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## 4

## Governance challenges and changes: The evolving role of boards of trustees

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### INTRODUCTION

Academic governance is a complex phenomenon. Understanding it requires taking into account issues of autonomy and control (Christensen 2011), decision-making processes (Bray 2010), and the influence of globalisation and internationalisation (Dobbins, Knill & Vogtle 2011; Jones & Oleksiyenko 2011). Creating flexible and responsive governance systems have been especially challenging for post-Soviet countries because their previous system was predicated on hierarchy and centralised control. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet countries have had to find their own way forward (Luong 2002). Kazakhstan, a signatory of the Bologna Process, offers an important example of a country seeking to reform higher education by drawing on practices worldwide and especially from the West (Merrill 2010). Policy makers have concluded that a system based on more decentralised control with greater institutional autonomy is the most promising means of improving the overall quality of its higher education system by enabling institutions to be more responsive to the pressing needs facing their localities. A central feature of these reforms is the establishment of governing boards, which is the subject of this chapter.<sup>1</sup> Reforms outlined in the 'State Program of Education Development for 2011–2020' require a majority of universities to establish boards of trustees by 2020.

Of course, incorporating an idea and/or practice from a different national context can be challenging. As such, the historical context of the US is quite different. Boards of trustees in the US were established because of a national and cultural resistance to centralised governmental

control. This desire for autonomy has influenced the governance and oversight of universities and led to a highly decentralised system of public and private (non-profit) higher education (Eckel & King 2006). The US also has a long history of self-sustaining, self-organising volunteer associations (for example, libraries, fire departments, local schools) and supporting them through private philanthropy and volunteerism.

Historically, boards of trustees were community leaders charged with overseeing a college or university that the community had established in order to ensure it served the public good (Taylor, Chait & Holland 1999). Trustees are neither employees of the university they govern nor are they usually academics, though occasionally academics do serve on boards. The concept is 'lay' or 'citizen' trusteeship (AGB 2007). Boards also are independent of government and serve as the fiduciary body, a concept grounded in American case law that means boards are stewards of public trust and responsible for ensuring that all of the assets of the organisation are safeguarded and held for the benefit of another (AGB 2014). Further, the system of shared governance in US universities mirrors democratic practices where individuals are expected to have a sense of agency and to play a role in decision making (Hartley, 2003). Finally, there has developed over a long period of time a consensus regarding the role of the key constituent groups (as indicated in normative statements from the American Association of University Professors and the Association of Governing Boards.) This provides at least some guidance regarding who should be party to making various kinds of important decisions.

Kazakhstan has a very different history. Its system of higher education was entirely state sponsored at its inception, with the state overseeing its investment through the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES). The Ministry has played a powerful role in regulating both public institutions and joint-stock companies (private institutions, which legally are equivalent to any business and have boards of directors). Prior to 2010, fully 75% of the undergraduate curriculum was determined by the Ministry to ensure a level playing field in the content being provided. While the idea of an Academic Council from the Soviet era did (and continues to) provide a venue for some shared decision-making, these bodies tend to be dominated by members of the administration, as discussed in the second chapter in this volume. Many key decisions (such as the types of academic programmes that can be

offered, who should be hired as rector, how funds should be spent) were, with few exceptions, determined by the Ministry. Such circumstances have made establishing boards of trustees a challenge.

## BOARD ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In the US the board is the legal entity that oversees a university or college; however, it is not involved in its daily operations. The work of the board focuses on policy rather than on management or implementation. The Association of Governing Boards outlines the primary roles and responsibilities of boards to be the following (2010a):

- 1 Ensure the mission is current and aligned w/public purposes
- 2 Select (and possibly terminate) the president
- 3 Work with and assess the president
- 4 Approve the strategic plan and monitor progress
- 5 Ensure fiscal integrity and financially support the college
- 6 Ensure academic quality and integrity
- 7 Protect and preserve academic freedom and institutional autonomy
- 8 Ensure policies are current and implemented
- 9 Engage appropriately relevant constituencies
- 10 Be transparent, ethical and assess own performance

While this is a US framework, this set of responsibilities closely mirrors the kinds of activities undertaken by boards in other national contexts including the UK and many European countries.

