# Organizational Culture and Social climate in Kazakhstani Higher Education Institutions during the COVID-19 Crisis: KazNU Case Study

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to analyze the current characteristics of organizational culture and climate in Kazakhstani higher educational institutions during the COVID-19 crisis. Materials for the study were collected from interviews and online discussions published on the website of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU). In addition, results from the social monitoring systems of the university's educational activities as well as an official survey have been used. The study offers details of how Kazakhstani universities dealt with the crisis by presenting KazNU case study. The paper presents the responsible actions developed at the university as well as the problems faced by students and teachers. One important lesson to be learnt is that educational organization needs to be more comprehensive, caring for appropriate technical equipment, helping develop skills for staff and students, and include vulnerable groups of the population.
Keywords: Organizational culture, social climate, COVID-19, Kazakhstan.

## INTRODUCTION

The world crisis caused by COVID-19 has exposed painfull weaknesses in many areas of public life. In addition to the healthcare sector, faced with an unprecedented burden, educational institutions were also forced to begin restructuring established educational processes almost from one day to the next. Due to the spread of the pandemic, schools and higher education institutions all over the world were forced into distance education. Teachers and students have faced increasing isolation, fear and anxiety. States of emergency were declared worldwide, and social climate

became very relevant as an emotional tie to create unity in the fight against the virus. The impact of the pandemic has been felt not just as a health issue but also as a social problem. The cultural response and exchange of experiences through online media has proven effective in creating a social climate of encouragement and in eliminating some limitations in organizational structures, as in the case of educational institutions.

Organizational culture affects the quality of decision-making as well as the morale and behavior of members. Thus, it is directly related to organizational performance (Kilmann & Saxton, 1991: 1). The culture of organization can be defined as a pattern of collective basic ideas acquired by a group in solving problems of adaptation to changes, both in the external environment and in internal integration (Schein, 1992: 34). Although the essence of organizational culture is a system of collective basic representations that are considered self-evident, culture manifests itself at the level of artifacts available for observation, as well as in the values, norms and rules of behavior accepted by the members of an organization.

Organizational climate, like organizational culture, is an abstract concept related to the fact that the actions of individuals belonging to an organization are affected not only by interactions with adjacent events, but also by interactions with incomprehensible forces in the organization's environment (Owens & Valesky, 2007: 192). Since the 1980s, organizational culture has a fundamental area of research interest and its connection with the effectiveness of educational organizations has attracted the attention of education theorists (Wang *et al.,* 2000: 24).

In an interview for *UNESCO Courier*, Yuval Noah Harari, author of *Sapiens, Homo Deus,* and of *21 Lessons for the 21st Century,* the Israeli historian analyzed the possible consequences of the current sanitary crisis, insisting on the need to strengthen international scientific cooperation and information sharing between countries. Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyze the characteristics of organizational culture and social climate in Kazakhstani higher educational institutions during the pandemic crisis. In order to achieve the research objectives, first, this study seeks to find clues to clarify the conceptual relationship between organizational culture and organizational climate from a comparative point of view. The authors discuss the problems and implications of establishing a conceptual relationship between the two concepts. The characteristics of

organizational culture and social climate centered on particular case study of higher education in Kazakhstan are explored from this perspective. The results derived from the discussion and social monitoring of university's educational activities in relation to the problems faced are synthesized and presented.

## CONCEPTUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

Organizational culture and organizational climate are widely used in educational organizational research as key concepts for explaining the invisible characteristics of an organization. Their conceptual meaning is somewhat unclear and involves similar aspects; definitions are also interchanged. Thus, it seems appropriate to classify them according to the research purpose, since definitions vary depending on the research area (Park, 2005: 52). It might be possible to reveal individual characteristics more clearly by revealing the relational characteristics existing between the two concepts.

Studies conducted in the 1980s explored business problems using the concept of organizational culture. These studies presented new motivation and perspectives on educational administration and educational organization theory (Kim, 2000: 2). Culture can be defined as a shared philosophy, ideology, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and norms that unite a community (Owens & Valesky, 2007). Margulies and Raia (1978) viewed organizational culture as a complex phenomenon involving values, behaviors, beliefs and customs collectively shared by people in an organization. In other words, there is an explicit or implied idea of what values and behavioral patterns should be established within the organization.

