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Higher education reform and the landscape diversity of Higher Education Institutions in the Kyrgyz Republic, 1991–2015

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Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is a small, mountainous, landlocked and relatively poor country in Central Asia. It is bordered by China to the east, Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, and Tajikistan to the south, and has a young, growing and ethnically diverse population comprised of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, and German, Kazakh, Korean, Tajik, Tatar, Ukrainian and other ethnic groups.³ Following its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Kyrgyzstan experienced processes of change across all areas of social, political and economic life. Higher education reform has been central to this agenda, and between 1991 and today the Soviet-era system of state-funded and Communist Party controlled higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kyrgyzstan has been transformed into an expansive, diverse, unequal, semi-privatized and marketized higher education (HE) landscape (Amsler 2011; Brunner and Tillett 2007; Mertaugh 2004; Narkoziev and Yanzen 2013). How should we make sense of these changes within the framework of institutional diversification?

Mindful of Fumasoli and Husiman's (2013) arguments that the marketization of higher education does not necessarily generate institutional diversification, that government regulation does not necessarily lead to homogenization among institutions, and that universities' own institutional strategies and responses to environmental changes shape processes of structural reform in complex ways, this paper assesses the specific character of these changes to the higher education landscape in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. After briefly describing the structure and financing of higher education in the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic from 1917–1991, we consider some key factors which have shaped patterns of the differentiation and diversification of HE in the post-Soviet period. These include the historical legacies of Soviet HE infrastructures, new legal and political frameworks for HE governance and finance, changes to regulations for the licensing of institutions and academic credentials, the introduction of new multinational policy agendas for higher education in the Central Asian region, changes in the relationship between higher education and labor, the introduction of a national university admissions examination, and the adoption of certain principles of the European Bologna Process. The picture of HE reform that emerges from this analysis is one in which concurrent processes of diversification and homogenization are not driven wholly by either state regulation or forces of market competition, but mediated by

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³ In 1991, the population was 4,422,000; in 2001, 4,968,119; in 2011, 5,551,888; and in 2015 the population was 5,960,000. The ethnic composition of the population 2013 was 72% Kyrgyz, 14.4% Uzbek, 6.5% Russian, and 7.1% other (Tajik, Kazakh, Ukrainian, Tatar, Korean, and German) (NSC, 2013a, 2014a). Kyrgyzstan is, by World Bank classification, a 'lower-middle income' country with 3.5% annual growth in 2015 (NSC 2015; World Bank 2016). The country's GDP is heavily dependent on agriculture, mineral resources such as gold, mercury, uranium and electricity export, and migrants' remittances working in Russia, Kazakhstan and other CIS countries. With a Gross Domestic Product of \$6.57bn, Kyrgyzstan relies on official development aid, revenues from exporting mineral resources, and migrant labourers' remittances from work in Russia and other CIS countries.

universities' strategic negotiations of these forces in the context of historical institutional formations in Kyrgyzstan.

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on trends, since 1991, in both 'external diversification' within the HE system (in which differences emerge between institutions) and 'systemic' and 'programmatic' differentiation, with particular attention to the relationship between this process and the dismantling, reinforcement or emergence of hierarchy and stratification within the HE system. 'Systemic differentiation' refers to 'differences in institutional type, size, and control found within a higher education system', and 'programmatic differentiation' refers to the 'degree level, degree area, comprehensiveness, mission and emphasis of programs and services provided by the institutions' (Huisman 1995 p. 13). The paper draws on national and international statistical indicators of higher education and educational reform in Kyrgyzstan, and qualitative data about the history and substance of these changes drawn from legislation, regulations, and policy statements concerning this period of reform. Statistical information about each university's structure, organization and curricula during the post-Soviet period was obtained from the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (NSC); government educational databases from the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), which is the main agency responsible for the quality of education and management of the education system in Kyrgyzstan; Accounting Chambers; the National Academy and National Testing Centre (for information about student enrollments) and institutional websites and annual reports.

The development of higher education in the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic

In the 1920s and 1930s, the new Soviet state implemented a violent process of forced settlement and collectivization in the KSSR and early Bolshevik programmes for 'civilizing' the Central Asian steppe and incorporating its diverse tribal communities into a new empire included the creation of new universities and research centers in the region (Amsler 2007; Buyanin 2001); these existed side by side with traditional educational institutions such as the *maktab* and *madrassa* until the 1930s (Khalid 1999). Institutions of higher learning such as universities and filials of the Russian Academy of Science, which began to appear in Kirgizia in the 1930s following the establishment of the Central Asian University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1920, were oriented primarily toward political and technical education rather than teaching or academic research, and used as experimental sites for promoting literacy and disseminating pedagogies on science, politics and morality, or as 'bases' for Russian ethnographic and geographical research (Amsler 2007).

During the mid-Soviet period, due to large-scale campaigns for basic education which accompanied a process of rapid industrialization across the country, the literacy rate in the society jumped from 16.5% (1926) to 99.8% (1979) (Ibraimov, 2001) and full systems of primary, secondary, professional and higher education were created (Holmes, Read and Voskresenskaya 1995; Shamatov 2015). By 1991, the country had twelve institutions of higher education, each of which served a different function within the educational system (Figure 1).

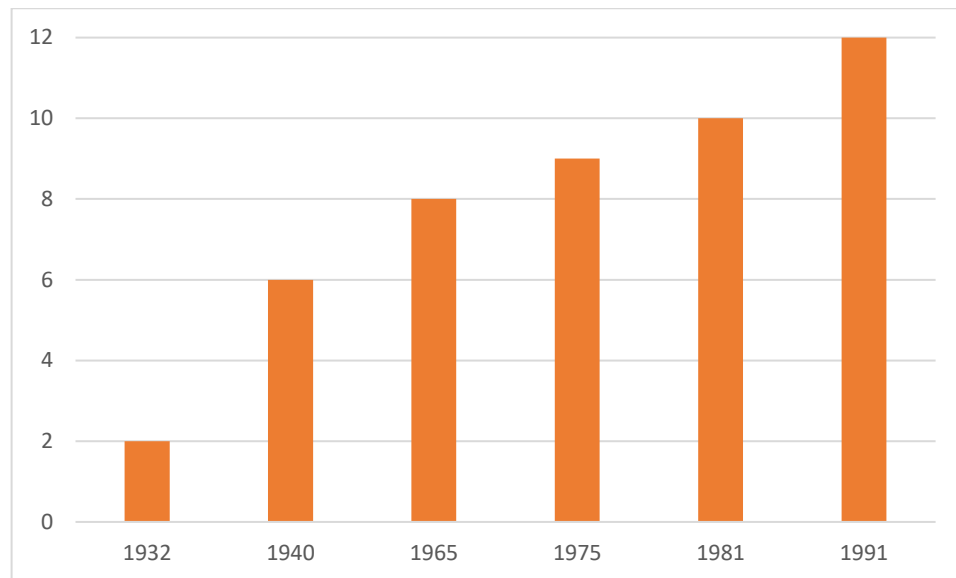


Figure 1. Number of HEIs in the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic, 1932–1991 (Orusbaeva 1982; NSC 2008)

