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Higher Education and Sustainable Development in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

In recent years, the understanding of the global economy has shifted. As economies across the world continue to rapidly develop, it has become clear that reliance on natural resource exploitation for growth and development is unsustainable. An essential part of developing a new model for development for any country will be reforming the education system of that country to meet the needs of a changing economy. This article analyzes the case of Kazakhstan and the steps it has taken to reform its education system in the context of sustainable development. Kazakhstan's experience reflects challenges and attempted reforms throughout the post-Soviet space. The reforms enacted by the Kazakhstani government have taken initial steps towards shaping its education system to support a new economy, though many challenges remain to be addressed

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, the world has radically shifted its conception of development. Half a decade ago, in the early 1960s, development focused heavily on methods for supporting economic growth. This model of development is often referred to as a “frontier” model or “exploitative” model, due to its emphasis on discovering and exploiting new natural resource deposits. In the past two decades, this model has begun to lose its dominance. Conceptualizations of development have begun to trend in favor of approaches to poverty reduction and social development [1]. Most notably, a new concept has arisen to address these concerns—the concept of “sustainable development”.

In 2006, Kazakhstan adopted a state document on the country's transition to a model of sustainable development. The document notes that this transition is an essential step in the republic's development. Under

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current conditions, growth and development in Kazakhstan cannot simply continue down the path of natural resource exploitation. The transition away from this “exploitation” model requires new and innovative solutions, including new technological approaches to increasing energy and natural resource efficiency. Without education reforms aimed at training a new generation of workers to meet these demands, this transition will be impossible.

The case of Kazakhstan is informative as a model for conducting this sustainable development transition in the post-Soviet space. The former Soviet republics pose a unique challenge to pursuing models of sustainable development; in the past two decades, these states have not only undergone massive economic reforms, but also have faced the challenge of adopting new social and environmental policies. These challenges have been met with varying levels of success in various social and economic sectors. The depth of reform pursued in Kazakhstan’s education sector provides a thorough example of how this transition can be addressed and what pitfalls face post-Soviet states in the adapting their education systems to support a sustainable development model.

2. The Concept of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is often conceptualized of consisting of three distinct branches: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and sociopolitical sustainability. This sustainable development scheme can be more simply conceptualized as a triangle with a clear list of “ingredients” in each of the three sections: economic, social, and environmental.



*<http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/images/what-pic.gif>
 figure 1*

One of the most important factors in development, which touches upon each section of the sustainable development triangle, is education. Education is evaluated as a development indicator on local, national, regional, and even global levels. One of the regions where education has become a primary development focus is the former Soviet Union, specifically Central Asia. The case of Kazakhstan provides an instructive window on processes of education reform in Central Asia in the context of sustainable development.

3. Education in Kazakhstan

Following the declaration of Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, the republic immediately set about reforming its education policy. These reforms can be conceptualized as occurring in four distinct stages:

The first stage (1991-1994) focused largely on forming a legislative basis for higher education. The most fundamental tasks of this stage were creating an effective network of higher education institutions and adapting courses of study to provide the necessary skills and training for a changing labor market. In 1993, Kazakhstan's law "On higher education" laid the groundwork for accomplishing these tasks. In 1994, Kazakhstan approved a state standard on higher education, which introduced bachelor's and master's level degrees to the republic.

The second stage (1995-1998) involved active measures aimed at modernizing Kazakhstan's higher education system. These measures included introducing a new list of specialties consisting of 342 specialties, and promotion of private institutes of higher education. Today, there are 66 private institutes of higher education operating in Kazakhstan.

The third stage (1999-2000) was characterized by decentralization of education management and financing, including by expanding the academic freedom of educational organizations, particularly by providing professors more time to pursue academic research. In June, 1999 the republic adopted a new law—also titled "On education"—as well as a "model for the formation of a student society in institutes of higher education.". The essence of the new model consisted of the implementation of entrance examinations for applicants in all specialties across the country, carried out by an independent and impartial body.

The fourth stage of Kazakhstan's education reform has been in process since 2001. This last stage has focused on strategic development of the higher education system. This period is characterized by adopting a system of three-stage education, consisting of bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and Ph.Ds. Other prominent features include the creation of a national education quality assessment system. In March 2011, Kazakhstan became a signatory to the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna Process). The "State Program on Development of Education from 2011-2020"[2] (the "State Education Program") lays out several measures that will bring the republic in line with the recommended parameters of the Bologna Process.

The government of Kazakhstan is taking active measures aimed at reforming its science and education systems, focusing on adapting these systems to modern standards and including domestic systems in the global scientific and education communities. However, the reformation process has also been characterized by several shortcomings.

For example, Kazakhstan for too long focused purely on adapting its education system to meet international standards. Though education reforms were undertaken from the first months of independence, education was not included in a conception of Kazakhstan's greater development until the adoption of the conception of sustainable development in 2006. Thus, education has been viewed as a completely separate issue from economic and environmental sustainability for nearly three-quarters of Kazakhstan's independent existence.

