

# KAZAKHSTAN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: OPPORTUNITIES AND PRACTICES<sup>1</sup>

D. Burkhanova, G. Kenzhakimova, S. Serikzhanova

*al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KAZAKHSTAN)*

## Abstract

At present, the Bologna process is the primary mechanism of higher education reform in Europe, as well as an integration initiative. The objective of the process - the creation of a European Higher Education Area, which will lead to the emergence of a truly pan-European integration project in this area. At a realization of the Bologna Process, all European countries face different kinds of challenges that are associated with the degree of correlation of national models with pan-European ideal, and with a choice of approaches. Kazakhstan in the late 90s already fragmentary have collaborated with the Commonwealth of European partners and tried to modernize the education system according to the formula of the Bologna process. Main arguments in favor of the reforms were the quality of education, the autonomy of universities, research autonomy, the use of new financing schemes. Since 2010, graduate education model in Kazakhstan became fully uniform. Credit system of education and quality control system of education were introduced. National Accreditation Centre was opened in 2012 that has been transformed into a Center of Bologna process and academic mobility of the Ministry of Education and Science. Each university has departments of academic mobility, a majority of universities have student organizations set up by the Bologna Process. Therefore, Kazakh university system in the European educational space lasts for more than 20 years. Currently, almost all the 139 universities of Kazakhstan, among which there are national, public and private, follow the principles of the Bologna Declaration. The paper presents some results of the sociological research "Bologna process in the eyes of experts" conducted in May 2015. Summing up the results of the evaluation of the quality of Kazakhstan's education, it should be noted that with regard to the main criteria for the implementation of the structural components of the Bologna Process Kazakhstan already at this stage achieved good results. All the positive trends at the same time do not release the reformation processes in the Kazakhstan education of problems and difficulties. By themselves, the reforms being driven by changes in society, requires, in turn, relying on a system of indicators showing the effectiveness / ineffectiveness of the results and thus making it possible to implement them timely coordination or specification.

Keywords: Bologna process, integration, education reforms, expert interviews, higher education area.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the European Union for several decades has been developing and implementing an integrated policy in the field of higher education, forming supranational institutions of coordination and management. These processes naturally led European politicians to the creation of the Bologna Declaration and the initiation of the Bologna process. Currently, the Bologna process is the primary mechanism of higher education reform in Europe, as well as integration initiative. Creating a European higher education area should enable national education systems of European countries to adopt a positive experience of partners - by enhancing the mobility of students, teachers, administrative personnel, strengthen ties and etc.

The main arguments in favor of the reforms were the quality of education, the autonomy of universities, research autonomy, the use of new financing schemes. Creating EHEA promotes the mobility of citizens, employment of graduates, and the overall development of the continent. The policy of Kazakhstan in this regard is consistent: the project "Path to Europe", the presidency of the OSCE, the official adoption of the Bologna Declaration in 2010. The basis for the reform of the educational policy in Kazakhstan are the three pillars: the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Education Act (2007) and "State Program of Education Development for 2011-2020". These

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is published within the project 1885 / GF4 "The integration of Kazakhstan into the European higher educational area: the implementation of the parameters of the Bologna Process"

documents have produced significant changes in the structure and content of education. The Education act has been adapted to the integration of Kazakhstani higher education in the Bologna process. It was introduced a single centralized control and monitoring of the education quality. For the first time new types of higher education institutions such as national research universities and others were included [Mukhamejanov, Abdiraiymova, 2011].

## **1.1 Reforms in higher education of Kazakhstan**

The acquired independence in 1991 has set the most important task for the Republic of Kazakhstan the entry into the world community - the task of harmonization with the international educational space. In this regard, the state policy in the field of education was carried out in the direction of reform of the legal framework, the management system and financing of education in the context of the task. The qualitative transformation of higher education is one of the main elements of the formation of the sovereignty of the state, its real political and economic independence. During the years of independence of Kazakhstan stages of higher education system reforming can be divided into the following:

*The first phase (1991-1994)* - the formation of the legislative and normative legal base of higher education. The main objectives of this phase was the creation of a network of higher education institutions and renewal of higher education specialties in order to ensure sufficient independence of the republic in specialist training, to meet the needs of a market economy. In 1994, State Standard of Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (General Provisions) was approved, which first determined the introduction of a multi-level structure of higher education in the country, academic bachelor and master degrees.

