these aspects are met. However, now the third most important factor is Word of mouth (X5) with an indicator of 8.18. Before entering university, respondents did not pay much attention or were not aware of universities, but now they are already studying and are in this environment, they began to hear more about their universities, for example, in conversations among friends, relatives, classmates, and also on social networks. Conversely, International opportunities (X4), System of education (X9), Infrastructure (X6) are characterized with a low expression of 7.41, 7.28, 6.82 respectively and Integration of sustainability (X11) with the least expression of 5.79 became the least expressed. When entering, respondents looked at and expected universities to have good quality laboratories, offices, and, in general, developed infrastructure, however, as shown in Table 2, the results of the assessment of this criterion for their universities show that the quality and development of the infrastructure of universities in Kazakhstan is significantly low. Unfortunately, the integration of sustainable development in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan remains in the last positions.

Visualization of the results using a radar chart clearly demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of the expression of consumer choice factors in universities of Kazakhstan. The general diagram of the importance of the criteria visually highlights zones resembling a triangle with a pointed peak in the reputation of the university and career growth, meaning that these factors are perceived as both crucial and quite highly expressed in universities. Special attention should be paid to where the factors in the diagram have a relatively low sum and located closer to the center compared to other factors, that is, where there was high expectation

and low implementation: such as Infrastructure and the System of education. The results are visualized in Figure 3:
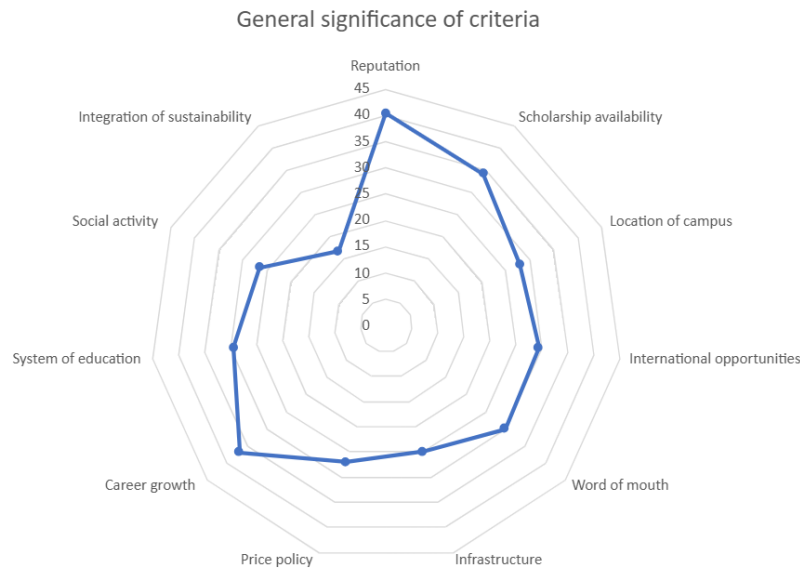

Figure 3: Radar chart of general significance of university-related factors based on experts' evaluations.
Note: Compiled by authors.

To examine how the factors of consumer choice may vary depending on the specialty, we divided our respondents' assessments into two categories: social & humanitarian and technical. The resulting assessments were sorted and filled in a table and then visualized using a radar chart. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3, which show the most significant factors for both groups: Reputation of the university (X1) and Career growth (X8). This suggests that despite the difference in specialties, respondents want to study at a more prestigious university and have career opportunities in the future.

Table 3: Distribution of university-related factors by specialty type (Social & Humanitarian vs. Technical).

№	Criteria for choosing university	sum (Social & Humanitarian)	sum (Technical)
X1	Reputation	40	40
X2	Scholarship availability	32	35
X3	Location of campus	27	28
X4	International opportunities	31	27
X5	Word of mouth	29	30
X6	Infrastructure	26	24
X7	Price policy	27	26
X8	Career growth	36	36
X9	System of education	30	28
X10	Social activity	26	26
X11	Integration of sustainability	16	17
Total		**319**	**319**

Note: Compiled by authors.

