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INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF STUDENT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN KAZAKHSTANI HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Malika Karieva: Institutionalization of student community engagement in Kazakhstani higher education
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Community engagement of higher education has been an increasingly important priority for educational policymaking around the world. In Central Asia, and specifically in Kazakhstan, there has been a limited amount of research on this topic. Therefore, the present qualitative case study explores the student community engagement practices in a subject university in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and what factors influence its realization, using the framework of institutionalization. The institutionalization of student community engagement is categorized into two elements: its added value as seen by students and administrators, and its compatibility with the university's internal and external norms and requirements.

The findings suggest that both added value and compatibility of student community engagement at the subject university are moderate. While student community engagement is not explicitly indicated as a policy priority on a country and institutional level, a number of related activities emerged, including projects done by students in student organizations, projects led by individual faculty members interested in the topic, and inclusivity related efforts.

Keywords: community engagement, institutionalization, higher education in Central Asia, higher education in Kazakhstan, service learning, student community engagement, student volunteerism

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Institutionalization of student community engagement in Kazakhstani higher education

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submitted by

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Statutory Declaration

I, Malika Karieva, hereby declare,

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2. that I have not used my Master's thesis or parts thereof as an exam paper in my domestic or any foreign country in any form to this date,
3. that, in case my Master's thesis concerns my employer or any other external cooperation partner, I have fully informed them about title, form and content of the Master's thesis and have his/her permission to include the data and information in my written work.

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Abstract

Community engagement of higher education has been an increasingly important priority for educational policymaking around the world. In Central Asia, and specifically in Kazakhstan, there has been a limited amount of research on this topic. Therefore, the present qualitative case study explores the student community engagement practices in a subject university in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and what factors influence its realization, using the framework of institutionalization.

The institutionalization of student community engagement is categorized into two elements: its added value as seen by students and administrators, and its compatibility with the university's internal and external norms and requirements.

The findings suggest that both added value and compatibility of student community engagement at the subject university are moderate. While student community engagement is not explicitly indicated as a policy priority on a country and institutional level, a number of related activities emerged, including projects done by students in student organizations, projects led by individual faculty members interested in the topic, and inclusivity related efforts.

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Contents

1.	Introduction.....	9
1.1.	Context of the study: community engagement as an international priority.....	9
1.2.	Student community engagement.....	10
1.3.	Higher education system in Kazakhstan.....	10
1.4.	Student community engagement in Kazakhstan.....	11
1.5.	Research gap.....	11
1.6.	Research purpose and question.....	12
1.7.	Research design.....	12
1.8.	Theoretical frameworks.....	12
1.9.	Research methods.....	13
1.10.	Contribution to theory and practice and structure of the study.....	14
2.	Literature review.....	14
2.1.	The concept of higher education community engagement.....	15
2.1.1	The role of HEIs towards the society	15
2.1.2	Defining and mapping the practices of community engagement	16
2.1.3	Measuring and evaluating community engagement	17
2.2.	Students' participation as a dimension of community engagement.....	18
2.2.1	Curricular community engagement: service learning	18
2.2.2	Extracurricular community engagement: volunteering.....	19
2.3.	Institutionalization of student community engagement.....	21
2.4.	Conceptualization of student community engagement in this study.....	23
2.5.	Higher education in Kazakhstan.....	24
2.5.1	Historical background of higher education in Kazakhstan.....	24
2.5.2	Current state of the higher education system in Kazakhstan	25
2.5.3	Factors influencing higher education domain in Kazakhstan	27
2.5.4	The position of community engagement in Kazakhstani higher education	27
3.	Methodology.....	28
3.1.	Research method and design.....	28
3.2.	Data collection.....	30
3.3.	Data analysis.....	33
3.4.	Validity and reliability.....	35
4.	Theoretical and conceptual frameworks.....	36
4.1.	The concept of student community engagement: TEFCE toolbox.....	36
4.2.	The institutionalization framework.....	40
5.	Findings.....	44
5.1.	Subject university and its context.....	44
5.2.	Mapping of student community engagement practices.....	45
5.2.1	Community engagement through student organizations	46

5.2.2	Student community engagement facilitated by teachers	47
5.3.	External compatibility.....	49
5.3.1	Compatibility with educational and youth policies	49
5.3.2	Compatibility with accreditation standards	51
5.3.3	External compatibility as seen by university staff	52
5.3.4	Compatibility with potential students' expectations	53
5.4.	Internal compatibility.....	53
5.4.1	Compatibility with strategic positioning and quality assurance standards	54
5.4.2	Compatibility with curriculum.....	55
5.4.3	Compatibility with university's structural units	55
5.4.4	Internal compatibility as seen by university staff and students	57
5.5.	Added value of student community engagement.....	58
5.5.1	Personal added value.....	58
5.5.2	General added value	60
5.6.	Challenges in student community engagement.....	62
6.	Conclusion and discussion.....	62
6.1.	Summary of findings.....	62
6.2.	Discussion.....	65
6.3.	Practical significance and recommendations.....	67
6.4.	Limitations and suggestions for future research.....	70
	References.....	71
	Annexes.....	80

Tables

Table	Title	Page
1	Categorization of intended interview participants	31
2	Research questions and related themes	34
3	Factors affecting institutionalization of student community engagement	42
4	Challenges in student community engagement	68
5	Recommendations	68

Figures

Figure	Title	Page
1	Mapping of student community engagement activities at the subject university	49

1. Introduction

This section provides a general context for this study, as well as its theoretical and practical significance. The research purpose, questions, and design are described as well.

1.1. Context of the study: community engagement as an international priority

Historically, universities have been the centers of knowledge generation (Chankseliani et al., 2021). The traditional vision of the university and its purpose implies two missions: teaching and research. However, the modern developments in the world such as globalization, dominance of free market economy and increased competition resulting from it, strive for economical and societal sustainability, and rapid technological development facilitated a new understanding of universities' role in the society, which is often referred to as the third mission (Pinheiro et al., 2015; Zomer & Benneworth, 2011). The third mission of universities implies that universities are expected to actively interact with the society and provide positive contributions to it beyond teaching and research. It presents universities as engaged communities of practice, other than isolated "ivory towers" (Pinheiro et al., 2015).

Community engagement, as a practical realization of the universities' third mission, comprises a variety of activities done by universities in order to have a mutually beneficial interaction with their communities (Driscoll, 2009). Due to the highly contextual nature of community engagement activities, it might be challenging to create a strict definition of it. As a way to introduce the concept for this study, I propose to look at the general definition given by Benneworth and colleagues (2018), where community engagement is presented as a "process whereby universities engage with community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial even if each side benefits in a different way" (Benneworth et al., 2018, p. 28).

Examples of community engagement activities include service learning, (Resch et al., 2020), technology transfer activities like creating spin-offs, licensing (Benneworth et al., 2018; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), efforts on increasing inclusivity and access of the disadvantaged groups (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021), participation in policymaking, involvement in social and cultural life and public understanding of science (Benneworth et al., 2018).

In the past two decades community engagement of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become increasingly important (Koekkoek et al., 2021, Rubens et al., 2017). A lot of public attention is given to social and environmental issues and how universities, as knowledge generating entities, can assist in providing solutions to them (Benneworth & Cunha, 2015). Among the global problems that facilitated this prioritization, are climate change, migration, aging society, income inequality, decreasing social cohesion, declining trust towards political institutions and rise in populist attitudes (Farnell, 2020).

Major intergovernmental organizations such as OECD, UN and European Commission introduce various strategic initiatives and policies aimed at supporting community engagement activities of HEIs. Examples of such strategic initiatives include the United Nations' 2030

Agenda for Sustainable Development, where universities actively participate in providing solutions within various Sustainable Development Goals, the OECD report “Benchmarking Performance in Higher Education” (2019), where HE community engagement is seen in relation with building the human capital, and various activities undertaken by the European Commission, such as European Universities Initiative, Knowledge Alliances or Horizon Europe initiative (Farnell, 2020).

1.2. Student community engagement

One of the ways for the universities to engage with their communities is through student initiatives. Similarly with the concept of community engagement itself, student community engagement can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the context of the university and its community. An example of a definition of student community engagement presented in the literature is “student learning through engagement in activities that are intended to convey some benefit(s) to the community” (Bourner & Millican, 2011, p.69). Student community engagement is important both for students themselves and for universities, as institutions, since it may enhance the students’ learning, provide an opportunity to practice the theoretical knowledge they received in class (Bourner & Millican, 2011), possibly influence their employability (Millican & Bourner, 2011; O’Connor et al., 2011) and impact universities’ general contribution to such issues as development of active citizens and enhancement of social justice (Millican & Bourner, 2011).

As an element of community engagement, student community engagement has been increasingly important, especially in line with the public expectation towards universities to bring up socially engaged, active citizens (Lilley et al., 2014).

1.3. Higher education system in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia with a population of 19 million people and economy primarily led by mineral resources extraction and oil production (World Bank, n.d.). The gross enrollment ratio in higher education amounts to 62%; expenditure on tertiary education - 0.25% of GDP (UNESCO, n.d.). The higher education system consists of 128 universities including 11 national, 29 state, 55 private and 17 universities belonging to joint stock companies (Independent Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.). The largest number of students study in Almaty (the largest city) and Astana (the capital city), due to the concentration of the universities in these cities and high numbers of young people (Movkebayeva et al., 2020).

The main legislative body for higher education policy is the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Policymaking in Kazakhstani higher education is guided by the ideas of modernization, human capital development and economic outcomes of education (Chankseliani et al., 2021). The State Program for the Development of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan is the main political document on education introduced in 2019. The higher education component of the program focuses on internationalization, research, and alignment of the higher education outcomes with the market needs, through increasing employability (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019).

1.4. Student community engagement in Kazakhstan

As described above, higher education policy in Kazakhstan is largely focused on commercial outcomes of higher education, expressed through preparation of industry-ready professionals, development of entrepreneurship and alignment with market needs (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). Community engagement, therefore, currently does not appear to be a central priority in Kazakhstani higher education environment.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan is a young nation with 20% of the total population composed of young people between 14 and 29 years old (TALAP, 2021). 62% of the age cohort are students enrolled in higher education institutions (UNESCO, n.d.), who, therefore, might potentially engage with the community, which makes universities an important platform for the engagement of young people with the society in Kazakhstan.

The literature on engagement of young people, including students, in the societal issues in Kazakhstan reports both strengths and challenges in these activities. Kilybayeva and colleagues (2017) highlight the interest of the Kazakhstani youth in societal and political issues, expressed through online activism and extra-parliamentary participation. Sharipova and Beimenbetov (2021) report a high value that youth in Kazakhstan attribute to the issues of human rights and disadvantaged groups like people with low socio-economic status or disabled people. Assylbekova (2015) on the other hand, finds that the motivation of students at a university in East Kazakhstan to engage with the community is low, likely due to lack of time and interest. Marinin (2019) brings up the barriers related to the oppression of the politically active youth in Kazakhstan from the side of government. Despite the challenges, it is evident that students in such a young nation as Kazakhstan, present an enormous potential for the future development of the country.

Considering this context, this study aims to explore how student community engagement is practiced by students in Kazakhstan, on an example of a university in the city of Almaty.

1.5. Research gap

Central Asia in general does not appear to be a well-researched area in the domain of higher education research. According to Smolentseva and colleagues (2018, p. 4) “very little research has been focused on the institutional landscape in post-Soviet systems, despite the major transformations in those landscapes”.

Kazakhstan, compared to other Central Asian Countries, features in a relatively higher number of research articles (Lixian et al., 2015). Regarding the topic of student community engagement, there are a number of works tackling related topics, for instance youth involvement in general (Kilybayeva et al, 2017), values of young people (Sharipova & Beimenbetov, 2021), motivations of students to engage with the community (Assylbekova, 2015) or the role of Western-educated students in civic engagement (Marinin, 2019).

While these works tackle the topic of student community engagement from the perspective of youth or students, there hasn't been detected any research that would combine both views of

students and other stakeholders within the university, and other institutional factors that may influence the realization of student community engagement. This thesis therefore aims to fill in this research gap by providing a holistic exploratory view of the processes influencing student community engagement at a selected university in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

1.6. Research purpose and question

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which student community engagement is practiced at a university in Kazakhstan and explain the factors influencing its realization.

This study focuses on the following research question: How is student community engagement practiced and institutionalized at a university in Kazakhstan?

With the following sub-questions:

1. What are the measures taken by the university to support student community engagement?
2. What community engagement activities do students do independently of the university?
3. What is the added value of student community engagement for the university, and for students themselves?
4. How does student community engagement fit into the university internal and external environments?

1.7. Research design

In order to tackle the research question, I undertake an exploratory qualitative case study, focusing on one university located in Kazakhstan. The qualitative method is chosen due to the nature of the investigated phenomenon – community engagement. In agreement with the literature (see Farnell, 2020), in this study community engagement is seen as a participative activity, oftentimes occurring due to intrinsic motivation of the people undertaking it. Therefore, investigating these activities through quantitative indicators might not provide an accurate representation of what is being done, and why. Alternatively, this study aims to generate exemplary knowledge (Thomas & Myers, 2015) in a form of a case study, including the testimonials and individual views of the actors engaging with the community at the subject university.

Moreover, the qualitative research design is suitable for this project due to the exploratory nature of the research question. This study aims to provide an initial detailed review of the investigated topic by means of exploration, rather than to build causal relations between different phenomena, therefore a qualitative research method is considered more suitable for this research than quantitative.

1.8. Theoretical frameworks

A combination of a theoretical framework of institutionalization and a conceptual framework developed within the TEFCE project is used in this thesis. The purpose of the TEFCE framework

is to provide the conceptual basis for the operational definition of the term “student community engagement”, as focused on in this thesis. The framework divides the community engagement activities in 7 dimensions: teaching and learning, research, service and knowledge exchange, students, management (partnerships and openness), management (policies and support structures), supportive peers (Farnell et al., 2020). Based on the two dimensions that relate to student community engagement (teaching and learning and students), the term “student community engagement” is understood as both curricular and extracurricular activities done by students in collaboration with the community representatives.

Institutional theory, or institutionalism, is one of the strands of organizational theory, which sees organizations as institutions, functioning and influenced by various normative, cultural and regulative forces (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & Bromley, 2015). One of the concepts of institutional theory is institutionalization, defined as a process “by which social processes, obligations, or actualities, come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341). In this study, a framework of institutionalization is applied, which examines the process of institutionalization through analysis of compatibility of the phenomena (in this case, student community engagement) with the internal and external environment of the university, and the added value for the actors engaging in the activity (in this case, students, university administrators and academics) (Cai et al., 2015).

1.9. Research methods

This study aims to investigate the ways students engage with the community, and how this process is institutionalized at a selected university in Kazakhstan, by means of an exploratory case study.

The data collection is organized following the steps established by Creswell (2014): identifying the participants, gaining access, defining the types of information that would answer the research questions best, designing the data collection protocol and administering the data collection with consideration to the ethical aspects (Creswell, 2014).

Semi structured interviews with the representatives of the university administration, teaching academics and students are complemented by the analysis of the documents relevant to the topic of this study.

Creswell (2014) offers six steps to guide the qualitative data collection: preparing data for analysis, initial coding, identifying common themes from the codes, representing the findings, interpreting the findings in relation to the existing research, and validating the accuracy of the findings.

Two sets of data were analyzed within this study: the text data collected during the interviews (9 documents) and the text data contained in the documents selected for analysis (7 documents). The coding was conducted using the Atlas.ti software in two stages. The first stage of coding employed inductive approach and used thematic analysis. The inductive approach implies identifying the specific small units of data and gradually moving to bigger overarching themes based on these specific units (codes) (Creswell, 2014). Thematic analysis is defined as “the

process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). Within the second stage, the themes related to research questions were derived from the codes generated during the first coding stage. At this stage, a deductive approach was employed. Deductive approach implies searching for specific categories (in this case, the themes defined by the research questions) in the existing pool of codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

1.10. Contribution to theory and practice and structure of the study

This research will contribute to practice and theory of community engagement. Practically, it might be useful for the actors (specifically university administrators) involved in the development and improvement of HE community engagement on an institutional level. Theoretically, it might contribute to improvement and enriching of definition and understanding of community engagement, considering the views of the actors operating in the region that has not been well researched so far.

The study consists of six chapters. The introductory chapter presents the context to the study, research purpose, research question, as well as basic information on theoretical frameworks and research methods.

The literature review section presents an overview of approaches to defining higher education community engagement, recent research on the topic of student community engagement, as well as Kazakhstan’s higher education landscape.

The section of theoretical and conceptual frameworks presents a more in-depth explanation of the process of institutionalization and factors that influence it, specifically in relation to institutionalization of student community engagement. Additionally, this section demonstrates the synergy between conceptual and theoretical frameworks mentioned above and the way they are used to answer the research questions.

The section on methodology contains information about participants of the interviews, as well as the process of data collection and data analysis.

The Findings section presents information on the subject university and the results of this study by means of thick description.

Finally, the conclusion and discussion chapter provides a summary of the study and its findings, contribution to theory and practice, limitations and implications for the future research.

2. Literature review

The literature on the topic of higher education community engagement is wide and rich. This chapter aims to provide an overview of approaches to and conceptualizations of community engagement and specify the position that this study takes in the wider set of existing literature on community engagement, by means of a thematic literature review (Creswell, 2014).

The subsections are organized in a general to specific order, starting with a review of a broader concept of community engagement, followed by student community engagement and its

institutionalization. Building on the insights from the literature, a more specific concept of student community engagement, which serves as operational definition in this thesis, is presented in the following subsection.

Finally, the literature review is concluded by a description of Kazakhstani higher education from the historical and modern perspectives, and the role of community engagement in it.

