Public administration of education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Case of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Verejná správa v oblasti vzdelávania počas pandémie Covid-19. Prípad Kazašskej republiky

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought tremendous difficulties in different fields including education. One of the significant challenges is the closure of educational organizations worldwide aiming to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. As a result, the decision has led to urgently changing the format of education. It is widely accepted that distance learning is an appropriate solution in case of emergency and the pandemic is undoubtedly is one of those cases. Accordingly, the Republic of Kazakhstan's government has taken a step to change its traditional format to distance alongside most states. The academic process at all levels of education has been switched to distance since March 2020. The decision to transition to distance education has not been smooth, what is more, it has been accompanied by many challenges. For example, the issue of the digital divide, the quality of education, the lack of communication and the information security problems. This paper aims to present the situation with the transition to distance education in the Republic of Kazakhstan due to the pandemic. Moreover, it intends to introduce the problems that have occurred during the process.

Keywords: *distance education, traditional education, pandemic, the right to education, Kazakhstan*

Abstrakt:

Pandémia COVID-19 priniesla obrovské problémy v rôznych oblastiach vrátane vzdelávania. Jednou z významných výziev je zatvorenie vzdelávacích organizácií na celom svete, ktorých cieľom je obmedziť šírenie koronavírusu. V dôsledku toho viedlo toto rozhodnutie k naliehavej zmene

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formátu vzdelávania. Všeobecne sa uznáva, že dištančné vzdelávanie je vhodným riešením v prípade mimoriadnych situácií a pandémia je nepochybne jedným z takýchto prípadov. V súlade s tým vláda Kazašskej republiky podnikla krok, aby popri väčšine štátov zmenila tradičný formát na diaľkový. Akademický proces na všetkých úrovniach vzdelávania bol od marca 2020 zmenený na dištančný. Rozhodnutie prejsť na dištančné vzdelávanie nebolo hladké, ba čo viac, sprevádzalo ho mnoho výziev. Napríklad otázka digitálnej priepasti, kvalita vzdelávania, nedostatočná komunikácia a problémy s informačnou bezpečnosťou. Cieľom tohto príspevku je predstaviť situáciu s prechodom na dištančné vzdelávanie v Kazašskej republike v dôsledku pandémie. Okrem toho chce predstaviť problémy, ktoré sa počas tohto procesu vyskytli.
Kľúčové slová: *riziko, analýza rizík, metodika, údaje*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has invoked an enormous challenge to education systems worldwide. Since the coronavirus started spreading, it has become impossible to conduct traditional education. The search for alternative forms of education has started widespread.

Distance education has been acknowledged as an alternative option instead of traditional face to face education to ensure the right to education during the pandemic. Although this form of education has started being used widely since the beginning of the pandemic, delivering it to everyone during the pandemic remains difficult.

The Republic of Kazakhstan has decided to switch to distance education in March 2020 due to the epidemiological situation in the republic. The students of the country at all levels of education had to shift to the education process through online platforms. Thus, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype are the general platforms that are used at educational organizations in the country. Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan has recommended several educational resources for each level of education. Thus, for school children, for instance, it has been proposed to use the following: «Bilim Media Group», «Daryn Online», «Opiq Platform», «iMektep», and the Platform for learning STEM. Also, Platonus, Univer, Moodle, and Canvas are the platforms that are used at the higher education institutes in the republic.

The unusual and unexpected circumstance has been painful for all education process parties: teaching staff, students, and their parents. Due to the new format of education, some individuals have been affected more due to the so-called digital divide or absence of types of equipment (computers, laptops, and smartphones) and adequate Internet connectivity to acquire knowledge at home.

This status quo is unacceptable because, firstly, it prevents receiving an equal education among different categories of students. No one can be left behind in education because they do not have access to a computer or online platform. Education should be available to everyone according to the international documents on the protection of human rights and the Constitution of the state.

What is more, the conduction of distance education has been passed with the other types of problems. Some of them were in the terms of the information security issues. Based on this supposition, this paper was written in an attempt to present the situation with the transition to distance education during the non-standard condition

such as the COVID-19 pandemic shown in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Moreover, it was dedicated to introducing the challenges that have occurred during the process.

The paper has been divided into four sections. The first part explores distance education in Kazakhstan. The second section focuses on the issues that have appeared due to the transition to distance education such as the digital divide. The third part presents the interview results. The last section

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1. The present situation with distance education in the Republic of Kazakhstan

Distance education has been recognized as one of the forms of learning in the Republic of Kazakhstan [1]. It has been acknowledged based on the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education in 1999. Since then, distance education is significant in the whole educational system of the country. However, it has started being used just recently, specifically, since the beginning of the pandemic [2].

The development of distance education as a goal has been set in the national strategies and programs. For instance, one of the state programs that was aiming to organize distance education was E-learning. The first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev set the objective of making the country one of the 30 most competitive countries in the world. He argued that it is possible to achieve this through the modernization of the educational system and the implementation of new technologies [3]. Thus, the Government of the state approved the national program of E-learning. E-learning was supposed to be implemented at all levels of the educational system: from pre-school education to post-doctoral level.

