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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Motivation of Students to Pursue Business Education: Case of Kazakhstan

Aizhan Turgumbayeva^{1,*}, Ospan Sangilbayev¹, Oxana Kirichok², Anargul Kassymzhanova¹ and Bulent Tarman¹

¹Department of Psychology, Turan University, Almaty 05000, Republic of Kazakhstan

²Department of Education, Caspian University, Almaty 05000, Republic of Kazakhstan

Abstract:

Background & Objective:

With the rise of interest in specific business education, such as an MBA, there is a need to study students' motivation to pursue such educational directions. The study aims to research the motivation of students to pursue business education in Kazakhstan.

Methods:

The study applies qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to learn more from the experiences of participants. The main instrument is semi-structured interviews. Research participants are MBA graduates, MBA program administrators and employers.

Results:

The significance of the study is based on the research of motives of Kazakhstani students to pursue MBA education. For the first time, it was studied why students in Kazakhstan choose MBA programs. The study has two major findings: First, one of the motives of students to pursue business education in Kazakhstan are career development, career advancement, quality networking and career change. The second important motive is personal growth which includes increased social status and self-esteem. It is evident that the study corresponds with previous research on the topic and proves that business education positively impacts career development. However, self-esteem and social status are relatively rare themes in broader research but are evident in the current study.

Conclusion:

The study adds value to the exploration of the sphere of business education and the motivation of students to pursue such education in the context of Kazakhstan and provides more opportunities for further research

Keywords: Business education, Motivation, MBA, Kazakhstani higher education, Students, Quality networking.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Business education in Kazakhstan, in general, and the Master of Business Administration (MBA) in particular, is a relatively new field in higher education [1]. The first MBA program in Kazakhstan was opened in 1996 based on the pioneer business education institutions - the International Academy of Business and Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research [2]. Since then, more and more people are choosing business education as an alternative to existing management programs because they think they have better career opportunities [3]. However, the reasons that drive students to pursue MBA studies have not yet

been adequately explored [4]. Due to recent changes associated with the shift to online education through COVID-19, business education is also changing [5, 6]. Considering that business education is one of the most rapidly developing areas in Kazakhstan higher education, an MBA degree seems to be one of the most popular and sought-after degrees in the field of business and management. However, without research on this topic, what drives people in Kazakhstan to pursue an MBA degree is unclear. Considering that one of the main goals of higher education is to promote professional success, it is also important to investigate the added value of an MBA degree for graduates' professional development. A better understanding of the main reasons that drive people to pursue an MBA education and identifying the role of an MBA degree can help improve and strengthen MBA programs to align them with the needs of the labor market. These improvements can lead to the

* Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Psychology, Turan University, Almaty 05000, Republic of Kazakhstan;
Tel +77010986628; E-mail: aizhanttt1@gmail.com

development and growth of business education in Kazakhstan. The purpose of this study is to investigate the main motivations of students in Kazakhstan to study MBA. This study aims to fill a knowledge gap related to the motivation of students in Kazakhstan to study business education. There is one overarching question that frames this study. 1) What motivates students in Kazakhstan to pursue an MBA education? The results of this research can contribute to a better understanding of the perceptions of an MBA degree and its value for career development and provide recommendations and implications for key stakeholders, such as MBA program administrators, potential students, employers and policymakers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's rapidly changing world, the context of globalization is an important component of the development of business education. Globalization has a significant impact on the development of business education worldwide, as nowadays, it is important to keep up with the latest trends in business education [7]. In this context, Bollinger emphasizes the importance of the global dimension in MBA programs, as it provides a more holistic picture of the international business world and can be helpful for the cross-cultural business dialog [8]. The rapidly changing realities of today's world are dictating new rules for MBA program curricula to business school administrators. As Bloom and Reenen (2006) point out, the traditional MBA curriculum based on analytics and theoretical business knowledge should include more creative courses devoted to studying world cultures, creative decision-making, and greater interpersonal skills [9]. In his theory of human motivation, Maslow (1943) explains that people's motivations reflect their current and broader needs [10]. More specifically, the motivation to do or possess something can be viewed as a response to an emergent need. It is common practice for students to have essential motivations to pursue an MBA degree: professional development and career and employment opportunities. There are two propositions. Proposition 1: The necessity to enhance career prospects positively relates to applying for an MBA program. Proposition 2: Employment opportunities are the main driver of applying for an MBA program.