As with other post-Soviet states, Kazakhstan rapidly pursued reforms in its education system immediately after gaining independence. However, international recognition of Kazakhstani diplomas implies corresponding qualifications and competitiveness on the international labor market. Today, the Kazakhstani education system is not always able to provide its graduates with these qualifications.

Moreover, while the Ministry of Education continues to play a role in influencing the supply of specialists to meet the demands of Kazakhstan's contemporary economy—including by supplying government grants—its policies have not been wholly effective. Kazakhstan faces ongoing structural unemployment, in which the skills of its workers do not align with the needs of its economy. Recent analysis of post-graduate employment has shown that a large percentage of graduates from Kazakhstani institutes of higher education take professional positions that differ from their courses of study. In May 2012, the news agency Rating.KZ published a study assessing the success of Kazakhstan's graduates in finding work. According to the results of the study, 51% of respondents—selected from the student bodies of Kazakhstani universities from 2007-2009—reported that they were working in a job that reflected their area of study. The survey also showed that many graduates believed

that their diplomas would have little significance for their future professional careers. More than a quarter of respondents reported that their diplomas did not help them at any point in their job search process [3].

The Kazakhstani government has aimed to address these problems in recent years. In 2010, the country adopted a “State Program on Development of Education from 2011-2020,” (the “State Education Program”), by presidential decree. The program provides guidance for what may well become a fifth stage of Kazakhstan’s higher education development, noting that its goal is to “develop [the republic’s] human capital by providing quality education for the sustainable growth of the economy.”

Among the problems the State Education Program addresses is the issue of the structural mismatch of Kazakhstan’s graduates with the direction of the country’s economic development. The program calls for the expansion of the country’s supply of economic specialists, with a specific focus on industrial development and innovation.

The program also attempts to raise the quality of education by placing increased focus on both instructors and evaluation. The relatively low social status of instructors in Kazakhstan—and throughout the former Soviet space - even those at major institutes of higher education, has resulted in “negative selection” for qualified educators. That is, the education sector is unable to attract the most qualified citizens due to the low status and salaries it offers. The Ministry of Education and Science has set forth a number of measures to improve both the reputation and social status of the republic’s teachers. These measures include a presidential grant in the amount of \$20,000 for the republic’s best university instructor, as chosen by the Ministry of Education, as well as the Bolashak Program, which provides instructors with international experience. Moreover, some universities, such as the Eurasian National University in Astana, offer to pay their instructors’ expenses in pursuing international work experience.

Finally, the State Education Program outlines the need to develop a more effective system of assessing the quality of higher education. But with this goal set, it Kazakhstan must be careful to avoid the same pitfall of pursuing international recognition over actual quality of education. Recently, discussion of education assessment has largely focused on the issue of recognition of Kazakhstani diplomas abroad. The topic has become such a central focus in the republic’s education debate that content analysis of presentations and articles shows that “recognition of diplomas” receives significantly more mention “quality of education” [4]. The emphasis on degree value reflects a broader trend within the republic (and elsewhere) to view the primary goal of education as a diploma which open career opportunities, rather than the actual gaining of knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

Higher education in Kazakhstan can and must become a part of Kazakhstan’s model for sustainable development. The Kazakhstani government has to date conducted a range of reforms aimed at bringing the country’s education system in line with international standards. However, the current system of higher education in Kazakhstan remains, in some aspects, ineffective.

In Kazakhstan, as in other post-Soviet states, there is a real danger that the new generation of specialists will be completely unprepared for their professions upon graduation. Truly raising the effectiveness of higher education and increasing its positive effects on Kazakhstani society will require stable and consistent investment in science and academia. This investment must be employed effectively to maximally increase the skills and capabilities of the national workforce.

In pursuing this goal, it will be essential to conduct and publish and audit of Kazakhstani universities. This will allow institutes of higher education to be rated based on their performance in preparing their graduates to enter the workforce. Technological advances and changes require the reassessment and creation of new educational standards with participation of all interested parties, including industry representatives, instructors, foreign experts, and representatives of government. Kazakhstan needs to prepare its students for work in a new economy by moving from the concept of “teaching” to the concept of “learning by doing”.

Analysis of the issue of reforming Kazakhstan’s system of higher education in the context of sustainable development is thus a useful tool for understanding the challenges faced by post-Soviet countries seeking to

adopt new development models. The case of Kazakhstan shows the unique challenges faced by these states, which largely stem from shortcomings in attempts to rapidly reform both economic and social norms following the collapse of the Soviet Union. But it also shows that there are steps that these states can take to increase the effectiveness of education in pursuit of a sustainable development model. This will require, most importantly, the search for new theoretical and practical approaches to reforming the education system.

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