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STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE: THE ROLE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING IN ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This article is based on the results of the research conducted in 2023, implemented under the agreement between the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. This study is a logical continuation of the research conducted in 2021 on satisfaction of local heads (akims) with the first conducted elections of akims of cities of district significance, rural districts, settlements and villages. The researchers assume that newly elected local heads may have problems with decision-making on some issues. This may be provoked by the lack of certain competences needed in rural areas. The article presents the results of the research of training needs of representatives of local government. During the research a mixed type of methods (quantitative and qualitative) was used. At the first stage, a sociological survey was conducted among local heads (akims) of cities of district significance, rural districts, settlements and villages (n=250). At the second stage of the research an in-depth interview was conducted with participation of akims, representatives of non-governmental organisations and business structures (n=29). The study showed that there is a need for training in communication skills, financial and legal literacy, as well as socio-cultural and psychological competences among representatives of local government.

Key words: public administration, local government, public service, local executive bodies, professional competencies, education, public policy, training.

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Мемлекеттік басқарудың тиімділігін арттыру: жергілікті мемлекеттік басқару органдарының кәсіби құзыреттілігін арттырудағы үздіксіз білім берудің рөлі

Мақала Ханнс Зайдель Қоры мен ҚР Президенті жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясы арасындағы келісім шеңберінде 2023 жылы іске асырылған зерттеу нәтижелері негізінде жазылған. Бұл зерттеу ауылдық округтер, кенттер, ауылдар және аудандық маңызы бар қалалар әкімдерінің алғашқы өткізілген сайлауына әкімдердің қанағаттануы туралы 2021 жылы жүргізілген зерттеудің жалғасы болып табылады. Зерттеушілер жаңадан сайланған әкімдердің арасында белгілі бір құзыреттерді алу қажеттілігіне байланысты кейбір бағыттар бойынша шешім қабылдауда қиындықтар мен мәселелер туындауы мүмкін деп болжайды. Мақалада жергілікті мемлекеттік басқару өкілдерін оқыту қажеттіліктерін зерттеу нәтижелері келтірілген. Зерттеу барысында әдістердің аралас түрі (сандық және сапалық) қолданылды. Осы мақсатта аудандық маңызы бар қалалардың, ауылдық округтердің, кенттер мен ауылдардың әкімдері арасында әлеуметтік сауалнама жүргізілді (n=250). Зерттеудің екінші кезеңінде әкімдердің, үкіметтік емес ұйымдар мен бизнес құрылымдар өкілдерінің қатысуымен терең сұхбат жүргізілді (n=29). Зерттеу көрсеткендей, жергілікті мемлекеттік басқару өкілдері арасында қарым-қатынас дағдыларын, қаржылық және құқықтық сауаттылықты, сондай-ақ әлеуметтік-мәдени және психологиялық құзыреттіліктерді оқыту қажеттілігі бар.

Түйін сөздер: оқыту, мемлекеттік басқару, жергілікті мемлекеттік басқару, мемлекеттік қызмет, жергілікті атқарушы органдар, кәсіби құзыреттер, білім, мемлекеттік саясат.

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Повышение эффективности государственного управления: роль непрерывного образования в повышении профессиональной компетентности органов местного государственного управления

Настоящая статья написана по результатам проведенного исследования в 2023 году, реализуемого в рамках соглашения между Академией государственного управления при Президенте РК и Фондом Ханнса Зайделя. Данное исследование является логическим продолжением проведенного в 2021 году исследования об удовлетворенности акимов прошедшими выборами акимов, сельских округов, поселков, сел и городов районного значения. Исследователи предполагают, что среди вновь избранных акимов могут быть возникать трудности и проблемы с принятием решений по некоторым направлениям, в связи с потребностью в приобретении определенных компетенций. В статье приводятся результаты изучения потребностей в обучении представителей местного государственного управления. В ходе исследования был использован смешанный тип методов (количественный и качественный). С этой целью был проведен социологический опрос среди акимов городов районного значения, сельских округов, поселков и сел (n = 250). На втором этапе исследования было проведено глубинное интервью с участием акимов, представителей неправительственных организаций и бизнес структур (n = 29). Исследование показало что среди представителей местного государственного управления имеется потребность в обучении навыкам коммуникации, финансовой и правовой грамотности, а также социально-культурным и психологическим компетенциям.

