Assessing student well-being indicators in the higher education context of Western Kazakhstan

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Abstract. This research examines the well-being indicators of students in Western Kazakhstan, focusing on four major cities: Aktobe, Aktau, Atyrau, and Uralsk. The research employed a quantitative methodology with a cross-sectional design, involving 1,377 students aged 16-21 from leading universities in these cities. The study utilized a questionnaire based on The Global Youth Wellbeing Index and youth development index calculation methodology developed by Kazakhstan's Ministry of Information and Social Development. The assessment covered six key domains: citizenship, economic opportunities, education, health, information and communication technologies (ICT), and security. The findings revealed an overall well-being index of 0.787 out of 1.00 across Western Kazakhstan as of August 2024, with variations among cities: Atyrau (0.809), Aktobe (0.784), Uralsk (0.780), and Aktau (0.778). The research demonstrated very high levels of well-being in education (0.84), ICT (0.83), and health (0.82) domains across all cities. Notable regional differences emerged, with Atyrau showing the highest scores in civic participation (0.79) and economic opportunities (0.83), while Aktobe led in ICT usage (0.86). The study provides valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions to enhance student well-being and development in Western Kazakhstan.

Keywords: youth well-being, positive youth development, youth well-being diagnostics.

Introduction

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index was established to evaluate how young people's environment contributes to their achievements across various life domains, including education, health, economic opportunities, and civic engagement (International Youth Foundation [IYF], 2017; Chaaban, 2016) [1-2]. This comprehensive tool also assesses youth security and access to information and technology in contemporary society (Goldin, 2014) [3]. The Youth Progress Index (YPI) represents a significant advancement in measuring young people's quality of life across different countries and globally. It has emerged as an "evidence-based tool for policymakers to make informed decisions in youth policy" (European Youth Forum [EYF], 2021, p. 4) [4]. Recent studies emphasize the importance of such indices in developing targeted youth policies and programs (Wood, 2023) [5].

The Global Youth Wellbeing Index evaluates youth well-being across 30 countries using 35 indicators (Rano, 2024) in seven key domains: gender equality, economic opportunity, education, healthcare, labor protection, civic participation, and information and communication technologies (ICT) (IYF, 2017). The index's methodology incorporates both quantitative metrics and qualitative perception-based indicators to present a comprehensive picture of youth well-being disparities 2023 (Eker, 2023). This multifaceted approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of youth development challenges and opportunities (Ott, 2024). The index not only provides an overview of youth circumstances but also identifies areas requiring improvement and investment. Its strengths include consideration of contemporary global trends such as climate change, digital transformation, and civic engagement patterns (EYF, 2021; Ratra, 2022). Recent research highlights how these trends significantly impact youth well-being and development opportunities (Tomyn, 2018) [6-10].

In the context of Kazakhstan, youth well-being assessment has become increasingly important for educational policy and practice. Studies indicate that understanding youth well-being in higher education contexts is crucial for developing effective support systems and educational programs (Knissarina et al., 2024). The country's focus on youth development aligns with global trends in prioritizing youth well-being as a key indicator of societal progress (Imanchiyev, 2023) [11-12].

The present study aims to evaluate the well-being index of student youth in Western Kazakhstan, measuring their civic participation, economic opportunities, educational access, health status, ICT usage, and security levels within the region. This research adopts a comprehensive approach to understanding youth well-being, reflecting recent theoretical developments in the field. The diagnostic results will identify factors influencing youth well-being and determine areas for improvement in creating a more supportive and developmental environment for young people. This research is particularly significant given the unique regional characteristics of Western Kazakhstan and its role in the country's educational landscape (Knissarina et al., 2024; Baikulova, 2024) [11;13].

The well-being of university students has become a central focus in academic research, with numerous studies examining various dimensions of this important construct. Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker (2019) conducted a comprehensive study examining Australian university students'

well-being, finding significant concerns about mental health among the student population. Their research, published in Higher Education Research & Development, emphasized the need for institutional support systems that address both academic and non-academic stressors affecting students [14].

Diener and Seligman (2004), in their influential work "Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being" published in Psychological Science in the Public Interest, established a framework for understanding subjective well-being that has been widely applied to student populations. Their research demonstrates that social relationships and engagement are stronger predictors of well-being than economic factors alone [15].