The aim of implementation of the electronic learning system (E-learning) into the educational process by 2020 was an important priority in the realization of the state program of educational development in the Republic of Kazakhstan [4].

The objectives of E-learning in Kazakhstan were the following:

1. Defining standards of internalization;

2. organizing an open and distance education;

3. developing and testing digital educational resources [5]

Despite having the national strategy and the allocated funds for the implementation of E-learning, the educational organizations were having difficulties in the transition to a new format of education during the first wave of the pandemic. (Saurambayeva 2020) notes that if in the framework of higher education the distance format is not a novelty, then school education simply was not technically prepared for the transition to such a new regime in a short period of time [6]. Thus, the transition to distance education in the context of the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the realities and challenges of the education system. The main are the following: the inequality to types of equipment between the students (digital divide), the educational platforms that do not meet information security requirements, the lack of quality educational content, and the learning process is accompanied by constant disruptions.

2. The concept of the digital divide and digital divide in Kazakhstan

The digital divide is not a new concept. However, the digital divide issue has become far more noticeable since the beginning of the pandemic COVID-19. For instance, it has been more prominent in education since the closure of educational organizations and the transition to distance mode. Due to the current health crisis worldwide, everyone has been required to study from home using the Internet and electronic devices. This decision has highlighted the problem of the digital divide that generally understands as the inequalities between people who have access to types of equipment and the Internet and to those who do not have it.

One of the scholars that have deeply analyzed the notion of the digital divide is Jan van Dijk. Jan van Dijk argues that the digital divide is a complex and dynamic phenomenon and describes four approaches to analysis of the phenomenon. The first approach involves rejecting the study of the digital divide as a contemporary form of inequality. The second one considers the digital divide as a temporary form of social inequality that will disappear in the future. The third sees the digital divide as a new form of inequality, adjusting over the old (income). The last approach is based on differentiation: some forms are reduced, and others intensified [7]. In this regard, the main issue is how to define the concept of the digital divide.

The concept of the digital divide emerged in the last years of the 1990s in the United States of America. The term digital divide has been defined variously. For instance, the definition digital divide was used to refer to the inequalities in access to and use of new media technologies between the so-called information "haves" and "have nots [8]."

Jan van Dijk believes that the digital divide has some limitations. According to his opinion, the content of the digital divide is usually reduced to a clear division between those who have access to modern technology and those who do not [9].

Saline notes as well that the digital divide is understood differently. For instance, some believe that the digital divide is about the lack of computers while others think it is about computer literacy. Following her interpretation, the digital divide refers to that disparity between individuals and/ or communities who can use electronic information and communication tools, such as the Internet, to better the quality of their lives and those who can not [10].

Moreover, the concept of digital divide has been applied to the gap that exists in most countries between those with ready access to the tools of information and communication technologies and the knowledge that they provide access to and those without such access or skills [11]. Therefore, the concept digital divide can be defined variously.

The issue of the digital divide is present in the Republic of Kazakhstan, although it was tried to be solved by the extensive reforms in the country. One of the significant ones was the state program called "Information Kazakhstan 2020" which aimed to create conditions to ensure Kazakhstan's transition to an information society. The results of the digitalization program for the years 2018-2019 is illustrated below [12].
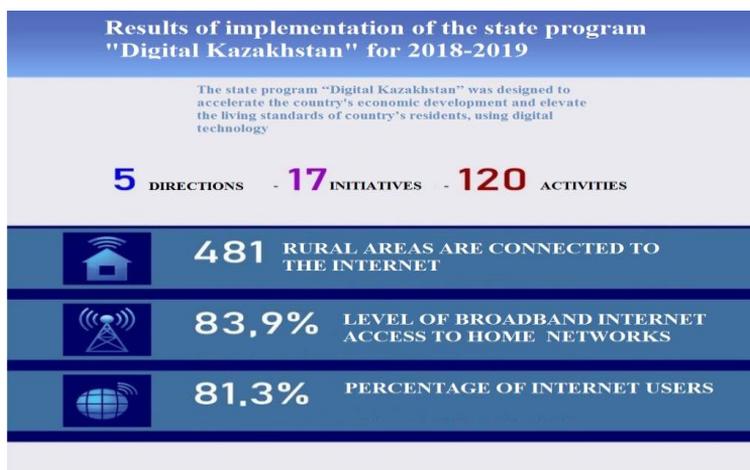
Figure 1 Results of implementation of the state program "Digital Kazakhstan"

for 2018 – 2019 [13]

According to the shown data, much work has been done. However, according to the deputy of the lower house Jamilya Nurmanbetova, more than 55,000 schoolchildren live in 835 rural areas without Internet and more than one million pupils - 30 per cent - do not have computers. Since the start of the school year 2020/2021, some 2.3 million children in Kazakhstan have been educated in a distance learning format and over 1 million in a combined format [14].

The students at the higher level of education have encountered the same problem. To indicate it, the interview has been conducted among the students of the two universities in the country. The results would be considered in the next subparagraph.

3. Interview Results

The interview on the accessibility of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic has been conducted among 50 respondents who are presently students at the two higher educational institutions, which are: L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Nur-Sultan and Manash Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University in Petropavl city.

