

CHAPTER 20

THE REFORM OF KAZAKHSTAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Problems of State Monopoly on Higher Education Quality

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this article is the analysis of the conflicting rhetorical issues in solving problems of education quality in Kazakhstan's higher education system. An attempt is first made in this paper to analyze the official documents defining and guaranteeing higher education quality in Kazakhstan, followed by a critique of the logical inadequacies internal to these documents. As well, discrepancies between stated and official aims and goals and practices to be found in national universities are reviewed. The author contends that in the end, higher education means and ends which are legislatively confirmed as a common standard by the Government run counter to international trends. Rather than making new information sources available and encouraging the

free-flow of ideas, "quality education" in Kazakhstan's higher education model continues to diminish such possibilities.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter analyzes the quality of education in Kazakhstan's higher education system. Given that higher education is systematically dedicated to matters of national leadership and international politics and economics, the importance of higher education seems critical (Toffler, 2002). This concern is also spelled out nationally in the document "The 'Education' State Program of the Republic of Kazakhstan" (2000), where it is claimed that a "high-efficiency system of education is one of the basic factors providing for the stable growth of Kazakhstan's economics and society" (p. 78).

In this paper, I analyze the official documents defining and guaranteeing higher education quality in Kazakhstan. I then critique the logic and inadequacies of these documents, also using critical national literatures related to the topic. It is also my aim to contrast the stated and official goals of higher education with the actual practice to be found in most state universities. I suggest that the model of education quality (both its means and ends) that is confirmed as the common standard by the Government (the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan) runs counter to international trends. Rather than making new information sources available and encouraging the free-flow of ideas, "quality education" in Kazakhstan's higher education model continues to diminish such possibilities (Toffler, 2002, pp. 446–450).

A background document of Kazakhstan's education system is the Law About Education, No. 389-1, dated June 7, 1999. This Law defines the criteria for quality education within the framework of the requirements of the State's obligatory standard of education—the State standard—(Article 6 of the Law). The commentaries provided by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) state that "for the first time the components of the State generally obligatory standard of education are concretized legislatively."¹ The State standard establishes requirements to set: the "contents of education; a maximal number of classes for students . . . ; rules and procedures of State control on the quality of education; level of students' education; and documents and forms verifying students' mastering of defined education programs."² In other words, the components of education quality are equated with content requirements (what should be taught), form (how and how much should be taught), and control of the observance of the contents and form (who should control knowledge and be responsible for its quality).

The particularity of Kazakhstan's State standard of education is that all these three functions belong completely to the Government: "The education standard is a strategically important document providing the realization of education politics in the Republic. Paragraph 4 of Article 30 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan indicates that, "The State establishes generally obligatory standards of education. The activity of any education institution should be in agreement with these standards" (Begailov & Tulegenova, 2002, p. 42).

This monopoly of the State over the control of education quality is defined by the specific tasks themselves that the State puts before the education system. E. Begailov, a Director of the Laboratory of Designing State Standards of Education, and R. Tulegenova, a Chief Specialist of the same Laboratory, describe the essence of these tasks: "The State education standard is designed for providing an opportunity for uninterrupted education, academic mobility, and rational expenses of financial, material, and technical resources. Standards should correspond to [the] demands of an individual, society and State, opportunities of their realization, [and] have an instrumental and technological organization based on strictly defined masters. Only in this case standards will establish conditions for developing economics, assist in developing science, technology, and culture" (Begailov & Tulegenova, 2002, p. 42).

Let us now consider how the State attempts to provide quality standards of professional education.

THE PROBLEM OF CONTENT

The first component, as mentioned above, focuses upon the content of education: "what should be taught from among the previous knowledge accumulated by mankind" (Begailova & Tulegenova, 2002, p. 41). The problem here is what disciplines should students study to assure quality. Unfortunately, State education standards that "should correspond to demands of an individual, society, and State" are unclear, contradictory, and not elaborated upon.

If the State standard is to be oriented toward the individual students, quality education would have in some way to be tailored to student interests. Yet, graduates who have pursued their own interests at public institutions may satisfy neither society's interests nor those of private sector companies that have yet to mandate or specify skills they might want new specialists to attain.

