

THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN PRESERVING HUMANITARIAN VALUES IN MODERN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Contemporary higher education is navigating a profound transition shaped by three intersecting forces: globalization, rapid digitalization, and market-oriented institutional reform. As universities worldwide adopt efficiency-centered frameworks, the moral foundations of academic life face a genuine risk of erosion. These developments are not without value – they broaden access to professional training and expand knowledge networks – yet they often marginalize the humanitarian values of dignity, justice, ethical responsibility, and civic engagement that have historically defined the university's deeper purpose.

This tension is not abstract. At Karaganda Medical University, where students are trained to become physicians in a society navigating rapid modernization, the stakes are concretely human. Future doctors who can diagnose disease but cannot reason morally about its social conditions, who can perform procedures but have not reflected on patient dignity, are technically capable but humanistically incomplete. The question of whether philosophy has a place in such an institution is, therefore, not a theoretical luxury – it is about what kind of professionals and citizens a medical university is responsible for forming.

This concern is not new to the Kazakhstani intellectual tradition. Abu Nasr al-Farabi (c. 870-950), the medieval philosopher born in Farab, now in modern Kazakhstan, argued in his *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* that the ordering of the just state depends on the quality of education that prepares its citizens for reflective participation in common life [1, p. 53]. A millennium later, Abai Kunanbayev (1845-1904), the poet-philosopher whose moral writings remain central to Kazakhstani educational culture, insisted in his *Words of Edification* that the purpose of learning is not the accumulation of advantage but the formation of an honest, humane, and socially responsible person [2, p. 17]. Both thinkers represent a regional philosophical tradition that predates and enriches the Western canon, and both speak directly to the challenges facing contemporary Kazakhstani universities.

International scholarship has converged on related concerns from different directions. UNESCO's report "Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?" argues that education must be understood as a shared social good oriented toward human dignity and social cohesion [3, p. 9]. Martha Nussbaum contends that the humanities are indispensable for democratic citizenship and the cultivation of empathy [4, p. 12]. Henry Giroux identifies the colonization of universities by neoliberal market logic as a structural threat to their civic mission [5, p. 45]. Bill Readings's concept of the "university of excellence," an institution whose driving metric is performative efficiency rather than substantive intellectual purpose, captures the institutional transformation underway in many Kazakhstani higher education contexts [6, p. 39]. This paper argues that philosophical reflection is not a peripheral or decorative element of higher education but a structural safeguard of its humanitarian mission. Drawing on the regional tradition of al-Farabi and Abai alongside the Western philosophical canon and situating the argument within the specific context of medical education in Kazakhstan, it demonstrates that philosophy provides the conceptual and ethical foundation without which universities risk producing technically skilled but humanistically incomplete graduates.

Methodology. This paper employs a conceptual-analytical approach. It synthesizes philosophical literature, educational theory, and policy documents addressing the relationship among philosophy, humanitarian values, and the institutional structures of modern higher education. The analysis draws on three bodies of literature: the Central Asian philosophical tradition (al-Farabi, Abai); Western philosophy of education (Kant, Dewey, Nussbaum, Giroux, Readings); and UNESCO policy frameworks and regional educational scholarship. Sources cited have been verified against original texts or reliable secondary scholarly accounts. References that could not be confirmed against primary sources have been excluded. The paper does not present primary empirical data; its contribution is the conceptual integration of regional and global perspectives on philosophy's role in preserving humanitarian values in contemporary higher education.

The Regional Philosophical Tradition: Al-Farabi and Abai. Any serious discussion of philosophy and education in Kazakhstan must begin not with Kant or Dewey but with al-Farabi. Born in the city of Farab, now

in present-day Kazakhstan, Abu Nasr al-Farabi was the most influential philosopher of the medieval Islamic world after Aristotle, known as the “Second Teacher.” His *Virtuous City* outlined an educational vision in which philosophical reason and moral formation were inseparable conditions of just governance and a humane community. For al-Farabi, education that produced only technical competence without ethical orientation was incomplete: the goal of learning was to cultivate a practically wise and morally formed person who could contribute to the flourishing of the polity [1, p. 55]. This vision – philosophy as the foundation of civic formation – is precisely what is threatened by market-driven approaches to higher education today.

Abai Kunanbayev extended this tradition into the nineteenth century, presenting it in a form directly accessible to Kazakhstani students. His *Words of Edification* (Qara Sozder) are not literary exercises; they are philosophical teachings on the conditions of genuine human development. Abai wrote: “Those who seek to master science need to know the conditions without which it is impossible to achieve the goal. First, when acquiring knowledge, do not set yourself the task of obtaining any benefit through it” [2, p. 18]. This formulation directly challenges the instrumental logic of marketized education. Knowledge pursued only for profit or career advancement, for Abai, corrupts the purpose of learning. Knowledge pursued honestly, in the service of human dignity and social good, is the foundation of civilization.