2.1. The concept of higher education community engagement

The term community engagement is characterized by its high level of complexity and ambiguity (Benneworth et al., 2018). There are multiple terms related to community engagement, such as “third mission” (e.g., Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020), “social responsibility” (e.g., Baptiste et al., 2022; Godonoga & Sporn, 2022), “engaged scholarship” (e.g., Cuthill, 2012), “university–community partnerships” (e.g., Groulx et al., 2021), “civic university” (e.g., Goddard, 2009). In order to demonstrate the diversity of interpretations of community engagement, this subsection aims to provide a comprehensive (however, not exhaustive) overview of its different conceptualizations by different scholars.

The materials were collected by a search of the major databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) and snowball reference tracking. The collected materials included journal articles, conceptual papers, literature reviews, case studies, book chapters, project reports. The main inclusion criterion was that the research questions and the purpose of analyzed literature focused on or included clarifying the meaning behind the term “higher education community engagement” and outlining the ways it is realized in practice. The following keywords and their combinations were used in the literature search: “higher education community/social/civic engagement”, “third mission”, “definition”, “concept”, “realization”.

The common topics detected in the reviewed literature were the following:

- the role of higher education institutions towards the society in a broader sense and different models of their interaction (Benneworth & Cunha, 2015; Chantler, 2016; Farnell, 2020);
- defining community engagement and mapping the existing practices (Baptiste et al., 2022; Benneworth et al., 2018; Butcher et al., 2011; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020);
- measuring and evaluating community engagement (Driscoll, 2014; Farnell et al., 2020).

Below is a more detailed recount of the insights on the above-mentioned themes.

2.1.1 *The role of HEIs towards the society*

The topic of the role of HEIs in the society and the ways in which they interact has been widely addressed in the literature. Jongbloed and colleagues (2008) discuss the changing expectations towards HEIs and their interaction with society and accountability, which result in “mission overload” (Jongbloed et al., 2008, p. 321). The authors argue that due to the need to maintain their relevance and alignment with the modern knowledge-based network society, universities

have to be in constant communication with multiple stakeholders and this context influences universities' strategic management and operations.

The concept of mission overload is also addressed in the article by Benneworth and colleagues (2016), where the authors propose some considerations on the ways universities address it and function in the modern society. It is argued that community engagement is a very context-dependent activity, and due to this context dependency, it is recommended for the universities to strive to improve the knowledge of their specific context, rather than attempt to find universal "third mission instruments" (Benneworth et al., 2016, p. 731).

A more functional approach to classifying university-society interactions is presented in the article by Trippel and colleagues (2015), which look at the contribution of HEIs to regional development and suggest four models of university-society interaction: the entrepreneurial university model, which outlines such activities as university spin-offs and technical knowledge transfer, the regional innovation system model, which includes informal collaborations with industry, such as contract research, the mode 2 university model, which implies universities contributing to solving regional problems through applied research, and the engaged university model, which includes cultural education, supporting policymaking and inclusion of disadvantaged communities.

2.1.2 Defining and mapping the practices of community engagement

Similarly to the variety of conceptualizations of university-society interaction, the definition of community engagement is also addressed in multiple ways in the literature.

Koekkoek and colleagues (2021) for instance, identify four ways to define community engagement: spatial, in which the university community engagement would be defined by its location, reciprocal, which highlights the importance of mutuality of interaction between the university and its community, developmental, which deals with the knowledge transfer, and instrumental which presents community engagement as a mean of accountability.

Another approach to classifying community engagement activities is provided by Culum (2018). The author divides community engagement classifications into three subtypes: the activities by mode of interaction with the community (for instance, through teaching or research), by the degree of intensity of the activities (one-dimensional or multifaceted, superficial or deep and embedded, transactional or transformational) and classification through assessment and benchmarking tools.

Benneworth and colleagues (2018) view community engagement as a specific part of a broader set of activities referred to as the third mission. While the third mission contains a variety of activities, including the entrepreneurship-oriented activities such as licensing, patenting, or creation of spin-offs, community engagement is conceptualized as separate from the entrepreneurial activities. It is focused on interaction of HEIs with communities who might benefit from universities, but typically do not engage with them actively (for instance, socially excluded communities) (Benneworth et al., 2018).

Similar view on the differences and relations between third mission and community engagement can be observed in other pieces of literature. For instance, Trencher and colleagues (2014) compare the notion of third mission, which, as the authors posit, is often seen through the perspective of technological and economic contribution of HEIs, and the concept of social interaction of universities with the external communities with an ultimate aim to contribute to the sustainable development.

The distinction between the approaches to the third mission as either a concept closely related to technology transfer (Rubens et al., 2017) or an overarching umbrella-concept containing both economic and social expressions of HEI-society interaction (Trencher et al., 2014) is evident in the literature.

Another distinct way for the university to engage with the community is to provide opportunities for the citizens, who normally do not have easy access to higher education, to benefit from it, which in other words can be called inclusivity efforts. Bennewoth and colleagues (2018) list such practices as providing alternative learning paths to learners from non-traditional groups, or lifelong learning. Strayhorn and colleagues (2012) view social inclusion through the perspective of involving women and ethnic minorities in STEM fields of education. Based on the evidence from the US, the authors provide an overview of possible barriers that might prevent people from these groups to involve in STEM-related programs and offer a number of strategies to tackle these barriers, including mentoring programs, campus visits, or online support communities. Zabeli and colleagues (2021) address the barriers to inclusion of disabled students in higher education in Kosovo from the perspective of policies, institutional management and teaching and learning. The authors highlight the importance of collaboration and alignment of actions by different stakeholders and cultivation of positive attitudes to the issues related to disability.

2.1.3 Measuring and evaluating community engagement

A separate stream of literature which focuses on the categorization and evaluation of community engagement practices might be represented by various community engagement assessment/benchmarking frameworks.

Carnegie classification is an example of one of the first frameworks of the type. It originates from the US and is predominantly used there, as well as in several other countries, like Canada, Ireland, and Malaysia (Carnegie Elective Classifications, n.d; McIlrath et al., 2021). This framework sees mutual benefit and reciprocity as key characteristics of university-community engagement. It highlights the role of institutional diversity in community engagement practice and prioritizes internal institutional arrangements that might facilitate this practice (Carnegie Elective Classifications, n.d.).

A similar type of framework was developed within the European Union's project "Towards a European framework for community engagement in Higher Education" (TEFCE). This framework is intended to serve as a self-reflection tool for the universities that will facilitate their better understanding of such issues of community engagement as the diversity of community the

university interacts with, the range of activities that the university conducts, how sustainable those activities are, and others (O'Brien et al., 2022).

A framework for measuring university community engagement was developed at Campus Engage, an institution affiliated with the Irish University association. The framework divides university community engagement into five dimensions: engaged research, teaching and learning, student volunteering, public engagement and involvement, institutional infrastructure and architecture (Campus Engage, 2018). The dimensions provide a number of indicators suggested for evaluating and measuring community engagement.

The aim of this subsection was to demonstrate the diversity of approaches to defining higher education community engagement. As it is shown above, among other conceptualizations, community engagement can be understood as a technology transfer process (Rubens et al., 2017), as a mean of accountability (Driscoll, 2014), as a way for universities to contribute to sustainable development (Trencher et al., 2014), or as a way to interact with the communities that normally do not interact with the universities (Benneworth et al., 2018). A common feature of the concept of community engagement which appears to be agreed on by many authors is its high context dependency, and therefore, difficulty in forming a unified definition. This complexity is addressed in the further subsections, which attempt to provide a more nuanced understanding of the term and introduce its operational definition used in this study.

2.2. Students' participation as a dimension of community engagement

Participation of students in the university-community engagement might have a wide variety of approaches and conceptualizations across the literature. The goal of this section is to demonstrate the concepts related to students' contribution to university-community engagement as they are presented in the literature.

The literature search on the major databases (Web of Science, SCOPUS, Google Scholar) by the keywords "student community engagement", "student civic engagement", "student volunteering", "student community interaction", as well as snowball reference tracking demonstrate that student community engagement is often related to two well-coined terms in the literature:

- service learning (Chong, 2014; Millican & Bourner, 2011; Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021; Zentner, 2010);
- student volunteering (Chapman et al., 2023; Jones & Giles, 2022; Mustafa et al., 2020).

The further subsections provide a more detailed insight on the literature on both of the topics.

2.2.1 *Curricular community engagement: service learning*

A major concept attributed to the student involvement in university-community engagement is service learning. The concept of service learning takes its origin in the US, in the beginning of the 20th century (Buber et al., 2019), from a philosopher and educationalist John Dewey, who

posited that a democratic society should provide education that sparks interest in societal issues in learners and cultivates their active participation in society (Dewey, 1916/2008).

In modern day, service learning is a widely-used method in teaching which follows the principles of student involvement, democratic participation and constructivist approach to learning (Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021; Zentner, 2010).

Chong (2014) reviewed the meanings behind the term “service learning” presented in the literature and found out that, among others, it may have a number of conceptualizations, depending on the context of each institution implementing it. Examples include “academic service-learning, civic-engagement, school-based service-learning, course-based service-learning, strategic academically-based community and scholarly service, community engaged learning, and community service-learning” (Chong, 2014, p. 348).

However, the author also identifies some common traits of service learning programs, such as (among others) meaningful service activities, integration into curriculum, structured reflection, direct student involvement, clear goals and set up monitoring process (Chong, 2014).

Diversity of labels under which service learning might be presented is also mentioned by Millican and Bourner (2011). The authors list such related terms as community engagement, community pedagogy, community knowledge exchange. The common understanding of service learning is presented as a curricular activity of students which involves external communities and implies experiential learning through a combination of theory and practice.

A more recent study by Buber and colleagues (2019) also provides a conceptualization of service learning according to which it is a pedagogical method integrated in the curriculum and based on an academic discipline, with the aim to enhance student's academic and civic development, mostly required as a mandatory activity by a student.

As shown in the literature presented above, it might be a challenging task to come up with a strict, narrow definition of service learning. Just like community engagement, service learning is a very context-dependent activity. However, despite the diversity of interpretations, it can be derived from the literature that commonly service learning is viewed as a pedagogic method employing experiential learning techniques, closely embedded in the curriculum and aiming at developing particular skills in students.

2.2.2 Extracurricular community engagement: volunteering

Student volunteering is another major theme related to students' participation in university-community engagement. As shown in the literature, the term “student volunteering” includes activities within the university such as peer tutoring, supporting other students in orientation (Chapman et al., 2023) and outside it, such as work with the disadvantaged communities. Additionally, the terms “service learning” and “student volunteering” often overlap and interchange each other, for instance, Jones and Giles (2022) refer to student volunteering as one of the elements of service learning.

In order to differentiate the concepts, here the term student volunteering is referred to as an extracurricular activity of students with the broader aim to provide a positive societal impact for the external community, the university, and students themselves.

Common themes appearing in the literature on student volunteering include students' motivations to volunteer (Chapman et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2022), benefits of volunteering (Mustafa et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2010) and challenges and critiques to student volunteering (Clegg et al., 2010; Jones & Giles, 2022).

A perspective on students' motivations to volunteer is given by Chapman and colleagues (2023), where the authors refer (among others) to extrinsic and pro-social motivations to volunteer. Extrinsic motivation includes willingness to enhance employability and gain skills for future employment, and pro-social motivation implies sense of duty and willingness to help others (Chapman et al., 2023).

A comprehensive look into motivations of medical students to volunteer during the Covid-19 pandemic is provided by Phillips and colleagues (2022). The authors identified that students were driven by altruistic motivations and humanitarian values when engaging in volunteerism during the pandemic. Additionally, it was concluded that such engagement had a positive impact on students' resilience and ability to cope with loss and other negative emotions caused by the pandemic (Phillips et al., 2022).

Another widely addressed topic in the literature is the perceived benefit of volunteering for students. Smith and colleagues (2010) analyzed responses from a longitudinal study across US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada and put forward a set of benefits of volunteering, as perceived by students. Their findings included instrumental benefits (improvement of career prospects through practical volunteer experience, networking, development of leadership skills), altruistic benefits (self-satisfaction, opportunity to learn, building trust among people), and social benefits (making new social contacts, getting recognition from others) (Smith et al., 2010).

A survey of students in Malaysian university conducted by Mustafa and colleagues (2020) demonstrates similar results related to students' perceptions on benefits of volunteering. The findings differentiate between intrinsic benefits (including the feeling of joy/satisfaction from helping others or contributing to the society), career-related benefits (development of skills, enhancement of CV) and a mix of other benefits like making new friends or "filling in free time" (Mustafa et al., 2020, p. 35).

Another prevalent topic in the literature on student volunteering is directed at challenges and critiques of it. From the perspective of equity, Clegg and colleagues (2010) highlight the importance of considering the lifestyles of diverse student populations and their ability to dedicate time to volunteer, specifically, when it comes to recognizing volunteering, for instance, in the curriculum. In other words, authors demonstrate the perspective on volunteering from the potentially disadvantaged student groups such as female students or working students and suggest considering their perspective in the higher education policymaking (Clegg et al., 2010).

Another critical view on the way student volunteering is realized is presented by Jones and Giles (2022). The authors discuss the lack of preparation and skill building of the student-volunteers, and how the university administrators responsible for student volunteering often balance between fulfilling the promise given to the community partners and giving the student-volunteers space to make mistakes and learn.

As an attempt to map the conceptualizations of students contribution as an element of university-community engagement, this subchapter outlined two well-coined terms detected by the thematic literature review: service learning, which implies students activities with the external communities as a part of the curriculum (Buber et al., 2019; Chong, 2014; Millican & Bourner, 2011), and student volunteering, which implies activities done by students with external communities, however, without inclusion in the curriculum (Chapman et al., 2023; Jones & Giles, 2022; Mustafa et al., 2020).

2.3. Institutionalization of student community engagement

This subchapter aims to review the literature on institutionalization of student community engagement, including the different interpretations of it, presented in the previous subsections (service learning, student volunteering).

The term institutionalization implies the process whereby a phenomenon becomes a taken for granted practice in an institution (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and stems from a broader institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & Bromley, 2015).

The literature on institutionalization of student community engagement, including its various interpretations, offers a number of reviews of different factors influencing institutionalization.

Bringle and Hatcher (2000) tackle the topic of institutionalization of service learning and outline several factors that may facilitate it. Firstly, the authors report that institutional strategy specifically focused on service learning positively contributes to its institutionalization. Additionally, according to the authors, a supporting structure within the university, such as a specialized service learning unit, which would be responsible for the technical and logistical support may also be a strong factor in institutionalizing service learning. Finally, the authors bring up the importance of the commitment from the higher-level institutional leadership.

More recently, Buber and colleagues (2019) described a service learning program at one of the Austrian business schools and brought up several factors which influence successful implementation/institutionalization of the program. The “driving forces” (Buber et al., 2019, p. 14) included attractiveness of the program to students, supporting the sustainability of the program through long-term partnerships with community stakeholders, financial stability, support from the university leadership (similarly with the previous example), and regular dialogue and feedback among the stakeholders of the program.

An extensive review of factors influencing institutionalization of community service learning is provided in the systematic literature review by Tijsma and colleagues (2023). The authors divide the process of institutionalization into three phases: start up, scale up and sustain. Within the

initial start up phase, the authors bring up such factors as creating a sense of urgency and securing funding, the scale up phase – (among others) raising awareness, creating a common vision, providing institutional support structures and conducting regular assessment, and sustain phase – including community service learning in the job descriptions and career promotion criteria of the university staff and creating long-term funding opportunities.

A review of the components of community engagement is given in the article by Nuuyoma and Makhene (2020), where, by means of conceptual literature analysis, authors identified three phases, that, according to them, constitute community engagement, the first phase being awareness of the staff and students about the existing societal issues, the second – alignment of teaching and research activities with the socially relevant topics, and the third – community engagement as an institutional value, with demonstrated commitment by the actors at the university.

While there are many works focusing on institutionalization of service learning (as presented above), there are also pieces of literature focusing on extracurricular student community engagement and what institutional support it might receive. A case of England is analyzed in the article by Brewis and Holdsworth (2011), where the authors look at the influence of university support on the students' volunteering experience. The survey conducted by authors in 6 universities across England showed that student whose volunteering activity is supported or facilitated by the university, report a more positive influence of volunteering on their personal development, soft skills, employability, and community awareness. A central message conveyed by the authors is that student volunteering is not something that occurs by itself or automatically, and that it needs to be actively supported by the university administratively and strategically.

A students' perspective on institutionalization of volunteering is provided by Hustinx and colleagues (2005), where the authors aimed to investigate the patterns and factors influencing Belgian students' involvement in volunteering at the university. The findings report that volunteering is rarely extensively prioritized by students. Additionally, the results demonstrate differing patterns of involvement with volunteering within and outside the university. Finally, some factors influencing student volunteering include being surrounded by other volunteers (for instance, have friends-volunteers) and being enrolled in particular disciplines.

This subsection provided different views in the literature on institutionalization of two key terms related to student community engagement: service learning and student volunteering. As the review shows, institutionalization of student community engagement is often reported to be influenced by institutional support structures, support from the university leadership, constant feedback and regular assessment.

Building on the conceptualizations presented in previous subsections, the next subsection aims to indicate the focus of this thesis and the concepts investigated in it, in the broader landscape of the literature.

2.4. Conceptualization of student community engagement in this study

The previous subsections provided an overview of the various approaches to defining and conceptualizing university-community engagement and students' participation in it. The wide variety of approaches to this issue provides a clear indication that creating a single limited definition of student community engagement is not a feasible task. The difficulty in defining community engagement and student community engagement is echoed in the literature as well. Buber and colleagues (2019), for instance, refer to it as “acute definitional fuzziness” (Buber et al., 2019, p. 3), Benneworth and colleagues (2018) highlight that community engagement is a highly contextual activity whose interpretation depends on the perspectives of the actors involved and local circumstances.

