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Higher education in Kazakhstan in terms of the Bologna process: Problems, solutions

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Abstract

After signing the Bologna Declaration, Kazakhstan has committed itself to reform the higher educational system. The authors draw an analogy with the system of higher education in the Soviet time, demonstrate and analyze the strategy for the reform of education in Kazakhstan. Considering the performance and results of a fundamental restructuring of education, the authors rely on statistical information, think critically about the main vectors of educational trajectories, identify problems and suggest solutions. According to the authors, the Kazakhstan system of education can get a new level using the best practices of the previous system, and at the same time continuing to introduce innovative principles of the Bologna Declaration.

Keywords: Higher education, Kazakhstan, the Bologna process, the labor market, competence, teacher.

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1. Introduction

One of the best achievements of the Soviet system was its educational system, which is still recognized as perfect. The collapse of the USSR and the formation of independent states has put the system of education, which had been made for years, in crisis. Each independent state began to search for a new system, while not considering the creation base of the model received, the conditions for its implementation in the established principles, without making predictions of possible outcomes and threats.

Soviet education according to Fimyar and Kurakbayev (2016) taught how to think, to develop autonomy, creativity in students and welcomed non-standard thinking. It fostered adaptive, active and universal personality. The things mentioned above should not be understood as nostalgia, but rather as a search for an acceptable variant of integrated education with keeping the best achievements of the past and defining the priorities of national interests. The collapse of the Soviet Union not only exacerbated social and economic problems, but also destroyed the Soviet education. Each republic of the former Soviet Union "catapulted into independence" (Laumulin, 2010), though independent moves into XXI century did not turn out to be successful for all. A typical trend for the former Soviet Union republics was the creation of national educational models, which is explained by the processes of globalization and the desire to meet the standards of modern times.

The content of higher education has undergone qualitative and quantitative transformation under the influence of radical changes in the economic sphere. The educational system, which was elite in Soviet times turned into mass education in the independent era. Reforming the system of higher education involved the formation of the innovative educational model, changes in the management structure, expansion of educational institutions' authority, their autonomization, and implementation of the polylinguism program.

At the current stage, the national educational system is trying to meet the requirements of the market economy and to follow the stringent international standards of competitiveness. The higher educational system is in the process of permanent reform, which led to the destruction of traditional principles, under which the generation of professors was formed, to introduction of new technology, adopted by older generation of teachers and administrative staff. Meanwhile, the system of personnel reproduction associated with introduction of three-tier training: Bachelor - Master - PhD and closing of dissertation councils has almost stopped. The best graduates were trained in foreign universities within the Bolashak program. After completing it, young scientists often go into the sphere of management and business, and only a small proportion of them go back to the universities. Thus, credit system is implemented by generation that grew up during the Soviet period and post-Soviet period, and the perception of its basic ideas is taking place through breaking the established patterns. In addition, the regulatory framework does not always have time to regroup under new requests.

The main task of universities is to train competitive personnel, providing for the successful employment of graduates and their positioning. Regulations, licensing requirements developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, make it possible to build educational and methodical work of educational institutions on the Bologna Process requirements. For the smooth functioning of all parts of the educational process, the development of standard regulations in all areas of teaching work is necessary. In addition, continuous learning, research on best practices by all persons involved in the educational process are in need.

Higher education in Kazakhstan is subject to constant reforms, sometimes in pursuit of beautiful slogans such as "Double diploma", "Dual training", "Multilinguism", and "Academic Mobility", we do not see the program implementation mechanisms, and so, good ideas remain only declarations. Weak regulatory framework becomes an obstacle to the implementation of innovations. It is necessary to view and evaluate the results of realization and implementation of new ideas. The relevant issue is active functioning of qualified teaching staff, which unfortunately tends to decrease and aging;

therefore, one cannot speak of the author innovative courses or introduction of the smart university component. Professional competence should be monitored at competitive commissions; multifactor assessment criteria in the teachers' certification period will create the conditions for functioning of multilingual groups, integration of education, science and innovation.

