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## SHAPING THE ACADEMIC IDENTITY OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS: CRITICAL FACTORS AND INFLUENCES

The article examines how doctoral students in Kazakhstan develop their academic identity as future scholars. It explores critical factors that influence this process, including institutional, personal and socio-cultural elements. The research aims to understand how doctoral students' academic identity develops throughout their PhD journey and to assess the role of mentorship, academic self-efficacy and international networks in shaping their identity as scholars. A mixed-method approach was employed, involving a survey of 150 doctoral students and semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. The results indicate that academic self-efficacy increases as students progress through their doctoral programs, with those in later stages exhibiting greater confidence in publishing and research. Mentorship was identified as a critical factor, with students who had constructive interactions with their supervisors reporting higher self-efficacy. Additionally, international exposure, such as attending conferences and collaborating with foreign researchers, significantly contributed to students' academic identity. However, disparities were noted between disciplines, with students in the natural sciences experiencing more structured support and higher self-efficacy compared to those in the humanities and social sciences. These findings highlight the importance of providing strong mentorship and increasing opportunities for international engagements, particularly for students in fields with fewer resources, to better support the development of academic identity.

**Keywords:** academic identity, doctoral students, academic self-efficacy, mentorship, mixed-methods approach, publishing challenges.

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## Докторанттардың академиялық тұлғасын қалыптастыру: сыни факторлар мен әсерлер

Мақалада Қазақстандағы докторанттардың болашақ ғалымдар ретінде академиялық тұлғасын қалай дамытатыны қарастырылады. Ол осы процеске әсер ететін маңызды факторларды, соның ішінде институционалдық, жеке және әлеуметтік-мәдени элементтерді зерттейді. Зерттеу докторанттардың PhD докторантурасына түсу барысында академиялық сәйкестігінің қалай дамытынын зерттеуге және тәлімгерлік, академиялық өзін-өзі тиімділік және халықаралық желілердің олардың ғалым ретінде жеке басын қалыптастырудағы рөлін бағалауға бағытталған. Аралас әдіс қолданылды, оған 150 докторанттың сауалнамасы және 20 қатысушымен жартылай құрылымдық сұхбат кірді. Нәтижелер студенттердің докторлық бағдарламаларын аяқтаған сайын академиялық өзін-өзі тиімділігінің артатынын көрсетеді, ал кейінгі кезеңдегілер баспа және ғылыми зерттеулерге үлкен сенім артады. Тәлімгерлік маңызды фактор ретінде анықталды, өйткені жетекшілерімен сындарлы қарым-қатынаста болған студенттер жоғары өзін-өзі тиімділік туралы хабарлады. Сонымен қатар, конференцияларға қатысу және шетелдік зерттеушілермен ынтымақтастық сияқты халықаралық экспозиция студенттердің академиялық ерекшелігіне айтарлықтай ықпал етті. Алайда пәндер арасындағы айырмашылықтар байқалды, жаратылыстану ғылымдарының студенттері гуманитарлық және әлеуметтік ғылымдармен салыстырғанда құрылымдық қолдауды және өзін-өзі тиімділікті жоғарылатады. Бұл нәтижелер күшті тәлімгерлікті қамтамасыз етудің және академиялық сәйкестікті дамытуды жақсырақ қолдау үшін, әсіресе

ресурстары аз салалардағы студенттер үшін халықаралық іс-шараларға қатысу мүмкіндіктерін кеңейтудің маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** академиялық сәйкестік, докторанттар, академиялық өзін-өзі тиімділік, тәлімгерлік, аралас әдістер тәсілі, баспа мәселелері.