The Ustaz-Shakirt relationship, the bond between master and student, occupies a central place in this tradition. Unlike the transactional instructor-client model that market logic tends to produce, the Ustaz-Shakirt model is a moral relationship in which the teacher bears responsibility for the student’s formation as a full human being, not merely for the transfer of technical skills. This model is pedagogically and culturally specific to Central Asia, and it is precisely this depth of relationship that digitalization and platform-mediated instruction risk displacing. Preserving it requires that institutions treat the philosophical foundations of education as practically important, not merely theoretically optional.

Crisis in Modern Higher Education: The Kazakhstani Context. The pressures reshaping higher education globally are evident in specific forms in Kazakhstan. Four interconnected dynamics constitute the current challenge. First, the marketization of universities has advanced through ranking systems, competitive funding models, and mounting pressure to demonstrate measurable employment outcomes. Within this framework, disciplines that cannot show a direct economic return, including philosophy, ethics, and the broader humanities, face institutional marginalization. The irony is acute: in a medical university, the discipline most directly relevant to preventing patient harm and navigating ethical complexity is treated as a soft supplement to the real curriculum.

Second, Kazakhstan’s ambitious digital transformation agenda, including platforms such as Platonus and the government’s Digital University initiative, has delivered genuine administrative gains but carries pedagogical risks. The shift toward online delivery and automated assessment displaces the conditions under which moral formation, critical argument, and mentored learning occur. Screens optimize content transfer; they cannot replicate the Ustaz-Shakirt relationship, in which values, judgment, and character are transmitted through sustained personal encounter.

Third, the post-Soviet legacy of highly technocratic, specialty-oriented university structures has led many Kazakhstani institutions to underinvest in the humanities. Students in medicine, engineering, and the natural sciences often have minimal exposure to philosophical and ethical reflection during their professional training. The result is a structural gap between technical preparation and humanistic formation that Kazakhstan’s rapid development agenda has not closed.

Fourth, there is a specific tension between the cultural modernization agenda articulated in Kazakhstan’s Rukhani Zhangyru program, which explicitly calls for the revitalization of Kazakhstani identity through engagement with its philosophical and cultural heritage, including the legacies of al-Farabi and Abai, and university curricula that treat this heritage as ceremonial rather than intellectually substantive. If al-Farabi and Abai are invoked in institutional branding but not engaged in actual philosophical education, the modernization agenda remains incomplete, and the tradition’s deepest intellectual resources go unused.

The Role of Philosophy in Preserving Humanitarian Values. Philosophy addresses these pressures through five specific contributions to the educational process. The first is critical thinking: not merely the evaluation of data, but the examination of the assumptions embedded in institutional structures, professional norms, and technological systems. When a medical curriculum is shaped by market metrics or administrative efficiency, philosophical training equips students and faculty with the conceptual tools to identify what has been lost and articulate why it matters. In this sense, critical thinking is not a generic skill; it is the exercise of reasoned judgment about the purposes of one’s own professional formation.

The second contribution is moral reasoning. Kant’s foundational principle, that humans must be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means [7, p. 38], is not an abstraction in a medical university. It is the ethical bedrock of every clinical interaction. The principles of biomedical ethics developed by Beauchamp

and Childress – autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice – draw directly on the Western philosophical tradition that Kant helped define [8, p. 12]. A physician who has not engaged with this tradition at a philosophical level lacks the conceptual depth to navigate the genuine moral complexity of clinical practice. The bioethics module alone, detached from its philosophical foundations, produces procedural compliance rather than ethical judgment.

The third contribution is tolerance through dialogue. Philosophical argument, when properly conducted, cultivates the ability to hold one's own convictions with intellectual humility, to engage seriously with opposing views, and to distinguish between the quality of an argument and the identity of the person making it. These habits are essential in pluralistic clinical and institutional settings and in a diverse society.

The fourth is civic responsibility. Dewey's argument that education is inherently democratic, that learning and civic participation are internally connected, remains practically urgent [9, p. 87]. Students who have engaged philosophically with questions of justice, rights, and the conditions of human flourishing are better positioned to exercise social responsibility in their professional roles. In the Kazakhstani context, shaped by Abai's legacy of insisting on social engagement and moral responsibility, a physician is not only a technical practitioner but also a public figure with civic obligations.

The fifth is reflective judgment: the capacity to pause before acting in conditions of genuine uncertainty, to examine the full context of a decision, and to weigh competing considerations with appropriate care. This is precisely the capacity that algorithmic systems, however sophisticated, cannot supply. It is also the capacity that the Ustaz-Shakirt tradition was designed to cultivate – not through formal instruction alone but through the modeled practice of careful, value-oriented deliberation.