The structural framework for Kyrgyzstan’s educational system, like that in all Soviet republics, was shaped by centralized state policies in accordance with the country’s economic needs and principles believed to define a general socialist education, including the eradication of illiteracy, the provision of vocational instruction in secondary school, the massification of educational opportunities and the incorporation of state ideology and moral education into the curriculum and training processes (Clark 2005). Decisions about governance, curriculum content and organization, student admissions and so on were made by the Ministry of Education in Moscow and, until the late 1980s, were similar across the fifteen Soviet republics (Amsler 2007; DeYoung 2011; Heyneman 2010).

Each higher education institution had its own ‘profile’ or portfolio of specialized functions and purposes within the system (Table 1; Figure 2). Contrary to current definitions of institutional positioning in which ‘higher education institutions locate themselves in specific niches within the higher educational system’ (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013, p. 160), this profiling as the responsibility of the Soviet state. There was no duplication of programs offered by each institution, although teachers with similar specialisms were distributed throughout all regions. The state built HEI each with a specialized, profile-appropriate campus; for example, the Medical Institute had a study campus and anatomy building, the Polytechnic Institute had state-of-the-art technical labs, and so on. However, financial resources were not distributed evenly across the sector, and HEIs were geographically stratified such that central institutions located in Frunze (now the capital city of Bishkek) were more likely to obtain funding from the Central Committee of the Communist Party than regional institutions with small student populations and lower-priority profiles.

Higher Education Institution	Established	Location	Student Numbers	Profile
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1	Kyrgyz Veterinary Institute (later the Agricultural Institute named after Skryabin)	1933	Frunze	5637	Agrarian
2	Kyrgyz State Medical Institute	1939	Frunze	4488	Medical
3	Kyrgyz State University	1951	Frunze	12869	Main state university with multi-disciplinary profile
4	Osh Pedagogical Institute	1951	Osh	6166	Teaching/pedagogy
5	Kyrgyz Women's Pedagogical Institute	1952	Frunze	4771	Teaching/pedagogy
6	Prejevalsk Pedagogical Institute	1953	Prejevalsk	3384	Teaching/pedagogy
7	Frunze Polytechnic Institute	1954	Frunze	14324	Technical/ Construction/ Geology
8	Institute of Physical Culture and Sport	1955	Frunze	1401	Sport
9	Kyrgyz State Institute of the Arts	1967	Frunze	1117	Art and Culture
10	Frunze special secondary school, <i>militiya</i> (police)	1969	Frunze	-	Protection of citizens and law
11	Frunze Pedagogical Institute of Russian Language and Literature	1979	Frunze	1249	Preparation Russian language teachers/pedagogy
12	Osh Technical University	1990	Osh	-	Technical/ Construction/ Geology for southern regions

Table 1. Higher Education Institutions in the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic, 1980 (Orusbaeva 1982)⁴

⁴ Data for the Frunze special secondary school and Osh Technical University was not available.

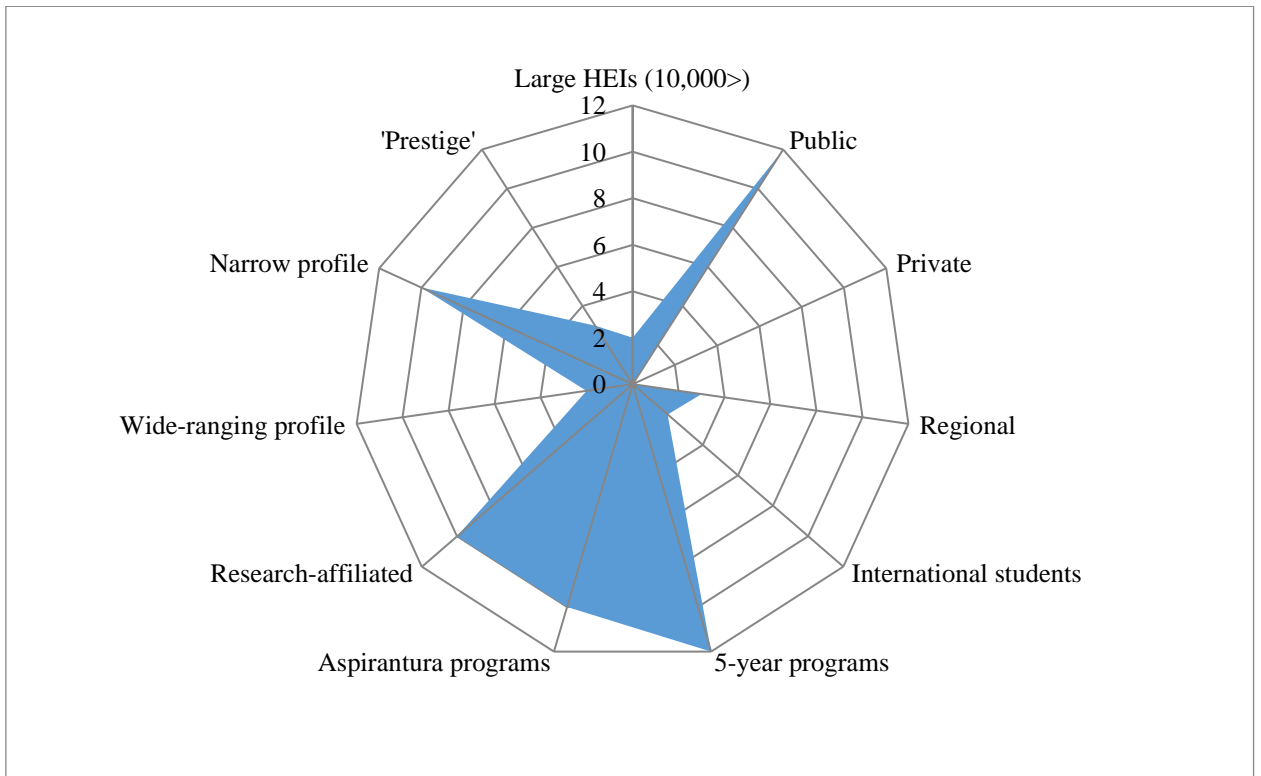


Figure 2. The HEI landscape in Kyrgyzstan (Orusbaeva 1982)

Student numbers were set by the State Planning Committee (*Gosplan*), which determined the demand for particular specializations in the national economy. All levels of education were state-funded, public and free of charge, and while enrollment was competitive it increased rapidly between 1965 and 1975 and then steadily until 1991 (Orusbaeva 1982, NSC 2012b; see Figure 3). By the early 1990s, 58,023 students were studying across all HEIs in Kyrgyzstan – 152 students per 10,000 citizens. As most of the institutions were located in Frunze, this urban center became the primary destination for higher education provision and many young people moved to the capital from rural locations across the country to obtain their qualifications.