Ключевые слова: обучение, местное государственное управление, государственное управление, местные исполнительные органы, профессиональные компетенции, образование, государственная политика, государственная служба.

Introduction

At the current time, the improvement of the public administration in Kazakhstan is an important aspect of the policy of state modernisation. In this regard, strengthening the level of professionalism of state personnel is one of the crucial tasks. Consequently, the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced the need to transform the public administration system through decentralisation and expansion of the area of responsibility of local executive authorities (Акорда, 2024). In 2021, the President approved the Concept for the Development of Public Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030, which states that currently new governance reforms are required to address problem areas, including those aimed at the development of local government and self-government (Концепция развития государственного управления, 2021).

Relevance of the topic of articles, goals and objectives. The topic of this study was chosen due to the current reform of the local government system. The instruction to hold direct elections of local heads was put forward by the President of the Kazakhstan K.-J. Tokayev in 2021 in his speech to the citizens: “Kazakhstan in a new reality: time for action”. According to the Constitutional Law of 25 May 2021 “On Amendments and Additions to the

Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan”, procedures for direct elections of akims. Candidates were nominated from political parties and higher-ranking akims were introduced, and for the first time there were self-nominees. The initiative of direct election of akims is aimed at consistent implementation of a package of key policy reforms related to decentralisation of public administration through the introduction of widespread practice of local self-government institutions. Given the regulated requirements, the head of a local government body should possess not only professional competences, but also managerial, communicative and other skills. It means to be able to make decisions, effectively interact vertically and horizontally in the system of public administration. These requirements are fully consistent with the norms of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. In order to ensure effective governance at the local level focuses the attention of local governments on the selection of highly qualified personnel by personal merit and professional competence (European Charter of Local Self-Government, Article 6, 1985)

Following the presidential decree, direct elections of akims were held on 25 July 2021 in 176 districts and cities in 14 regions. By this date, the majority of akims (87.5 per cent) had vacated their

seats due to the expiration of their term of office, and the remaining 12.5 per cent due to early resignation. According to the data of the Central Commission for Elections of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as of 1 January 2021, there were 2345 akims in the country, including 48 akims of cities of district significance, 1993 akims of rural districts, 106 settlement akims and 198 akims of villages (Economy, 2024).

Elections were held on the basis of universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret voting. To be elected as an akim of a city of district significance, village, settlement, rural district, a citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan must meet the requirements stipulated by the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 'On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan', the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 'On Local Government and Self-government in the Republic of Kazakhstan' and the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the field of civil service. Thus from 2021 to 2023, overall about 2 thousand local akims were elected in different regions of Kazakhstan (Закон РК «О местном государственном управлении и самоуправлении в РК», 2001). The authors of this paper assume that with such a large number of elected akims, there are some among them who are new to management experience and therefore have problems in their professional activities. For this purpose, the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the RK conducted the research to know their needs for training and then support these civil servants.

In order to study the process and results of the first elections in 2021, the staff of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan conducted a sociological study on 'Satisfaction of the population with the elections of rural akims in 2021' and 'Satisfaction of akims with the procedure of direct elections' (Кошербаев, 2023). This study aimed to identify problems related to the electoral process of local executive elections and to make recommendations to improve the effectiveness of ongoing political reforms. One of the recommendations was to conduct seminars for first-time candidates. In the sequel to the series of studies, current research is aimed at determining the identification of problem areas at the level of local government and for preparing recommendations for the training of necessary competences. As a consequence, continuous development of civil servants' professional competences through training is a priority for the Academy.

Purpose of the current study: assessment of training needs of akims of villages, settlements, rural districts and cities of district significance. The object

of the current research is local government bodies. Subject of the study: analysis of professional competences of representatives of local executive bodies, study of their needs for training in certain skills. Objectives: to identify problem areas in the work of local government bodies of the Republic of Kazakhstan; to propose options of solving problems and giving recommendations; to identify training needs of akims of villages, settlements, rural districts and cities of district significance of the Kazakhstan.

Methods and methodology

Two years after the first election of local akims and the completed research (Кошербаев, 2023), a research team from the Academy staff in 2023 conducted a new research and studied the training needs of akims of the cities of district significance, rural districts, settlements and villages.