The World Health Organization (2020) released guidelines on promoting mental health and well-being among university students, highlighting a global approach to student wellness [16]. This report emphasizes preventative measures and early intervention strategies that universities can implement to support student flourishing. Keyes, Eisenberg, Perry, Dube, Kroenke, and Dhingra (2012) examined the relationship between mental health and academic performance in their study published in the Journal of American College Health. Their research revealed that students with positive mental health indicators demonstrated better academic outcomes and higher retention rates [17-18].

Huppert and So (2013), in their research published in Social Indicators Research, developed a multidimensional model of flourishing that has been particularly valuable for understanding student well-being. Their approach integrates both hedonic (pleasure-oriented) and eudaimonic (meaning-oriented) aspects of well-being [19].

Stallman (2010) conducted groundbreaking research on psychological distress among Australian university students, published in Studies in Higher Education. This work revealed significantly higher rates of psychological distress in university students compared to the general population, sparking increased attention to student mental health globally [20].

Ryff and Keyes (1995) developed the six-factor model of psychological well-being that continues to influence research on student well-being. Their dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance provide a comprehensive framework for understanding student flourishing beyond simple happiness measures [21].

The OECD (2021) "Education at a Glance" report includes specific indicators related to student well-being across member countries, providing valuable comparative data and highlighting the importance of institutional and policy factors in supporting student wellness [22].

McInnis (2004) examined the transition to university and its impact on student well-being in research published in Studies in Higher Education. This work emphasizes the critical nature of the first-year experience and the importance of orientation programs that support student adjustment [23].

Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone (2015), in their research published in The Lancet, explored the relationship between economic circumstances and subjective well-being, with specific applications to student populations facing financial stress. Their work demonstrates that financial hardship significantly impacts psychological well-being among students [24].

Current research on student well-being increasingly adopts holistic approaches that consider academic, psychological, social, and physical dimensions of wellness. This multidimensional

perspective recognizes that student flourishing depends on a complex interplay of personal, institutional, and societal factors.

Research question: What is the current level of well-being among university students in Western Kazakhstan higher education institutions, and what regional differences exist in well-being indicators across key domains (civic participation, economic opportunities, education, health, information and communication technologies, and security) in the four main cities of the region: Aktobe, Aktau, Atyrau, and Uralsk?

Methodology

Within the framework of this research, a positivist paradigm was employed, enabling a quantitative assessment of student well-being in four major cities of Western Kazakhstan (Aktobe, Aktau, Atyrau, Uralsk). The research was based on a quantitative cross-sectional design, which provided a current snapshot of facts, opinions, and behavioral patterns at the time of data collection.

The research sample consisted of 1,377 students from leading higher education institutions in Western Kazakhstan: West Kazakhstan Marat Ospanov Medical University (340 people, Aktobe), West Kazakhstan Makhambet Utemisov University (375 people, Uralsk), Sh. Yessenov Caspian University of Technology and Engineering (327 people, Aktau), and Kh. Dosmukhamedov Atyrau University (335 people, Atyrau). The age range of participants was from 16 to 21 years.

The research instrument used was a questionnaire developed based on The Global Youth Wellbeing Index and the youth development index calculation methodology proposed by the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The questionnaire included assessment of six key domains: citizenship, economic opportunities, education, health, information and communication technologies, and safety and security.

Data processing was carried out in stages: initial collection, accumulation, and systematization of information was conducted using MS Excel 2016, statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics version 26 (IBM Corp., USA), and data visualization was implemented through R 4.3.2.

The obtained quantitative data demonstrated statistical representativeness and revealed significant trends during quantitative analysis. To ensure comparability of indicators with different denominators across domains and their integration into a single assessment, a normalization or "grouping" process was conducted. Within this process, all indicators (question-answers) were scaled in a range from 0 to 1, where the maximum value was assessed as one and the minimum as zero. After normalizing all respondents' answers, the mean value (M) was determined for domains according to the established formula (figure 1).

Formula:

$$Indicator_p^{normal} = \frac{Max_p - Indicator_p}{Max_p - Min_p}$$

Translation of Explanation:

- $Indicator_p^{normal}$ — normalized value of indicator p;
- $Indicator_p$ — initial value of indicator p (where a higher value corresponds to a worse result);
- Max_p — maximum value of indicator p;
- Min_p — minimum value of indicator p.

Figure 1. Formula for Mean Value (M) by Domains

The determination of domain weight coefficients was carried out in accordance with the instructions from the Guide on Youth Well-being and Development Index, developed by the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS Statistical Committee) in 2021. When determining the weight of each domain, their significance was taken into account, with the key indicator being the positive response ("Yes") from respondents to the corresponding questionnaire items.