Currently, there are a number of inconsistencies between credit system introduction and the documents coordinating the system of higher education, in the following approaches:

- The procedure for counting teacher's personal load (the Soviet period standards - 1775 hours per year – are still in use), while in the curriculum, the number of credits is taken into account. Standard time for classroom teaching is reduced. Thus, teachers used to develop 2-3 main basic courses, carried out research in those subjects, developed teaching aids; now every professor has 6-7 subjects. One cannot speak of the quality of teaching, training and research activities, or extracurricular work with students. So, one of the priorities is revision of the time standards taking into account the content of self-study and classroom hours.

- The number of students in academic groups; now the correlation of teachers and students is calculated 1/8, 1/32, etc. Meanwhile, the credit system involves a learning trajectory for each student, formation of individual training plans based on the list of competencies. The real state of things in higher educational institutions shows that a student is offered a standard curriculum and the catalog of elective subjects is closest to the potential of the department where the training program is fixed. Accounting post-requisites and prerequisites does not allow students to fully choose the individual learning trajectory.

- conducting training sessions on the new system requires innovative approaches in the scheduling of classes, filling the content of the educational portal, defining the list of elective courses. Meanwhile, departments have to include not only the mandatory disciplines from standard plans into the curricula, but also the subjects being introduced in various decision-mails, thus failing to build the proper model of the graduate. Frequently changing approaches in the development of educational-methodical documentation in universities (Educational-methodical complex of the discipline, work programs, basic curriculum, modular education program), because of lack of standards lead to additional burden on teachers, who often spend time preparing another form of syllabus rather than presentation of some innovative course. As a result - weak demand for educational programs of national universities by foreign students.

Despite these challenges, the pace of the reform of Kazakhstan's model of education is impressive. Competitive environment between higher educational institutions is formed, ratings of educational programs and rankings of universities are periodically held. Universities of capital cities - Astana and Almaty took the advantageous position due to getting a significant number of budgetary places for national universities. Accordingly, these institutions can systematically invite foreign professors, train teachers in leading universities, establish research laboratories and centers, implement dual degree programs, and update staffing by doctoral graduates.

The Law on Education 2007 (Kz), the State Program for Education Development until 2020 (2010, Kz) provide legal framework for the educational system in Kazakhstan. Because of legislation improvement, Kazakhstan's educational system began to meet international criteria of classification of educational programs ISCED - 1997. The compelling reason for unification of the national education to European standards was joining of Kazakhstan to the Bologna Declaration in 2010.

The Bologna Declaration in 1999 is the result of integration processes in Europe and the need for unified educational and territorial space with common grading scale of competencies and qualifications of the potential employee. Let us remember well-known principles of the Declaration, which we think are especially important in the Kazakh model of the Bologna Process:

- Multi-level system of higher education (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate);

- Transition to the European system of credit transfer (academic credit system);
- Accreditation of educational institutions and educational programs;
- Academic mobility as a criterion for trainees and faculty demand, which leads to the creation of common educational space;
- Integration of science and education.

At the beginning of the 2015/2016 academic year, according to statistics (Higher educational institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the 2015/2016 academic year, 2016), the Republic of Kazakhstan had 127 higher educational institutions. The total number of students was 459,369, of whom 414,772 (90.3%) are studying for a Bachelor degree; 39,344 are getting higher professional education. 29.6% of the total number of students are studying in Kazakhstan universities at the expense of state educational grants and orders.

The number of full-time faculty members in the 2015-2016 academic year is 38,087, including part-time teachers which are 5,250 in number. Doctor's degree have 9.4% of the total staff of the faculty, Candidate degree - 37.7%, the title of professor - 6.1% and associate professor - 17.1%. The number of teachers with academic master's degree is 10,108 people, or 26.5%, PhD and Doctor in the profile – 1,273 or 3.3%.

There are 50 universities of the state type of property with enrollment of 216,879, or 47.2% of the total number of students. Of the total number of students enrolled full-time, there are 358,233 (78%), part-time – 70,922 (15.4%), evening classes – 30,214 persons (6.6%) (Higher educational institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the 2015/2016 academic year, 2016). The number of students in higher educational institutions of the capital cities of Astana and Almaty is much higher than in regional universities. This is due to a significant number of state orders, allocated to them and the hopes of potential entrants to receive a high-quality education, which, in their opinion, is better than in the regions. Koch stated (Koch, 2014) that over the past few years, a course of geopolitics of higher education in Kazakhstan aims to create elite national universities.