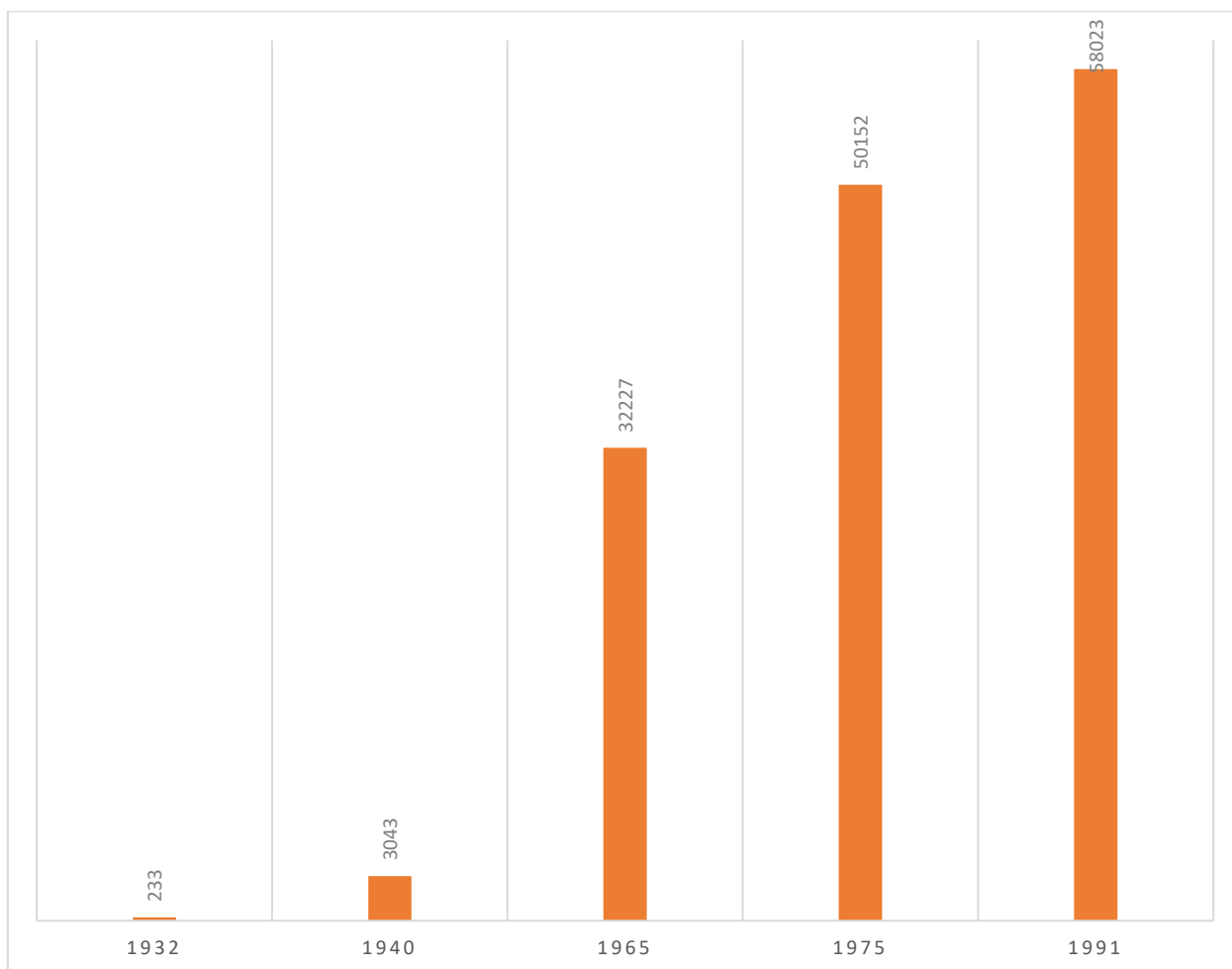


Figure 3. Number of HE students in the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic, 1932–1991 (Orushbaeva 1982; NSC 2008)

By 1990, the formal higher education system in the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic was thus both differentiated and externally diversified (as different types of institutions, courses environments and educational programs had been created in response to state-defined political and economic needs) and homogenous (as this process was directed through state planning and regulation, and all HEIs were state institutions).

Independence and new patterns of differentiation and diversification in higher education

In December 1992, a year after Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the Soviet Union, the government adopted a Law “On Education” to re-orient educational reform in the new political-economic context, in particular, ‘changing to diversified educational programmes, seeking new learning forms and technologies, arranging multi-channel funding, involving various partners in providing educational services and developing non-governmental education’ (MoESYP 2006; Tiuliundieva 2008 p. 78). This was followed by a series of new laws and strategies aimed at structurally transforming the system along these lines.⁵ HEIs thus became partially autonomous

⁵ Key legislation and policy include the Law On Education (1992) and its amendments in 1997, 2003 and 2008 etc.; the creation of the ‘Bilim’ National Education Program (1996); the introduction of State Educational Professional Standards in Education (2000); the adoption of the ‘Education for All’ goals of the Dakar Agreement (2001);

and able to implement independent policies in areas such as human resources, student performance evaluation, educational methodology and technology, the identification of scientific research areas, and the management of organizational, financial and other issues in accordance with their statutes, memoranda, legal and other regulatory acts. Within these parameters, however, the state remained responsible for many core activities including providing basic funding for higher education according to individual’s abilities and propensities (as determined by testing), setting standards for each level of formal education, approving priorities in curriculum development, training teachers, accrediting higher education institutions, collecting statistics on education, liaising with the National Academy of Sciences to set research priorities, and managing official international cooperation. Since independence, HEIs in Kyrgyzstan have remained accountable to the state for ‘quality assurance’ and must, at least formally, comply with its regulations in order to operate.