This study deliberately focuses on a specific interpretation of student community engagement in order to establish a clear conceptual basis and to provide a specific indication of the subject of this research to the interview partners and readers. However, considering the exploratory nature of the research question the definition suitable for this case had to provide an idea of what community engagement is, without strictly narrowing down to a specific limited understanding of it. The following definition provided by Paul Benneworth (2018) appeared to have a necessary level of specificity, at the same time allowing for a space to look into different ways community engagement realized itself in the selected university.

Community engagement is “a process whereby universities engage with community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial even if each side benefits in a different way” (Benneworth et al., 2018, p. 138).

In addition to the balance of flexibility and specificity, needed for this thesis, this definition also contains the key common themes that were evident in the literature review presented above, such themes as university engagement (contrary to the “ivory tower” conceptualization, (Pineiro et al., 2015), collaboration with the community partners (other than one-sided service from universities to community partners), and reciprocity (Driscoll, 2014).

Referring to the relation between the concepts of technology transfer and entrepreneurial activities of the universities (in some pieces of literature referred to as the third mission), in this thesis, the focus of the investigation is the socially-oriented community engagement activities of HEIs, therefore the entrepreneurial activities are not the central topic of this research.

Regarding the concept of student community engagement, as presented above, the literature offers two well-coined related terms: “service learning” and “student volunteering”. Both of these concepts are addressed within this thesis.

On the background of the existing literature, this subsection indicated an operational definition of the key terms tackled in this thesis: community engagement and student community engagement. The further subsection draws on the literature discussing the Kazakhstani higher education landscape, in order to describe the empirical environment where the subject university operates.

2.5. Higher education in Kazakhstan

This subsection is dedicated to a description of the higher education system in Kazakhstan, including its structure, governance, funding mechanisms and strategic priorities reviewed from the perspectives of the historical development and current state. On the background of these developments, the position of community engagement in the Kazakhstani higher education policy and institutional practice is reviewed as well.

2.5.1 Historical background of higher education in Kazakhstan

This subsection describes the major period in the history of Kazakhstan from early to the late 20th century, when it was a part of the Soviet Union, the way higher education was organized and the roles fulfilled during that time. Additionally, the period after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is covered, including the major steps in the transition from the Soviet socioeconomic regime to the modern times.

The role of higher education in the Soviet Union was to support the communist party in bringing up ideologically correct citizens and supply the economy and production with skilled professionals (Smolentseva et al., 2018). Smolentseva and colleagues (2018), identify three features of the Soviet higher education. Firstly, the central planning approach and top down governance whereby all the authority belonged to one administrator at the top of the hierarchy and the decisions were sent down the hierarchy. Secondly, due to a major commitment to producing highly qualified professionals for the needs of production and economy, higher education was mainly vocational and driven in the directions set by the economic and military priorities. Lastly, the system was characterized by high level of standardization and uniformity. Similar principles and requirements were applied to all the institutions across the union, including, for instance, the use of Russian language as a primary language of education (Smolentseva et al., 2018).

In Kazakhstan, the development of the higher education domain started with its accession to the Soviet Union (Ahn et al., 2018). With the first universities established in the 1920s, by 1975, 47 HEIs conducted programs in 157 professional areas and hosted around 200 000 students (Ahn et al., 2018). As described above, the HEIs primarily focused on preparing qualified graduates for the needs of the industry.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan faced a major socioeconomic transition – a move from communism to capitalism, from a planned production economy to a free market economy (Silova, 2011). As Ahn and colleagues (2018) describe, the point of departure for the Kazakhstani higher education at the dawn of the new socioeconomic reality was a system consisting of 55 universities, the majority of which were engineering and pedagogy institutes, still closely aligned with the Soviet ideology, underfunded and relatively isolated from international trends and practices (Ahn et al., 2018). In the process of adaptation to the new socioeconomic reality, neoliberal values and principles of new public management entered the Kazakhstani higher education domain (Ait Si Mhamed et al., 2021; Chankseliani & Silova, 2018).

Major policy reforms undertaken by the Kazakhstani government during the transition period are listed below (Ahn et al., 2018).

- 1993 – establishment of the private universities. The legislation “On Education” permitted private universities to enter Kazakhstani higher education landscape;
- 2000s – privatization of public HEIs. In order to diversify the funding sources for higher education (including introduction of student fees), the government shared the ownership of several universities with private companies, those universities received a status of joint stock companies;
- 2003 – introduction of the Unified National Test (UNT). To tackle the issue of corruption at the university entrance exams, a standardized testing was introduced, which also served as a high school graduation exam;
- 2010 – joining the Bologna process. This major step towards the internationalization of Kazakhstani higher education served as a basis for a set of other important policy focuses including reforms on the university autonomy, prioritizing the research output according to the international standards, internationalization through faculty and student exchange within programs like Erasmus Mundus and introduction of quality assurance requirements (Ahn et al., 2018).

The measures mentioned above shaped the higher education domain in Kazakhstan as it is in the current time, which is described in the next subsection.

2.5.2 Current state of the higher education system in Kazakhstan

In 2023, Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia with a population of 19 million people and economy primarily led by mineral resources extraction and oil production (World Bank, n.d.). The gross enrollment ratio in higher education amounts to 62%; expenditure on tertiary education – 0.25% of GDP (UNESCO, n.d.).

The higher education system in Kazakhstan consists of a wide range of types of institutions: national research universities, national higher education institutions, state research universities, state universities, academies, institutes, and their equivalents (conservatory, higher schools, and higher colleges), fully private universities and universities affiliated with the private joint stock companies, co-owned by government and private actors (Yessentemirova et al., 2019) – this classification stems from the historical differentiation of educational institutions established during the Soviet Union. The funding of higher education is realized through the state grants, whereby the government provides the public and private universities with grants according to the number of qualifying students enrolled at the institution (Ait Si Mhamed et al., 2021). The largest number of students study in Almaty (the largest city) and Astana (the capital city), due to the concentration of the universities in these cities and high numbers of young people (Movkebayeva et al., 2020). The public grants are allocated as quotas per the specific program at each university. The flagship national research university (Nazarbayev university, located in

the capital city of Astana) receives significantly higher amount of the public grants compared to other universities (Ait Si Mhamed et al., 2021).

In order to provide educational services and be eligible to receive the public grants, universities are required to obtain an accreditation provided by independent accrediting agencies, approved by the government (Independent Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.). In recent years, the government introduced regulations aimed at increasing the quality of higher education which tightened the accreditation requirements, which led to a decrease in the number of registered higher education institutions (Independent Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.). By 2021, 128 universities function in Kazakhstan, with 11 national, 29 state, 55 private and 17 universities belonging to joint stock companies (Independent Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.).

In 2022, the main legislative body for education policymaking (Ministry of Education and Science) was divided into two organizations – the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for the primary, secondary, postsecondary education and children’s rights, and Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which deals with the respective fields (Kunafin, 2022). The rationale behind dividing the ministry was to dedicate a specific governing organ – the Ministry of Science and Higher Education – to the issues of science and research.

Policymaking in Kazakhstani higher education is guided by the ideas of modernization, human capital development and economic outcomes of education (Chankseliani et al., 2021). According to Chankseliani and colleagues (2021) higher education policy in Kazakhstan focuses on development of skills in order to educate competitive and productive individuals who would support the economic modernization and development of a knowledge economy. In other words, as described by the authors, the view on the purpose of education in the society is rather instrumental, as opposed to social or moral purposes (Chankseliani et al., 2021).

These views are also reflected in the main political document on education introduced in 2019, The State Program for the Development of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The program aims at increasing the competitiveness of Kazakhstani education on a global scene, bringing up the students on the basis of humanistic values and increasing the contribution of science to the socio-economic development of the country (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). The components of the program related to higher education focus on internationalization, research, and alignment of the higher education outcomes with the market needs, through increasing employability (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). With regard to implementation of the above-mentioned priorities, OECD (2017) reports several challenges in higher education governance in Kazakhstan, including heavy financial regulation of HEIs without differentiation according to the different types of institutions and their distinctive roles and low level of autonomy which impedes creativity, initiative, and responsibility on an institutional level.

Considering the current priorities and challenges of higher education governance in Kazakhstan, the next subsection draws on literature to discuss the underlying factors influencing higher education development in Kazakhstan, and possible forces that might influence the future change.

2.5.3 Factors influencing higher education domain in Kazakhstan

Literature suggests several factors that influence post-socialist countries like Kazakhstan educational policymaking. Chankseliani and Silova (2018), drawing on the insights from other researchers, provide a nuanced overview of the policy undercurrents present in the post-socialist countries like Kazakhstan. According to the authors, during the transition from the socialist socio-economic reality, to a modern, capitalist free market conditions, post socialist countries like Kazakhstan, adopted a number of neoliberal values realized through a wide variety of policies and reforms. The process of implementing those policies and changes, according to the authors, is characterized by several features, namely (among others) strive for modernization, economic rationales, path dependency and policy borrowing (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018). The focus on modernization is expressed through the efforts to optimize and reorganize the higher education systems with the ultimate intention to increase their compliance with international standards and global competitiveness (Tamtik & Sabzalieva, 2018). The economic rationales include the intention to increase the efficiency of historically underfunded and low quality public HEIs by inviting the private actors in the higher education domain and diversifying funding schemes. Path dependency is another feature of higher education in Kazakhstan, and a factor that influences it. It is expressed in, as authors describe it, “teachers continuing to teach and leaders continuing to lead the same way they used to do in the Soviet times” (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018, p. 9). Policy borrowing occurs as the decision makers adopt the international policy trends like, for instance, quality assurance (Janashia, 2018) and attempt to implement them in the local context. However, as the author notes, it often happens that the original meaning of the policy gets interpreted by local policymakers in ways that do not entirely reflect the idea of the original borrowed policy (Janashia, 2018). This process contributes to the complexity of higher education domain in countries like Kazakhstan.

Bischof (2018), through the perspective of higher education quality assurance policies, analyzed the influence of institutional isomorphism in Kazakhstan’s higher education. According to the authors, the international innovations like independent quality assurance system were introduced in Kazakhstan largely due to its accession to Bologna process. With the support of the president and other key decision makers, this innovation has been implemented relatively smoothly (Bischof, 2018).

2.5.4 The position of community engagement in Kazakhstani higher education

The previous subsections reflected on the roles and functions that higher education fulfilled in Kazakhstan during its two major historical periods – the Soviet Union and the independence. From the perspective of the interaction of HEIs with the society, they can be viewed as instruments of realization of a particular materialistic goal (essentialist view) (Chankseliani et al., 2021), or as a constituent of the society which functions to “help individuals and societies realise their human rights and capabilities” (Chankseliani et al., 2021, p. 110) (anti-essentialist view). From the perspective of these two philosophies, it is evident that in Kazakhstan, higher education has historically fulfilled the instrumental role. In the Soviet Union, for instance, while the general ideology promoted by the party was communism and socialism, higher education

was strictly oriented to and governed by military and economic goals (Smolentseva et al., 2018). In the modern world, with the transition to the free market, higher education is seen as a driver of economic progress and contributor to the labor market (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018). Meanwhile, with the high orientation to international standards, policy borrowing and exposure to institutional isomorphism (Bischof, 2018; Janashia, 2018), facilitated partly by the presence of international actors in Kazakhstani higher education environment, Kazakhstan is susceptible to the educational innovation and political influence from international actors. Therefore, while currently community engagement does not appear to be explicitly highlighted as a policy priority, looking at it as educational innovation, it might be likely that in the future it “arrives” to the Kazakhstani higher education landscape and gains a more solid weight as a policy priority.

3. Methodology

This chapter is dedicated to the description of the research design, data collection and analysis methods employed to address the questions tackled in this thesis.

3.1. Research method and design

In alignment with the purpose of this study to explore the ways student community engagement is practiced at a university in Kazakhstan and explain the factors influencing its realization, a qualitative research method is employed. A major characteristic of qualitative research, according to Creswell (2014, p. 35) is “exploring the problem and developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon”, and addressing research problem which does not identify specific variables, but rather intends to explore. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 6), qualitative research “uncovers the meaning of the phenomenon for those involved”, rather than “determining cause and effect” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.5).

This study aims to provide an initial detailed review of the investigated topic by means of exploration, rather than to build causal relations between different phenomena, therefore a qualitative research method is considered more suitable for this research than quantitative.

There are a number of research designs employed in qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2015), for instance, identify 6 common approaches:

- Basic qualitative research. Basic qualitative study is also labeled as interpretive research and does not follow any specific design, while focusing on the way people interpret their experiences and attribute meaning to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015);
- Phenomenology. It aims to depict the phenomena experienced by people, the way they see them. As described by Creswell (2013), a phenomenological researcher focuses on a small group of subjects during an extensive period of time in order to gain a deep understanding of their lived experiences;
- Grounded theory. Grounded theory is an approach which aims to develop a theory based on meanings derived from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015);

- Ethnography. This design is often used to research specific cultural groups in their natural environments (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), it implies a long-lasting observation by the researcher and evolves as the research progresses;
- Narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is another qualitative research design which investigates personalities and experiences by means of narratives and stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and is often presented in such formats as biography, autobiography, life story;
- Case study. Another common qualitative research design is a case study. According to Crowe and colleagues (2011, p. 1), a case study is a “research approach that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context”. An important item in the case study research is a case, which is a real-life phenomenon limited by particular time and space (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Yin (2018) outlines three conditions for the choice of case study as a research method: firstly, the research must tackle the “how” and “why” questions related to the investigated phenomenon, secondly, there is no opportunity/rationale for a researcher to control the involved subjects, and lastly, the studied phenomenon is contemporary (not historical).

The subject of this research is the engagement of students with the community occurring at a particular university in Kazakhstan. Therefore, the occurrence of this phenomenon in a limited space and current time may be described as a case. In the research question (How is student community engagement practiced and institutionalized at a university in Kazakhstan?), the ways students practice community engagement constitutes the “how” question, and the process of institutionalization may be viewed as the “why” question, as presented by Yin (2018).

Considering the time and volume limitations of the master’s thesis, the long-term close observations employed in, for instance, phenomenology or narrative inquiry are not suitable. Additionally, since this thesis employs theoretical framework as a lens through which the subject is viewed, rather than aiming to develop a theoretical framework, the approach of grounded theory does not appear as suitable. On the background of the qualitative research designs described above, case study design was considered the most suitable.

Thomas and Myers (2015), drawing on previous classification by other analysts, propose a comprehensive classification of case studies. From the perspective of a purpose, the authors divide case studies into four types: intrinsic, instrumental, evaluative and exploratory.

Intrinsic case studies (term originally coined by Stake, 1995) focus on a single case with unique characteristics that presents interest on its own, or stands out in some way. Instrumental case studies tackle the case with the aim to connect its specificities with its environment and understand the broader context (Stake, 1995). The evaluative case study aims to analyze the investigated phenomenon according to particular criteria and derive lessons from such evaluation (Thomas & Myers, 2015). Exploratory case study discovers a phenomenon in order to provide an empirical insight and develop an initial understanding of its dynamics and context (Chopard & Przybylski, 2021).

This study aims to draw an initial picture of how student community engagement is realized in the current context on an example of a selected university in Kazakhstan. Therefore, this study employs an exploratory case study research design, rather than evaluative or intrinsic. An instrumental component is also utilized in this research, since the references to the subject university's external environment are also made.

This subsection aimed to explain the choice for the research method and research design employed in this thesis. Against the background of other methods (ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study and others) and research designs (intrinsic, evaluative, evaluative), an exploratory case study has been selected as a suitable research design due to the purpose of this research to explore a phenomenon taking place in a selected institution and explain the factors influencing its realization.

3.2. Data collection

This subsection provides a detailed description of the population, sample, and the data collection techniques employed in this thesis, as well as the justification behind using these specific methods.

The data collection process consisted of five steps, as established by Creswell (2014): identifying the participants, gaining access, defining the types of information that would answer the research questions best, designing the data collection protocol and administering the data collection with consideration to the ethical aspects.

This study focuses on a single case of a university in Kazakhstan, and aims to investigate the ways students engage with the community, and how this process is institutionalized at the subject university. Therefore, the participants of this study are students, academics, and staff members of the subject university. Being a qualitative study, this thesis does not aim to provide a generalizable knowledge but rather to explore a central subject in a detailed manner (Creswell, 2014), therefore the choice of the subject university was guided by the logic of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014) and sought to investigate an institution located in Central Asia, which appears to be familiar with the idea of community engagement and interaction with the society beyond teaching and research.

An initial review of the websites of 30 universities located in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan was conducted. The purpose of this review was to identify universities that communicate the ideas related to the topic of this thesis through their websites. The search revealed 10 universities which appeared to be potentially suitable to be subjects of this research based on community engagement-related activities, strategic priorities, structural units dedicated to community engagement which were presented on the universities' websites. The potential subjects were then contacted by email addresses presented on their websites, with a booklet containing the information on the idea of this study and the commitment expected from the interview participants (the booklets in Russian and English languages are attached under Annex 1 and 2).

According to the procedure outlined by Creswell (2014), the next step was to gain access to the interview participants at the subject university. The three major target groups were expected to participate in the interviews: students, teaching academics and staff members of the university.

Triangulation of information, according to Creswell (2014), is an important aspect to consider during the data collection stage. It is defined as “the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection” (Creswell, 2014, p. 283), which “ensures that the study will be accurate because the information draws on multiple sources of information, individuals, or processes” (Creswell, 2014, p. 283).

In order to ensure triangulation of information, all the above-mentioned groups were intended to be asked about all the aspects of the student community engagement. For instance, questions regarding the measures that the university takes to support students in their community engagement were to be addressed not only to the members of leadership, other staff members or teaching academics, but also to students.

The specific members of the above-mentioned groups (staff, academics, students) were initially considered as preferred interview participants, in accordance with the research question and sub questions. Below is a detailed categorization of the intended interview participants.

