International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies, 8(7) 2025, pages: 881-896

IJIRSS
International Journal of Innovative Research & Scientific Studies

ISSN: 2617-6548

URL: www.ijirss.com

"Work over university?" A qualitative exploration of demotivation toward higher education among Kazakhstani youth

Symbat Ashimkhanova[1], Abdullah Sarwar[2*], Abay Kalykov[3], Dalwinder Kaur[4]

[1]*Department of Management Science, Buketov Karaganda University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan.*
[2]*Faculty of Management, Multimedia University, Cyberjaya, Malaysia.*
[3]*Abylkas Saginov Karaganda Technical University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan.*
[4]*School of Education, Manipal GlobalNxt University, Malaysia.*

Corresponding author: Abdullah Sarwar (*Email: sunabdullah@gmail.com*)

Abstract

This study examines the factors underlying students' demotivation to enrol in higher education, framed within management science perspectives. Guided by Human Capital Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Expectancy Theory, we conducted qualitative interviews with 20 youths in Almaty, Karaganda, and Astana who either decided against university or left university early to work. The findings reveal a combination of empirical, contextual, and practical gaps in existing literature, as prior research has scarcely addressed Kazakhstani youth in this regard. Our results link youth decisions to forego university with perceived low returns to education and strong pull factors from the labor market, echoing global post-pandemic shifts. By integrating motivation theories, the discussion offers insights into how economic expectations, intrinsic motivation, and outcome valuations shape educational choices. Hence, this study contributes to management and education literature by illuminating why many young Kazakhstani students choose work over university, and suggests strategies for re-engaging youth in higher education. Policy implications include enhancing the perceived value of higher education, providing financial and academic support, and aligning university programs with labor market needs.

Keywords: Higher education, Kazakhstan, Motivation, Qualitative study, Youth employment.

DOI: 10.53894/ijirss.v8i7.10815
Funding: This study received no specific financial support.
History: Received: 20 August 2025 / **Revised:** 22 September 2025 / **Accepted:** 25 September 2025 / **Published:** 6 October 2025
Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).
Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.
Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.
Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Institutional Ethics Committee Guidelines of Buketov Karaganda University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan.
Publisher: Innovative Research Publishing

1. Introduction

Higher education plays a critical role in human capital development, yet recent trends suggest that many young people in Kazakhstan are losing motivation to pursue university degrees. Instead, an increasing number prioritize entering the workforce immediately after secondary school. This issue has garnered attention from educators and policymakers, given its implications for the country's skilled labor supply and long-term economic growth. According to official statistics, Kazakhstan's gross tertiary enrollment rate peaked at about 65% in 2020 but fell to 56.5% by 2023, indicating that fewer secondary school graduates are transitioning into college. Additionally, roughly 7.3% of Kazakh youth are classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), reflecting a segment of young people disengaged from formal education pathways. These indicators raise concerns about why university education is becoming less attractive to today's youth.

Several factors may be contributing to this phenomenon. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting economic conditions have influenced youth decisions about college. In many countries, young adults from low-income backgrounds have been "going to work instead of going to college," lured by rising wages and immediate income needs. Kazakhstan has experienced similar labor market dynamics. By 2023, youth under 35 made up 40% of the national workforce, with many entering service-sector jobs straight out of school. While unemployment for Kazakhstani youth remains relatively low (3.5% in 2023), underemployment and informal employment are common for those without higher qualifications. The government faces a "demographic window" of a growing youth population entering the labor market. If a significant portion forego higher education, there could be a mismatch between the skills youth carry and the qualifications needed for knowledge-intensive industries. Indeed, a practical gap exists in aligning education with employment: employers in Kazakhstan have noted a shortage of mid-level skilled workers alongside a surplus of university graduates lacking practical experience. One response by policymakers has been the introduction of short-cycle "applied bachelor" programs since 2018, offering a shorter, practice-oriented alternative to traditional degrees. These programs, with lower cost and faster completion, aim to attract youths who might otherwise skip college for work. However, the uptake and impact of such alternatives on students' motivation remain under-studied.

Culturally, higher education has long been valued in Kazakhstan, a legacy of the Sovietera when university degrees were a primary route to social mobility. Yet, contemporary students may perceive a contextual gap between what universities offer and the realities of a rapidly changing society. Technological advancement and new forms of work (e.g., gig economy, entrepreneurship in IT) provide alternative pathways to success that did not exist for previous generations. If the current higher education system is seen as outdated, overly theoretical, or misaligned with local economic opportunities, students might logically question its utility. This context could diminish the subjective value (in Expectancy-Value terms) that youth assign to a university degree, especially if success examples exist outside academia.

2. Literature Review

Prior research on student motivation and higher education choice highlights multiple perspectives. Human Capital Theory (HCT) suggests that individuals pursue education as an investment, expecting future returns in the form of higher earnings or improved employment prospects. If youth observe that a bachelor's degree no longer guarantees a good job or salary, their cost–benefit calculus may shift. Reports have emerged of young people opting for immediate employment due to rising entry-level wages and the need to support family during tough times. In late 2021, for example, wages in service jobs were boosted substantially, tempting many recent graduates to enter the labor force rather than enroll in college. In Kazakhstan's context, the average monthly salary rose 6% in 2024 (to ~KZT 276,000) amid economic growth, potentially raising the opportunity cost of unpaid study. HCT would predict that if the expected returns to education decrease relative to the immediate returns of work, rational actors may choose work – a pattern possibly unfolding now.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a complementary lens by focusing on intrinsic motivation and basic psychological needs. SDT posits that individuals are motivated when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Educational environments that fail to fulfill these needs can undermine students' motivation. Many Kazakhstani students endure a rigid schooling system (e.g., intensive university entrance exams and regimented curricula), which might leave them feeling controlled rather than autonomous. If upon finishing school they feel amotivation toward further formal study – perhaps because prior educational experiences were not need-supportive – they may prefer to enter a work setting that promises more independence or immediate competence through practical tasks. Indeed, SDT-based research has shown that lacking autonomy support in learning contexts correlates with lower persistence in education [1]. In our context, some youths might be demotivated by teaching methods that emphasize rote learning or by universities that are perceived as impersonal. Conversely, the prospect of a job (even an entry-level one) could appeal to their sense of agency and real-world efficacy, thereby satisfying autonomy and competence needs more than a lecture hall might.

Expectancy Theory (particularly Vroom's expectancy-valence model) and the related Expectancy-Value Theory provide further insight. Expectancy theory in management asserts that motivation is highest when individuals believe their effort will lead to good performance, that this performance will be rewarded, and that they value the reward. Applied to the education versus work decision: a student's expectancy might be their belief that they can successfully complete a university degree; instrumentality might be their belief that completing the degree will lead to a desirable job or outcome; valence is how much they value that outcome (e.g. a diploma or the career it promises). If any link in this chain is weak, motivation to pursue the degree diminishes. For instance, if a student doubts their academic ability or fears failure (low expectancy), or if they believe that even with a degree they might remain unemployed or earn only slightly more than without it (low instrumentality), their incentive to enroll falls. Alternatively, if they simply do not highly value the jobs a degree might bring relative to other life goals (low valence), they may not pursue higher education. Recent studies

employing expectancy-value models have found that students' expectancies and subjective task values are strong predictors of dropout intentions in higher education. In other words, when students do not expect success or do not value the outcomes, they are more likely to leave or avoid tertiary studies. In Kazakhstan, anecdotal evidence suggests some students see university studies as "not worth it" if decent employment can be obtained through vocational training or direct entry into certain industries (e.g., IT, trades, entrepreneurship). This reflects a potential break in the traditional expectancy chain that once strongly linked a Kazakhstani university diploma to secure white-collar employment.