*The second stage (1995 - 1998)* - modernization of the higher education system, updating its content. This stage is characterized by the conceptual definition of the higher education system development, which is reflected in the Concept of public policy in the field of education approved by the National Council for State Policy under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (August 4, 1995). the adoption of new legal provisions regulating the activity of higher education institutions. From 1995 to 1997 - first Kazakhstani educational standards for 310 professions of higher education were approved.

*The third stage (1999-2000)* - the decentralization of management system and financing scheme, the expansion of academic freedom of educational institutions. At this stage, takes place the real decentralization of education organizations management system. Radically changed the principles of admission to HEI, the transition to the training of specialists with higher education on the basis of state order. Since 1999 a new model of formation of student contingent of higher education institutions by providing applicants state educational grants on a competitive basis.

*The fourth stage (beginning of 2001)* - strategic development of the higher vocational education system. The basic directions of the progressive development of higher education in XXI century are determined.

The main trend in the development of higher education was the refusal of the state monopoly on education, the abolition of rigid centralized management of education sphere and the strict regulation of activity of higher educational institutions. As a result, the non-state sector of higher education began to develop on equal terms, indicating the creation of the educational services market, which, like any market, is developing according to the law of competition. State higher education institutions have the right to receive and train students on a fee basis, thus sources of funding for higher education have been diversified. The principle of financing the training of specialists was changed: grant or student loan funds receive a student, not a higher education institution; consequently there was a shift from the principle of "Financing the object of education" to the principle of "Financing subject of education" [Mutanov, Burkitbayev, Ibrayeva, Abdiraiymova, 2011].

Reforming the financial mechanism of the education organizations implies a valuation of public funds and the development of alternative sources. Other sources of financing education institutions are external loans, grants, sponsorship and charitable aid, corporate funds and etc. In world practice, there are successfully functioning academic conglomerates, including educational institutions and scientific - research institutes. This connection is the real basis of the integration of science and education, and allows a single scientific-technical and educational policies in the country. The most effective form of integration today is a merge of universities and research institutes. Higher education in Kazakhstan at the present stage is characterized by a continuous structure of education, including the implementation of learning opportunities throughout life, modernization based on national

traditions and global trends in the field of education, equal access to all levels, unity of its elements and requirements, continuity of all levels of education. In the past two decades, Kazakhstan has activated international cooperation in the field of higher education. The integration of the higher education system into the European higher education area is one of the long-term strategic priorities of the country.

Since 2010 in our country graduate education models became fully uniform. The traditional doctoral studies are replaced by PhD program. There were changes in the management of higher education institutions through the creation of board of trustees and the introduction of corporate governance. The credit system of training and quality control system of education were introduced. National Accreditation Centre was opened in 2012, which was transformed into a Center of Bologna process and academic mobility of the Ministry of Education and Science of RK. Each higher educational institution (HEI) has departments of academic mobility; many higher educational institutions (HEIs) have developed student organizations for the Bologna Process [State program of development of education, 2011].

## 2 RESEARCH RESULTS

The aim of the expert survey "Bologna process through the eyes of experts", conducted in May 2015 in within the project 1885 / GF4 "The integration of Kazakhstan into the European higher educational area: the implementation of the parameters of the Bologna Process" among representatives of the leading universities of Kazakhstan is a description of the state as well as the cracter of the implementation of Bologna process in higher education of Kazakhstan from the position of experts.

To carry out the expert survey was developed a questionnaire (in Kazakh and Russian languages), which contains 39 simple and complex questions on the 8 thematic blocks: 1) the institutional mission 2) The structure of degree; 3) the system of credits and the recognition of degree; 4) Mobility; 5) services for students and student participation; 6) Lifelong Learning and the system of qualifications; 7) the quality of education; 8) attractiveness and the external measurement of European higher education.

