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Internationalization of Higher Education in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The process of globalization in the world has induced intensification of economic, political and cultural contacts among the nations of the world and education is not immune from this process of internationalization.

Nowadays tertiary institutions in Kazakhstan have signed Memoranda on mutual understanding and cooperation with foreign universities. Implementation of these agreements has revealed a lot of issues to be discussed and solved: for example, the details of the regulation on students exchange programs, short-term and long-term faculty exchange and other issues. We propose to discuss these issues with other colleagues at the conference.

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Key words: Internationalization of Education, education quality, mobility of scholars, exchange programs

1. Introduction

The background: As the tertiary educational institutions in Kazakhstan are undergoing a process of integration into the global education market we have chosen this issue as the main topic of our Doctorate research. We have documented some case studies of the internationalization process and some of the challenges in implementing the provisions of the Bologna agreement. After interviewing international colleagues with salient experiences, we propose solutions for these challenges.

Purpose of study: to research the internationalization process in education worldwide and in the Republic of Kazakhstan in order to recommend improvements for the educational system in our country.

2. Internationalization processes in the Kazakhstani higher education system

The internationalization of education is the process of including various international aspects in the research, teaching and administrative activities of educational institutions of different levels.

The internationalization process involves:

- students: recruitment of foreign students, the organization of exchange programs, as well as individual student mobility;

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- faculty: faculty exchange, joint research programs, training in foreign universities, joint training programs, the organization of intensive courses and summer schools;
- certification issues, the recognition and measurement: issue of "double" diplomas, credit system, and the international recognition of education, assessment of the quality of education;
- international cooperation: exchange programs for the administration and management of human and material resources, consulting and information services, and the evaluation procedure and infrastructure.

The successful resolution of the internationalization of the educational institution depends on the mutual efforts and close cooperation of the participants - managers and teaching staff of educational institutions, departments, and faculties. At the same time, the process of internationalization of each educational institution depends on its features and should be related and consistent with the educational mission of the institution, its personnel and financial resources, physical facilities, scientific potential, the number of students, and other key components of a strategic plan for the development of the educational institution.

To explore aspects of internationalization, we studied the level of awareness of students and professors about the process of education internationalization. We conducted a sociological survey and interviewed 126 students and lecturers from Zhezkazgan Baikonurov University and Zhetysu State University named after I. Zhansugurov. For the interview we used a questionnaire developed by Guncherenok (2000)

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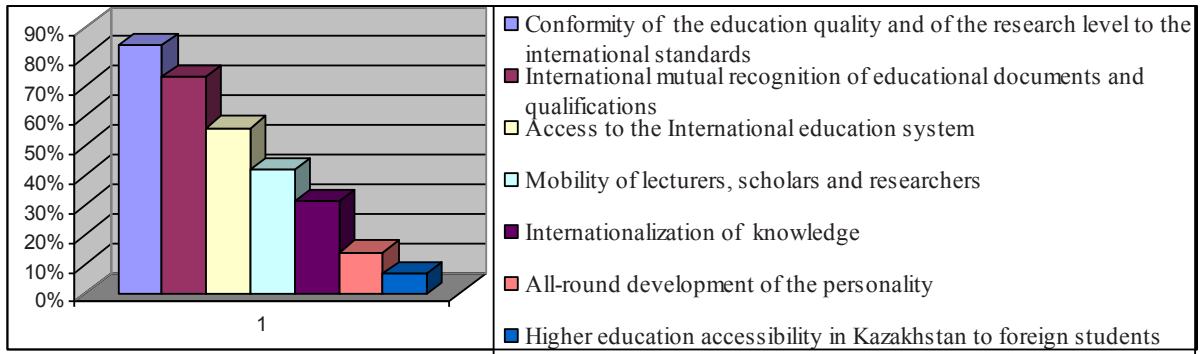
The survey results revealed that only 37% of students knew about the internationalization of education, and 61% of lecturers could explain the essence of the internationalization process. Nearly half (47%) of respondents consider the internationalization of education as an importance task for the university, but only 12% relate it to the top priority. Among faculty, 39% said that the internationalization of education is not a priority, and 21% could not make decision. The level of their understanding of the process of internationalization of education may be judged by the fact that most respondents left their answer blank for the open-ended question: "internationalization of education - is ... (continue sentence)" .

Analysis of the results shows some differences between respondent's ideal for the internationalization of education and their experience in the current Kazakhstani context. This discrepancy was recorded in response to the questions: "What principles do you think should be the basis for the process of internationalization?" and "What are the challenges of internationalization in your university (select three of the most important things)." The answers to the first question (in descending order) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. "What principles do you think, should be the basis for the process of internationalization?"