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature and theoretical foundations discussed above, the following conceptual framework was developed to guide this study. It integrates Human Capital Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory to explain the motivational and contextual factors leading Kazakhstani youth to prioritize work over university education.

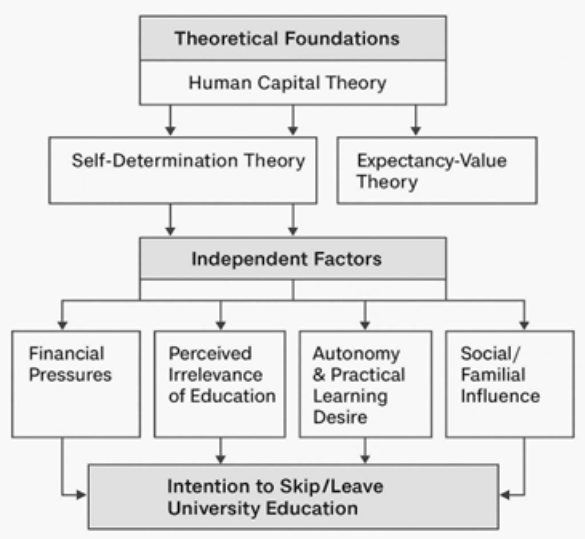

Figure 1.
Conceptual Framework.

The framework shows how financial, psychological, and social factors influence students' perceived value of higher education and their expectation of success, ultimately shaping their motivation and intention to enroll in or abandon university studies.

Despite these plausible factors, there is a lack of empirical research focusing on Kazakhstani students' own perspectives on why they might be demotivated to attend university. Most existing studies on higher education in Kazakhstan have examined system-level issues (e.g. quality assurance, education reforms, or private vs public institution growth). Few, if any, have delved into the lived experiences and motivations of youths deciding between work and college in the current socio-economic climate. This represents an empirical gap, as our understanding is not grounded in local qualitative data. It is also a contextual gap because lessons from other countries may not fully apply to Kazakhstan's unique mix of cultural expectations, post-Soviet educational legacy, and emerging economy dynamics. Moreover, a practical gap exists in translating research into policy – without knowing why students are demotivated, initiatives to encourage higher education enrollment (such as scholarship programs or curricular reforms) may miss the mark.

Research Gap: In summary, what is missing is a nuanced, context-rich understanding of why many young people in Kazakhstan appear to be turning away from university education. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing qualitative evidence from the students themselves, thereby addressing the combined empirical, contextual, and practical gaps identified. Following the principles outlined in Cesari, et al. [2] we position our inquiry at the intersection of these gaps: empirically by gathering original data, contextually by focusing on Kazakhstan (an underexplored setting in this topic), and practically by aiming to inform educational and management practices. Accordingly, we pose two primary research questions:

1. What factors lead Kazakhstani students to be demotivated about pursuing a university education and to instead prioritize entering the workforce?
2. How can these factors be interpreted through the lenses of Human Capital Theory, Self- Determination Theory, and Expectancy Theory to inform management and education strategies?

By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute both theoretical insights (linking motivational theories to education decisions in a developing economy context) and practical recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers in Kazakhstan. In the following sections, we detail our methodology, present the qualitative results with representative quotes, and discuss the findings in light of the theoretical frameworks and policy implications.

3. Methodology

To investigate the motivations and decision-making processes of youths who choose work over university, we employed a qualitative research design. A phenomenological approach was taken to deeply explore participants' lived experiences and personal reasons for eschewing higher education. Given the exploratory nature of our inquiry and the sensitivity of discussing personal decisions, semi-structured in-depth interviews were deemed appropriate. This design allowed participants to voice their motivations and feelings in their own words while enabling the researchers to probe underlying factors.

This study follows the consolidated criteria for qualitative research rigor. We adhered to recent methodological standards for thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke [3] and Kiger and Varpio [4]. Specifically, we used a reflexive thematic analysis approach [3] to identify patterns in the data, which emphasizes researcher reflexivity and an inductive development of themes. Throughout the process, we maintained an awareness of our theoretical frameworks (HCT, SDT, and Expectancy Theory) without imposing them a priori on participants' narratives, to allow new themes to emerge organically from the data.

We conducted interviews with 20 young individuals (ages 18–21) from three major cities in Kazakhstan: Almaty, Karaganda, and Astana. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were: (a) recent secondary school graduates or university students who had decided not to pursue a traditional university path (either by not enrolling or by dropping out in the early years), and (b) who had instead entered the workforce or were actively seeking employment. We sought variation in gender, socio- economic background, and field of intended study to capture diverse perspectives. Initial participants were recruited via youth career counselling centers and personal contacts in each city; they then referred us to peers (snowball technique) meeting the criteria.

Table 1 summarizes the participant demographics and status. Pseudonyms (P1–P20) are used to protect identities. The sample included 11 men and 9 women. Their situations varied: half (n=10) chose not to enroll in any university after finishing high school, and the other half enrolled but left their programs within the first year or two. By the time of interview, all participants were either employed in entry-level jobs or actively job hunting. Socio-economic backgrounds ranged from low-income (e.g., needing to support family financially) to middle- class. Academic aptitude also varied – some had been high-achievers in school, others average. This diversity allowed us to examine whether similar themes arose across different personal circumstances.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics (N = 20).

ID	Age	Gender	City	Educational Status	Current Work Situation
P1	18	M	Almaty	Finished high school; never enrolled in university	Full-time salesperson at electronics store
ID	Age	Gender	City	Educational Status	Current Work Situation
P2	19	F	Almaty	Admitted to college but deferred entry	Receptionist at a travel agency
P3	18	M	Karaganda	Finished high school; did not apply to uni	Apprentice in auto repair workshop
P4	20	F	Astana	Completed 1 year of Economics degree; dropped out	Cashier and bookkeeper in family business
P5	21	M	Karaganda	Completed 2 years of Engineering; left program	Junior technician at mining company
P6	19	F	Almaty	High school graduate; opted for vocational course	Freelance web designer (self-taught)
P7	18	M	Astana	High school graduate; no uni plans	Waiting staff at a restaurant
P8	19	F	Astana	Enrolled in law school; withdrew in 1st year	Intern at a law firm (clerical role)
P9	20	M	Karaganda	High school graduate; never enrolled	Construction laborer (learning trade)
P10	18	F	Karaganda	High school graduate; no uni due to family needs	Home-based tailor (entrepreneur)
P11	21	M	Almaty	Completed 1 year of IT degree; dropped out	Junior IT support technician
P12	19	M	Almaty	High school graduate; attended coding bootcamp instead of uni	Freelance programmer
P13	20	F	Astana	Completed college prep, didn't pass uni exam	Sales assistant in retail fashion
P14	18	F	Karaganda	High school graduate; decided to work for a year	Barista at a cafe
P15	21	M	Almaty	Completed 2 years of Business degree; left	Started small e-commerce business
P16	19	F	Karaganda	High school graduate; married after school, no uni	Part-time online crafts seller
P17	20	M	Astana	Enrolled in college, took academic	Ride-hailing driver (full-

				leave	time)
P18	18	F	Almaty	High school graduate; scholarship missed narrowly	Unemployed (preparing for police academy exam)
P19	19	M	Karaganda	Enrolled in distance-learning program but not attending	Factory machine operator (trainee)
P20	21	F	Astana	Completed 1 year Medical college; dropped out	Nursing aide at private clinic

As shown in Table 1, participants represent a spectrum of choices and contexts. This enabled us to identify common themes in motivations despite different individual pathways.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Interviews were carried out in the participants' preferred language – 12 were primarily in Russian and 8 in Kazakh (with occasional English words used by some). The researchers are bilingual in Kazakh and Russian, ensuring nuanced understanding. An interview guide was used to steer the conversation while allowing flexibility for participants to bring up what they felt was important. Key questions included:

- "Can you tell me about how you decided what to do after finishing high school?"
- "What were your thoughts about university education for yourself? What influenced those thoughts?"
- "What led you to choose working (or another path) instead of enrolling in a university right away?"
- "How do you feel about that decision now? Any regrets or things you are happy about?"
- "What do your family and friends think about your decision? Did their opinions play a role?"

