

Kazakhstan Has Joined the Bologna Process: New Challenges for the Higher Education Policy



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Annotation

The article is dedicated to the key goals of current policies and the reform of higher education in Central Asia. The author attempts to explain the significance of reform in the sphere of higher education for the countries in the region as a whole and more specifically for Kazakhstan, which is striving to become a true member of the international education community. It offers an evaluation of government initiatives on Kazakhstan's course towards becoming part of the Bologna Process and analyzes the significance of its instruments and means to ensure the high quality of education services, provided to Kazakh universities.

Key words: Bologna Process, the reform of higher education, university infrastructure, the quality of education services, corruption in higher education.

Introduction

In March 2010 Kazakhstan joined Bologna process. The efforts of Kazakhstan go back to the beginning of this century and, thus, include almost ten years of preparation for this acceptance. Joining the Bologna process has been an important part of the higher education policy in Kazakhstan for a number of years, and both policy makers and the educational community perceive the recent acceptance as a considerable achievement which may mean that a country now has become tightly integrated with the international educational community. However, is it really so? This paper attempts to examine how the integration with the international educational community is understood locally, by university faculty, administrators, and students in Kazakhstan, and what the challenges, set by the Bologna process, are to the Kazakhstani higher education policy, after this country has joined Bologna. Some sections included in this paper have been reported by the author at Fifth International Research Forum «Ryskulov Readings» in Almaty, Kazakhstan¹. However, this paper focuses mainly on challenges that Kazakhstan faces after it has joined the Bologna process.

While the policy agenda and conditions in higher education vary widely in Central Asian countries, the natural question is what common features they may have. The literature and interviews with many professors and university administrators allow to conclude that the common feature is the rhetoric (reflected in multiple policy documents, government programs, university strategic plans, analytical papers, etc.) that suggests that each of the five countries wants to become a part of the international educational community.

¹ Mouraviev, N. Policy Agenda for Higher Education in Central Asian Countries: Why Globalization? In the proceedings of the Fifth International Research Forum. Ryskulov Kazakhstan Economics University, Vol. 5. 2010. Almaty: 85-91.

This rhetoric became widespread in the beginning of the 21st century when government officials (and, later, the university community) started to include routinely the phrase about the intention to join the world educational community in the policy documents and university reports. The convincing illustration of this is the government Concept of the Development of Kazakhstan to 2030 in which the section devoted to education clearly describes the Kazakhstan's goal to join the international educational community in the timeframe used in this document¹.

The goal of joining the world educational community poses the following question: are Central Asian countries considered a part of the international educational community now? They probably were in this community - together with other republics of the former Soviet Union - until 1991 when the Soviet Union disintegrated. How did it happen that between 1991 and now the countries in Central Asia «lost their membership» in the international educational community? If countries intend to join it, does it mean that they previously have excluded themselves or were excluded from this community? If yes, in what way?

This also poses yet another set of questions. What is the international educational community, in the context of policy agenda of Central Asian countries^{2, 3}? What countries are its members, and why, and what countries are not its members, and why? In other words, what are the criteria that would allow to include one country in the international educational community and to exclude another^{4, 5}?

An Overview of Developments in the Higher Education Policy Agenda in Central Asia

The need for reforms in higher education has been discussed in Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union for a long time, from the beginning of the 1990s. However in the 1990s there was little or no discussion about the influence of

globalization processes on formation of new systems of higher education in those countries. In each of the five Central Asian countries democratization processes, development of the civil society and of the market economy took different paths, and higher education inevitably served the needs of a society and reflected the society's understanding of its current priorities. Though a detailed analysis of higher education policy in the 1990s is not included in the scope of this paper it would be useful to review what the main trends in higher education were. This would allow to find out how well Central Asian countries are prepared to meet globalization challenges that could be observed in the beginning of the 21st century.

Two countries in Central Asia — Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - underwent rapid transition to a market economy, and the natural key elements of reforms in higher education were the massive formation of private higher education institutions (HEIs) and introduction of the variety of educational programs that were supposed to serve the needs of an emerging market economy. The general trend in higher education policy in these two countries in the 1990s was substantial liberalization of many aspects of higher educational sector that was previously tightly managed and fully owned by the government^{6, 7}.

