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DIGITAL EDUCATION, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND BARRIERS TO INCLUSION: THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT. Against the backdrop of Kazakhstan's accelerated digital transformation, issues of social mobility and inclusive development are becoming especially relevant. The article examines the role of national digital educational platforms — OpenU, Skills.Enbek, and AI-Sana — in expanding educational opportunities and supporting social mobility for vulnerable groups. The theoretical framework is based on the concepts of human capital, digital inequality, and institutional economics. Comparative and content analysis methods are used, and the empirical base includes strategic documents, official reports, and data on the functioning of the platforms in question. The results show that despite significant progress in expanding access to digital education, their impact is constrained by a number of factors, including institutional limitations, differences in the development of digital infrastructure across regions, and insufficient recognition of alternative educational certificates in the labor market. At the same time, there remains a risk of reproducing inequality, especially in the context of limited digital literacy and persistent labor market segmentation. It is concluded that there is a need to develop a coordinated state policy, recognize digital qualifications, and adapt EdTech initiatives to regional and social characteristics.

KEYWORDS: digital education, social mobility, digital inequality, inclusion, digital platforms, human capital

Цифровое образование, социальная мобильность и барьеры инклюзии: кейс Казахстана

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АННОТАЦИЯ. На фоне ускоренной цифровой трансформации Казахстана вопросы социальной мобильности и инклюзивного развития приобретают особую актуальность. В статье исследуется роль национальных цифровых образовательных платформ — OpenU, Skills. Enbek и AI-Sana — в расширении образовательных возможностей и поддержке социальной мобильности уязвимых групп населения. Теоретическая рамка основана на концепциях человеческого капитала, цифрового неравенства и институциональной экономики. Использованы методы сравнительного и контент-анализа, а эмпирическая база включает стратегические документы, официальные отчёты и данные по функционированию рассматриваемых платформ. Результаты показывают, что несмотря на заметный прогресс в расширении доступа к цифровому образованию, их влияние сдерживается рядом факторов, включая институционные ограничения, различия в развитии цифровой инфраструктуры по регионам и недостаточное признание альтернативных образовательных сертификатов на рынке труда. При этом сохраняется риск воспроизводства неравенства, особенно в условиях ограниченной цифровой грамотности и сохраняющейся сегментированности рынка труда. Сделан вывод о необходимости формирования координированной государственной политики, признания цифровых квалификаций и адаптации EdTech-инициатив к региональным и социальным особенностям.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: цифровое образование, социальная мобильность, цифровое неравенство, инклюзия, цифровые платформы, человеческий капитал.

Цифрлық білім беру, әлеуметтік мобильділік және инклюзияға кедергілер: Қазақстан кейсы

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АҢДАТПА. Қазақстанның жеделдетілген цифрлық трансформациясы аясында әлеуметтік ұтқырлық және инклюзивті даму мәселелері ерекше өзекті болуда. Мақалада ұлттық цифрлық білім беру платформаларының — OpenU, Skills.Enbek және AI-Sana - білім беру мүмкіндіктерін кеңейтудегі және халықтың осал топтары үшін әлеуметтік ұтқырлықты қолдаудағы рөлі қарастырылады. Теориялық негіз адами капитал, цифрлық теңсіздік және институционалдық экономика тұжырымдамаларына негізделген. Салыстырмалы және мазмұнды талдау әдістері қолданылады, эмпирикалық базаға стратегиялық құжаттар, ресми есептер және қарастырылып отырған платформалардың жұмысы туралы деректер кіреді. Нәтижелер цифрлық білімге қолжетімділікті кеңейтудегі елеулі прогреске қарамастан, олардың ықпалы бірқатар факторлармен, соның ішінде институционалдық шектеулермен, өңірлер бойынша цифрлық инфрақұрылымды дамытудағы айырмашылықтармен және еңбек нарығында баламалы білім туралы сертификаттардың жеткіліксіз мойындалуымен шектелетінін көрсетеді. Бұл ретте, әсіресе шектеулі цифрлық сауаттылық пен тұрақты еңбек нарығын сегменттеу жағдайында теңсіздікті қайта өндіру қаупі сақталады. Келісілген мемлекеттік саясатты әзірлеу, цифрлық біліктілікті тану және EdTech бастамаларын аймақтық және әлеуметтік сипаттамаларға бейімдеу қажет деген қорытынды жасалды.