Number of experts interviewed was 77 people aged 22 to 66 years old living in Almaty and regional centers of 14 regions of Kazakhstan, among them 15 were men, 62 - women. All of them are direct and active participants in the HEI reform. The survey involved representatives of the leading HEIs of Kazakhstan.

Currently, almost all the 139 universities of Kazakhstan, among which there are national, public and private, follow the principles of the Bologna Declaration. Therefore, stay of Kazakh higher education system in the European educational space lasts for more than 20 years.

One of the main provisions of the Bologna Declaration, defining the future architecture of the European higher education is the transition to a multi-level system - Bachelor-Master-PhD. In Kazakhstan there is also a gradual development of a multi-level system of education within it three cycles of higher and postgraduate education were created. According to most experts (40.3%) from different HEIs of Kazakhstan today the highest degree is a «Ph.D.». At the time as 36.4% of the experts note a bachelor's degree and 23.4% of the experts note a master's degree as the highest degree appropriated to graduates.

Considering the regional distribution, it is worth noting that to date, in the central regions of the country (80.0%), as well as in Almaty (85.7%) the predominance of degree "Ph.D.» as the highest assigned degree. While for most of the southern HEIs (48.6%) and Northern (70.0%) regions highest assigned degree is a bachelor's degree (1st cycle). Also important is the fact that Northern HEI do not assigne "Ph.D." degree. In the western (44.4%) and Eastern (83.3%) regions highest degree awarded to graduates is a master's degree.

According to the empirical data, the profile of the majority of educational institutions in Kazakhstan today is characterized by a peculiar combination of research and educational activities - 67.5%, at the same time, 28.6% of the experts indicate that their HEI is mainly characterized by a focus on educational work. Only 3.9% of universities that focuses on research activities.

Experts were also asked about the medium-term prospects for the development of the HEI, opinions were distributed relatively equally, and thus 50.7% of the experts noted institution that they represent is planning to increase the proportion of academic work. While, 42.7% of the experts' HEIs intend to focus on research in the near future, maintaining the current status plans only 6.7% of the experts.

## 2.1 Creating the concept of the European Higher Education Area

In 2010, the creation of EHEA has increased the need for specific empirical information regarding its influence within specific countries. Therefore, to date, evaluation of the existing results of realization of program of the European Higher Education Area is very important. As seen in Figure 1, evaluating the results of creating a united European higher education area, 60.5% of the experts consider the existing results as positive, while 36.8% of experts evaluate existing results as mixed, thus not excluding difficulties and side effects of reforms associated with the creation of the EHEA. This indicator is logical, since any large-scale transformation are always to some extent related to the difficulties and latent effects.