The new legal, financial and ideological frameworks for HE policy created conditions for a rapid diversification and expansion of the system, which grew from 12 HEIs in 1991 to 52 in 2015 (although this number can fluctuate from year to year as new institutions are opened and closed). This was accomplished in a variety of ways, including the establishment of new institutions in all regions of the republic; the creation of new branches, departments, and educational centres with legal status in existing institutions; and the re-organization of vocational institutions (*technikums*) into higher education institutions that had a broader remit to offer market-oriented programs. For example, in the 1990s, the accounting vocational institute (*Frunzenskiy tecknicum sovetskoy trgovly*) changed its status to become the Bishkek High Commerce College (1997), then the Institute of Bishkek State University of Economics and Business (1999), the Bishkek State Institute of Economics and Commerce (2003) and the Kyrgyz Economic University (2007) (See the table 7).

	1991	1995	2002	2005	2015
Public HEIs	12	22	32	33	34
Private HEIs	—	10	16	18	18
Total HEIs	12	32	48	51	52

Table 2. Dynamics of institutional growth in Kyrgyz higher education, 1991–2016 (Abdykalykov 2008; NSC 2016)

Today, the Kyrgyz state classifies its 52 higher education institutions into four categories based on their teaching and research profiles. *Academies* are educational institutions that offer training programs and conduct fundamental and applied scientific research (public – 6, private – 5). *Universities* are multi-profile institutions which provide a wide range of specialist training at all levels of higher education including academic and in-service training, and which conduct fundamental and applied scientific research (public – 19, private – 7). *Institutes* may be either independent or units in universities carrying out higher education training for specialists and in-

constitutional revisions (2003); the Development Strategy for Higher and Professional Education of the Kyrgyz Republic (2003); and National Education Strategies, 2007–10 (2006) and 2012–20 (2012).

service training programs at all levels (public – 4, private – 6). Finally, ‘*profiled HEIs*’ offer more narrowly defined education and training programs in specific areas, such as the training of highly specialized experts in music or the military (Conservatory, art and musical HEIs – 3, Military Institute of the Armed Forces and Interior HEI – 2). In this paper, we offer a slightly more nuanced typology, focusing on processes of differentiation and diversification, which makes visible the impact of the emergence of new private and international HEIs (see Table 5).

On one hand, this systemic differentiation and external diversification of the institutional landscape has broadened the range of HEIs in Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, however, the setting of national curriculum standards by the MoES and the state regulations for institutional licensing means that there are still parameters for the differentiation or diversification of HE as all programs, regardless of whether they are located in public or private institutions, must demonstrate compliance with these state standards. This limits the scope for HEIs to develop genuinely independent profiles, which in turn limits the degree of diversity within the system (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013, Huisman 1995, Van Vucht 2008, Teichler 1988). Nevertheless, institutional expansion has been coupled with an increase in the overall number of students enrolling in higher education. Despite economic hardship in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, public demand for higher education grew during the 1990s and has continued to do so to the present day, with nearly 40% of the current age cohort enrolling in higher education of some kind (NTC, 2014; Table 3).

	1991	1995	2002	2005	2013
Public university students	58023 (100%)	57211 (88.5%)	184879 (93%)	213619 (92.5%)	196232 (88%)
Private university students	–	7430 (11.5%)	14245. (7%)	17476. (7.5%)	27009 (12%)
Total university students	58023	64641	199124	231095	223241

Table 3. Dynamics of student population, public and private HEIs, 1991-2013 (NSC 2008; NSC 2013a)

According to official data (NSC, 2008), student enrollment in HE reached its highest point in 2005 due to the growth in the number of HEIs in the country and the low cost of tuition fees (the average tuition fee being 8,000 Kyrgyz soms or USD \$200 at the time). In 2008, however, more students began dropping out from universities due to the cost of tuition, and enrollments in vocational institutions – which charge lower fees, are more directly linked to employment and offer shorter training periods – significantly increased (Figure 4).

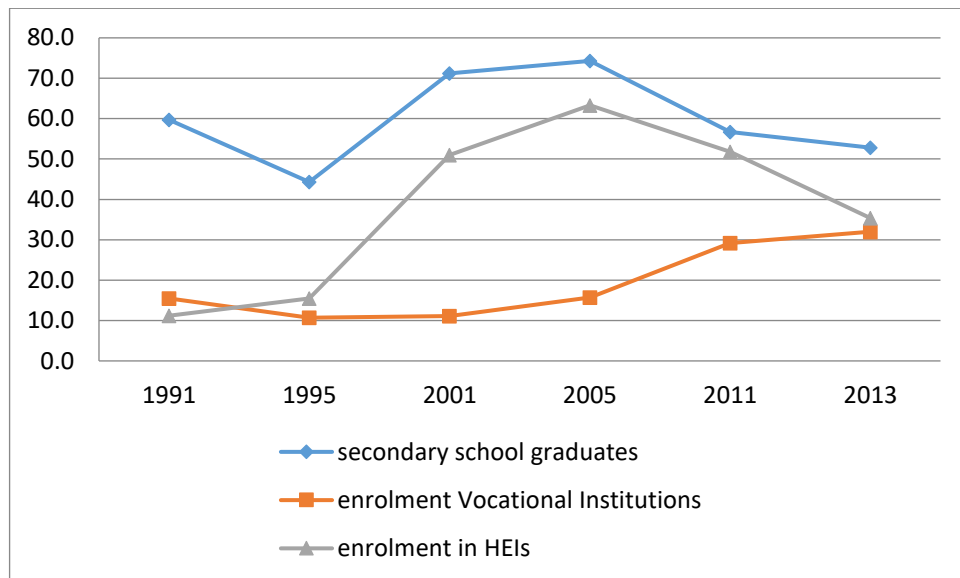


Figure 4. Secondary school graduates and student enrollment in vocational and higher education institutions, 1991–2013 (NSC 2014c)

In 2008, the enrollment of secondary school graduate students to HEIs decreased because the tuition fees increased to a minimum cost of 17,000 Kyrgyz soms (\$360), and it became mandatory for students to submit their results from a new national admissions test to enroll in any university. Many graduates who did not pass the test found alternative pathways into higher education, such as enrolling in specialized colleges on the basis of their ninth-grade marks (see also DeYoung 2011, p. 44). Such colleges operate as parts of particular HEIs which do not require admission test scores because students take a special study program of study for credit and, upon completing it, continue two further years of study at the same HEI. Finally, secondary school graduates and their parents still often consider the four-year bachelor's degree, a post-independence credential which was introduced as part of Kyrgyzstan's efforts to join the Bologna Process, to be an incomplete higher education as compared with the Soviet five-year specialized degree. This strategy for access has generated new relationships between vocational institutions and other types of HEI, and some institutions such as the Kyrgyz State University, Kyrgyz Technical University, International University of Kyrgyzstan, Slavonic University and Bishkek Humanities University have internally diversified into multi-level complexes offering initial, secondary and higher levels of vocational education.