According to Schein (1981; 1984; 1992), organizational culture consists on three elements: structural stability, patterning or integration within a given culture, and sharing. In other words, it is shared with all members through their interaction; in the case of educational organizations this occurs in the process of learning. On the premise of these three elements, Schein conceptualizes the conceptual structure of organizational culture in three stages, from the superficial first level of artifacts to the basic assumption level that lies deepest (Park, 2003: 163). Kim Jungi (2000)

synthesized the various definitions and accepted the concept of the organizational culture as values, beliefs, ideologies, and goals, embedded into an organization of symbolic acts and expressed in the actions of the members of the organization. In this way, it also incorporates the organization's environment as a structural factor, the elements shared by members, and other aspects such as symbols and behavioral patterns.

Although research on organizational culture developed in the 1980s, the study of organizational climate has a history of over 50 years. Organizational climate was initially thought of as a general concept for expressing the lasting characteristics of organizational life. Tagiuri (1968) suggests that organizational climate is an ecological, environmental, social system which develops alongside culture. In 1963, Halpin and Croft developed the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ). Then Litwin and Stringer (1968) introduced a new concept based on the collective perception of people living in a given environment, and a series of measurable work environments influence the behavior of their members. Lawler and Hall, Oldham (1974) defined the subjective impressions or perceptions of members related to their workplace, and Anderson (1982) described the interactions among members as the social characteristics in relation to educational organizations. Owens (2001) found that researchers rely heavily on logically eliciting participants' perceptions of the various environmental aspects of the organization.

Interaction is the pivotal point both in organizational climate and culture. It is methodologically described as the systematical understanding of environmental factors and organizational contexts that affect individual behavior (Park & Lee, 2014). According to Maxwell and Thomas (1991), who explain the relationship between two concepts, organizational climate, deriving from the field theory of Lewin, is a social aspect related to the perception of the member’s physical environment. It is defined as the member's shared perception of the working environment that encompasses policies, actual actions, and procedures and it may have a regional specificity (Schneider, 1975). On the other hand, organizational culture is related to the perception of dynamic elements, expressing the feelings of the members of a given educational institution. Thus, having anthropological foundations, organizational culture has a more individual and abstract character and refers not to social values and common symbolic systems and beliefs.

In terms of research methodology, culture-related research has a strong tendency to use qualitative methodology to identify unique aspects of individual environmental conditions. On the other hand, studies related to organizational climate are primarily concerned with the pursuit of universal laws covering individual environments based on quantitative methodology. After all, culture as an environmental variable defined as a belief system that reflects the subjective perceptions of organizational members, whereas climate is focused on the members' shared perception of the observables that can be identified in life of organization (Denison, 1996). Table-1 compares the organizational culture and the organizational climate research perspective due to these differences.

Table 1. Contrasting Organizational Culture and Organizational Climate research perspectives

| Differences | Culture literatures | Climate literatures |
|---|---|---|
| Epistemology | Contextualized & idiographic | Comparative & nomothetic |
| Point of view | Emic (native point of view) | Etic (researcher's viewpoint) |
| Methodology | Qualitative field observation | Quantitative survey data |
| Level of analysis | Underlying values and assumptions | Surface level manifestations |
| Temporal orientation | Historical evolution | Ahistorical snapshot |
| Theoretical foundations | Social construction; critical theory | Lewin's field theory |
| Discipline | Sociology and anthropology | Psychology |

Source: Denison (1996: 625), Park et. al. (2016: 39).

As such, Ashforth (1985) said that the difference between the two concepts is that the definition of organizational culture consists of shared assumptions, values, and norms, while the organizational climate is defined in terms of shared perception of behavior. According Hoy and Miskel (2001), research in organizational culture makes frequent use of qualitative and folklore techniques characteristic of anthropology and sociology in order to study the organizations. In addition, Ouchi and Wilkins (1985) said that organizational culture researchers focus on how belief cultural elements in an organization play a role in maintaining social

structure. On the other hand, organizational climate researchers typically use quantitative approaches and multivariate analysis to identify patterns of behavior perceived in the organization. Hoy and Miskel (2001: 208) conclude the following.

> The two concepts are partly competitive and partly complementary. It is too hasty to define culture as an aspect of climate or to define climate as a result of culture. The distinction between culture and climate is useful and provides a competitive framework for practitioners and students in understanding the dynamics of school life.