Discussion and Results

In accordance with the methodological requirement that the total weight of all domains should equal 1 (or 100%), the following weight coefficients were established for students in Western Kazakhstan: education and health received the highest weights - 0.1964 (19.64%) each, followed by information and communication technologies - 0.1894 (18.94%), economic opportunities - 0.1701 (17.01%), security - 0.1157 (11.57%), and civic participation - 0.1 (10%). The distribution of weight coefficients enabled a comprehensive assessment of student youth well-being, taking into account the significance of each component (Tables 1-4).

Table 1

Distribution of Weight Coefficients

City / Domain	Education	Health	Economic opportunities	Safety	Civic engagement	ICT
Western Kazakhstan	0,1964 (19,64%)	0,1964 (19,64%)	0,1701 (17,01%)	0,1157 (11,57%)	0,1 (10%)	0,1894 (18,94%)
Atyrau	0,1842 (18,42%)	0,1845 (18,45%)	0,1756 (17,56%)	0,1303 (13,03%)	0,1599 (15,99%)	0,1655 (16,55%)
Aktau	0,1931 (19,31%)	0,1904 (19,04%)	0,1728 (17,28%)	0,1303 (13,03%)	0,1386 (13,86%)	0,1884 (18,84%)

Uralsk	0,2025 (20,25%)	0,2067 (20,67%)	0,1611 (16,11%)	0,1130 (11,30%)	0,1197 (11,97%)	0,1971 (19,71%)
Aktobe	0,1842 (18,42%)	0,2043 (20,43%)	0,1712 (17,12%)	0,1011 (10,11%)	0,1085 (10,85%)	0,2084 (20,84%)

The methodology for determining weight coefficients in the composite index is characterized by a variety of approaches - from strictly statistical to normatively justified, with no universal method existing. The statistical approach uses variance analysis to establish indicator priorities, however, this method does not consider the importance of indicators as a normative concept. In the Global Youth Well-being Index, weight coefficients are determined based on a comprehensive approach that includes analysis of empirical data on youth development, expert assessments using the analytic hierarchy process, evaluation of technical validity and data reliability, as well as normative judgments from specialists in the field.

Table 2

Comparison of Domain Values Based on Respondents' Age

Domain	Age category			
	16-18 years old (0)		18-21 years old (1)	
	M±SD	95% ДИ	M±SD	95% ДИ
Civic engagement	0,71±0,28	0,68-0,73	0,64±0,29	0,62-0,67
Economic opportunities	0,82±0,21	0,80-0,83	0,77±0,23	0,75-0,78
Education	0,86±0,20	0,84-0,87	0,83±0,20	0,81-0,84
Health	0,84±0,21	0,82-0,86	0,80±0,23	0,78-0,82
ICT	0,84±0,19	0,82-0,85	0,82±0,20	0,81-0,84
Safety	0,67±0,22	0,65-0,69	0,62±0,23	0,61-0,64

Note:
M – mean value
SD – standard deviation
CI – confidence interval for the mean (lower/upper bounds)

Table 3

Comparison of domain values depending on the gender of respondents

Domain	Gender			
	Female (0)		Male (1)	
	M±SD	95% ДИ	M±SD	95% ДИ
Civic engagement	0,69±0,28	0,66-0,70	0,66±0,30	0,63-0,69
Economic opportunities	0,80±0,21	0,79-0,82	0,76±0,25	0,73-0,78
Education	0,86±0,19	0,85-0,87	0,82±0,23	0,75-0,84

Health	0,83±0,21	0,82±0,85	0,82±0,26	0,78-0,83
ICT	0,85±0,18	0,84±0,86	0,80±0,22	0,78-0,82
Safety	0,66±0,22	0,65±0,67	0,62±0,25	0,60-0,65

Note:

M - mean value

SD - standard deviation

CI - confidence interval for the mean (lower/upper bounds)

Comparative analysis of domain values across the four studied cities of Western Kazakhstan (Table 3) revealed significant regional differentiation in indicators. In the "civic participation" domain, the maximum indicator was recorded in Atyrau (0.79), while the minimum was in Aktobe (0.60). In the sphere of economic opportunities, Atyrau also leads with an index of 0.83, while the lowest value was noted in Uralsk (0.77).

Analysis of the educational domain shows equal maximum indicators (0.85) in three cities – Aktobe, Uralsk, and Atyrau, while Aktau recorded a slightly lower value (0.83). In the health domain, the highest indicators (0.83) were shared by Uralsk and Atyrau, with the minimum value noted in Aktau (0.81).