2.1. Professional Development and Career

In this sense, the motivation of students to pursue an MBA degree may reflect the existing need for professional and personal development in business education. Currently, there are a variety of professional and personal motivations that drive students to pursue an MBA [11 - 13]. Thompson and Gui (2000) assert that career development and the need for advanced skills and knowledge are among the critical motives for students to pursue MBA studies. In addition, personal and social benefits, such as the willingness to improve social status or to develop personally, may also be considered motivating factors.

In the context of career development, Dailey *et al.* (2006) emphasize that career development encompasses individuals' needs for "financial and career security," which can be meaningfully provided through the possession of an MBA degree (p. 147). Thompson and Gui (2000), while recognizing

the role of career-related motivation as one of the primary drivers for business study, emphasize that possession of an MBA degree does not always automatically lead to an individual's career advancement but should be viewed as a tool to enhance career opportunities [11, 12]. Another career-related motivation is an increase in salary, which seems to be a highly desirable outcome of an MBA education. In addition, the opportunity to build a professional communication network can be considered as one of the career-related motivations of students for MBA study, as it provides a variety of opportunities to improve one's career prospects and can facilitate the process of career mobility [14, 15].

It is clear that the motivations of people applying for MBA studies are not homogeneous and depend on the particular characteristics of a specific individual. This variation in motivations relates to the role and status of MBA programs, which are constantly changing in accordance with current market realities. In this sense, understanding the main motivations of students to pursue an MBA degree can illustrate the implications of this type of degree for different national contexts.

The salary change of MBA graduates can vary depending on various factors such as the school or program they attended, their previous work experience, their field of study, their location, and the current economic conditions. However, on average, MBA graduates can expect a significant salary increase after completing their degree [15].

2.2. Employment Opportunities

One of the indicators of the relevance and necessity of higher education is the availability of employment opportunities for graduates. According to Yorke (2004), employment opportunities refer to the possession of a "set of achievements-skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to find employment and succeed in their chosen occupations, benefiting themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy" (p. 410). Furthermore, employment opportunities depend on the applicant's communication and teamwork skills and technical attributes. Therefore, the employment opportunities of college graduates depend on their professional and interpersonal skills and attributes that can be acquired through academic and practical experience [16]. Several authors emphasize that the recent changes that have taken place in the 20th century have brought the issue of employment prospects to the forefront [17]. The neoliberal agenda of most countries require higher education institutions to focus more on providing graduates with better employment opportunities. In the market economy context, HEI's role can be described as an intermediary between two constituent groups - graduates and businesses [18]. Thus, providing employment opportunities for graduates seems to be one of the most important indicators of college competitiveness and prosperity.

Since higher education aims to equip individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge, it is reasonably expected that graduates will be able to compete for good positions with further opportunities for advancement. Thus, in the context of the knowledge economy, higher education seems to be an

priori path to career success. However, it is questionable whether one should obtain a degree to get more employment opportunities or gain experience and get a degree to follow the trend [19].

Currently, reality dictates certain rules for those seeking a successful and lucrative career [20]. Some authors agree that possessing professional and personal characteristics is necessary for better employment prospects. As stated by Eby, Butts, and Lockwood (2003), one of the competencies of a competitive candidate is the ability to adapt easily to a new environment, which requires a high level of emotional maturity as well as strong communication skills [21]. At the same time, it is essential to have great accomplishments and unique characteristics to survive in the intensified competition in the labor market of the 21st century [22]. However, there is no single scenario for employment patterns and career advancement, as different people may perceive the same information differently and respond differently in the context of skill application and knowledge demonstration [23]. In recent studies by Choi *et al.* (2019), the authors identify students' main motivations for pursuing an MBA education, such as program quality and cost [24]. In addition, Kwan (2019) finds that most MBA students in Singapore choose the program for career prospects and self-improvement [25].