## METHODS

This chapter synthesises two studies conducted by the authors. The first examined the work of boards of trustees at six universities as they were conceptualising and operationalising their roles in 2013 (Hartley et al. 2015). The second, conducted in 2015, sought to understand how the

work of the boards at three universities had evolved over time. In all, 165 individuals (board members, senior administrators, faculty leaders, students, alumni, employers) were interviewed during these studies. This chapter examines what is occurring at the institutional level in order to understand what practices have been developed and what factors are constraining efforts to implement the reforms.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE IN THE US

Before we describe the role of boards at the institutions in this study, it will be helpful to offer a brief overview of the system of governance in the US. The overarching characteristic is that it is decentralised. While MoES in Kazakhstan influences matters from strategy and budget to the particulars of the curriculum, those decisions are made at the institutional level in the US (and academic decisions are often made at the unit level).

Essentially there are three key decision making constituents – the board of trustees (which has ultimate authority), the senior administration (especially the President), and the faculty. Each group has a particular role to play and are outlined below.

**The board of trustees** is the legal, and therefore ultimate, decision-making body of the university. It is responsible for upholding the institution's mission and ensuring its long-term financial health. A board pays attention to the long-term health of the institution and ensures the institution is being steered in the right direction. But it does not tell administrators how to do their jobs – that is, it doesn't engage in micro-management (Chait, Taylor & Holland 2005).

**The senior administration** (e.g. president, provost, vice presidents, deans) is responsible for the day-to-day management of the institution. If the board establishes long-term goals for an institution, it is the administration's task to ensure that those goals are reached. The president is the key senior administrator, serving as the chief executive officer – the most visible and influential individual on campus. Successful presidents are ones who are able to lead with continued support from very different institutional stakeholders, including the board and faculty (Birnbaum 1992).

**The faculty** is the constituent group responsible for all academic matters. This includes activities such as determining admissions criteria, hiring new faculty members, developing the curriculum for programmes, setting the academic schedule and the schedule of classes (who will teach what course), and determining graduation requirements.

Important strategic issues require all constituents to work together. A board of trustees would not decide to open a new academic department without discussing what resources would be needed with the administration and without speaking to the faculty about the kinds of academic expertise that would be required to make the department successful. Similarly, the faculty cannot decide to create a new programme without consent of the board, which will need to secure the resources for it. In fact, among these three groups there is an 'inescapable interdependence' (AAUP 1995). They must work together for the institution to thrive.

## OUR FINDINGS

Today, there continue to be a number of factors that limit the role of boards of trustees at universities in Kazakhstan. These include the policy environment and the degree to which the institution has managed to identify meaningful work for the group. Despite these challenges, some boards are beginning to carve out meaningful roles.

## THE FORMAL AUTHORITY OF BOARDS OF TRUSTEES REMAINS LIMITED BUT IS GROWING

The current policy context continues to restrict the authority of boards. Despite some important reforms, MoES continues to exert significant control. For example, on financial matters the Ministry sets the budgets of all public institutions while boards have no influence over admissions criteria. In terms of leadership at most institutions, boards have little say over the hiring or firing of rectors (for a detailed discussion, see Chapter 2). Additionally, there are ten institutions that were assigned special status and established Boards of Overseers, the governing bodies that do weigh in on the selection of the rector and can authorise a wider array of budgetary activities. Overall, however, the Ministry sets the budget of all public institutions. This leaves the vast majority of

university boards in the challenging position of being asked to provide oversight of a person who is not accountable to them and to participate in strategic planning when they really have no control over the budget. In budgetary, personnel and academic matters, the Ministry establishes the guidelines that institutions must follow. In short, universities in Kazakhstan are far more constrained by Ministerial policies and regulations than their counterparts in the US, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Although these bodies are still relatively new, some boards are beginning to grapple with important institutional issues including strategic planning, personnel policies, review of major reports and approval of schedules of work. One rector explained, 'This past year, our board considered issues related to gender equality including the graduation rates of men and women and the ratio of men and women in key roles at the institution including department chairs and vice rectors ... The board also approved plans for strategically allocating governmental funds that were provided to the institution.' Such decisions are vital to the long-term health of the institution and represent important and meaningful work.

