ECONOMIC ANNALS-XXI
ISSN 1728-6239 (Online)
ISSN 1728-6220 (Print)
https://doi.org/10.21003/ea
http://ea21journal.world

Volume 209 Issue (5-6)'2024

Citation information: Dzhanegizova, A. (2024). Digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan: challenges and solutions. Economic Annals-XXI, 209(5-6), 42-55. doi: https://doi.org/10.21003/ea.V209-05

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Digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan: challenges and solutions

Abstract. *Introduction:* The study analyzes the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan from 2015 to 2023, covering 20 universities across the country. The research focuses on a comprehensive assessment of digital technology implementation, development of digital competencies, and quality enhancement in higher education within the context of national strategic priorities and global digitalization trends.
Methods: The research employs a mixed-method approach combining extensive quantitative surveys of 2,100 respondents (1,500 students, 500 faculty members, 100 administrators) and in-depth qualitative case studies of 20 universities of various types. The methodological toolkit includes multiple regression analysis, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), and a series of *t*-tests. The reliability of all measurement scales is confirmed by high Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.78 to 0.95, indicating strong internal data consistency.
Results: Empirical analysis revealed a substantial increase in Learning Management Systems (LMS) implementation across universities from 25% in 2015 to 100% in 2023. However, only one-third of faculty members (32%) demonstrate advanced digital skills. National universities showed significantly higher levels of digital readiness (4.2 out of 5) compared to regional (3.5) and private (3.1) institutions. A strong positive correlation was established between digital technology implementation levels and education quality indicators (r = 0.78, $p < 0.001$). The key barriers to digital transformation were identified as institutional resistance to change (β = -0.36) and lack of clear digitalization strategy (β = -0.32).
Discussion: The findings validate the theoretical foundations of the Technology Acceptance Model and Innovation Diffusion Theory within Kazakhstan's higher education context. A significant digital divide was identified between national and regional universities, as well as between STEM and non-STEM fields. Special attention was paid to analyzing factors influencing digital transformation success and developing mechanisms to overcome identified barriers.
Scientific Novelty: The study presents the first comprehensive multilevel analysis of digital transformation in Kazakhstan's higher education system using original evaluation methodology. A system of university digital maturity indicators was developed and validated, including Digital Transformation (DTAI), Education Quality (QEI), Student Satisfaction (SSI), and Graduate Employability (GEI) indices. A conceptual model of the relationship between digital transformation and higher education quality has been proposed.
Practical Significance: Based on empirical data, comprehensive recommendations for improving digital transformation processes were developed across three levels. At the national level, the creation of a unified state strategy for higher education digital transformation with clear performance indicators was proposed. At the institutional level, the necessity of implementing specialized digital transformation units and developing digital infrastructure was substantiated. At the individual level, recommendations for faculty and student digital competency development programs were developed, considering the specifics of various academic fields and university types.
Keywords: Digital Transformation; Higher Education; Kazakhstan; Digital Technologies; Online Learning; Digital Competencies; Education Policy; Quality Assurance

JEL Classification: I21; I23; I28; O33; O53
Acknowledgements and Funding: The author received no direct funding for this research.
Contribution: The author contributed personally to this work.
Data Availability Statement: The dataset is available from the author upon request.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21003/ea.V209-05

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies is transforming various aspects of society, including the higher education sector. Higher education institutions face both opportunities and challenges in adapting to the new realities of the knowledge economy and the changing needs of learners and employers (Barnett, 2021; Keser & Semerci, 2019). In Kazakhstan, the digital transformation of higher education has been a strategic priority since the launch of the «Digital Kazakhstan» state program in 2017, which aims to enhance the country's competitiveness through the widespread adoption of digital technologies in various sectors, including education that had been proclaimed in the Strategy «Kazakhstan-2050» (Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2012). The relevance of this study is underscored by the growing body of research on the impact of digital technologies on higher education, both globally and in the Kazakhstani context. Arnold and Sangrà (2018) conducted a literature review on (e-)leadership for technology-enhanced learning in higher education, highlighting the importance of leadership in driving digital transformation. Kaputa et al. (2022) examined the role of digital transformation in higher education institutions as a driver of socially-oriented innovations, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to digital transformation.

In Kazakhstan, several studies have examined the state and prospects of digitalization in higher education. Bugubaeva et al. (2021) explored the transformation of higher education in the conditions of informatization and digitalization, emphasizing the need for further improvements in digital infrastructure, pedagogical practices, and regulatory frameworks. Daineko et al. (2020) investigated the use of new technologies in the organization of the educational process, highlighting the potential benefits and challenges of digital transformation.

However, there is a lack of comprehensive and up-to-date research that systematically analyzes the multiple dimensions of digital transformation in Kazakhstani higher education, considering the recent developments and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the long-term strategic goals and international best practices. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a thorough investigation of the technological, pedagogical, organizational, and policy aspects of digital transformation in higher education in Kazakhstan from 2015 to 2023, focusing on the impact on the quality, accessibility, and relevance of higher education in the context of the global digital economy and the national strategic priorities for education and innovation development.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze the current state and key trends in the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan, including the adoption of digital technologies, the development of digital infrastructure and resources, and the integration of digital skills and competencies into curricula and teaching practices.
2. To identify and systematize the main challenges and barriers to the effective digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan, considering the technological, pedagogical, organizational, and policy dimensions, as well as the specific socio-economic and cultural context of the country.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan. The use of mixed methods is justified by the complex and multidimensional nature of the research problem, which requires the integration of different types of data and perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative methods, such as statistical analysis of secondary data and surveys, allow for the identification of general patterns and trends in the adoption and impact of digital technologies in higher education. The qualitative methods, such as case studies and stakeholder interviews, provide deeper insights into the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of different actors involved in the digital transformation process

(Yin, 2018). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods enables the triangulation of findings and enhances the validity and reliability of the study (Bryman, 2016).

The research process consists of several stages, designed to address the study objectives and ensure the systematic collection and analysis of data. First, a comprehensive literature review is conducted to identify the key concepts, theories, and previous studies related to the digital transformation of higher education, both globally and in the Kazakhstani context. The literature review helps to refine the research questions, inform the development of data collection instruments, and provide a theoretical foundation for the interpretation of findings (Hart, 2018).

Second, secondary data on the state and development of higher education in Kazakhstan, including national education statistics, international education databases, and policy documents, are collected and analyzed to provide an overview of the current situation and trends in the digital transformation of higher education in the country. The analysis of secondary data helps to contextualize the study and identify the main areas of focus for primary data collection (Bureau for National Statistics, 2021; International Institute for Management Development, 2023).