Higher education in Kyrgyzstan also became more linguistically diverse after independence. With different logics of higher education reform operating in the country, from nation-building to regionalization and internationalization (Silova 2011), improving the quality of education in both a new national language (Kyrgyz) and English as well as Russian became a focus of educational policy. While post-independence language laws initially stipulated the development of national language literacy at all levels of education, with then-President Akayev signing a state language law in 2000, an acute lack of adequate textbooks, dictionaries and teaching materials in Kyrgyz hindered the implementation of this policy (even the training manuals for the law were published in Russian). In 2013, although the legal status of state and official languages was altered again so that all official documents were to be prepared only in Kyrgyz, Russian remained the main language for most of the country's higher education programs. Therefore, while the Kyrgyz language was used in primary and secondary schools in the 1990s, it was not used at the university level except in linguistic specialisms.

While some universities have dedicated programs in English (such as, e.g. degrees in Medicine or Information Technology for international students), there remains a shortage of both teaching materials and instructors who can teach diverse subjects in foreign languages in universities across the sector. Some institutions do now offer dual-language courses in other strategic languages. International HEIs such as the American University of Central Asia, the Kyrgyz–Turkish Manas University, and the Ata Turk Ala-Too University offer programs in English or Turkish and have degrees recognized jointly by both governments (the KRSU and KTU Manas universities work more generally in a new institutional form of inter-governmental agreement, which gives them more money for facilities and demands comparatively looser government oversight).

The Bologna Process: an external driver of diversification in Kyrgyz Higher Education

The Bologna Process project of ‘harmonizing’ and standardizing university awards across Europe and affiliated world regions has, in Kyrgyzstan, led to a certain type of diversification of education programs and the development of new types of relationship for training, financing, and partnerships in the provision of education services with European HEIs. In 2004, the Kyrgyz government, through a Working Group of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Integration of HEIs of Kyrgyzstan into the Bologna Process and the National Office of the EU Tempus–Tacis program, signed a Memorandum of Agreement to integrate its HEIs into the Bologna Process (National Tempus Office Kyrgyzstan, 2010). A number of universities (the International University of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek Academy of Finance and Economics, Kyrgyz Economic University and Kyrgyz National University) subsequently adopted projects to implement the requirements of the Bologna Process. Despite being denied membership to the Bologna Process in 2007, owing to the fact that Kyrgyzstan was not party to the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe, Kyrgyzstan still aspires to join and the state continues to create reform policies which are informed by the principles of the Bologna Process in order to increase opportunities for joint projects and international mobility among students and academic staff.

For example, the Bologna agenda had a significant impact on the structure of academic degree courses within the Kyrgyz higher education system, and on the status of existing and newer degree-holders. Today, the Soviet-era two-cycle system, which consists of a specialist diploma degree and an advanced *aspirantura*, co-exists with the Bologna three-cycle system, which prepares students at Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD levels. While recognized PhD enrolment in Kyrgyzstan began only in 2013 in a small number of HEIs (e.g., the Kyrgyz–Turk Manas University, Kyrgyz National Agrarian University and International University of Kyrgyzstan), by 2012 the MoES required all higher education institutions to offer Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in order to lay enable future compliance with the Bologna Process. Seven HEIs are now licensed by the MoES to offer all three tiers of educational program and seven to offer MAs, and while all universities offer BA programs, only ‘profiled’ HEIs can offer MA and PhD programs. The status of the PhD degree itself remains ambiguous in the country and at present only a few universities offer it, while the *aspirantura* award is still widely available. Such programs are thus offered alongside traditional five-year specialized degrees in many parts of the country, although with more universities reducing these programs as required by government decree (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2011).

These courses are not, however, distributed evenly throughout the system and their availability varies across disciplines: Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees are in greater demand in economic and humanitarian fields, whereas within industry and agriculture priority is still often given to specialists with what is considered “full” (i.e., five-year) higher education. Such degrees will thus remain part of the system for the foreseeable future and will not be shut down entirely, as according to a recent government resolution on education, by 2020 the proportion of students

within the country's universities should be 70% BA, 20% MA and 10% specialist (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2012). Yet the differential value between these Bologna-compliant credentials and the previous two-tier cycle of awards, combined with the emergence of competition for students in public and private institutions alike, has become influential as a criterion for making hierarchical distinctions between the country's higher educational institutions. These different levels of license thus contribute to both diversification and vertical differentiation within the system, which in turn influences future developments in the academic profile, infrastructure and focus of teaching and research within each institution.

Forces and factors of vertical differentiation

The National Scholarship Test for university admission

The higher education landscape in Kyrgyzstan has also been reshaped by the introduction of a National Scholarship Test, which is administered by a national testing center that is independent from both the MoES and individual HEIs. Kyrgyzstan was the first state in Central Asia to introduce a merit-based national university admission exam (following, in the wider CIS region, Azerbaijan in 1992 and Russia in 2001; see Drummond and Gabrscek 2012). It was introduced in 2002 in order to create a more transparent system for distributing state scholarships (National Tempus Office Kyrgyzstan, 2010) and to replace institutional-based admission practices that had become regarded as problematic in the post-Soviet period because it allowing universities to fill government-allocated student quotas and distribute government scholarships enabled some to be discriminatory, corrupt and ineffective (Blau 2004; Heyneman *et al.* 2008; Mertaugh 2004; Osipian 2007; Shamatov 2012). From 2004, a new Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM), funded by the United States Agency for International Development, assumed responsibility for administering this exam. In 2012, the MoES made it mandatory for all students to have a national test certificate in order to enroll on any program, and the 50 applicants with the highest test scores from across the country receive a certificate enabling them to enroll in the discipline and university of their choice without further examination (National Tempus Office Kyrgyzstan 2010).

The National Scholarship Test (NST) has had dual implications for the structure of the higher education system in Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, it is regarded as having the potential to reduce practices of corruption in university admissions processes and increase the participation of students from historically underrepresented social groups and geographical (particularly rural and mountainous) regions through the operation of a complex quota system (Shamatov 2012). On the other hand, it reinforces and produces vertical differentiation and inequalities within the system as students' academic performance is influenced by existing inequalities in language instruction, educational resources, type of school (public or private) and geographical opportunities (Tiuliundieva 2008). Elite students still have a better chance of winning a state scholarship for the program and university of their choice. This introduces a new form of hierarchy into the HE system as 'top choice' universities recruit more students with better scores and which, as they increase their prestige and 'value', are able to charge higher tuition fees for fee-paying students as well (DeYoung 2011 p. 13). Universities are therefore situated within a competitive market in which all strive to recruit state-funded students with high admission test scores, as the more students they recruit the more resources they will accumulate for improving facilities, hiring strong academics and investing in research. Yet as state tuition grants are minimal and often do not cover the full costs of students' education, even state scholarships introduce an element of competition between institutions which all angle for economic survival amidst a 'radical transformation of the whole market for higher education with the introduction of so-called *kontraktnyie*, or fee paying places' (Reeves 2005, p. 15). The introduction and reorientation of higher education financing towards

private tuition fees is thus a major driver of both diversification and standardization in Kyrgyzstan today.