ТҮЙІНДІ СӨЗДЕР: цифрлық білім, әлеуметтік мобильділік, цифрлық теңсіздік, инклюзив, цифрлық платформалар, адами капитал

INTRODUCTION. Social mobility and inclusion have increasingly become central themes in discussions of inequality. While income inequality remains a key indicator of societal stratification, broader concepts—such as the ability to move between social strata and access new economic opportunities—provide a more comprehensive lens for analyzing the dynamics of inequality. Classical political economists, such as Smith and Ricardo, viewed inequality primarily as a result of income distribution across production factors. Later, neoclassical economists—including Schultz, Becker, and Mincer—shifted attention to individual productivity, emphasizing education, experience, and skill acquisition as drivers of both income and upward mobility. However, more recent research by Muszyńska and Wędrowska [1] shows that equal educational investments do not ensure equal opportunities for advancement, as structural factors—such as institutional contexts, social background, and labor market segmentation—significantly shape individual life chances.

Further insights from labor market segmentation theory highlight that access to stable, well-paying jobs—and by extension, opportunities for social mobility—is often determined more by structural advantages than by individual merit.

Kaboth et al. [2], examining the German context, demonstrate how employment trajectories are shaped by these dynamics. Political economy and institutional analyses add yet another dimension by highlighting how fiscal policy, welfare systems, and the strength of labor institutions affect the inclusivity of economic opportunities. Studies by Rau and Stokes [3] and Ahlquist [4] link persistent inequality to weakening democratic institutions and eroding labor protections, which in turn restrict social mobility for disadvantaged groups. Contemporary understandings of inequality, therefore, encompass not only economic but also political, institutional, and technological factors that influence inclusion and mobility [5–7].

In Kazakhstan, fostering inclusive social mobility increasingly requires addressing the digital divide. Digital education platforms are promoted as tools for expanding access to skills and knowledge that can enable upward mobility, particularly for vulnerable populations. However, disparities in digital access present significant barriers to realizing this potential. Digital inequality extends beyond internet connectivity to include access to devices, digital proficiency, frequency of use, and the broader institutional environment. These factors interact with systemic issues such as affordability, the availability of localized support, and gaps in policy implementation [8–14].

Table 1- Key Indicators of Digital Inequality

Indicator	Description
Connectivity level	Availability and quality of stable internet across regions
Device access	Availability of modern smartphones, laptops, or relevant devices
Digital literacy	Skills in using ICTs for information, communication, work
Motivation & usage	Frequency and confidence in applying ICTs in daily life
Infrastructure & support	Access to online services, courses, technical support
Institutional & policy barriers	Affordability, regulation, and lack of policy coherence

**Note: Prepared by the authors based on sources [2–12]; these indicators represent key structural factors influencing access to digital education and shaping opportunities for social mobility and inclusion.*

As summarized in Table 1, key indicators of digital inequality encompass not only technical factors—such as connectivity and device access—but also human and institutional dimensions that critically shape the ability of individuals and communities to engage with digital education. Without targeted efforts to address these gaps, digital education risks perpetuating existing patterns of exclusion rather than fostering pathways to inclusive social mobility. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is therefore essential for designing digital education strategies that effectively promote equitable access, support lifelong learning, and enhance social mobility across Kazakhstan's diverse regions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS OF RESEARCH. This study draws on qualitative methods at multiple levels to explore how three national digital educational platforms—OpenU, Skills.Enbek, and AI-Sana—contribute to fostering social mobility and addressing barriers to inclusion in Kazakhstan. The research is grounded in institutional and human capital theory and informed by concepts from the literature on digital inequality.

The empirical foundation of the study includes an in-depth review of national strategic documents (such as Digital Kazakhstan), government reports, and publicly available statistics related to digital literacy and access to education. In addition, detailed case studies of the three platforms were developed by analyzing open-source data, official publications, and media reports. These case studies focus on various dimensions of platform performance, including functionality, user profiles, course offerings, certification outcomes, and geographic reach.