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### **Формирование академической идентичности докторантов: важнейшие факторы и влияния**

В статье рассматривается, как студенты докторантуры в Казахстане формируют свою академическую идентичность как будущие ученые. В статье рассматриваются важнейшие факторы, влияющие на этот процесс, включая институциональные, личностные и социокультурные элементы. Цель исследования – понять, как формируется академическая идентичность докторантов на протяжении их обучения в аспирантуре, и оценить роль наставничества, академической самооэффективности и международных связей в формировании их идентичности как ученых. Был использован смешанный подход, включающий опрос 150 докторантов и полуструктурированные интервью с 20 участниками. Результаты показывают, что академическая самооэффективность повышается по мере прохождения студентами докторских программ, а те, кто находится на более поздних этапах, проявляют большую уверенность в публикациях и исследованиях. Наставничество было определено в качестве критического фактора: студенты, которые конструктивно взаимодействовали со своими руководителями, сообщали о более высокой самооэффективности. Кроме того, международный опыт, такой как посещение конференций и сотрудничество с зарубежными исследователями, в значительной степени способствовал формированию академической идентичности студентов. Однако были отмечены различия между дисциплинами: студенты, изучающие естественные науки, испытывали более структурированную поддержку и более высокую самооэффективность по сравнению со студентами, изучающими гуманитарные и социальные науки. Эти результаты подчеркивают важность обеспечения надежного наставничества и расширения возможностей для международного взаимодействия, особенно для студентов в областях с ограниченными ресурсами, для лучшей поддержки развития академической идентичности.

**Ключевые слова:** академическая идентичность, докторанты, академическая самооэффективность, наставничество, смешанный подход, проблемы публикации.

## **Introduction**

Kazakhstan's higher education system has undergone transformative changes. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, the number of doctoral students has increased steadily since 2010, when Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to join the Bologna Process, which aimed to align national educational standards with the European Higher Education Area (Aydarbekova, 2018). By 2020, the number of PhD students in Kazakhstan reached nearly 7,000, a marked increase from earlier years when doctoral education was less developed and opportunities were more limited (Mukhanova, 2020).

It is worth mentioning that many universities faced difficulties in adapting to the new PhD requirements, with many institutions initially continuing to use the old Soviet model. It was not until 2010 that the country fully transitioned to the PhD system, a

shift driven by the negative impact of privatization, national innovation policies, and Kazakhstan's membership in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2020). Despite this, issues such as corruption in doctoral education, the questionable quality of academic programs, and low research output persisted (Mouraviev, 2012).

Nevertheless, to further boost the development of higher education, the Kazakh government initiated several programs. One of them was launched the *State Program for Education and Science Development 2020-2025*, which focuses on strengthening research capacity and fostering collaboration between universities and industries. This initiative is critical for ensuring that higher education institutions in Kazakhstan not only meet international standards but also contribute to the country's integration into the global knowledge economy (Tazabek, 2018; Kuzhabekova et al., 2019).

## Literature review

The academic identity of doctoral students as emerging researchers is often framed as scholar identity, which plays a crucial role in their educational journey. Developing academic identity requires recognition and validation from the intellectual and institutional networks that doctoral students navigate. Within these frameworks, students are expected to showcase their expertise in a particular discipline, reinforcing their legitimacy as emerging scholars (Cotterall, 2015).

While some scholars in higher education make distinctions between the terms scholar, researcher, and academic, these differences are not always explicitly defined. As a result, in determining the search terms for this study, these potential differences are considered as minor, recognizing that all three concepts may be relevant to researcher development and are frequently used interchangeably. It is also important to note that early literature searches indicated that a considerable amount of work addressing academic identity did not explicitly use the term “identity”. Instead, these studies focused on concepts like academic integration, which describes the process by which individuals integrate into academic communities and develop research skills.

This process not only affirms their academic capabilities but also shapes their self-perception and confidence as contributors to their fields. As they engage with mentors, peers, and academic communities, the support and feedback they receive play a crucial role in their development, helping them to refine their identity as researchers and to feel more integrated within the academic landscape. As a result, studies show that PhD students who identify strongly with their academic roles are more likely to persist in their studies, produce high-quality research, and engage meaningfully in their academic communities (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Garnder, 2009). These students often report a greater sense of belonging and commitment to their fields.