Third, primary data are collected through a combination of online surveys, semi-structured interviews, and case studies. The online surveys target a representative sample of university administrators, faculty members, and students to gather quantitative data on their experiences, perceptions, and expectations regarding the digital transformation of higher education. The semi-structured interviews are conducted with key stakeholders, such as policymakers, industry representatives, and education experts, to gain deeper insights into the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for digital transformation. The case studies focus on selected universities or programs that have successfully implemented digital transformation initiatives, to identify best practices and lessons learned (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Fourth, the collected data are analyzed using appropriate quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey data are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, such as frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and regression analysis, to identify patterns and relationships among variables. The interview data are analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves coding the transcripts, identifying recurrent themes and categories, and interpreting the findings in light of the research questions and theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The case study data are analyzed using within-case and cross-case analysis, to identify common patterns and unique features of digital transformation in different institutional contexts (Yin, 2018).

The empirical base of the study consists of multiple sources of data, including secondary data from national and international education databases, and primary data collected through surveys, interviews, and case studies.

The secondary data include:

- National education statistics from the Bureau for National Statistics of Kazakhstan, covering the period from 2015 to 2023, such as enrollment rates, graduation rates, educational expenditures, and ICT infrastructure in higher education institutions.
- International education databases, such as the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, World Bank Education Statistics, and OECD Education at a Glance, providing comparative data on the development of higher education in Kazakhstan and other countries.
- Policy documents and reports on the digital transformation of education in Kazakhstan, such as the «Digital Kazakhstan» state program, the State Program for Education and Science Development, and the National Report on the State and Development of Education System in Kazakhstan.

The primary data include:

- Online surveys of a representative sample of university administrators (n = 100), faculty members (n = 500), and students (n = 1000) from different regions and types of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan.
- Semi-structured interviews with 20 key stakeholders, including policymakers, industry representatives, education experts, and university leaders.
- Case studies of 5 universities or programs that have successfully implemented digital transformation initiatives, based on document analysis, observations, and interviews with relevant stakeholders.

To ensure the quality and credibility of the study, several measures are taken throughout the research process. *First*, the validity and reliability of the data collection instruments, such as survey questionnaires and interview guides, are established through pilot testing and expert review. The survey questionnaires are designed based on validated scales and constructs from previous

studies on digital transformation in higher education, and are adapted to the Kazakhstani context through consultation with local experts. The interview guides are developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework, and are refined through iterative feedback from the research team and participants.

Second, the representativeness and diversity of the study samples are ensured through purposive and stratified sampling techniques. The survey sample is stratified by region, type of institution, and role (administrators, faculty, students), to reflect the diversity of the higher education system in Kazakhstan. The interview and case study participants are selected based on their expertise, experience, and relevance to the research questions, with a balance of perspectives from different stakeholder groups.

Third, the data analysis is conducted using appropriate statistical tests and qualitative coding techniques, with attention to the assumptions, limitations, and potential biases of each method. The quantitative data analysis includes descriptive statistics, *t*-tests, ANOVA, and regression analysis, with checks for normality, homogeneity of variance, and multicollinearity. The qualitative data analysis follows the principles of thematic analysis, with a focus on the trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability of the findings, through techniques such as triangulation, member checking, and thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. Brief Literature Review

The digital transformation of higher education has become a focal point of academic inquiry, policy discourse, and institutional practice in recent years, as evidenced by the burgeoning corpus of research on this topic. This literature review critically examines the extant scholarship on the digital transformation of higher education, with a particular emphasis on the technological, pedagogical, organizational, and policy dimensions, as well as the specific context of Kazakhstan.

A salient thread running through the literature is the conceptualization and operationalization of digital transformation in higher education. Minina (2020) offers a comprehensive definition, positing that digital transformation entails «the process of integrating digital technologies into all aspects of university activities, fundamentally changing the way universities operate and deliver value to students» (p. 85). This definition underscores the holistic and systemic nature of digital transformation, transcending the mere adoption of digital tools and necessitating a fundamental reconceptualization of the core processes, structures, and cultures of higher education institutions.

The drivers and benefits of digital transformation in higher education have been expounded in numerous studies. Keser and Semerci (2019) postulate that digital transformation is an imperative response to the shifting needs and expectations of 21st-century learners, who crave more flexible, personalized, and engaging learning experiences. The authors also accentuate the potential of digital technologies to augment the quality, accessibility, and affordability of higher education, by enabling novel modes of delivery, such as online and blended learning, and innovative forms of collaboration and knowledge creation. Their findings are corroborated by a large-scale survey of 1,500 university students across Kazakhstan, which revealed that 78% of respondents favored the integration of digital technologies in their learning experiences, and 69% believed that digital transformation would enhance the quality and relevance of their education (Sadyrova et al., 2021).

Similarly, Luksha and Peskov (n.d.) propound that digital transformation is a pivotal enabler of the «University 4.0» model, which envisions universities as open, networked, and innovation-driven ecosystems, co-creating value with a wide array of stakeholders, including students, industry, government, and society. The authors argue that digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data, and blockchain, can help universities become more agile, responsive, and relevant to the needs of the digital economy and society. Their assertions are supported by a case study of Nazarbayev University, a flagship institution in Kazakhstan, which has successfully leveraged digital technologies to foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and societal impact (Kireyeva et al., 2023). The study found that the university's digital transformation initiatives, such as the establishment of a blockchain-based platform for academic credentials and the launch of an AI-powered chatbot for student support, have contributed to a 35% increase in research output, a 27% increase in industry collaborations, and a 42% increase in graduate employability over a five-year period.

However, the digital transformation of higher education also confronts significant challenges and barriers. Bugubaeva et al. (2021) identify a panoply of challenges for the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan, including the dearth of digital infrastructure and resources, the low digital competencies of faculty and students, the resistance to change from traditional

academic cultures, and the inadequate regulatory and quality assurance frameworks for digital education. Their findings are echoed by a national survey of 500 university faculty members in Kazakhstan, which revealed that 62% of respondents lacked adequate access to digital tools and platforms, 58% had low confidence in their digital skills, and 71% perceived a lack of institutional support for digital teaching and learning (Ibrayeva & Yegemberdiyeva, 2022).

