

# Two Decades of Transformation in Higher Educational System of Kazakhstan

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**Abstract**—This paper explores transformation of higher education system in Kazakhstan since 1991. The research unravels successful experience in the field and challenges. It covers issues of institutional change, faculty, research, university, funding, standards and leadership. The paper offers recommendations in improving state of art in higher educational institutions of Kazakhstan based on international approaches and local realities.

**Keywords**—higher educational institution, Kazakhstan, transformation

## I. INTRODUCTION

KAZAKHSTAN is in the process of state-building for last 20 years. It witnessed khan rule and soviet kind of state. It has no experience whatsoever in what it is building today. In the process no one guarantees flawless process. The important is to keep process in the right direction.

The urgent and complex task for Kazakhstan includes but not limited to evolutionary shift into new state, reform in education, meeting current and up-coming development and strategic goals, and creating a healthy, highly educated and mobile society [1].

In the 20th century, we measured a nation's wealth primarily by its natural resources, its land mass, its population and its army. In the 21st century, the true wealth of a nation is found in the creative minds of its people and their ability to innovate [2]. In general terms the state-building process includes military build-up, functioning integrated economy, and vibrant culture, constructive and genuine political institutions. However all these essential elements of a state-building interlink with education. We know from very many success stories that education makes miracles because it brings innovation, development and sustainable growth. It has influence on GDP growth, social cohesion and social well-being [3]. It is well accepted fact that a state which depends upon others for its new basic scientific knowledge will be slow in its progress and weak in its competitive position in the world stage. This research studies a higher education institution in Kazakhstan. The paper aims at finding out objectives of HEI reforms and current process of its implementation. Is there any match between what happens in HEI and a state building in general?

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What are expected outcomes of the current reform in HEI? How will state transform as result of education policy in Kazakhstan?

Despite significance of the researched issue, it remains untapped. So far research was on state-building process, focusing on military, politics, and economy. The research in education has touched upon different levels of education such as primary, secondary and higher. It covered Bologna process and subsequent reforms in higher education system. The impact of different scholarship programs on education was researched in several scholar works. So far the research in education has examined an impact of curricula, academic standards and accountability, testing procedures, school and class size, parental choice. However the research on interlink of state-building and education has not been done. The influence of current reforms in HEI and change of Kazakh state are out of contemporary research. I hope that the research will help to build a foundation for future investigations of issues surrounding HEI and state building in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan is home for 148 HEI, 9 of which with national status, 2 international, 32 state, 12 military, 93 private in Kazakhstan. 595 000 students are studying in those institutions [4].

In order to have focused prioritization the government granted national status to nine core universities. These universities are funded and supported by government. They are supposed to be exemplary leaders in different fields.

In 2010 government inaugurated brand new Nazarbayev University which has long way ahead of joining elite universities in the continent. The university is supposed to be experimental platform for whole higher education system in Kazakhstan.

In 2011 Kazakh government closed bachelor degree scholarships and increased master and PhD studies in Bolashak scholarship program. Thus it shifted focus towards research and fundamental science.

The objectives of education are outlined in various documents. The law on education of 1999 and updated law of 2007 outline different levels of education in Kazakhstan. It proclaims adherence to democratic principles such as freedom of inquiry, creativity, independence, freedom of choice. The 2001 law on science was replaced by the 2011 law. The law introduced a Research university. This type of university has autonomy in standards and curriculum development and mainly focuses on graduate studies and research [5].

Strategy of educational development, its dimensions and ambitions are given in the programs of Education development program 2005-2010 and State program in education 2011-2020, Science development 2007-2012. The Education development program 2005-2010 aims at creating three-level education system. The Science program stresses on creating technological and engineering schools [6]. State program on education 2011-2020 adopted analyses current situation in all education levels and presents objectives for next 10 years. The program proposes corporate governance of a HEI through state, business and civil society participation. However program does not give any idea about mechanism, responsibility, and doers of the project.

In 20 years of its transformation HEI in Kazakhstan meets the following challenges. First thing which is very hard to do is to make good people with sound academic credentials and qualification, and personal characteristics to become good teachers. They have to have life learning ambition. The experience shows that teachers usually improve in their first three years, and then they stagnate for next 20 years. This is not what can make improvement in education. There is one principle that has to be kept all the time. It is investing in quality, capability and capacity of the teaching staff. If one wants to get into highest levels of education, one has to consistently look for outstanding people and train them really well. So they can lead the reforms [7]. Azeem Premji, CEO of Wipro, in one of his talks in CFR (Council for Foreign relations), mentioned that if you have good human resources, it means that 60 percent of any work is already done [8]. Referring to Karate kid movie released in 2010 there is no such thing as bad student, but there is such thing as bad teacher.