Table 1. Categorization of intended interview participants

Group	Specific intended participants
Students	Students who actively engage with the community, e.g., student organization leaders; Other students interested in the topic.
Administrators/staff members	Administration members working with students, e.g., staff of the student affairs department; If in place, employees of the structural unit responsible for community engagement.
Leadership	Rector; rectorate members; other members of senior leadership interested in/related to the topic.
Academics	Academics leading community engagement initiatives.

Based on this categorization, a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014) served as a guiding principle in the initial process of building the relations and gaining access to the interview participants.

During the course of communication with the potential subject universities, and later with the single university recruited to be the subject of this thesis, it became evident that due to limited availability of time and access to the intended interview partners (for instance, senior leadership

members) it might not be feasible to follow the purposeful sampling strategy strictly. Therefore, the purposeful sampling strategy has been complemented with the approach of snowball convenience sampling. Snowball convenience sampling is a method used in the cases of “unfamiliarity with the topic by the population, or complexity of events” (Creswell, 2014, p. 231), which implies that a researcher asks interview participants to suggest other participants who would be knowledgeable on the topic, and those who are interested and available are recruited as interview partners.

Facilitated by the primary contact person at the university (“gatekeeper” (Creswell, 2014, p. 233), 9 interviews in total were conducted with the following members of the university community:

- Students (no specific categorization, snowball sampling) – 4 interviews;
- Senior leadership member – 1 interview;
- Student affairs department employee – 1 interview;
- Academics leading community engagement initiatives – 3 interviews.

Interviews are a popular technique of data collection in qualitative research (Cresswell, 2014, Yin, 2018). Creswell (2014) identifies 5 types of qualitative interviews: one on one interviews, focus groups, email interviews, telephone interviews and written questionnaires with open-ended questions. By the structure, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) classify interviews into highly structured, semi-structured and unstructured. As the names suggest, the highly structured interviews have strictly determined set of questions, unstructured interviews are characterized by high level of flexibility and the semi structured interviews follow a predetermined protocol, however, allow for flexibility in wording and the flow of the conversation. In this study, one on one semi-structured interviews using the digital software Zoom were considered an optimal interview type, since it allowed for an in-depth conversation with interviewees and offered the flexibility predetermined by the semi structured composition of the conversation. Additionally, software such as Zoom provides an automatic transcription, which served as an aide in the transcribing process later.

Every interview lasted from 30 minutes to one hour and consisted of a set of open-ended questions in accordance with the research questions. As indicated by Creswell (2014), open-ended questions are considered to be highly effective in qualitative interviews since they provide an opportunity for the interviewee to voice their experiences without any possible constraints stemming from past research findings or the researcher’s opinion/bias. The list of questions is attached in the Annex 3 and 4.

In order to ensure consistency of the discussed topic, a clear indication of the meaning of the terms “community engagement” and “student community engagement” was presented to the interview participants during the interviews. In the case of students, in order to draw out their understanding of these concepts, a general question on their perception of their engagement with the community was asked, before introducing the operational definition tackled in this thesis.

Beside the interviews, documents served as an additional source of information within this study. Publicly available documents related to the issues investigated in this topic were collected and analyzed together with the data obtained at the interviews. In alignment with the research questions, the following documents were included in the data analysis:

- Subject university's development plan (1 document);
- Subject university's quality assurance plan (1 document);
- National education development strategy (1 document);
- National youth policy (1 document);
- Documents containing standards of the accreditation companies which conducted a review of the subject university (3 documents).

The ethical considerations related to participants' consent and confidentiality were closely followed during the data collection. The participants were informed about the contents of the interview questions and the idea of the study prior to the interviews. Besides, a consent form containing the written information on data collection and storage was distributed to all the interview participants and a signed consent obtained from them. The versions of the consent form in Russian and English languages are attached under Annex 5 and 6.

Full confidentiality of the university and the participating interviewees was requested by the primary contact person, therefore, the information on the name of the university and specific positions of the interview partners is not disclosed in this thesis. However, the thick description of the university and its environment is provided in the findings section. The interview participants are further indicated as follows:

- Students – ST1, ST2, ST3, ST4;
- Senior leadership member – SL;
- Student affairs department employee – SA;
- Academics leading community engagement initiatives – AC1, AC2, AC3.

Regarding the references to the university's internal documents, considering the agreement on confidentiality requested by the subject university representatives and the APA 7 guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2020) the documents are not listed in the reference list. However, in order to provide a detailed description, the documents are cited within the Findings chapter, without indication of the actual name of the document (For instance, "subject university's strategy 2030" or "subject university's quality assurance policy").

3.3. Data analysis

This subsection describes the data analysis process conducted within this study. Creswell (2014) offers six steps to guide the qualitative data collection: preparing data for analysis, initial coding, identifying common themes from the codes, representing the findings, interpreting the findings in relation to the existing research, and validating the accuracy of the findings.

Upon completion of the data collection, two distinct sets of data emerged – the text data collected during the interviews (9 documents, 3200 words on average) and the text data contained in the documents selected for analysis (7 documents). The initial preparation implied reading through the transcriptions of interviews data generated by the Zoom transcription software, identifying and correcting errors, and making general notes on the content and initial themes that emerged. In the case of the document analysis, the transcription was not needed, so only the initial reading and identification of general themes was conducted as a preparation for coding.

The coding was conducted using the Atlas.ti software, where four sets of documents were bundled into the Atlas.ti projects: texts from the interviews with students, texts from the interviews with administration members and academics, texts from the university’s internal documents, and texts from the external documents related to the investigated topic.

The first stage of coding employed inductive approach and used thematic analysis. The inductive approach implies identifying the specific small units of data and gradually moving to bigger overarching themes based on these specific units (codes) (Creswell, 2014). Thematic analysis is defined as “the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352).

The first stage of inductive coding, also called open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was aimed at identifying the common topics mentioned by the interview partners, including both the codes that were directly related to the investigated issue, and those which did not have the direct relation, but frequently appeared in the data from the interviews and documents. A total of 78 codes were generated out of the open coding stage. Examples of the initial codes include “employability”, “lifelong learning”, “ratings”, “volunteering”, “curriculum”, “digitalization”, “inclusivity”, “altruistic motivations”, “criteria of selecting the university”, “channels of information about community engagement”, “challenges to community engagement”, “funding”, “teachers’ performance indicators” and others.

The following step was to derive themes related to research questions from the codes generated during the open coding stage. At this stage, a deductive approach was employed. Deductive approach implies searching for specific categories (in this case, the themes related to the research questions) in the existing pool of codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The existing codes were grouped into code groups, divided by the 6 major themes according to the focus of each sub question. The sub questions, related major themes and specific codes attributed to them are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Research questions and related themes

Sub question	Overarching themes	Examples of code groups attributed to the theme
What are the measures taken by universities to support	University support	“Curriculum”, “administrative structures”, “funding”, “information channels”, “teachers’ performance indicators”.

student community engagement?		
What community engagement activities do students do independently of the university?	Student activities	“Student activities/initiatives”, “student organizations”, “information channels”.
What is the added value of student community engagement for the university, and for students themselves?	Personal added value; Added value for the university.	“Importance of student community engagement”, “challenges to student community engagement”, “Intangible benefits”, “personal motivation”, “altruistic motivations”, “revenue”.
How does student community engagement fit into the university internal and external environments?	Internal compatibility; External compatibility.	“Inclusivity”, “curriculum”, “research”, “youth volunteering”, “university strategy”, “employability”.

The entire dataset has been analyzed twice, and the data analysis was completed when the data saturation was evident. The data saturation, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 210), is “the point at which...no new information, insights or understandings are forthcoming”.

3.4. Validity and reliability

Other important aspects that were considered during the data collection and analysis stages are validity and reliability of data and findings generated within this thesis. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), internal validity of findings denotes the level of congruence of the findings with the actual reality. Reliability, in qualitative research, is the extent to which the results of the data analysis are “consistent with the data collected” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 251). While defining the objective reality and judging the research findings against this definition might be an implausible philosophical task, the authors, building on the previous research, propose strategies to ensure internal validity and reliability, one of which is triangulation of information. As mentioned previously, triangulation of information is “the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection” (Creswell, 2014, p.283). In this study, the data was triangulated in two ways. First, different target groups within the university participated in the interviews and provided their insights on the same topic. This way, different perspectives on the issue were gained (for instance, the support that the university provides to the student community engagement as seen by the student affairs department employee, senior leadership member and students).

Additionally, a thick description of the subject university and its context provided in the Literature review and Findings chapters are aimed to increase the credibility and reliability of the findings of this study.

4. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

This section aims to describe the process of selection of theoretical frameworks to guide this study, according to its purpose and tackled questions. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks used in this research are described below, together with the rationale behind choosing these specific frameworks and the way they facilitate a thorough understanding of the issues addressed by the research questions.

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which student community engagement is practiced at a university in Kazakhstan and explain the factors influencing its realization. While community engagement is not explicitly highlighted as a priority area in Kazakhstani higher education environment (see Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019), a number of community engagement activities are conducted on the level of institutions (as described in the Findings section). This research, therefore, places itself in the interpretative paradigm of social constructivism (Kezar, 2006) and aims to describe the existing student community engagement practices at the subject university, and explain the factors enabling them, in order to understand what constitutes and influences the realization of student community engagement in the given context of the subject university.

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks are intended to be used as a lens to identify the key themes and concepts to be investigated, according to the research purpose and question (Creswell, 2013).

The topic of community engagement does not appear to be a well-researched topic in the region of Central Asia, therefore the current study aims at initial review of the current state of student community engagement on an example of a selected university in Kazakhstan. Additionally, the limitations of time and volume related to the format of this study as a master's thesis are present. Due to these considerations, according to Kezar's (2006) classification, a middle level explanatory theory has been sought.

Additionally, due to the high level of context dependency of the terms "community engagement" and "student community engagement", a conceptual framework which would provide a definition for investigated phenomena was selected as well.

4.1. The concept of student community engagement: TEFCE toolbox

As reflected in the literature review, the concepts of student/community engagement are highly context dependent and difficult to be strictly defined (Benneworth et al., 2018). Literature offers a wide range of classifications and conceptualizations of community engagement. Therefore, a conceptual framework was needed, which would serve as a definitional basis for the term "student community engagement" and facilitate the forming of the questions that were discussed during the interviews. Considering the diversity of interpretations that student community engagement receives in the literature, it was planned to select a framework according to several principles:

1. Comprehensive approach. As the literature review demonstrates, there are two common ways to conceptualize student community engagement: the curricular and the extracurricular activities. A framework containing both of the types was sought for this study.
2. Succinctness. Due to the time and volume limitations associated with the master's thesis, it was preferred to draw on a framework which would combine a comprehensive approach and succinct and clear format of the concepts presented in it.
3. Focus on qualitative concepts other than quantitative indicators. Since this thesis employs qualitative research design, it was preferred to apply a framework which would provide a concept-, rather than number-based description of student community engagement.

A number of community engagement frameworks presented in the literature look at the notion of community engagement, including the students' curricular and extracurricular contribution.

The Carnegie Classification is one of the well-established frameworks created at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the US. Educational institutions willing to conduct an assessment of their community engagement activities may apply for the Carnegie elective classification through an online application (Carnegie Elective Classifications, n.d.). The classification consists of 14 sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the HEI and its relation to community engagement. The sections tackling the students' involvement appear to be sections 10 (Curricular engagement), 11 (Co-curricular engagement) and 12 (Pathways for Student Development and Learning Through Community Engagement). These (and other) sections contain a combination of open questions intended for a narrative-style answer and number-based indicators, for instance, a number of credit-bearing community engaged courses (Carnegie Elective Classifications, n.d). While the classification provides a comprehensive set of questions related to university community engagement and the students' contribution to it, the format of the classification did not seem to be suitable to be used as a conceptual framework. Since the purpose of the conceptual framework for this thesis was to provide a succinct definition of student community engagement, the Carnegie Classification, presented as an application form for an institutional assessment, did not appear to align with the reasoning related to the expected succinctness of the framework.

Another framework for community engagement was developed by Molas-Gallart and colleagues at the university of Sussex (2002). The authors use the concept of "Third stream activities" and provide a classification of university's interactions with the external partners, including both socially-oriented activities and commercial activities like technology transfer and commercialization of facilities. The framework addresses the students' engagement with the community mainly through the teaching perspective, namely, through the inclusion in the curriculum of such elements as internships, student placement and courses. Additionally, the framework includes a dimension on whether the curriculum is formed in collaboration with the representatives of the society (Molas-Gallart et al., 2002). While this framework addresses the issues related to the topic of this research, it does not cover some central topics of this thesis,

such as student-organized activities or student volunteering. Besides, due to the focus of this framework on third mission activities, rather than community engagement, an inclination towards the commercial approach to the university external engagement is evident (see more on the concepts of third mission and community engagement in the subsection 2.1.1 of the literature review).

A framework for measuring university community engagement was developed at Campus Engage, an institution affiliated with the Irish University association. The framework divides university community engagement into five dimensions: engaged research, teaching and learning, student volunteering, public engagement, institutional infrastructure and architecture (Campus Engage, 2018). The dimensions of teaching and learning and student volunteering provide a number of indicators suggested for evaluating and measuring the student community engagement. The examples of the indicators presented in the framework are organizations and charities involved in curriculum building, student satisfaction from community engaged programs, awards for student volunteers and others. While the big number of indicators provided in the framework demonstrates its comprehensive approach, for this thesis, a more synthesized framework was preferred. Additionally, since the purpose of this framework is to measure community engagement, a quantitative approach is observable in the indicators, which does not fit with one of the qualities of the framework preferred for this thesis – qualitative approach.

Upon the review of the above-mentioned frameworks, and considering the criteria for the preferred framework that would address the research questions, a framework developed within the TEFCE project was selected as a definitional basis for the concept “student community engagement” tackled in this thesis.

TEFCE (Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education) is a project within the Erasmus+ initiative of the European Union, that was realized between 2018 and 2020 by a group of universities, research centers and public institutions from across Europe (Farnell et al., 2020). The project aimed at developing innovative and feasible policy tools for supporting, monitoring and assessing the community engagement of universities (Benneworth et al., 2018; Farnell et al., 2020). The main intellectual output of the project is the institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement, or the TEFCE toolbox. The TEFCE framework aims to guide universities in their self-analysis of community engagement. The toolbox divides community engagement activities in 7 dimensions:

- teaching and learning;
- research;
- service and knowledge exchange;
- students;
- management (partnerships and openness);
- management (policies and support structures);

- supportive peers.

Each dimension is divided into specific sub-dimensions. Since the framework intends to enable the university actors to understand the current state of their community engagement activities, and possible areas of lower or higher intensity (Farnell et al., 2020), each sub dimension is additionally segmented into specific activities, that constitute the supposed level of intensity of that activity. Considering the intended purpose of this framework for this thesis – which is to serve as a definitional basis of the term “student community engagement”, the levels of intensity are not considered as primary indicators of institutionalization of student community engagement. Instead, the dimensions and sub dimensions are treated as equal elements that constitute the notion “student community engagement”. Based on the two dimensions that relate to student community engagement (teaching and learning and students), the following understanding of the term is applied in this thesis (Farnell et al., 2020):

Curricular community engagement:

- Study programs or courses respond to societal needs that are specific to the university's context and its external communities;
- Study programs include a community-based learning component for students;
- Study programs are created, reviewed or evaluated in consultation/cooperation with external community representatives.

Extracurricular community engagement:

- Students at the university deliver their own community engagement activities through student organizations or initiatives;
- The university facilitates matchmaking between community groups and students through extracurricular activities (e.g., volunteering, internships and employment opportunities in NGO's).

This framework provides a comprehensive, yet concisely formatted conceptualization of student community engagement, which is also aligned with the purpose of this research to describe the existing student community engagement activities (in addition to the factors influencing its institutionalization). Since the tool is intended to be used by the universities independently, without the need for additional guidance, the way the concepts are presented combines both specificity and space for interpretation, depending on the context of the university. Such a combination of flexibility and specificity suits the exploratory nature of the research questions tackled in this thesis. Additionally, the framework approaches student community engagement holistically, and looks at both curricular and extracurricular activities.

Since the framework was developed in the European context, a possible limitation of it could be the Europe-oriented approach, considering that the subject of this thesis is a Central Asian university. However, there is no evident or officially-declared indication of the geographic boundedness of this tool. Additionally, the tool has been presented/promoted to the

representatives of the universities outside Europe (SHEFCE, n.d.), which indicates its versatile applicability in terms of the geographical context.

4.2. The institutionalization framework

Institutional theory, or institutionalism, is a widespread theory used to investigate social phenomena (Cai & Mehari, 2015). It belongs to a wider group of organizational theories and studies the relations between the actors and their environments (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & Bromley, 2015). One of the key concepts of institutional theory is “institution” which is defined as “systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions” (Hodgson, 2006, p. 18). In this study, the investigated institution is the subject university.

Another key concept of institutional theory employed in this research is “institutionalization”, which is defined as “the process by which social processes, obligations, or actualities, come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341).

Institutional theory has been increasingly used in higher education research (Cai & Mehari, 2015)). Cai and Mehari (2015) in their review found that often institutional theory in the research of higher education is used to study the technical processes like policies and management and investigate institutions through the prism of their interaction with the external environment.

Aligned with the purpose of this research to provide an exploratory look at the institutionalization of student community engagement in an environment where it has not been extensively researched, the selection of the theoretical framework of institutionalization was following the following logics:

1. Inclusion of both internal and external factors. It was intended to provide a holistic look at factors influencing the institutionalization of student community engagement, including factors within the subject institution and outside of it.
2. Inclusion of technical and personal factors. It was intended to discover the various motivations that drive individuals to engage /support community engagement, including both formal incentives and personal motivations.

Since the process of institutionalization is not limited to particular phenomena, the search for the theoretical framework was not limited to institutionalization of community engagement strictly, but also included frameworks which addressed related topics such as service learning (Furco, 2008) or third mission (Benneworth et al., 2015).