Both Kazakhstan — especially due to its leading economic role in the region — and Kyrgyzstan are in the search for better solutions that would allow to advance their higher education systems and get them closer to international standards. While many reforms (such as changes in the curriculum, changes in the degree structure and the introduction of Bachelor and Master degree programs, privatization of many government-owned universities, etc.) have been accomplished in the 1990s, there is general consensus in these two countries that a lot more progress in many aspects of higher education is required. Unlike other countries in the region, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have items on their policy agenda that show their ambitions to develop higher education further and respond in a certain way to globalization challenges that come from the rest of the world.

In Tajikistan reforms in higher education clearly were pushed back or at least slowed down by the civil war in the 1990s. However in the beginning of this century Tajikistan appeared to

¹ Tuimebayev, Zh. (2007). Integration of Kazakhstan in the International Education, Report for the International Workshop on Implementation of Credit Hour System. Taraz, Kazakhstan, accessed on 11 July 2007, <<http://www.edu.gov.kz>>

² Anderson, K. and Heyneman, S. (2005). Education and Social Policy in Central Asia: The Next Stage of the Transition. *Journal of Social Policy and Administration*. Vol. 39, No 4: 361–380.

³ Bassett, R. (2005). The High Profile of Trade in Higher Education Services. *International Higher Education*. Vol. 40: 5–6.

⁴ Alderman, G. (2001). The Globalization of Higher Education: Some Observations Regarding the Free Market and the National Interest. *Higher Education in Europe*. Vol. 26, No. 1: 47–52.

⁵ Altbach, P. (2001). «Higher Education and the WTO: Globalization Run Amok», *International Higher Education*, Vol. 23, pp. 2–4

⁶ DeYoung, A. (2005). «Ownership of Education Reforms in the Kyrgyz Republic: Kto v Dome Hozyain?» *European Educational Research Journal*, Vol 1, pp. 36–49.

⁷ Merrill, M. (2006). Internationalization of Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan: Three Potential Problems. *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, Vol 5, No. 2, pp. 34–40.

be open for reforms though no clear direction was or is set. This openness for reforms, based on the understanding that the country is substantially behind its neighbors in terms of improving higher education, presents a variety of opportunities for Tajikistan in terms of formation of higher education policy that would include adequate, well-justified responses to modern globalization challenges. The agenda for higher education policy remains open and the country is in a search for solutions and appropriate ways for improving its higher education.

In Uzbekistan from the beginning of the 1990s to now there have been little or no improvements in higher education. The latter largely remains how it was during the Soviet time. Though some new universities were formed and many changed their names there is still no law that allows the formation of private HEIs in Uzbekistan. Most of undergraduate programs are still of the Soviet style in terms of length (traditional five-year programs) and curriculum (which is largely fixed, with little or no electives, and with contents similar to what it was many years ago). It would be an overstatement to argue that there is some noticeable degree of openness to reforms in higher education in Uzbekistan. While this country has not yet accomplished some fundamental changes such as reforming the program degree structure, or updating the curriculum, or providing universities with any flexibility in program and course design, it is unlikely that Uzbekistan currently is prepared to meet international globalization challenges with some meaningful and adequate responses.

Yet another country in the region — Turkmenistan — remains largely closed to any kind of external influences. Little information that is available about higher education in Turkmenistan shows that during the 1990s higher education has been dismantled to a large extent and that the country needs substantial time and resources in order to build its higher education to the levels at least comparable to those in neighboring Central Asian countries.

A brief review of where five Central Asian countries are in terms of reforming their higher education and whether their policy agenda includes or may potentially include in the near future responses to external impulses from the rest of the world shows that it is two countries - Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - that may have some realistic, not just pure theoretical, interest toward closer integration with globalization processes. The status of higher education reforms allows these two countries, as they argue themselves, to discuss globalization challenges and what needs to be done to meet them. The most powerful

impulse, as these two countries see it, comes from the Bologna process in Europe.

It is important to note that both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan see themselves this way — that to the large extent they are ready to include responses to the Bologna process in their policy agenda [12]. In the international community, including the European Union, there is much skepticism about preparedness of the two countries to join the Bologna process and much criticism of the overall quality of education in those countries.

