

Higher Education Reform In Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

Kyrgyzstan, a former soviet republic in Central Asia, is currently going through a process of higher education reform to strengthen its system, many of the problems of which are a legacy of its soviet history. Reforms include the establishment of a national testing system for graduates of secondary education, the development of an ethics code to counter the buying of grades, the development of new programs and courses, the institution of higher education consortia, and others.

This paper provides a review of some of the reforms that are currently underway in higher education in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan (officially, Kyrgyz Republic) is a small, mountainous, Central Asian country with a population of 4.8 million. The land area is 198,500 sq km (77,415 sq mi), comparable to a medium-sized U.S. state like Minnesota. It is a former republic of the Soviet Union, having received its independence in 1991 (*Country Brief, Kyrgyz Republic*, 2000); thus, its official languages are both Kyrgyz and Russian. Its capitol, Bishkek, has a population of about 670,000. Its population is of diverse ethnic backgrounds; Kyrgyz is the dominant ethnic background, with a declining population of Russians now numbering about 18% of the population, mostly in Bishkek. Because so few people in the west are knowledgeable about the geography of the former Soviet Union, a map showing the location of Kyrgyzstan follows.



The current higher education system in Kyrgyzstan was formed as part of the soviet education system. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the old system continued to work automatically and still does to a large degree (Miroshnichenko, 1998). However, the introduction of the market economy, the worsening economic conditions, and the soviet legacy of centralization produced many problems in the higher education sector. There are a number of reasons for the worsening economic situation. First, when the Soviet Union withdrew from Kyrgyzstan, it took much of the industrial base with it, leaving behind an economy with about a 40% unemployment rate (United Nations System in Kyrgyzstan, 1999). Further, it has been difficult to restore industry because Kyrgyzstan is land-locked, and ground transportation (such as railways) is basically non-existent. The mountainous terrain of Kyrgyzstan makes other forms of land transportation (such as trucks) difficult. Another factor has to do with the lack of natural resources, though there is some oil (but not for export) and some other minerals.

Major Problems in Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan

There are a number of problems facing higher education in Kyrgyzstan, many left over from the soviet system. In 2001 a group of experts from the Institute for Higher Education Policy submitted a report to the Ministry of Education and Culture of Kyrgyzstan on higher education reform initiatives. The recommendations in the report were taken as a strategic plan for changing the situation in the higher education sector. In this paper we will explore some of the reform initiatives that are being implemented.

The report identified corruption as the major problem in higher education. Corruption is a major problem in the society at large, and, thus, it carries over into the higher education system. It occurs in many ways, but two of the primary ways in which it occurs is in admissions decisions (particularly into the most prestigious institutions and programs) and in assignment of grades. In Kyrgyzstan, grades are awarded based solely on results of a final exam given at the conclusion of a course. Thus, students may not attend the course at all, read the textbooks, and complete any assignments, and they may be totally unprepared for the examination. Given that college professors in Kyrgyzstan may be paid as little as \$8 per month (!), it becomes very tempting to accept a monetary gift from a student or a student's parents in return for a grade.

Another problem in higher education in Kyrgyzstan is that there is an inefficient connection to the labor market. Higher education does not have a history of providing courses and programs based on the needs of the labor market, and schools do not provide guidance or counseling to help students select programs that are likely to provide them with employment opportunities on graduation. For example, with the support of U.S. funding, American Studies has become a popular major in some Kyrgyz universities. But what does a student in Kyrgyzstan do with such a degree? They are not licensed to teach, and there are few, if any, job opportunities for students with such degrees. So there are huge gaps in the supply and demand for employment.

Historically, there has been a lack of responsiveness to student demands in higher education in Kyrgyzstan (and in the Soviet Union). In part, this is a problem similar to the lack of responsiveness to the labor market. Higher education faculty are not accustomed to making decisions about curriculum, and they are finding it difficult to respond to student demands for change in the higher education system.