Commodification and marketization: the influence of competition on student enrollments

Although 86% of students in Kyrgyzstan attend public HEIs, the majority still pay tuition fees as the government provides scholarships for only 21% of full-time students (NSC 2014a) in particular disciplines. As the demand for student-financed education has steadily increased, HEIs have sought new ‘revenue streams’ to attract fee-paying students with concerns that the emphasis on increasing fee-based revenues sometimes supersedes attention to the academic quality of the courses being taught. Various study formats – full-time, part time and evening classes – attract different types of students (Figure 5), and international students who often pay more unless they benefit from a bilateral agreement between countries co-sponsoring a university.

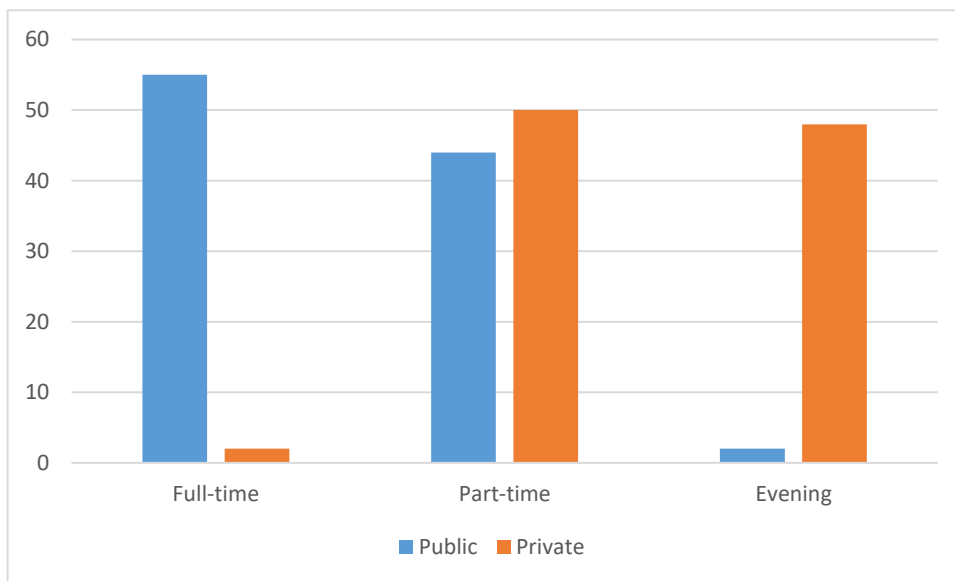


Figure 5. Part-time and full-time, day and evening-class students (NSC 2014a)

This form of educational commodification has been intensified as universities seek new means of financial survival in the absence of adequate state funding (Morgan, Kniazev and Kulikova 2004). In contrast to the internally differentiated Soviet system of universities in which each institution served a particular function in relation to the others, many HEIs now thus offer a range of similar programs with minor modifications. For example, new disciplines which are associated with (or presumed to be associated with) market economics quickly gained prestige after independence, with economics, management, law, international relations, psychology and foreign languages becoming oversubscribed as students and their families believed these professional qualifications would be lucrative; at the same time, HEIs have struggled to recruit and retain students for technical or teaching courses despite the allocation of state scholarships in such fields (Figure 6).

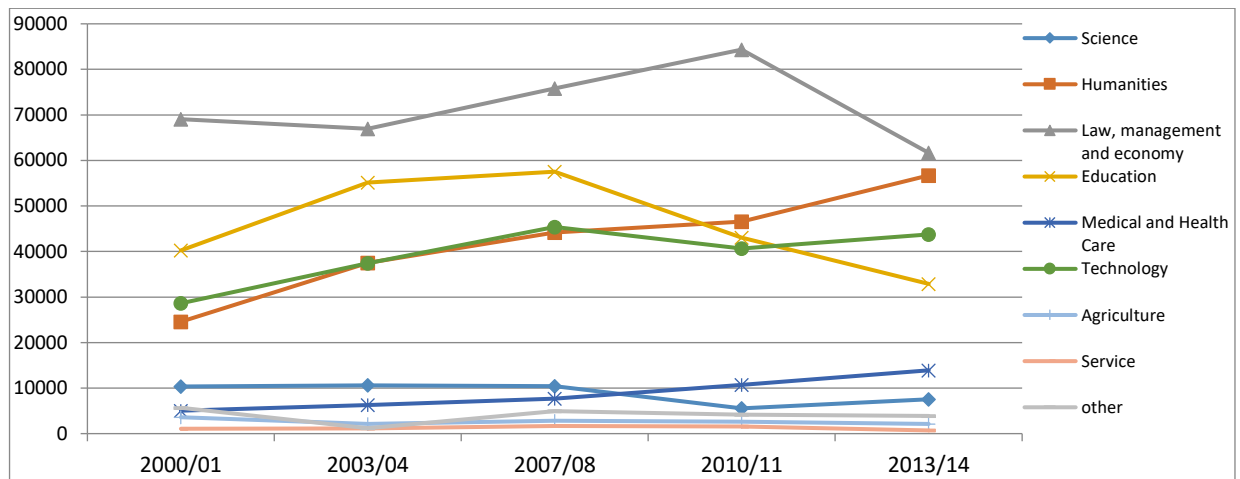


Figure 6. Dynamics of higher education enrollment by fields of study, 2000–2014 (NSC 2008; NSC 2015)

This has created a problem of saturation in particular fields of study, in which universities educate more specialists than can be employed in a field and lead students to select courses of study instrumentally. By 2015, the state had already closed 23 university branches because they were deemed to be systemic ‘duplications’ (Bengard 2015). While the expansion of educational programs after independence was initially a process of diversification, in other words, the unfolding of this processes within a commercialized and marketized environment created a high degree of homogeneity across the system.

The Higher Education landscape in contemporary Kyrgyzstan

After independence, new legal and policy frameworks for university governance, financing, staffing, and educational programming created conditions for complicated new patterns of differentiation, diversification and homogenization among higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan.