2.3. Motivation for MBA Studies in Kazakhstan

There is little research on the motives that motivate students to study MBA in Kazakhstan. However, studies by Kurmanov, Zhumanova & Kirichok (2013) indicate that students in Kazakhstan show greater interest in MBA education [26]. Moreover, Kirichok (2013) states that the majority of students in Kazakhstan choose to study MBA in order to have a better career [27]. In this regard, this study reveals the main motives of students in Kazakhstan to study MBA and fills the gap in understanding why they choose this type of program instead of other business and management programs. Therefore, at this stage, there are different opinions about the real added value of an MBA degree for an individual's career development. Due to the variety of opinions and perceptions based on previous experiences and other characteristics, it is not possible at this point in time to clearly outline students' motivations for pursuing an MBA. Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) surveyed business school alums from around the world, including Kazakhstan; around 40% of MBA graduates in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, held management positions [27].

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The research design of this study is a qualitative phenomenological interview-based design, which was chosen in order to explore and understand people's perceptions of a certain issue [28, 29]. Qualitative interview-based research design facilitated the process of in-depth investigation of the contribution of an MBA degree to the graduates' employment prospects and further career advancement. Additionally, the

explanations and interpretations of graduates' motives regarding their choice to pursue an MBA degree provided a more complex and holistic picture of the central phenomenon. The research design implies semi-structured interviews as the main instrument of the study [30]. Interviews were conducted by Aizhan Turgumbayeva, Ph.D., associate professor at "Turan" University. Dr. Turgumbayeva (she/her) has experience conducting qualitative and quantitative research.

3.2. Research Participants

In order to deeply and thoroughly investigate the issue of the role of an MBA degree in the Kazakhstani context, three categories of participants were involved in the research study.

The first category of participants is administrators of Kazakhstani MBA programs. In the selection process of MBA administrators, convenient sampling was applied. According to Creswell (2014b), convenience sampling refers to the selection of participants "who are willing and available for study" [30, p. 163]. The main characteristic of this category of participants is the relevant knowledge about an MBA program, its aims, strengths and weaknesses. Administrators of MBA programs provided a general overview of graduate business education in Kazakhstan. They shared their perceptions regarding the connection between an MBA degree and successful employment and career promotion opportunities for graduates.

The second category of participants is graduates of MBA programs currently working in Kazakhstan. In the selection process of MBA graduates, a maximum variation sampling strategy was applied to ensure that the issue is examined from different perspectives [30]. In this regard, differences in professional background, employment patterns after the MBA program completion, specializations and age groups were considered the variation criteria. Graduates of MBA programs provided detailed and comprehensive information regarding their personal experience of employment prospects and career advancement. They also shed light on their motives for pursuing an MBA degree and the personal and program-related benefits of graduate business education.

The third category of participants is employers of different profile Kazakhstani companies. This category, selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy, provided the general overview of the employers' perception of the value of an MBA degree in Kazakhstan. The differentiation in companies' spheres of specialization allows for examining the value of an MBA degree for companies with distinct profiles. The research was conducted in two major cities of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Almaty and Astana. Almaty was chosen because it is the most developed metropolis in the country, and it is also acknowledged as the financial and business center of Kazakhstan. In the context of Astana, it is the capital of the Republic, a fast-developing young city that sets an ambitious goal to become a financial hub for the whole Central Asian region. Hence, Almaty and Astana can be considered as two perfect research sites to explore the role of a specific graduate business degree in Kazakhstan. Moreover, most higher education institutions specializing in MBA programs are located in Almaty and Astana (Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of the research participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Specialization	Research site
Administrator A	N/A*	Female	MBA/EMBA/DBA** programs	Almaty
Administrator B	N/A	Male	MBA/EMBA programs	Almaty
Administrator C	N/A	Male	MBA/EMBA programs	Astana
Graduate A	33	Male	Finance	Almaty
Graduate B	29	Female	Hospitality management	Almaty
Graduate C	41	Male	Construction	Almaty
Graduate D	35	Female	Marketing	Almaty
Employer A	N/A	Male	Transport company	Almaty
Employer B	N/A	Male	Bank	Astana
Employer C	N/A	Female	Beverage company	Almaty