To better understand regional differences, a comparative analysis was conducted across Kazakhstan's regions, with particular attention to variations in digital infrastructure, levels of digital literacy, and accessibility of EdTech services. Content analysis was also applied to assess how these platforms address key aspects of social mobility: improving access to education, developing digital skills, and facilitating integration into the labor market—especially for vulnerable and underserved groups.

Finally, the study critically examines systemic factors that may hinder inclusive outcomes. These include the limited institutional recognition of digital credentials, persistent labor market segmentation, and uneven development of digital capacities across regions. By combining these methodological approaches, the study aims to provide a more grounded understanding of how digital education intersects with broader structural dynamics that shape opportunities for social mobility in Kazakhstan.

RESULTS AND THEIR DISCUSSION. The data presented in Figure 1 reveals notable regional disparities in digital literacy across Kazakhstan in 2024, even as the country has made substantial progress at the national level. Republican cities such as Astana and Almaty report near-universal digital proficiency—97.1% and 96.9%, respectively—benefiting from well-developed digital infrastructure, widespread access to e-services, and strong IT education ecosystems. Their early transition to advanced levels of digital maturity, largely completed by 2022, remains an exception rather than the norm across other regions.

In contrast, a number of regions demonstrate varied outcomes. Turkistan (93.5%), Kostanay (91.9%), and Kyzylorda (91.1%) show relatively high levels of digital literacy, supported by targeted initiatives under the Digital Kazakhstan program, including the active use of platforms such as Skills.Enbek. However, progress has been uneven. Regions such as Zhambyl, Pavlodar, Atyrau, West Kazakhstan, and particularly North Kazakhstan and Mangystau

continue to lag behind, with digital literacy rates below 88% and little improvement since 2021.

Newly established regions present a mixed picture. Ulytau reports comparatively strong results (91.2%), likely reflecting inherited infrastructure advantages, while Jetisu (88.7%) and Abai (86.6%) face structural challenges, such as limited investment in digital hubs and inconsistent policy support [16-18].

These patterns suggest that future digital inclusion efforts in Kazakhstan must account for regional differences not only in infrastructure, but also in local capacity, skills development, and the availability of ongoing support. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. Instead, tailored strategies that address the specific needs of each region will be essential to ensuring that digital education can contribute meaningfully to greater social and economic inclusion.

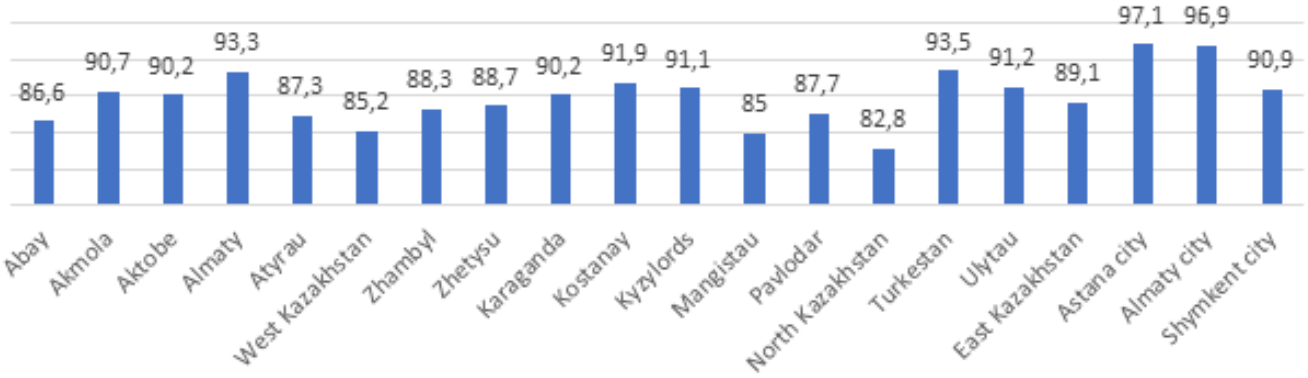

Figure 1 – The level of digital literacy of the population by regions of Kazakhstan in 2024, %

**Note: prepared by the authors based on sources [15]*

Regional differences in digital literacy across Kazakhstan highlight the limitations of a uniform national approach. While general access to digital technologies has improved, developing meaningful digital competencies now requires more than basic connectivity. Skills such as data literacy, online safety, and critical thinking are becoming essential for full participation in digital life. In regions where digital proficiency remains low, this limits access to online services, remote employment, and educational opportunities, further deepening existing inequalities.

