Students' perceptions of unified national test scores, state scholarships, and academic performance

Oxana Kirichok [a][1], Caspian University, Dostyk Ave 85A, Almaty 050000, Kazakhstan, o.kirichok@cu.edu.kz
Saya Amankeldiyeva[b], Caspian University, Dostyk Ave 85A, Almaty 050000, Kazakhstan, s.s.amankeldiyeva@gmail.com
Zholdasbek Nussenov [c], Caspian University, Dostyk Ave 85A, Almaty 050000, Kazakhstan, nussenov@mail.ru

Abstract

The Unified National Testing in Kazakhstan evaluates students' past academic performance, predicts career prospects, and guides state educational scholarship allocation. This study examines private university students' perceptions of the relationship between their UNT scores, selected subjects, scholarship opportunities, and academic performance. Using a qualitative approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 second-year students from four majors: Finance, Geology, Nursing, and Law. Participants were selected through maximal variation sampling, ensuring diverse views by including those with the highest and lowest UNT scores and GPAs. Thematic analysis, guided by Creswell's framework, revealed a gap between high school-specific academic skills and the broader competencies required for university success, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and presentation skills. Findings highlight the need to reform the scholarship allocation system by incorporating accessibility measures and better aligning high school preparation with university-level demands.

Keywords: Academic performance; examination; scholarship; unified national testing

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 * ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Oxana Kirichok, Caspian University, Dostyk Ave 85A, Almaty 050000, Kazakhstan.
E-mail address: o.kirichok@cu.edu.kz

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Kazakhstan, which is a post-Soviet country, was traditionally linked to economic workforce production (Ahn et al., 2018; Hanson & Sokhey 2021), with admission to higher education institutions previously being based entirely on the Soviet Union's five-year economic plans (Matthews, 1982). Kazakhstan's transition from a centrally planned command economy to a free market economy, therefore, has been influenced by past Soviet systems and practices, current economic conditions, and its education structure (Jonbekova, 2020). The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan is responsible for defining Kazakhstan's educational policies and priorities, regulating funding, and preparing quality standards (OECD, 2017).

In 2004, Kazakhstan introduced a compulsory, centralized higher-education-institute admission examination, the Unified National Test (UNT). However, for the past 16 years since UNT's introduction, there have been disputes about its feasibility and objectivity. Opponents have argued that the test only demonstrates a student's ability to learn the curriculum but does not reflect the education quality, whereas defenders have argued that the testing system is a well-established, effective form of similar college admissions examinations around the world. Because Kazakhstan seeks to belong to the international community, the country's educational systems must comply with advanced global standards (Anafinova, 2020; Bokayev et al., 2020; Duisenova et al., 2020; Smagulov, 2016).

Anderson (1939) and Gegenfurtner & Testers (2022) found that student academic success and performance were conditioned by previous educational background and that the IQ measured in college was typically highly correlated with a general level of school achievement. Since that time, there have been many studies on the extent to which various admission tests were related to future academic performances (Drummond & DeYoung, 2003; Kuncel et al., 2001; Sackett et al., 2008).

UNT was originally designed to minimize administrative corruption associated with the Kazakh high school final exams (Sackett et al., 2012). Therefore, UNT was seen to be a considerable improvement on the old system of school-administered assessment based only on the teachers' judgments (Zajda, 2003). Further, the introduction of centralized examinations made access to universities less subject to manipulation by university employees (Kalikova & Rakhimzhanova, 2009).

Winter et al., (2014) considered the UNT to be one of the most powerful drivers of behavior in the school system in Kazakhstan, stating that the "UNT plays a major role in shaping what young people learn in school and how it is taught". Because of this examination's high stakes, the validity and reliability of UNT have attracted attention from all stakeholders, including Kazakh secondary school graduates, secondary school teachers, and administration, university teachers and administration, parents, and employers. One of the methods used to assess the validity and reliability of UNT has been to monitor the students' university performances relative to their UNT scores. As a result, the student perceptions of the relationship between the UNT score and university performance have been a key focus for Kazakh educators, with several studies having already focused on the relationships between the UNT score, academic performance, and student perceptions of the relationship between their UNT score and university success (Li, 2024; Konovalov & Ugryumova, 2010; Smagulov, 2011; Smagulov, 2006).