Let us consider the basic parameters of implementation the Kazakhstani model of education, using the ones mentioned above, and identify the problems faced by regional universities, on the example of S.Amanzholov East-Kazakhstan State University (hereinafter EKSU).

1. Introduction of a multi-level system of higher education (Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate) resulted in an automatic rejection in 2010 of the academic degrees of candidates and doctors of sciences. At the same time, the main criterion for licensing and accreditation of the university is the percentage of teachers with academic degrees; the latter must be at least 50%. In EKSU, the number of full-time teaching staff is 322, 6% of them - with the degree of Doctor of Sciences, 44.7% - of Candidate of Sciences; the academic title of professor have 1.5%, and associate professor - 15.2%. In academic parameters, our university meets the criteria for state university assessment.

However, when demonstrating age data, the indicators are not so good since most of them exceed 50-55 years. The state order for PhD training has not kept pace with the rapid aging of the teaching staff. Regional universities (particularly EKSU), unlike higher educational institutions of the capital, are given only one budget place in the doctorate that does not solve the problem of updating the scientific staff to the full. Thus, in the future they may face a decrease in the level of staff with academic degrees, which is typical for all regions of Kazakhstan.

2. The content of the three-tier system is based on the approved State Educational Standards (the SES), which consists of two components - a set of compulsory courses and elective courses. Departments determine the component of choice - the list of elective subjects - on their own, though it is necessary to involve students, employers, teachers in the formation of the list of elective subjects. The key benchmark of the content of educational programs and therefore elective disciplines is a

competence-based approach. Thus, higher education is aimed at the needs of the labor market, and the university should be cost-effective, work for the future, have long-term marketing forecasts.

At EKSU, the total number of students is 3,750 (0.82% of all students of the country). Those include students enrolled in the baccalaureate programs – 3,548 (94.6%), at the expense of state educational grants – 1,051, that makes 29.6% of the total number of students, and on the paid basis – 2,497 or 70,4% . Figures show the demand for university majors. Besides, it should be noted, that the geography of students is vast and includes several regions of Kazakhstan, and border countries.

The university implements 47 Bachelor and 30 Master educational programs, the latter has 200 trainees. Of the total number of students, full-time make 2,116 - 59.7%, part-time - 193 - 5.4%, with evening classes – 1,239 - 34, 9%. Demographic waves of the reform era at this stage determine the existence of small groups. The University educational cell is a group of students, which is the reporting unit of university records as well. Accordingly, the choice of the trajectory is determined by a student group, in the absence of alternative choice in general, but not by the sole choice of the student which regional universities lack. By the way, among the universities of Kazakhstan, the opportunity to have the freedom of subject choice, have only the students of the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP), Kazakh-British Technical University (KBTU), judging by their schedule and set of credits.

In addition, the students' choices of courses are influenced by the lack of competitiveness among the faculty and their enormous load, not just academic. At this stage, there are plenty of mobile learning technologies and types of teachers' training (Ozdamli, 2011). EKSU is actively using innovative mobile technology in the implementation of educational trajectories. However, the formal paperwork, standardized university system of Kazakhstan result in the absence of a systematic, logical and qualitative approach in the formation of the working curriculum.

3. The transition to the European credit transfer system, in our view led to the entropy of the educational process, as in the content of credit-scoring system there is no content of disciplinary knowledge. Students under the Bologna program should get most of educational knowledge by themselves and demonstrate their competency skills in subjects during mid-term assessment. However, the Bologna system involves active research of students and undergraduates, and later doctoral students. The three-tier system involves segregation at the undergraduate level in scientific research and professional qualities.

World educational practice of the countries in the Bologna process indicates that doctoral graduates and PhD are engaged into public administration. This is a strategic priority of the Bologna system, to which Kazakhstan is committed now. According to President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the best, gifted, creative thinking personalities should get to the higher echelons of power as a result of segregation processes; "Bolashak" program, which is now being implemented has been designed for this sake. In addition, new legislative initiatives of the Government of Kazakhstan on the development of A and B groups of officials with new pay terms and motivational package, led to the interest in post-master's and doctoral studies. For regional universities, it is the ability to increase the number of master students on a contract basis by local officials who want to get into the above- mentioned groups A and B.