The worldwide COVID-19 crisis has revealed an urgent need for the timely exchange of practical experience and the latest scientific and technical developments between countries. As mentioned above, this research analyzes the characteristics of organizational culture and the social climate in Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU) during the pandemic. KazNU has made a phenomenal advanced in university ratings in only one year, rising 42 positions in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). Taking the 165th place in the global ranking it has become the first Kazakhstani University, in the top 200 Higher Education Institutions in the world. In part, this is due to the current status of the organizational culture and climate of the university. Official surveys, informal interviews and online discussions among principals, professors and another university's staff, as well as students have served as a means of social monitoring of university's educational activities. Results from these sources allows us to understand what distinguishes the university from others. It can also provide insights in how to manage sudden changes and crisis at university level, predicting the consequences of these changes.

## THE CASE OF AL-FARABI KAZAKH NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

As in other universities, KazNU organizational culture is supported by faculty members, students, administrative staff, and the service and management sectors. Each carry a certain set of values and patterns of behavior that are formed in the organization in relation to particular circumstances. This organizational culture covers a large area of phenomena, from material to immaterial aspects, norms and values, the officially or secretly adopted code of conduct, and so on. Elements of organizational cultural also affect organizational climate.

During the quarantine period, most of Kazakhstan's higher education institutions restructured their work promptly; switching to distance learning. Within the framework of social responsibility, KazNU provided the opportunity of free educational services and advice to those universities that use the "Univer" digital system developed by KazNU to accompany the educational process. In this way, Kazakhstani Universities manage to control of organizational climate and health of students in the sudden conditions of distance learning. The Dean of the Faculty of Oriental studies observed the following:

> Let's assume that all curators-adviser of the University conduct online chats in messengers with students and parents. The heads of subdivisions of all levels – heads of Departments, Deans of Faculties and University management – communicate with students in social networks. The University's call center is open round the clock so that the student can promptly receive an answer to any question or consultation. During the quarantine services and centers of the University organize webinars in social networks on support of students and their parents. (Dean of the Faculty of Oriental studies, interviewed on April 26, 2020)

The work of the Committee of Youth Organizations at KazNU, which unites the leaders of student self-government bodies and more than 100 youth organizations, was also extremely important. Students continued to participate online in the work of all collegial bodies and in the educational and management processes. The problems that students suffered during the quarantine are summarized in the Vice-Rector's address quoted below:

> Today we see that the most acute problems are related primarily to tuition fees. In this regard, the University provides benefits and discounts for certain categories of students. They cover almost 3.5 thousand students from among excellent and socially vulnerable groups. It has become a good practice to raise funds from outside to establish social scholarships for students from low-income families. In view of the difficult economic situation during quarantine, students are also provided with installments in payment for their studies. Currently, there are about 900 foreign and non-resident students of KazNU in Almaty. They have received targeted assistance in the form of foodstuffs and the necessary medical protection and household goods […] (Vice-Rector of KazNU, interviewed on April 13, 2020)

In this difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic, KazNU invited other universities to cooperate and was ready to train the teachers through free massive open online courses MOOCs in the digital educational resource moocs.kz, designed by KazNU, has currently become very popular.

It presents Kazakhstan National Open Education Platform and unites 12 universities participating in the Consortium for the implementation of educational programs using online courses. There are also 24 partner universities and the «DARA» charity foundation.[1]

The creative development of young people was supported during quarantine conditions following the Vice-Rector indications:

> All previously planned debating tournaments, scientific conferences, olympiads, project competitions, amateur art, meetings with interesting people and much more we are now conducting in a new format – online. And the best students are also encouraged by diplomas and money, as before. …By the way, I would like to note that under quarantine conditions, students' interest in the events only increased…The proof of this is a huge number of participants and a lot of videos and posts shared by students in social networks within the projects. The University clubs and clubs in scientific, professional, patriotic, socio-political, spiritual and moral, volunteer areas continue to operate remotely. (Vice Rector for Academic Affairs, interviewed on April 13, 2020)

In the struggle against the spread of COVID-19 the organization of the volunteers to the state and society has been particularly urgent. There are many students of KazNU among the volunteers.