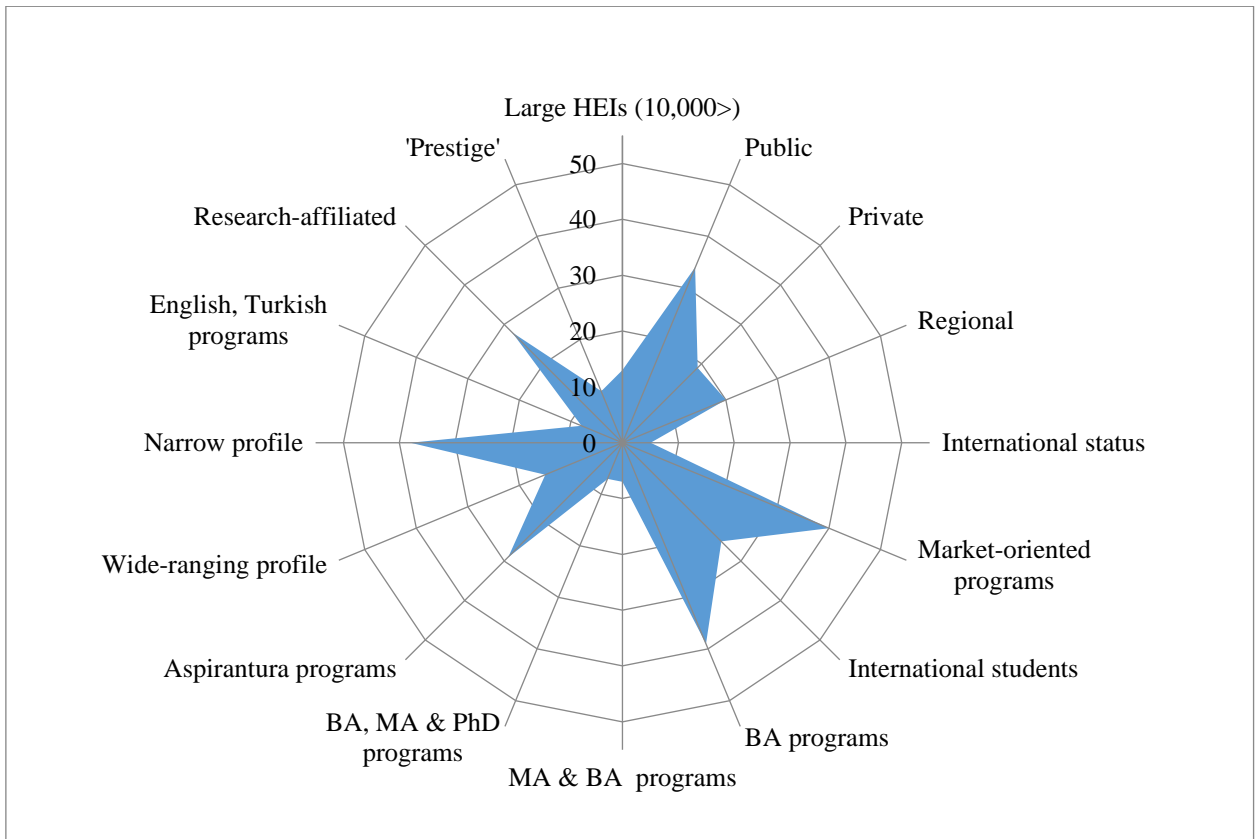


Figure 7. The HEI landscape in Kyrgyzstan, 2015

The system of higher education now consists of 52 public and private HEIs under the MoES: 3 technical and technological (“specialized”, or “profiled”) universities under the MoES; 1 medical university and 4 medical and healthcare institutes as a branches of 2 public and 2 private HEIs, under the Ministry of Health; 1 agrarian institution, under the Ministry of Agriculture; 3 institutions in Arts and Culture, under the Ministry of Culture; 2 institutions in “state security,” under the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Emergency Situations; 1 university in Sports and Tourism, under the State Agency for Youth, Physical Culture and Sports of the Kyrgyz Republic; 1 diplomatic academy and international relationship academy, under the Ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs); 1 Academy of Management, with the President’s Administration; and 1 institute for social work and development, under the Ministry of Labor, Migration and Youth (Table 5, Figure 7).

Institutional type (number)	Historical status	Description of institutional type	Selected examples
Leading state comprehensive HEIs (2)	Soviet-era HEI type	The oldest universities in Kyrgyzstan, these have strong bases in both applied and fundamental research. They offer a diverse spectrum of undergraduate, graduate, doctoral and specialized degree programs and are affiliated with other research and educational institutions, colleges and regional branches. They are the major providers of candidate (PhD) and doctoral (DSc) degrees. These universities also have the largest student bodies.	Kyrgyz National University named after J. Balasagyn (30,000 students) Osh State University (29,000 students) former Osh pedagogical state Institute
Leading, specialized public HEIs (6)	Soviet-era HEI type	These ‘profiled’ HEIs carry out a broad range of specialist training at all levels of higher education (BA, MA, PhD, DSc) and in-service training, and conduct fundamental and applied scientific research in specific areas. They include research and educational institutions, research centers and colleges. Student bodies range from 10,000 to 20,000.	Kyrgyz Technical University (19,000 students) Kyrgyz State University n.a. I. Arabaeva (17,000 students) Kyrgyz State University of Construction, Transport and Architecture (12,000 students) Bishkek Humanities University (10000 students)
Narrowly profiled state HEIs (10)	Soviet-era HEI type and Post Soviet-era HEI type	These leading ‘profiled’ HEIs carry out narrow specialist training at all levels of higher education and conduct fundamental and (primarily) applied scientific research in specific fields. They offer BA, MA, and PhD level programs, including aspirantura and doctorantura degrees. Some HEIs, such as the Kyrgyz State Juridical Academy and Kyrgyz Economic University, changed their status by re-organizing HEIs of the Soviet period.	Kyrgyz State Juridical Academy (8,000 students) Kyrgyz state Agrarian University (7,000 students) Kyrgyz Medical Academy (4,000 students) Kyrgyz Economic University (4,600 students) The Kyrgyz State Academy of Physical Education

