

Faculty Professionalization in Kazakh Higher Education: Barriers and Possibilities

Timothy C. Caboni
Higher Education Leadership and Policy Program
Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations
Vanderbilt University
tim.caboni@vanderbilt.edu

Michael K. McLendon
Higher Education Leadership and Policy Program
Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations
Vanderbilt University
michael.k.mclendon@vanderbilt.edu

Nataliya Rummyantseva
Higher Education Leadership and Policy Program
Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations
Vanderbilt University
nataliya.rummyantseva@vanderbilt.edu

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Introduction

Following the political changes a decade ago, all new nations in the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe entered similar transitions to market economies and open societies. The five republics in Central Asia, however, faced an additional challenge: having been incorporated by force into the Soviet Union early in the 20th century, none had experienced independence in the modern era.

Higher Education in Kazakhstan faces several challenges as it transitions to a market economy. The challenges include diversifying institutional revenue sources, competing with other institutions for new students, fostering curricular and academic innovation, rooting out system-wide corruption, and adapting to a new, less centrally controlled, regulatory environment. This last challenge is of particular importance and consequence to the functioning of higher education in Kazakhstan. During the Soviet era higher education in Kazakhstan was as centrally planned as the nation's command economy (McLendon, in press). Central ministries of state held near-monopolistic control over university curriculum, pedagogy, finance, and governance. However, over the past decade the nation has adopted several important finance and governance reforms that shift some of the control over the curriculum and academic matters from central ministries to universities and their faculties. In effect, universities now have far greater control than they did just five- or ten-years ago over their academic programs. Hence, faculty members are likely to play an important role in Kazakhstan's higher education transition. Specifically, the *professionalization* and *self-regulation* of the academic profession in Kazakhstan will play an important role as Kazakh institutions begin to function autonomously from the Ministry of Education.

Conceptual Framework

Professions ensure that members adhere to the ideal of service through the use of formal and informal social control mechanisms (Braxton, 1986; Braxton, Bayer & Finkelstein, 1992; Bucher and Strauss, 1961; Goode, 1957). Goode (1957) suggests these rules are taught to new members of a profession through the socialization process. These social control mechanisms define what behaviors by members of a profession are appropriate and inappropriate.

Formal Social Control Mechanisms

One marker of the degree of professionalism an occupation has attained is the existence of a code of conduct (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Barber, 1962; Harries-Jenkins, 1970; Abbott, 1983). Published codes of ethics by which professionals are expected to abide are an example of a formal social control mechanism. These codes assist a profession in attaining professional autonomy and self-regulation (Cohen & Pant, 1991). They also serve as a measuring stick against which members of a profession may judge the relative impropriety of certain demands (Frankel, 1989). “Through its ethical code, a profession’s commitment to the social welfare becomes a matter of public record, thereby insuring for itself the continued confidence of the community” (Greenwood, 1966, p. 14).

Informal Social Control Mechanisms

In the absence of formal social control mechanisms, faculty must rely upon informal mechanisms to ensure that members of the profession are conforming to what are considered appropriate behaviors. Carlin (1966) and Friedson (1975) found that informal rules are more important social control mechanisms than formal controls.

Norms are one mechanism through which professions self regulate using informal social controls. Norms are shared beliefs about how an individual should act in a particular situation (Merton, 1968, 1973). Merton (1957, 1968) suggests that norms function as mechanisms of social control because they consist of prescribed and proscribed patterns of behavior. This concept is derived from Durkheim's (1951) statement that the natural human condition is unregulated passion, whereas conforming requires social regulation. Without a normative structure, individuals in the profession would be free to act as they saw fit, with individuals deciding for themselves what behaviors constituted appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Additionally, "norms assure that professional choices adhere to the ideal of service" (Braxton and Bayer, 1999, p. 4). By self-regulating, a profession communicates to its members the necessity of stewarding the welfare of its clients. Goode (1969) suggests that the mastery of a basic body of abstract knowledge and the ideal of service to clients are the two core traits which define professions. Those occupations which possess these two traits may legitimately claim professional status (Goode, 1969). Goode (1969) suggests that members of a profession must base their individual decisions on what will serve the needs and protect the welfare of their clients.