#### THERE CONTINUES TO BE SOME VARIABILITY IN HOW THE WORK OF THE BOARDS ARE DEFINED AND ENACTED

When asked to define the work of the board, most of the academic leaders and board members were able to define the characteristics of effective boards. They understood that a board is a group of knowledgeable individuals that are committed to the institution and who provide input on the strategic plan and also are responsible for seeking resources for the institution. A number referenced the guidelines provided by the Ministry that defines the role of boards. While those guidelines have led to the development of institutional documents that align with best practices (specifying that boards are responsible for providing advice in long-range planning, financial oversight, oversight of the academic programmes and so forth), in practice the actual work of some boards falls somewhat short of these stated purposes.

In the US, boards of private universities (that average 29 trustees) meet approximately four times a year and those of public institutions (that average 12 trustees) hold approximately seven meetings a year

(AGB 2010). Boards also have standing and ad hoc committees that may meet more frequently than the board as a whole. In the US, board meetings typically span two days, often with the first day consisting of committee and ad hoc task force meetings, and the second day consisting of a full board meeting. Nearly every board we examined in this study indicated that they met only twice a year, although they were careful to say that if the board needed to meet more often, it could. On some campuses, these meetings consisted of having administrators provide general reports about what was happening on campus. The rector is the individual most responsible for developing the strategic plan. As one rector explained, 'The rector defines the development strategy of the university, establishes the tactics of activities within structural subdivisions. The mechanism of implementation depends on the rectors and deans of universities.' This leaves very little role for the board.

Further, for a board to engage in strategic thinking it needs a deep understanding of the institution and the context in which it is operating. Two meetings a year is insufficient time on task to understand such complexities, particularly if the board is comprised of non-academics. A board meeting format where attendees sit passively and listen rather than engage in substantive debate and dialogue over issues is unlikely to produce much in the way of strategic advice and consequential board action (Chait, Ryan & Taylor 2005). This passive reporting is unlikely to capture the long-term interest of the important people from business and industry that serve on these boards. It is perhaps not surprising that participation in board meetings has been sporadic in some cases, with only half the members attending. One rector told us, 'I must say, however, that at most higher education institutions the activities of the boards of trustees have a largely formal and symbolic character.' As governance scholar Richard Chait (2009) writes, 'Effective governance entails influential participation in meaningful discussions about consequential matters that lead to significant outcomes.' This goal is far from being realised.

The result of these practices is that board members have only a superficial understanding of the issues facing their university. When we asked 'What are some of the most important challenges facing this institution over the next few years?' few were able to answer except in broad generalisations about needing to improve quality or help graduates get jobs. One senior administrator told us: 'The university has always been free to determine their strategic plans. Of course being a state university we

have to follow state rules and regulations but it is our right to decide our own mechanism or way to meet those particular tasks and goals.' This statement reflects a profound misunderstanding about strategic planning. In fact, the Ministry is the body that is determining strategy. Institutions are asked then to develop the tactics to realise that strategy. While the leadership of some institutions is incredibly strong, there are rectors who are effective at complying with regulations but have little experience developing strategy. This prevents more strategic conversations from happening at the board level.

However, we did see examples of boards that have been assuming an important strategic role. Because of its special status as an international university, the board of Akhmet Yassawi University (Kazakh Turkish International University) has a great deal of formal authority. Half the board members are from Kazakhstan and half are from Turkey and the meetings rotate from one country to the next. A senior administrator explained the purpose of the board,

The board of trustees is responsible for overseeing a broad spectrum of long-term strategic issues – five-year programs. They control the finances. They approve construction of new buildings. They are in charge of the overall financial health of the university. They also play a big role in academic issues. For example, the formation of the academic structure is in their purview. They designate the number of vice-rectors, provosts and department directors.