Probing questions were used to delve deeper into any mentioned factors (e.g., financial reasons, academic struggles, personal interests, etc.). Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. The Kazakh and Russian transcripts were later translated to English for analysis; to ensure accuracy, translations were reviewed by a second bilingual researcher. Participants were given the option to review their transcript summaries for validation; five participants provided minor clarifications via follow-up phone calls, which were incorporated.

4. Data Analysis

We utilized thematic analysis to examine the interview data. Following the six-step framework by Braun and Clarke [3] the analysis proceeded as follows:

1. Familiarization: The research team read and re-read transcripts to immerse in the data. Initial notes were made on recurrent ideas.
2. Coding: We performed line-by-line coding using NVivo 14 software. Codes were assigned to meaningful segments of text (e.g., "financial difficulties," "bad university experience," "family expectations," "enjoying work more than study"). We combined inductive coding with some deductive codes informed by our theoretical framework (e.g., "lack of autonomy," "perceived low ROI of education"), but remained open to unexpected codes.
3. Generating Initial Themes: Codes were collated into preliminary themes. We gathered codes into candidate theme groupings such as "Economic Factors," "Academic Disillusionment," "Parental Influence," etc. At this stage we had around 8 candidate themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: We reviewed and refined these themes by checking against the dataset to ensure each theme was supported by significant data and that different themes were coherent and distinct. Some themes were merged or re-scoped. For example, codes about wanting practical experience and hands-on learning were merged with those about jobs teaching skills under a broader theme we later called "Preference for Practical Learning/Work." We also dropped a theme on "COVID-19 disruptions" as it was only mentioned tangentially by a couple of participants and overlapped with other factors.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: We arrived at four major themes that captured the core motivations expressed by participants. Each theme was clearly defined in terms of its essence and sub-components. We named them to reflect participants' perspectives (detailed in the Results section).
6. Producing the Report: We selected vivid, representative quotes for each theme and began relating the themes to our research questions and theoretical perspectives in writing up the findings.

Throughout analysis, we emphasized methodological rigor. Multiple researchers were involved in coding to enhance credibility: two researchers independently coded the first five transcripts and discussed discrepancies to harmonize the coding framework. The remaining transcripts were coded primarily by one researcher, then a second coder reviewed the coding for consistency. This peer debriefing process helped ensure that the themes were grounded in the data and not solely in one analyst's interpretation. We maintained an audit trail of coding memos and theme development decisions for transparency. The analysis was largely inductive, but we also reflected deductively on how identified themes might map onto elements of Human Capital Theory, SDT, and Expectancy Theory during the later stage of interpretation (as presented in the Discussion).

5. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Karaganda University (Approval #2024-12-15). All participants provided informed consent prior to interviews. Given that participants were young adults (18 or older), parental consent was not

required, but we took care to ensure they fully understood their rights. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time. Confidentiality has been strictly protected: real names and identifying details have been replaced with pseudonyms and generalized descriptions. For instance, when quoting participants, we use their pseudonym (e.g., P5) and city but omit specific school or company names if mentioned. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on encrypted devices accessible only to the research team. After transcription, recordings were deleted to further protect confidentiality.

We also acknowledge potential power dynamics and sensitivity around the topic.

Discussing one's decision to not attend university can be personal or even stigmatizing in certain families or communities. The interviewers were careful to create a non-judgmental atmosphere, emphasizing that we were trying to learn from participants' experiences and that there were no right or wrong answers. Several participants expressed appreciation that the research was giving voice to their viewpoint, which is less commonly heard in a society that generally encourages university education.

No incentives were provided beyond a small token of appreciation (a $10 phone credit voucher) to thank them for their time, so as not to unduly influence participation. The authors declare no conflicts of interest in conducting this research. Participants' decision paths had no bearing on any relationship with the researchers, and the study was conducted independently of any institutions that might have stakes in university enrolment.

By addressing these ethical considerations, we aimed to ensure the integrity of the research process and the well-being of our participants. Having outlined the methodology, we now turn to the results, where we present the key themes supported by interview excerpts.

6. Results

Through thematic analysis of the 20 interviews, we identified four major themes that encapsulate why these young Kazakhstani individuals chose work over pursuing university education. The themes are:

1. Immediate Economic Pressures and Cost–Benefit Calculations – Encompassing financial constraints, desire for income, and viewing work as a better investment than a degree.
2. Disillusionment with the Quality and Relevance of Higher Education – Encompassing perceptions of low educational quality, misalignment with job market needs, and doubts about the payoff of a degree.
3. Desire for Autonomy and Practical Experience – Encompassing the appeal of hands-on work experience, preference for learning by doing, and the satisfaction of independence outside the classroom.
4. Social and Familial Influences – Encompassing family expectations (such as needing to contribute financially or carry on a family business), peer examples, and cultural norms affecting the decision.

Each theme is discussed below with illustrative quotes from participants (attributed by their ID and city). Notably, these themes are interrelated; many participants cited multiple factors in their decision. However, for clarity, we discuss them separately.

6.1. Immediate Economic Pressures and Cost–Benefit Calculations

A dominant theme was the immediate financial reality faced by many participants and a calculation that working would yield more tangible benefits than studying. Nearly all interviewees touched on economic factors, though the intensity varied. For some, financial pressure was acute – university was not seen as financially feasible – while for others it was about opportunity cost and an evaluation of returns on investment.

Financial Constraints: Over half of the participants (11 out of 20) explicitly mentioned that they or their families could not comfortably afford university tuition or the associated living expenses. While Kazakhstan has state grants, they are limited and competitive; those who missed out on a scholarship often could not pay tuition. Participant P10, a young woman from a village near Karaganda who moved to the city, shared:

"My parents simply didn't have the money to send me to university. After I didn't get the state grant, that was it. I decided I'd better start earning money than put my family into debt." (P10, Karaganda).

She had considered taking a student loan or working part-time while studying, but high interest rates and the risk of not being able to repay worried her. P10's story was echoed by others who had siblings to support or who came from single-income households. For example, P1 (Almaty) noted that as the oldest of four children, he felt obliged to work to support his younger siblings' schooling instead of "indulging" in higher education for himself.

6.1.1. Need to Earn Money Immediately

Many participants expressed a strong desire or need to earn their own income right after high school. This was tied not only to necessity but also to a sense of responsibility and even pride. P5 (Karaganda), a 21-year-old male who dropped out of an engineering program, explained:

"*At 19, I just couldn't keep asking my parents for pocket money. I saw an opportunity to work at the mine with decent pay, so I took it. Now I bring money home, I feel useful. If I were still studying, I'd be a burden on them.*" (P5, Karaganda).

For P5, and several others, working immediately was associated with adult independence and contributing to family welfare. The cultural expectation in some families for children to start contributing financially early was evident. One interviewee (P16, Karaganda) got married at 18 and felt that continuing education was incompatible with starting a household; she began earning through home-based craft sales to support her new family.