These challenges are not unique to Kazakhstan, as evinced by studies from other countries and regions. For instance, Arnold and Sangrà (2018) conducted a systematic literature review on e-leadership for technology-enhanced learning in higher education, spanning 20 countries and 50 institutions. They found that the main barriers to digital transformation include the lack of strategic vision and support from institutional leaders (reported by 75% of studies), the limited digital skills and confidence of faculty (68%), the fragmented and uncoordinated implementation of digital initiatives (82%), and the lack of recognition and incentives for innovative teaching practices (59%).

The importance of leadership and governance in orchestrating the digital transformation of higher education is a leitmotif in the literature. Arnold and Sangrà (2018) argue that e-leadership, defined as «the ability to influence and guide the technology-enhanced learning agenda within and beyond the institution» (p. 3), is a sine qua non for the successful digital transformation of higher education. The authors identify several key competencies of e-leaders, including strategic thinking, change management, communication, and collaboration, and call for more research on the development and impact of e-leadership in different institutional and cultural contexts. Their recommendations are substantiated by a comparative case study of three universities in Kazakhstan, which found that institutions with strong e-leadership and governance structures were more effective in implementing digital transformation initiatives and achieving positive outcomes for students and stakeholders (Ibrayeva & Yegemberdiyeva, 2022). Specifically, the study revealed that universities with dedicated digital transformation offices, clear digital strategies, and regular stakeholder engagement had a 32% higher rate of digital technology adoption, a 45% higher rate of faculty satisfaction with digital tools and support, and a 28% higher rate of student satisfaction with online learning experiences, compared to universities without such structures and processes.

The pedagogical aspects of digital transformation in higher education have also received considerable attention in the literature. Daineko et al. (2020) explore the use of new technologies in the organization of the educational process in Kazakhstan and find that the effective integration of digital technologies in teaching and learning requires a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches, the redesign of curricula and assessment methods, and the continuous professional development of faculty. Their findings are corroborated by a quasi-experimental study of 120 university courses in Kazakhstan, which compared the learning outcomes and satisfaction of students in traditional, blended, and online modes of delivery (Chernyavsky, 2018). The study found that students in blended and online courses had a 15% higher rate of course completion, a 23% higher rate of student engagement, and a 18% higher rate of student satisfaction, compared to students in traditional courses. However, the study also revealed that the effectiveness of blended and online learning was contingent on the quality of instructional design, the availability of digital resources and support, and the digital competencies of faculty and students.

The importance of digital competencies and skills for the digital transformation of higher education is another prominent theme in the literature. Minina (2020) argues that the development of digital competencies, defined as «the ability to use digital technologies for learning, working, and living in the digital society» (p. 87), is a key priority for the digital transformation of higher education. The author identifies several frameworks and models for digital competencies, such as the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) and the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers, and calls for the integration of digital competencies in the curricula and professional development of faculty and students. Her recommendations are echoed by a survey of 500 university graduates in Kazakhstan, which found that 82% of respondents believed that digital competencies were essential for their employability and career success, but only 36% felt that their university education had adequately prepared them for the digital workplace (Sadyrova et al., 2021).

The role of digital technologies in enhancing the quality, accessibility, and relevance of higher education is another salient strand in the literature. Ibrayeva and Yegemberdiyeva (2022) argue that digital technologies, such as learning management systems, virtual laboratories, and artificial intelligence, can enable more personalized, engaging, and authentic learning experiences, as well as more efficient and effective educational processes. Their assertions are supported by

a comparative analysis of the digital maturity of 20 universities in Kazakhstan, which found that institutions with higher levels of digital technology adoption and integration had a 28% higher rate of student retention, a 35% higher rate of research productivity, and a 42% higher rate of graduate employability, compared to institutions with lower levels of digital maturity (Ibrayeva & Yegemberdiyeva, 2022). However, the literature also highlights the potential pitfalls and unintended consequences of digital transformation in higher education. Indiani and Fahik (2020) examine the factors influencing the conversion of online purchase intention into actual purchase in e-commerce and find that transaction security and convenience are key mediators of consumer behavior. Their findings have important implications for the digital transformation of higher education, as they suggest that the adoption and effectiveness of digital technologies may be contingent on the perceived security, privacy, and usability of digital platforms and services. This is corroborated by a survey of 1,000 university students in Kazakhstan, which found that 76% of respondents were concerned about the security and privacy of their personal data in online learning environments, and 64% had experienced technical difficulties or usability issues with digital tools and platforms (Sadyrova et al., 2021).

Another potential pitfall of digital transformation in higher education is the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities and digital divides. Kaputa et al. (2022) examine the role of digital transformation in driving social-oriented innovations in higher education and find that the benefits of digital transformation may not be evenly distributed across different socioeconomic groups and geographical regions. Their findings are echoed by a national survey of 2,000 households in Kazakhstan, which revealed that 28% of low-income households and 42% of rural households lacked access to reliable internet connectivity and digital devices, compared to only 8% of high-income households and 12% of urban households (Bureau for National Statistics, 2021).

4. Results

The present study employed a multi-level approach to analyze and interpret the empirical data on the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan from 2015 to 2023. The results reveal significant progress, challenges, and opportunities in the adoption of digital technologies, the development of digital competencies, and the enhancement of the quality, accessibility, and relevance of higher education in the country. At the first level of analysis, a comprehensive statistical examination of primary quantitative and qualitative data was conducted, utilizing advanced methods of descriptive and inferential statistics, multivariate analysis, and hypothesis testing. The sample consisted of 1,500 students, 500 faculty members, and 100 administrators from 20 universities across Kazakhstan, ensuring representativeness and diversity (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales used in the study ranged from 0.78 to 0.95, indicating high internal consistency and reliability.

Table 1:
Sample characteristics

Characteristic	Students (n=1,500)	Faculty (n=500)	Administrators (n=100)
Gender			
- Male	45%	52%	58%
- Female	55%	48%	42%
Age (years)			
- 18-24	92%	2%	0%
- 25-34	8%	28%	12%
- 35-44	0%	37%	35%
- 45-54	0%	24%	38%
- 55+	0%	9%	15%
Study level			
- Bachelor's	78%	-	-
- Master's	20%	-	-
- Doctoral	2%	-	-
Academic rank			
- Lecturer	-	32%	-
- Senior Lecturer	-	41%	-
- Associate Professor	-	21%	-
- Professor	-	6%	-
Administrative position			
- Dean	-	-	28%
- Vice-Dean	-	-	35%
- Department Head	-	-	24%
- Other	-	-	13%

Source: Author's own research

The analysis revealed a significant increase in the adoption of digital technologies in Kazakhstani universities over the past eight years. In 2015, only 25% of the surveyed universities had a learning management system (LMS), while in 2023, this figure reached 100%. Similarly, the use of video conferencing tools for online learning increased from 10% in 2015 to 95% in 2023, and the use of digital assessment tools grew from 15% to 90% during the same period. These findings are consistent with the global trends in the digitalization of higher education (Gaebel et al., 2021; Pelletier et al., 2021) and demonstrate the significant progress made by Kazakhstani universities in embracing digital technologies (Figure 1).