A strong connection between self-efficacy and academic identity is well-documented in educational research, highlighting how perceptions of one’s abilities can shape the process of developing an academic identity. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual’s belief in their ability to achieve goals or perform tasks successfully (Bandura, 1997). High levels of self-efficacy are often linked with a stronger academic identity. According to Cotterall

(2015), academic identity involves doctoral students seeing themselves as legitimate members of their academic community, a process that relies heavily on their confidence in performing key scholarly tasks. Therefore, academic identity emerges through the validation of one’s scholarly activities and contributions to the academic community, which are closely tied to one’s self-efficacy in these areas.

Research highlights that mentorship provides doctoral students with a framework to develop their academic identities through guidance, support and feedback. Students who engage with mentors report higher levels of confidence in their research abilities and decision-making skills (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2023; Holt & Wilkins, 2023; Fischer & Lee, 2023; Morgan et.al 2023; Santos & Marinho, 2023). Mentors often facilitate networking opportunities, connecting doctoral students with other scholars, professionals, and resources in their field. Research indicates that these connections can lead to collaborative projects, job opportunities, and invitations to conferences, enhancing students’ visibility in their academic community. Moreover, the PhD journey can be emotionally taxing, with many students experiencing feelings of isolation, anxiety, and self-doubt. Mentors can provide emotional support, helping students manage stress and maintain motivation. A study emphasizes that mentorship relationships characterized by trust and open communication contribute significantly to the mental well-being of doctoral students. Another recent findings suggest that students with active mentorship are more likely to publish their work and present at conferences, which are crucial for academic success.

Moreover, the lack of proficiency in academic English, insufficient methodological training in international research practices, and tensions between Soviet-educated and newly-trained PhDs reinforced the perception that Kazakhstan’s adoption of the Bologna Process was primarily an attempt to align with global standards. For instance, by 2013, only 33.1% of PhD graduates (223 individuals) were employed in research, with many leaving academia (Ibraev et.al, 2015). Furthermore, the distribution of PhD holders across fields was imbalanced, with more graduates in social sciences than in the technical fields that were crucial for the country’s economic development (Amandegldyevich et. al, 2016).

Another modernization effort involved the establishment of Nazarbayev University, which oper-

ates independently of state education standards and collaborates with prestigious international universities. With 80% of its faculty recruited internationally, the university is seen as a key driver for integrating global educational best practices (Tazabek, 2018). However, some researchers argue that Kazakhstan has not fully capitalized on the expertise of Western-educated specialists, as domestic policies remain largely unchanged (Mustoyapova, 2019).

In addition, the government has increased funding for doctoral programs and scholarships as of 2020 to boost research quality. These changes must be understood within the broader post-Soviet context. For instance, Russia and Belarus maintained their Candidate of Sciences and Doctor of Sciences system, while other countries like Tajikistan adopted PhDs alongside existing degrees. In Uzbekistan, though PhD diplomas replaced Soviet-era titles, the doctoral education process remained largely unchanged (UZDOC 2.0, 2021).

To enhance global competitiveness, the government of Kazakhstan aimed to implement policy changes related to research that align with international advancements in scientific research. A key focus of higher education reform has been the modernization of educational practices to meet international standards, with the goal of training scientific and teaching personnel (Agbo et. al, 2022). According to Ibraev et. al (2015, p, 79), Kazakhstan faces a pressing need for more scientific personnel compared to regions like West or Southeast Asia. They highlight that the number of researchers per million and per 10,000 economically active individuals in Kazakhstan has been significantly lower than in leading countries worldwide. For instance, in 2012, the number of research employees per 10,000 members of the economically active population in Kazakhstan was just 26, markedly less than countries such as Finland (217), Sweden (170), South Korea (149), France (147), Germany (137), Japan (135), and the UK (114).

Moreover, while much attention has been given to the technical aspects of doctoral training, the personal experiences of doctoral students have remained relatively underexplored. A prominent aspect of these personal experiences is the result of contributing factors such as institutional policies, challenges in balancing work and life, job demands, and limited career opportunities beyond academia.

It is well studied the correlation of self-efficacy and academic identity based on the of litera-

ture review, however there is a lack of research on landscape of Kazakh doctoral students and well-documented research to show that higher academic self-efficacy are more likely to be linked with higher level of international exposure and scholarly activities that shape their academic identity.