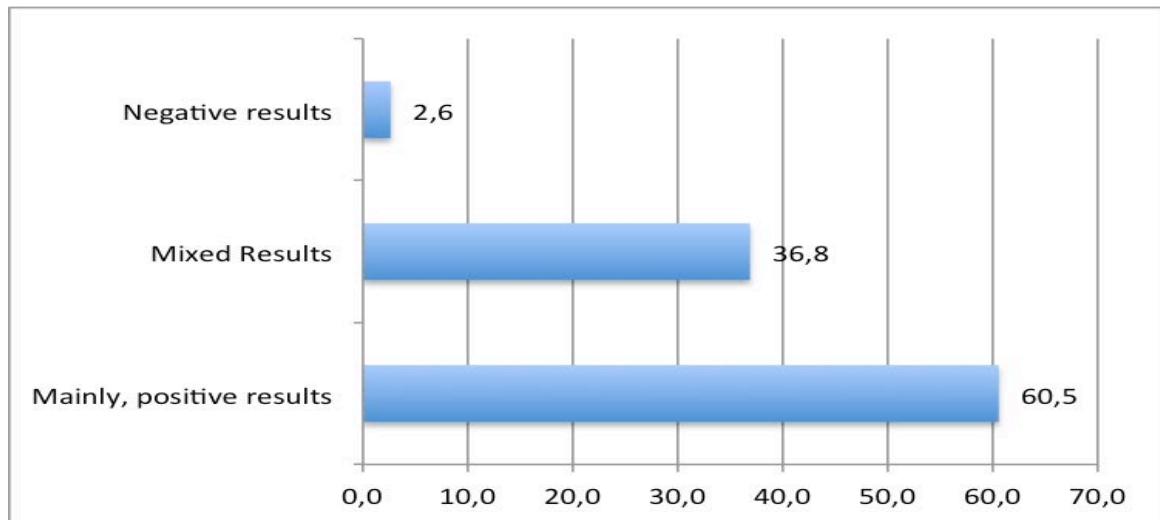


Fig.1. Evaluating existing results of creating EHEA

In this regard, the experts were asked about the concept of the European Higher Education Area itself, - 50.0% of the experts believe that at this stage it is very significant to speed up the process of creating a European Higher Education Area (Fig.2).

However, more than 24% of the experts believe that despite the fact that the idea of the European Higher Education Area is a good, it is not the right time for implementing it. Also noteworthy is the fact that 13.5% of respondents strongly against the concept of the European Higher Education Area, which may be associated with underlying complexities and the lack of immediate results of such large-scale transformation.

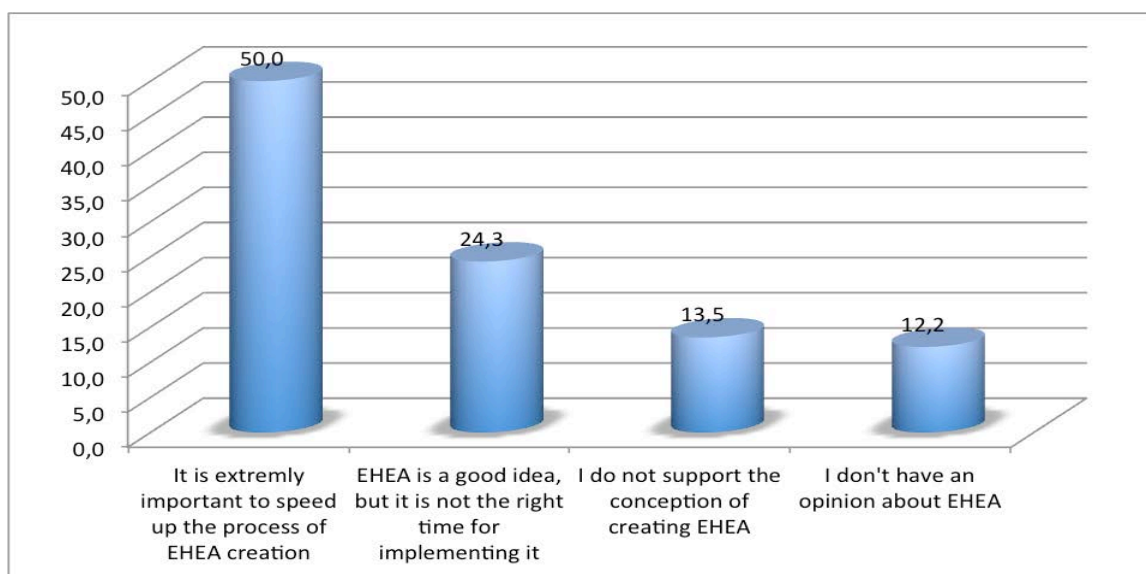


Fig.2. Opinion about EHEA concept

## 2.2 Importance of changes for HEI

During the survey, the experts were also asked to assess the importance of changes to their educational institution for the past three years. Among the proposed options as the most important change experts unanimously consider participating universities in rankings of universities (Figure 7). Thus, 78.6% of the experts believe this change is important, and 18.6% very important. Since the choice of both foreign and domestic university with high rankings for academic mobility of both students and teachers is very important. It allows receiving a quality education, to compare the advantages and integrate them into the educational environment of the HEI.