Another problem is the surplus of higher education institutions. At the time of independence, there were 9 higher education institutions in the country. By 1999, there were 114. This has occurred for a number of reasons. First, in soviet days, students could attend any higher education institution for any degree anywhere in the Soviet Union at no cost. Now, however, most students have to pay tuition. This has created an entrepreneurial opportunity in higher education, and many institutions have been established for profit-making purposes. Further, some individuals perceive that there is prestige in being a rector of their own university, thus causing the development of new institutions. Some countries (Russia, United States, Turkey, Germany) wish to have influence and have established joint institutions. Local communities have also desired to have ready access to higher education institutions. All of these factors have contributed to the boom in higher education institutions. But there is no way to support this number of institutions; resources available from the government just are not sufficient.

Finally, there has been a deterioration of academic quality in higher education institutions. While there are many reasons for this, two major factors are that there simply is not a sufficient number of faculty to staff this number of institutions, and the declining economy of the country has led to continually declining resources.

The following sections will highlight steps that are being taken to reform higher education in Kyrgyzstan in response to these problems.

National Testing to Overcome Corruption in Admissions

National Scholarship Testing (NST) was recommended in the 2001 report as a means to overcome corruption in admissions. NST was supposed to help to identify the most capable students with limited financial means. In 2001 an independent testing body was established to develop and administer university and entrance examinations in Kyrgyzstan. Funding was secured from the US Agency for International Development. The American Councils for International Education (ACTR/ACCELS), an international not-for-profit organization leading the development and exchange of knowledge between the USA and Eastern Europe/Eurasia, was selected to guide and administer the campaign. ACCELS opened its office in Bishkek in 1993. It represents the Educational Testing Service in Kyrgyzstan and ten other countries. ACCELS has worked on numerous test development and assessment projects. Its mission is to foster independence and democratic development by advancing education and research, cultivating leadership, and empowering individuals and institutions through learning (Kyrgyzstan Independent Testing Organization Fact Sheet, web).

The idea of the independent test was to select students on fair and equitable grounds. Students would be offered scholarships based on their scores, so they could enter the budget departments of state higher education institutions. As with free higher education under soviet times, the Kyrgyz constitution guarantees free basic education at state educational institutions. However, two sources of funding have emerged in Kyrgyz higher education: state funding, and student tuition fees and private investments. Accordingly, students who are state-funded (not paying tuition) are called budget students, and students who pay for their education are called contract students. Private investments and tuition make up 100% of the budgets of non-state universities. At state universities the budget consists of 20-30% state funding, and 70-80% comes from private sources, including tuition. Because of differentials in financial resources, faculty in contract programs are paid much more than faculty in budget programs. As an example, at the Kyrgyz State Pedagogical University (KSPU), the full-time English language teacher in the budget department receives a salary of 300 soms (7 USD per month), whereas the salary for the same work in the contract department is 2800 soms (70 USD). As a result, better instructors are selected for the contract programs, leading to serious deterioration in budget programs and increasing the demand for contract programs, with budget programs declining in their appeal to students.

In 2001, about 14,500 secondary school students out of 62,000 took the NST. It was not successful for a number of reasons, and the enrollment of such scholarship students continued to late November when half of the semester had already passed. One reason for failure was the inefficient work of the Ministry of Education. But the main reason was that budget places in the most prestigious universities are limited, and the students did not want to enter the universities they were offered because of their low quality or the location of the university. Instead, they entered contract-based departments or private universities in spite of their costs.

In 2003, 35,000 students out of more than 110,000 graduating secondary school students participated in the test. This number is much higher than the previous year because ten years ago there was a reform in secondary education when an 11-year system of secondary education was introduced instead of the previous traditional 10-year system of education. The majority of schools moved to the 11-year form, and schoolchildren who passed the 3rd grade moved to the 5th grade. But not all schools adopted this system immediately. There were a number of schools, especially in the rural areas, that continued with the 10-year system of secondary education. As a result, the number of school graduates was less than usual in 2002 and much larger in 2003. The Ministry of Education offered 5,000 scholarships or rather placed this number of students in the budget departments of state universities throughout the country. The top 200 winners of the test were offered enrollment in any higher education institution, and almost all of them chose the Kyrgyz-Slavonic University because the graduation diploma is jointly offered by Kyrgyzstan and

Russia, allowing great flexibility in mobility and employment. A number of institutions did not get the scheduled number of winners, and one could see the announcements on TV inviting secondary students to enter the budget departments of their institutions. While institutions would rather have contract students than budget students, not all departments have the desirable number of contract students. In order not to be closed and have at least state paid jobs, they are trying to keep at least budget students. Departments of physics, chemistry, special education, and some others suffer from a shortage of contract students.