However, there are slight differences in the importance of some factors, which can be seen in Figure 4 by how they are more scattered. These are factors such as International opportunities (X4), Scholarship availability (X2) and Infrastructure (X6). For example, for experts of social and humanitarian specialties, International opportunities (X4) are 4 points more significant and Infrastructure (X6) by 2 points and for experts of technical specialties, Scholarship availability (X2) by 3 points.
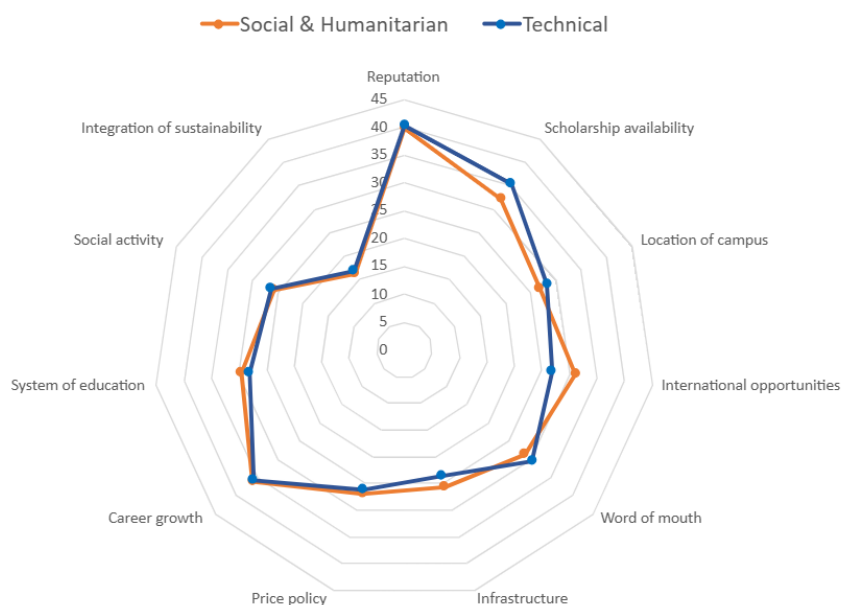

Figure 4: Radar chart comparing the significance of university-related factors by specialty type.
Note: Compiled by authors.

In general, based on the sum of the importance of all factors, indicated at the end of Table 3, the opinions of both specialties are literally the same with 319 points for each type. Analyzing the data of this category, we can come to the conclusion that regardless of the areas of study, the importance and expressiveness of most factors are universal for experts (Figure 4).

To test how type of funding might affect respondents' university selection preferences, we categorized them into two categories: those who study on a government scholarship and these who cover tuition fee themselves.

Table 4 indicates Reputation of the university (X1) is the most important for both groups. Regardless of type of funding for Kazakhstani students, the reputation of the university remains a universal and important reference point, equally significant for everyone who plans to receive higher education.

Further, Scholarship availability (X2), where the sum of the significance for respondents on a scholarship (37 points) dominates by 15 points, it can be argued that government scholarship recipients prefer a university with a good reputation when entering, but at the same time they focus on the availability of a scholarship without additional financial risks. Career growth (X8) has almost the same significance for both groups – 35 and 37 points, ranking 2nd in importance.

This means that despite the difference in the type of financing, respondents in both groups equally value career growth and employment opportunities. With a difference of 17%, the factor Word of mouth (X5) stands out, with a predominance in favor of respondents on a government scholarship (30 points). Government scholarship recipients are more likely to take into account the opinions of their immediate circle and trust established social recommendations, which may reflect their desire to minimize risks when choosing a university and even after entering the university by relying on trusted sources of information.

Table 4: Distribution of significance for university-related factors by type of funding (Scholarship vs. Fee Paid).

