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REFORMATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF KAZAKHSTAN

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Summary. The purpose of this article is to investigate the correspondence of the educational policy of Kazakhstan to the international standards of education by analyzing the process of higher education reformation throughout the history of independent Kazakhstan. The main stages of education reform in Kazakhstan in the period of independence is list. Much attention is paid to the analysis of the role of the «Bolashak» University in the process of internationalization of education programs. The activities in the field of education aimed at accession to the Bologna Declaration are detailed.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; higher education; transformation; internationalization.

The start of reforms

Kazakhstan is a young country focusing on the development of a market economy and inevitably becoming affected by the process of globalization. In the beginning of the 1990s, Kazakhstan was in a deep economic crisis, therefore, the government, following the example of western countries, decided to reform the educational system in order to meet the requirements of a developing market economy [1, p. 12–14]. However, the process of adaptation to the western educational system was complicated by the Soviet framework of education, which was automatically inherited by Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union [2, p. 594–603]. Understanding that education is the catalyst of economic development and the main object of investments, the government started a campaign for the systematic transformation of education.

According to A. Mambetkazyev [7, p. 6–9], the process of reforming might be divided into four main stages:

- 1) formation of the legal framework of higher education (1991–1994);
- 2) changing the content of the higher educational system (1995–1998);
- 3) enhancing the academic independence of higher educational institutions (1999–2000);
- 4) systematic development of professional education (the present stage was established in 2001).

The first ten years of independence are characterized by a series of reforms connected with the transformation of higher education as a response to the changing economic situation. Firstly, with the acceptance of the market economy, the government needed to change the structure of higher education. This measure is explained by the necessity to develop market labour. This meant that education could not be restricted by any specific sector, it was supposed to be free [4, p. 76–87]. Secondly, the government changed the content of higher education by introducing



new subjects and special ties with which the Soviet system was unfamiliar, such as business, management and market economy. At the same time subjects related to the Soviet ideology were excluded from the new curriculum [4, p. 76–87]. Thirdly, the lack of international sources and information moved the government to make reforms towards the international cooperation, which allowed the process of policy travelling to start. As a consequence, there was a need to connect scientific institutions with universities in order to conduct research for educational institutions and provide students with updated information [13, p. 277–291].

In brief, the education reforms which were made by the government during the first decade of independence focused primarily on the requirements of a market economy. This means that the concept of education became market labour-oriented. However, the level of governmental control over educational institutions remains high, which means that the main feature of western education – autonomy of educational institutions was not implemented in any full sense.

Internationalization

The process of internationalization was started in 1993 when the first international scholarship “Bolashak” (“future”) was established [11, p. 41–55]. Realizing that there was a lack of specialists with “western” education, the government of Kazakhstan decided to support gifted young people by sponsoring their education at the best universities in the world. At the moment, there are more than ten thousand students that received an education at 200 universities in 33 countries [9, p. 34–55]. The main purpose of this programme is the preparation of highly qualified professionals who will contribute their knowledge and experience to the development of Kazakhstan. In addition, students have a unique opportunity to acquire different cultures and traditions and learn diversified curriculums from all over the world [2, p. 594–603]. In 2005, the number of

scholarships was significantly increased from 100 per year to 1697. At the same time, additional contract clauses were implemented in order to diminish the threat of “brain drain” [9, p. 34–55]. According to statistics from the Center for International Programs [3, p. 40–45], the vast majority of scholars were specialized in social and economic sciences, while other sectors, especially innovation and technology were not popular among students. Therefore, the administration of “Bolashak” scholarship introduced a list of 13 priority specializations which are in high demand in the economy of Kazakhstan. Another change was made in 2011, when Nazarbayev University – the first world-class university in Kazakhstan was opened. Since that time, only post-graduate students could apply for a “Bolashak» scholarship, while undergraduate students had an opportunity to be taught according to the international standards at Nazarbayev University [2, p. 594–603].