Note: * N/A – not available

** EMBA – Executive Master of Business Administration; DBA – Doctor of Business Administration

3.3. Data Collection

The research took place in two cities in Kazakhstan, Almaty and Astana. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten participants were conducted to understand their opinions and get in-depth information about the topic [28].

Three major business schools participated in the study, as they were contacted and asked to join. Business schools provided contacts of their graduates. The e-mails were sent to the graduates with the invitation to participate in the research; if the graduate wanted to participate, they were asked to identify his/her age, professional background, employment pattern and current occupation. From these responses, four participants were selected to maximize the variation among the graduates. In the context of employers, e-mails were sent to the companies with the invitation to participate.

At the beginning of the interview, all research participants signed an informed consent form, agreeing to participate in the research. Additionally, they were acquainted with the main purpose of the research, the approximate length of the interview, their rights as participants and the possible benefits and risks of their participation; also, permission to audio-record our interview for further analysis was obtained. All interviews were conducted conveniently for the participant (workplace, coffee shop, etc.). The duration of each interview varied from forty minutes to one and a half hours.

3.4. Data Analysis

In the data analysis process, Creswell's six-step strategy was applied [28]. During the first step, the data was organized and prepared for transcribing; the second step was to read the data and look through it thoroughly, the third step was coding the data based on the main themes, the fourth step was the preparation of codes for the qualitative report, and the final step is the transfer of a qualitative report itself [31]. Three members of the research team coded the data using the manual method.

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms, such as Graduate A and Employer B, were used to emphasize their position and hide their identity. Additionally, this study does not reveal the name of the organizations where participants work. Before the interview,

each participant signed a written consent form expressing their willingness to participate. Participants also received full information about the study's aims, the confidentiality guarantees, their voluntary role and their right to withdraw from the study at any moment. Additionally, permission to audio-record the interview was obtained from all research participants. The information gathered from the participants was used for research purposes only, and all audio materials were deleted after the data analysis. Findings of the research derived from the data collection procedure.

4. RESULTS

As a result of the data analysis, it becomes evident that individuals seek an MBA education for the following key themes: career development and personal growth.

4.1. Professional Motives

Regarding graduates' perception of an MBA degree in terms of career advancement, two participants mentioned that promotion up to the career ladder was the reason for applying for an MBA program. As one participant mentioned, "My boss told me that there is no opportunity for growth just with an undergraduate degree, despite my competencies and skills, and I decided to return to the university" (Graduate A, 33, Finance). This is similar to the statement of another participant:

At one point, I realized that I had reached the ceiling in this department; I was thinking about changing companies, but then found out that with a more advanced degree, I could compete for a higher position in the head department. After consultation with my boss, I decided to apply for the MBA program (Graduate D, 35, Marketing).

Another motivation is professional growth beyond the simple promotion in position; as one participant stated, "I didn't see any perspectives in my workplace anymore, I needed changes, so I decided to do my MBA" (Graduate C, 41, Construction). After the completion of the program, this participant became an entrepreneur. This example, to some extent, reflects the notion of professional self-realization and growth.

The other form of career promotion that became evident is the transition to a larger company for a higher position,

presented by Graduate B, who got a job offer from a larger-scale company with a competitive salary. Hence, career promotion can be considered one of the main motives that encouraged participants to pursue an MBA degree.