An analysis of the reports of local election commissions for the period since the first elections of local akims in 2021 revealed that among the newly elected akims there are representatives of different professions (entrepreneurs, military, teachers and others). The direct elections of akims of 42 districts and 3 cities of regional significance held in 2023 in all 17 regions of the country confirmed the diversity of the composition of candidates for local heads. During the 2023 election campaign, 249 candidates were nominated (Выборы акимов районов и городов областного значения, 2023). 36.24 per cent were nominated by political parties and 63.86 per cent by self-nomination. Most of the candidates were civil servants, about 10 per cent were representatives of the budgetary sphere, 15 per cent of candidates were employed in commercial structures, as well as temporarily unemployed (6.28 per cent). By speciality, economists (more than 20 per cent), lawyers (more than 19 per cent), teachers (about 15 per cent), specialists with agricultural education and other representatives were nominated (Выборы акимов районов и городов областного значения, 2023). This factor was the reason for conducting a research aimed at studying the problems that local executive bodies' representatives may face in their professional activities, who came to the sphere of local government from other spheres of activity. In addition, the task was to find out whether there is a general demand for training among representatives of local executive bodies.

Based on the results of the study, it was supposed to form certain recommendations on training of akims in necessary professional competencies within the framework of trainings and seminars,

which are taught on the basis of the Academy and its branches in all regional centres. At the start of the study, the working group put forward a hypothesis that to some extent the representatives of local executive bodies may have problems in the sphere of building communication with the population, financial and legal literacy.

To study the problem a mixed method of research was used: quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method was based on a sociological survey by sending out an online questionnaire, for qualitative research the method of in-depth interview was chosen. To conduct the sociological survey, the Academy's potential was used in the form of attracting the help of branches. The focus was on five key regions North, East, West, Centre and South. The research team selected these five particular regions where the largest number of akims were elected for the period 2021-2023. Research started from conducting sociological survey. Sociological survey was among akims of cities of district significance, rural districts, settlements and villages (n=250) and maslikhat deputies (n=50). At the second stage, a structured in-depth interview was conducted with akims, business structures and NGOs (n=29).

The system of empirical indicators assessed by respondents was used to register and analyse the parameters for determining training needs: socio-psychological characteristics of local self-government subjects; understanding and assessment of management of external and internal factors affecting the activities of local government and self-government bodies; competencies related to the ability to interact with the population, representatives of the local community and their involvement in solving problems of the population.

The survey was conducted in the period from August to September 2023. The geography of the survey is represented by North-Kazakhstan, East-Kazakhstan, Akmola, West-Kazakhstan, Turkestan regions. The target group in this study, apart from akims of cities of district significance, rural districts, settlements and villages, were also deputies of maslikhats, representatives of the business sector and non-governmental organisations. Maslikhats as representative bodies, which include representatives of the local community, are direct observers of problems in local self-government and can also have some influence on decision-making by akims.

The questionnaire was distributed and respondents were recruited through official letters sent to branches of the Academy of Public Administration, akimats of villages, rural districts, settlements and

cities of district significance. The survey sample is quota: akims of villages, rural districts, settlements and cities of district significance, maslikhat deputies.

Literature review

In recent years, the concept of competence-based approach has been extensively employed in advancing the state's administrative structure. When hiring for governmental positions, candidates are subjected to requirements to meet the qualification requirements, taking into account a set of necessary competences. Civil servants must first of all have such qualities as integrity, responsibility, stress resistance, initiative, customer orientation (Внедрение единой рамки компетенций при отборе на государственную службу, 2024). These and other requirements for personal and professional qualities of a civil servant are included in the Unified Framework of Competences, which is compiled in accordance with foreign practices and meets OECD standards. Foreign researchers conduct research with regard to the opinion of civil servants themselves about the set of required competences and their importance (Kruyen, 2020). Before starting a training process, a study should be carried out to assess the need for professional development and improvement of professional competences (Kremer et al., 2023). The Academy, like other foreign educational organizations, regularly conducts research to assess the competency-based approach, widely analyzes and applies the data obtained during the training of specialists (Абил, 2023; Bokayev, 2022). The faculty members of the branches also conduct research to study and analyse the necessary transformations of public administration and professional competencies in order to shape training courses and trainings at the local level (Есбергел, 2023; Лазаренко, 2017; Искендинова, 2023; Iskendirowa, 2023).