№	Criterias for choosing university	sum (Scholarship)	sum (Fee Paid)
X1	Reputation	40	41
X2	Scholarship availability	37	22
X3	Location of campus	28	25
X4	International opportunities	29	27
X5	Word of mouth	30	25
X6	Infrastructure	25	23
X7	Price policy	26	27
X8	Career growth	37	35
X9	System of education	29	27
X10	Social activity	27	23
X11	Integration of sustainability	17	15
Total		**325**	**290**

Note: Compiled by authors.

Radar chart (Figure 5) demonstrates the difference in the importance and significance of the factors mentioned above for this category.
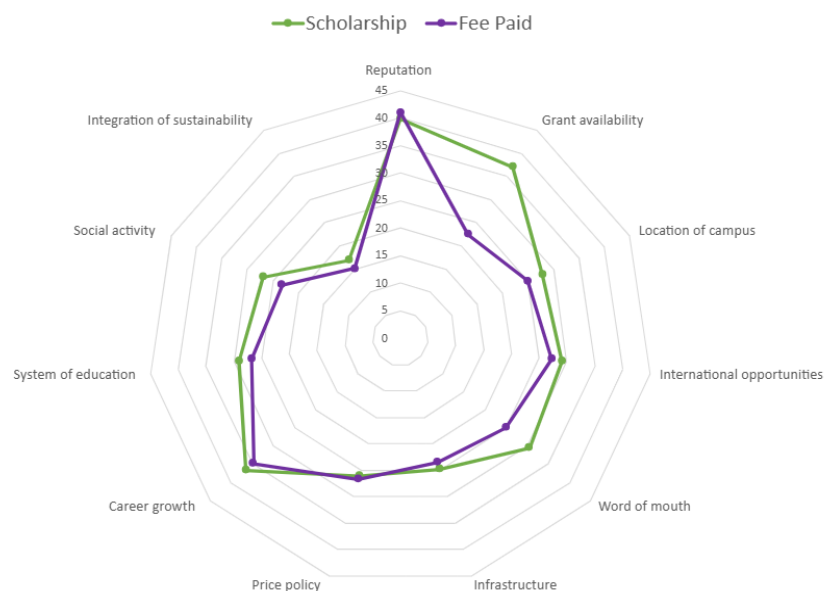

Figure 5: Radar chart comparing significance of university-related factors by funding type (Scholarship vs. Fee Paid).
Note: Compiled by authors.

Moreover, the sum of the significance of all factors for experts whose education is covered by a government scholarship is 325 points, and those who cover tuition fees by themselves - 290 points, with a difference of 35 points, proving the discrepancy in the opinions of respondents about the significance of factors. Analyzing the data of this category, we can come to the conclusion that the importance and expressiveness of the identified factors differs for experts with different types of financing for education.

Table 5: Indicators of the weight and significance of factors according to the first and second assessments of respondents by type of funding.

№	Criterias for choosing university	Scholarship recipients		Fee-paying respondents	
		weight	significance	weight	significance
X1	Reputation	4,6	8,6	4,6	8,9
X2	Scholarship availability	4,4	8,3	3,1	7,1
X3	Location of campus	3,6	7,8	3,4	7,4
X4	International opportunities	4,0	7,4	3,9	7,0
X5	Word of mouth	3,7	8,2	3,4	7,4
X6	Infrastructure	3,6	6,9	3,8	6,2
X7	Price policy	3,5	7,4	3,7	7,2
X8	Career growth	4,4	8,4	4,6	7,6
X9	System of education	4,0	7,3	4,1	6,5
X10	Social activity	3,6	7,5	3,4	6,8
X11	Integration of sustainability	2,9	5,9	2,9	5,2
Total		**42**	**84**	**41**	**77**

Note: Compiled by authors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis, we can offer a number of recommendations that Kazakhstani universities and educational centers should pay special attention to when formulating development strategies and educational reforms. Implementing these recommendations, universities will be able to retain and attract more clients, which will further increase the attractiveness and hence profits of educational institutions.