6.1.2. Perceived Low Return on Investment (ROI) of a Degree

A recurring calculus described was along the lines of *"four years of study, lots of money spent, and no guarantee of a good job – versus four years of working, lots of money earned and four years of experience gained."* This cost–benefit analysis was made explicitly by several participants. For instance, P15, who left a business degree after two years, reasoned:

"I did the math. If I graduate at 22, I might start at a salary of maybe 120-150,000 tenge a month. But if I work from 18, by 22 I could be earning more, with promotions. In these four years, I can make money instead of spending it. Honestly, a degree's payoff didn't seem worth it." (P15, Almaty).

Such reasoning reflects a human capital calculation, albeit one where the expected returns to education were judged as insufficient. P15 had started a small e-commerce business and by 21 was already earning roughly what an entry-level graduate might earn. His example, as well as P12 (Almaty) who attended a coding bootcamp and immediately got freelance programming gigs, show that non-traditional paths can sometimes yield quick earnings, reinforcing the perception that a university degree is not the only route to financial stability.

Some participants cited examples of acquaintances who had finished university but struggled to find well-paying jobs. P2 (Almaty) mentioned her older cousin:

"My cousin got her diploma in Management, but she's still making coffees as a barista because she can't find a management job. Watching that made me think – why waste four years for nothing special? I'd rather work my way up somewhere without a degree." (P2, Almaty).

This comment highlights a belief that experience can trump education in the job market, at least for certain fields. When participants saw degree-holders underemployed or working in unrelated jobs, it diminished the perceived value of investing time and money in a degree. Instead, they felt gaining work experience early could put them ahead. P11 (Almaty), who left an IT degree, noted that in tech, "skills matter more than a paper" and that by self-learning and doing projects he could build a portfolio in the same time others were studying theory.

6.1.3. Opportunity Cost and Time Preference

A few participants also talked about time in a way that suggested a preference for immediate returns over delayed gratification. P7 (Astana), an 18-year-old working in a restaurant, said:

"Four years is a long time. I wanted to start life now, not when I'm 23. Who knows what will happen in four years? If I can get a job now and maybe save or start something, why wait?" (P7, Astana).

P7's perspective, while perhaps short-term, reflects a sentiment of seizing present opportunities. This was especially pronounced among those who did not particularly enjoy academic study to begin with – they saw four years in university as a delay in real life progress. Earning now was often seen as more concrete and certain than the abstract promise of a better salary later.

Interestingly, even among those who were not in dire financial need, the idea of getting a head start in the workforce was attractive. P12 (Almaty), from a middle-class background, had support available for university but chose a fast-track coding program. He remarked:

"It's not that my family couldn't pay for uni – they could. It's that the job market in IT moves so fast. By the time a four-year degree ends, the tech has changed. I figured I should just jump in now, get real experience. Money now is better than maybe money later." (P12, Almaty).

P12's angle combines both economic logic and a critique of the education timeline relative to industry.

In sum, Theme 1 captures how financial realities and rational calculations drive the decision to favor work. For many, the decision was framed not as "dropping" something but rather as actively *choosing a more pragmatic route*. The allure of an immediate paycheck,

freedom from financial burden, and the belief that those early years of earnings and experience could outweigh a degree, all contributed to demotivation towards university. This theme aligns strongly with Human Capital Theory considerations and will be revisited in the discussion on how youths gauge the return on investment of education.

6.2. Disillusionment with the Quality and Relevance of Higher Education

The second major theme is a sense of disillusionment or skepticism toward universities – that the education offered may be low quality, not relevant to real jobs, or otherwise not worth the effort. Participants voiced concerns about both academic and systemic issues in Kazakhstan's higher education.

6.2.1. Perceived Low Quality of Education

Several interviewees who had at least some exposure to university (either through brief enrolment or through friends) criticized the teaching methods and curriculum. P8 (Astana), who left law school in her first year, felt the education was outdated:

"In the first semester, I realized the professors were just reading out of old textbooks. No practical case studies, nothing interactive. It felt like a waste. I wasn't learning anything useful for actual law practice, just memorizing." (P8, Astana).

Her dissatisfaction with the pedagogical approach ("just memorizing") made her question continuing. Another participant, P5 (Karaganda), described his engineering classes as overly theoretical: *"We were learning abstract formulas but never seeing how they apply on a real construction site."* This theoretical bias without practical application was a common complaint.

Participants also mentioned issues like large class sizes, lack of professor engagement, and even instances of corruption or nepotism in universities. P11 (Almaty) alleged:

"Some of my instructors barely showed up, and we all know you can pay to get certain grades. The whole system felt like a joke. I wanted real skills, not just a purchased diploma." (P11, Almaty).

While P11's view may be on the harsher end, it highlights a trust issue – if students believe a degree can be obtained with money or connections rather than merit, it devalues the degree's meaning for them.

6.2.2. Irrelevant Curriculum to Job Market

Many participants felt what universities teach does not align with the skills employers demand. This relevance gap was noted by those who had started working and realized much of what they needed on the job was not taught in school. P15 (Almaty), who started an e-commerce business, mentioned he learned more about business "by running a small online shop and watching YouTube tutorials" than in his two years of business administration classes:

"In uni they were teaching us theory about economics from a decade ago. Online marketing, social media strategy – none of that was in the curriculum. But that's exactly what you need to run a business today."(P15, Almaty).

Similarly, P19 (Karaganda), now a machine operator trainee, pointed out that technical universities didn't offer the specific certifications for operating modern machinery that his employer required – he had to get on-the-job training anyway. Cases like P19's reinforce a sentiment that *practical vocational training or direct workplace entry might prepare one just as well, if not better, than a generic degree*.

6.2.3. Doubt in the Reward Despite a Degree

Tied to quality is the doubt about whether a degree guarantees the intended reward (a good job in the field). Several participants shared anecdotes of underemployment among graduates, as

noted in Theme 1. Beyond that, some expressed a broader cynicism: *"University teaches theory, life requires practice,"* as P3 (Karaganda) succinctly put it. In fields like IT, participants like P12 perceived that employers care more about portfolios and certifications than a diploma. P12 stated:

"I went to a tech meet-up and everyone there said the same: your GitHub (projects) matters more than your GPA. That hit me – why am I worrying about grades then? I should be coding real projects." (P12, Almaty).

For those in more academic fields (like law for P8 or medicine for P20), leaving was harder, but even P20 (Astana) who dropped out of medical college cited quality concerns: *"The labs were poorly equipped, we hardly practiced. I lost confidence that this school would make me a good nurse."* She opted to work as a nursing aide to gain practical patient care experience, considering perhaps to re-enrol later in a better program if possible.

6.2.4. Negative Experiences and Burnout

A few participants who had enrolled in university described negative personal experiences that fuelled their demotivation. P8 (Astana) mentioned lack of support and even some gender bias (being a female law student, a professor insinuated women don't succeed in legal careers, which discouraged her). P5 (Karaganda) felt overwhelmed by academic workload and failing some exams, leading to a loss of confidence in continuing. There is a component of academic burnout or feeling *"unfit for the academic track"* that emerged. P5 admitted:

"I wasn't doing well. Instead of feeling motivated to try harder, I started feeling like – maybe I'm just not cut out for this. Working seemed more straightforward than struggling through exams." (P5, Karaganda).

In essence, personal academic struggles compounded by a perception that the struggle might not even yield worthwhile knowledge contributed to dropping out.

6.2.5. Comparisons with Abroad or Private Institutions

A couple of participants contrasted local universities with foreign options. P2 (Almaty) had considered studying abroad but couldn't afford it, and felt that local universities were second- rate in comparison: *"If it's not a top place like Nazarbayev University or abroad, a degree here is just middling quality. "*This kind of comparison further diminished the appeal of attending a local mid-tier institution, at least for more ambitious students.