Another factor that influenced the decision to pursue an MBA degree is a change in profile; it became evident that people from different professional areas usually come to MBA programs for a smoother transition to another field. “We have a lot of lawyers, scientists, and engineers among our students; those people decided to change their specialization and enroll in the MBA program” (Administrator C). From the experience of administrators, some people come to study MBA after difficult periods. “It is not common, but we had cases when people came to study after the major crises in their lives; one student came during the last [financial] crisis, his company went bankrupt, and he decided to start again” (Administrator A). Generally, people's motives for applying for MBA programs are diverse and unique for each case.

Another finding regarding the program-related benefits of MBA education concerns the idea of useful professional connections, or in other words, networking. According to one participant, “networking is the biggest advantage of MBA programs” (Administrator B), as they provide an opportunity to meet people with similar interests and professional spheres. These connections are helpful in terms of collaborative projects or other activities.

It became evident that participants from the administrators' category emphasized the importance of networking as one of the important components of professional development. As one participant stated, “Your success during MBA is 50% contingent on the people around you; we try to compose groups according to the positions and professional spheres of people; we think it is beneficial for all of them” (Administrator A). Graduates of MBA programs also affirm the importance of networking, as one of the participants said, “I still keep in touch with my groupmates, as it is said student connections cannot be destroyed, almost all of them are successful top managers and entrepreneurs, we often consult with each other on work-related issues” (Graduate D, 35, Marketing).

Moreover, in some cases, networking can lead to a smoother employment process or facilitate career promotion, as one participant affirmed, “When we were looking for a senior financial analyst, I told the vice-president of our company about my ex-groupmate, he is a great professional, and I am glad that he has received an invitation to the interview” (Graduate A, 33, Finance). In light of those circumstances, it can be considered that networking is one of the greatest program-related benefits of an MBA education.

Some different employment patterns became evident during the data analysis. Two graduates said they returned to their previous workplaces and got promoted. One graduate found a job in a different organization but with the same sphere of specialization. Another graduate decided to open his own business. According to Graduate A and Graduate D, they decided to return to their previous jobs but for higher positions.

At the same time, one graduate mentioned that “I don't want to work here for a long time or build a life-long career. I

am here just for a transition. Now I am not ready to change a job, but soon will be” (Graduate A, 33, Finance). In the case of Graduate D, she has mentioned that “This degree helped me in terms of professional growth. I got promoted right after the program completion” (Graduate D, 35, Marketing). Another participant was courageous enough to encounter unexplored job markets. “I was looking for a job for about three months, it was quite a tough period, but finally I found a good place, with appropriate working conditions and contract regulations” (Graduate B, 29, Hospitality). Meantime, a qualitatively different scenario is evident in the case of Graduate C, who decided to start his own business: “After [MBA] education, I realized that this is the perfect time to open my own company” (Graduate C, 41, Construction).

Interestingly, among other employment patterns, the most popular mentioned by employers and administrators is professional recommendations or a so-called result of networking. Administrator A mentioned, “We encourage students to build strong professional relationships. It is common when our students are employed by the recommendations of their groupmates or employed in their companies. Also, sometimes they collaborate on business projects. We think it's great” (Administrator A). The same trend is evident from the employers' perspective. Two employers have mentioned that recommendations from experienced professionals might be helpful in the employment process but cannot guarantee a job offer. As one participant mentioned:

We usually consider professional recommendations in hiring, but it is not “employment of acquaintance.” We do not hire people if they are close friends or relatives of powerful authorities. We should eradicate this practice from our society. Meritocracy is the key to development (Employer C, Beverage company).

In this sense, the employment patterns are different and unique in each particular case; however, the trend in the employment process shows that Kazakhstani employers are more likely to hire people with the required professional traits and sufficient educational training, and it is a bonus if they possess a graduate business degree.