A competency-based approach to hiring a skilled employee includes a mix of information processing, communication technology, analytical skills as well as creative thinking, problem solving, critical thinking and communication skills (Васильева, 2019). Of particular importance are the leadership abilities of civil servants, which need to be constantly developed and trained in management skills, which should be monitored and provided in a timely manner by certain HR-service (Ayu, 2019).

Retraining and requalification of employees in all areas is crucial. All these changes are leading to a major rethinking of education and training throughout the professional life cycle, as well as the signifi-

cance and role of personal growth and advancement. The swift evolution of technology, which affects all areas of activity, ultimately requires highly skilled workers constantly update their skills through life-long learning. This is why the concept of 'life learning' has become popular and has become a concept or principle for many organisations, including government agencies. In this regard, foreign studies argue that the state should support staff training and motivate all employees of state bodies to start learning new skills as early as possible (Park, 2020).

With the rapid pace of technological development, accompanied by the spread of information and the ongoing changes in the global economy, researchers and experts emphasise the need to transform public administration. In order to develop the sphere of public administration, it is essential to review and adjust the requirements for the professional competencies of civil servants as needed.

In this regard, researchers all over the world focus extensively on studying new trends that influence and modify public policy. In every state there are different models of competences of civil servants, where there are both universal elements and taking into account national specifics. The universal competences required for all civil servants include the ability to manage change, to think strategically and make decisions, leadership skills, the ability to achieve results, communication competences, and in the new environment it is important to have digital competences. Thus, representatives of public authorities should be motivated to develop dynamically and acquire the required knowledge for their professional activities (Карапегян, 2020).

Results and discussion

In Kazakhstan, various approaches are being adopted to transform the public administration structure, considering the study of all existing models, principles and technologies. According to the Law of RK 'On Public Service', one of the fundamentals of civil service is the continuity of training and development of necessary competences (ЗПК от 23.11.2015г. «О государственной службе Республики Казахстан»). The personnel of the Academy are continuously researching global trends to enhance training programmes, retraining initiatives and advancement of governmental officials. Training courses for the civil servants of local government are organized in every regional center at the Academy branches. After the first local elections in 2021, the Academy was the first to support the training of rural akims. As part of the execution of the

Concept of Development of Local Self-government in Kazakhstan until 2025, the newly elected akims of rural districts underwent special training as part of the introductory program (Концепция развития МСУ в РК до 2025 года, 2021).

Akims in all regions were provided with courses relevant for that period on: introduction to the main strategic and programme documents; the fundamentals and initiatives of local self-government in the country; managing and planning the budget for rural areas; public procurement, management of communal property; managing tax revenues allocated to the rural territory; the norms of the administrative procedural legislation of Kazakhstan; effective communication skills; team management; working with social networks; and working with the local authorities.

As a result of the seminars, the trainees (akims) were surveyed, where they had to reflect the degree of satisfaction with the courses, usefulness of the information received and make suggestions for future courses. From the wishes for improvement of future courses, the trainees recommended to include topics related to budgeting, financial literacy, public procurement, land relations, psychology and communication with the population.

It is obvious that akims lack certain skills and knowledge, in this regard, many asked for more frequent organisation of training, the need to teach certain courses. The most common wish was to continue the courses, to study more in-depth, to organise such training courses for akims more often. In some regions they asked for additional counselling on the courses.

The research revealed that the majority of the respondents' professional education is predominantly: legal, economic, pedagogical, and technical (Figure 1).

According to the survey, the researched groups can interact with the population in the state and Russian languages, and in the questionnaire they also noted their knowledge of English. In a number of isolated cases there were answers about knowledge of languages of ethnic groups living in the studied region. This indicates that linguistic competences of akims allow them to build constructive communications, find a common language and establish trusting relationships with the local population.

In the survey, a significant part of respondents are heads of rural districts and villages. Almost half of those who took part in the survey have been working in this position for 1 to 3 years (Figure 2). Thus, the training needs of this category may be higher than those of more experienced colleagues.