Were the State standard oriented toward particular companies' interests, and, if as a result students took classes only to prepare for careers with particular companies, will these specialists' knowledge satisfy any more

general social or even other private sector concerns? Or, is it in the State's interest to turn over definitions of quality education to the private sector? Probably not.

Decentralization of the curricula formulation and implementation, as well as procedural matters, would likely cause an endless diversity of offerings and radically varying standards, thus undercutting the rigorous quality education standards themselves. It might also lead to breaking connections between various educational levels: between high school and the university; between the university and post-university education. It might also lead to limiting students' academic mobility among higher education institutions and/or to increased costs, due to duplication of efforts by the various decentralized higher education institutions.

In other words, complete decentralization would not guarantee observance of the State's educational system's strategic goals, so the State in Kazakhstan chooses its own demands as a priority. R. Bekish, Director of the Laboratory of the Institute of Higher Education of the Kazakh Academy of Education, defines these demands as two "basic fundamental aims of higher education system": "The first aim is that [the] higher education system should be considered as a basic mechanism translating historically cultural, social, scientific, educational values of folk, society, and State; the second aim is preparing specialists for the State system of management and national economy" (Bekish, 2003, p. 18). According to this definition, the State should ignore demands of individuals and also subordinate companies' interests to a uniform model of a classic universal education.

Other documents that have come from or been accepted by the Ministry of Education and Science confirm this secondary aim of forming specialists, whereby the State determines the "requirements of preparing a specialist," including "a set of knowledge and skills of the graduate" (Atykhonov, 2002, p. 25). For example, according to the State education standard in the list of disciplines on any specialty there are State discipline components (70% of program class hours) and the university's component (30%). From the 30% university component, the instructors themselves can only select and design 10% of the curriculum. Berkimbaeva, the MES minister, argues that this proportion is innovative because it "increases university academic freedom and mobility and gives the opportunity to take into account particularities of local labor market demands for specialists" (Berkimbaeva, 2002, p. 21).

In reality, this proportion means at best that individual students choose only 3% of what they study, the rest is determined by the university (27%) and the national ministry. The effectiveness of such a centralized curriculum is addressed in articles written by some Kazakhstan universities' heads. For example professor M. Altynbasarov, a vice-rector at Ekibastuz Engineering Technical Institute, notes: "The content of the contemporary higher

education is still far from optimal. It corresponds to a public opinion that universities teach many unnecessary things. On the other hand, universities' graduates often can hardly adapt to real working conditions to which they are supposedly trained" (Altybasrov, 2000, pp. 18–19). As an example, Professor M. Altybasrov suggests: ". . . For some specialties on economics the state standard orders the study of such a discipline as 'A Conception of Contemporary Natural Science.' It is supposed by the title to introduce students to ideas of contemporary natural science such as basic principles of the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, genetic structures and so on. But there is again a question—is it necessary to include such topics in the obligatory content for economists?" (pp. 19–20)

Other authors, Professor B. Damitov, Rector of West-Kazakhstan State University, and Docent B. Melnikov, Director of the Monitoring Department of the same University, conclude upon comparing old and new curricular standards since independence that "fundamental modification leading to new content standards has not happened" (Damitov & Melnikov, 2002, p. 12). They thus underscore that the new State standards still mandate that most time be devoted to general humanities and natural science components at the expense of most disciplinary specialties.

THE MATTER OF FORM

Despite the flowery language of curricular and education reform in Kazakhstan since independence, it seems clear from the above that the contradictions between long-standing State curricular control, incipient demands of the private sector, and individual choices in higher education have not been resolved, nor even discussed in public. So too are there serious problems with the supposed new forms of higher education. The State standard in its point 4.3 declares complete freedom of universities in choosing the form and methods of students' education. "Universities of the Republic of Kazakhstan can freely use any education technologies for achieving defined aims. They have a right to choose a form and method of organizing and control in the education process" ("The State Common," 2001, p. 62).