To summarize Theme 2, the lack of faith in higher education's quality and relevance significantly demotivated these youths. Whether through direct experience or observation, they perceived universities as lagging behind modern needs, overly theoretical, sometimes corrupt or uninterested in students' success. This disillusionment eroded the intrinsic value they saw in obtaining a degree. As a result, work was not just financially attractive (Theme 1), but also intellectually or pragmatically attractive – a place to learn real skills and do something "meaningful" as opposed to sitting in uninspiring classes. This theme resonates with Expectancy and Value components of motivation: if students do not expect to gain competence or see value in the academic content, their motivation to engage in it will naturally wane.

6.3. Desire for Autonomy and Practical Experience

The third theme centres on the intrinsic motivations and personal preferences of the youth – specifically, a desire for autonomy, real-world experience, and a learning-by-doing approach that they believed work would provide better than university. This theme reflects more of an intrinsic orientation (aligned with SDT's focus on autonomy and competence) rather than purely extrinsic financial drivers.

6.3.1. Craving Independence

Many participants expressed that entering the workforce made them feel independent and "adult" in ways that continuing as a student would not. They took pride in making their own decisions and not being tied to a school schedule or parents' support. P7 (Astana) said:

"Working makes me feel grown-up. I manage my own time, I earn my own money. If I were in university, I'd still feel like a schoolkid, dependent on parents for money and permission." (P7, Astana).

This sentiment was common among those who valued personal freedom. University, with its classes, exams, and sometimes strict rules (attendance, curfews in dorms, etc.), was seen as an extension of controlled schooling. In contrast, having a job (even an entry-level one) meant more control over one's life. P14 (Karaganda), who worked as a barista, enjoyed the fact that after her shifts she was "free of homework" and could pursue hobbies or social life without academic stress looming.

For some, this independence was not just lifestyle but also *psychological need fulfilment*. P12 (Almaty) articulated that making decisions in his work (freelance programming) made him feel a sense of autonomy and competence that sitting in lectures did not:

"When I solve a client's problem through code, I feel accomplished. In college, even if I solved an assignment, it felt like jumping through hoops. Now I pick which projects to accept, I plan my day – it's liberating." (P12, Almaty).

This quote highlights how practical work gave him direct feedback and a sense of achievement. The valence of these experiences – feeling competent, contributing something real – was high for him, whereas academic tasks felt artificial.

6.3.2. Love of Practical Work

Several participants simply *enjoyed working with their hands or being active* more than studying. P3 (Karaganda), who works in auto repair, found joy in the tangible results of his labour:

"I was never a book person. I love working on cars – at the end of the day, I see a car running that wasn't before. That makes me happy. Sitting in class never gave me that feeling." (P3, Karaganda).

Participants like P3 felt that their personal aptitudes were better served in a work environment than an academic one. This touches on the idea of diverse intelligences or learning styles – some individuals thrive in kinesthetic or applied learning contexts. P19 (Karaganda), the factory trainee, said he learns much better by doing: *"I could read about machine operation for months and not get it, but one week on the shop floor taught me more than a semester in a classroom could."* This preference for experiential learning made university seem not just less attractive but less suitable for their personal development.

6.3.3. Seeking Early Career Experience

A strategic dimension was also present: some youths believed that accumulating work experience early would set them ahead in their careers. P15 and P12's quotes in earlier themes already hinted at this. To add, P11 (Almaty), who dropped his IT degree, said:

"In tech, experience is everything. I have friends who graduated and are starting as junior developers at 22 with no real experience. I'm 21 with three years of real projects. I feel I'm ahead of the game." (P11, Almaty).

He deliberately left school to dive into work experience, believing it would make him more competitive and skilled. This strategy was not limited to tech fields. P8 (Astana), in law, took a legal assistant job and noted she was picking up practical skills (like drafting documents, interacting with clients) that her law-school peers wouldn't get until much later. Although she knows a law degree is typically necessary to advance in that field, she valued getting this practical foundation early and expressed an intention to possibly complete her degree part-time later.

This subtheme suggests that for some, leaving university is not abandoning a career in that domain, but rather reordering the steps: first gain practical knowledge, then formalize credentials if needed. It's a less linear path than usual, but one they perceive as advantageous.

6.3.4. Mistrust of Formal Credentials vs Skills

A couple of participants voiced almost ideological stances valuing skills over credentials. P15 (Almaty) said, *"I respect people for what they can do, not what piece of paper they have."* While this might be a rationalization, it was genuinely how some of them felt after seeing instances of graduates who were not actually competent. To them, going straight to work was a way to focus on *developing real skills*. P17 (Astana), who took an academic leave from college to drive for a ride-hailing service, reflected:

"I was studying hospitality management, but guess what – actually working in the service industry taught me more about dealing with people and time management. Maybe I'll go back to finish the degree, but I'll do it with much more perspective now." (P17, Astana).

P17's perspective is interesting because he sees his time working as complementary education before finishing his formal education, indicating a non-traditional, experiential learning-first approach.

6.3.5. Avoidance of Academic Pressure and Examination

Another aspect of autonomy was escaping the pressures of academic evaluation. Some participants admitted they did not like exams, assignments, or the competitive environment of university entrance (notably, Kazakhstan has a high-stakes Unified National Test for university admission). P18 (Almaty) narrowly missed a scholarship by a few points on the exam and decided to switch goals:

"I studied so hard for that test and still fell short. It was demoralizing. I thought – maybe academia isn't for me. Instead of trying again next year, I'm applying to join the police academy where the selection is different, more physical tests." (P18, Almaty).

In P18's case, a specific academic hurdle turned her away from university. She wasn't exactly choosing the workforce in a commercial sense, but she was choosing a non-university professional track (police service) that aligned better with her strengths. For her, and a few others, *avoiding the academic grind* and finding a path where they could excel through other means (be it physical aptitude, creative talent, or entrepreneurial savvy) was a key motivator.

Across these accounts, Theme 3 highlights that beyond external considerations, intrinsic motivations and personal identity play a crucial role. These youths found empowerment, satisfaction, and learning in work settings that they did not find in school. They valued autonomy – being treated as an adult, making their own choices – which they associated more with working life than student life. They also often felt more competent when engaging in practical tasks, thereby fulfilling a basic need for competence that might have been thwarted by academic challenges or an impersonal lecture environment. The implication is that their demotivation toward university is not necessarily a demotivation toward learning or self- improvement, but rather a rejection of the *mode* of learning that university currently offers. They sought alternative ways to grow and prove themselves.

6.4. Social and Familial Influences

The final theme encompasses the social context and influences surrounding the youths' decisions. Family expectations, obligations, and peer examples all emerged as factors that either pushed them away from university or pulled them toward work.

Family Economic Obligations: In a number of cases, family circumstances played a decisive role. Some participants felt obliged to support their family financially after finishing school, as touched on in Theme 1. For example, P1 (Almaty) mentioned being the eldest son who needed to help earn money once he turned 18 because his father was ill. Similarly, P16 (Karaganda) noted that after marriage she prioritized contributing to her new family's income. These obligations left little room for full-time study. P1 said:

"My mom sat me down and said, 'We need you to work, at least for a year or two, to help out.' University became a luxury we just couldn't afford – not just money-wise, but time-wise. My siblings needed support now." (P1, Almaty).

In such scenarios, the decision was not solely the youth's personal preference but a family-influenced choice. The concept of filial responsibility is strong in many Kazakh families, and participants like P1 internalized that helping the family was more important than their individual educational ambitions, at least temporarily.

6.4.1. Parental Education Background and Expectations

Interestingly, the level of support or pressure from parents varied. Some parents were supportive of the choice to work, especially if they themselves had not attended university and had done reasonably well. P3 (Karaganda) said his father, a mechanic, told him: *"University isn't the only way. If you work hard and learn a trade, you'll be fine."* P3 felt validated by this and comfortable in his decision.