One of the reviewed frameworks was developed by Furco (2008), which is presented in the form of an institutional self-assessment rubric, dividing the process of institutionalization in 5 dimensions: philosophy and mission of service learning, faculty support for and involvement in service learning, student support for and involvement in service learning, community participation and partnerships, institutional support for service learning. For each dimension and its components, three stages of institutionalization are implied, from the lowest to the highest level of institutionalization: “critical mass building”, “quality building” and “sustained institutionalization” (Furco, 2008, p. 67). While this framework provides a comprehensive

account of the factors that may influence institutionalization of a phenomenon (in this case, service learning) within the university, it does not consider the external factors, for instance, whether student community engagement or service learning are present in the country's higher education policy.

Benneworth and colleagues (2015) approach universities as loosely-coupled institutions, in which, according to institutional theory, the institutional formal structures and decision-making processes do not fully correspond with the actual process of change taking place. Instead, the process of change is greatly shaped by cultural norms, taken-for-granted behaviors and informal academic communities (Benneworth et al., 2015). In the article, the authors aimed to provide a classification of the tensions that arise in the process of institutionalization of the third mission activities on an example of a Swedish university. The factors presented by the authors include the tensions occurring within the institution and in the relationships with external stakeholders. While this classification could be used as a framework for investigating the issues related to community engagement, its orientation on the tensions, rather than enabling factors, did not appear to match the purpose and research questions of this thesis.

Upon the review of the above-mentioned frameworks, a theoretical framework of institutionalization presented in the article by Cai and colleagues (2015) was selected for this study.

Drawing on the key concepts of institutional theory and the works of other scholars, the authors analyze institutionalization of technology transfer in a selected Chinese university through technology transfer offices (TTOs). The authors see TTOs as an innovative phenomenon in the educational environment in China and analyze it from the perspective of compatibility and profitability (Cai et al., 2015). Compatibility in this case implies the way a phenomenon (in the case of this article, TTOs) fits in the environments a subject institution operates, both internal and external (Cai et al., 2015). Profitability implies the tangible or intangible, as well as personal, or general (for the university as an organization), benefits that could result from the phenomenon (Cai et al., 2015). Additionally, the authors highlight that the innovation process in the organization is subject to two environments: the technical environment which is attributed to the organizational structures and strategic responses to changes in the external environment, and institutional environment, which implies the strive for legitimacy, convergence, and conformity (Cai et al., 2015). The authors developed a theoretical framework based on the above-mentioned concepts, and containing the factors that could influence the compatibility and profitability of Chinese TTOs in technical and institutional environments.

Building on the logic proposed by this framework, an adapted version catering to the specificities of the research questions tackled in this study was developed. The developed version closely follows the structure of the existing framework, with the following adaptations:

- Reinterpretation of the concept of profitability. The original framework focuses on TTOs, which are functional units aimed at commercializing the research output (Lockett et al., 2003) and therefore, bring monetary profit to the university. In the case of this thesis,

the notion of community engagement is not directly attributed to monetary value for the university. While community engagement may bring some profit, the primary function of it is not strictly focused on profit generation (Benneworth et al., 2018), therefore, in order to facilitate the understanding of the concept for the readership and the interview partners, the term “added value” is used instead of profitability. Added value, in this case, implies both tangible and intangible value that participating in or supporting community engagement may bring to the individual actors or the university.

- Development of a set of factors adapted to the topic of student community engagement. The factors developed by Cai and colleagues (2015) closely relate to the organizational field of TTO, and, for instance, do not include students. Therefore, building on the framework provided by Cai and colleagues (2015), a set of factors related to the student community engagement was developed for this study.

The factors are developed according to the four main themes: external and internal compatibility, personal added value and added value for the university.

The external compatibility is defined as the extent to which student community engagement fits in the university’s external environment. The university external environment implies the current directions in higher education and youth policy in the country, the external accreditation requirements, embeddedness of student community engagement in the current developments of the Kazakhstani higher education domain as well as expectations of students when making decision to study at the subject university.

The internal compatibility is defined as the extent to which student community engagement fits in the university’s administrative structure and academic norms, including the internal quality assurance standards, curriculum, presence of community engagement as one of the performance indicators for university staff and academics, recognition and rewards for community engagement of students, and availability of individual academics/staff members/students promoting student community engagement.

The personal added value is defined as the extent to which students, staff, and academics can gain tangible and/or intangible benefits from student community engagement, including the official incentives/rewards and personal considerations such as aim for prestige or altruistic reasons.

The added value for the university is defined as the extent to which the university as an organization gains tangible and intangible benefits from student community engagement, through revenue, as an element of the technical environment, or increase of the image among the local higher education community through student community engagement. The table below summarizes the factors and the elements of technical and institutional environments.

Table 3. Factors affecting institutionalization of student community engagement

Factor	Definition	Elements of technical environment	Elements of institutional environment
External compatibility	The extent to which student community engagement fits in the university's external environment.	Policies on higher education; Policies on youth; Accreditation requirements.	Expectations of students when selecting this university; Embeddedness of community engagement in the Kazakhstani higher education domain.
Internal compatibility	The extent to which student community engagement fits in the university's administrative structure and academic norms.	Administrative structure; Academic norms (curriculum); Internal quality assurance standards; Performance indicators of staff, academics; Evaluation/recognition of students who engage with the community.	Opinions of students, staff and academics on the importance of student community engagement; Availability of individual academics/staff members/students promoting student community engagement.
Personal added value	The extent to which students, staff, and academics can gain tangible and/or intangible benefits from student community engagement.	Motivation of students, staff, and academics to benefit from official rewards/receive incentives associated with student community engagement. Willingness to develop particular skills, increase future employability (for students).	Motivation driven by altruistic considerations; Desire for legitimacy and prestige;
Added value for the university	The extent to which the university gains tangible and intangible benefits from student community engagement.	Motivation for the university administration to gain revenue for the university.	Motivation for the university administration to increase the prestige of the university.

Considering that community engagement as a strategic priority is not present in Kazakhstani higher education environment (see Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019), the effort to promote it on an institutional and country level might be seen as innovation. Therefore, conceptualization of the investigated phenomenon as an innovation, as proposed by this

framework, fits with the nature of student community engagement as an institutional innovation in the subject university.

A limitation of this framework is the absence of the focus on institutional entrepreneurs and change agents (Ma & Cai, 2021). As suggested by the recent developments of institutional theory, also known as new institutionalism, institutional entrepreneurs are individual actors acting as change agents or drivers of innovation (Ma & Cai, 2021). Considering the time and volume limitations of this master's thesis, the scope of this research was limited to the technical and institutional environments and compatibility and added value. Investigating the issue from the perspective of institutional entrepreneurs and embedded agency can be suggested as a route for future research.

5. Findings

In line with the research questions, this chapter provides a detailed report on what community engagement activities are done by students independently or with the support of the subject university. Findings on the level of institutionalization of student community engagement expressed through compatibility with internal practices and external requirements of the university, and added value for students, academics, administrators, and the university in general (Cai et al., 2015) are presented as well. Each factor is given a descriptive indication of the level of compatibility/added value (for instance, moderate external compatibility). There is no specific scale of measuring the level of indication, instead, an illustrative value is given as a mean of thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As an outcome, it is attempted to draw a holistic picture of what student community engagement constitutes at the university and what influences its realization.

With regard to concepts described in this section, it has to be noted that during the interviews the participants often referred to community engagement in general, without focusing on the students' community engagement specifically. Therefore, further in the text, in the cases when the interview partners referred to a general notion of community engagement (including the students' involvement) it is worded as "community engagement". In the cases when the interview partners referred specifically to students' contribution, it is worded as "student community engagement".

5.1. Subject university and its context

The subject of this research is a private university located in the city of Almaty, Kazakhstan. The university has a legal status of a non-for-profit organization, and belongs to a bigger private company. Due to the affiliation of the university to a private business group, the strategic direction of the university is in alignment with the parent business group's strategy, and specifically, its corporate social responsibility efforts (Parent company strategy).

The university currently hosts around 4000 students, with 3500 of them studying on a Bachelor's level. 50 programs focusing on the fields of management, information technologies, public governance, law, business, and humanities are offered. Among the programs, majority

offer bachelor (22 programs) and master (19 programs) level courses. PhD programs and a program for continuing education are offered as well (Subject university's website).

The programs are hosted by 5 faculties, or as they are called, higher schools, each of which is divided into departments (Subject university's website).

As described on its website, the university follows the "corporate" style of governance, with the key decision-making actor being the governing board, which deals with the university development and strategy. The board is headed by the university president and 5 board members leading some of the higher schools or other major administrative bodies (the financial department, the department of legal affairs and HR).

The board of directors is another governing body at the university, which addresses the university's connection with the parent company. It consists of members holding senior leadership positions in the parent company as well as other business companies (Subject university's website).

While the two above-mentioned organs appear to be addressing the strategy and relations of the university with the parent company, the current affairs related to teaching and learning and research fall under the governance of another major division titled academic council. The council consists of around 30 members representing various departments and units of the university, academics, members of administration and student bodies.

Lastly, a separate council dedicated to business relations and dialogue of the university with industry representatives is also in place, consisting of around 20 representatives holding senior leadership positions at various business companies.

Tuition fees are collected from the students at this university. The average tuition fee for bachelor's courses amounts to around 2500 USD per year. Beside the tuition fee, a particular amount of funding of the university is provided by the parent company. All the operation surplus is reinvested in the improvement of education and research quality (Accreditation agency report).

Looking at the strategic direction of the university, it is positioned as predominantly business and economics-oriented institution aimed at preparing skilled professionals for the improvement of socioeconomic wellbeing of the country and the world (Subject university's development strategy 2030). A strong focus on the alignment of educational activities of the university with the industry and market needs are also highlighted in the university strategy.

Through the framework of institutionalization (Cai et al., 2015), the further subsections take a closer look at how student community engagement fits in and manifests itself in the subject institution's internal and external environments.

5.2. Mapping of student community engagement practices

A number of curricular and extracurricular student community engagement activities taking place at the subject university have been detected during the interviews and document analysis. The extracurricular student community engagement takes place at student organizations with

the support of student affairs department. The curricular community engagement or service learning is not explicitly embedded in the university curriculum, however, individual academics act as agents to promote student community engagement by implementing it in their teaching.

The following subsection reviews the student community engagement activities, as well as the way they are realized by students independently, or with the support of the university.

5.2.1 Community engagement through student organizations

Majority of the extracurricular student community engagement activities are implemented on the basis of student organizations, whose work is coordinated by the student affairs department.

This department provides support and mentoring to the leaders of the student organizations. Referring to the relationship between the student affairs department and student organizations, the interview participants mentioned support, mutual understanding and overall positive dynamics between the two actors.

Students' satisfaction with their experience at the university is one of the priorities of the student affairs department. Therefore, it attempts to promote different ways of student engagement, including community engagement. The activities done by the department include promotion of community engagement opportunities coming from the external community partners, mentorship to the student organization leaders, regular meetings with the members of student organizations to plan future projects and providing financial support for the projects/events.

Student organizations have the autonomy to initiate and conduct projects/events, and the student affairs department provides the support or steering of student engagement.

Common initiators of community engaged activities mentioned by the interview participants are students themselves. They may propose an idea, find the external partner (often through informal connections) and realize the project/event. Another source of initiative on community engagement is through the external partners/organizations that approach the students directly (for instance, through the social media pages of the student organizations) or approach the student affairs department, which forwards the information to the students.

Regarding the information channels by which students find out about community engagement opportunities, four types of channels were identified during the interviews, ordered from the more common to the less common:

- Social media pages/messenger chats of student organizations;
- Informal online and offline chats with friends;
- Emails from the student affairs department;
- Discussions during classes.

From the perspective of the student affairs department, student community engagement is framed in the same way as other student activities like hobby clubs (dance groups, culture clubs), student entertainment activities (cultural events, celebrations), peer tutoring (international

students' orientation, peer psychological support), skill development events (workshops). The university website lists around 20 student organizations which could be classified into three groups: interest clubs on the topics of sports, art, debates, and others; skill development groups like financial club, entrepreneurship organization "Enactus", student research club; and volunteering groups.

Within the interviews, participants mentioned around 7 organizations that they consider active, among which one appeared to be focused on socially oriented projects involving students and external community representatives. Among other activities, this group conducts fundraising events and visits to orphanages and elderly houses. Below are examples of community engagement activities mentioned by students and classified according to the conceptual framework (Farnell et al., 2020).

Awareness raising events.

One example brought by a student was awareness raising videos created by students in collaboration with an external partner, focusing on the issues of addiction to technology.

Another awareness raising event brought as an example by one of the students was a collaboration with a city-wide student organization where students were distributing leaflets with information on the harm of drug use.

Fundraising events.

This type of community engagement activities was mentioned the most often by the participants of the interviews. The popular activity appears to be fundraising and collecting other donations (like clothes) for children living in orphanages or the elderly staying in elderly houses. The channels to collect donations mentioned at the interviews were donation boxes arranged by the students, or entertainment events like concerts or trips organized by students where the collected proceeds were given to the above-mentioned institutions (orphanages, elderly houses). Another example of fundraising is related to emergency situations, where students collected funds to support victims of, for instance, forest fires in Kostanai region in 2022 or the political protests that took place in the same year.

Partnerships with the community groups.

While some of the previously mentioned projects (awareness raising or fundraising events) do happen in collaboration with external partners, they cannot be described as strategically planned and consistently implemented activities, but rather as organically occurring, ad hoc occasions, therefore, it is assumed that the partnership with the community groups is not something that is typically done by students at the student organizations.

5.2.2 Student community engagement facilitated by teachers

While service learning does not appear to be included in a university-wide approach to curriculum, some community engagement activities are organized by teachers, often within the research projects that they conduct in collaboration with external partners. Several academics at the university lead community engagement related projects, often involving students.

The thematic orientation of the projects seems to be dependent on the interests and professional profile of the academic who engages with it, as well as the external partner involved in the project. The types of projects that emerged during the interviews are research and capacity building projects/projects aiming to contribute to the solution of a particular social issue. For the topic of societal issues and community involvement, for instance, the activities seemed to be grouped around the departments of sociology and public governance, often done in collaboration with NGOs whose aim includes contribution to social development in the country (for instance, UN Women or The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)). The initiative to launch these projects frequently comes from the external partners, who are looking for the expertise of the university academics to contribute to the project outcomes. The research interests of academics combined with their experience in similar projects and the network gained over the years are the factors that facilitate the organization of such projects. Regarding the role of students and relation of the projects to the curriculum, it highly depends on the individual department. The common practice appears to be inclusion of students in two roles: as research assistants or as project participants.

Examples of teacher-led projects with students as research assistants

- A research project on influence of misinformation on the society of Kazakhstan – students assisted with data collection;
- A research project titled “What do the Almatians (people residing in Almaty) want?”, on communication between the residents of Almaty and city administration – students assisted with data collection and analysis;
- Project focusing on prevention of violence against women and children during emergency situations, realized in collaboration with UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) – students assisted with data collection;
- Research project focusing on the level of awareness about and implementation of SDGs by the business enterprises in Kazakhstan – a student conducted data collection and analysis;
- A project aiming to minimize the toxic outcomes of the gold mines in the region of Aksu in Kazakhstan – students assisted with data collection and communication between different partners of the project (provided translation assistance).

Examples of teacher-led projects with students as participants

- A project on the peer-to-peer law education for the high school students. University students delivered educational sessions on law and human rights to the high school students;
- A project focusing on the development of social entrepreneurship among the university students conducted in collaboration with British council. Students created social entrepreneurship project ideas and pitched them at a hackathon.

Other examples of curriculum-based activities

- Bachelor’s and master’s thesis projects at the department of public governance whereby students are expected to identify a social issue in the community, conduct an analysis and propose recommendations for solutions of the issue;
- Internships at the public institutions such as public service centers or anti-corruption government units facilitated by the department of public governance.

This subsection aimed to provide a systematic mapping of the student community engagement activities organized by students at student organizations, the teachers or included in the curriculum structure. The figure below provides a graphic representation of the types of activities and actors that implement them.

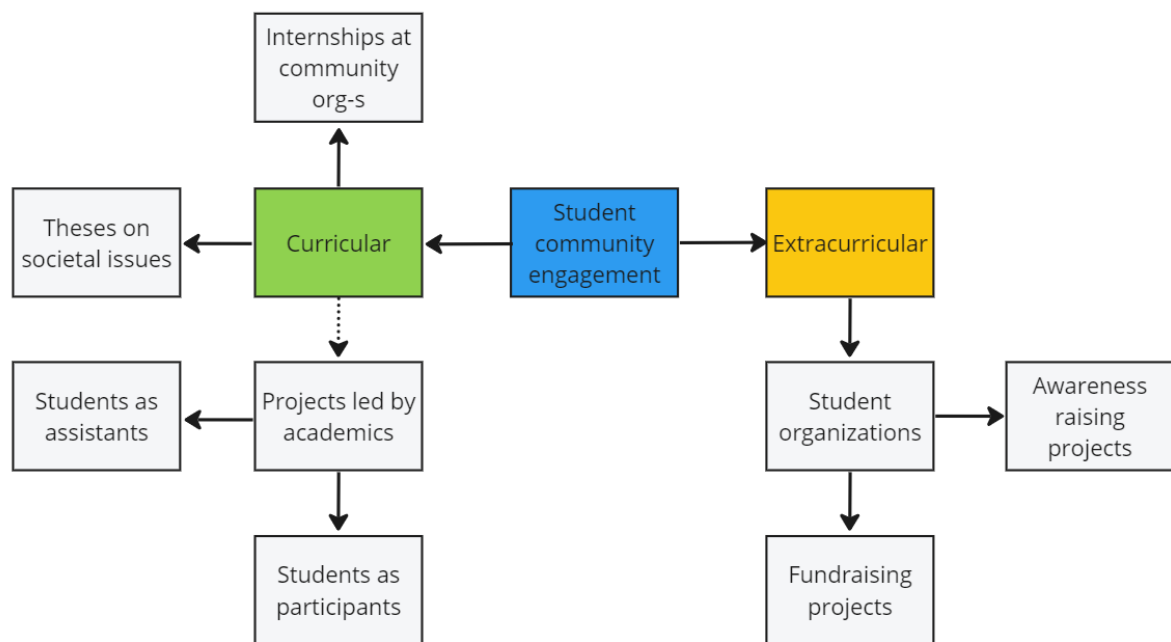


Figure 1. Mapping of student community engagement activities at the subject university

5.3. External compatibility

This subsection describes compatibility of student community engagement with the external environment of the university. External compatibility in this thesis is conceptualized as the way student community engagement is aligned with the higher education policy priorities in the country, the accreditation requirements and standards, and current developments in the Kazakhstani higher education domain, as seen by the experienced university staff. Additionally, views of students were collected on whether they considered community engagement as a criterion of choice when making a decision to study at the subject university.