In the U.S., faculty members possess a great deal of autonomy in the conduct of their professional duties. They are also responsible to multiple clients, two of which are the knowledge base and the student (Braxton and Bayer, 1999; Fox and Braxton, 1994; Hackett, 1994; Braxton, 1991). Braxton (1991) notes that that "the academic profession allocates rewards to those who adhere to these norms and sanctions those who deviate from them" (p.88).

Research Questions

This paper addresses two research questions. First, it answers, *What is the state of the academic profession within the Republic of Kazakhstan's current higher education policy environment?* And second, *What are the challenges facing the academic profession as the country considers nationwide policy innovations?*

Research question one addresses the formal structure of the academic profession in Kazakhstan. Faculty responsibility for curriculum planning, textbook selection, and recruitment are addressed. The current state of academic professionalization is also discussed.

Research question two deals with the potential for policy changes within the Kazakh system of higher education and how the academic profession might adapt to a different environment. The authors detail the need for faculty self-regulation and professionalization, and describe the systemic barriers to professionalism. Finally, the system of strong centralized control and its relationship to faculty work are discussed.

Data Collection

The interviews for this project were conducted at three Kazakh institutions: Kainar University, the first private university authorized to operate in Kazakhstan; Kazakhstan National Technical University, the nation's most prestigious source of postsecondary training in the fields of engineering, science, mathematics and in many related fields (e.g., petroleum sciences and engineering); and, East Kazakhstan State University, a former teacher's college and now comprehensive institution located in the Northeast of the country, in the heart of the Soviet space and technical industry. The three institutions selected for participation in this project are representative of the diversity found in the higher education system of Kazakhstan.

The data emerged out of a technical assistance project sponsored by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs of the U. S. Department of State. This project has paired Vanderbilt University with the three Kazakh universities over a period of three years. Data collection occurred during a training seminar for Kazakh university officials at Vanderbilt in the spring of 2002 and 2003, and through field visits by the authors to each of the universities in Kazakhstan in the summers of 2002 and 2003, and took the form of 100 interviews with faculty and staff of the three site institutions and analysis of institutional and state documents.

Institutional Settings

Kainar University

The first institution we visited is Kainar University, a private institution located in Almaty. Within Kazakh higher education, private refers to individually owned and operated institutions which operate with the goal of generating a profit for the owner(s), similar to U.S. for-profit enterprises. Kainar University was founded in 1991 and was the first private higher education institution licensed by the Ministry of Education. The university has seven academic departments which offer a variety of liberal arts degrees at both the graduate and undergraduate level.

Kainar enrolls more than 7,000 students in its academic programs. However, approximately 2500 study at the main campus in Almaty. The remainder of enrollees attends branch campuses located around Kazakhstan. The university has 3,800 alumni who have received degrees over the 10-year history of the institution. For the purpose of this paper, attention is focused on faculty activities on the main campus. Kainar employs 260 faculty in Almaty. Of those, 54 are full professors and 126 are assistant professors.

Kazakh National Technical University (KazNTU)

The second university included in our visits is Kazakh National Technical University, also located in Almaty. This institution primarily prepares students in engineering, geology and other technical fields. The university is divided into six institutes, which include geology and oil-gas business; mechanical engineering, technology and ecology; and computer science and information technology. The university is the only technical institute which has received the national designation from the Ministry of Education, which gives it a competitive advantage over its peers.

KazNTU has an enrolment of just over 12,000 students. Of these, approximately 10,000 are full-time day students and 2,000 are correspondence students. The university offers undergraduate and graduate degrees, including both masters and Ph.D. degrees. There are 996 faculty members employed by the university, of which 109 are doctors of science and professors, and 435 are candidates of science.

East Kazakhstan State University (EKSU)

The final university selected for study is East Kazakhstan State University, located in Ust-Kamenogorsk. The institution is 50 years old and was originally founded as a pedagogical institute. In 1991, the institution was transformed from a teacher-training institute into EKSU. The university is divided into 7 institutes which cover a broad array of disciplines including business and law, philology and journalism; history, psychology and culture; natural sciences, ecology and medicine. The university employs over 900 faculty members, of whom 40 are professors or doctors of science; and 200 are candidates and senior lecturers.