4. The undoubted advantage of the Bologna system and its implementation in Kazakhstan is the ability to radically change the attitude of young people towards their future through a desire for true knowledge corresponding to the time demands and society. To implement this strategy to the full is possible if not only high school activities are being reformed, but also the mentality of teaching staff changes, from consumer awareness to self-improvement and self-education in terms of competitiveness.

Academic mobility of teaching staff and students suggests the possibility for the first to demonstrate their professional skills and innovative training courses, for the second – to include into

their transcript academic disciplines that they lack in their home institution. The students of regional universities, in particular of EKSU actively participate in academic exchange with universities-partners: Kentsan (Gyeongsang National University (GNU)), Jinju, South Korea; ("International Business") Tennessee Technological University; Wroclaw University, Poland; Dalian University of Technology (Dalian, China) and others. At EKSU, 192 foreign students are enrolled, including from CIS countries – 22: Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan; China - 33, Mongolia - 137. These figures are evidence of recognition of our university by representatives of foreign countries.

5. The number of higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan, in our opinion exceeds generally accepted standards. Educational programs offered by the universities of Kazakhstan are identical with a few exceptions. For example, in the East Kazakhstan region there are 8 institutions of higher education. All of them except medical university train economists, financiers, lawyers, etc. The analysis of the region's labor market shows the deficit of technical, pedagogical and medical specialties. Duplication of specialties in higher education and commercialization of education have led to plenty of low-demanded professionals, and decrease in the quality of the content of educational programs. Marketing calculations showed that the labor market of the Eastern Kazakhstan up to 2020, on average needs 500 agricultural experts, 2800 - teachers, 1200 – technicians, 800 - economists, and 500 - lawyers. At the same time, the share of the University in the educational market today is in teacher training - more than 65%, technical sphere - 40%, economic sphere - 50%, juridical sphere - 50%, agricultural field - 30%.

Creative and knowledgeable economy in XXI century leads to the urgent need for a common educational environment. Kazakhstan has held the radical reform of the educational system. However, in our view, it is necessary to solve the following problems:

- due to overproduction and plenty of people with higher education, its devaluation, the latter should become elite; optimization of higher educational institutions, determining the priority of educational trajectories in compliance with the requirements and demands of the labor market is required. To solve this problem, defining optimum contingent of students for specific universities and specialties of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, increasing the number of educational grants, funding training of specialists for a particular industry by national companies can be offered;

- for the majority of university graduates, the diploma is more important than knowledge; the choice of profession is primarily based on its prestige, next comes the labor market demand; and in the perspective, consumer attitudes and outside help are primary, while professionalism and knowledge are secondary. The solution is seen through improving the quality of career guidance and activation of mobile information about prospective vacancies on the labor market, by strengthening analytical forecasts for the deficit of qualified professionals, the development of plans for the long-term training of specialist staff, target orders for staff training.

- misbalance between the set of skills and competences on the one hand, and the theoretical component of training on the other hand; that is, the effectiveness of modern education is reduced to zero due to lack of opportunities for students to acquire practical skills, professional experience. The solution is seen in the increase of number of credits for professional practice, implementation of the principles of dual training, including research projects into the list of obtained skills that will enhance the quality of training of specialists with narrow-profile competences;

- high level of the faculty load on the background of low wages on the one hand results in the outflow of scientific personnel; on the other hand, it leads to the low performance of research activities. The solution is to help young teachers to obtain academic degrees and differentiation of faculty wages according to the results of their activities.

For the purpose of systematic and progressive development of the higher educational system of Kazakhstan, the relevant task is joining of capital and regional universities in the world rankings. For

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this, dynamic and competitive environment, which attracts the best scientists and talented students, should be created. Universities may present unique educational programs, advanced and applied research on the orders of strategic partners.

To reach this level, it is necessary to allow the best practices of the previous system, introduction of innovative principles of the Bologna Declaration, a significant breakthrough in the following areas:

- Strengthening the universities' intellectual potential by attracting leading scientists and teachers, improving internal and external academic mobility, supporting young scientists, promoting the results of research and innovation, promoting teachers and researchers;

- Promoting employability of graduates - this requires gradual transition to dual training, developing the network of departments' branches, expanding the basis for educational and professional practice;

- High-quality training, taking advantage of innovative technologies, experience of foreign universities, implementing programs of "double diploma".

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