The reason for differences in the ability of various institutions to compete for these scholarship students is relatively easy to explain, as the programs offered at the state universities are not the most attractive. Those that are in the highest demand are usually contract-based. The teaching staff is professionally much weaker in the state (budget) departments than in the contract ones. It is obvious from these numbers that higher education, in general, is vastly underfunded in Kyrgyzstan and that teachers are very much underpaid (Heyneman, 1998); Heyneman estimated that school budgets for most CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries fell by at least 50% since 1991 and, in some instances, is only 5% of what it was then. These factors combine to raise the question, are the winners of NST really winners? For a small percentage, the answer is yes, but for the majority it is not the best choice.

The remedy to this situation is, first, to develop a mechanism under which the top scorers on the NST could enter the department of their choice, irrespective of the form of ownership of the institution. The government should find the finances to guarantee a scholarship that is enough to cover the tuition fee. The average yearly tuition fee for a private higher education institution is 450 USD. In some, like the American University in Central Asia, the tuition fee is 1,800 USD, and the average National scholarship is 80 USD.

Another way to deal with this problem within institutions, given that the contract enrolments are much larger than budget enrolments, is to eliminate the distinction between contract and budget students and instructors. By combining budget and contract students, the quality distinctions between the two types of program will be eliminated, winners of the NST will have a broader choice of options with higher quality programs, and faculty pay distinctions will disappear.

However, the major source of corruption in higher education probably does not lie with the entrance exams. When higher education institutions are interested in recruiting the brightest students, the problem of corruption disappears by itself. Besides the percentage of state funded places comprises only 1-2 % of the overall enrollment in higher education. This year, for example, at KSPU, about 290 students were enrolled in budget departments and about 3,274 to contract departments.

Ethics Code to Counter Buying Grades

A more severe problem of corruption occurs when students buy their grades on course examinations. As explained, some few students could do well on final examinations without attending class. Most, however, resort to attempts at bribery. Lately, though, there have been some positive changes. At the universities a modular-rating system has been introduced. A course is divided into 2-3 modules that represent major topics in the course. As a module is completed, students are supposed to take a test or write an essay. The rating of students includes attendance and participation in the class. The final grade includes both—the results of module testing and the rating of a student. Such grading seems to be more efficient and is bringing positive results.

Another approach to this problem is addressed in a project that was launched at KSPU in January, 2003, that may have a longer-term perspective. The project, "Academic Honesty," is run by students. The aim of the project is to propagate the idea of academic honesty among students so it becomes the norm. One of the main goals at present is to counter academic dishonesty (plagiarism and corruption). Students are conducting workshops, round-table discussions, and meetings with students and teachers. They regularly conduct surveys, asking questions like, "Have you ever experienced cases of academic dishonesty?" thus encouraging students to speak on existing problems in education openly and find solutions to them. The indirect purpose of the project is to involve students more and more in the social life of the university, develop their leadership potential, and make them active

participants of the education reform process. Students are working on the development of a Code of Academic Honesty for students that will include rules and regulations concerning the intellectual ownership of students and the notion of academic honesty itself. University mailboxes and e-mails have been opened so that anyone can write and discuss a problem he or she considers to be important. Public attention to the problem of corruption is an effective means to stop it or at least to slow it down. Dozens of other universities have joined the project, and the latest conference on academic honesty, which took place 16 October 2003 in Bishkek, reported considerable achievement in this direction.

Inefficient Connection with the Labor Market

The report (Phipps & Wolanin, 2001) defined the second major problem in higher education as an inefficient connection with the labor market. The first reaction of the higher education sector to the market economy was to grow the number of higher education institutions. Then, there was an active campaign by the Ministry of Education to decrease the number of higher education institutions. During 2001-2002, there was an inspection of all higher education institutions in the Republic. The institutions that did not meet the requirements of the Inspectorate were closed. The result of the campaign was that the number of higher education institutions was reduced from 114 to 46.