The rector gives a comprehensive report to the board twice a year. If it is needed, the board makes recommendations to ensure that progress on the strategic plan is ongoing. The board also has budgetary control. It allocates money twice a year and can withhold those resources or re-allocate them as it sees fit.

The unique status of joint-stock companies (JSCs) also conveys greater authority to their boards. Like corporations, JSCs have boards of directors. The rector of Kazakh Law and Humanitarian University explains, 'The administration is completely transparent because any large decision must be approved by the board of directors, the rector or institution doesn't have any authority to act otherwise.' The status allows institutions to generate income through a variety of activities such as expert consulting, scientific work and even real estate. At Kazakh Law and Humanitarian University, the rector currently serves as chair of the board of trustees. The senior administrators we spoke

with indicated that it was a very efficient system. While such arrangements do occur in corporations, they do not at US universities because of concerns that it will blur the lines of authority between the policy work of the board and the administrative and management work of senior administration and may lead to conflicts of interest. For example, it would be problematic for the chair of a board that is also the rector to lead an annual review of the rector or seriously take up concerns about the rector's performance. The system is efficient and works well when everyone is in agreement and when the leadership is strong. But because the lines of responsibility are not clearly demarcated, complications can arise when differences of opinion surface. Regardless, the governance structure of the JSCs does provide more autonomy than that enjoyed by the public institutions and their boards.

We also saw an example of a board at one institution without a special status that was engaged in strategic work. The board clearly understood the context as well as its appropriate role. In describing the key issues facing his institution one board member said:

There has been a major problem regarding the employment of graduates. The board of trustees has directors of all the leading enterprises in the Oblast. Through our work we have helped employ over 70% of our graduates in these enterprises – this is good for the university and good for the Republic. The second big issue was regarding the content of quality preparation. When this issue was brought up on the board of trustees meeting, it also met with a successful solution.

Another commented: '[In our work] we are looking 10 or 15 years ahead.' That level of understanding of the issues points to the degree to which this board is engaging in strategic decision making. This board takes seriously the expertise that it brings to the table and is able to draw upon its collective influence to make a consequential contribution. Although it does not have formal legal authority, it serves as a powerful independent body of experts that has a great deal of influence. A board member explained:

Our rector does not weigh in over us; he is a member, and everyone has a say. [...] We graduated from this institution and our children and grandchildren have also graduated from it, so we are independent. We respect the rector. But the collaboration is based on mutual respect.

In discussing his hopes for the board, the current chair said:

My task – one of the tasks – is for the board of trustees to become a competent body which would not [get its way through] pressure, but through its competence and prove that public governance can allow this institution to operate without intervention from the Ministry, which places major limitations on the institute.

This board is in the process of organising its efforts and establishing sub-committees focused on key issues facing the institution. It has also created something of an executive committee that is charged with preparing documents and the agenda of each upcoming meeting and conducting some initial analysis of the issues in order to lead the discussions of the full board.

#### BOARDS OF TRUSTEES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

One area in which boards of trustees have provided a great deal of assistance to institutions is in the development of university/industry partnerships. A board member from Atrau Institute of Oil and Gas noted, 'The fact that board members include representatives from the production, processing and transport industries has yielded good results. Opportunities developed through the board of trustees have helped students learn about future projects.' These partnerships have led to the development of internships, summer employment and often jobs after graduation. Some board members are working closely with the faculty from particular academic programmes, helping them think through their curricula and programmes of study. As one board member noted, 'We know what problems exist during preparation of specialists, what kind of problems exist with the organisation of the education system, demand for specific specialties on the market, introduction of new education methods.' From the perspective of both the board members and the faculty, people have found these collaborations extremely helpful. However, while beneficial, they are not governance. Instead it seems that the positive contributions of the boards are to open doors and establish relationships that benefit the institution and its students. While important, such work does not approach the needed fiduciary work of effective boards either in terms of oversight or in terms of strategy setting, two key roles for boards (Chait, Ryan & Taylor 2005).