In 2020, 53,864 state education scholarships were awarded for study in undergraduate bachelor's degrees (Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020) by UNT results. In 2020, UNT was conducted three times: in January 2020, June 2020, and August 2020. In January 2020, 80,457 high school students attempted the exam (76% of which was in Kazakh, with the rest of it being in either Russian or English) (Kazakh National Test Center, 2020a), of which 32,353 schoolchildren (37%) were unable to attain the required minimum of 50 points out of 140 to enter university, and with the overall average UNT score being 60.53 (Kazakh National Test Center, 2020a). In June, 122,717 high school graduates participated, with 38,957 of them (31.7%) being unable to meet the minimum (Kazakh National Test Center, 2020a) and with the average being 64.06 points (Kazakh National Test Center, 2020c). In August, 19,382 graduates sat for UNT, with the average being 52 (Kazakh National Test Center, 2020a).

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Although 53,864 state educational scholarships were allocated in 2020 for undergraduate study (Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020) only 41,578 (77%) were distributed (List of Holders of State Educational Scholarships, 2020) as follows. However, the statistical data of Educational Areas the State Order was allocated in 2020 is available for 28,462 scholarships as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Educational Areas the State Order was Allocated for in 2020

Area	Number of educational scholarships allocated for undergraduate study in 2020	Percentage
Pedagogical Sciences	8,243	19.8%
Arts and Humanities	1,615	3.8%
Social Sciences	867	2%
Business and Law	979	2,3%
Natural Sciences	4,088	9.8%
Information Technology	3,815	9%
Engineering	1,565	3.7%
Agriculture	1,565	3.7%
Veterinary Medicine	825	2%
Health Care	2,700	6.5%
Services	2,200	5.2%
Total	28,462	67.8%

Subsequently, 25,402 scholarships (32.2%) were assigned to support state programs and universities. The "Mangilik El" program provided 5,116 state educational scholarships for some selected state universities, for example, 700 for Kazakh British Technical University; 1100 for International IT University; 1,100 for the Astana IT University; 45 for the Moscow Aviation Institute; 1,185 full grants and 700 foundation bursaries for the Nazarbayev University; and 200 scholarships for Turkish citizens at the International Kazakh Turkish University named after Yassavi. State educational scholarships were also given under special quotas to 278 orphans, 181 disabled persons, 17 military officers, and 909 people of Kazakh nationality who were not citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kazakh National Test Center, 2020b).

The state scholarships are provided for specific educational programs (Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016), with a list of UNT subjects that the applicant must take, scoring a minimum total of 50 out of 140 points (Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). Applicants must adopt a specific UNT subject as their future undergraduate major. These subjects are listed and approved to allow the UNT score to be considered a predictor of the good academic performance of scholarship recipients at university, and further to project their subsequent success in their chosen careers. Unintentionally, however, the list of required UNT subjects specified for particular majors prevents the full body of 117,204 high school graduates (Kazakh State Agency of Statistics, 2019) from applying for state scholarships because of the variations in UNT subjects selected by high school graduates. For example, 183 graduates applied for 589 state educational scholarships for a major titled Preschool Education and Upbringing; 238 applicants registered for 300 educational scholarships for Special Pedagogy; and 1260 graduates applied for 1652 state educational scholarships to major in Geology. According to the prevailing policy, a student's academic success in Special Pedagogy at the university can be predicted by the achievement of good UNT scores in geography and biology. A high score in these subjects is, thus, believed to secure state funding from being misallocated and may be used by the state as a guarantee for availing the services of a competent professional in Special Pedagogy in four years.

Therefore, it is important to apprehend the perception of high school graduates apropos the connections between their UNT scores, their choice of UNT subjects as their undergraduate majors, their chances of receiving state educational scholarships, and their prospective academic performances at university.