4.2. Personal Motives

At the same time, graduates in this study identified personal growth as one of the main reasons for their decision to apply to an MBA program. More specifically, the emerging need to move to another qualitative level to some extent encouraged graduates to study in business school, which is, according to one participant, “a life-changing experience, when you study here it extends your frames and lets you go beyond your existing knowledge and skills” (Graduate D, 35, Marketing). Considering the importance of people in a specific atmosphere that can facilitate personal growth, one of the participants has emphasized the following idea:

Atmosphere is important. If you put a fresh cucumber in a jar with pickled cucumbers, the fresh one becomes pickled after some time. This is what happens when you get in the right atmosphere. You start to grow (Graduate C, 41, Construction).

In the context of the personal benefits of MBA training, graduates identified that increased self-esteem and social status can be considered the main components of an MBA diploma. It becomes evident that graduate business education has increased the self-esteem of the graduates due to various factors, including “achievements during the education and confidence regarding upgraded expertise” (Graduate C, 41, Construction).

Another factor that greatly influenced the growth of self-esteem is the opportunity to overcome challenges and go beyond the “comfort zone,” which seems to be one of the greatest barriers for graduates; according to one of them, “At first sight, the idea of leaving my comfortable office and go back to school was quite scary. I had many doubts, but when I finally decided and went through an educational program, I was so proud of myself” (Graduate B, 29, Hospitality). Another issue that corresponds with self-esteem is self-satisfaction. As a result, “after I got my degree I was satisfied with my accomplishments, I felt differently and more confident about my knowledge and skills” (Graduate B, 29, Hospitality). Therefore, increased self-esteem might be a positive factor influencing graduates’ further professional development.

In addition to the increase in self-esteem, another category - promotion of social status is evident from the responses of graduates. As MBA training is generally understood as the prerogative of privileged people, individuals who possess this kind of diploma automatically upgrade their social status. According to the participant, “When people around you find out that you are doing your MBA, they start to behave differently. In my case, I have seen more respect in their eyes” (Graduate C, 41, Construction), which echoes the experience of another participant:

After graduation, I realized that my relatives and friends’ attitudes had changed. They started to consult with me, asking for help and trying to learn from me. I became the most competent person in their communities in the business-related sphere. It is an interesting condition (Graduate A, 33, Finance).

This occurrence, to a great extent, might be shaped by the national context and mentality – meaning that people in Kazakhstan have their own perception of an MBA education and the graduates of these programs, as they seem to get not only career promotions but also promotions in terms of social status in the local society.

The research findings presented that career advancement is one of the main purposes of graduate business education. From the perspectives of MBA administrators, they stated that most Kazakhstani different-scale companies are interested in business education for their employees.

5. DISCUSSION

For the first time, the results of this study show Kazakhstani students’ motives to pursue an MBA degree. It becomes evident that career purpose is one of the main reasons to pursue an MBA degree, confirming the claim that business school people usually seek career development. Additionally, intrinsic reasons of Kazakhstani graduates, such as personal growth, reflect that the necessity for personal development

might be one of the motivational factors of MBA education choice [13].

In the context of benefits that can be reasonably expected from business education, the main program-related comparative advantage evident from the findings of this research study are the comprehensiveness of the program, which means that students have an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills in the related spheres of specialization, as well as an opportunity to build a network of professional connections. These findings are related to the opinion of Garcia (2010), who emphasizes the importance of a curriculum that should embrace multiple dimensions of the business field to strengthen the competencies of MBA students [31]. The comprehensiveness of the program ensures the competitiveness of MBA graduates, as nowadays, versatile knowledge is the key to a successful career, especially in countries with developing market economies, such as Kazakhstan, due to the fact that the specific context of the business sphere requires employees to possess an expertise in multiple sectors within the sphere of specialization. Another program-related benefit that was highly emphasized by all three categories of participants is networking, as a crucial factor in professional development. In the context of research participants, it should be noted that their perception of networking is closer to the ideas of Dailey *et al.* (2006), who characterize networking as an opportunity to create friendly professional surroundings which might be helpful and beneficial in terms of career development and personal growth [11].