			and Sport (1,700 students)
	Soviet-era HEI type	Two military HEIs have a specific public function and offer training programs focused on military services. They require students to pass a special aptitude test as part of their admission process, and are affiliated with military ministries and state bodies.	Academy of the Ministry of Interior of the Kyrgyz Republic n.a. E. Aliev The Military Institute Of the Armed Forces of the Kyrgyz Republic n.a. K. Usenbekova
	Soviet-era HEI type	Three arts-focused HEIs offer programs in the arts, music, painting, sculpture, acting and other related specialties. They offer undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate programs in these areas.	Kyrgyz National Conservatory n.a. K. Moldobosanov (200 students) National Academy of Arts of the Kyrgyz Republic n.a. the Academic T.Sadykov Kyrgyz State University of Arts n.a. B. Beishenalieva
Regional leading public universities (5)	Soviet-era HEI type	These universities are leading regional HEIs offering a wide range of programs at all levels, with the PhD being the highest award possible. They have a regional rather than international focus and conduct primarily applied research.	Osh Technical Universities (11,000 students) Jalal-Abad State University (16,000 students)
Regional specialized small HEIs (9)	Post-Soviet HEI type	In this category of teaching-focused institutions are <i>technikums</i> or HEI branches established during the Soviet period, comprehensive state universities and specialized institutions, and 2 autonomous HEIs.	Talas State University (3,000 students) Naryn State University (3,600 students)
Private comprehensive universities (18), including private international HEIs (7)	Post-Soviet HEI type	Private leading universities offer a wide range of programs focused on market demands for education, primarily in the areas of Economics, Management, Law and Social Science. This type includes international institutions such as the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) and the University of Ala-Too	International Academy of Management, Law, Finance and Business (3,000 students)

		Ata Turk, which are regarded as prestigious despite charging high educational fees (e.g., \$7,000/year at AUCA).	Bishkek Academy of Finance and Economics (1,500 students) International University for Innovation Technologies (3,800 students)
Leading comprehensive international universities (2)	Post -Soviet-era HEI type	These institutions, which work under agreement with two national governments, are highly prestigious and have strong educational infrastructures. They are funded by the Kyrgyz government with considerable funding from a foreign government. Both universities offer a wide range programs at BA, MA and PhD levels. They are top choices for students with the best National Test scores. KTU ‘Manas’ offers only scholarship-study programs, while KRSU offers a small number of scholarships with a larger number of study programs being tuition-fee based.	Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University (11,000 students) KTU “Manas” (4,800 students)

Table 5. Classification of Higher Education institutions in Kyrgyzstan, 2015

Figure 6 represents the current landscape of HEIs in Kyrgyzstan, illustrating each element of external and internal change which has been discussed previously in this chapter. This new landscape includes both historical and newly established public and private universities as well as HEIs which have been created by transforming technical institutes into universities. It also includes a number of institutions with new ‘joint’ forms of governance, such as those which are regulated by both the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science and other government ministries, and joint-national universities such as the Kyrgyz–Russian (Slavic) and Kyrgyz–Turkish Manas universities. The two oldest universities in Kyrgyzstan are the largest, having had many years to build their material and academic infrastructure. Leading specialized public HEIs that have been working since the Soviet period have also had more opportunities and resources (such as space, staff and students) and some of them changed their statuses to develop in comparison with newly emerged private institutions, and, after the collapse of the Soviet Union these institutions used their advantages to become leading HEIs in their areas of specialization. Private HEIs are comparatively small and still need buildings and finance to operate. Regional HEIs, with the exception of the state universities (e.g., in Issyk Kul and Djalal-Abad), have developed from what were vocational institutions in regional branches of state HEIs and asserted their independence when education was redefined as a profit-making service in order to recruit local students. Leading comprehensive international universities work under bilateral agreements and are mainly funded by foreign countries. These universities build the landscape of HEIs in Kyrgyzstan.

Conclusion

For twenty-five years, higher education institutions in independent, post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan have undergone rapid, complex changes which are shaped by wider national and global projects to

overhaul the social functions, financing, organizational structure and intellectual content of higher education itself. The 1992 law 'On Education' was particularly influential in that it encouraged the creation or annexation of new public and private institutions, including 'international' or joint-governmental universities, which are neither dedicated to specific political and economic functions as in the Soviet system nor reliant on state funding for their survival. Yet the expansion of the system from 12 to 52 HEIs (at the time of writing) has not implied an immediate or totalizing diversification of institutional forms. For example, many of the country's original universities and institutes are still operating today (even if in altered form and under different names), and both Soviet and Bologna degree structures remain in operation across the sector. The development of higher education in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, while a process of expansion and diversification, remains located within historical and emergent hierarchies which separate older from newer, central from regional, public from private, generalized from specialized, larger from smaller, richer from poorer, and (increasingly) internationally-connected from regionally-oriented institutions.

These processes have been driven by economic, political and cultural reform agendas which seek to shift from state to private funding for higher education; to create economic and political mechanisms of competition for students, resources and prestige; and to transform higher education from a public system into a field of autonomous entities which compete for revenue and prestige through the sale of commodified teaching and research products, goods or services (Amsler 2008, 2013). Within this framework, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science officially regulates the functions of individual HEIs through its licensing and accreditation mechanisms (although deregulation of 'attestation' has been proposed, see Merrill 2016) and maintains control over some processes of institutional diversification such as the functional and hierarchical distinction between elite (PhD-awarding, state-scholarship recruiting) and non-elite (BA-awarding, 'contract'-focused) institutions. At the same time, externally-inspired reforms such as the US-led institutionalization of the National Scholarship Test and the government's ambition to participate in the European Bologna Process framework have introduced new forces of systemic homogeneity and convergence, largely by introducing and harmonizing mechanisms for 'quality control' in HEIs, and through this also producing new distinctions (e.g. between HEIs which are more or less compliant, connected to European projects, etc.). As elsewhere in the world, HEIs in Kyrgyzstan are poised between 'differentiation and compliance' in the 'search for legitimacy' that will 'make themselves different to elude competition' (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013, p. 160).

Yet for individual institutions, within this general context differentiation, diversification and market-led specialization is primarily a strategy for survival. As the public budget for higher education has been reduced and HEIs are forced to recruit greater numbers of fee-paying students in order to survive and thrive, they are under pressure to diversify and commodify the form and substance of their activities often regardless of whether such quantitative expansion enhances or damages the quality of educational activities and relationships. In this sense, they follow a familiar cross-national pattern in which universities are 'compelled...to start positioning themselves, by constructing portfolios through setting priorities and a more explicit focus on specific competencies' (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013, p. 157). However, as illustrated by the ballooning of student applications for and programs dedicated to 'market-oriented disciplines' promising (often elusive) individual return and the simultaneous difficulty of recruiting and retaining students to government scholarship-funded programs in core fields such as teacher training, this process in Kyrgyzstan may be more akin to 'traditional positioning in for-profit sectors' (ibid., p. 160; Amsler 2011). In a competitive context where the most marketable niche to occupy is the capacity to occupy a range of marketable niches, the institutions with the greatest resources to do so – accumulated historically, by association with governmental and international power, or through reputation and prestige – have the most capacity for differentiating themselves strategically. This, in addition to the traditional forces of state and market, may have a significant impact on the further development of Kyrgyzstan's higher education landscape for the foreseeable future.

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