1.1. Literature review

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Sackettet al., (2012) concluded that "scores on admissions tests were indeed predictive of academic performance, as indexed by grades"; Kobrin et al., (2008) found the average multiple correlation coefficient to be 0.35 for the influence of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) on future academic performance. Walberg (2010) mentioned that high-stakes tests represent an assessment tool for the adjustment of resources to achieve public education goals. Giersch et al., (2021) found that college students associated their academic performance with the availability of challenging undergraduate courses. Different selection tools predicted discrete outcomes for graduates entering medical programs. GPA remained an important performance predictor across curricula, whereas GAMSAT was found to be predictive in the early (pre-clinical) years. A semi-structured panel interview was discovered to be more apt as a projection tool in the later (clinical) years of medical programs (Sladek et al., 2016). Zakharov et al., (2014) found a positive relationship between student achievements and teaching practices aimed at raising student performances in the Russian Unified State Exam (USE), a high-stakes college entrance examination.

Some researchers claim that UNT scores do not predict student academic performance due to the content of UNT. For example, Winter et al., (2014) challenged the simplistic content of the current UNT system claiming that the UNT only checked factual knowledge and not depth of thinking, logic, or critical thinking, all of which are required for university academic programs.

Melnick (1971) claimed that the relationship between admissions testing and academic performance was too simplistic and not proven because the observed correlations were too low, with the validity estimate of .46 being seen as a "weak" predictor. Teleuov et al., (2006) conducted an analysis of the correlations between the UNT results of first-year students and their academic performances at Semey State Medical Academy and found that students who had attained UNT scores between 50 and 59 had an average grade of 3.82 out of 5, and students who had attained a UNT score between 70 and 79 had an average grade of 4.24; that is, the analysis indicated a significant correlation at 0.67 between mid-term grades and UNT scores for 432 students. Konovalov and Ugryumova (2010) concluded that the average UNT score grew in East Kazakhstan from 72.1 in 2008 to 86.0 in 2009 and to 88.2 in 2010, but this did not lead to an increase in the first-year students' academic performances.

Some qualitative research has been conducted on private university students' perceptions of the relationships between UNT preparation at school and academic performance at university, from which it was found that UNT had to be more closely aligned with future occupations, and the content shifted from memorization tasks to tasks focused on job skills (OECD, 2018). Although these results supported studies that had found a correlation between admission tests and academic performances, some researchers felt that these types of speculation resulted in more harm than good. For example, Berliner (2011) questioned the rationale of using high-stakes testing to assess academic achievements as they could "easily retard the development of achievement in later grades as a function of the restrictions on learning in earlier grades". This idea was also raised in an earlier study by Galton and MacBeath (2002), who concluded that the focus on content was being depreciated by an orientation toward testing.

Some studies have concluded that academic performance and admissions test scores are affected by numerous other factors, such as socioeconomic status (Sciffer et al., 2022; Suleiman et al., 2024; Langensee et al., 2024; Tan, 2022). Rothstein (2004) identified the correlation of SAT scores with high school demographic characteristics. This outcome was supported by Zwick and Sklar (2005), who also believe that SAT indicates the socioeconomic context of high school graduates. Sackett et al., (2008) note that test scores are affected by "socioeconomic factors, such as parents' earnings and education… and there is a substantial relationship between social and economic status and test scores." Some researchers have opined that college admissions tests act as barriers to campus diversity in the United States because of the wide-ranging performance gaps between the socioeconomically privileged population and other ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Zwick, 2019). Some studies have also claimed that the socioeconomic status of the school is a SAT score predictor and "academic performance is influenced both by student-level SES and by school-level SES" (Zwick, 2012).

The situation has been somewhat similar in Kyrgyzstan, where teaching and learning in most secondary schools are oriented toward rote memorization rather than the development of skills and competencies (Shamatov, 2012). Kyrgyzstan has a quite different admissions testing system policy as highlighted in some past studies. For example, Drummond and DeYoung (2003) were mostly negative about the UNT content but positive about the Kyrgyz UNT version called the NST as "the knowledge-based nature of UNT assesses how students memorize grammar rules and identify parts of speech, whereas the Kyrgyz NST relies on verbal skills." Valyayeva (2006) supported Drummond and DeYoung's (2003) view and highlighted the fact that the UNT in Kazakhstan was managed by a state body, whereas in Kyrgyzstan, the NST was managed by an independent NGO.

