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Higher Education in Kazakhstan: New Opportunities and The Problem of Crystallization of Middle Strata Status

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Abstract

In today's society, where the presence of large middle class ensures its stability and is a symbol of resolution of hidden economic problems, education is an integral part of formation and reproduction of the middle class. This article presents part of results of the sociological study conducted under the project "Kazakhstan model of education: international experience and national traditions" supported by the Foundation of the First President of Republic of Kazakhstan - Leader of the Nation to determine the ratio of students to the transformations of the educational system. The authors conclude that the Kazakhstani system of education, passing through the transformation processes, improving the quality of educational programs and trying to correspond to the international standards, not yet in full range, but begins to perform important functions in the formation of the middle class.

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1. Higher education and middle class

The urgency and importance of education in modern society can hardly be overestimated. First, it is education as a priority value that provides a socio-economic progress of society and is an important source of motivation of human behavior. Second, it becomes a mainstay in solving many social problems, by creating the best opportunities to achieve quality education for each citizen. Third, it is the guarantee of cultural development, economic prosperity and political stability. At the same time in contemporary society, where the presence of large middle class ensures its stability and symbolizes the resolution of a whole chain of hidden economic problems, education is an integral part of the formation and reproduction of the middle class. Thus, higher education is one of the most important

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factors in the formation and reproduction of the middle class, and students, as direct participants of the educational process, are potential members of the mass middle stratum. Its presence is an indicator of positivity of ongoing economic, social and educational reforms.

At present, the process of intensive reforming Kazakhstan's educational system is being carried out, aimed primarily at achieving international standards of education and integration into the global educational and informational space. Education is recognized as one of the most important long-term priorities of the Strategy "Kazakhstan - 2030". The government relies on the predominance of middle class in society, which is regarded as a "comfort class" and undoubtedly the improvement of education system plays an important role in achieving this goal. In this article will be presented and analyzed part of the results of the sociological research, conducted under the project "Kazakhstan model of education: international experience and national traditions" (grant #108, 2011) (Mukhamejanov and Abdirayimova, 2011) and supported by the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - Leader of the Nation, to determine the ratio of young scientists and students to the ongoing transformations of the educational system of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

For today problem of formation of middle class in contemporary society is at the center of attention of political figures and scientists (sociologists, political scientists and economists) that is connected with the need to evaluate the effectiveness of transformational processes. However in the Kazakhstani science there is no clear idea of the selection criteria for the middle class, and therefore remain disputable questions about its presence in the area of social society, the size, its composition, education, and life strategies. Therefore, to give a specific definition of the boundaries of the middle class or description of its representatives is not an easy process. There are a myriad of different approaches and angles of viewing. Although, to date, single standard of definition of the middle class is not developed, however, the fundamental elements of its identity do not cause serious disputes. These are: a sustainable economic position, a certain level of education and actually self-identification as the middle class. Thus, assuming that belonging to the middle class is not inherited, but is achieved in the course of life, it is easy to assume that the most important factor of belonging to middle class is education (Goux and Maurin, 2012).

These two phenomena are closely related. Educational qualification for the middle class is the most important stratification criterion for selection, a fundamental prerequisite for upward mobility. In turn, the middle class is almost the only ground for the development of education as a social institution (Sogomonov, 2002).

The values and norms of behavior of the middle class are reflected in educational programs and allow creating a base for the "production stream" of its representatives. Middle class is directed by the constant striving for new, applied knowledge, which is able to provide with a worthy place in the modern world. At the same time the middle class itself has a significant influence on the development of education. In this social group not only businessmen and entrepreneurs, not professors and teachers that are directly related to the educational environment are united. They can be named as the main carriers of value and behavioral ideals of the middle class - precisely because of their work, students can obtain the necessary knowledge base and norms that will allow them to either retain their middle status in society, or to increase their chances of upward social mobility. Thus, higher education is the source of the formation and the main guarantor of the preservation and reproduction of the middle class. And the better and more diversified the system is, the more high-quality, diverse and stable will be the middle class (Torkunov, 2008)

The transformation process of Kazakhstan's education traces its origins to the period of independence. The first bachelor and master programs have been implemented in institutions of the republic in 1992 and 1996, respectively; during this period state educational standards based on a two-stage model of learning were approved.

The next stage of modernization of education in RK dates back to 2004 when, after a preliminary examination and approbation of certain professions, leading Kazakh universities moved to the credit system of education. During the years 2004-2008 changes were made in the standards of education of the bachelor and master degrees, that gradually brought closer national educational model with international standards and, above all, to the objectives of the Bologna process. Since 2010 in Kazakhstan models of postgraduate education became completely consistent. PhD doctorate comes to replace the traditional postgraduate study and doctoral study.

All the positive trends at the same time do not relieve the reformation process in Kazakhstan's education from the problems and difficulties. On their own, the reforms being caused by changes in society, and in turn require the reliance on a system of parameters or indicators pointing out the effectiveness/ineffectiveness of the results and, accordingly, enabling to make timely coordination of them.

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