According to the general results of the analysis, when choosing a university, students expect a high-quality education system and good university infrastructure, but these factors are poorly expressed in the current state of the university environment in Kazakhstan. In this regard, one of the main priorities should be to improve the education system. Universities need to apply modern methods and use relevant data sources, as well as switch to a more practice-based methodology, offer more elective disciplines, and academic support programs. Next important recommendation is the modernization of infrastructure in universities. High-quality learning environment, modern classrooms and laboratories, comfortable dormitories and coworking spaces are very important for students and form a general impression of the university. After all, for many students, it is the campus atmosphere that becomes the decisive factor when choosing a university, as they choose a place where they want to live, study and develop. By creating high-quality infrastructure, the university not only increases its attractiveness, but also lays the foundation for a return on investment through the success of graduates. The focus should also be on the development of international programs and double degree programs, as

this element remains underdeveloped. Universities should more actively build partnerships with foreign universities, expand international exchanges and improve the availability of such programs for students.

The recommendations are based on the division of respondents by two main characteristics: the type of specialty (social & humanitarian and technical) and the type of funding (scholarship and paid education). For each group, separate recommendations have been developed aimed at improving educational strategies for both universities and educational centers in order to more accurately meet the expectations and needs of students.

As revealed by the analysis, students of social and humanitarian specialties value global perspectives and a comfortable educational environment more, therefore, if a university is focused on this type of direction, it should develop international opportunities (exchange programs, double degrees) and improve infrastructure (coworking spaces, libraries, multimedia auditoriums). In this way, the university will be able to attract more clients of social and humanitarian directions and increase competitiveness in the market. If we look at the priorities for students of technical specialties, they value the availability of government scholarships more than students of social and humanitarian directions. Therefore, private universities should not focus on opening or increasing the number of places in technical specialties. If a university is focused on attracting fee-paying students, then the analysis suggests that universities should improve the quality of their infrastructure and career development. Fee-paying students are not fully satisfied with their career development opportunities, so universities are encouraged to expand partnerships with companies, implement practice-oriented courses, create internship opportunities and mentoring programs, and monitor graduates' career paths to help students adapt to the labor market.

CONCLUSION

The research determined several main factors that influence how Kazakhstani students choose universities and evaluated the extent to which they were implemented in the country's current higher education system. The results show that university reputation and future career prospects are the most important criteria for applicants. At the same time, some other aspects including university infrastructure, the structure of the education system, and availability of international opportunities continue to be overlooked, even though respondents consider them important. It was found that social and humanitarian students value international perspectives and a comfortable educational environment, while technical students focus on affordability, as scholarship availability is especially important to them. Regardless of the type of funding or specialty, infrastructure is a rather weakly expressed criterion according to respondents. Intended audience including universities and educational centers, might benefit from the research's findings as they can apply the data to correct development strategies to increase attractiveness and competitive advantages. This work can also provide a useful empirical foundation for future studies of researchers and analysts in the fields of consumer behavior.

References

[1].   Bureau of National Statistics. (2024, December 26). *Higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan (At the beginning of the 2024–2025 academic year)*. https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/stat-edu-science-inno/publications/277816/

[2].   Official Information Resource of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2019, December 11). *The Government held a meeting of the commission on optimization of higher educational institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. https://primeminister.kz/ru/news/v-pravitelstve-sostoyalos-zasedanie-komissii-po-optimizacii-vysshih-uchebnyh-zavedeniy-rk

[3].   Asia Pacific Career Development Association. (n.d.). *Kazakhstan area information*. Retrieved May 12, 2025, from https://asiapacificcda.org/kazakhstan-information/

[4].   Prabhu, J. J. (2020). A study and analysis of consumer behavior and factor influencing in marketing. *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering*, *2*(04), 68-76.

[5].   Rusdian, S., Sugiat, J., & Tojiri, Y. (2024). Understanding Consumer Behavior in Marketing Management: A Descriptive Study and Review of Literature. *Golden Ratio of Marketing and Applied Psychology of Business*, *4*(2), 76-87.