Many NST policy areas have interested researchers. For example, Kyrgyz researchers claimed that the NST tests such competencies as critical thinking, problem-solving, and the application of knowledge in real-life situations (CEATM report, 2010). "By simply introducing these concepts in testing, it was hoped, perhaps unrealistically, that the NST would positively influence teaching and learning processes" (Shamatov, 2012).

CEATM report (2010) also reported NST tested competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and the application of knowledge in real-life situations by introducing these concepts in testing. It was hoped, perhaps unrealistically, that the NST could positively influence teaching and learning processes (Shamatov, 2012), and the MoES claimed that the step-by-step education and testing situation would motivate the development of new teaching methods, styles, and standards (Drummond & DeYoung, 2003).

The situation about state scholarships in Kyrgyzstan is like the circumstances that prevail across the country. Young people whose families lack sufficient economic resources face difficulties in paying the requisite fees for their education. In such cases, youngsters must apply for the distribution of educational grants or receive social benefits to enroll in university programs (Shnarbekova, 2018).

In 2009, 33,579 students took the NST, and 4,928 were enrolled in budget-funded places at universities. These numbers represent grants that were awarded and accepted because some candidates refuse to accept grants if they are not awarded those for the university or area of study in which they are interested (Shamatov, 2012). Further, "The results of the NST show that rural students have benefited from the new system. However, the quality of each grant place is different because the specialties and universities vary in prestige" (Shamatov, 2012).

1.2. Purpose of study

Many studies have highlighted issues of high-stakes tests, including UNT in Kazakhstan, consequent students' academic performances at the university, and some solutions (Covarrubias et al., 2018) identified program components that helped or undermined participants' college adjustment and performance. However, fewer studies have been conducted on student perceptions of the relationships between the UNT subjects selected by them as their undergraduate majors and their chances of receiving state educational scholarships. It is important to understand the perceptions of students concerning the associations between their UNT scores, their choice of UNT subjects as their undergraduate majors, their chances of receiving state educational scholarships, and their subsequent academic performances at university. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the following research questions: What are the perceptions of a private university student on the relation between their UNT scores, their choice of UNT subjects as their undergraduate majors, their chances of receiving state educational scholarships, and their prospective academic performances at university?

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

A qualitative research approach was employed, the data were collected using semi-structured face-to-face interviews with fourth-year private university students to obtain opinions that went beyond the frame of the expected answers (Creswell, 2015).

2.1. Participants

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The research participants were selected using maximal variation sampling, which is generally employed when a researcher wants to capture a wider range of perspectives on a specific topic and seeks views from respondents whose thoughts are more extreme than the norm (Creswell, 2015). The students were varied by major, with one student in each major selected who had an extreme top UNT score and one student who had an extreme bottom UNT score being invited to the interview.

Thirty-four second-year students from a private university in Kazakhstan expressed a desire to participate in the interview. However, only 20 students were chosen for the study based on the following criteria: students who were awarded state scholarships (10) and students who were paying for their undergraduate study at the university (10). The selected students equally represented four majors, so they passed examinations on different UNT subjects. Finance students were required to take the Geography and Mathematics examinations; Geology majors, Physics and Mathematics; Nursing majors, Biology and Chemistry; and Law majors, World History and Individual, Society, and Law. The participants (nine males and 11 females) represented either the highest or the lowest scores in UNT or the highest or lowest total GPAs. The maximum UNT aggregate of 140 points comprises two elective subjects that determine the university major of undergraduate students and three core subjects, including the Basics of Reading, History of Kazakhstan, or the Basics of Mathematics (Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Characteristics