> The students massively participate in the Challenge «Qaiyrymdy Qogam (responsive society) », initiated by the University within the framework of national movement «Biz Birgemiz (we are together) ». The youth together with scientists of University participates in projects on creation of new antiseptics, methods of sterilization of subjects of medical appointment and manufacturing of special protective helmets. As volunteers, KazNU students help retired persons and poor citizens, distribute food and medicine to needy families, organize sewing and distribution of reusable masks. More than fifty Master's and Doctoral students of the Faculty of Medicine and Public Health of KazNU, who are certified doctors, are «on the front line» of the fight against coronavirus. (Vice Rector for Languages and Student Development, interviewed on April 24, 2020)

At the beginning of the crisis and the state of emergency, various platforms for distance learning already existed in Kazakhstan. For the duration of the emergency they were given free access after a memorandum of cooperation was signed between the Vice Minister of Education and Science Rustem Bigari, the Vice Minister of Digital Development Daryn Tuyakov, and the telecom operators.[2] In the early days of distance learning, educational portals were expected to encounter

technical problems due to the large influx of users. Moreover, in the country there are critical challenges associated with the basic provision of Internet and computers in Kazakhstani families. Although the country ranks 65th in terms of the number of internet users among the 141 countries of the world (Schwab, 2019: 316), Kazakhstan is the 99th position in terms of mobile internet speed (out of 141 countries), and in the 65th with regards to fixed broadband (out of 176 countries).[3] These technical requirements and the quality of online education associated to these aspects has determined the situation of Kazakhstan during the pandemic.

## THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE EDUCATION PROCESS

According to the results of the survey of the Center for Sociological Research and Social Engineering of KazNU, which was conducted remotely among 31,000 students in Kazakhstan, during the pandemic and quarantine regime the values of life, health and virtue have become more important than usual.

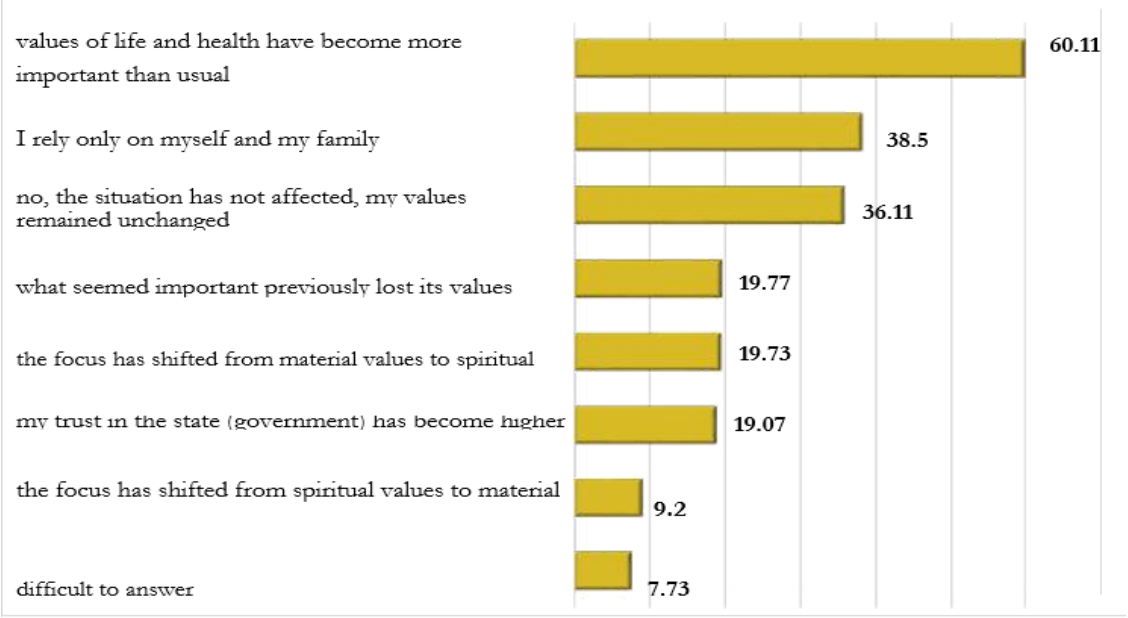


Figure 1. Results of social mood of the students and faculty

Source: Center for Sociological Research and Social Engineering of KazNU (2020), retrieved from www.kaznu.kz.