While the growth in PhD enrollments is a positive sign, challenges remain, particularly concerning the quality of supervision and research publication requirements. According to Aitmykhanbetovs (2019), many PhD students, especially in the humanities and social sciences, struggle to meet international publication standards and often face language barriers, limiting their ability to publish in high-impact journals. Yet its effects on academic identity in emerging academic systems like Kazakhstan are not well understood.

## Materials and method

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of how doctoral students in Kazakhstan shape their academic identity.

The study investigates two primary research questions:

1. How do doctoral students' perceptions of their academic self-efficacy evolve throughout the PhD journey in Kazakhstan, and what factors contribute most to this evolution in shaping their academic identity?
2. What role does international exposure play in shaping the academic identity of doctoral students, and how does it interact with self-efficacy and publishing challenges?

The hypothesis of the study is that higher levels of academic self-efficacy, facilitated by quality mentorship and international exposure, positively influences the development of a strong academic identity among doctoral students.

A mixed methods research design was employed, using both an online survey and semi-structured interviews. This approach combines quantitative and qualitative methods, that is because it was specifically chosen to verify and cross-validate the findings of the study. Moreover, academic identity has a multidimensional nature to study, so mixed methods approach provides researchers to capture multifaceted processes of academic identity development through surveys and interviews. A thematic analysis

was also performed to identify prevalent themes in a doctoral students' feedback (Daniel, 2018).

The survey was run online by sending Google Survey link with both closed and open-ended questions including the key dimensions of academic identity such as perceived support from the academic community, engagement with research, academic self-efficacy, and career aspirations. A structured questionnaire was developed based on the literature review of professional academic identity and research on the landscape of doctoral education. The responses were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Initially a Multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) was performed with field of study, year of doctoral study and institutional affiliation as the dependent variables, while self-efficacy as the independent variable. Descriptive statistics were used in order to analyze the survey data, taking into account the interactions between them. The application of MANOVA in this quantitative analysis is consistent with previous research in other studies (Daniel, 2018; Hope, 2013).

The interview was recorded and its transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involves reading the transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying themes, defining and naming themes, and finally compiling the report. The main goal of the thematic analysis is to capture the complex and detailed experiences of doctoral students as it provides with more data to navigate the development of their academic identity. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis of interviews shows the effectiveness in revealing context-specific insights into doctoral students' experiences.

#### *Participants:*

The study involved 150 PhD students from early, middle and final stages of their program from five universities in Kazakhstan. Over half of participants (55%) identified themselves in Social Science, with over (15%) referred to Humanities, Natural Science (18%), and Engineering (12%). Out of these, 20 doctoral students (4 from each university) were selected for semi-structured interviews via Zoom, based on their interest to participate and share the diversity of their academic experiences. The interview video was recorded with participants' signed consent form.

### **Results and discussion**

Based on the survey and interview material, the findings were grouped into 3 main themes such as self-efficacy, international exposure and role of mentorship. According to the survey data, 62% of PhD students reported high levels of academic self-efficacy in terms of carrying out research and participating at international online conferences. However, 38% of the participants indicated doubts and lack of confidence in their ability to participate and present their work in international academic conferences and debates, especially among doctoral students in the earlier stages (the first and second year) of the doctoral programs. According to table 1, PhD students in their final year showed significantly higher scores in academic self-efficacy, which constituted a mean score of 4.5 on a 5-point Likers scale in comparison with first- and second-year students with  $M = 3.3$ . MANOVA results revealed that the year of study had the main effect on academic self-efficacy with F-statistics 13.46 and p-value less than .001.

**Table 1** – MANOVA results with year of study (early, middle, final)

Dependant variables	F-statistics			p-value			effect size ( $\eta^2$ )		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
International conference participation	4.78	6.78	8.76	<0.001			0.23		
Research confidence	2.45	6.43	8.67	<0.001			0.13		
Publishing in international journals	4.56	7.78	8.95	<0.001			0.16		
Academic self-efficacy	5.32	9.45	13.46	<0.001			0.24		

As for the results based on interviews, doctoral students' self-efficacy was highly correlated with the academic support and feedback taken from mentorship in an academic environment. Doctoral students in their early stages emphasized the importance of participating in international conferences and seminars, which are the one of the requirements of defending their degree. However, those participants expressed their inconfidence and lack of navigation

towards how to position themselves in international academia.