5.3.1 Compatibility with educational and youth policies

The two main policy documents regulating the higher education and youth affairs in Kazakhstan are The State Program for the Development of Education and Science of the Republic of

Kazakhstan launched in 2019, and The Concept of the State Youth Policy of Kazakhstan 2023-2029, launched in 2023. An analysis was conducted in order to detect the presence of the concepts related to student community engagement in these documents.

The State Program for Education and Science outlines the state priorities on education development in the country, including the K-12 sector, vocational education and higher education. The program aims at increasing the competitiveness of Kazakhstani education on a global scene, bringing up the students on the basis of humanistic values and increasing the contribution of science to the socio-economic development of the country (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019).

The thematic review (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) of the document demonstrated several key themes related to higher education. Listed from the more common to less common, the themes in the program are employability, internationalization, inclusivity of higher education, and science, and research development (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019).

Employability and alignment of the higher education outputs (graduates and research) to the needs of the market appeared to be the central priority of the program in relation to higher education. Examples of action steps included in the program are implementation of dual learning in higher education, involvement of employers in the curriculum building, skill building of PhD students (research skills), increasing the funding for research.

Internationalization is another major priority mentioned in the program. Steering measures proposed for it include increasing the partnership and academic exchange with foreign institutions, promoting the English language learning and increasing the number of publications in major databases like Web of Science.

With regard to community engagement, there is no explicit term or concept in the program similar to it, however other concepts that could be related to the engagement of universities with their communities are present, namely inclusivity, lifelong learning and development of citizenship among the students.

Inclusivity of higher education is one of the most common themes mentioned in the document (3rd most common by the number of codes generated during the thematic analysis, after employability and internationalization). The priorities related to increasing inclusivity of HEIs in Kazakhstan include narrowing the gap in quality between the rural and urban universities, reforms in state scholarship requirements to include the social economic status as one of the criteria, initiatives to promote digital education, creation of MOOCs to make the learning materials more accessible.

Lifelong learning is another priority brought up in the document, conveyed through the focus on better alignment of the learning outcomes on different levels of education in Kazakhstan, and recognition of alternative learning pathways.

Lastly, albeit vaguely, the development of citizenship among the students in Kazakhstani HEIs is also brought up in the program in the context of providing support and awards to the students

who “demonstrated high level of citizenship and patriotism” (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019, p 37).

A more defined focus on the youth (including students) citizenship is taken in the Concept of the State Youth Policy of Kazakhstan 2023-2029. This document does not primarily focus on the university students, however, it was considered useful for this research since it talks about a broader group of young people, which includes the university students. Together with the program on the development of education, it provides a general view on the position of student community engagement in the policy landscape in Kazakhstan.

The youth citizenship in this document is presented mostly through involvement of the young people in decision-making, including their involvement in political bodies. Another term related to community engagement detected in the document is youth volunteerism. It is reported that there is a big demand for volunteering in general and specifically in the domains related to societal issues, and it is intended to provide more funding to provide volunteering opportunities to young people (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

Similarly to the program on development of education and science, youth employability and entrepreneurship enjoy the highest prioritization in this policy document. Some measures to enhance youth employment and entrepreneurship include reviewing and updating the business education curriculum at universities, providing support to the recent graduates with the first employment through the “First job placement” program, and improving the business education of young people (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023, p. 24).

A review of the national policies on education and youth shows that the central priority for Kazakhstani policymaking is broad alignment of education and youth with the needs of the market. This prioritization is expressed through the aims to increase employability of students, alignment of research with the market needs and development of entrepreneurship skills in students. On this background, community engagement is not completely excluded, however, seems to receive a secondary importance. It is expressed through inclusivity and involvement of students who do not normally get access to higher education, as well as inclusion of youth in decision-making and development of volunteerism. Considering this background, it is possible to conclude that student community engagement is moderately compatible with the political environment.

5.3.2 Compatibility with accreditation standards

Accreditation is an important part of the universities' professional positioning in Kazakhstan. In order to be formally licensed to provide educational services, all the universities in Kazakhstan have to obtain an accreditation which is conducted by the government-approved national or international agencies (Independent Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.). The two types of accreditation available for the universities in Kazakhstan are institutional and program accreditation (Independent Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.). The institutional accreditation entails a review of institutional structure, strategy, and governance. The program accreditation focuses on individual study programs, their forming and update processes and content.

The subject university obtained a number of institutional and program accreditations from the agencies included in the government's approved list, and other reputable agencies. For this research, two reports issued by the accrediting agencies (one institutional accreditation and one program accreditation) were analyzed to find out whether community engagement or related topics are considered as requirements for the university to be accredited.

The institutional accreditation reviewed the university by such categories as mission and strategy, management structures, quality management, teaching, research, student services and transparency. The categories by which the university is reviewed do not appear to include any items related to community engagement. Rather, the accreditation aimed to see the alignment of the above-mentioned dimensions with each other and with the general university mission and strategy. Nevertheless, the accreditation committee highlighted a number of activities that were considered successful. Those activities include the university's actions on employability, internationalization and inclusivity. Unlike the national policies, in the case of the external review by an international accreditation company, inclusivity received slightly more attention (more mentions in the accreditation report) than employability and internationalization.

The program accreditation reviewed 9 programs of the university in the fields of management, marketing and business administration. The programs were reviewed against such criteria as program management, information management and reporting within the program, monitoring and evaluation, student-centered approach, teachers, student support, informing the public. Each criterion has a set of standards according to which the program is evaluated. Among the standards of evaluation, employability, internationalization, and inclusivity were detected as central themes. Similarly to the institutional accreditation, in this accreditation alignment of the program with the societal needs and inclusivity (providing alternative study paths to different groups of students, recognition of prior learning and others) had slightly more mentions than employability and twice as many mentions as internationalization-related indicators.

Review of the two sets of accreditation standards shows that employability and internationalization are prioritized as accreditation standards, however, community engagement in the form of inclusion has a slightly higher prioritization. It might allow for an assumption that compatibility of community engagement with the accreditation standards is higher than with the national policies.

5.3.3 External compatibility as seen by university staff

In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the environment the university operates in and to ensure triangulation of information (Creswell, 2014), the perspectives of university staff on the importance of community engagement for the university's public image and its embeddedness in the current developments in Kazakhstani higher education domain were considered as well.

According to the senior administration member, community engagement is something that is indeed prioritized by the accreditation agencies, however, not necessarily the student community

engagement, but other forms of it, for instance, making the university spaces and resources (like library) available for the public.

Other interview partners among the teaching academics shared their perspectives on the perception of community engagement in the professional community of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. According to them, community engagement is not a well-known, but an emerging concept that gradually gains popularity among the university-related stakeholders and some initiatives by international NGOs, for instance related to UN SDGs, support its promotion.

Based on the insights shared by university administrators and professors, it is possible to summarize that community engagement is currently not fully embedded in the professional community of Kazakhstani higher education, however it gradually gains popularity with the help of international organizations.

5.3.4 Compatibility with potential students' expectations

Another perspective on the external compatibility of student community engagement is provided by students. The current students of the university were asked what were the criteria of their choice to study at the subject university, and whether presence or absence of student community engagement was one of them. A common criterion mentioned by students was opportunity to have international experience or international recognition of the diploma. Some other criteria included facilities, fees, location, and availability of student activities such as interest clubs. Based on the answers provided by students, the compatibility of student community engagement with the potential students' expectations appears as minimal.

This subsection reviewed compatibility of student community engagement from four perspectives: national policies on education and youth, accreditation requirements, professional environment as seen by the university staff and students' expectations.

The level of compatibility with the above-mentioned factors may be indicated as moderate, with some exceptions in relation to inclusivity of higher education. This criterion appears to be prioritized by the accreditation agencies. Additionally, in the general professional environment of Kazakhstani universities, community engagement is an emerging concept promoted by the initiative of international organizations.

The role of students in community engagement, however, has not been explicitly identified in any of the above-reviewed documents/interview data, therefore, its external compatibility can be considered as minimal.

5.4. Internal compatibility

This chapter aims to indicate the level of compatibility of student community engagement with the internal procedures, standards and general orientation of the subject university, building on the combination of document analysis and interviews with university staff and students. The internal compatibility in this thesis is conceptualized as the way student community engagement

is aligned with the university's institutional structure and processes, and the perceptions of university staff and students on the importance of student community engagement.

5.4.1 Compatibility with strategic positioning and quality assurance standards

The university's mission, vision, values and strategic priorities are outlined in its Strategy-2030 document. This document was chosen for an analysis in order to get an understanding of the general positioning of the university, the contribution to the society it aims to make and the specific developmental goals it sets. Additionally, to get a more in-depth view on the university's internal processes, an internal quality assurance policy was analyzed to see whether community engagement is included as a quality indicator. Both of the documents are publicly available. Lastly, university staff members' inputs were collected during interviews on whether any aspect of community service or student community engagement is included in their performance indicators.

According to the Strategy-2030 the university is positioned as an entrepreneurial institution aiming to contribute to the solution of the social and economic challenges in Central Asia and the world. The mission statement of the university highlights its intention to educate leaders ready to take on responsibility for the real-life issues of the world (Subject university's development strategy 2030). Thematic analysis of the document demonstrated that alignment with the market and industry needs, development of the students' entrepreneurial skills and ensuring their employability are the highest prioritized areas of activity at the university. Another important priority outlined in the document is internationalization, reflected through international academic mobility, aim to receive international accreditations and increased use of English as a medium language of instruction.

Societal issues and contribution to them are mentioned in the document as well, however largely as a general reference rather than a specific priority or strategic goal. Engagement with external partners is framed as a part of the mission to provide "globally oriented education in close partnership with the industry" (Subject university's development strategy 2030) – through dual programs with industry and involvement of business representatives in the development of educational programs.

The university's internal quality standards are outlined in the quality assurance policy document. This document contains the principles on which the quality assurance and quality management at the university are based. The document was analyzed to see whether any references to community engagement are present among the quality parameters. The analysis shows that, in alignment with the strategic direction of the university, the approach to quality assurance is focused on the university-industry interaction and preparing employable graduates. For instance, a separate section is dedicated to compliance of the university activities to the needs of society – and such compliance is framed as alignment with market needs and employability of students (Subject university's quality assurance policy).

As an element related to community engagement, equal access and inclusivity are also a part of the quality standards at the university. The specific indicators related to it are discounts for

students from disadvantaged groups, accessible learning conditions for differently abled students, and flexible learning paths and recognition of non-formal learning.

An additional input on the inclusion of community engagement in the staff's performance indicators were provided during the interviews. The member of the senior leadership reported that community engagement is not included as a performance indicator. Other interview partners, teaching academics, shared that their performance evaluation heavily depends on their research productivity, and community engagement is not included in it. The strong focus on research output of the professors is explained by the Kazakhstan's general policy orientation on increasing research production in the country and raising in the international rankings (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019), and specifically this university's commitment to the same (Subject university's development strategy 2030).

5.4.2 Compatibility with curriculum

The curriculum at the subject university consists of two elements – the standard block of programs that all higher schools implement, including subjects like basic math, English, IT, and a specialized block that each higher school and department is free to form by itself. The inclusion of community engagement in the curriculum depends on the orientation of an individual department or program. The departments of sociology or public governance, for instance, were referred to as the ones including the community engagement element to a large extent, by involving community partners in the curriculum forming, organizing placements and internships at community organizations for students, coordinating theses on the topics related to societal issues. Regarding the institutionalized effort to include service learning in curriculum – no substantial evidence of such efforts has been detected within this study.

This subsection examined the compatibility of community engagement, including students' contribution, with the university's strategy and internal processes. The findings suggest that this university is mainly oriented on alignment with business and industry and sees external engagement primarily through this perspective. Community engagement does not appear to be explicitly embedded in the strategy and mission of this university, however a related concept – inclusivity – was largely included in the university's quality assurance standards. Therefore, the compatibility of student community engagement with current university strategy and processes may be indicated as low, however, inclusivity, as one of the aspects of community engagement, has a distinct position in the university internal processes.

5.4.3 Compatibility with university's structural units

At the time of this research, there was no specific office or any structural unit at the university dedicated to community engagement. However, some other units with different primary responsibilities conduct activities which may be attributed to community engagement. This subsection reviews those units and the areas of extension of their activities to community engagement. The units include the student affairs department, the SDG research center and examples of higher schools whose work relates to community engagement.

The student affairs department deals with a wide array of tasks related to administration of student experience at the university. Examples of their tasks include organizing student housing, supporting students with logistical issues like transportation cards, coordinating student entertainment activities and student organizations. From the perspective of this department, student community engagement is seen as a part of the student engagement, and done with the purpose of providing a fulfilling student experience and facilitating entertainment and skill development. Since one of the responsibilities of this department is to coordinate student organizations and volunteering, it also includes coordination of socially-oriented student initiatives that are done in those organizations. The student affairs department provides mentoring to the leaders of student organizations, conducts regular planning meetings, and if requested by students, may provide some amount of funds (as described by the interview partner, the amount of funds should have a particular limit: “not a million” (SA). Generally, while the student affairs department does not specifically prioritize student community engagement, it provides support and coordination of it as a part of general student engagement coordination.

Another structural unit within a university conducting work related to student community engagement is the SDG research center. The primary tasks of this institution are to conduct basic and applied research using the framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNDP, n.d.). Other activities of the center include promotion and advocacy for the idea of sustainable development in the university and outside. Some activities of promotion of SDGs include implementing the sustainable development principles in the university curriculum, creating a sustainability strategy for the university and organizing dual degree programs with universities abroad on the topics related to SDGs. Regarding the work with external partners in Almaty, major collaboration projects are related to ecological and environmental issues. Some other external projects include work on the learning outcomes on a country level and inclusion of sustainability topics in it, in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries.

To summarize, this research center works with external partners on the topics of sustainability – which can be attributed to as community engagement. Students are also involved in the activities of the SDG center – usually as research assistants in the projects. Engagement of students, however, is not the first priority of this center, and the students’ involvement fluctuates depending on the interest of individual students.

Another major structural division at the university is the higher schools. There are 5 higher schools at the university, each focusing on a specific field (Subject university’s website):

- School of economics and management;
- School of public governance;
- School of digital technology;
- School of business;
- School of humanities.

The higher schools consist of departments teaching specific disciplines according to the department's focus. Additionally, some schools host research centers aligned with the school's topical focus. Several examples of community engagement activities conducted on the basis of departments or research centers emerged during the interviews. For instance, at the departments of social sciences and the department of public governance, a number of community engagement activities were led by the initiative of individual faculty member. The activities are focused on research on particular societal issues in Kazakhstan in alignment with the research interests of the faculty members, and are often initiated due to those faculty members' professional connections with other community partners (NGO's, government bodies). Students regularly participate in such projects as research assistants, or, in cases when the project involves working with students as participants, they are involved in discussions.

The characteristics of such projects on the level of schools and departments are that they are initiated by individual faculty members, they involve students in a role of assistants or participants, and that they are aligned with the general direction of the higher school by which they are hosted. A relation between the topical focus of the school and whether it will host community engagement projects was also mentioned by some interview partners. The school of humanities, for instance, is seen as a school with a closer orientation towards community engagement projects due to its topical focus.

This subsection reviewed the way community engagement is included in the subject university's structural units and demonstrated that on the level of student affairs office, it is seen as a part of student engagement at the university, and on the level of higher schools and research centers a number of community engagement activities emerged from the initiative of individual faculty members. The student involvement in community engagement in the case of student organizations is welcomed, however not steered specifically. In the case of higher schools and research centers – students are involved in assisting roles. This evidence might allow for a preliminary conclusion that student community engagement has a moderate compatibility to the university's structural units and their activities.

5.4.4 Internal compatibility as seen by university staff and students

University staff members and students were asked whether they see community engagement as something important to be done at the university. This subsection reviews the data from the answers given by the interview participants. The purpose of this question was to look into the opinions of the interview partners on the importance of community engagement in general, rather than their own motivations to engage. The latter is addressed in the section 5.5.1 dedicated to the added value of community engagement.

A diversity of views on the importance of community engagement for the university emerged during the interviews. By students, for instance, community engagement was seen as a positive activity which can entail several positive outcomes, like opportunity to help the ones in need, which, however, comes as secondary to studies and learning. Several student-interview partners highlighted the importance of their time management and the relation between the availability of free time and their ability to engage with extracurricular activities, including community

engagement. As described by one of the student-interviewees, “studying is primary, volunteering is secondary” (ST4).