In spite of these changes, overall enrollment grew from 65,000 to 159,000 in the last 5 years. This quantitative growth could have been positive if the new institutions were offering new programs in high demand or if they offered an alternative to existing programs, courses of higher quality, different delivery modes, geographically more accessible, and so on. Instead, there has been extensive overlap and duplication, without much thought to student or marketplace demands. Duplication is observed even within one educational institution. For example, at KSPU there are four institutes offering the same programs in foreign languages and two institutes with similar departments in business management and economics. At present in Kyrgyzstan, there are 31 state higher education institutions and 15 private. The majority have the same programs.

As a solution, the report (Phipps & Wolanin, 2001) suggested the establishment of a board of trustees and the defining of the missions of the eight key educational institutions, as it was considered unrealistic to define the missions of all 31 state higher education institutions. It was recommended that, as a first step, eight key universities should be selected and their missions defined. The Ministry of Education chose Kyrgyz National University, Osh State University, Kyrgyz Technical University, Kyrgyz Agrarian Academy, KSPU, Batken University, Naryn and Talas State Universities. Only these key institutions will receive state funding, the rationale being that, instead of diluting state funds among all state higher education institutions, it would be better to concentrate them in a few and, in return, receive higher quality results.

That means that KSPU, as the only pedagogical institution in this group, will need to ensure a flow of well-qualified teachers and administrators for elementary and secondary education. However, important questions arise: Does such a policy make the university monopolistic in its sphere? Because funding is guaranteed by the state, does the university lose incentive for its development? Does it limit the development of the university, resulting in a limited perspective? This year, by the President's decree, an Academy of Law has been established in Bishkek that supposes that all departments of law at other higher education institutions will be transferred to the Academy. Such a decision raises more questions than it answers.

A board of trustees is also a debatable question. The board of trustees in countries like the USA or Russia could be a good idea, but, in a country as small as Kyrgyzstan, the idea of having boards of trustees for 46 higher education institutions hardly seems to be realistic. In the end it could turn out to be an additional burden for the institution.

In the situation of poor links of higher education with the market, the solution lies in the development of management and leadership skills among educators. The last two years were indicative of the changes in people's mentality. Last year the enrollment of students in higher education was low because of the small number of school graduates. This year was the same. This tendency demonstrates that people are being disappointed in the importance

of higher education in getting a job. A diploma does not guarantee a job as it did in soviet times. People are still ready to invest money in education but on the condition that it provides them with employment opportunities. And what happens in reality? There are hundreds of doctors, economists, lawyers, and international affairs specialists who are unemployed. This does not mean that the market does not need economists or lawyers. It needs them but with different professional quality and numbers. In addition, there is great demand for accountants, software developers, specialists in computer sciences, English language teachers, and so on. However, there is an absence of trained people able to offer and develop new programs. Thus, the professional development of its own staff and the recruitment of qualified staff should be high on the agenda of higher education institutions. Leadership, staff development, and aggressive recruitment will directly or indirectly result in upgrading the educational services provided by higher education. Another option, perhaps instead of the boards of trustees, would be to develop advisory committees for institutions of higher education, so that they are not in a control position, but they are knowledgeable individuals who can provide advice to the institution and its faculty.

Lack of Responsiveness to Student Demands

The next problem, closely related to the previous problem, is the lack of responsiveness to student demands. Many see the cause of this in the legacy of a centralized command and a rigid system of educational standards. To a certain degree, this is the case, but not to the extent that it explains the lack of quality of new programs and courses. Lately, a number of educational standards have been reconsidered and approved at the Ministry of Education. The new standards are a reflection of the changes in Russian educational standards. According to the new requirements, the curriculum is divided into four blocks. Two blocks that represent required general courses are compulsory for every higher education institution (e.g., History of Kyrgyzstan, Russian/Kyrgyz Language, Physical Culture, Computer Skills, and a number of others). The other two blocks are professional training, and the courses are chosen and approved by the universities themselves. The function of curriculum development has been delegated to the universities, which provide the opportunity for them to include courses that are in demand. The problem lies in their inability to develop new programs and courses because of the professional training that most faculty have had in the former system and the perception on the part of faculty that this is extra work for which they are not paid.