On the other hand, a few participants faced disappointment or concern from parents. P8 (Astana) described her parents as initially upset when she left law school:

"They invested a lot of pride in me going to uni. When I quit, they were angry and worried. It took time to show them I had a plan and could succeed via a different path." (P8, Astana).

Likewise, P20 (Astana) mentioned her mother still urges her to return to medical school. These familial tensions can themselves be demotivating or stressful, but for our participants who ultimately chose work, it appears they either convinced their parents or decided to go against their wishes after weighing their own happiness. In the context of Expectancy Theory, one might interpret that the valence of parental approval was outweighed by the participants' own values (autonomy, etc.), or that they expected too low a chance of satisfying their parents via academic success if they were already struggling.

6.4.2. Peer Influence and Examples

Peers also provided models that influenced decisions. Many participants had friends who either went straight to work or conversely went to university. Seeing peers' experiences helped shape their own choice. For example, P14 (Karaganda) said her two closest friends enrolled in university but frequently complained about stress and boredom, while another friend started working in a bakery and seemed much happier. She observed:

"My friend who works – she was learning new recipes, saving money, already getting promoted to shift lead. My friends in uni were just stressed about exams. I knew which life sounded better to me." (P14, Karaganda).

Stories of peers earning money or advancing in jobs gave confidence to some that one could do well without a degree. P11 (Almaty) mentioned a peer group of tech enthusiasts who largely skipped university and encouraged each other to take online courses and freelance projects instead. That community support made it easier for him to deviate from the traditional path.

Conversely, seeing peers struggle post-degree also affected them, as discussed. P2 (Almaty) and P15 (Almaty) cited examples of acquaintances with degrees stuck in low-paying jobs or irrelevant fields, reinforcing their belief that university was not a guarantee of success.

6.4.3. Cultural Norms and Shifts

On a broader level, there was a sense that attitudes among young people are shifting somewhat. A few participants noted that "it's not like in our parents' time when not having a degree was shameful." They felt that society (at least in urban areas) is slowly becoming more accepting of alternative paths, especially with the rise of entrepreneurs and skilled trades being valued. P12 (Almaty) pointed out that high-profile tech founders and even local success stories of college dropouts succeeding in business have made an impression on his generation.

However, this is not uniform. Some participants still felt a stigma or fear of judgment for not going to university. P2 (Almaty) confessed:

"When all my classmates went to universities and I didn't, I felt embarrassed at first. Some people think you failed or you're not smart. I had to overcome that and prove through my work that I'm not a failure." (P2, Almaty).

This indicates that social pressure can cut both ways: there is a conventional pressure to pursue higher education (as a status symbol or expected step), but there is also emerging validation for those who break the mold if they manage to show success. Many of our participants were navigating these conflicting pressures. For example, P8 (Astana) noted that after she got a good performance review at her law firm job, her parents and friends became more accepting of her choice, as if it retroactively justified her leaving university.

6.4.4. Influence of Teachers and Counselors

It is worth noting that only a couple of participants mentioned advice from teachers or school counsellors. P18 (Almaty) said her high school teachers encouraged everyone to go to university and didn't present working as a positive option. In contrast, P12 (Almaty) had a mentor in a coding club who told him that a portfolio could outweigh a degree in IT, which gave him confidence to skip university. This suggests that adult influences outside the family, such as mentors or counsellors, can play a role but were not prominent in most narratives. Generally, these youths forged their decisions largely based on family needs and peer examples rather than institutional guidance.

In summary, Theme 4 captures how the social fabric around the individual shapes their motivation (or lack thereof) for higher education. Family responsibilities often *necessitated* choosing work, while family expectations could either support or conflict with that choice. Peer experiences provided powerful comparative outcomes that either inspired them to pursue an alternative path or alleviated the fear of doing so. Social norms in Kazakhstan still favour higher education, but there is a growing counter-narrative valuing skill and entrepreneurial success without degrees – our participants are at the crux of this cultural shift. This theme underscores that the decision is not made in a vacuum; it is embedded in relationships and societal values. Therefore, any interventions to address university demotivation must consider family and community contexts, not just the individual's psychology or economics.

These four themes collectively answer our first research question by illuminating *why* these students are demotivated to pursue university. To briefly recapitulate:

- Economic pressures and a rational cost–benefit analysis make work appear more rewarding than study in the short-to-medium term.
- Disillusionment with higher education's quality and relevance leads to doubts about the efficacy of a degree.
- A desire for autonomy and practical experience draws young people toward the workplace where they feel more empowered and engaged.
- Social and familial contexts either push them toward work (through obligations or new norms) or mitigate the stigma of not attending university.

In the next section, we discuss how these findings relate to our theoretical framework and what they imply for management science theory and educational policy (our second research question). We explore how Human Capital Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Expectancy Theory help make sense of the results, and we suggest ways to address the identified gaps and motivations.

7. Discussion

The decision of young Kazakhstani students to prioritize work over university, as revealed by our qualitative findings, is multifaceted. In this discussion, we interpret these findings through the lens of the three theoretical frameworks – Human Capital Theory (HCT), Self- Determination Theory (SDT), and Expectancy/Expectancy-Value Theory – and explore the implications for both theory and practice. We also situate our results in the context of existing literature and consider how they address the identified research gaps. Finally, we discuss practical recommendations for education policymakers and managers.

7.1. Theoretical Interpretation of Findings

Human Capital Theory (HCT): HCT would predict that individuals choose to invest in education if the expected future returns (earnings, career opportunities) outweigh the immediate costs (tuition, time, foregone income). The participants' narratives suggest that many are *doubting the returns* and/or *emphasizing the costs*, leading them to forego the educational investment. For a significant subset, this appears economically rational. As reported, participants like P15 conducted an informal ROI analysis and concluded that four years of earnings and work experience were more valuable than a degree with uncertain payoff. This aligns with observations in other contexts that when the labor market offers rising wages for entry-level positions, low-income youth are especially likely to choose work over college. Our data provide a micro-level perspective on this: youth are not passively dropping out; they are actively evaluating (sometimes very pragmatically) the value proposition of higher education.

In Kazakhstan, the earnings premium of higher education may have eroded in the perception of these youth. Official statistics still show that on average, those with tertiary education earn more than those without, but if that premium is not visible or guaranteed, youths' behaviour may shift. Some participants saw graduates struggling or only marginally better off than non-graduates, which would reduce their perceived expectation of higher future earnings. Additionally, the immediate availability of jobs (especially in certain booming sectors like services or gig economy) increases the opportunity cost of college. This matches the scenario Shapiro described in the U.S. context during the pandemic recovery, where rising hourly wages lured young people away from college. Similarly, in Kazakhstan's recent context of economic recovery and labour demand, youth may find it more worthwhile to seize the moment.

However, HCT alone might label their choice as myopic if indeed tertiary education offers long-term benefits not captured in short-term thinking. The fact that gross tertiary enrolment in Kazakhstan dropped from ~65% to ~56% in 2020–2023 could reflect many making similar calculations. This constitutes an empirical gap scenario: the theory says education is beneficial, but the empirical data (youth decisions) show otherwise – suggesting either a change in actual returns or a change in perceived returns. Our findings lean towards the latter, bolstered by some actual instances of mismatch in the labour market (Theme 2's quality/relevance issues).

From a HCT perspective, a *policy implication* is that to shift these cost–benefit calculations, either the benefits of higher education need to become clearer/higher (e.g., better graduate employment outcomes, higher wage premium) or the costs need to be mitigated (e.g., financial support, shorter time to degree). We will return to this in the implications section.