The university enrolls over 8,000 students and has over 40,000 alumni who have received degrees from the institution. The university offers undergraduate and graduate degrees through the Ph.D., and conferred over 1,800 degrees in 2001-02. The university also operates four residence halls for students, which contributes to campus life.

Findings

The discussion of faculty in Kazakhstan is divided into two sections. The first section includes a discussion of faculty roles and responsibilities within the current regulatory environment. This includes an exploration of faculty professionalization compared to the markers of a profession. The second section addresses issues of how faculty might move toward professionalization in the current policy context.

Faculty Roles and Responsibilities

Curriculum Development and Oversight

Traditionally, local institutions had little ability to modify their curriculum to meet changing demands from the market. The Ministry of Education centrally approved each specialization offered by an institution, and there was little deviation across institutions in the composition of academic specializations or in the content of courses within those specializations—courses offered in the same major at different institutions had identical content regardless of the instructor. Integral to this system was the concept of the “State Standards”—that the central education ministry, working through committees of experts representing each of the various approved fields of study in the country, established specific nation-wide guidelines regarding course content and pedagogy. Additionally, within each

approved specialization, there is a detailed plan of required courses and textbooks dictated by the central ministry. Under this centralized model, the emphasis was upon standardization and formalization of curriculum content in the belief that academic “quality” was best assured through a system of rigidly prescriptive, universal curriculum guidelines. State Standards exist for all 226 approved specialties offered at public and private higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. For each specialization, the State Standards specify, in precise terms, the appropriate learning objectives, the number of courses required for certification, the substantive content of courses, textbooks that are to be used, course sequence, the number of classroom contact hours, the number of hours students should expect to study in a week, maximum course load per academic term, the specific jobs for which students may be eligible following graduation, and the skills and knowledge employers should expect of employees who have been certified in a given specialization (McLendon, in press).

During the late 1990s, Kazakhstan adopted a series of reforms granting institutions greater control over their curricula. For example, one such experiment allows universities to petition the government to substitute other courses for those required in a given specialty, up to 30% of the total specialty requirement. Yet, despite this and other reforms, the central government’s control over curriculum in Kazakhstan remains firm, with important consequences for the ability of faculty to develop professional attributes. By design, Kazakhstan’s highly rigid and prescriptive system leaves little room for faculty creativity, innovation, or personalizing of teaching and learning processes. Many faculty, thus, view themselves as clerks or government bureaucrats, taking class attendance, delivering scripted lectures, monitoring student compliance with academic regulations, and following strict guidelines about course content and pedagogy. Except in isolated instances, university faculty (either individually or corporately, at the

institution level) do not have independent authority to identify learning objectives, to set expectations for the intellectual -development of students, to design their own course syllabi, or to deliver lectures in ways that align the personal strengths of faculty with the particular developmental needs of students. Additionally, the highly bureaucratized nature of higher education curricula in Kazakhstan also impeded the ability of institutions to develop new degree programs, to align their curricula more closely with the changing labor market, to respond to student demand, or to forge institutional partnerships with universities both within and without Kazakhstan.

The centralization of curricular responsibility removes much of the oversight function typically assigned to faculty in more decentralized systems. In addition, as some studies of professions note, stripping professionals of professional authority, bureaucratization and rationalization of academic activities leads to major changes in the profession itself, such as deprofessionalization of faculty and erosion of professional norms. (Debber, 1982; Roberts & Donahue, 2000).

Faculty Employment and Salaries

At both state institutions visited, faculty salaries are set by the Ministry of Education according to a civil-service salary schedule, and determined by two criteria: length of tenure and degree possessed. The Ministry of Education through agreement with the Ministry of Labor approves budget expenditures for teaching staff of public institutions. Additionally, the total number of professors and instructors in public institutions is determined by formula based upon student teacher ratios (IIEP, 2001). Prescribed norms for student/faculty ratios are 8:1 for daytime education, 16:1 for evening education and 32:1 for correspondence education (IIEP, 2001). Yearly salary increases are incremental and determined centrally. The Rector set salaries

and salary increases of Faculty members at Kainar University. Additionally, decisions regarding promotion fall under the purview of the Rector of each institution.