[6].   Duralia, O. (2022). Consumer behavior and competition-factors of a successful marketing strategy. *Studies in Business and Economics*, *17*(3), 70-79.

[7].   Riyanto, D. Y. (2022). Deeper understanding of customer needs utilizing customer relationship management. *Journal of Applied Management and Business*, *3*(1), 1-10.

[8].   Bouaddi, M., & Khaldi, S. (2023). The Importance of Studying Consumer Behavior in Marketing Strategies: The Case of Moroccan Companies. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Human and Social Studies*, *2*(2).

[9].   Liu, Xueqing. (2024). The Role of Consumer Behavior in Shaping Market Demand and Economic Trends. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*. 15. 10-16. 10.54097/skmxzd63.

[10]. Wells, V. K., & Foxall, G. R. (2011). Consumer behavior analysis and services. *The Service Industries Journal*, *31*(15), 2507-2513.

[11]. Nobar, H. B. K., & Rostamzadeh, R. (2018). The impact of customer satisfaction, customer experience and customer loyalty on brand power: empirical evidence from hotel industry. *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, *19*(2), 417-430.

[12]. Singh, P., Rao, K. S., Chong, A. Y. W., Mui, D. K., Hung, A. J. J., Hong, A. C. Y., ... & PV11, R. (2021). The Influence of Consumer Behavior on Brand Success: A Case Study of Panasonic Corporation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management and Education*, *4*(2), 6-19.

[13]. Fatonah, S., & Hidayat, A. (2024). Exploring the impact of consumer behavior and innovation orientation on business strategy and firm performance: Insights from MSMEs in Indonesia. *International Journal of Management and Sustainability*, *13*(4), 818-831.

[14]. Singh, P., Arora, L., & Choudhry, A. (2022). Consumer behavior in the service industry: An integrative literature review and research agenda. *Sustainability*, *15*(1), 250.

[15]. Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence, and power:"Student voice" in educational research and reform. *Curriculum inquiry*, *36*(4), 359-390.

[16]. Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2011). Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: implications for academic developers. *International Journal for academic development*, *16*(2), 133-145.

[17]. de Koning, B. K., Kunn-Nelen, A., & Kunn, S. (2022). Student Satisfaction Scores Affect Enrollment in Higher Education Programs.

[18]. Finger, G., & Smart, V. (2013). *ELearning Strategic Planning 2020: The Voice of Future Students as Stakeholders in Higher Education*. International Association for the Development of the Information Society.

[19]. Simonson, S., Glick, S., & Ellen C. Nobe, M. (2013). Accessibility at a public university: student's perceptions. *Journal of Facilities Management*, *11*(3), 198-209.

[20]. Alderman, L., Towers, S., & Bannah, S. (2012). Student feedback systems in higher education: A focused literature review and environmental scan. *Quality in Higher education*, *18*(3), 261-280.

[21]. Johnston, T. C. (2010). Who and what influences choice of university? Student and university perceptions. *American Journal of Business Education*, *3*(10), 15-24

[22]. Derkach, T. M., Kolodyazhna, A., & Shuhailo, Y. V. (2021, May). Psychological factors motivating the choice of university entrants. In *Second International Conference on History, Theory and Methodology of Learning (ICHTML 2021)*.

[23]. Proboyo, A., & Soedarsono, R. (2015). Influential factors in choosing higher education institution: A case study of a private university in Surabaya. *Jurnal Manajemen Pemasaran*, *9*(1), 1-7.

[24]. Harahap, D. A., Amanah, D., Gunarto, M., & Purwanto, P. (2023). The Importance Factors That Students Consider in Choosing a University. *Migration Letters*, *20*, 341-356.

[25]. Agrey, L., & Lampadan, N. (2014). Determinant factors contributing to student choice in selecting a university. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, *3*(2), 391-404.