In the sphere of information and communication technologies, Aktobe holds the leading position (0.86), while the lowest indicator was recorded in Atyrau (0.81). The security domain is characterized by the highest value in Atyrau (0.72) and the lowest in Aktobe (0.61).

Table 4

Comparison of Domain Values Based on Respondents' Age

| Домен	Universities							
	0 (Aktobe)		1 (Uralsk)		2 (Aktau)		3 (Atyrau)	
	M±SD	95% ДИ	M±SD	95% ДИ	M±SD	95% ДИ	M±SD	95% ДИ
Civic engage-ment	0,60±0,28	0,57-0,63	0,62±0,29	0,59-0,65	0,71±0,27	0,68-0,74	0,79±0,26	0,76-0,81
Economic oppor-tunities	0,78±0,21	0,76-0,80	0,77±0,21	0,75-0,79	0,78±0,25	0,75-0,81	0,83±0,23	0,80-0,85
Education	0,85±0,19	0,83-0,87	0,85±0,19	0,83-0,87	0,83±0,24	0,80-0,86	0,85±0,21	0,83-0,88
Health	0,82±0,21	0,80-0,85	0,83±0,22	0,81-0,86	0,81±0,24	0,78-0,83	0,83±0,24	0,81-0,86
ICT	0,86±0,18	0,84-0,88	0,84±0,19	0,83-0,86	0,83±0,21	0,81-0,85	0,81±0,22	0,79-0,83
Safety	0,61±0,20	0,59-0,63	0,63±0,22	0,61-0,66	0,63±0,25	0,61-0,66	0,72±0,23	0,69-0,74

Note:

M – mean value

SD – standard deviation

CI – confidence interval for the mean (lower/upper bounds)

The domain weight coefficients in the Global Youth Well-being Index reflect their comparative significance in forming overall well-being. The calculation of the integral index based on established weights allows for identification of priority areas requiring targeted intervention to improve youth well-being levels. In the research methodology, a value of "1" corresponds to 100% well-being indicator, while the overall personal well-being scale is differentiated into five levels: low (0-0.494), medium (>0.494-0.607), high (>0.607-0.671), rather high (>0.671-0.810), and very high (>0.811-1).

According to the research results, the integral well-being index of students in Western Kazakhstan as of August 2024 was 0.787 out of 1.00 (Figure 2), corresponding to a rather high level. Regional analysis demonstrates the following index values: Atyrau – 0.809432 (highest indicator in the region), Aktobe – 0.783888, Uralsk – 0.780252, and Aktau – 0.778311, which indicates significant territorial differentiation in student youth well-being indicators.
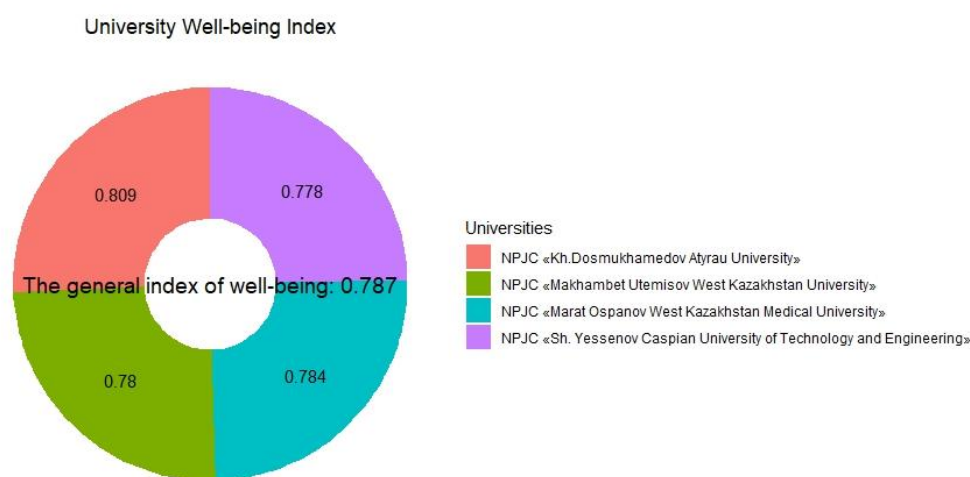
**Figure 2. Index of well-being of students in Western Kazakhstan**