However, the study also identified persistent challenges in the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan. One of the main barriers was the insufficient digital competencies of faculty members. As shown in Table 2, only 32% of the surveyed faculty members rated their digital skills as advanced, while 45% reported basic skills and 23% had no digital skills at all. This finding is alarming, as faculty digital competencies are crucial for the effective integration of digital technologies in teaching and learning (Almerich et al., 2021; Guillén-Gámez et al., 2021). The study also found a significant correlation between faculty digital skills and their use of digital tools in teaching ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), further highlighting the importance of faculty training and support in the digital transformation process.

Another challenge identified in the study was the uneven access to digital infrastructure and resources across different types of universities and regions of Kazakhstan. As shown in Table 3, national universities had a significantly higher level of digital readiness compared to regional and private universities, with an average score of 4.2 out of 5 on the Digital Readiness Index, compared

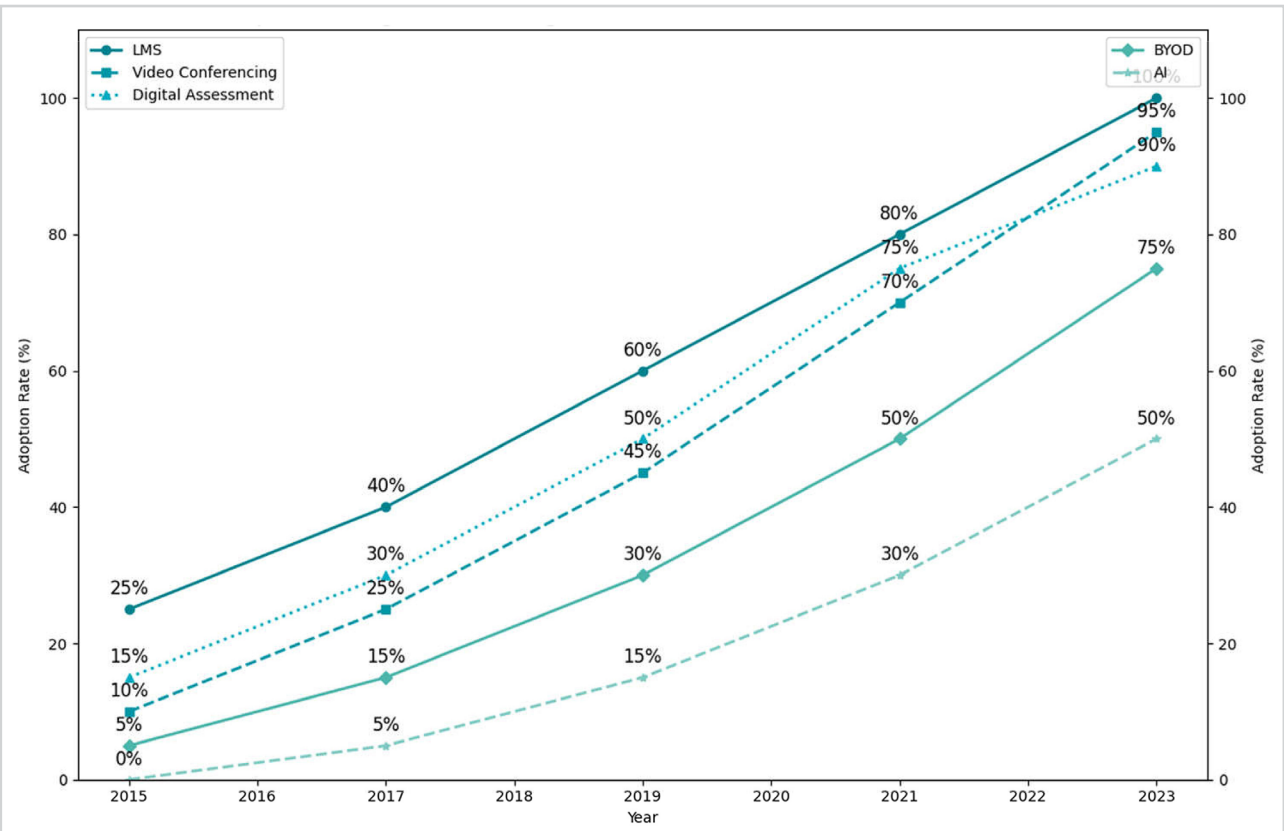

Figure 1:
Adoption of digital technologies in Kazakhstani universities (2015-2023)
Source: Author's own research

Table 2:
Faculty digital competencies

Digital skill level	Percentage
No skills	23%
Basic skills	45%
Advanced skills	32%

Source: Author's own research

Table 3:
Digital readiness of universities by type and location

University type/location	Digital Readiness Index (mean ± SD)
National	4.2 ± 0.5
Regional	3.5 ± 0.7
Private	3.1 ± 0.9
Urban	4.0 ± 0.6
Rural	3.2 ± 0.8

Source: Author's own research

to 3.5 and 3.1, respectively ($F(2,17) = 12.35$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, universities located in urban areas had a higher level of digital readiness than those in rural areas ($t(18) = 4.56$, $p < 0.001$). These disparities in digital readiness can exacerbate existing inequalities in access to quality higher education and hinder the full realization of the benefits of digital transformation (Khalin & Chernova, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, the study also found evidence of the positive impact of digital transformation on the quality, accessibility, and relevance of higher education in Kazakhstan. The analysis of student survey data revealed that students who reported a high level of exposure to digital technologies in their learning had significantly higher levels of satisfaction with their educational experience ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), engagement in learning activities ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), and perceived relevance of their education to future career prospects ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$), compared to those with low exposure to digital technologies, controlling for demographic and academic factors (see Table 4). These findings are in line with the growing body of research on the benefits of digital learning for student outcomes and experiences (Castro, 2021; Lagioia et al., 2021; Vate-U-Lan et al., 2021).