One of the main objectives of the Bologna process is ensuring European cooperation to improve the quality of higher education, in particular the establishment and development of common criteria and methodologies for assessing the compatibility of national systems and quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In this regard, according to information received, conducted reforms of quality assurance are the second most important change for the experts, in general, more than 95% of the experts in varying degrees, note the importance of this event.

The third among the major changes occurred in the last three years is directly Bologna process itself and reforms related to its implementation, as 74.6% of the experts believe this change is important, 15.5% - is very important.

According to evaluation of 73.9% of experts the European research and innovation policy for the past three years also has been an important change for their HEI. However, the number of experts who evaluate the change as "not very important" and those who, on the contrary, considers it "very important" same - 13.0%.

Comparable in its importance to the experts are reforms in the management and financing. Thus, reforms in financing seemed important for 70.0% of the experts, and very important to 15.7%. A similar situation with the assessment of the reforms in the management of 67.2% of the experts consider them to be important changes, 17.9% of the experts answered "very important".

Internationalisation and mobility in higher education is constantly seen as the main instruments of implementation of the EHEA in response to the global challenges and increasing demands of competitiveness. In the context of the EHEA, internationalization of education contributes to the development of a stable and democratic society, while emphasizing the key role of universities in this process. Internationalization is a key factor in the development of civil mobility and employment opportunities within the overall European development. This is an important indicator of the inclusion of Kazakhstan in the world educational area. So, for 59.2% of Kazakh experts the internationalization of the process as a whole is an important change in the past three years. At the same time, 25.4% of the experts believe that the internationalization of the past three years has not been one of the significant changes.

## 2.3 Lifelong Learning

The concept of «Lifelong Learning» from the beginning was seen as a major component of the Bologna process in Prague Communiqué of 2001. In a communiqué was considered the need of educational strategies for a lifetime to meet the challenges of competitiveness, to create equal opportunities, as well as for the overall increase of lifequality. Experts in this study were asked to rate the priority of the concept «Lifelong learning» in their HEI. Thus, 42.5% of the experts stressed the very high priority of the concept of "life-long learning." However, for 32.9% of experts priority of the concept is comparable to the other priority issues. Also, 20.5% of the experts said that today the priority of concept is not high, but may increase over time.

Regarding new opportunities provided by EHEA for HEIs expert opinions divided as follows - 61.1% of the experts believe there are new opportunities "for all universities within the EHEA", 45.8% of experts chose "extended opportunities will appear mainly for the most competitive HEIs in the European market of higher education", equally 22.2% of experts believe that new opportunities will be available in general for the most prestigious HEIs" and "mainly for international HEIs" 18.1% of the experts also noted that the extended features may appear for HEIs of the largest countries within the EHEA.