The graphical data visualization presents a comprehensive assessment of youth's subjective perception of well-being in the studied cities. Quantitative indicators are distributed in the range from 0 to 1, with values ranked from maximum to minimum. For visual differentiation of well-being levels, a graduated color indication is used, where yellow corresponds to high well-being levels, orange to medium levels, and red to low levels of youth well-being. Thus, Figure 3 shows that young people have very high levels of well-being in three domains: "education" – 0.84; "ICT" – 0.83; "health" – 0.82, while results in other domains also indicate a sufficient level of youth well-being (Figure 3).
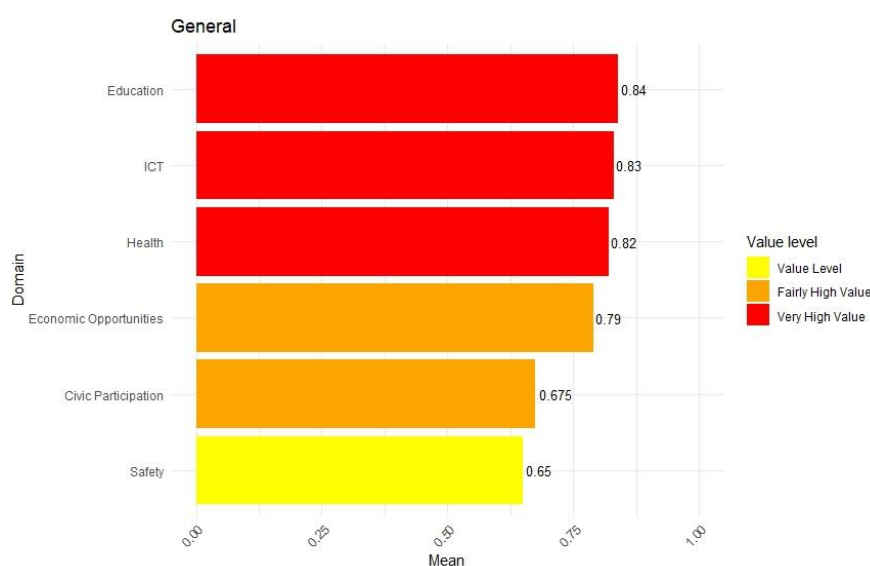
Figure 3.The average value for normalization of all received data

In the city of Aktau, the well-being index remains at a very high value for the domains "Education" – 0.83; "ICT" – 0.83 than other domains (Figure 4).
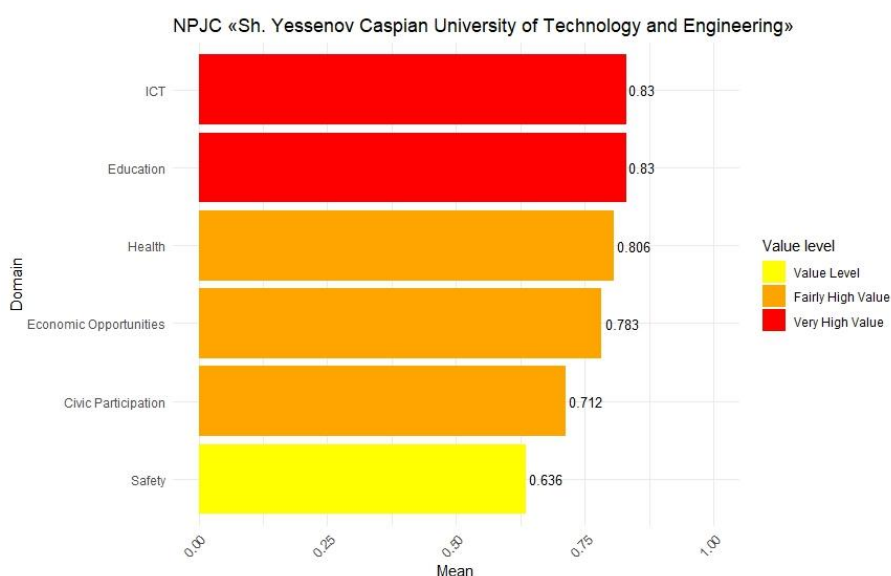