7.2. Expectancy-Value and Expectancy (Vroom) Theory

These frameworks can explain our findings at the psychological level of motivation. Expectancy-Value Theory posits that a student's motivation to engage in higher education depends on their expectation of success and the value they place on that education. Many of our participants had low expectancies or low value attached to university:

Expectancy (Can I succeed in university?): Those who struggled academically or feared they would (like P5, who was failing, or P18, who narrowly missed a scholarship) had diminished expectation of successfully completing a degree. This low expectancy, combined with the availability of an alternative path where they *could* succeed (e.g., a job or vocational route), naturally led them to redirect their efforts. If one doesn't expect to do well in the university environment, motivation plummets. This aligns with studies linking low academic self-efficacy to higher dropout intentions.

Instrumentality (Will a degree lead to what I want?): Many doubted the instrumentality of a degree for securing a good job – seeing examples of graduates underemployed broke the perceived link between academic performance and career reward. In Vroom's terms, the P→O (performance to outcome) link was weak in their minds. If a student believes *even if I get good grades and graduate, I might not get a good job*, the motivation to perform academically will suffer greatly.

Valence (Do I value the outcomes of a degree?): Some participants did not highly value the typical outcomes (like a formal qualification or the kind of jobs that require a degree). For instance, P3 and P19 valued becoming skilled tradesmen over having an office job; P12 valued tech project achievement over diplomas. For them, the reward of "being a university graduate" had low personal valence, thus reducing motivational pull.

The *practical implication* here is that unless youths can be convinced that a university education will indeed lead to outcomes they care about (personal success, a desirable career, etc.), their motivation will remain low. This connects to the practical gap in research and policy: perhaps insufficient work has been done to ensure or communicate that connection (bridging education and employment effectively).

Our results illustrate how youths' motivation is not merely a factor of individual trait or laziness – it's often a rational response to the environment as they perceive it. The expectancy- value lens shows that improving either the expectancy (through better preparation, support, self-efficacy building) or the value (through clearer career pathways and making education more engaging/valuable) could change the equation.

7.3. Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT provides a nuanced understanding of the intrinsic aspect of motivation. Many participants' remarks reflect SDT's core needs:

- *Autonomy:* Youths like P7 and P12 left academia in part because they felt controlled or constrained, whereas work offered autonomy. The traditional university setting in Kazakhstan (and many places) can be quite structured and top-down, which may thwart students' sense of autonomy (e.g., rigid curricula, little choice in learning, authoritative teaching styles). SDT research shows that when autonomy is low, amotivation or extrinsically driven motivation dominates, which is less persistent. Our participants who felt "treated like schoolkids" in university versus "an adult" at work illustrate this
- well. They sought environments where they could self-direct, which happened to be the workplace or entrepreneurial ventures rather than the classroom.
- *Competence:* Several interviewees felt competent in their jobs but not in school. For example, P3 could fix a car (high competence) but maybe struggled with exams (low competence feeling). SDT would suggest that failing to experience mastery in the academic context can lead to disengagement. On the other hand, successfully contributing at work boosts one's intrinsic motivation to continue that path. The discussion by P12 about feeling accomplished solving real problems at work versus the "hoops" of homework underlines the role of

competence: the latter didn't make him *feel* competent in a meaningful way, whereas work did. This swap of context to find competence satisfaction is a key insight.

- *Relatedness:* This need was less explicitly discussed, but can be inferred. Some participants might have felt more belonging in a work team or family business than in an impersonal university. P17, for example, mentioned thriving in an actual service environment. If universities do not foster a sense of community or support, students might not feel a strong relational incentive to stay. However, relatedness did play a role in peer influence – having a peer group outside academia gave some a sense of belonging that made leaving easier (e.g., P11's tech community).

SDT helps explain why even if the economic or rational calculation could favour eventually getting a degree, the day-to-day motivational drive might still be higher for work. Work satisfied psychological needs now, whereas university was failing to do so for these individuals. Indeed, global research indicates that autonomy-supportive educational environments result in better student engagement and persistence. The apparent lack of such support in participants' experiences contributed to their demotivation.

In theoretical terms, our study contributes by applying SDT in a novel context – the transition from secondary school to either higher education or work in Kazakhstan. It suggests that enhancing need satisfaction in higher education could be a key to retaining students. This addresses a contextual gap because much SDT research in education has been in Western contexts; our findings echo those principles in Central Asia, implying their broader applicability.

7.4. Addressing Research Gaps

We identified an empirical gap in literature regarding this specific trend in Kazakhstan. Our study provides initial qualitative evidence to fill that gap. By doing so, we also highlight a contextual gap: previous studies on university dropout or enrolment decisions often focus on either developed countries or other developing regions, but Central Asia has unique socio- economic structures (e.g., influence of Soviet legacy, rapid economic transitions, centralized education policies). The combination of factors we found – economic considerations, education quality issues, and cultural values – may have a distinct configuration in Kazakhstan. For instance, the presence of widespread private universities that may vary in quality, or the expectation for elder children to support family, might not be as prevalent in other contexts. Our research hence adds a contextualized understanding and cautions against one-size-fits-all explanations of dropout.

We also contribute to bridging a practical gap. Practitioners (educators, university administrators, career counsellors) now have richer information on why students are turning away. A key practical insight is that interventions must be multi-pronged: purely offering scholarships might not suffice if underlying disillusionment and autonomy needs are not addressed, and vice versa.

7.5. Policy and Managerial Implications

Re-aligning Education with Employment: A clear message is the need to improve the alignment between higher education curricula and labour market requirements. Participants frequently cited outdated or irrelevant coursework. Universities, especially in Kazakhstan, could involve industry partners in curriculum design, increase internship opportunities, and emphasize practical skills within academic programs. If students see that university is teaching them what employers genuinely value (e.g., digital skills, problem-solving, up-to-date technical training), the instrumentality of education will be reinforced. Some initiatives already exist (like the applied bachelor's programs) to shorten and focus study. Expanding and publicizing these could attract those who are deterred by a long theoretical course. Essentially, making higher education feel like a worthwhile investment is key – which might mean more earn-and-learn models, co-op programs (combining work and study), and visibly strong career services linking graduates to jobs.

7.6. Financial Support and Incentives

To tackle the economic barrier, policies such as expanded need-based scholarships, income- contingent loans, or tuition reimbursement programs (perhaps by employers or the government for those who work while studying) could help. For example, if a youth could work part-time and study part-time with financial aid covering tuition, they might manage both. Kazakhstan's government might consider incentives for working youth to return to education later (such as recognizing work experience as credit towards a degree, or offering flexible evening/weekend university programs). This could address those who choose work out of necessity but might pursue a degree if it were more accessible alongside work. The idea is to reduce the opportunity cost of education. If someone like P1 could support his family and study at the same time through a flexible schedule or stipend, he might not have had to completely forgo university.

7.7. Improving Quality and Teaching Methods

The theme of disillusionment with quality suggests that educational institutions must improve teaching quality – through faculty development, modern pedagogies, and incorporating active learning. Fighting corruption and ensuring fair academic practices also came up (P11's point about buying grades). Restoring trust in the integrity of higher education is crucial. The Ministry of Education and Science has been working on quality assurance, and our findings underscore the importance of those reforms reaching students' everyday experiences. If students feel they are getting world-class education at home, they are less likely to dismiss it. This ties to closing the gap identified in the Cesari, et al. [2] reference about contextual and practical relevance – education must adapt to context and produce practical outcomes, otherwise it will be side-lined.

7.8. Addressing Psychological Needs

From a management (and educational management) perspective, universities could take cues from SDT to improve student motivation. This might include:

- Giving students more choice in courses or projects to boost autonomy (e.g., elective courses earlier in programs, student-driven projects).
- Creating more competency-supportive environments, such as tutoring and mentoring programs that help struggling students build mastery, so they don't give up like P5 did.
- Building a community (relatedness) – through engaging campus life, responsive faculty, and support groups – so students feel connected and supported. If P2 had a support network validating her, she might have felt less embarrassed about not going to uni, or conversely if she were in uni, that network might make it more bearable.