The students have been asked eight questions, among which four questions are the following:

1. How would you rate the performance of your university your university's performance in providing distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Have you or your fellow students encountered problems accessing distance learning during the pandemic (for example, problems with Internet access or lack of types of equipment?

3. If yes, please state the reason for the problem: (living in the countryside, financial difficulties). Did the university where you study support you or your fellow students in solving this problem?

4. How do you rate the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan's work on the transition to the distance learning format?

The participants ranged in age (19-40 years old) since the questions were asked by the students at three higher educational levels (bachelor, masters, and PhD). Specifically, the dominant ages of the students that participated in the interview are:

· 18 years old (11 respondents);

· 19 years old (9 respondents);

· 20 years old (13 respondents).

Moreover, few participants at the age 25, and by one participant at the age from 24 to 40, among which are:

1. women (76%);

2. men (24%).

One of the rating scale questions that has been asked was the satisfaction of the students regarding the organization of distance education by their universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students had multiple answers: very poor, poor, ok, good, and very good.
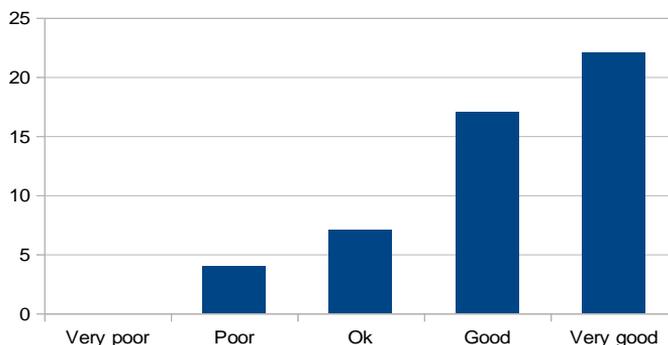

Figure 2

Source: compiled by author based on the interview

Following the diagram above, the students have rated the organization of distance education as good and very good. 4 students have noted that the organization of distance learning by their universities was poor. The significant point is that no one participant has marked very poorly.

The above results are quite interesting in the answers to the question because the students have also mentioned the problems, they have faced during it. One of the main issues that have been mentioned by the respondents is the issue of access to

distance learning. 54% of the students have indicated that they encountered mainly problems with access to the Internet, the lack of computers, and electricity due to the following reasons: living in the rural areas of the country and financial difficulties.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, support is provided to students who do not have access to the Internet or the necessary types of equipment. 10% of the students out of 54% noted that they received help from their universities. Thus, for those who had issues with internet access due to living in rural areas the places in university dormitories were provided.

The work that has been done to transit to distance education by the responsible body, which is the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan has been rated by the respondents as follows:

1. 40% good;

2. 60% bad.

The majority of the respondents answered negatively towards the made work of the Ministry. What is more, they marked the necessity of solving the crucial problem of the digital divide firstly. The entire conduction of distance education is impossible in the country where the students have shortages of Internet or computer.

4. Other challenges during the transition to distance education

During the process of the transition to distance learning in the Republic of Kazakhstan, other concerns have evoked. For example, the crucial matter is the educational platforms and their inconsistency towards information security requirements. Although that the Ministry has suggested some educational resources for each level of education, some of the Kazakhstani students have witnessed network trolls through the Zoom platform throughout the country. The disruptions of online learning have been confirmed by the education authorities[15].

It is important to note that the students are taught on different educational platforms in Kazakhstan. Thus, for the schoolchildren, it has been recommended to use the following platforms: the platform for learning STEM, the primary school program iMektep, the STEM Academy, the NIS Play, the educational portal for schoolchildren and students, the virtual simulator for preparing for the unified national testing iTest, and the educational resource Daryn online.

To organize the educational process for the students at higher education, the Ministry has provided access for students to electronic platforms such as "MOODLE", "Univer", "Platonus", "Canvas", "Daryn online". The Coursera platform has provided free access to courses, while ZOOM has provided free access to classes [16].

Apart from it, the government and the responsible bodies for education have been criticized due to the lack of quality educational content and IT competence of the teaching staff.

Conclusion

This paper has been written to review the transition to the distance format of education and its challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kazakhstan. Since education in the present time is the distance, I shall argue that the digital divide problem should be considered an obstacle to realizing the right to education. Acquired from the analysis that has been done, distance education will not be available for all until the issue of access is present,

The research carried out on the accessibility of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kazakhstan showed that the digital divide problem is being acute in the country. 54% of the students have indicated that they faced the problems of Internet connectivity. It covered mainly students from rural areas. Therefore, distance education is accessible; however, the students from the villages are mostly experiencing difficulties.

The government of the Republic of Kazakhstan has been resolving it by implementing a program on digitalization, which includes the goal to provide Internet access in rural areas of the Republic of Kazakhstan based on satellite technology. For this purpose, one of the priority projects planned for implementation is the construction of fibre-optic communication lines in over 1,200 rural settlements under a public-private partnership scheme.

Another subject that has to be considered is the creation a unified online education platform and ensuring the quality of its functioning in the republic. If the problems solve, it will have a significant impact on education.

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