Figure 4. The average value for normalization of the received data for Aktau

In the city of Uralsk, the well-being index remains at a very high value for the domains "Education" – 0.849; "ICT" – 0.844; "Health" – 0.834, in comparison to other domains (Figure 5).
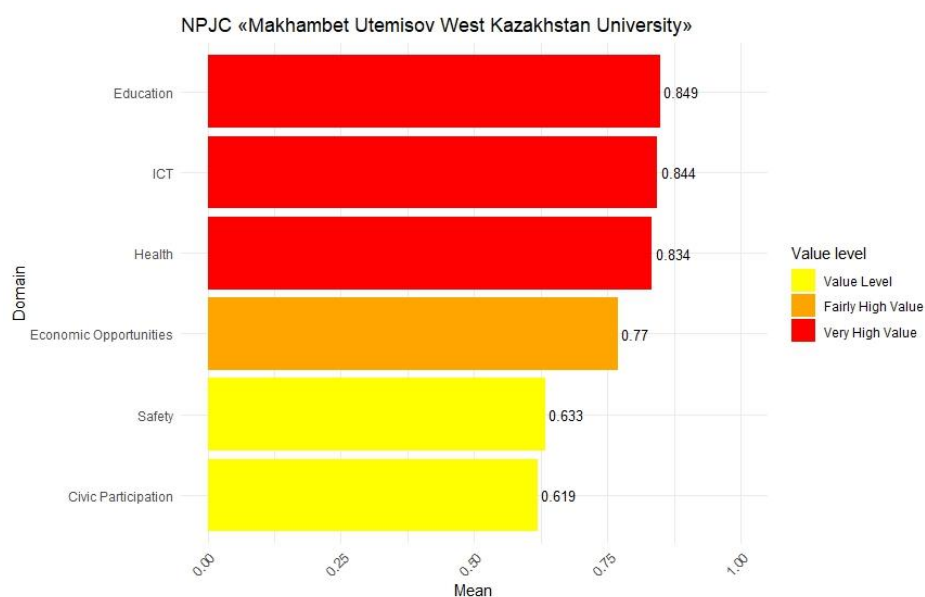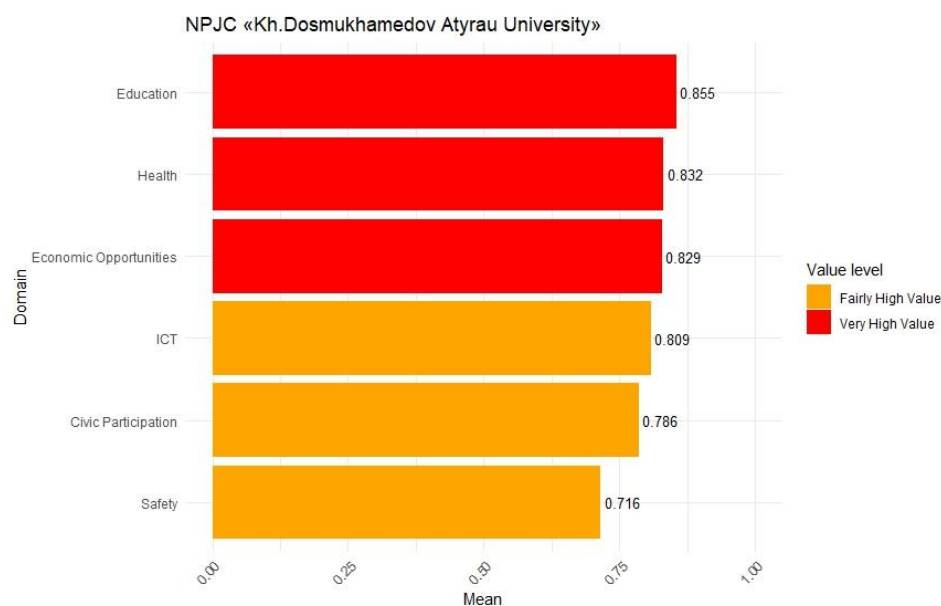
Figure 5. Mean Value of Normalized Data for Uralsk