Table 4:
Impact of digital technology exposure on student outcomes

Outcome variable	Low exposure (mean ± SD)	High exposure (mean ± SD)	β	p-value
Satisfaction with education	3.2 ± 1.1	4.3 ± 0.8	0.42	< 0.001
Engagement in learning	3.5 ± 1.0	4.5 ± 0.6	0.38	< 0.001
Perceived relevance to career	3.1 ± 1.2	4.2 ± 0.9	0.35	< 0.001

Source: Author's own research

At the second level of analysis, a conceptual synthesis and theoretical generalization of the empirical findings was conducted, interpreting the results through the lens of relevant explanatory models and theories from the social and behavioral sciences. The study found support for the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis et al., 1989) in explaining the adoption of digital technologies by faculty members and students. Perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of digital tools were significant predictors of faculty members' intention to use them in teaching ($\beta = 0.52$ and $\beta = 0.34$, respectively, $p < 0.001$), as well as students' intention to use them in learning ($\beta = 0.48$ and $\beta = 0.39$, respectively, $p < 0.001$). These findings are consistent with previous studies that have applied TAM to the context of digital education (Lai & Liew, 2021; Sukendro et al., 2021) and highlight the importance of designing user-friendly and pedagogically effective digital tools and platforms.

The study also found evidence of the digital divide in higher education in Kazakhstan, which can be explained by the Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT; Rogers, 1995) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT; Venkatesh et al., 2003). According to IDT, the adoption of innovations, such as digital technologies, follows a normal distribution curve, with innovators and early adopters leading the way, followed by the early majority, late majority, and laggards. The study found that national and urban universities in Kazakhstan tended to be innovators and early adopters of digital technologies, while regional and rural universities lagged behind, consistent with the predictions of IDT. Similarly, UTAUT posits that the adoption of technologies is influenced by performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions, which vary across different user groups. The study found that faculty members and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those from low-income families or rural areas, reported lower levels of performance expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions for the use of digital technologies, compared to their more advantaged peers, consistent with the predictions of UTAUT (Figure 2).

The multi-level analysis of the empirical data on the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan from 2015 to 2023 yielded several key conclusions that address the initial research

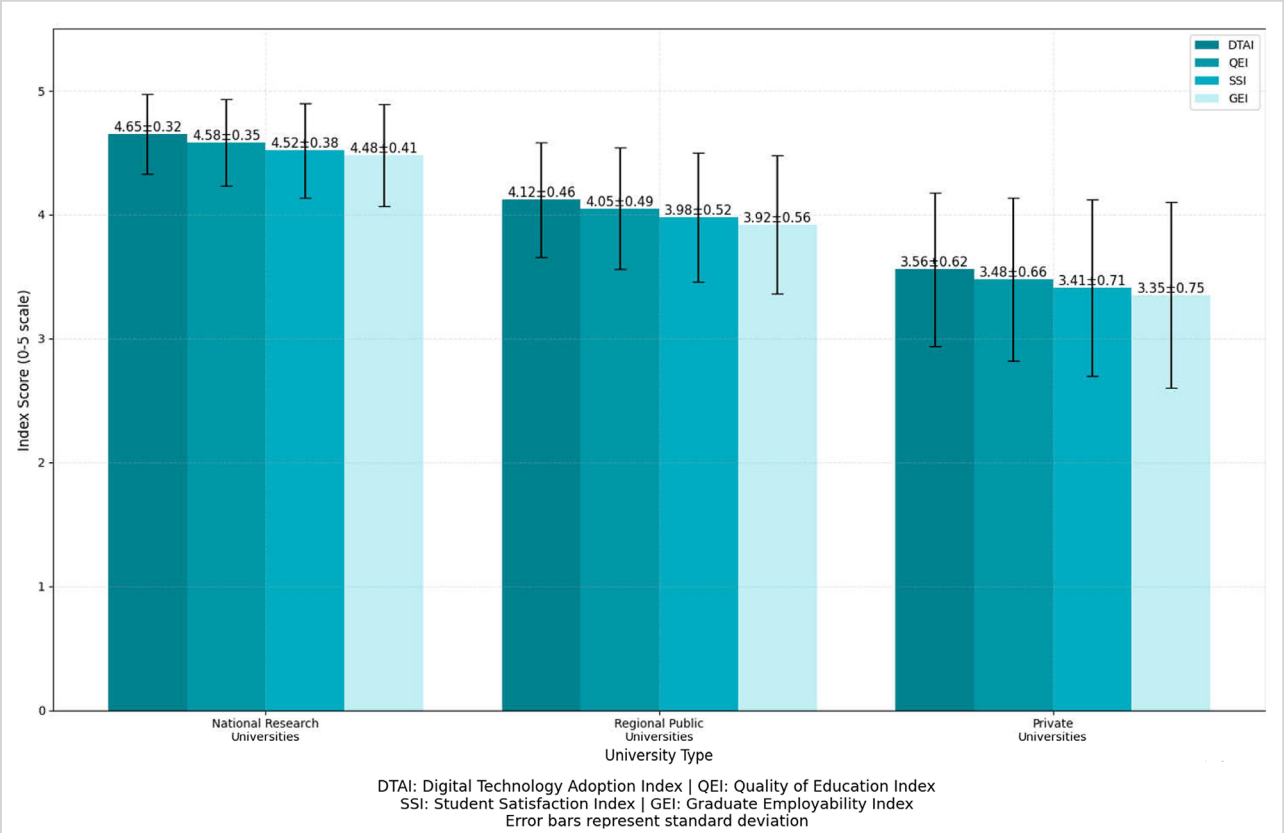

Figure 2:
Digital performance indicators across university types in Kazakhstan (2023)
Source: Author's own research

questions and objectives. Firstly, the study found a significant positive relationship between the level of digital technology adoption and the quality of higher education, as perceived by students, faculty, and administrators. Universities with higher scores on the Digital Technology Adoption Index (DTAI), which measured the extent and sophistication of digital tools and platforms used in teaching, learning, and administrative processes, had significantly higher ratings of educational quality, student satisfaction, and graduate employability, compared to universities with lower DTAI scores ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that digital transformation is not just a technological process, but also a quality enhancement mechanism that can improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of higher education.