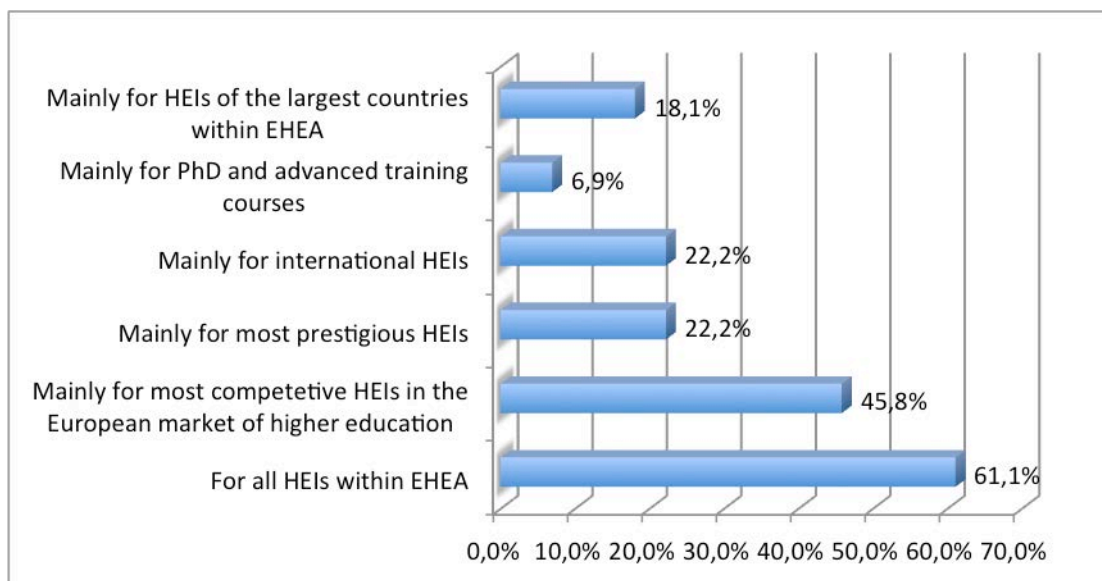


Fig. 3. Do you expect that created EHEA will ensure extended opportunities for HEI

Looking at the transformation of the higher education system it should be noted that the overall objective of the educational reforms in Kazakhstan is adaptation of the education system to the new socio-economic conditions and challenges. The main aspect of higher education reforms in Kazakhstan at the present stage is a further development of the multi-level system of education. Talking about the qualification of future professionals produced by HEIs in Kazakhstan is important to note that the need to improve the quality of education is both a root cause and a consequence of the ongoing reforms.

The main task today is preparation of competitive, highly skilled professionals, corresponding to the modern intellectual requirements, international standards and the development strategy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The main criterion for the quality of education should be a high level of professionalism, to ensure the competitiveness of graduates and the demand in the labor market that is becoming particularly relevant in connection with the integration of Kazakhstan's training system in the world educational space. Specification of empirical data obtained on the basis of the expert survey allowed assessing the profile of the majority of educational institutions in Kazakhstan; most of them are characterized by a peculiar combination of research and training. However, in the medium-term development plans of the HEIs represented by experts is to increase the share of particularly educational work.

Given the importance of evaluating the existing results of implementation of the EHEA program, most experts consider the existing results as positive, while 36.8% of experts evaluate results as mixed results thus not excluding difficulties and side effects of the reforms associated with the creation of the EHEA. In general, according to experts, at this stage of development it is essential to speed up the process of creating a European Higher Education Area. However, despite the positive assessment, more than 24% of the experts believe that the idea of the EHEA is good, but it is not the right time for its implementation. Among the most important changes in HEIs over the past three years, the experts noted, first of all, the participation of HEIs in the international university rankings.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Summing up the results of the evaluation of the quality of Kazakhstan's education, it should be noted that with regard to the main criteria for the implementation of the structural components of the Bologna Process Kazakhstan already at this stage achieved noticeable results.

All the positive trends at the same time do not release the reformation processes in the Kazakhstan education of problems and difficulties. the reforms themselves being driven by changes in society, requires, in turn, relying on a system of indicators showing the effectiveness / ineffectiveness of the achieved results and thus making it possible to implement timely coordination or concretisation of them.

Today, higher education is a major factor of social and economic development as well as of innovations in the world, driven by knowledge. Bologna process and, as a result, European Higher Education Area, being unprecedented examples of regional, cross-border cooperation in higher education, generated considerable interest in other parts of the world and made European education more visible at the global level.

Key role in shaping the European Higher Education Area, to provide opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies that contribute to the career of students and their lives as citizens of democratic states, as well as their personal development, a huge role is assigned to the scientific community - the heads of higher education institutions, teachers, researchers (scientists) administrative staff and students. This calls for more favorable conditions for the employees to carry out their tasks and more effective mechanisms for the involvement of employees of higher educational institutions and students in the process of functioning and further development of the European Higher Education Area. A very important point is the involvement of staff and students in the structures that develop and make decisions within the Bologna process at European, national and institutional levels.

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