For the city of Aktobe, the well-being index maintains very high values in the domains of "ICT" – 0.857; "Education" – 0.855; "Health" – 0.823, compared to other domains (Figure 6).
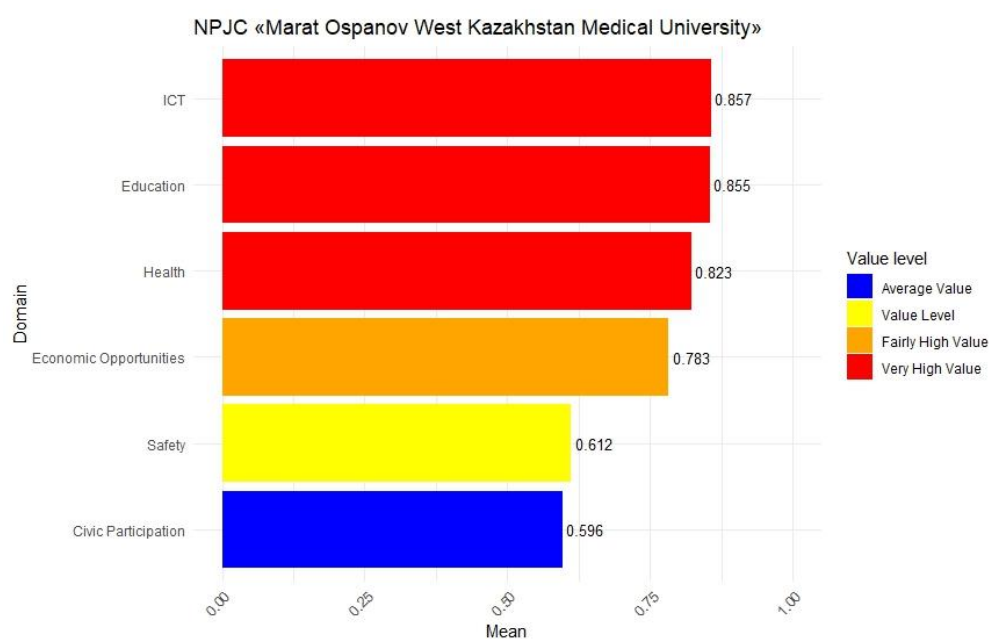
Figure 6. Mean Value of Normalized Data for Aktobe

For the city of Atyrau, the well-being index maintains very high values in the domains of "Education" – 0.855; "Health" – 0.832; "Economic opportunities" – 0.829, compared to other domains (Figure 7).

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Figure 7. Mean Value of Normalized Data for Atyrau

Based on the comparative analysis of empirical data, significant territorial differentiation has been revealed in the distribution of weight coefficients across wellbeing domains among students in urban centers of Western Kazakhstan. The research has established that the domain structure of wellbeing is characterized by substantial heterogeneity across territories. Specifically, the educational domain shows maximum concentration in Uralsk (20.25%), which may be determined by developed educational infrastructure and effective implementation of educational programs. Meanwhile, the minimum value of this indicator was recorded in Atyrau (18.42%), indicating potential disparities in the educational support system. Analysis of the "Health" domain revealed its dominance in Uralsk and Aktobe (20.67% and 20.43% respectively), demonstrating high efficiency of regional healthcare systems and the prevalence of health-preserving practices in these locations. Contrasting indicators are observed in Aktau (19.04%), which may be attributed to the specifics of territorial organization of medical services. In the structure of the economic domain, Atyrau holds the leading position (17.56%), correlating with the region's high level of economic potential. The minimum values recorded in Uralsk (16.11%) can be interpreted as an indicator of relatively low economic activity and limited resource base. The security domain demonstrates a bimodal distribution with maximum values in Atyrau and Aktau (13.03%), which may be determined by the specific socio-demographic structure of these urban centers. The minimum indicator in Aktobe (10.11%) suggests potential deficits in the public security system. In the sphere of civic participation, there is significant dispersion of indicators: from the maximum value in Atyrau (15.99%) to the minimum in Uralsk (11.97%) and Aktobe (10.85%), reflecting substantial differences in the development level of civic institutions and social activity of the population. The Information and Communication Technology domain is characterized by pronounced asymmetry with predominance in Aktobe (20.84%) and minimization in Atyrau (16.55%), which may be due to differentiation in the level of digital

infrastructure and accessibility of information technologies. The research results confirm the presence of pronounced territorial heterogeneity in the structure of wellbeing domains, necessitating the implementation of a differentiated approach to developing and implementing youth wellbeing enhancement programs, taking into account regional specifics.

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of student well-being across major urban centers in Western Kazakhstan reveals a complex interplay of regional factors influencing youth development. The findings demonstrate that while overall well-being levels are relatively high (0.787 out of 1.00), there are notable regional variations that warrant attention from policymakers and educational institutions. The observed differences in domain weights across cities – particularly in civic engagement (ranging from 10.85% in Aktobe to 15.99% in Atyrau) and ICT utilization (from 16.55% in Atyrau to 20.84% in Aktobe) – suggest that local socioeconomic conditions significantly influence student well-being outcomes. These findings have important implications for higher education policy in Kazakhstan. First, they indicate the need for regionally tailored approaches to student support services, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. Second, the strong performance in education (0.84), ICT (0.83), and health (0.82) domains across all cities suggests that recent investments in these areas have been effective, providing a foundation for further development. However, the lower scores in civic participation and security domains highlight areas requiring additional attention and resource allocation.