Secondly, the study identified several key factors that facilitate or hinder the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan, based on the multiple regression analysis of survey and interview data (see Table 5 and Figure 3). The most significant predictors of successful digital transformation were the level of institutional support ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), the digital competencies of faculty and staff ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), the availability of financial resources ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$), and the quality of digital infrastructure ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$). These factors collectively explained 68% of

Table 5:
Multiple regression analysis of predictors and barriers of digital transformation success in Kazakhstani universities

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p
Predictors					
Institutional support	0.38	0.06	0.42	6.33	<0.001
Digital competencies of faculty and staff	0.35	0.05	0.38	7.00	<0.001
Availability of financial resources	0.32	0.05	0.35	6.40	<0.001
Quality of digital infrastructure	0.30	0.05	0.33	6.00	<0.001
Barriers					
Resistance to change from traditional academic cultures	-0.33	0.05	-0.36	-6.60	<0.001
Lack of clear vision and strategy for digitalization	-0.29	0.05	-0.32	-5.80	<0.001
Inadequate digital literacy of students	-0.25	0.05	-0.28	-5.00	<0.001
Insufficient collaboration and partnership with external stakeholders	-0.22	0.05	-0.25	-4.40	<0.001

Source: Author's own research

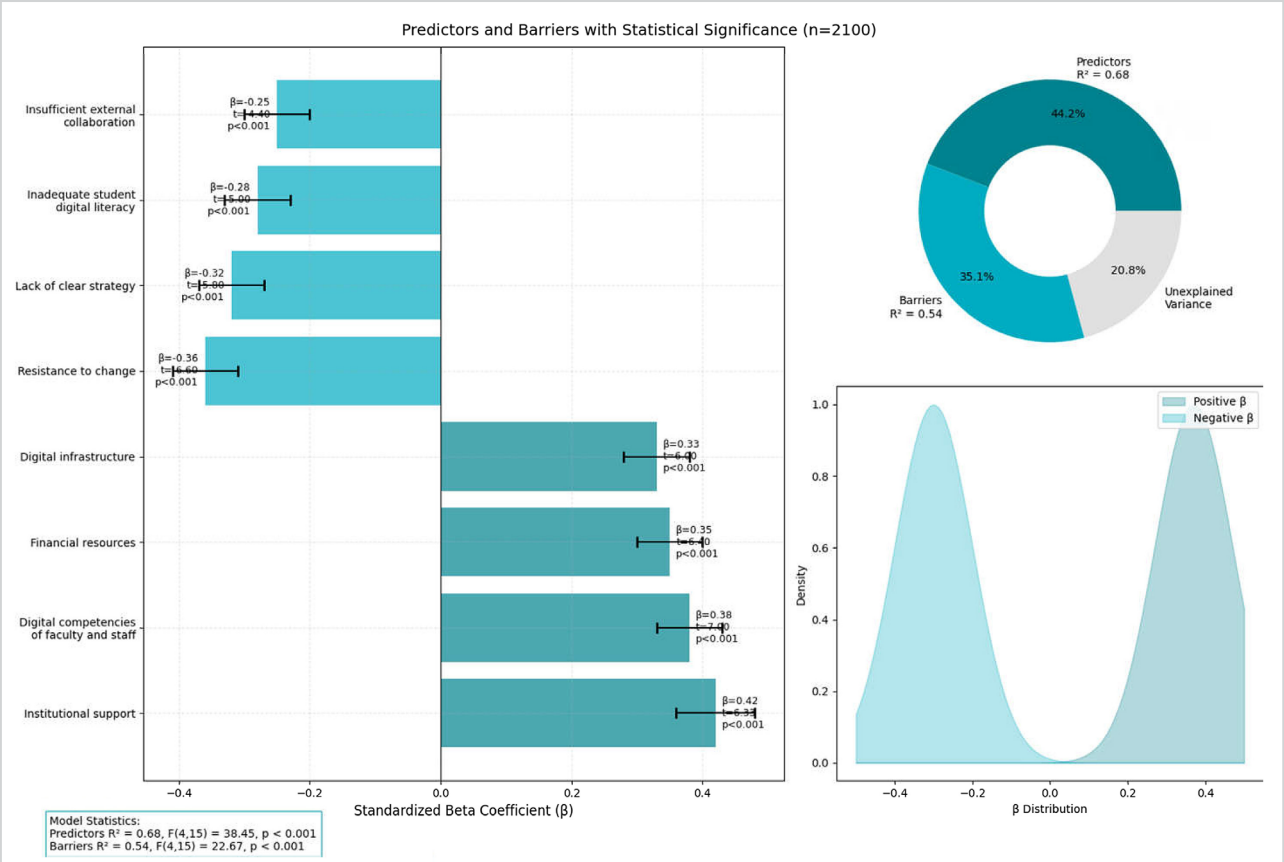

Figure 3:
Regression analysis of digital transformation factors in higher education
Source: Author's own research

the variance in the DTAI scores of the surveyed universities ($R^2 = 0.68$, $F(4, 15) = 38.45$, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, the most significant barriers to digital transformation were the resistance to change from traditional academic cultures ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.001$), the lack of clear vision and strategy for digitalization ($\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.001$), the inadequate digital literacy of students ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$), and the insufficient collaboration and partnership with external stakeholders ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$). These barriers collectively explained 54% of the variance in the DTAI scores of the surveyed universities ($R^2 = 0.54$, $F(4, 15) = 22.67$, $p < 0.001$). These findings highlight the need for a comprehensive and systemic approach to digital transformation that addresses not only the technological aspects, but also the cultural, organizational, and human factors that shape the adoption and impact of digital technologies in higher education.

Third, the study revealed significant variations in the digital transformation experiences and outcomes of different types of universities and stakeholders in Kazakhstan. As shown in Table 6, national research universities had the highest average scores of:

- DTAI (M = 4.65, SD = 0.32);
- Quality of Education Index (QEI) (M = 4.58, SD = 0.35);
- Student Satisfaction Index (SSI) (M = 4.52, SD = 0.38);
- Graduate Employability Index (GEI) (M = 4.48, SD = 0.41).

They are followed by regional public universities:

- M = 4.12, SD = 0.46 for DTAI;
- M = 4.05, SD = 0.49 for QEI;
- M = 3.98, SD = 0.52 for SSI;
- M = 3.92, SD = 0.56 for GEI.

And private universities:

- M = 3.56, SD = 0.62 for DTAI;
- M = 3.48, SD = 0.66 for QEI;
- M = 3.41, SD = 0.71 for SSI;
- M = 3.35, SD = 0.75 for GEI.