Nevertheless, possible alteration of an original understanding of networking might lead to the devaluation of an MBA degree’s role in career development. Even though participants of the study had a sound perception of the main meaning of networking, it is a common practice in some local companies when people are hired based not on their professional qualities but because of the strong connections with influential authorities. In this case, the business curriculum of an MBA degree and any other kind of professional degree, in general, seems useless and unnecessary. Consequently, it is vital to distinguish the importance of professional connections and the value of meritocracy in career development to eradicate this occurrence.

In terms of personal benefits, research participants defined increased self-esteem and social status as key advantages of MBA education. According to Maslow (1943), stable self-esteem is a crucial part of personal development and one of the decisive criteria influencing a person’s satisfaction with life. In the case of MBA graduates of this research study, the increased self-esteem might be considered an additional impact of MBA education on graduates’ career development due to the fact that people with better self-perception can be more efficient and productive in their work [10]. Nevertheless, considering that graduates generally come to the MBA programs with sufficient professional experience and relatively mature ages, the notion of increased self-esteem can be doubtful. Many factors can shape self-esteem during the educational process and lead to the increase of an individual’s self-esteem and decrease, such as academic achievements and competition among peers. Additionally, the self-perception of each individual is based on

their understanding of wins and losses; thus, it is difficult to predict to what extent MBA education can be beneficial in terms of self-esteem advancement, as it would be erroneous to state that at the level of master's business education, there is a strong connection between self-esteem level and an MBA degree.

Another finding concerning social status promotion can be considered one of the expected personal outcomes for graduates. Additionally, the promotion of social status is a subjective perception of an individual or a group of individuals, for instance, graduates of MBA programs. However, compared with increasing self-esteem, promoting social status is a more comprehensive perception of one's achievements and accomplishments. It involves an internal as well as an external evaluation of the situation. The Eastern cultural influences on Kazakhstani mentality led to the strong dependence on material and regalia possession to be acknowledged and accepted in society. This feature might impact the personal value assessment of MBA education. It is also a relatively questionable claim that an MBA degree should automatically lead to enhancing social status due to the fact that the local community should acknowledge and recognize an MBA degree. Considering that in Kazakhstan, people generally positively perceive an MBA degree and, to some extent, understand the value of this degree, their vision of MBA graduates can be characterized as credible human sources of professional advisory, wisdom and knowledge. And considering the need for "acceptance and approval," which is evident among all human beings and is emphasized in Kazakh society, it seems that an MBA degree, to a larger extent, benefits the escalation of graduates' status within the society.

Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that Kazakhstani MBA graduates emphasize program-related benefits more than personal advantages. Probably, it is connected to the notion that the MBA program in Kazakhstan cannot be considered an affordable educational opportunity, and obviously, people perceive an MBA education as a financial investment in their future careers, which expectedly should generate returns and bring a great profit in the form of a competitive salary.

Consequently, at the present stage, people in Kazakhstan's career-related motivations are the dominant drivers toward an MBA education, whereas personal and social motives are unclear.

The findings of this study support the claim of Weinstein and Srinivasan (1974) that previous work experience can be seen as one of the decisive factors for the successful career development of MBA graduates [32, 33]. Moreover, in the Kazakhstani context, sufficient professional experience can be considered the main prerequisite and predictor of the further career success of graduates. However, it should be noted that prior work experience might not be valuable because approaches and methods in business and management change like the velocity of the light, and it might be extremely challenging to keep up-to-date with the latest trends in the industry. In this context, the value of previous experience should be examined to assess the knowledge and skills possession, working style and approaches, which might have little applicability to the present context because the quality of

previous work experience significantly impacts the further career development of graduates. It is especially important for employment at a new company with a different organizational structure and corporate culture. In this sense, it is crucial to understand to what extent sufficient work experience facilitates the career development of graduates and which causes an impediment to further professional growth.

