Askat Ashimov’s master thesis “Trends and patterns of cancer mortality in Kazakhstan in comparison with some selected European countries from 1986 to 2008” consists of 117 pages of text and 25 pages of appendices. The thesis has a standard structure. It is divided into ten numbered chapters along with a conclusion, an overview of abbreviations and lists of tables and figures as well as the bibliography and data sources sections. The thesis’ integral part includes annexes with dozens of structural graphs.

The theme of the submitted thesis is highly topical. It primarily arises from the fact that cancer mortality constitutes the second most significant group of causes of death in Kazakhstan. Moreover, with expected ageing of mortality patterns and continuing decrease of mortality intensities related to some other groups of diseases, especially those resulting frequently in premature deaths one can expect structural changes and shift of mortality towards examined group of diseases. Significance of the theme is strengthened by the selected period under analysis which covers all the period of Kazakhstani society sweeping changes and dynamic developments related to disintegration of the Soviet Union, deep economic and social crisis of the 1990’s as well as the period of recent dynamic economic growth.

The assessed thesis has set four main objectives:
1) to analyze differences in total mortality levels;
2) to identify differences in cause-specific mortality by main groups of diseases;
3) to compare differences in cancer mortality trends among the selected countries, including differences in trends by sex, age group, and major kinds of neoplasm;
4) to describe the factors leading to growth and spreading of cancer.

Roughly one-third of the submitted text is devoted to the technical, mainly theoretical and methodological aspects of the solved research questions. The first, introductory chapter consists of four parts covering the problem definition; specification of the thesis objectives and its relevance as well as description of the thesis structure. The second chapter primarily focuses on discussion of literature and inventory of current knowledge on the topic. The following chapter briefly examines the theoretical background. In the fourth chapter, the author formulates main research questions and hypotheses. Data and methodological questions are merged into one whole represented by the fifth chapter. Here, besides the critical discussion of data sources and their quality, Askat Ashimov also presents the international classification of diseases. Adopted approaches and methods are summarized briefly in the last part of the fifth chapter. The chapters six and seven, together 39 pages out of 117 ones, are devoted to the main topic introduction, to an overview of general mortality trends in Kazakhstan and developments of mortality by major groups of death causes in particular. The core of the work, a comparative analysis of cancer related mortality by major kinds of neoplasms is a subject of the eight chapter. Together with discussion of risk factors and conclusions of the diploma research this block represents also 39 pages, i.e. exactly one third of the thesis.

Askat Ashimov drew up his thesis independently under the regular supervision of his tutor and the consultant using listed literature and available data sources. Due to regular supervision and intensive work on the second submitted version of his thesis he demonstrated substantial progress in his knowledge and abilities to obtain and presents findings, and to formulate adopted as well as own ideas. On the other hand, it should be said that the student did not apply any complicated techniques in his analyses which would allow him to deepen his
knowledge on described structural and developments regularities, especially on causal factors and their changing role during the period of observation. The thesis is largely based on the calculation of age-standardized mortality rates and their comparison. The results are only described and summarized in the text, while the student only exceptionally tried to make a detailed and deeper interpretation. Due to this simplification as well as intensive supervision, the work has minimal number of content errors.

Quality of the submitted thesis is, however, considerably affected by a relatively large number of formal deficiencies. From all my notes to the text I am going to select only several representatives to illustrate basic types of errors done by the author:

1) Askat Ashimov has problems with English in some parts of his text. Most frequently one can find misprints or missing words. There are missing words in title of the Figure 30 on page 10, in the 3rd sentence on the page 17, etc. Several misprints are, for example, in numbers of pages in the list on the page 8 (501 instead of 51, 690 instead of 69, 789 instead of 79);

2) Author’s particular inconsistency has become evident in rather frequent errors in quotations of sources. On page 11 should be mentioned Ferlay et al. 2007 instead of only Ferlay 2007, on page 12 appears source WHO 2005 which is missing in the references, the same situation is concerning the quotation of Phillips 1994, the direct quotation of Caldwell 2005, pp. 159-170 is incorrect due to wrong page range, on page 16 is not presented entire title of Dobrossy’s work, etc.;

3) The author was not enough careful when he formulated the text. On page 11 he is writing about “… post-communist and European countries” as the post-communist countries would not be mostly European ones, further on the same page he uses unjustified formulations writing for example “Cancer deaths will continue to rise.”, on page 13 appears hardly understandable the 3rd sentence under the title of subchapter 1.4., and unclear description of the content of chapters 7 and 8, the same problem is with the first sentence in the 3rd paragraph on the page 15, etc.;

4) Worse readability of the thesis is also “supported” by less careful structuration of the text. See, for instance, page 11 where the last paragraph is not connected with the previous text. The same situation is on page 20 with the first four paragraphs.

This is only an illustrative example of possible comments to the result of Askat Ashimov’s work on his master thesis. In addition allow me to review briefly author’s results summarization as presented in the conclusion of the thesis.

First of all, in some of his conclusions Askat Ashimov refers to the topic which he did not deal with at all (incidence of neoplasms; see the first paragraph on page 107 and also the second paragraph on the page 109). In the second paragraph on the page 107 he again made a statement on economic crisis in Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union but nowhere gives evidence of it, in particular of its scale and duration. In the context of the text of the third paragraph I would like to draw Askat Ashimov’s attention to the fact that life expectancy at birth cannot help to analyze mortality patterns by causes of death. On the same place he considers Kazakhstan as the European country. On the following page, the text in the second paragraph between “Until the 1990s, …” and “… the improvement in mortality rates.” is completely unintelligible. Similarly, confusing text appears also in the third paragraph on page 110. The most significant deficiency of the conclusion is represented by the fact that the findings obtained are not properly hierarchized and generalized, and observed trends are practically not rationalized.
After some hesitation and despite the presented reservations, I can state that Askat Ashimov has finally displayed the ability of carry on basic research and produce professional text on a level required from a graduate of the master program of Demography. This is why I recommend the acceptation of Askat Ashimov thesis “Trends and patterns of cancer mortality in Kazakhstan in comparison with some selected European countries from 1986 to 2008” for its defence.

Prague, August 17, 2012

RNDr. Boris Burcin, Ph.D.
tutor