Many of the board members see this work as being mutually beneficial: employers want excellent employees and universities want their graduates to get jobs. A board member from Taraz State University told us, 'We want the university to prepare specialists at a world-class level. We have employers that are strongly interested in getting well-educated specialists. That is why the board of trustees was created.' Another board member echoed this point. 'I think that the board of trustees is a good help to the university from both the employer's and the entrepreneur's sides. It is also expanding opportunities for the university itself. Previously, in Soviet times, everything was centralised. We had centralised governance, centralised requests. That system does not work now. Now, there is a need of high-quality specialists, but not the ones who are prepared on a mass scale. So, I think that the board of trustees must help to regulate the needs of specialists. That is how I see [the] situation.'

Board members are also playing a role in strengthening the quality of education the students receive. They help provide internships to students. One explained, 'We have an internship that lasts two or three months. Students take part in the completion of scholarly papers during the internship. Thus, they can follow the science process, see the direction it takes. It is useful for professors and for students.' Board members engage in dialogue with academic departments about curricula. The expertise of board members has led them to be selected to speak in classes and to serve on graduate student committees. However, boards have important roles to play in ensuring academic quality that goes beyond the type of activities described here, which are not a part of the governance oversight that boards are expected to provide. Boards can and should be asking questions about student outcomes, about ongoing work that the university is doing to determine the effectiveness of teaching and research productivity, and ensuring that institutions are collecting educational data and acting upon findings (Ewell 2012).

#### A COMPARISON OF KAZAKHSTANI BOARDS AND PRACTICES IN THE US

The work of the board of trustees is complex and important. A traditional criterion for board selection in the US is 'the three W's': wealth, wisdom and work. Board members must work to secure resources for their institutions (wealth), they have expertise that they can share (wisdom), and they also must be willing to attend board meetings and

actively engage in board activities (work). Boards must pay attention to a number of factors in order to be effective. Chait, Taylor and Holland in their examination of effective board practices in the US point to five key dimensions (Chait, Taylor & Holland 1993).

- 1 Contextual Dimension:** Upholding the mission of the institution and the core values it is seeking to advance;
- 2 Educational Dimension:** Being well-informed about academic issues at the institution and monitoring academic quality;
- 3 Interpersonal Dimension:** Paying attention to how the board itself is functioning. Maintaining an appropriate board structure with board sub-committees;
- 4 Political Dimension:** Maintaining good relationships with key constituencies – the senior administration, the faculty and students;
- 5 Strategic Dimension:** Envisioning the institution's future and thinking strategically.

If we consider the structure and work of the boards in this study, we can find examples of nearly all of these dimensions across the institutions. But there is more to be accomplished. Work focused on strategic thinking and planning (understanding the contextual dimension and the strategic dimension) was uncommon. Some boards have begun to develop an understanding of the educational issues and the needs of their institutions (educational dimension). However, for others that knowledge remained relatively superficial. Some boards are building strong working relationships with the senior administration and the faculty (political dimension). Only one spoke about the interpersonal dimension – thinking about board structure, paying attention to how the board is functioning. With the exception of the work that boards have taken on to develop university/industry partnerships, boards meet far more infrequently than their US counterparts. In sum, while there are examples emerging of good board practice, most have not yet developed to the point where they are addressing all five dimensions of governance work.

## MOVING FORWARD

Needless to say, examining the practices of a small subset of institutions does not enable us to make broad generalisations about the entire

system. However, there are a few areas that would seem profitable to explore further as Kazakhstan continues to strengthen the work of boards at its campuses.

## CREATING INTENTIONAL STRATEGIES TO IDENTIFY QUALITY TRUSTEES

One of the most essential factors contributing to effective governance is the ability to identify individuals the talent and insights to fulfill this complex yet important role. In the US, for most public universities trustees are identified through an external appointing body. Individuals are identified and vetted by elected officials. In other universities, individuals are identified by a working group of the board itself; they act as self-perpetuating boards. Regardless of process, boards can only be as good as the individuals who serve on them. Being intentional and strategic about the skills and knowledge needed for effective governance is essential (AGB 2013).