7.9. Career Counselling and Communication

Many decisions were made on the basis of perceptions that may or may not be fully accurate. For example, some may underestimate long-term benefits of a degree or overestimate immediate job stability. High schools and universities should ramp up career counselling that presents students with realistic information: what are the average outcomes for graduates' vs non-graduates over 5, 10, 20 years? Are there apprenticeship or certificate programs that can combine with eventual degrees? Also, showcasing positive role models – e.g., alumni who successfully combined work and study, or graduates in cool jobs – could influence perceptions. At the same time, acknowledging alternative success paths is important too; the goal is not to force everyone into university but to ensure those who skip it do so after informed consideration, and those who want to attend are not needlessly deterred by fixable concerns. Flexible and Alternative Pathways: Our findings suggest a binary choice (work vs uni) in participants' minds. A modern education system can blur this binary. For instance:

- Gap Year or Deferred Admission: Encourage students like P7 or P1 to take a structured "gap year" of work or service with a guaranteed university spot the next year. Some may return to studies after fulfilling immediate needs or simply maturing with work experience.
- Recognition of Work Experience: For those who do spend years working, universities could offer accelerated programs that credit that experience. P17's case of doing service work relevant to his hospitality degree is a good example where recognition could shorten his remaining study.
- Lifelong Learning Opportunities: Create bridges for these youth to possibly re-enter formal education later. A number of participants, like P8 and P17, expressed potential interest in returning to education once circumstances allow. Policies like Open University courses, online degree programs, or part-time study options can cater to them. Ensuring these are available and known is vital.

7.10. Macro-Level Socioeconomic Policies

On a broader scale, the government might look at labour market signals. If indeed too many graduates are underemployed, it might indicate a need to steer educational enrolment into fields where there is demand (e.g., STEM, technical skills) or to develop industries that can absorb graduates. The mismatch noted by Omirbayev, et al. [5] of shortage in mid-level technicians vs oversupply of generic degree holders is telling. Vocational and technical education reforms could alleviate some issues. Our participants like P3 and P19 effectively chose informal vocational paths (learning a trade on the job). Strengthening formal vocational education's attractiveness (making it a prestigious and viable route, not a consolation prize) could ensure those who have practical inclinations still engage in structured skill development.

Cultural Shifts and Communication

Finally, from a societal perspective, it may be beneficial to openly address this trend. Public campaigns or dialogues on the value of education could be refreshed, focusing not just on economic value but personal development. Conversely, acknowledging successful entrepreneurs or tradespeople is fine, but also highlighting cases where lack of education limited growth might balance the narrative. Families could be engaged through community programs or media to support their youths' choices in constructive ways (for example, encouraging compromise solutions like part-time study). Essentially, managing the *public perception* of higher education is now as important as managing the education itself, because perception heavily influences motivation.

8. Limitations and Future Research

While our study sheds light on important factors, it has limitations. The sample size is small (N=20) and focused on three urban centres. Rural youth might have different experiences (for instance, access to local universities or jobs is different outside big cities). Future research should include a broader demographic and possibly quantitative surveys to gauge how widespread each factor is among the wider youth population. It would be valuable to know, for example, what proportion of high school graduates cite financial reasons versus academic dissatisfaction in choosing not to enrol.

Additionally, our study is cross-sectional – capturing motivations at one point in decision-making. Longitudinal research could follow students over time to see if those motivations change, or if some who chose work later decide to pursue university (or vice versa). This could inform whether certain decisions are permanent or delay tactics.

Another avenue is to investigate the perspectives of those who did enrol in university despite similar pressures – what made them persist? Comparative studies between those who opt in and opt out could isolate key differentiators (like personality traits, stronger support systems, etc.). Also, exploring the employers' perspective would be

enlightening: are employers finding these young workers adequately prepared? Are they indifferent to degrees or do they value them? That could feed back into how youth anticipate employer preferences. In terms of theory, applying frameworks like Social Cognitive Career Theory or Life Course Theory might deepen understanding of how these decisions are made in context. Our application of HCT, SDT, and Expectancy was fruitful; however, integrating them (since each addresses different layers – economic, psychological, social) could move towards a more comprehensive model of educational decision motivation.

Finally, given the increasing availability of alternative education (online courses, boot camps, micro-credentials), research could examine how these factor into youths' decisions. A few participants (e.g., P12 at a coding boot camp) used alternatives to substitute for university. The rise of such options in Kazakhstan (perhaps accelerated by pandemic-era remote learning) could be changing the landscape of how human capital is accumulated.

8.1. Ethical and Managerial Note

From a management science perspective, educational institutions can be viewed as organizations competing for "clients" (students). Losing students to the workforce is akin to losing market share. Managers in education (university administrators) must understand the customer (student) motivation and dissatisfaction – which our study provides – and respond innovatively. Ethically, they also have a responsibility to ensure students make informed choices for their long-term welfare. Striking that balance is a management challenge that these findings can help address.

9. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate why a growing number of students in Kazakhstan are demotivated to pursue university education, opting instead to enter the workforce. Through qualitative interviews with 20 youths across Almaty, Karaganda, and Astana, we uncovered a complex interplay of economic, educational, personal, and social factors driving this trend. In summary, many young people perceive immediate work as more rewarding or necessary than higher education due to financial pressures, doubts about the quality and payoff of university, a desire for autonomy and practical engagement, and influences from family and peers.

By framing the findings within Human Capital Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory, and Self-Determination Theory, we demonstrated that these decisions, while context-specific, resonate with broader motivational principles. When the *expected returns* to education are uncertain and the *psychological needs* of learners are unmet, motivation for university dwindles. In Kazakhstan's context, a combination of rising short-term job opportunities, misalignment of curricula with market needs, and a rigid educational environment has created a situation where for some, skipping university is a rational and fulfilling choice.

This work fills an important research gap by providing empirical evidence from Kazakhstan and highlighting contextual nuances. It also has practical implications: to re- engage students with higher education, systemic changes are needed. These include making university education more affordable, relevant, and flexible; improving teaching methods and support to satisfy students' autonomy and competence needs; and integrating work experience with study. Policymakers and educational institutions should strive to *reduce the gap* between the classroom and the real world, so that youths do not feel they must choose one or the other.

Ultimately, the goal is not to simply increase university enrolment for its own sake, but to ensure that all young people have access to the learning and development opportunities that best suit their aspirations and talents – whether that's through university, vocational training, or other pathways. A healthy economy requires a diverse workforce of professionals, tradespeople, and entrepreneurs, and education in various forms is key to preparing them. By understanding why students turn away from university, stakeholders can improve educational systems to better serve students' needs and society's demands.

References

[1] R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, "Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions," *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, vol. 61, p. 101860, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860

[2] M. Cesari *et al.*, "Identification of research gaps to improve care for healthy ageing: A scoping review," *Family Medicine and Community Health*, vol. 12, no. 4, p. e003116, 2024.

[3] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be (com) ing a knowing researcher," *International Journal of Transgender Health*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 1-6, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

[4] M. E. Kiger and L. Varpio, "Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE guide No. 131," *Medical Teacher*, vol. 42, no. 8, pp. 846-854, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030

[5] S. Omirbayev, D. Akhmed-Zaki, A. Mukhatayev, A. Biloshchytskyi, K. Kassenov, and A. Faizullin, "The conceptual foundations of lifelong learning in Kazakhstan: Process modeling," *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, vol. 16, no. 17, pp. 60-75, 2021.