Joining the International Educational Community: the Meaning

Except of Turkmenistan, countries in Central Asia have established systems of higher education, with a large number of higher education institutions (HEIs) relative to the size of population (for example, as of 2012, there are more than 120 private and public HEIs in Kazakhstan with its population of about 16 million people), with a certain program degree structure (Bachelor and Master degrees, five-year undergraduate degree of a specialist, and the advanced degrees of a Candidate of Sciences and Doctor of Sciences which are now being replaced by PhD programs), sizable workforce in higher education, a set of government laws and regulations (such as requirements and procedures for obtaining a license to grant a degree), and a certain governmental management structure for the entire sector of higher education. In all of the five Central Asian countries governments play a leading role in higher education and, as a result, the governmental management structure and the scope of government regulation of various aspects of higher education appear to be quite extensive.

With all this in mind, what do they mean in Central Asia when they speak about the need to join the international educational community? Apparently, the sole existence of educational infrastructure complemented with the established degree structure, work force, and government regulations appears to be insufficient to claim that a Central Asian country is a legitimate member of the international educational community, much like the United States, or Australia, or France. What is lacking is the quality attached to higher education in Central Asia.

Concerns about the sharp decline in quality of higher education that happened after the disruption of the Soviet Union have been commonly repeated all across Central Asia for many years in a row. The widespread opinion argues that quality of university graduates dropped substantially compared to time of the Soviet Union,

and knowledge and skills of graduates usually are deemed substandard. One clear indication of low quality of higher education is high unemployment among university graduates. In contrast, a resident of Central Asia, who gets an undergraduate degree from a Western university in almost any field, typically does not have any difficulty finding a well-paying job upon his/her return to Central Asia and his/her career advances a lot easier and faster.

The sharp decline in quality of education is also associated with many other things such as bribery, when a student pays a professor for a grade. Since the disruption of the Soviet Union bribery became widespread in HEIs in Central Asia. If the key component of education — acquisition of knowledge and skills — is undermined, is it still possible to call a corrupted university system with widespread bribery a legitimate part of international educational community?

Yet another aspect associated with poor quality of higher education is that academic degrees granted in Central Asia are not recognized in the Western Hemisphere. Government officials as well as university professors and administrators usually focus on the legacy of the Soviet Union in terms of the outdated academic degree structure including the degree titles that do not easily find their equivalents in the West. Occasionally the discussion raises the questions whether a structure of an educational program offered by a Central Asian HEI is comparable to a structure of a similar program in a Western university. However, almost never the discussion reaches more advanced levels that require the comparison of the contents of what exactly being taught in universities of different countries and, most importantly, the quality of teaching and learning.

It can be summarized that there is a consensus in Central Asian countries that their academic degrees are not (easily) recognized by the Western universities and employers as degrees carrying knowledge and skills comparable to degrees of university graduates in the U.S., Canada, Australia, or Western Europe. So, the two interconnected factors — overall poor quality of higher education and lack of recognition of academic degrees granted in Central Asia — allow to conclude that Central Asian countries do not see themselves as a part of the international educational community. It is likely that the same applies to many other transitional countries that currently are building their higher educational systems. This is why joining the Bologna process was one of the priorities of the higher education policy in Kazakhstan.

However, the understanding of why exactly this is important appears to be simplistic. In the

educational community there is a widespread belief that, after Kazakhstan has joined Bologna, there should be some kind of automatic recognition of academic degrees granted by Kazakhstani universities. This opinion was obtained and confirmed in multiple interviews, both formal and informal, with faculty, university administrators at various levels, and students. Many expressed a view that from now on it may be easier for graduates of Kazakhstani universities to get accepted for further studies, for example, in a Master program in a European HEI. Also, many persons expressed an opinion that from now on it may be easier to get a job in Europe because a Kazakhstani academic degree is going to be recognized.

Kazakhstan is Part of the Bologna Process: What's Next?

There is substantial evidence available that most people in the educational community believe that for Kazakhstan getting accepted in the Bologna process means that the ultimate goal has been achieved. They fail to understand that joining the Bologna process is just a beginning of a lengthy and, likely, difficult process of extensive changes in universities in order to comply with the requirements and processes of Bologna. These changes include first of all the use of a credit as a measure of student load, and a certain number of credits have to be assigned by a university to each course that it offers. This may lead to the need to revise curriculum which may not be an easy task, given that curriculum is largely formed by government educational standards. In turn, government standards may need to be revised and updated which by itself is a difficult and lengthy process.