## DEVELOPING BOARD TRAINING

It is clear that the board members interviewed for this study are an impressive group of individuals who bring to the institutions they serve a wealth of expertise. However, experience from the US suggests that being an effective senior manager from industry or a judge or a scientist does not prepare a person to be a board member. Effective universities in the US have ongoing board development programmes, which require a great deal of effort to learn about the roles and responsibilities of boards, best practices in governance and trends and issues in higher education. Some board development workshops also include larger trends in the region such as economic and employment trends. Board members at the universities we visited bring expertise and wisdom based on their experience. But often they are only asked to serve as a passive sounding board for plans developed in detail by the senior administration, or are called upon for their professional connections. They rarely play a meaningful role in shaping long-term strategy or even in the oversight of the university. This situation is problematic in two ways: first, it keeps consequential governance (Chait, Ryan & Taylor 2005) out of reach and prevents institutions from benefiting from the knowledge of their board members and, second, over time it leads to disaffected board

members. Board members are important people, so specific attention to developing an engaging approach to governance is paramount to effective boards and to the overall success of institutions.

Models of board training need to be developed and made available so that boards can use them and adapt them to suit their particular purposes. This might include training on selecting and recruiting new board members, more intensive focus on key issues such as the oversight of education quality or mitigating institutional risk, and opportunities to learn about higher education trends at the local, national and even global levels. Such training should be problem-based and pragmatic, and it might include case studies that spell out particular strategic challenges facing institutions that would spur discussion and debate along with sets of questions that invite the board to think further about its work. Training materials might also provide boards with sample briefing-books to suggest how they might convey information to their members.

#### THE BENEFITS OF BOARDS IS SOMETHING THAT NEEDS TO BE COMMUNICATED MORE CLEARLY

There was a good deal of curiosity about how boards function in the US during our site visits: How are board members selected? How long do they serve? How do they structure their meetings? Occasionally, there also were questions about what practical value boards have. A board that deeply understands the institution and its goals is more likely to support it both with their time and financially. A board that is comprised of people who also understand the local area and region will be in a strong position to offer advice about the institution's work, a point well illustrated by a rector who commented that 'I'd rather speak with a group of professionals who know the university than report to a 26-year old Bolashak graduate from the Ministry.' Boards also can provide political cover for rectors when controversial decisions must be made, because they too are a part of the decision making process. These benefits need to be more systematically communicated across the system.

#### BOARD RESTRUCTURING

Currently, most boards in Kazakhstan are operating as 'committees of the whole'. While this structure makes sense since initially, to pursue

meaningful work (which will be necessary to draw in and engage good board members), boards will need to develop sub-committees that can explore important issues in greater depth and then lead discussion and debate by the full board. This will require rethinking the board calendar and moving towards a system where boards meet more often and for longer to do their work.

Further, these sub-committees would benefit from particular skill-sets of the board members. Board members should be individuals who are creative and critical thinkers and who have the ability to work collectively. They should know how to ask meaningful questions and to hold institutional leaders accountable for answers. They should have the time to donate both to board meetings and work outside of them. However, to be effective, board members need to be socialised to higher education and they need to learn the work. They need to understand the local and regional context and they also need to have an appreciation of academic culture and a detailed understanding of how their university functions. It is particularly important to have a committee that helps identify future board members and that also helps socialise new board members, as done in the US through the work of the governance committee.

One aspect of the restructuring of the governance processes relates solely to JSCs. Kazakh Humanitarian and Technical University has a well-functioning board of directors that has substantial say over the final budget of the institution and the hiring and firing of the rector. It is unclear if establishing a separate board of trustees makes sense if the intent is for this body to eventually become an oversight body. This has been the case at other JSCs we examined. Currently, the boards of trustees at JSCs serve essentially as alumni councils or fundraising bodies. It would be far better for JSCs to think about how they might reconfigure their boards of directors to engage in the kind of meaningful board work described above.