This year the Ministry of Education invited all higher education institutions to initiate bachelors and masters degrees to allow them to enter "international educational space." At KSPU, which at present consists of 12 institutes, only two masters degree programs have been developed. The Institute for World Languages was planning to initiate an MA in Education Management, but, at the last minute, the proposal was withdrawn because we realized that the faculty are not yet professionally ready to start this new program. Instead, this year an MA degree program in philology was initiated, leaving the education administration masters degree for next year. At the same time, however, in another part of the university, a similar degree (an MA in Educational Management) has been initiated, resulting in the graduation of its first class in the summer of 2003, an example of how internal duplication occurs.

One way in which the faculty are being prepared professionally to offer the new program is participation in a partnership program sponsored by the U.S. State Department of Education in which faculty from KSPU are visiting the University of Minnesota for a period of two-three months to take courses, visit schools, participate in conferences, and visit with faculty in mentoring roles. Faculty from the University of Minnesota are visiting Kyrgyzstan to offer workshops in educational management, to visit schools, to visit parliamentary education committee members and the Ministry of Education to influence the reform process, and to assist in the curriculum development process (McLean, Seashore, Naimanova, & Karimov, 2001).

Another attempt to find a solution to the lack of new programs that are in demand was the establishment of a consortium of four universities in Bishkek: American University in Central Asia (AUCA), Kyrgyz-Turkish University, Kyrgyz National University, and KSPU (*Report of the working group...*, 2001). In fall, 2003, two other universities joined the consortium: Bishkek Humanities University and Ataturk Kyrgyz-Turkish University. Every semester, 10-12 students from the World Languages Institute at KSPU take courses at AUCA, with the courses being registered on the diploma course list. Such cooperation has a promising future, and more effort should be invested in its further development.

Credit-Hour System in Response to Student Demands

The other popular issue being discussed at present is the introduction of a credit-hour system throughout the country. The credit-hour system has both academic and financial advantages. First, the credit-hour system standardizes the amount of classroom time for students and faculty, changes the relationship between students and faculty, and allows students to transfer from one university to another. The responsibility of conveying knowledge under the present system rests with the faculty. The credit-hour system expects students to acquire knowledge independently of the faculty, thus changing the role of the teacher to a facilitator and tutor (Phipps & Wolanin, 2001).

The introduction of this system could bring a number of advantages. Again, however, it is essential to provide appropriately trained faculty, adequate textbooks (both in Kyrgyz and Russian), library resources, and internet connection for all students. Without this, the introduction of a credit-hour system loses its appeal. It also requires a change in thinking on the part of the Ministry of Education as it reviews proposed programs that are designed to accommodate the credit-hour system.

Conclusions

All of these reform efforts are of little value without changing people. NST, the credit-hour system, new programs and courses, the ethics code, improved connections with the labor market, and so on, will all be simply formal if we do not change the heart of the problem, which is leadership and staff development. Thus, major efforts are needed to provide such development throughout higher education in Kyrgyzstan.

Recommendations

There are a number of next steps. First, the government of Kyrgyzstan (with support from other countries) needs to provide funding to allow for extensive evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the various reforms being undertaken and changes that need to be made in the implementation of the reforms.

Second, because faculty development cannot occur overnight, continuing efforts in human resource development of faculty, university officials, and government officials must continue with a long-term commitment to ongoing change.

Third, a much-improved system of identification of labor market demands is needed, and a system must be put in place to insure that higher education institutions are responsive to the information provided from such a system.

Fourth, there must be continued opportunities to bring faculty and administrators together from different institutions to share their experiences and to explore ongoing revisions in the reform efforts.

Most importantly, the reforms must continue to be developed with an indigenous perspective, so that the higher education system in Kyrgyzstan can optimize higher education within the culture of the country (McLean, 2001).

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Notes