In order to highlight some tasks set by Bologna, the following example can be used. A Bachelor degree in the framework of the Bologna process normally includes three years of studies while currently in Kazakhstan a Bachelor degree requires four years of studies¹. This presents a new challenge for the higher education policy, specifically, of how to revise or reconcile existing educational programs in Kazakhstan with the guidelines set by Bologna.

In addition, the Bologna process requires that a semester should have a standard length, and changing the number of weeks in a semester for Kazakhstani HEIs may not be a quick and easy task given the educational traditions that this country has.

¹ Bologna Secretariat (2004). «Requirements and Procedures for Joining the Bologna Process» (no. BFUG B3 7 fin), Bergen.

However, assignment of credits to courses offered by universities and introduction of other related tools and processes are not going to guarantee the final result (i.e. an expectation that Kazakhstani degrees will be recognized in Europe). There is no doubt that the key to degree recognition is in the high quality of education which is often lacking at local HEIs^{1, 2, 3, 4}.

Among immediate concerns for the public policy of higher education there are two each of which requires extensive government involvement. One is that Kazakhstani universities for a number of years worked on the implementation of the U.S. model of credit hour system. This work has not been fully completed, and much has yet to be done at the government level (i.e. by the Ministry of Education and Science), as well as by HEIs. It is worth noting that in the U.S. model a credit hour is broadly used as a measure of student load (and contact time) as well as faculty load. However a credit hour in the U.S. model has a different meaning compared to a credit used in the Bologna process. In the latter, a credit refers to number of student working hours per week. For example, a six-credit course means that a student is expected to spend six hours a week studying including time in the classroom and outside the classroom (i.e. library, computer lab, home, etc.). The use of both terms (U.S. credit hour and European credit) may create massive confusion in the university community and may lead to misunderstanding of

what each system is about. Essentially, a legitimate question in the university community (and beyond it) is likely to be as follows: which system are we going to implement: one, or the other, or both? The challenge for the public policy in this regard is to clarify the difference, and to set the direction for further reforms. Additionally, it would be useful if the government provides extensive guidance for the implementation and explanations how to reconcile the U.S. and European models.

The second challenge for the public policy is to decide whether it is useful and practical to start massive implementation of the tools and processes of the Bologna process by Kazakhstani HEIs without (or before) addressing the issue of quality of higher education. While quality can be improved in the long run, in the short run only marginal improvements can be expected. However marginal improvements in quality are unlikely to assure recognition of academic degrees granted in Kazakhstan by the European universities. This may backfire the government: why was it necessary to join the Bologna process if, for example, a receiving university in Europe is not willing to recognize a Kazakhstani degree based on the concerns regarding quality of education? The privilege to recognize and accept a certain degree granted by a HEI in any country belongs to a receiving university, and tools and processes of the Bologna process are supposed to make this recognition easier, however not automatic.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that policy makers need to revisit the understanding of what joining the Bologna process means for Kazakhstan and for the public higher education policy. While joining the Bologna process may be a positive event, it is just the beginning of the lengthy road toward quality improvement and degree recognition. Moreover, after joining the Bologna process, the country is facing new challenges regarding further direction of reforms and these challenges need to be adequately addressed by the Kazakhstani higher education policy.

¹ Douglass, J. (2005). How All Globalization is Local: Countervailing Forces and their Influence on Higher Education Markets. *Higher Education Policy*. Vol. 18: 445–473.

² Heyneman, S. and DeYoung A. (2004). *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia*. Information Age Publishing.

³ Mouraviev, N. Policy Agenda for Higher Education in Central Asian Countries: Why Globalization? In the proceedings of the Fifth International Research Forum. Ryskulov Kazakhstan Economics University, Vol. 5. 2010. Almaty: 85–91.

⁴ Tuimebayev, Zh. (2007). Integration of Kazakhstan in the International Education, Report for the International Workshop on Implementation of Credit Hour System. Taraz, Kazakhstan, accessed on 11 July 2007, <[http:// www. edu. gov.kz](http://www.edu.gov.kz)>