Participants	Gender	Age	*Major*	*Total GPA (max. 4.0, min. 0)*	UNT total score (max. 140, min. 50)	State scholarship owner or pay for study	UNT elective subjects
Participant 1	Male	21	Finance	3.8	95	Pay for Study	Geography Mathematics
Participant 2	Male	20	Finance	2.0	110	State scholarship owner	Geography Mathematics
Participant 3	Female		Finance	2.9	60	State scholarship owner	Geography Mathematics
Participant 4	Female		Finance	3.2	73	Pays for study	Geography Mathematics
Participant 5	Male	19	Finance	3.12	95	Pays for study	Geography Mathematics
Participant 6	Male	19	Geology	3.75	53	State scholarship owner	Physics Mathematics
Participant 7	Female	19	Geology	2.5	71	Pays for study	Physics Mathematics
Participant 8	Male		Geology	2.3.	61	State scholarship owner	Physics Mathematics
Participant 9	Female		Geology	3.3	72	State scholarship owner	Physics Mathematics
Participant 10	Female		Geology	2.9.	74	State scholarship owner	Physics Mathematics
Participant 11	Male	19	Nursing	3.5	89	Pays for study	Chemistry Biology
Participant 12	Female	21	Nursing	3.8	66	State scholarship owner	Chemistry Biology
Participant 13	Male		Nursing	2.7	67	Pays for study	Chemistry Biology
Participant 14	Female		Nursing	3.4.	65	State scholarship owner	Chemistry Biology
Participant 15	Female		Nursing	3.2	70	Pays for study	Chemistry Biology

Participant 16	Male	20	Law	3.75	121	State scholarship owner	World History Person, Society, Law
Participant 17	Female	20	Law	3.5	53	Pays for study	World History Person, Society, Law
Participant 18	Female		Law	2.9	67	State scholarship owner	World History Person, Society, Law
Participant 19	Male		Law	3.0	82	Pays for study	World History Person, Society, Law
Participant 20	Female		Law	2.9	98	Pays for study	World History Person, Society, Law

Note: UNT: Unified National Testing

2.2. Data collection tool

Data were collected through multiple sources including interviews, observations, documents, and statistical analyses. The respondents served as checks throughout the analysis process. An ongoing dialog with respondents regarding their real intentions and meanings and the inferences of researchers ensured the factual value of the data. Researchers offered respondents a clear, accurate, detailed account of the focus and methodologies of the study, that is, the roles discharged by the researchers, the positioning of informants and the criteria for their selection, the contexts through which data would be gathered, and data collection and analysis strategies. Reliability and validity were ensured by assigning three "coders" to independently code verbatim transcribed scripts to highlight themes. These coders then jointly discussed and arrived at a consensus on emerging thematic elements, ultimately determining the themes. In addition, the data were subjected to triangulation to ensure internal validity.

2.3. Analysis

The findings derived from the interviews were coded by three coders, interpreted, and divided into themes, as outlined in Creswell (2015). The analysis steps were as follows: (1) transcribing all tape-recorded data verbatim and comparing the scripts with the notes made during the interview, (2) coding the data, (3) using the codes to develop themes by combining and summarizing similar codes, and (4) connecting and synthesizing the finally emerged themes (Creswell, 2015).

3. RESULTS

Based on the analysis of the 20 participants' interview responses, five general themes were identified:(1) Factors that influenced academic performance, (2) connections between the UNT score and academic performance, (3) judgment on the policy of state educational scholarship distribution, (4) connections between UNT and future professional skills, and (5) suggestions for changes to the UNT. These themes corresponded with the perceptions of students about the relationships between UNT preparation at high school and academic performances at university, that is, their UNT scores, the UNT subjects they select as undergraduate majors, their chances of receiving state educational scholarships, and their subsequent academic performances at university.

3.1. Theme 1. Factors that influenced academic performance

The main drivers for good academic performance were found to be related to having a good academic background at high school, an orientation to achieve the highest scores in the group, a high level of interest in the chosen major, regular class preparation, parental or other pressures to get good marks, good living conditions that facilitated good study concentration, and financial incentives for good academic performance.