In particular, low-income households often face compounded disadvantages. Limited access to digital infrastructure, financial barriers to device ownership, and gaps in digital skills contribute to a cycle where educational and economic inequalities reinforce one another. Addressing these challenges requires not only investments in infrastructure and training but also policies that are responsive to local contexts and support digital inclusion as a key element of both education and employment strategies.

Among national digital initiatives, the OpenU platform has played a notable role in expanding access to online learning. Developed by the National Translation Bureau in collaboration with leading Kazakhstani universities, OpenU is built on the Open edX platform and offers more than 110 courses in Kazakh and Russian, covering subjects such as IT, business, humanities, and science [1]. Learning is asynchronous and supported by a range of digital resources. By 2018, over 1,000 students had completed courses, with a significant portion of the content available in Kazakh [2; 3]. OpenU's flexible format makes it particularly valuable for learners outside major urban centers.

Skills.Enbek, launched in 2021 by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, focuses on practical skills development. The platform offers over 850 courses, with 300 available free of charge. By 2023, it had attracted more than 145,500 users, including unemployed individuals, young people, and older adults participating in the Silver Age program [5; 6]. Courses cover topics such as e-commerce, social media marketing, and retraining for older workers. Notably, Skills.Enbek partners with both domestic and international organizations, including Nazarbayev University and Yandex Kazakhstan, to enhance its offerings.

The AI-Sana initiative, led by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, aims to strengthen Kazakhstan's capacity in artificial intelligence and DeepTech. Since its launch, AI-Sana has reached over 100,000 learners and aspires to train one million citizens by 2025 [16, 19–20]. The program incorporates international collaborations, such as with the TUMO Center and instructors from Stanford University. It also seeks to foster entrepreneurship, with plans to support the creation of 1,000 to 1,500 AI-focused startups [21-22]. While ambitious in scope, the program's success will depend on ensuring that foundational digital skills are widely accessible, particularly in less digitally advanced regions.

Overall, these platforms reflect significant progress in expanding digital learning opportunities across Kazakhstan. However, their effectiveness continues to be shaped by broader structural factors, including regional disparities in infrastructure, variations in digital literacy, and the uneven integration of digital credentials into the labor market. As such, the role of digital education in promoting social mobility will depend not only on the quality of platform offerings but also on sustained efforts to address these underlying challenges.

CONCLUSION. Theoretical perspectives on labor market segmentation, institutional constraints, and intergenerational inequality cycles highlight that digital education must be understood not merely as a technical tool, but as part of a broader strategy to promote social mobility and foster inclusive development. Without systemic recognition of micro-credentials and their integration into formal employment pathways, the ability of digital education to enhance life chances remains limited. Persistent digital divides—along geographic, gender, and income lines—continue to determine who benefits from digital learning opportunities. Furthermore, the feedback loop between poverty, limited educational access, and weak digital skills risks reinforcing, rather than reducing, patterns of social exclusion.

This study has explored the role of national digital educational platforms—OpenU, Skills.Enbek, and AI-Sana—in supporting social mobility and addressing barriers to inclusion in Kazakhstan. These platforms have expanded learning opportunities, contributed to the development of digital competencies, and targeted diverse groups, including youth, unemployed individuals, and older citizens. However, their potential to facilitate upward mobility and

foster inclusive participation is constrained by systemic institutional barriers, regional disparities in digital infrastructure, and the insufficient labor market recognition of alternative educational credentials.

Kazakhstan's experience demonstrates that advancing social mobility through digital education requires embedding EdTech initiatives within a comprehensive policy framework aimed at enhancing both educational and labor market inclusion. EdTech should not be viewed as a standalone solution, but as part of an integrated ecosystem that connects education, employment, and digital equity. Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of digital learning on social mobility outcomes, the effectiveness of micro-credential recognition, and the role of public-private partnerships in scaling inclusive innovations. In this context, digital platforms can become powerful instruments for promoting social mobility and overcoming barriers to inclusion—provided they are supported by systemic efforts to ensure equitable access and structural support for disadvantaged populations.

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