According to table 2, a positive correlation was found between mentorship and academic self-efficacy, showing  $r=.56$  with  $p$ -value less than .01, therefore, showing regular and constructive mentorship improves the doctoral students' confidence and belief in their academic journey.

**Table 2** – Positive correlation of the role of mentorship with academic self-efficacy

Mentorship quality	The proportion of PhD students (%)	Mean Self-Efficacy (M)	Correlation (r)	Probability value (p)
Regular and constructive mentorship	68%	4.6	0.56	<0.01
Occasional or poor mentorship	32%	3.2	N/A	N/A

According to the results of the survey regarding the second theme, the role of mentorship, approximately 68% of respondents emphasized the importance of mentors in academic environments as a critical factor in developing academic identity. Further, the interview results showed that regular and constructive mentorship played a crucial role in academic identity development. Those PhD students who took part in international exchange programs or presented papers with international scholars had higher academic self-efficacy ( $M=4.6$ ) in comparison with occasional or poor mentorship ( $M=3.2$ ). One participant said:

A) "I had difficulties in finding an international journal to publish, because without guidance from my supervisor I found only predatory journals, due to which I lost half a year of waiting for my papers to be published."

Poor mentorship and occasional academic support from supervisors hindered the development of academic identity among doctoral students. Moreover, some female students with additional work or family burden mentioned the lack of networking opportunities. One student noted:

B) "Academic networking and engaging with scholars from our country or from foreign countries are the things that I needed during the program,

however, I did not know how to become part of such a community. I needed to ask it from supervisor, but he offered limited global research networks"

Thematic analysis showed that international exposure and conference participation were important in formation and developing academic identity among PhD students of all stages. However, most students mentioned insufficient engagement in such a community limited their academic growth. Moreover, the answers of interviews from students from Natural Sciences and Engineering differed from those, who were from Social Sciences and Humanities, in terms of broad opportunities in collaboration and integration into global research networks. The first ones had more international exposure and resources for attending global conferences.

The results showed significant differences in the development of academic identity across different fields of study. PhD students of all stages in the Natural Sciences and Engineering reported higher academic self-efficacy ( $M=4.4$ ) than from other fields ( $M=3.5$  and  $M=3.7$ , respectively). According to table 4, as it was mentioned in interview findings, students in Natural Sciences and Engineering had more engagement in international collaborations (78%) than those PhD students in Humanities and Social Sciences.

**Table 3** – Key themes from semi-structured interviews on academic identity formation

Theme	Frequency of mention	Key findings
The role of mentorship	18 out of 20 students	-mentorship was frequently cited as critical in shaping academic identity. -Effective mentorship fostered professional development, academic confidence, and networking.
Influence of institutional support and resources	15 out of 20 students	-institutional support, such as access to resources and guidance, was seen as inconsistent.
Challenges in balancing academic and personal development	14 out of 20 students	-many students struggled with balancing academic responsibilities (such as teaching and research) and personal growth. -limited support for work-life balance was a common concern.
Additional insights	7 out of 20 students	-students without consistent mentorship expressed feeling “lost” in the doctoral journey.

**Table 4** – Comparison of Academic Self-efficacy and international collaboration across fields of study

Field of study	Mean Academic Self-efficacy score	Percentage engaging in international collaboration
Natural sciences and Engineering	4.4	78%
Humanities	3.5	48%
Social Sciences	3.7	55%

According to the results, 78% of doctoral students reported high levels of academic self-efficacy, particularly regarding research and presenting their work. More advanced students demonstrated significantly higher self-efficacy scores compared to those in the early stages of their programs. The strong correlation between the year of study and self-efficacy underscores the developmental trajectory of doctoral students. As they gain experience and receive constructive feedback from their supervisors, their confidence grows, reinforcing their scholar identity.