Participant 1 commented, "My main goal was to get only good marks as my state stipend was allocated only for good academic performance." Participant 14 stated, "Actually, I cannot imagine my life without learning to nurse. I was born to cure, and I like the subjects, which are directly connected with my future occupation,". Participant 4 then said, "In my opinion, students have to concentrate on good academic performance. The reason is that if you study well, you become a good professional. Good professionals cannot

appear from nothing, success is based on previous studies. The better the academic achievements in your student time, the better professional progress you have."

3.2. Theme 2. Connection between the UNT score and academic performance

The study has not found evidence that a high UNT score is associated with a high-level GPA or a successful professional career. During the interview on the connection between the UNT score and academic performance, Participant 2 asserted,

I cannot share any clear information about my academic performance and my UNT score. I know that there should be a connection, but this is not my case. I was proud of my UNT score, which provided me with open access to any education course and I chose finance as the most prestigious course. It turns out that it was not my cup of tea and I cannot say that I am proud of my study. So, I am a living example that a high UNT score does not guarantee high academic performance.

Participant 8 also highlighted the lack of connection between the students' total UNT score and their academic performance:

Nowadays, no one cares about the UNT score, but much more about their academic performance. The UNT is only a lottery, and you can easily get either the highest or the lowest score in UNT. It is not the case that is it related to academic performance. Academic performance is the result of consistent work, and good academic performance indicates your dedication toward your future profession.

Participant 17 also supported the idea that there was an inconsistency between UNT scores and academic performances, stating,

To be honest, I feel very surprised when people talk about the UNT score being a predictor of academic performance. I hardly managed to get the minimal UNT score, but currently, I am one of the best students in my cohort. So, studying for the UNT and studying for my future occupation are very different things.

From this quote, it can be seen that the students did not see any connection between the total UNT score and their academic performance or future careers.

3.3. Theme 3. Appraisal of the distribution policy of state educational scholarships

Most participants expressed generally neutral stances toward the distribution system of state scholarships; however, almost all the students suggested areas of modification for the system. The main issues brought forward by the participating students included unfair access to state scholarships for graduates from some disciplines or divergent school-based quality of education, uncertainty regarding their obligation to work in public sector organizations anywhere in Kazakhstan as compensation for being granted state funding, and the system's disregard for the desires of high school graduates in the allocation of scholarships for unpopular programs or study at non-prestigious universities in rural areas.

Participant 4 commented that it is a myth that the system of state scholarship distribution is fair and provides equal access for everyone: people with different backgrounds are not equally prepared for UNT and state scholarship competition. Many people are left behind in the case of state scholarships and cannot pay for education.

Participant 12 stated that she received a state scholarship with a rural quota, but I was the only one from my class who was lucky enough to get enough scores to take part in the competition. You know, the requirement is not just a total score of 50 but also at least 5 marks for each subject. I am thankful to my teachers but generally, the level of education does not let the majority of students pass the test properly and receive scholarships.

Participant 4 then said that their opinion, the system is not correct because there is a mismatch; on the one hand, scholarships are coming back to the state budget because people who need these scholarships cannot meet the requirements. On the other hand, people, who can meet the requirements, are at times not

willing to apply for these scholarships because of not receiving funding for the program or university of their choice.

Participant 18 asserted, "I am wondering what to do because I am a state scholarship student. I have already found a job at a company, but after graduation, I have to pay back my scholarship somewhere in a rural area. I don't know; maybe I will somehow combine the two."

3.4. Theme 4. UNT and future professional skills

It is vitally important to align previous studies with professional life. Almost all respondents were eager to become successful in their different areas. Although they did not see the connections between the total UNT score and professional skills, many pointed out that there was possibly a slight connection between the UNT elective subject score and their professional skills. Participant 6 stated,

To be honest, there is nothing illogical in the schema when you study the UNT subject "Physics" well and then you study the university subject "Oil and Gas Well Development" well. Professional skills are based on basic subjects, which are checked by UNT.

Surprisingly, for the finance major, the correlation was not significant. The participant felt that the subject identified as being associated with the college major was not truly representative of the skills required for the studies in that major.