One important issue that should be addressed under this provision is how students are scheduled. According to the State standard, an academic year should have thirty-four weeks at minimum, the total amount of students' study time per week should not be more than fifty-four hours, and the maximum number of classes per week per student should not be more than thirty-six hours ("The State Common," 2001, p. 64). In reality, this means that students have eighteen classes in nine subjects per week, on average. Students are required to spend two-thirds of their study or "work"

time in formal classes and only one-third on their own, in the library or for studying alone. Under such conditions, a professor is not free to assign students to, for example, work with literature outside of class, to engage in computer work, or to do any independent study. As a result, it should be recognized that many students cannot work with literature, define a basic theory and its more important parts, consider studied material from different points of view..., and direct their own research independently (Abdukarimova & Galiev, 2001, p. 24).

This basic demand on students to attend lectures and seminars effectively localizes the education process into the classroom and makes it easier for accounting and controlling both the professors' work day and students' study activity by the university administration. This situation of control within a yet-centralized system is even worse considering the lack of provisions for students to study what they are interested in. It also obviously severely constrains what and how any given professor may choose as his or her pedagogical strategy.

THE PROBLEM OF THE MINISTRY

The third dimension related to "reforming" higher education quality must focus on the controlling agency itself: the Ministry of Education and Science. Thus far, the MES retains sole control of higher education institutions. The State not only officially retains a monopoly on 70% of all higher education content, but it also has no provision for either the private sector or clients (students) of the system to have any formal voice or advisory capacity into MES policy or policy deliberations. Since to this point no external group has been able to affect MES control, the consequence has been further "tightening the control on universities" (Abdrasilov, 2002, p. 9).

Meanwhile, written in "The Strategic Plan of Developing the Republic of Kazakhstan to 2010" (2001) is the following: "Methods and mechanisms of university licensing, certification, and accreditation processes as basic forms to control education quality will be improved constantly" (p. 264). Licensing, certification, and accreditation as institutional forms of the control on education quality as practiced here currently are completely at odds with national calls for reforming national universities. The State carefully inspects all the technical, educational, and methodical functioning of universities and also attempts to inspect knowledge acquisition among university students (Bekturganov, 2001; Iskakov, 2002).

At the same time, in all program documents at most government levels there are rhetorical calls for recognizing the necessity of university autonomy as a basic condition to better harmonize and counterbalance interests

of individuals and society. The widely proclaimed "Strategic Plan of Developing the Republic of Kazakhstan to 2010" (2001), signed by the President of the Republic, expressed this claim very specifically:

In the higher education system university autonomy will be introduced. Aims providing high levels of university excellence should be achieved due to the procedures of universities' certification and accreditation, and developing a competition between them. In this case students themselves and companies which come to them will value the quality of the system's training. And as a normal result the diplomas of second-rate universities won't be in demand. (This) autonomy of universities means that they will have a right to develop independently their own study plans (curricula), enter their own criteria of a knowledge valuation, and locally solve problems of personnel and education process. (pp. 275-276)

CONCLUSION

As the preceding discussion suggests, higher education change in Kazakhstan is a stated ideal, but in fact the national Ministry of Education and Science maintains a very centralized system of management for the bulk of the national universities, using the normative instrument, the State education standard.

The Ministry of Education and Science, arguing that all other participants of the education market remain "immature," postpones any decisions or procedures for giving real autonomy to regular universities. But this extremely centralized system of the State education standard, eliminating almost any ability to make curricular or organizational choices, deprived all those studying or working in the public education sector of any meaningful input into the system and new learning that might be achieved within the national universities.

The State standard of Kazakhstan's education system continues to limit educational possibilities. It does this by solely determining the definition of education content (what should be taught), its form (how and how much should be taught), and the monitoring of the entire educational process. Contrary to the expressed aims of the President, the Ministry of Education and Science continues to in effect to preserve and consolidate State monopoly over education control. Such an outdated conception of quality education, based on centralized State control, is a carry-over from the days of the former USSR and not one consistent with the demands of democracy, a market economy, or the new information age.

NOTES

1. *The Law "About Education" of the Republic of Kazakhstan with Commentaries of All Articles and Basic Documents on its Realization* (Almaty: Dastan, 2000), 181.
2. *The Law "About Education,"* 181–182.

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