#### CONTINUED CHANGES IN STATE POLICY

Ultimately, for boards to do their work, they need to be granted authority to make important decisions related to the strategy and oversight of their university. Currently the Ministry plays this role. It will be necessary to change the law so that boards are able to assume their



fiduciary role. They will need the freedom to think boldly and, at times, to make mistakes. That said, there are some important questions (and indeed, great concern) among administrators and faculty about moving too quickly towards granting institutional autonomy in which boards are the ultimate deciding body. The clear consensus is that some institutions are not ready for such autonomy. That said, there are institutions that have demonstrated their commitment to high-quality teaching and research by successfully pursuing international accreditation. A set of criteria should be developed that point to a path that institutions might take that would lead to greater autonomy, with boards empowered to make important strategic decisions of increasing complexity and consequence over curriculum, personnel and then budgets.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: A STAGED PROGRESSION TOWARDS AUTONOMY?

Kazakhstan has begun to undertake some significant reforms. However, the way forward needs to be traversed carefully. Some commentators have pressed for academic autonomy for all universities, seeing it as a decisive step towards higher quality and an important symbolic step away from the centralised Soviet model of higher education. However, the clear consensus of the people we encountered during our research was that a sudden shift to a system where all institutions have boards of trustees with significant authority would cause significant problems. There is a learning curve and institutions are figuring out what role these bodies might play. They will need the time to identify and recruit the right people to serve on boards. The process of educating potential board members about the work is in its early stages. The problem is that this early period has established certain norms for some boards that may be difficult to alter later on. Specifically, they operate largely as a ceremonial group, meet only twice a year, are passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in planning, and as a result these boards have ended up being comprised of high-level people being asked to do low-level work. Board behaviour is passed down from generation to generation. Good ideas are quickly codified but so are ineffective processes and habits.

The movement towards greater autonomy has been episodic and incremental. The latest step has been the creation of boards of overseers for the ten universities that are part of the government's economic

diversification strategy. While the legal status of this group of ten institutions provides more authority to boards, that freedom will be useless if people don't know how to operate within a system predicated on institutional autonomy. It would be useful not only to provide training (which is occurring) but for a professional network to be established so that institutions can learn from one another. What initiatives are unfolding at the institutions? What processes are working well and where is more work needed? The task at hand is not simply establishing new regulations; it is the creation of a small sub-system predicated on an entirely different set of assumptions than the preexisting system. It requires not only changing policies but changing minds.

An evolutionary process is slower than some would like and it is not immune to error. But it is more likely to result in the development of a set of practices that are consonant with the values and aspirations of country.

#### NOTES

- 1 Kazakhstan has used various terms to describe governance bodies. Early on the term in use was 'boards of trustees' and many institutions still use this term. However, recent legislation has given the boards of a small subset of institutions more authority, including a say over the selection of the rector and the budget. These bodies are termed 'oversight boards'. For the purposes of this chapter, we will use 'board of trustees' as the more inclusive term.

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## 5

## The context for higher education development in Kazakhstan

Mary Canning

### INTRODUCTION: THE LEGACY

In common with most post-Soviet countries, at independence in 1991 Kazakhstan had a relatively well-educated and literate population and a respected education system. However, higher education was centrally planned and directed and featured many narrowly focused courses directed at specific occupations, often linked to a particular enterprise and taught in specialised institutions with strong industry links. And, as in other countries of the former Soviet Union, access to higher education was inequitable and tended to favour students from academically elite schools (OECD 2014a). While higher education institutions (HEIs) combined teaching and research activities and there was extensive cooperation among researchers in all the former Soviet Republics, funding for basic research was traditionally largely allocated to national academies and, for applied research, to specialised institutes attached to sector Ministries.

Work to adapt the entire education system in Kazakhstan started in 1991 in response to political, economic and social change. Since then, a constant objective of Kazakh presidential and government initiatives for the development of higher education and research has been to encourage the creation of human capital and to equip graduates with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to participate in the economy and in society.

This chapter provides an overview of government policies and programs and sectoral initiatives and their outcomes since 1992.<sup>1</sup>