How is it possible to connect a geography score with professional activity in the sphere of finance? For my future occupation, analytical and computer skills are in demand, but geography is only a general subject, which does not predict your success any more than any other subject, such as physical training. We can find a slight connection, but logically, they are not connected. UNT does not predict what kind of professional you will be.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that when a UNT elective subject was truly representative of the skills required for college studies in a particular major, the participants viewed the UNT subject scores as being a good predictor of success in the professional subject.

3.5. Theme 5. Recommendations to improve the UNT system

All participants said that when they were at school, they prioritized UNT rather than their future professions. Participant 6, for example, said, "My main goal was to successfully pass the UNT, which is why I did not worry much about my future career." "Participant 5 stated, "Actually, I did not imagine my future job so much at high school. I imagined only the UNT. If I got a high score on UNT, I would probably be able to choose my preferred job." Participant 4 commented that in her mind, students have to concentrate only on the main UNT subjects during high school. The reason is that it takes plenty of time to get ready for other subjects. For example, even if chemistry is not related to my future career, it is a must for the whole class to write lectures and do many tasks. In turn, this disturbs us in our preparation for the main test.

Almost all participants indicated that UNT should be better connected with future-occupation-related studies in college. Therefore, it could be concluded from the interviews that UNT should be better aligned with future occupations, and a shift should be made from the focus on memorization to the skills required for professional development and careers.

4. DISCUSSION

This study identified five main themes from the students' perceptions of the relationship between UNT preparation at high school and academic performance at university: (1) Factors that influence academic performance; (2) the connection between the UNT score and academic performance; (3) appraisal of the policy on the distribution of state educational scholarships; (4) UNT and future professional skills; and (5) suggested changes to UNT.

The study reveals that according to the students of one private university, academic success at the tertiary stage of education depends on the high school context, the orientation to achieve the highest scores in the group, and a high level of interest in the chosen major. In addition, these students believe that their total UNT

scores do not determine their academic success at the university. To predict their future academic success more accurately, the UNT should test the skills required for university studies in specific disciplines.

Most participants highlighted that the distribution system for state scholarships must ensure and enhance accessibility. The interviews indicate that the quality of school education differs from school to school; some school leavers are not able to compete for state scholarships because of different educational backgrounds. As a result, several high school graduates who desire to obtain scholarships are unable to meet the requirements for state scholarships. Thus, several applicants with high UNT scores do not apply for these scholarships to pursue programs or universities of their choice.

One of the delimitations of this study is that as all universities and high schools in Kazakhstan must follow the state standard for content and program structure, a private university does represent the majority of universities in the country. Despite the educational, socioeconomic, and cultural differences, and the small number of participants, the results of this study replicated the findings in previous research in Kyrgyzstan (Shamatov, 2012; Official site of the UNESCO office in Kazakhstan, 2005).

5. CONCLUSION

Several limitations must be acknowledged although the present study revealed several interesting findings about students' perceptions of the relation between their UNT score, their choice of UNT subjects as undergraduate majors, their chances of receiving state educational scholarships, and their subsequent academic performance at university. First, the results of the study cannot be generalized. It was assumed that the relation between the UNT scores of students, the UNT subjects they selected as undergraduate majors, their chances of receiving state educational scholarships, and their subsequent academic performances at university were more or less homogeneous; however, conditions may differ for state and private universities and different majors.

Second, because only two weeks were spent on the data collection process, there was a small number of participants (N = 20), which affected the generalizability of the results; however, further studies should include a larger sample. Third, there was a gender disparity in this study with only 42% male, which meant that the sample was not representative of the gender distribution in the population, which may have affected the results.

The main recommendation for future research is that the study should be replicated with universities from other regions. As students in rural areas might have less access to high-quality education to prepare for the UNT, these students may have a greater commitment to achieving higher academic performances than urban students.

This study questioned the reliability and validity of the UNT score, the viability of UNT subjects in predicting academic performance, and the chances of applicants receiving state educational scholarships. The studies reviewed in this paper investigated gender differences in the relation between academic performance and the UNT score, with some connecting admission test scores with students' sociocultural backgrounds. Therefore, further t-test statistical studies could be conducted to assess the gender differences between UNT scores and consequent academic performances.

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