Understanding the importance of the higher educational system in the building of a free market economy, the government of Kazakhstan decided to redesign the concept and structure of higher education by adopting the European system. The process of transition to the western system started in 2004 after the adoption of the State Program on Development of Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2005–2010 [2, p. 594–603]. The main purpose of this shift was the introduction of the three-stage model of higher education which is recognized in the majority of world countries. Joining the Bologna Process in 2010 was an important step on the way to implementing the European model of education. Kazakhstan is the first Central Asian country which entered the European Educational Area [9, p. 34–55]. One of the main reforms under the Bologna Process was the adoption of a credit system of higher education. This reformation entirely changed the content of higher education, in particular, the main focus was shifted from the process



of education to the outcome. This meant providing more academic flexibility and autonomy to the participants of the educational process [12, p. 4–13].

By signing the Bologna Declaration, Kazakhstan pursued the following aims:

- to make educational programs internationally recognized;
- to provide students with a big range of educational programs;
- to approve a consecutive character of programs for all levels of higher education;
- to connect educational programs with the labour market [8, p. 156–171].

However, there were some challenges faced by the government during the adoption of the western concept of higher education. First of all, the implementation of new levels of higher education such as the bachelor's degree, master's degree and post-graduate PhD was accompanied by misunderstanding because of the old degrees inherited from the Soviet system of education. In particular, the participating in academic mobility was restricted by the absence of the international equivalent system. So, the five year Soviet diploma of a specialist in some countries equates with a master degree, while in other countries it is equivalent to a bachelor's degree [8, p. 156–171].

Another barrier was caused by the unpreparedness of teaching staff to change the methods of teaching and assessment in line with the new standards. Generally, this was caused by the sharp changes in the programme curriculum [4, p. 76–87]. As a result, the methods of teaching were often affected by the Soviet standards, which do not meet the requirements of the Bologna Process. The realization of academic mobility was also complicated by the low language preparation of teachers and students. The majority of educators do not speak foreign languages. Moreover, on average, teachers at Kazakhstan's universities are supposed to give about 700 hours of courses annually, which considerably limits their research

activity and as a consequence prevents international mobility [14, p. 1473–1478].

As a result, many universities have adopted only the external attributes of credit-based western universities, while items such as academic mobility and students' choice of optional subjects remain uncovered [6, p. 15–19].

Accreditation

The process of integration in a world educational community requires a new system of quality assurance. It is worth mentioning that before signing the Bologna Declaration, the process of licensing of higher educational institutions was guided by the Ministry of Education and Science. Institutions were attested every five years [11, p. 41–55]. In 2006, the National Centre for Educational Quality Assessment (NCEQA) was established. The purpose of NCEQA is the evaluation of the quality of education at all levels [9, p. 34–55]. The former type of attestation was conducted by the government and required to meet the minimum criteria, therefore educational institutions looked for additional international attestations. However, none of them provide all-inclusive attestation. In contrast, the concept of accreditation was created on the basis of the best western practices and the main focus was made on objective self-evaluation and the internal actions of universities [9, p. 34–55]. Although, the national standard for institutional accreditation was approved, many universities focus on international accreditation and disregard the institutional one. As a result, universities could be accredited internationally, without recognition on a national level [11, p. 41–55]. According to OECD review [9, p. 34–55], the coexistence of several accreditation systems leads to confusion regarding their purposes. Therefore, it would be more effective to decentralize the existing quality standard and to move towards stakeholder oriented quality assurance.



What is more, relying on international experience, the quality assurance should be entrusted to independent agencies and the government should be restricted by managing only these agencies [5, p. 134–146].

Although, the modification of the higher educational system of Kazakhstan is happening according to the Bologna Declaration principles, it seems that the relationships between policy-makers and higher educational institutions are unbalanced. It might be caused by the post-Soviet legacy, which is shown by the imposed character of reformation [10, p. 9–11]. Therefore, as soon as the government provides universities with autonomy, they will be more likely to adopt the European vision of higher education. However, what is more important for the national policy of Kazakhstan is to “agree on the importance and priority of raising efficiency, it is not necessary to agree on the mechanism for bringing it about” [4, p. 76–87]. In other words, the acceptance of international reforms should be applied by the government considering local peculiarities and priorities.

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