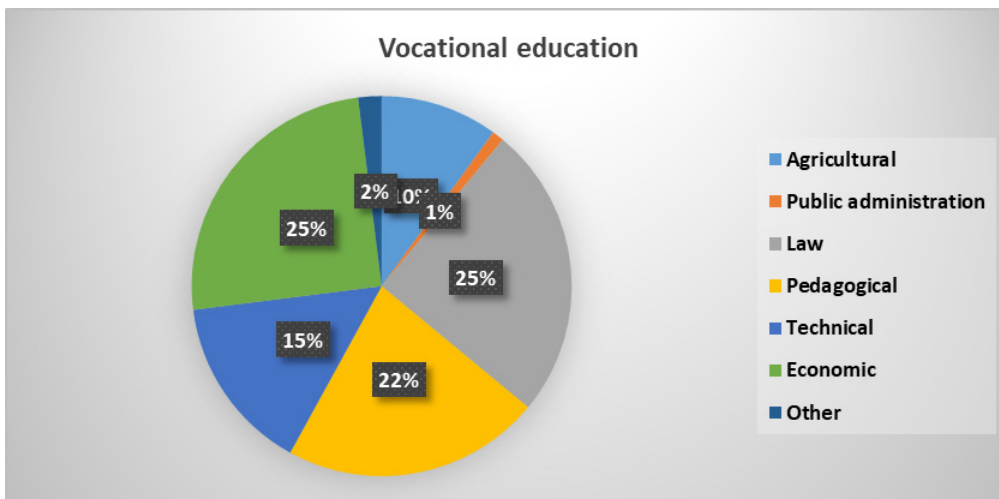


Figure 1 – Vocational education

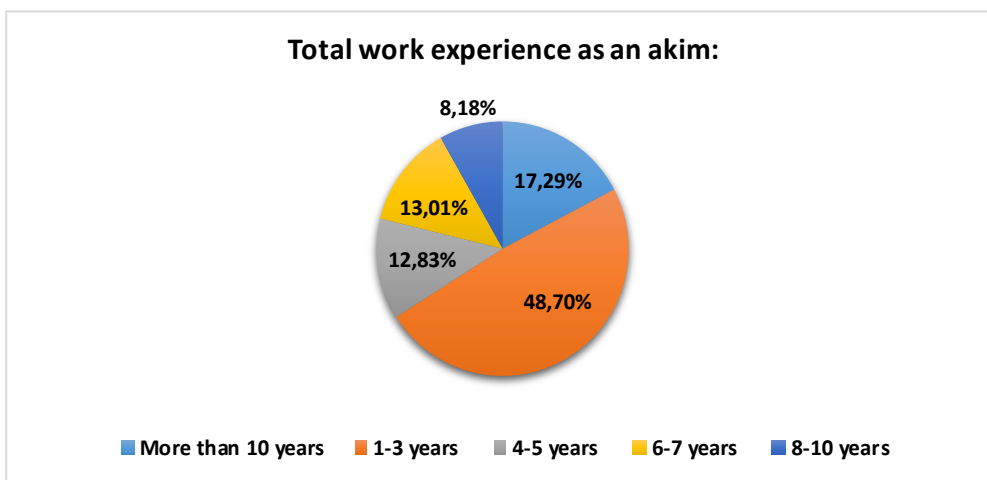


Figure 2 – Seniority of managerial work of akims

In terms of age parameters akims are represented in a wide range from 25 to 64 years old. The average age of respondents is 44 years old. The largest number of respondents expressed readiness for training, professional and personal development. According to the survey data, the majority of elected akims were nominated by representatives of the local community, are natives and have been living in rural areas for a long time. This factor indicates a positive characteristic of elected akims, who should have first-hand knowledge of the problems and needs of the local population. The majority of representatives have lived in a certain area for more than 10 years (69.1 per cent). This indicates that the respondents have a good knowledge of regional peculiarities, local traditions and customs of

the population and as a consequence it can be an auxiliary factor in establishing communications in interaction with citizens.

It follows from the obtained data that akims try to expand communication channels with the population. The research showed that mostly akims carefully study what means of communication are mainly used by the population.

The research investigated the need for specialised knowledge. Respondents were asked to indicate the branches and areas of knowledge they need and were asked to rank them in order of importance. The main group of knowledge needs required in local government and self-government is financial literacy, followed by communication skills, legal and digital literacy, and mediation skills (Figure 3).