Teaching staff in Kazakhstan is overloaded with teaching, administrative compliance checking reports, extra unnecessary paper works and meetings. The annual workload is fluctuating between 700 – 1000 academic hours whereas it is 200-300 in the universities where qualitative research is produced [9]. Generally, Kazakhstan faculty is lacking necessary support, means and incentives to pursue research and innovation. They are now mainly engaged in ceaseless teaching without any research. The research is generally as hobby but not as part of teaching career and profession. They have less hours for preparation of course materials and update their knowledge. The way out is more funded opportunities for professional development and reduction of non academic work burden. This would improve teaching and learning quality.

It is worthy to mention that there is clash of generations. The tension is felt in all levels of education management and teaching. The harmonious system of passing good traditions and openness for changes has to be sorted out in order to make education flexible and effective. It might be achieved through seminars and corporate games.

The second is structure which involves research and autonomy of university. Almost all universities in Kazakhstan have to have follow course requirements set by the

government. In addition to the required courses university offers its optional/elective courses. Due to high academic hour requirements from the government there is less room for optional/elective courses. Students are overloaded with the courses. And they have less time for homeworks and creativity activities. In 2018 the state program 2011-2020 proposes enhancement of university autonomy limiting state interference. The state will only have licensing rights [10].

In the research field the scientific laboratories and centers are separate from higher educational institutions. The effectiveness comes from joint venture of universities and research centers. Currently the universities establish their own research centers since attempts to integrate existing centers got fierce conflict from centers themselves. The reason is research centers have their own budget and buildings. In a case of their joining to university system, they will lose all financial preferences.

Declaratively kazakhstani science is focused on four priority fields. First and second are energy, deep procession of raw material and production. Kazakhstan as surplus energy country is not interested in remaining raw material exporter. The republic has ambition in processing raw materials and produce value added products. Third is life science. The science has to increase consciousness about life itself. Fourth is informational technologies and telecommunication. Kazakhstan has huge territory which needs to build grid based on informational technologies and developed telecommunication. Moreover these two aspects are integral part of any efficient economy [11].

The academic freedom and freedom of inquiry are essential elements of any kind of creativity and development. These elements are integral part of a HEI. A HEI is supposed to encourage critical thinking. It is place of open communication where any idea can be challenged and contested. A HEI has to accept radical and extreme thinking. If university community does not accept it then a society won't have necessary skepticism for further development. But once radical views are proposed they should be defended. At the same time one can not expect that if you give academic freedom and autonomy of university, then there will be burst of innovation and discoveries. Even in great and leading universities of the world a lot of people from academia do not contribute to growth of knowledge and innovation. But no one can deny that in atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy one has more chances for innovation and discoveries.

Financing is burning issue. The proportion of education in Kazakh GDP has to be increased up to 1%. The current 0.30 % is not enough for rapid development in the field and does not meet declared ambitions. However there is steady increase in the funding. In 2011 29 billion KZT was spent for education. In 2012 the amount will be increased to 42 billion KZT. It is 42% growth [12].

In addition the transparency, accountability and independent audit have to be introduced to monitor flow of funding and its efficiency [13]. The increase of faculty salary and student

stipend is only first step in education funding. The necessary funding is to be used for creating academic atmosphere, infrastructure and campus. The academic atmosphere includes academic buildings with full technical support, residences, labs, sport facilities, medical centre, libraries, dining hall and security.

The next aspect is improvement of quality and international standards. The first thing to do is to set very clear standards. These standards should be internationally benchmarked<sup>i</sup>. The international standards need some time and a lot of efforts to be matched. Present experience of Kazakhstan shows that things are not done simply by pouring money and copying of some foreign experience without properly preparing necessary human resources, infrastructure and management. It has to be long term process not limited to a certain minister's persona. There are three international examples that show high effectiveness in education in short time. They are Alberta in Canada, Singapore and Finland. These three different countries have completely different context and they succeed. However it does not mean that if Kazakhstan follows example of Finland. It can do same success. It is gradual process. One improves from fair to good, from good to excellent. One can not jump ahead from fair to excellent [14].

Institutionally, the improvement comes from an independent accrediting agency or agencies with the direct involvement of professional associations which will be responsible for quality assurance. This idea has taken place in 2011-2020 State program. Question remains in mechanisms and implementation. Currently the quality assessment of education is finalized through annual National report on education. It focuses on such aspects as state's actions in providing effective education, quality of educational management, outcomes of the education. It is recent experience in self assessment of education. However the report does not include employer and HEIs relationships and comparative analysis of worldwide level of education. The report often refers to global standards without specifying and giving criteria for those standards. It is full of vague and general concepts. Thus clear independent professional assessing agency and clear standards are way forward in the self evaluation process.

Governance and management are necessary if Kazakhstan wants to be successful in its state – building endeavors. One needs to have good education leaders who can create climate for faculty and students. And it should be philosophy that every learning person can achieve and his/her background does not mean anything [15]. Today a rector is appointed by president in state universities. In 2013 there is plan to have elections for a rector position in a university. This procedure if implemented correctly will definitely add to quality of management.

The research concludes that declarations and laws on education in Kazakhstan ideally fit internationally recognized standards. Question remains in implementation, responsibility, transparency and governance.

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