The central control of faculty pay removes the ability of state institutions to reward those faculty who demonstrate outstanding performance. Also, because the sole criteria for pay increases is length of tenure, most state institutions cannot offer any salary incentives to encourage increased productivity or outstanding achievement by faculty. For example, because faculty salaries are set according to years of experience, universities are limited in their ability to recruit faculty from other institutions who might exhibit preeminence in their field or to attract to academe those from industry or other sectors of the economy, where labor is far better paid. Many faculty have left academic jobs for better paying jobs elsewhere in the economy. Low pay also has diminished the number of young graduates pursuing academic careers, and has accelerated the flow of those faculty to jobs outside academe. The dearth of supply in young academicians has left universities with few alternatives but to hire pensioners that are returning to the workforce because of the reduced value of their state pensions under recent inflationary pressures. Unfortunately for Kainar University, because of small enrollment and low tuition, the institution cannot exploit its competitive advantage to pay salaries without input from the Ministry.

Another issue raised by salaries is the need of many faculty to teach at multiple institutions to piece together an adequate salary. In 1999 (World Bank, 2002) the average net salary of an assistant professor teaching at a public Kazakh university was 8,320 tenge (about 53 US Dollars). Because of the comparatively low salaries earned by university professors, individuals may be employed by several universities. This becomes additionally problematic when the individuals are hired by competing institutions to teach identical courses. These

conditions create problems involving intellectual property rights because it is unclear which university, among the several for which a faculty member might work, owns the intellectual products deriving from the faculty member's scholarship.

Faculty Professionalization

As previously discussed, professions possess a number of characteristics and traits. These include: an extensive period of training and socialization, the possession of a systematic body of theory, the formation of professional associations, the existence of a code of conduct.

Additionally, members of a profession adhere to an ideal of service, and conduct their work with autonomy from external review (Goode, 1969). Faculty members at Kazakh institutions of higher education possess few of these markers. Specifically, faculty lack the following: a professional association, a formal code of conduct, self-regulation of peers, and autonomy in decision-making.

Professional Association

Faculty in Kazakhstan have no national organization to represent the professional interests of its members. As a result, faculty have no unified voice with which to speak when addressing to issues of compensation, dismissal, curricular control, or other issues central to faculty life.

Absence of a Code of Conduct

No code of conduct for academics exists in Kazakhstan. This is not surprising, due to the lack of a professional association for faculty. As a result, no formal nationwide sanctioning

process for faculty misconduct exists. The lack of a clearly delineated set of activities which faculty should avoid in the conduct of their duties may also hinder the development of informal proscriptive norms, which typically flow from, or mirror established formal codes of conduct (Braxton, et.al., 1999).

Without a nationwide code, the responsibility for sanctioning falls to individual institutions. However, only one institution we visited had developed a code of conduct for faculty. When we asked for a copy of the code, the institution refused our request. As a follow-up, we inquired about how individual faculty knew about the code and were told, “They just know.” In other cases we were told that faculty’s code of conduct is equivalent to criminal or civilian code of conduct specified by state laws and regulations and therefore, there is no need to communicate it to faculty members. Administrators at one university we visited informed us that some behavioral rules for faculty members are specified in each individual contract that every faculty member signs upon employment. Access to such contracts is restricted and whatever code is specified is not made public for all participants of the university.

Limited Autonomy

As described earlier, faculty have little autonomy in the conduct of their courses. Details, such as material to be covered within specific courses, are dictated by the Ministry of Education. The courses to be taught within a particular program of study are also articulated by the Ministry. There is very little room for variation within these centrally designed curriculum.

Goode (1969) suggests that members of a profession must base their individual decisions on what will serve the needs and protect the welfare of their clients. However, because the

system provides such limited flexibility, faculty decision-making is driven less out of a concern for students and more by a desire to adhere to centrally prescribed curricular standards.

Inadequate Compensation

Faculty pay is also dictated centrally. In a system which is similar to some nations' civil service systems, faculty are rewarded not for performance, but rather for length of employment. Additionally, there is no incentive-pay available to reward outstanding faculty members. Because of the low wages and lack of incentive to perform, some faculty turn to the practice of selling grades in order to supplement their income. Widespread corruption is a problem and poses a threat to the legitimacy of higher education within Kazakhstan.