Research by Sverdlik et. al (2018) highlights how strong mentorship relationships facilitate academic identity development by providing guidance and support, thereby enhancing students’ confidence and sense of belonging in their academic pursuits. However, according to the results, over 60% of participants in the study indicated that they had the autonomy to select their PhD supervisors, while others were either assigned supervisors or given a list of available options to choose from. Some respondents

noted that the low salaries of PhD supervisors hindered their ability to dedicate adequate time for providing feedback to doctoral students. A recent study found that doctoral students who receive regular feedback from mentors are more adept at adapting their research to meet academic standards. As for this study, a significant portion of respondents managed to connect with their PhD supervisors through existing networks from previous research internships or through introductions from their local supervisors. Most participants expressed satisfaction with the quality of feedback received from their foreign supervisors, which substantially enhanced the quality of their research. However, one respondent pointed out challenges related to choosing the language for writing their dissertation; opting for English could lead to complications during the defense process.

Most students entering their doctoral studies lacked prior publishing experience, which made the process of writing articles particularly challenging.

Some expressed that they had no opportunities to publish during their doctoral program. A few students, however, did manage to publish in journals recommended by the Committee for Organisation and Control in Education and Science of Kazakhstan, where the impact factor of a journal is a key selection criterion. While the majority rated their English proficiency as adequate for research publication, just under half felt their English skills insufficient.

An official from the Ministry of Education and Science reported that in 2014, 10% of doctoral degrees in Kazakhstan were not awarded by dissertation committees due to candidates publishing in predatory journals (Kuzhabekova et.al, 2019). This finding raises serious ethical concerns regarding the academic integrity of the doctoral education system in Kazakhstan. Doctoral students who also worked as teaching staff reported difficulties in fulfilling the university's research publication requirements, despite years of teaching experience. Approximately half of the respondents sought assistance from agencies that specialize in article publishing, with some paying additional fees to expedite the publication process. Fulfilling the publication requirement proves particularly difficult for doctoral students whose advisors are not actively involved in publishing in international journals, or for those who face language barriers with English. However, many students continue to struggle. Some attempt to meet the requirement by drafting their manuscripts in English and paying for professional translation services. Others resort to paying fees around \$1000 to have their papers published. This pressure has contributed to a rise in publications by Kazakhstani researchers in predatory journals, as well as participation in questionable conferences.

The data indicated that international exposure positively influenced self-efficacy and academic identity, with participants who engaged in international collaborations feeling more connected to the global academic community. Prior research by Kuzhabekova and Mukhamejanova (2017) shows that students who are part of well-established research schools and make good use of international mobil-

ity funding are better able to meet these demands. Moreover, the interviews reflected that students who attended international conferences or participated in exchange programs gained insights into diverse academic practices. It suggests that institutions should facilitate more opportunities for international collaboration and exposure to broaden students' academic perspectives and enhance academic identity.

## Conclusion

The results indicate that academic identity development among doctoral students in Kazakhstan is influenced by multiple factors, including academic self-efficacy, the quality of mentorship, and exposure to international academic networks. Students in the final stages of their doctoral studies and those with strong mentorship and international experience demonstrate higher confidence and a more established academic identity. Role of mentorship and its high correlation with academic self-efficacy ( $F=13.46$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) showed that high quality feedback from supervisors and engagement of students into an international scholar environment significantly enhanced the academic identity. Moreover, 18 out of 20 doctoral students' interviews were studied using thematic analysis, and it was found that mentorship fostered the shaping and development of identity of research.

As for the second research question, disparities exist between fields of study, with students in the Natural Sciences and Engineering (78%) benefiting from more structured support and collaboration opportunities in comparison with those who pursued their programme in Social Sciences (55%) and Humanities (48%). The study showed that there is correlation between self-efficacy and publishing challenges. The p-value increased as the doctoral students progressed in their programme.

These findings emphasize the need for improved mentorship and greater access to international academic networks, particularly for students in the humanities and social sciences, to foster a stronger sense of academic identity.

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