The territorial heterogeneity in well-being indicators suggests that future policy initiatives should focus on reducing regional disparities while building upon existing strengths in each city, including creating inter-university networks for resource sharing and establishing regional centers of excellence that leverage each city's unique advantages. Future research should explore the longitudinal dynamics of student well-being and investigate specific factors contributing to regional variations. Comparative studies with other regions of Kazakhstan could provide valuable insights for national educational policy development and implementation.

Authors' contribution:

A. Syzdykbayeva – conceptualization of the research, methodology development, data collection and analysis, writing the initial draft of the article;

M. Knissarina – scientific supervision, critical analysis and text refinement, validation of research results;

G. Onlanbekkyzy – data collection, statistical analysis, visualization of results;

A. Baikulova – literature review, technical preparation of the manuscript, editing and text refinement.

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Оценка показателей благополучия студентов в контексте высшего образования Западного Казахстана

Аннотация. В данном исследовании рассматриваются показатели благополучия студентов Западного Казахстана с фокусом на четыре крупных города: Актобе, Актау, Атырау и Уральск. В исследовании использовалась количественная методология с поперечным дизайном, охватывающая 1377 студентов в возрасте 16-21 год из ведущих университетов этих городов. В исследовании использовалась анкета, основанная на Глобальном индексе благополучия молодежи и методологии расчета индекса развития молодежи, разработанной Министерством

информации и общественного развития Казахстана. Оценка охватывала шесть ключевых областей: гражданственность, экономические возможности, образование, здоровье, информационно-коммуникационные технологии (ИКТ) и безопасность. Результаты показали общий индекс благополучия 0,787 из 1,00 по Западному Казахстану по состоянию на август 2024 года с вариациями по городам: Атырау (0,809), Актобе (0,784), Уральск (0,780) и Актау (0,778). Исследование продемонстрировало очень высокий уровень благополучия в сферах образования (0,84), ИКТ (0,83) и здоровья (0,82) во всех городах. Выявились заметные региональные различия: Атырау показал самые высокие показатели по гражданскому участию (0,79) и экономическим возможностям (0,83), в то время как Актобе лидировал в использовании ИКТ (0,86). Исследование предоставляет ценную информацию для политиков и образовательных учреждений по улучшению благополучия и развития студентов в Западном Казахстане.

Ключевые слова: благополучие молодежи, позитивное развитие молодежи, диагностика благополучия молодежи.

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Батыс Қазақстанның жоғары білім беру контекстіндегі студенттердің әл-ауқат көрсеткіштерін бағалау

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеу Батыс Қазақстанның төрт ірі қаласы: Ақтөбе, Ақтау, Атырау және Орал қалаларындағы студенттердің әл-ауқат көрсеткіштерін зерттейді. Зерттеуде осы қалалардың жетекші университеттерінен 16-21 жас аралығындағы 1377 студентті қамтыған көлденең дизайны бар сандық әдіснама қолданылды. Зерттеуде Жаһандық жастар әл-ауқаты индексі және Қазақстанның Ақпарат және қоғамдық даму министрлігі әзірлеген жастар даму индексін есептеу әдістемесіне негізделген сауалнама пайдаланылды. Бағалау алты негізгі салаға назар аударды: азаматтық, экономикалық мүмкіндіктер, білім беру, денсаулық, ақпараттық-коммуникациялық технологиялар (АКТ) және қауіпсіздік. Нәтижелер 2024 жылдың тамыз айындағы жағдай бойынша Батыс Қазақстан бойынша жалпы әл-ауқат индексі 1,00-ден 0,787 құрағанын көрсетті, қалалар бойынша айырмашылықтар: Атырау (0,809), Ақтөбе (0,784), Орал (0,780) және Ақтау (0,778). Зерттеу барлық қалаларда білім беру (0,84), АКТ (0,83) және денсаулық (0,82) салаларында әл-ауқаттың өте жоғары деңгейін көрсетті. Елеулі аймақтық айырмашылықтар анықталды: Атырау азаматтық қатысу (0,79) және экономикалық мүмкіндіктер (0,83) бойынша ең жоғары көрсеткіштерді көрсетсе, Ақтөбе АКТ пайдалану бойынша көш бастады (0,86). Зерттеу саясаткерлер мен білім беру мекемелеріне Батыс Қазақстандағы студенттердің әл-ауқаты мен дамуын жақсарту үшін құнды ақпарат береді.

Түйінді сөздер: жастардың әл-ауқаты, жастардың оң дамуы, жастардың әл-ауқатын диаг-ностикалау.

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