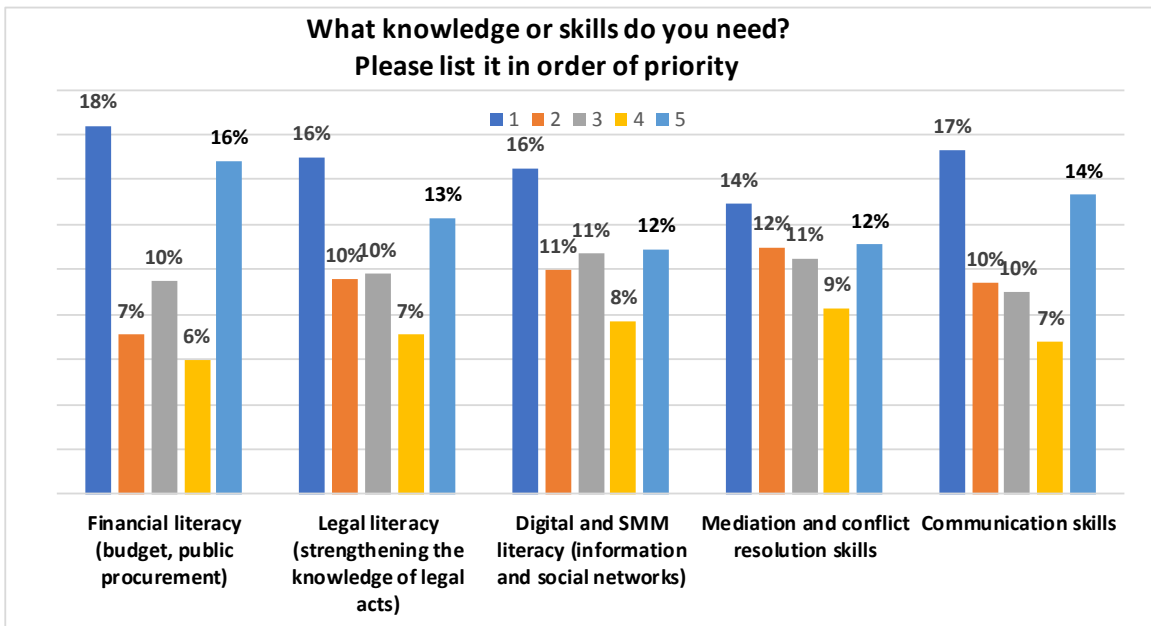


Figure 3 – Knowledge/skills needs
(as rated by respondents, where 5 is the highest score, 1 is the lowest score).

In addition, respondents were queried whether they believed that the election of akims would positively influence the socio-economic advancement of the region. The overwhelming majority

(74% of respondents) noted that they expect positive changes in the realm of socio-economic development of the regions following the elections. (Figure 4).