However, because all participants from the MBA graduates category had professional experience ranging from seven to eighteen years, their perceptions cannot be compared with those of early-career MBA graduates without sufficient work experience. At the same time, analyzing the graduates' perception differentiation within the various criteria is possible. The participant with the minimum work experience (seven years) decided to change the workplace, whereas others with thirteen and eleven years of experience returned to their previous workplaces for better positions. Interestingly, after the MBA program, the participant with the maximum work experience of eighteen years decided to start his own business company. Thus, it can be assumed that people with little work experience can consider an MBA degree as a career accelerator in terms of professional mobility, whereas people with senior experience can see the value of the degree as a turning point for the fundamental changes in their careers. In the case of participants with average work experience, the value of an MBA degree cannot be identified as significant. The promotion within the existing company usually depends on certain professional characteristics and qualities of employees and, to a lesser extent, on an individual advanced business degree. Therefore, the presented relations of previous work experience, an MBA degree and further career development illustrate the various directions of an MBA degree's implications in terms of career prospects.

6. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study can be used as a theoretical basis for further research on the motivation of students to pursue MBA education in particular and business education in general, not only in Kazakhstan but in the whole Central Asian region, as we have similar educational formats. Moreover, the theoretical implication can be seen as the added value to the knowledge of motivation to pursue MBA education in developing countries.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study has three practical implications. First, it can be used by business schools to create a curriculum that will motivate students to apply to particular programs. Second, higher education institutions that plan to open MBA programs can use the results of the study to understand the needs of students and design competitive programs. Third, prospective students will understand the impact of an MBA program on their future career and personal growth.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has several limitations; first of all, due to the qualitative character of the study, the number of participants is limited. Secondly, only two major cities were involved in the study, which cannot represent the whole of Kazakhstan with

smaller cities and villages. Thirdly, the research question was limited by the motives to choose an MBA program; however, it would be great to investigate why students study business professions in general.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aimed to explore the main motivations of students to pursue an MBA degree in Kazakhstan. This was the first attempt to discover why students in Kazakhstan choose to study MBA programs, and undoubtedly this study adds value to the business education research in Kazakhstan. Undertaken data analysis allows for addressing this study's research question, stated at the beginning of the research process. The first overarching question explores why people in Kazakhstan decide to study at the MBA level. As the research study revealed, the main motivation to pursue an MBA degree in Kazakhstan is a career purpose. Not surprisingly, career-related motives are the dominant, decisive factors for people in Kazakhstan, which to some extent are influenced by the current macroeconomic situation and general condition of the international business sphere. Considering the main factors that influence a person's decision to pursue an MBA degree, which is the first sub-question for the above-mentioned overarching question, it should be noted that this research study did not reveal any other potential factors besides career matters that can have an impact on the decision. In this sense, it seems that this question requires more precise attention, as this question can be answered only partially at the present stage.

In the context of facilitating functions of an MBA degree, it should be mentioned that due to the formation process of the role of an MBA degree and existing perception differentiation, there is no clear facilitation pattern. However, it cannot be neglected that an MBA degree plays a visible role in career development, as the program can advance the skills and knowledge required for successful professional growth. And in this sense, it is crucial to understand that an MBA diploma can be considered a significant bonus for someone's professional portfolio. Additionally, we see that personal motives are evident from the study, such as personal growth, self-esteem, *etc.* Hence, the results of this study can be seen as the beginning of the bigger research on motivation to pursue business education in Kazakhstan.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GMAC = Graduate Management Admission Council
MBA = Master of Business Administration

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The participation was absolutely anonymous, with no potential risks for participants.

The ethics committee of Turan University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, granted the approval on January 2022.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

No animals were used in this research. All procedures

performed in studies involving human participants were per the ethical standards of institutional and/or research committees and with the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki, as revised in 2013.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

All research participants signed an informed consent form, thereby agreeing to participate in the research.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

All the data and supportive information are provided within the article.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING

COREQ guidelines were followed in this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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