A variety of perspectives on the importance of student community engagement emerged from the interviews with the staff members. A senior leadership member talks about community engagement as “invisible bonus” (SL) to the university’s main activities, which helps the university in its pursuit to prepare not only skilled professionals, but also socially aware citizens. From the perspective of the student affairs department, the importance of student community engagement is seen through skill development and students’ future employability. Teaching academics highlighted the importance of student community engagement as a way to implement the theoretical knowledge that students received during classes, in practice. The general attitude towards the importance of community engagement across the staff members is that it is by definition positive and important. However, a specific prioritization and strategy around it appears to be absent.

This subchapter reviewed internal compatibility of community engagement, including students’ contribution, as it is reflected in the university positioning and strategy, structural units and their activities and opinions of the staff members and students. Given the corporate style of management and general orientation of this university on alignment with industry, entrepreneurship, and internationalization (Subject university’s development strategy 2030) community engagement as an effort to engage with the external partners to solve local issues does not appear to be highlighted as a separate priority. Nevertheless, a number of community engagement activities occur in student organizations, research centers and higher schools.

5.5. Added value of student community engagement

This section looks at the student community engagement at the subject university from the perspective of the added value that the actors engaging with it see for themselves and the institution in general. The concept of added value of student community engagement in this thesis is divided in the tangible and intangible value that it may bring to students, staff, and the university as an organization.

5.5.1 *Personal added value*

This subsection reviews the personal added value of student community engagement as seen by academics, staff members and students themselves. The added value may be divided into two types: the personal motivations (for instance, willingness to gain particular skills or altruistic motivations to help the ones in need) and official rewards for participating in student community engagement (for instance, extra points to GPA for students).

The personal motivations detected during the interviews vary from instrumental reasons (future employment or skill development), to altruistic considerations (desire to help people in need). One of the prevailing motivations for students to engage with the community is development of skills in order to increase their competitiveness in their future career (including general references like “I can develop professional skills” (ST1, ST2, ST3, ST4), and specific expectations to develop particular skills: “it (community engagement) develops my communication skills

which in the future will help me build relations with clients” (ST3). Development of communication and leadership skills were commonly mentioned as reasons to engage with the community as well: “I need to learn to communicate with people” (ST2); “To improve my skills as organizer and leader” (ST3, ST4).

The second common reason to engage with the community for students were altruistic considerations: desire to help the people in need (often mentioned in the context of supporting people staying at the elderly houses), sense of duty to help others, and desire to “bring joy” (ST2) to others, based on a feeling of pity for the people in need.

Other motivations mentioned by students included references to the prestigious image of volunteering and community engagement. Students mentioned that volunteering and community engagement “sounds nice and important” (ST1), or that they would “show it off to their parents” (ST3).

Regarding the official incentives for students to engage with the community, there is no specific scheme dedicated to community engagement individually, however, several interview partners (ST3, ST4, SA) mentioned “social GPA”, which, according to their description, implies that the volunteering activities (including community engagement) of individual students are recorded and then particularly active students who have high social GPA are subject to benefits such as discounts of student fees.

Overall, the added value of community engagement for students is not substantially expressed through official incentives or awards, but rather their participation is driven by the motivation to develop their skills or help the people in need, therefore the level of personal added value of community engagement may be indicated as moderate.

Another perspective on the personal added value of the student community engagement is provided by the academics who teach at the university. The questions on this topic were formed in a way to find out what motivated the academics to encourage their students to engage with the community, or directly involve them in the social projects that they conduct.

One of the common motivations for the teachers was their critical attitude to the marketization and commercialization of the world. The interview partners highlighted the importance of social values and teaching them, as well as research on social issues. The following quotes by the academics illustrate their attitudes: “Not everything is measured by business measures” (AC2); or “We shouldn’t end up in the world of material transactions where the only thing that matters is how much money one has. This is completely wrong” (AC3).

Another common motivation among teaching academics are their research interests and the intention to develop their research portfolio. As described by one of the interview partners, teachers are driven to initiate projects with external partners to enhance their professional development and fulfill their research interests and satisfaction from the work that they do. One of the interview partners formulated in the following way: “I like the work that I am doing, and I don’t do it for money” (AC1). Another perspective on this was given by an academic, who said that they choose to work at this university because “the university does not limit their freedom

to create” (AC2) – meaning that academics at this university enjoy the autonomy to follow their research interests through projects without any limitations from the university leadership.

Lastly, a common reason for academics to encourage student community engagement through their research projects was enjoying interacting with the students, discussing the issues that they consider important and receiving their feedback, and contributing to educating professionals that would tackle the societal issues that these academics consider important. Quotes reflecting this reason include: “I like working with younger people because they are proactive (AC1)”; “My motivation is to tell the students that through the work and desire to help others, they can become successful people (AC3)”; “It is not a one-way work, I always receive feedback from students, and it motivates me too (AC3)”.

Regarding the official incentives for the teachers to conduct student community engagement activities, there is no incentive specifically dedicated to that, and the main performance indicator for academics is their research productivity. However, the funding of the projects that the academics conduct with external partners normally allocates a particular amount to the academic – therefore a financial income from the projects may also be seen as an incentive for academics to conduct community engagement projects.

Beside academics and students, university staff members were also asked regarding their personal motivations to promote student community engagement. There hasn’t been detected any official scheme that would provide an incentive for them to encourage student community engagement. Regarding the intrinsic motivations, an interview partner from the student affairs department mentioned the enjoyment of interacting with the students and empowering them to make a positive impact on the society. The member of the senior leadership of the university referred to the importance of educating students as active citizens who “acknowledge the importance of freedom, choice, compassion, gender, physical and political diversity (SL)”.

As the review demonstrates, similarly to students, academics and staff are not officially incentivized to promote student community engagement at the university, but are rather driven by their intrinsic motivation and general accepted notion that student community engagement is something positive.

The added value that motivates students, academics, and staff to involve in or promote student community engagement at the subject university may be indicated as moderate. Specifically, the findings suggest that to a large extent the actors are driven by their personal motivation such as desire to gain particular skills, develop professional portfolio, help the people in need or broadly contribute to the society positively. The official incentives like “social GPA” or income from the project budgets for academics who conduct them, are also in place, however not as widespread.

5.5.2 General added value

The added value of student community engagement for the university as an organization is presented as possible financial revenue or other benefits that entail tangible or intangible profit to the university.

Regarding the financial profit brought by the student community engagement activities, there hasn't been detected any evidence of it. Activities of the SDG research center related to partnerships with businesses in the sphere of ecological solutions bring some financial revenue to the university. However, by the description of an academic involved at the SDG center, this activity resembles knowledge transfer rather than community engagement: the team at the SDG center developed a technology which attracted interest from a local business enterprise and was purchased by it from the university.

Additionally, a particular amount of revenue comes from the research projects led by the individual professors, described above. Commonly, the projects are funded by external actors, often international NGOs, which contribute to the budget of the project in their collaboration with the university. Therefore, the projects led by individual faculty members also contribute to the university revenue.

Regarding the non-financial added value that student community engagement might bring to the university, the interview partner from the senior leadership referred to the marketing value of student volunteering in general and student community engagement specifically. It was communicated that the activities that are done by students are recorded and promoted on the university's social media to support its image as a dynamic and engaging place to study and attract more potential students.

This subsection reviewed the general added value of the student community engagement to the university through the perspective of financial and non-financial profit. The data analysis demonstrates that while not completely absent, the financial profit from the student community engagement is not substantial. The non-financial benefit was seen as a way to market the university to potential students. Considering this evidence, the general added value for student community engagement may be described as moderate.

Based on the findings presented above, the level of compatibility and added value of student community engagement at the subject university may be described as moderate. While there hasn't been detected a specific prioritization of student community engagement in the university's internal and external environments, a number of references to concepts attributed to community engagement (for instance, inclusivity) have been detected.

From the perspective of external compatibility, inclusivity of higher education appeared to be one of the central themes in the government strategy on education and in the standards of international accreditation agencies. Looking at the internal processes and standards at the university, student community engagement is prioritized by the student affairs department, as it sees it as a way to improve students' experience at the university. From the perspective of teaching academics, the community engagement research projects done by the teachers stem from their personal initiative based on their interests and professional networks.

Regarding the motivations to engage with the community (by students) or support student community engagement (by staff), it appears to be predominantly dependent on the actor's personal reasons, rather than the university's intentional effort to incentivize community

engagement. The students' motivations include the willingness to develop their skills and future employability, as well as altruistic desire to help the ones in need. Staff and teachers are motivated by their research interests related to societal issues and belief in the value of community engagement as opposed to commercialization of education.

5.6. Challenges in student community engagement

The interview partners referred to several challenges that occur in the process of student community engagement, that are listed and described below. Recommendations to tackle the challenges are given in the Conclusion section of this thesis.

- Dependence on individual initiative. This challenge has been mentioned by interview partners among the teaching academics. According to the interviewees, the way student community engagement is realized might depend on individual initiative from selected students. If there are no individuals who would drive the student community engagement, then promoting and realizing it might be more difficult.
- Lack of interest from students. From the perspective of teaching academics, the level of interest and initiative among students from community engagement could be higher.
- Frequent changes in university leadership. The changes of higher-level leadership at the university may be a challenge for a sustainable implementation of different initiatives, including community engagement.
- Imbalance of theory and practice. It was suggested by the teaching academics that the practical element of the programs taught at the university could be increased to include more interactions of students with the community.
- Students' availability of time. Mentioned by both academics and students, they often do not find enough time to engage with the community due to their commitment to classes.
- Low popularity of "social" activities. According to a teaching academic, the general image of community engagement and similar activities is less attractive to young people than ideas of financial gain and commercial entrepreneurial success.

6. Conclusion and discussion

This section summarizes the findings of this thesis and provides a wider conceptualization of the results of this study on the background of the existing research on the topic of institutionalization of student community engagement. Additionally, practical recommendations on enhancement of community engagement at the subject university are given, drawing on the challenges reported by the interview participants. Lastly, limitations of this thesis as well as suggestions for the future research on the topic of student community engagement are provided.

6.1. Summary of findings

This thesis focuses on the process of institutionalization of student community engagement at a selected university in Kazakhstan. The purpose of this research was to explore the ways in which

student community engagement is practiced at a university in Kazakhstan and explain the factors influencing its realization. Guided by the theoretical framework of institutionalization (Cai et al., 2015), the following research questions were tackled in this thesis:

Main question:

How is student community engagement practiced and institutionalized at a university in Kazakhstan?

Sub-questions:

- What are the measures taken by the university to support student community engagement?
- What community engagement activities do students do independently of the university?
- What is the added value of student community engagement for the university, and for students themselves?
- How does student community engagement fit into the university internal and external environments?

Below are listed the student community engagement activities which emerged during the interviews and data analysis. According to the theoretical framework, the four key concepts were investigated in this thesis: internal and external compatibility of student community engagement, added value for the actors involved in community engagement activities and added value for the university as an organization – they are summarized as well.

Mapping of student community engagement activities

A number of student community engagement activities take place at the university, driven by the initiative of various actors. According to the conceptual framework (Farnell et al., 2020), two types of student community engagement were investigated in this thesis: extracurricular and curricular. The extracurricular student community engagement appears to be taking place through student organizations with the support of student affairs department. The activities include awareness raising events (for instance, distributing information leaflets or creating education video-materials on societal issues) and fundraising activities (collecting funds for elderly houses, orphanages, victims of emergency situations).

The curricular community engagement or service learning is not officially embedded in the university curriculum, however, some elements of service learning are present in the curriculum of selected higher schools. For instance, at the department of public governance, students are encouraged to write master and bachelor theses on societal issues. Furthermore, internships for students are offered at the public institutions such as public service centers or anti-corruption government units. Additionally, individual academics act as agents to promote student community engagement by implementing it in their teaching. In those projects, students are usually involved as research assistants (for instance, a research project on influence of misinformation on the society of Kazakhstan, where students assisted with data collection) or

directly as participants (for instance, a project on the peer-to-peer law education for the high school students, where students delivered educational sessions on law and human rights).

Internal compatibility of student community engagement

The internal compatibility of student community engagement with the university's structural units, processes, mission, and the attitudes of staff and students can be indicated as moderate. Several key outcomes on the internal compatibility of student community engagement emerged upon the data analysis.

First, while the themes related to societal issues and the university's contribution to them are mentioned in the university's strategic and operational documents (university's development strategy, the internal quality assurance policy) they appear largely as general references rather than specific goals or strategic priorities. Considering the university's orientation of commercial outcomes and alignment with industry, community engagement is present in the university's activities, however not explicitly prioritized.

Second, as a concept related to community engagement the theme of inclusivity (Benneworth et al., 2018; Zabeli et al., 2021) is largely addressed by the university's quality assurance strategy. The specific indicators related to it are discounts for students from disadvantaged groups, accessible learning conditions for differently abled students, and flexible learning paths and recognition of non-formal learning.

Third, the actors within the university who initiate and facilitate student community engagement are students, student affairs office and individual academics interested in the topic. Student affairs office sees student community engagement as a part of student life and general experience at the university. Individual faculty members support it as a way to provide practical experience beside the theoretical knowledge, and students see it as something positive, however, prioritize it as a secondary activity to studying.

The general attitude towards the importance of student community engagement is that it is by definition positive and important. However, a specific prioritization and strategizing around it appears to be absent.

External compatibility of student community engagement

The external compatibility of student community engagement was viewed from the perspectives of national policies on education and youth, accreditation requirements, and the general external professional environment the university operates in (as seen by the university staff).

Similarly to the university internal environment, community engagement does not appear to be a central topic in the university's external environment, however a related concept of inclusivity seems to be receiving a prioritization as an international accreditation requirement. It is measured, for instance, through provision of alternative study paths to different groups of students, or recognition of prior learning.

Second, in the general professional environment of Kazakhstani universities, community engagement appears to be an emerging concept driven by the initiatives of international organizations who collaborate with the university in various social initiatives.

These results suggest that international actors in the Kazakhstani higher education landscape may contribute to the promotion of community engagement, framed as, for instance, inclusivity-focused effort.

Personal added value

The added value is presented as official rewards that the actors get for participating in the student community engagement (for instance, extra points to GPA for students), and the intrinsic motivations to engage in or support student community engagement (for instance, feeling of satisfaction, enjoyment, altruistic motivations).

The findings suggest that to a large extent the actors within the university are driven by their personal motivation such as desire to gain particular skills, develop professional portfolio, help the people in need or broadly contribute to the society positively. The motivation of students to engage with the community at the subject university vary from instrumental reasons like employment or skill development, to altruistic considerations like desire to help people in need. The official incentive schemes that may contribute to the actors' motivation to support student community engagement ("social GPA" or income from the project budgets for academics who conduct them), are also in place, however not as widespread. Therefore, the personal added value of student community engagement may be indicted as moderate.

Added value for the university

The general added value of student community engagement was conceptualized as financial and non-financial profit that the university might receive from it. The findings suggest that while not completely absent, the financial profit from the student community engagement is not substantial. One instance of community engagement activities bringing financial profit is the projects led by individual academics with external partners that provide funding as part of the projects' budgets and, therefore, add to the university revenue. However, it may not be characterized as a significant revenue stream for the university. The non-financial added value presented as a way to use student community engagement in the university's marketing efforts by promoting the projects done by students and branding the university as a dynamic and engaging place to study, to attract other potential students. Considering this evidence, the general added value for student community engagement may be described as moderate.

6.2. Discussion

This subsection reflects on the results of this thesis on the background of the existing research on the topic of community engagement. It discusses the connections with the existing literature revealed within the domain of definition and interpretation of the concepts "community engagement" and "student community engagement". Furthermore, the relation of the present study to the previous research on institutionalization of community engagement is discussed.

This study contributes to the scientific knowledge on higher education community engagement from the perspective of a geographical area where this topic hasn't been widely researched – Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan.

Regarding the third mission of universities and their societal contribution beyond teaching and research – these ideas appear to be in an emerging state at the subject university, and perceived as secondary to economic contribution of the universities.

However, inclusivity, as one of the expressions of community engagement, has been detected as one of the important factors taken into consideration by the internal and external actors of the university's environment. A number of inclusivity efforts taken by the subject university, that emerged within this study, align with some concepts mentioned in the literature, for instance, lifelong learning (Benneworth et al., 2018), or inclusion of disabled students (Zabeli et al., 2021).

From the perspective of curricular and extracurricular community engagement, based on the analyzed literature, curricular community engagement, or service learning, appears to be a widespread phenomenon in the western universities (Chong, 2014) and be practiced as widely as student volunteering. In this subject university, the curricular community engagement appears to be in an emerging state, and highly dependent on the individual faculty. Compared to students' initiatives and volunteering, service learning currently is a less common practice of community engagement.

Another finding which largely aligns with previous scholarly research is the motivations of students to engage with the community that emerged within this study. Similarly to studies by, inter alia, Brewis and Holdsworth (2011), Chapman and colleagues (2023), Phillips and colleagues (2022), this study detected two types of motivations: the instrumental motivations (like the desire to gain particular skills or improve future employability) and altruistic motivations (like the desire to help the people in need).

From the perspective of institutionalization of community engagement, the literature discusses the importance of institutional structures such as a dedicated community engagement office (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Tijsma et al., 2023), support from the university leadership (Buber et al., 2019; Nuuyoma & Makhene, 2020) and presence of a common understanding of the idea of community engagement among different actors within the institution (Nuuyoma & Makhene, 2020; Tijsma et al., 2023). The findings of this research cannot fully confirm or disagree with the propositions regarding the importance of the above-mentioned factors, as posited by existing literature, due to the fact that community engagement as an institutional priority does not appear to be in place at the subject university. Since there doesn't seem to be an explicit leadership support to community engagement, or community engagement office, or a shared understanding of community engagement by different actors at the university, it may not be feasible to make conclusions on the importance of these factors.

What this research has found, however, is the importance of individual actors in promoting community engagement. While the institutional structures dedicated to community engagement are not in place at the subject university, an initiative from selected faculty members interested

in this topic, complemented by their experience and network in the local higher education environment, appeared to be a potential driving force to institutionalization of community engagement. This finding echoes the theoretical propositions on the role of individual agents in the process of change by Ma and Cai (2021) and empirical manifestations described by Chankseliani and colleagues (2021).