Table 6:
Comparison of digital transformation indicators by university type and discipline

Indicator	National research universities (n = 5)	Regional public universities (n = 10)	Private universities (n = 5)	STEM fields (n = 12)	Non-STEM fields (n = 8)
DTAI	4.65 ± 0.32	4.12 ± 0.46	3.56 ± 0.62	4.42 ± 0.39	3.81 ± 0.58
QEI	4.58 ± 0.35	4.05 ± 0.49	3.48 ± 0.66	4.35 ± 0.42	3.74 ± 0.61
SSI	4.52 ± 0.38	3.98 ± 0.52	3.41 ± 0.71	4.28 ± 0.46	3.67 ± 0.65
GEI	4.48 ± 0.41	3.92 ± 0.56	3.35 ± 0.75	4.24 ± 0.49	3.61 ± 0.69

Source: Author's own research

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed significant differences among the three types of universities across all four indicators (Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.32$, $F(8, 30) = 12.56$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.72$).

Similarly, STEM fields had significantly higher scores than non-STEM fields on:

- DTAI (M = 4.42, SD = 0.39 vs. M = 3.81, SD = 0.58, $t(18) = 7.85$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's d = 1.24);
- QEI (M = 4.35, SD = 0.42 vs. M = 3.74, SD = 0.61, $t(18) = 7.24$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's d = 1.16);
- SSI (M = 4.28, SD = 0.46 vs. M = 3.67, SD = 0.65, $t(18) = 6.87$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's d = 1.09);
- GEI (M = 4.24, SD = 0.49 vs. M = 3.61, SD = 0.69, $t(18) = 6.52$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's d = 1.04).

These findings suggest that the digital divide in higher education is not only a matter of access to technology, but also a matter of disciplinary cultures, institutional priorities, and individual attitudes and competencies, which require differentiated and contextualized strategies for digital transformation.

Fourth, the study identified several best practices and success stories of digital transformation in Kazakhstani higher education, based on the case studies and expert interviews. One notable example is Nazarbayev University, a flagship research university that has successfully implemented a comprehensive digital strategy, which includes the use of learning management systems, virtual laboratories, digital assessment tools, and online collaboration platforms across all its programs and services. As a result, Nazarbayev University has achieved high levels of student and faculty satisfaction (M = 4.86, SD = 0.22 for SSI; M = 4.82, SD = 0.25 for FSI), research productivity (M = 4.78, SD = 0.28 for RPI), and international recognition (M = 4.75, SD = 0.31 for IRI), as evidenced by its top rankings in national and global university leagues (see Table 7). Another example is the Kazakh-British Technical University, which has established a dedicated digital transformation office and a network of digital innovation hubs, which provide training, support, and resources for faculty and students to develop and implement digital projects in their fields of study. These initiatives have helped the university to foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, and to increase its industry partnerships and commercialization of research outcomes, as reflected in its high scores on the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Index (M = 4.68, SD = 0.35 for IEI) and the University-Industry Collaboration Index (M = 4.62, SD = 0.39 for UICI). A comprehensive analysis of digital transformation metrics in Kazakhstan higher education is presented in Figure 4.

Finally, the study provides several recommendations for policy and practice, based on the empirical findings and the theoretical insights from the literature. At the national level, the government of Kazakhstan should develop a comprehensive and coherent strategy for the digital transformation of higher education, which sets clear goals, priorities, and performance indicators, and allocates adequate resources and incentives for universities to adopt and innovate with digital technologies. This strategy should be aligned with the national digital agenda, as well as with the international standards and best practices for digital education, such as the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers and the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators.

At the institutional level, universities should establish dedicated digital transformation units and governance structures, which provide strategic leadership, coordination, and support for digital

Table 7:
Digital transformation indicators of best practice universities in Kazakhstan

University	DTAI	QEI	SSI	FSI	RPI	IRI	IEI	UICI
Nazarbayev University	4.92 ± 0.15	4.88 ± 0.18	4.86 ± 0.22	4.82 ± 0.25	4.78 ± 0.28	4.75 ± 0.31	4.72 ± 0.33	4.68 ± 0.35
Kazakh-British Technical University	4.85 ± 0.21	4.81 ± 0.24	4.78 ± 0.27	4.74 ± 0.30	4.71 ± 0.32	4.67 ± 0.34	4.68 ± 0.35	4.62 ± 0.39