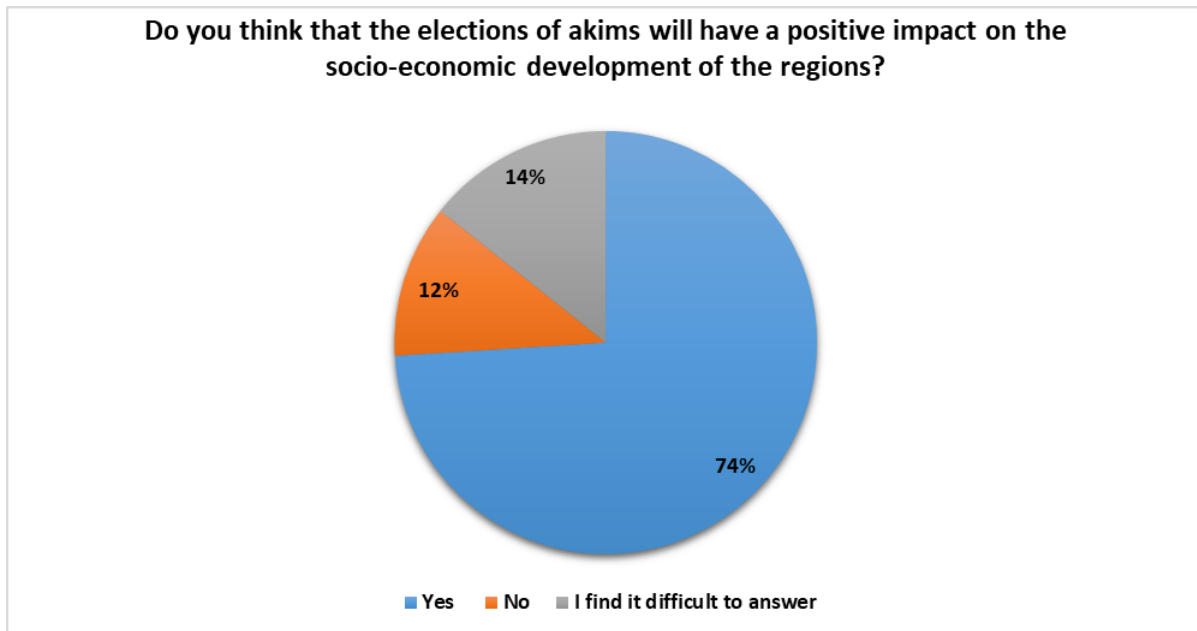


Figure 4 – On the impact of holding elections of akims on socio-economic development of regions

The other part of the study, in-depth interview was conducted to identify the main problems faced by akims in their activities in more detail. During the interviewing, the respondents were asked to frankly share their problems and to tell what courses to improve their professional competence would be useful to them. They were also warned that the findings of the interview will be used in the development of training programmes

on the development of local self-government, will be included in the content of professional development courses, as well as for akims themselves, seeking to improve their skills and management efficiency.

The results of interviews with akims, representatives of NGOs and business structures were categorised according to identical problems expressed by respondents (Table 1).

Table 1 – Training needs of respondents (based on interview results)

Skills training needs	Key issues/problems	Interpretation/solution
Budget management	How to replenish the budget	The need for training in using financial instruments in accordance with budget 4 level
Legal regulation	The akim must know all the legal aspects of his activities, monitor changes in the regulatory sphere	Ability to act in the legal field, knowledge of law, legal regulations
Public procurement	Ability to enter into an agreement correctly and take into account all risks	Knowledge of legislation, rules for implementing all public procurement procedures
Communication skills	The akim must combine a set of diverse qualities, including actively addressing issues promptly and maintaining constant accessibility to people	Skills on delivering speech to an audience, the art of effective communication, networking
Information policy	Numerous issues stem from inadequate, inaccurate information	Properly and timely demonstrate own professional activity, master modern information technologies
Image	There is no such vocation as “akim”	The image of the akim is formed on the basis of professional and personal qualities, a focus on the values and traditions of the local population, an understanding of the psychology of local residents
Recruitment and HR management	A lot depends on the personnel	Ability to recruit professionals for work, HR management skills

*Table compiled by the authors

Conclusion

In summarising the results of the research, the following important conclusions can be highlighted:

The results of the sociological survey and in-depth interviews showed the readiness of akims for professional development through the study of expert experience and effective practices in interacting with the population, ways of solving social and economic problems in rural areas. In the interviews, the respondents shared their experience in solving the issues that occurred in the communication sphere within the state body with colleagues, as well as in interaction with the population. Some respondents expressed their willingness not only to learn, but also to share their experience, cases and management solutions, tools and approaches that have been successfully tested.

Based on the findings of the research it was found that there is a need to train both professional skills and socio-cultural and psychological competences (forecasting, teamwork, influencing decision-making and delegation, effective communication). It follows from the study that akims in their activities face the need to solve problems, the execution of which often depends on personal leadership skills, and such competencies as the ability to analyse, make decisions on various levels of problems, organise appropriate work and fulfil obligations. These encompass strategies for managing stress, building resilience, mastering public speaking and business writing, and cultivating abilities focused on solving problems effectively.

The results of the research demonstrate that the primary focus for training should be in the realm of communication, specifically enhancing methods

to interact effectively with the public and engage citizens in the self-government process, the use of potential resources of collective labour and cooperation, the ability to act proactively, effectively and rationally solve current problems.

Respondents believe that the manual for local government should feature a section that provides details on strategic documents and programs, regulatory legal acts, including references to their original sources, as well as examples, cases of tasks and algorithm of actions for making managerial decisions. Respondents believe that there is a continual need to improve knowledge, take professional development courses, learn new financial instruments, fundraising, including knowledge of the legal sphere, legislation and innovative digital technologies.

The obtained results of the study will be used to implement research tasks on the assistance and maintenance provided to local governments, namely the formation of a training programme for akims of self-government level, as well as in the organisation of advanced training courses for interested stakeholders. It has been recommended by the research participants to prepare a handbook with cases and proposals for solving specific problems and tasks that most often arise in the settlements.

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