Discussion and Implications

As outlined above, Kazakh faculty are not entrusted with curricular oversight in their institutions. Faculty promotion is decided upon centrally by government ministers, as are salary schedules for faculty at state institutions. The highly centralized nature of faculty roles and worklife in Kazakhstan has led to a deprofessionalization of faculty in that nation. In contrast with their counterparts in many other nations, faculty in Kazakhstan lack a professional identity, this condition evidenced by the absence of faculty professional associations, the absence of a code of conduct (both nationally and institutionally) through which faculty self-regulate, and the severe limits placed upon faculty autonomy by external regulators.

Recent market-reforms, however, may exacerbate, rather than mitigate, those underlying conditions leading to corruption in Kazakh higher education. As institutions respond to market pressures by adopting various systemic and institutional policy innovations, the lack of faculty

professionalization poses serious issues for higher education in Kazakhstan. The primary concern is that without formal mechanisms to ensure conformity to professional standards of behavior, any autonomy granted to faculty could result in an increase of inappropriate behaviors. This is particularly problematic when coupled with the high level of corruption that is already pervasive within Kazakh higher education. Currently, there is widespread perception among the public that higher education in Kazakhstan is corrupt. Respondents in a recent World Bank study of corruption (2002) reported that the only state sector to which bribes were paid more than education was the traffic police. Twenty-five percent of those participating in the study report “making an unofficial payment that was in some ways a bribe” (World Bank, 2002, p. 26). When asked to explain why they paid bribes to universities and their agents, 69 percent responded that the main reason is to gain admittance to study at university. Additionally, it is not uncommon for students to pay faculty members for course grades; some 10-percent of respondents to the 2002 World Bank survey reported having paid bribes to university officials in exchange for a better grade. The frequency of this practice is directly related to the low level of faculty salaries and the erosion in living standards experienced by members of the professoriate in Kazakhstan. Thus, one alternative to teaching at multiple institutions (or to leaving the professoriate) is for one to accept bribes from students to supplement one’s income. The practice creates an insidious cycle of corruption because the public’s perception that grades do not accurately reflect student knowledge and performance undermines confidence in the concept of merit, thus encouraging the use of bribes in post-graduate placement and beyond. The same set of issues also may be seen in the admissions process, where a lack of confidence in the reliability of scores on entrance examinations leads students, examiners, and university personnel to resort to illegal and unethical economic transactions as students attempt to buy their way into higher education.

Recommendations

As higher education in Kazakhstan continues its transition toward more market-oriented features, we recommend several steps to help move the academic profession toward the status of an “emerging profession.” First, faculty should consider forming a national professional organization to represent their interests with the ministry of education and other policymaking bodies at the national level. This body should be viewed merely as a “union” representing faculty’s economic interests, but also one whose central purpose is that of raising public consciousness about the difficult conditions Kazakh higher education faces, particularly the conditions that foster academic-related misconduct, impropriety, and illegality by university constituencies and personnel. Second, faculty should work toward the drafting and adoption of a professional code of conduct, which would include sanctions for violations by members. While this would ideally occur through a national professional organization, such as the kind mentioned above, faculty at individual institutions could also adopt codes of ethics for their own university. Third, a shift in the organizational culture of higher education institutions may aid in faculty professionalization. If administrators were to adopt a more participatory leadership, perhaps faculty involvement in university affairs would increase. Finally, higher education institutions should strive to increase faculty salaries through revenue diversification strategies. By generating revenue beyond student-paid tuition and fees, universities may increase budgets and, as a result, have the capacity to increase faculty salaries. These strategies of diversification might include soliciting voluntary support, developing relationships with local corporations, and maintaining contact with alumni for the express purpose of increasing university coffers (Caboni, forthcoming).

Future Research

The issues discussed in this paper suggest two research projects which would assist in a more full understanding of faculty roles in Kazakh higher education. First, an exploration of faculty perceptions of corruption could be undertaken to shed additional light on the problem. Particular attention might be focused on the frequency of these events, the perceived harm they cause to the educational system, and faculty perspectives on how they might be eliminated or reduced. Second, a detailed examination of faculty behaviors relating to teaching and research could help to uncover informal norms which guide and shape faculty actions. Once identified, these norms could form the basis of a code of conduct for faculty in higher education.

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