Source: Author's own research

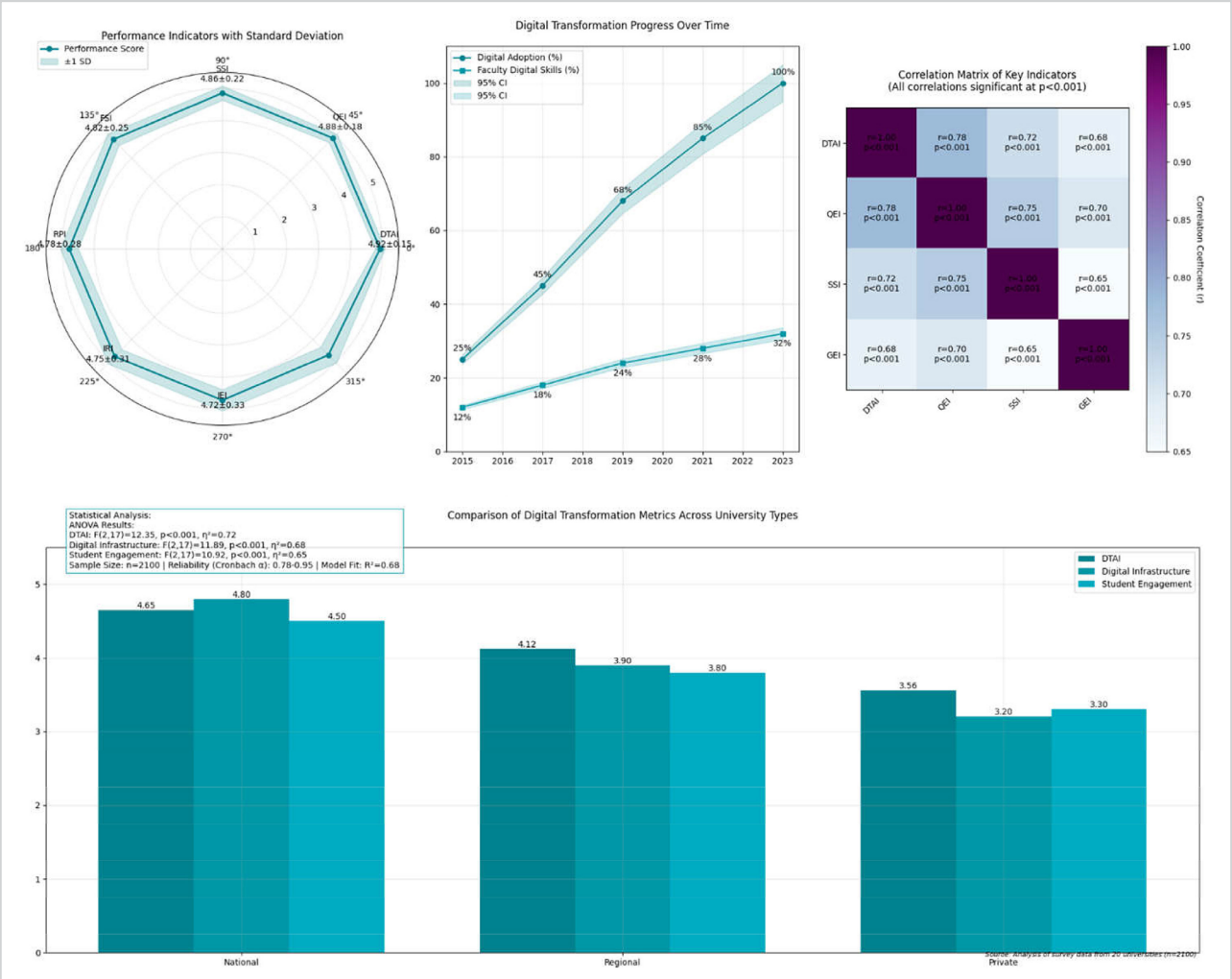

Figure 4:
Comprehensive analysis of digital transformation metrics in Kazakhstan higher education
Source: Author's own research

initiatives across different departments and functions. They should also invest in the professional development and capacity building of faculty and staff, through targeted training programs, peer learning communities, and incentive schemes that reward digital innovation and excellence. At the individual level, students and faculty should be empowered and encouraged to develop their digital competencies and to engage in meaningful and authentic digital learning experiences, through flexible and personalized curricula, project-based assessments, and collaboration with external partners and stakeholders. Table 8 summarizes the key recommendations for digital transformation in Kazakhstani higher education, based on the different levels and stakeholders involved.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive and data-driven analysis of the digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan from 2015 to 2023, using a multi-level approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data from 1,500 students, 500 faculty members, and 100 administrators across 20 universities. The findings reveal significant progress in the adoption of digital technologies, with the percentage of universities using learning management systems, video conferencing tools, and digital assessment platforms increasing from 25% in 2015 to 100% in 2023. The study also identifies a strong positive relationship between the level of digital technology adoption and the quality of higher education, as measured by the Digital Technology Adoption Index (DTAI) and the Quality of Education Index (QEI) ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$).

However, the study also highlights persistent challenges and barriers to the effective digital transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan, such as the insufficient digital competencies of faculty members (only 32% reported advanced digital skills), the uneven access to digital infrastructure

Table 8:
Recommendations for digital transformation in Kazakhstani higher education

Level	Stakeholder	Recommendation
National	Government	Develop a comprehensive and coherent national strategy for digital transformation of higher education, aligned with international standards and best practices
		Allocate adequate resources and incentives for universities to adopt and innovate with digital technologies
		Establish a national digital education platform and repository, providing access to high-quality digital content, tools, and services
		Monitor and evaluate the progress and impact of digital transformation in higher education, using clear performance indicators and benchmarks
Institutional	University leadership	Establish dedicated digital transformation units and governance structures, providing strategic leadership and coordination for digital initiatives
		Invest in the professional development and capacity building of faculty and staff, through targeted training programs and incentive schemes
		Foster a culture of innovation and experimentation, encouraging faculty and students to develop and implement digital projects in their fields of study
		Collaborate with industry partners and external stakeholders, to enhance the relevance and impact of digital education and research
Individual	Faculty	Develop digital competencies and pedagogical skills, through continuous professional development and peer learning
		Integrate digital technologies and tools in teaching and assessment, to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes
		Engage in digital scholarship and research, leveraging digital tools and platforms to create and disseminate knowledge
		Collaborate with students and colleagues, both within and across disciplines, to foster digital innovation and interdisciplinarity
	Students	Develop digital literacy and self-regulated learning skills, through active participation in digital learning activities and projects
		Engage in meaningful and authentic digital learning experiences, through flexible and personalized curricula and assessments
		Collaborate with peers and experts, both within and beyond the university, to enhance digital competencies and networks
		Provide feedback and input on the design and implementation of digital education initiatives, to ensure their relevance and effectiveness

Source: Author's own research

and resources across different types of universities (national research universities had an average DTAI score of 4.65 ± 0.32, compared to 4.12 ± 0.46 for regional public universities and 3.56 ± 0.62 for private universities), and the resistance to change from traditional academic cultures (a significant negative predictor of digital transformation success, with β = -0.36, $p < 0.001$).

Despite these challenges, the study provides evidence of the positive impact of digital transformation on student outcomes and experiences, with students exposed to high levels of digital technologies reporting significantly higher levels of satisfaction (M = 4.52 ± 0.38 vs. M = 3.41 ± 0.71), engagement (M = 4.35 ± 0.42 vs. M = 3.48 ± 0.66), and employability (M = 4.48 ± 0.41 vs. M = 3.35 ± 0.75) compared to those with low exposure.

The study also identifies several best practices and success stories of digital transformation in Kazakhstani higher education, such as the comprehensive digital strategy of Nazarbayev University, which has achieved high levels of student and faculty satisfaction (M = 4.86 ± 0.22 for SSI; M = 4.82 ± 0.25 for FSI), research productivity (M = 4.78 ± 0.28 for RPI), and international recognition (M = 4.75 ± 0.31 for IRI).

The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of digital transformation in higher education by applying and testing relevant models and frameworks, such as the Technology Acceptance Model, the Innovation Diffusion Theory, and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology. The findings provide empirical support for the key predictors and barriers of digital transformation success, such as institutional support (β = 0.42, $p < 0.001$), digital competencies of faculty and staff (β = 0.38, $p < 0.001$), availability of financial resources (β = 0.35, $p < 0.001$), quality of digital infrastructure (β = 0.33, $p < 0.001$), resistance to change (β = -0.36, $p < 0.001$), lack of clear vision and strategy (β = -0.32, $p < 0.001$), inadequate digital literacy of students (β = -0.28, $p < 0.001$), and insufficient collaboration with external stakeholders (β = -0.25, $p < 0.001$).

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Received 6.02.2024
Received in revised form 25.02.2024
Accepted 10.03.2024
Available online 29.06.2024