Conformity of the education quality and of the research level to the international standards	84%
International mutual recognition of educational documents and qualifications	73%
Access to the International education system	56%
Mobility of lecturers, scholars and researchers	42%
Internationalization of knowledge	31%
All-round development of the personality	14%
Higher education accessibility in Kazakhstan to foreign students	7%

Figure 1. "What principles do you think, should be the basis for the process of internationalization?"



Thus, we can say that the staff of the universities understand how to change the organization of the educational process to increase its internationalization. Among these factors the qualitative changes in education take the first position. In our opinion, this shows the understanding that the integration of educational spaces is a key aspect of internationalization.

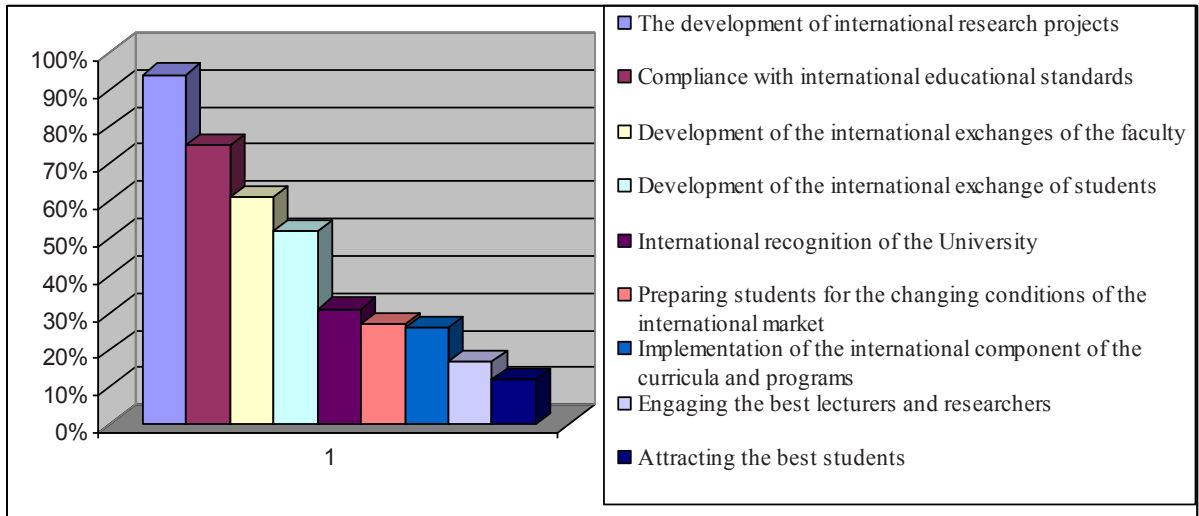
This conclusion is confirmed by the responses to the question: In what direction should the internationalization of higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan develop? 67% of respondents called internationalization of the curriculum and program development as the main line, access to the international market of educational services and technologies was pointed out by 49%, and access to the European system of mutual offsets of taken courses was highlighted by 41% of respondents.

However, it is noteworthy that access to higher education in Kazakhstan for foreign nationals deemed significant for only 7% of respondents. In our opinion, this is an indirect recognition of the fact that the Kazakhstani higher education system as a whole is not considered by the respondents as integrated in the international educational space.

Table 2. "What are the main objectives of the internationalization process at your university?"

The development of international research projects	94%
Compliance with international educational standards	75%
Development of the international exchanges of the faculty	61%
Development of the international exchange of students	52%
International recognition of the University	31%
Preparing students for the changing conditions of the international market	27%
Implementation of the international component of the curricula and programs	26%
Engaging the best lecturers and researchers	17%
Attracting the best students	12%

Figure 2. "What are the main objectives of the internationalization process at your university?"