Moving from the institutional to the country level, currently community engagement and the societal role of universities appears to be prevailed by the commercial view on higher education, its alignment with industry and the market needs (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). Surely, the societal issues and the universities' contribution to their solution appear both in the country policymaking agenda (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019; 2023) and the subject institution's discourse, however, largely as general references rather than specific priorities. It may not be feasible to provide a solid hypothesis on whether and when community engagement becomes a strategic priority in Kazakhstan, however some processes of change like institutional isomorphism (Bischof, 2018) or policy borrowing (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018) that are currently taking place in the Kazakhstani higher education environment may indicate that community engagement is likely to "arrive" to Kazakhstan as a policy priority in the future. As described by Bischof (2018), institutional isomorphism in Kazakhstani higher education manifests itself when the trends originating in foreign environment (in the case of Bischof's example, in Europe), became adopted in Kazakhstan due to its accession to international reform initiative (in the case of Bischof's example, Bologna process). Policy borrowing in Kazakhstan occurs as the decision makers adopt the international policy "buzzwords" like "quality assurance" (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018, p. 19) and attempt to implement them in the local context. However, as Chankseliani and Siova (2018) note, it often happens that the original meaning of the policy gets interpreted by local policymakers in ways that do not entirely reflect the idea of the original borrowed policy. This process contributes to the complexity of higher education domain in Kazakhstan.

On the background of a complex, changing external environment where the subject university operates, this study has also collected a number of specific challenges that stakeholders within the university who involve in or promote student community engagement encounter. Based on the challenges brought up by the interview partners, a number of recommendations are offered in the following subsection.

6.3. Practical significance and recommendations

This subsection re-states the challenges in realization of student community engagement brought up by the students and academics during the interviews and offers a number of recommendations to tackle them. Practically, the recommendations might be useful for the actors (specifically university administrators) involved in the development and improvement of HE community engagement on an institutional level.

Table 4. Challenges in student community engagement.

#	Challenge	Description
1	Dependence on individual initiative.	According to the interviewees, the way student community engagement is realized might depend on individual initiative from selected students. If there are no individuals who would drive the student community engagement, then promoting and realizing it might be more difficult.
2	Lack of interest from students.	From the perspective of teaching academics, the level of interest and initiative among students from community engagement could be higher.
3	Frequent changes in university leadership.	The changes of higher-level leadership at the university may be a challenge for a sustainable implementation of different initiatives, including community engagement.
4	Imbalance of theory and practice in curriculum.	It was suggested by the teaching academics that the practical element of the programs taught at the university could be increased to include more interactions of students with the community.
5	Students' availability of time.	Mentioned by both academics and students, they often do not find enough time to engage with the community due to their commitment to classes.
6	Low popularity of "social" activities.	According to a teaching professor, the general image of community engagement and similar activities is less attractive to young people than ideas of financial gain and commercial entrepreneurial success.

The following table presents suggested recommendations.

Table 5. Recommendations

#	Recommendation	Description	Relates to challenge(s) number:

1	Community engagement as a strategic priority.	Placing community engagement as one of the strategic priorities might serve as a strong driver to its further institutionalization.	1, 3, 6
2	Structural unit on community engagement.	A centralized structural unit on community engagement might provide strategic, managerial and logistical support in community engagement.	1, 2, 3, 4
3	Inclusion of community engagement in current practices of teaching and research to a larger extent.	For instance, inclusion of service learning in curriculum might enhance student community engagement.	4, 6
4	Connecting individual actors who promote community engagement.	There are a number of individual professors interested in the topic of community engagement who actively conduct related projects. Creating a sense of community and mutual support among these actors might positively contribute to overall institutionalization of community engagement at the university.	1
5	Fully implementing the "Social GPA" for students.	The findings of this thesis suggest that currently this incentive mechanism for students is not implemented fully. Its full implementation might help to increase students' motivation to participate in community engagement activities.	2, 5
6	Awareness raising on community engagement.	Information efforts such as educational sessions for students and staff might be a starting point in order to eventually build a common understanding of community engagement within the university.	2, 6
7	Promoting community engagement to the parent company leadership.	Since the university's activities are already positioned as the parent company's corporate social responsibility efforts, it might be a feasible strategy to pitch community engagement to the parent company leadership, since the ideas of community engagement	1, 3

		are in line with the ideas of corporate social responsibility.	
8	Using inclusivity as a starting point to promote community engagement.	Since inclusivity is already included in the university strategy, it might serve as an initial basis to promote community engagement in its other expressions.	1, 6

6.4. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This thesis aimed to provide an initial exploration of the way student community is institutionalized at one of the universities in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Beside the internal and external factors such as compatibility and added value of community engagement, a factor of individual agency of actors interested in community engagement and their potential to contribute to its enhancement, emerged as a finding of this study. Further studies, therefore, might focus on this factor specifically and explore the ways individual change agents impact the institutionalization of community engagement (see Ma & Cai, 2021).

The perspective of international developments in educational policy and their influence on Kazakhstani higher education environment might be an interesting direction for further research as well. The framework of institutional isomorphism (Cai, 2010) might be used as a guiding theory.

Additionally, this study focuses on a private university in the biggest city in Kazakhstan. To address the diverse institutional landscape in Kazakhstan, further studies could focus on other profiles of institutions, for instance, public universities or universities in smaller cities.

Finally, to gain a more holistic view of community engagement at the subject university, it is suggested to apply the TEFCE framework fully. Since this thesis focused on community engagement done by students, it took into consideration 2 dimensions related to students. In the future research, other dimensions could be used to investigate other perspectives of community engagement, like research or partnerships.

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Annexes

Annex 1. Information booklet for the potential interview participants (English version).



The cover features a blue vertical bar on the left side. In the top right corner, the MaRIHE logo is displayed, consisting of the text 'MaRIHE' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, with 'Erasmus Mundus' in a smaller font below it, and 'Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education' in an even smaller font at the bottom. The main title 'Student community engagement in Central Asia' is written in a large, bold, blue, sans-serif font. Below the title, the text 'Research proposal' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Further down, the author's name 'by Malika Karieva' is written in a black, sans-serif font, followed by her credentials 'Master's candidate in Research and Innovation in Higher Education' and 'University for Continuing Education, Krems, Austria' in a smaller black, sans-serif font.

MaRIHE
Erasmus Mundus
Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education

Student community engagement in Central Asia

Research proposal

by Malika Karieva
Master's candidate in Research and Innovation in Higher Education
University for Continuing Education, Krems, Austria

Table of Contents

- 01** About MARIHE
- 02** Key concepts and research questions
- 03** Data collection
- 04** Timeline

01. About MARIHE

Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education - MARIHE is a 2-year Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree funded by the European Commission, aiming to promote innovation and internationalization through educating higher education professionals.

The program is facilitated by the consortium of 6 universities:

1. University for Continuing Education Krems, Austria;
2. Tampere University, Finland;
3. Osnabrueck University of Applied Sciences, Germany;
4. Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary;
5. Beijing Normal University, China;
6. Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology (deemed to be University), India.



marihe.eu

This master's thesis research project is coordinated by the University for Continuing Education Krems, Austria.

02. Key concepts

Community engagement - a process whereby higher education institutions undertake joint activities with external communities in a way that is mutually beneficial (TEFCE Project, n.d.).

Institutionalization - process 'by which social processes, obligations, or actualities, come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action' (Cai, Zhang, Pinheiro, 2015).

02. Research questions

Main question: How is student community engagement institutionalized in Central Asian universities?

Sub questions:

1. What are the measures taken by universities to **support** student community engagement In Central Asia?
2. What community engagement activities do students do **independently** from the university?
3. What is the **added value** of student community engagement for university, and for students themselves?
4. How does student community engagement **fit** within the university internal and external environment?

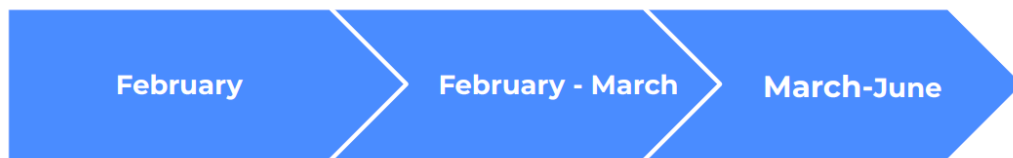
03. Data collection: interviews

Target group	Questions content
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of community engagement activities that they do • Their motivation to engage with the community • Whether community engagement was one of the criteria when they chose to study at this university
University administration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President, • Civic engagement center employees, • Student affairs center, • Administrators responsible for curriculum/teaching and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How university supports st. community engagement • How they think st. community engagement is compatible with the norms at the university • How st. community engagement is included in the curriculum • What they think is the added value of st. community engagement for university, and for themselves

03. Data collection: document analysis

Type of document/text	Purpose
University's mission, vision, values	To see whether student community engagement is mentioned in those texts, and fits with the internal and external norms/regulations (sub.question 4)
Subject country's major policies on higher education/youth	
Documents containing requirements for the university to be accredited (if available)	

04. Timeline



- Introduce the subject university to the research topic and design
- Provide the needed data protection documents
- Schedule interviews
- Conduct interviews
- Run data analyses
- Summarize and interpret results
- Further work on the thesis
- Defence - in June

*The university is requested to participate in February and March

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Социальный вклад студентов в университетах Центральной Азии

Предложение по исследованию



Исследования и инновации в сфере высшего образования

- Программа европейского союза
- Университеты-партнеры: Австрия (координатор), Финляндия, Германия, Венгрия, Индия, Китай
- www.marihe.eu

“Community engagement” - социальный вклад

- “Третья миссия” университетов
- Вовлеченность в социальные проблемы региона
- Вклад студентов
- Какую пользу студенческие социальные мероприятия приносят самому университету и региону/городу

Содержание

01 Исследуемые вопросы

02 Вопросы интервью

03 План исследования

01. Исследуемые вопросы

Основной вопрос: Как социальный вклад студентов реализуется в университетах в Центральной Азии?

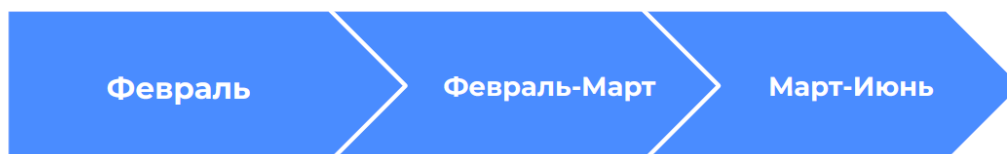
Дополнительные вопросы:

- Какие меры предпринимаются ВУЗами в ЦА для поддержки социального вклада студентов?
- Какие мероприятия по взаимодействию с общественностью студенты проводят независимо от университетов?
- Какие преимущества социальная вовлеченность приносит университету и самим студентам?
- Как социальная вовлеченность студентов вписывается во внутренние процессы и внешние реалии, в которых функционирует университет ?

02. Вопросы интервью

Группа	Содержание вопросов
Студенты	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Обзор мероприятий по взаимодействию с общественностью, которые они проводят• Их мотивация взаимодействовать с сообществом
Представители администрации университета	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Как университет поддерживает социальную вовлеченность студентов• Насколько, по их мнению, соц. вовлеченность студентов вписывается в требования и законы по высшему образованию в ЦА/стране, где расположен университет• Как соц. вовлеченность студентов включена в учебный план• В чем, по их мнению, преимущество соц. вовлеченности студентов для университета, и для них самих, как администрации
Представители компаний/й, где работают выпускники университета	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Важно ли для компании, что студент (выпускник), которого они нанимают, участвовал в социальном взаимодействии

03. План исследования



- Ознакомление университета-участника с идеей и планом исследования
- Предоставление необходимых документов по защите информации
- Планирование дат интервью
- Проведение интервью
- Анализ полученной информации
- Подведение итогов исследования
- Дальнейшая работа над диссертацией
- Июнь - защита диссертации

*Участие университета предполагается в феврале и начале марта

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Annex 3. List of interview questions (English version).

University staff:

1. What would be the “arena” where the university acts? What would be its immediate community? (City/region/country/international)
2. What are the community engagement activities done by the university in general?
3. What would be specific importance why this university engages with the community, if any?
4. Is student community engagement something this university prioritizes? Why?
5. University facilitates matchmaking between community groups & students
 - a. by providing information on extra-curricular activities to address community needs.
 - b. by organizing extra-curricular opportunities for students to become engaged in the community
 - c. by jointly designing extra-curricular opportunities for student community engagement through structured partnerships with community groups
6. In your opinion, how does student community engagement fit in the external regulations/policies that the university has to follow? Is it something important to do, to be accredited (official regulations)?
7. In your opinion, how does student community engagement fit in the external dynamics. Is it something important to do, to be seen as a prestigious university? To be more popular among the prospective students? To be more “respected” by other universities/companies/government?
8. Is community engagement, and specifically student community engagement included in your job description/kpi? Does it influence your career?
9. Is community engagement, and specifically student community engagement included in the job description of administrators and academics at the university?
10. Beside the technical requirements on student community engagement related to your job as an administrator, does community engagement have any personal meaning to you? A feeling of pride?
11. What would you say, in general, what is the attitude of employees at the university to student community engagement? Do you think they believe it is important?

Students:

1. What community engagement activities do you do?
2. What motivates you to do it?
3. Was the university’s community engagement a factor for you, when choosing this university?
4. What do you expect from engaging with the community? Future employment?
5. Do you feel proud of engaging with the community?
6. Do you feel supported by university in your community engagement activities?

7. Do you participate/know of any of the following:
 - a. awareness raising campaigns to address community needs.
 - b. fundraising/organising charitable events for donations to community groups in need.
 - c. partnerships with community groups to jointly address problems in the community.

Annex 4. List of interview questions (Russian version).

Сотрудники университета:

1. Какая деятельность по взаимодействию с обществом проводится университетом?
2. В чем заключается важность взаимодействия с обществом для университета?
3. Говоря о студенческом взаимодействии с обществом, является ли оно приоритетом для У? Почему?
4. Принимаются ли в У следующие меры для поддержки студенческого взаимодействия с обществом:
 - a. Информирование студентов о внеучебных/внеуниверситетских возможностях взаимодействия с обществом
 - b. Организация внеучебных активностей по взаимодействию с обществом для студентов
 - c. Сотрудничество с представителями общества для организации социальных активностей для студентов
5. Как студенческое взаимодействие с обществом вписывается в официальные требования/законы по образованию. Важно ли оно, например, для аккредитации У или подобных процедур?
6. Важно ли для репутации У, чтобы его студенты взаимодействовали с обществом? Может ли это повлиять на престиж университета в глазах потенциальных студентов, других университетов, гос. органов?
7. Входит ли (студенческое) взаимодействие с обществом в Ваши официальные обязанности?
8. Важно ли для вас лично, чтобы студенты У были активны во взаимодействии с обществом?
9. В целом в университете, считается ли студенческое взаимодействие с обществом чем-то действительно важным, для преподавателей, администрации?

Студенты:

1. В каких мероприятиях/проектах по взаимодействию с обществом вы участвуете?
2. Что мотивирует вас участвовать в них?

3. При выборе университета, играло ли для вас роль, есть в этом университете проекты по взаимодействию с обществом или нет?
4. Какие у вас ожидания от участия во взаимодействии с обществом?
5. Видите ли вы поддержку от университета в ваших социальных проектах?
6. Проводятся ли студентами У следующие активности/проекты:
 - a. кампании/проекты по повышению осведомленности, направленные на решение социальных проблем,
 - b. сбор средств/организация благотворительных мероприятий для пожертвований нуждающимся общественным группам.
 - c. партнерство с общественными группами для совместного решения социальных проблем

Annex 5. Consent form (English version).

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT

I,

_____, confirm my participation in the interview within the Erasmus Mundus MARIHE master's thesis under the working title “Student community engagement in Central Asian universities”, conducted by Malika Karieva.

I give permission for:

- conducting an online interview with me using video platforms,
- audio recording of the interview for subsequent transcription,
- use of interview materials in the text of the master's thesis,
- anonymous use of direct quotes,
- subsequent storage of the interview transcript and this document in accordance with the procedures of the University for Continuing Education Krems and the Tampere University.

I have been informed about the research topic and the content of the questions and that I can stop or withdraw from the interview at any time.

I have been informed that the results of the master's thesis research will be available in the database of the Krems University of Lifelong Learning and the University of Tampere.

I have been informed that I can contact Malika Karieva with any questions regarding the study.

Signature

Date

ИНФОРМИРОВАННОЕ СОГЛАСИЕ НА УЧАСТИЕ В ИССЛЕДОВАНИИ

Я,

_____, подтверждаю свое участие в интервью в рамках магистерской диссертации Erasmus Mundus MARINE под рабочим наименованием «Социальный вклад студентов в университетах Центральной Азии» (Student community engagement in Central Asian universities), проводимой Маликой Кариевой.

Я даю разрешение на:

- проведение онлайн интервью с использованием видео-платформ,
- аудиозапись интервью, с целью последующей транскрипции,
- использование материалов интервью в тексте магистерской диссертации,
- анонимное использование прямых цитат,
- последующее хранение транскрипта интервью и этого документа в соответствии с процедурами Университета непрерывного образования Кремс и Университета Тампере.

Я был/а проинформирован/а о теме исследования и содержании вопросов и о том, что могу остановить или отказаться от интервью в любой момент.

Я был/а проинформирован/а о том, что результаты исследования в рамках магистерской диссертации буду доступны в базе данных Университета непрерывного образования Кремс и Университета Тампере.

Я был/а проинформирован/а о том, что могу обратиться с любыми вопросами по исследованию к Малике Кариевой.

Подпись

Дата