The results of the survey conducted among teachers and students of KazNU, and examination of the digital environment put in motion showed that 78.1% of teachers highly appreciated the assistance from the educational departments in the process of organizing online learning modes. 63.3% of teachers highly appreciated the effectiveness of consultations and the instructions for conducting exams. 41.9% noted the low level of motivation of students, and also a lack of feedback from them. 31.3% experienced mental difficulties and fear of making mistakes. 21.5% experienced organizational difficulties in conducting exams.

The results of the survey among students showed that 67.7% of them highly appreciated the help from teaching staff. 45% of students claimed that they relied only on their own knowledge during exams. 38% of students replied that they circumstances during quarantine were extenuating, and 29.5% encountered various difficulties (technical malfunctions, problems with exams for technical reasons, etc.). 28.3% experienced mental difficulties (Center for Sociological Research and Social Engineering, 2020: 11).

A survey of Center for Sociological Research and Social Engineering (2020) on the level of knowledge of distance technologies was also conducted. The assessment of technology proficiency showed that 37.5% of teachers rated 3.8 on a scale of 5 points in their level of knowledge of distance technologies. 35% of teachers improved their skills in using online learning tools and student support services, and 21.3% rarely used remote communication services to participate in webinars. 14.3% of teachers used only the mobile phone and 14.8% said that the lack of digital skills, the reduced time to learn new tools, and the restructuring of the educational process were problematic.

Students also had difficulties in distance learning. The survey results showed that 48.7% of students noted poor quality or lack of a stable Internet, and 24.3% - the lack of a computer, webcams and more. Only 18.7% of students had no difficulties, while 8.2% of students had only organizational difficulties. 2.9% of students experienced difficulties due to lack of communication with teachers and 1.1% of them replied that there were difficulties with new materials. When asked would they like to use distance learning in the future, 30.9% answered 'yes', 52.9% answered 'no' and 16.2% found it difficult to answer.

Those results show that Kazakhstan, like most other countries of the world, was not ready for such a large-scale and instantaneous transition to online education, provoked by the coronavirus pandemic. However, this situation provides a unique opportunity to carry out a stress test of the education system and give a practical assessment of the reforms in the country's digitalization in recent years. At the same time, it is important to draw lessons from the current situation and not to allow vulnerable categories of students to be left alone with new challenges that they will face in the post-crisis time.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At present, the Republic of Kazakhstan is in the period of formation and liberalization using the so-called path of discontinuous development, characterized by the evolution of certain sociocultural phenomena and the constant restructuring of the higher education system. Therefore, a case study of the organizational culture of one of Kazakhstan universities makes it possible to reach some value-meaning generalizations of empirical materials to help construct theoretical models that allow high-quality assessments of the processes taking place at a time of crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed weak points in many areas of public life. In addition, educational institutions have been forced to begin restructuring established educational processes into online learning in record time. Like many other countries, Kazakhstan faces issues that need to be addressed. Some of these are technical equipment, information competencies of teachers and students, as well as the organization of education for vulnerable groups of the population. It is clear that the most urgent problem is access to the Internet and computer equipment in rural areas. Additionally, the pandemic has put aside problems related to the general wellcondition of students and teachers, problems that have missed out the spotlight because so much else was going on.

The lessons to be learnt from this emergency situation are that educational organization needs to be more comprehensive. There are fundamental aspects to be improved, such as a stable internet connection, the quality and accessibility of educational resources, and technical skills for teachers and students alike. One of the main tasks of organizational culture is to create fair and decent conditions for its members (teachers, students,

administrative staff, etc.) and to learn how to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions that our world is facing. The competitiveness of the educational organization in the post-crisis period will directly depend on this.

Notes

[1] "Study online at MOOCS.kz", published in 20.04.2020, retrieved from https://www.kaznu.kz/en/3/news/one/19856/.

[2] Retrieved from official website of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/edu/press/news/details/kazahstancam-predostavyat-besplatnyy-dostup-na-obrazovatelnye-internet-resursy?lang=en.

[3] Speedtest Global Index. Ranking mobile and fixed broadband speeds from around the world on a monthly basis. April 2020. Retrieved from https://www.speedtest.net/global-index.

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