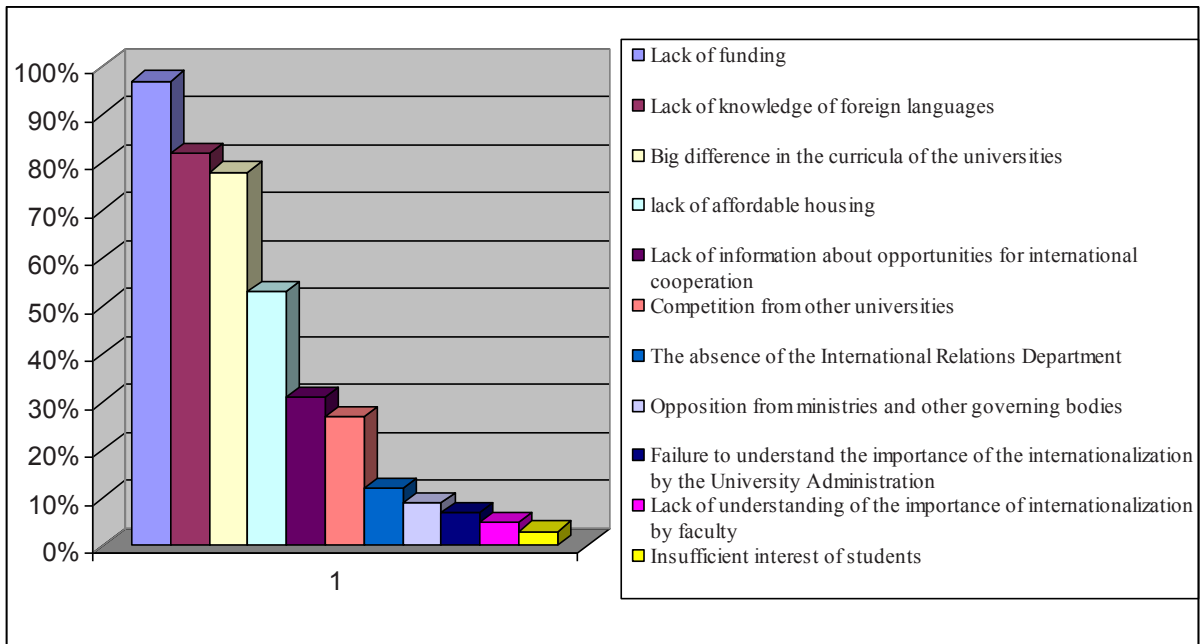
Responses and their rankings concerning the respondents’ own institutions, suggest that the internationalization of higher education is understood by our experts primarily as the intensification of external contacts. The next two most frequently highlighted factors are related to educational standards and international academic exchanges.

While the desire to intensify external contact is consistent with the process of internationalization, we should not forget that this kind of contact in most cases is carried out by foreign funding.

Table 3. "What is the main obstacle to the internationalization of your university (Choose three main reasons)?"

Lack of funding	97%
Lack of knowledge of foreign languages	82%
Big difference in the curricula of the universities	78%
Lack of affordable housing	53%
Lack of information about opportunities for international cooperation	31%
Competition from other universities	27%
The absence of the International Relations Department	12%
Opposition from ministries and other governing bodies	9%
Failure to understand the importance of the internationalization by the University Administration	7%
Lack of understanding of the importance of internationalization by faculty	5%
Insufficient interest of students	3%

Figure 3. "What is the main obstacle to the internationalization of your university (Choose three main reasons)?"



It is not surprising that the most frequently noted obstacle to internationalization is the problem of and this issue has been called a "chronic disease" of our educational system for a long time. The governmental educational program "Bolashak" applies now almost exclusively to the Master's and doctoral programs and for Baccalaureate study only for specialties where demand severely outstrips supply and assumes scholarships for the whole course of study, i.e. four academic years. Thus is not intended for academic exchanges of students for a short term.

As another major obstacle to the internationalization of higher education respondents cited the lack of knowledge of foreign languages. Only 32% of the experts noted that they speak foreign languages. In this case we are dealing with so-called legacy of the Soviet system in which higher education is not necessarily accompanied by the knowledge of a foreign language. In this regard, it is encouraging that 54% of respondents answered positively to the question whether there is an opportunity for faculty to learn a foreign language at the expense of the University.

Some concern is the fact that about a third of academics (31%) called a lack of information about opportunities for international cooperation as barrier to internationalization. This result can be interpreted in two ways: first, as the inability to use the available information about global opportunities, and secondly, as evidence of the poor performance of the international relations department at the university. It should be noted that this was specifically indicated by 12% of the respondents. They consider that the role of the international relations department is to develop international partnership projects (94%), to disseminate information about the university, to attract international exchanges of faculty (61%), and to attract foreign students to study (12%). Approximately one in five experts respondents believe that the role of the International Relations Department is to seek international sponsors and writing grant applications.

Conclusion

In our view, the survey results can be regarded as quite encouraging, considering that the very possibility of the integration of the national education system in international educational space appeared as real fact no more than 10 years ago in the context of the overall social transformation. We can conclude that except funding and some other difficulties and obstacles, the issue of differences in curricula, the issue of the admit the credits, courses and the rating and assessment system remain the main problems to be solved during the signing of the agreement on academic exchanges between tertiary institutions to promote the internationalization of education worldwide. We plan to continue our research and propose measures that will increase our tertiary institution's ability to thrive in the international educational arena.

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