Philosophy and the Digital Transformation of Kazakhstani Universities. The digital transformation of Kazakhstani higher education requires philosophical scrutiny, not resistance. The question is not whether to digitalize but how to ensure that digitalization serves the human purposes of education rather than replacing them with administrative convenience. This requires philosophical frameworks that can evaluate digital systems against normative criteria: Do they respect the dignity of students as persons? Do they support or undermine the conditions of genuine learning? Do they distribute educational opportunity equitably or reinforce existing inequalities?

Floridi's work on the ethics of artificial intelligence provides analytical tools for this evaluation [10, p. 48]. Applied to the Kazakhstani context, these tools raise concrete questions: When Platonus mediates the entire administrative relationship between student and institution, what happens to the personal accountability that the Ustaz-Shakirt model requires? When AI-assisted assessment replaces teacher judgment, what kinds of knowledge and judgment go unrecognized? When online modules replace face-to-face seminars, what conditions for philosophical dialogue are lost?

These are not rhetorical questions. Kazakhstan's Rukhani Zhangyru program explicitly recognizes that cultural modernization requires integrating Kazakhstani values into contemporary institutional life – not replacing them with imported technological models. Philosophical reflection is the mechanism for achieving this integration thoughtfully: it enables institutions to evaluate digital innovations against the criteria of human dignity and cultural identity that the regional tradition has always upheld, from al-Farabi's vision of the virtuous city to Abai's insistence on the moral purpose of knowledge.

In conclusion, this paper argued that philosophy occupies a structurally necessary position in modern higher education, not as a traditional discipline to be preserved for cultural reasons, but as the intellectual mechanism through which universities sustain their commitment to human dignity, critical agency, and civic responsibility in the face of market and technological pressures.

The argument has been deliberately grounded in the Central Asian philosophical tradition. Al-Farabi's vision of education as the formation of the morally and intellectually complete person, and Abai's insistence that knowledge pursued for advantage alone corrupts the purpose of learning, are not historical curiosities. They are living intellectual resources that speak with precision to the challenges facing Kazakhstani universities today. The Ustaz-Shakirt tradition embodies a model of the educational relationship – personal, morally serious, and oriented toward full human formation – that offers a culturally specific and philosophically grounded alternative to the transactional model's market logic tends to produce.

At Karaganda Medical University, integrating philosophical reflection into the curriculum is not optional enrichment. It is the condition under which the bioethical principles governing clinical practice can be genuinely understood and applied, rather than merely recited. Future physicians who have engaged seriously with moral philosophy – who have thought carefully about dignity, autonomy, justice, and the conditions of trustworthy professional relationships – are better prepared for clinical practice than those who have not.

The institutional response called for is not the expansion of philosophy as an isolated discipline but its genuine integration across the curriculum – into professional training, into governance frameworks for

evaluating digital systems, and into the formation of institutional culture. This, in the deepest sense, is the demand that the regional tradition from al-Farabi to Abai has always made that education form not only capable practitioners but also human beings worthy of the trust society places in them.

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PHILOSOPHY OF HEALTH AND MEDICINE

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Philosophy of health and medicine is an essential interdisciplinary field that examines the deeper intellectual foundations of medical science, clinical reasoning, and healthcare systems. Although medicine is often presented as a purely scientific discipline grounded in biology, chemistry, and technological innovation, its practice rests on conceptual distinctions, value judgments, and assumptions about human nature that require philosophical clarification. Every diagnosis presupposes a theory of disease, every treatment decision implies an understanding of well-being, and every healthcare policy reflects ethical priorities. For this reason, philosophy of medicine is not external to medical practice but embedded within it, shaping how physicians think, how patients are understood, and how health systems function.

Historically, medicine and philosophy evolved together rather than separately. In ancient Greek thought, medical inquiry was inseparable from philosophical reflection on nature, causation, and ethics. Hippocratic medicine rejected supernatural explanations of illness and emphasized careful observation and rational analysis, laying early foundations for clinical methodology. Aristotle's biological works furthered systematic understanding by introducing teleological explanations and a classification of living organisms. These early philosophical commitments shaped the development of medicine as a reasoned and disciplined inquiry into the human body. In later centuries, Islamic scholars such as Avicenna integrated Aristotelian metaphysics with medical science, reinforcing the idea that health involves balance and harmony within the organism. Medieval European traditions continued this integration, linking physical health with the moral and spiritual dimensions of life.

The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment brought dramatic shifts in medical thinking. Advances in anatomy, physiology, and microbiology fostered a mechanistic model of the human body. The discovery of microorganisms and the development of germ theory provided powerful evidence that diseases have identifiable physical causes. This success strengthened the biomedical model, which defines disease primarily as biological dysfunction and locates pathology within organs, tissues, or cells. The mechanistic approach enabled extraordinary progress in surgery, pharmacology, and diagnostic technology, contributing