

# THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

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## General notes

After Kyrgyzstan gained independence, Kyrgyzstani higher education was challenged by broad changes in political and economic life, and by the destruction of the ideological values, which used to shape the development of higher education. Economic and political processes have affected the entire structure of educational organizations. Meanwhile, higher education was also impacted by the internationalization of life throughout the country. The process of the Kyrgyz Republic's integration into the global system resulted in social demands visible and not very visible, to the higher education sector. In general, higher education in Kyrgyzstan was always a part of the bigger Soviet system of education. All principles of higher education structurization, its mission and goals, its strategy and main curriculum requirements were centrally developed in Moscow, then sent for implementation to the republics. We were a part of a multicultural and multinational educational system and yet this multicultural and multinational educational system was a unified system, based on monopoly on the level of higher education policy development. These particular experiences of living in a big system and its historical legacy left our colleges and universities unprepared for independence. This situation, to a great extent, is influencing the process of our integration into the global educational community of universities, and to a certain extent shapes the process of internationalization as well as its goals.

We are currently experiencing revolutionary changes in higher education. Factors influencing the current changes include the transition to a market economy, and internationalization of higher education as a part of the "opened doors" policies. Many of these changes are due to our efforts and intentions to use international experience to run higher education on the basis of cost effectiveness and our belief in international experience as a highly valuable resource. Foreign experience is impacting our development, and foreign specialists are creating our future development plans. For example, "The Education and Training Master Plan" of the Kyrgyz Republic was prepared for the Asian Development Bank by mainly international specialists in consultation with our local specialists.

There is strong political support for the internationalization of the higher education sector in the country. For example, several years ago, the President of Kyrgyzstan established a special commission for promotion of the science, education and culture. One of this commission's activities included enhancement of international ties of academia and international accreditation of our universities. The Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Education in the section 1, article 3 "Principle of organization of Education" declares "orientation towards achievements of modern science and to international standards" as one of the basic principles of organization of education.

At the moment in Kyrgyzstan, internationalization is not only a process of linkages with foreign colleges and networking, but also a process of reshaping our internal higher education structure through the integration of internationalization into the

development of higher education. In other words, internationalization is also functional. Internationalization acts at this historical moment as one of the factors for future system development. As the "Education and Training Master Plan" of the Kyrgyz Republic states, "the intended restructuring of Kyrgyz higher education in order to reach the world class level in teaching and research also requires major changes in university administration" (6, p. 114)

In a more general sense, internationalization supports the integration of the Kyrgyz Republic into the global economic community. However, this goal is not as recognized in our country as it is in Western Europe, where educational efforts are supported by the EU and are aimed at supporting European economic integration.

Another goal of internationalization is the provision of broad opportunities to the citizens of Kyrgyz Republic to study and work in internationally.

When speaking of internationalization, one may include at least two parameters:

1. Internationalization of higher education institutions, including not only the components of the higher education system, (curriculum, student body, faculty and staff, administrative behavior, management, etc.), but also changes in that system, (for example, a shift from a single level university education to a dual level system--undergraduate and graduate or the introduction of the credit hour system).

2. Internationalization of external relations - developing various academic, research, and cultural linkages with foreign higher education institutions. In this case, internationalization may be on a structural level, behavioral level, and service quality level.

Internationalization has become one of the key indicators of the organizational quality in our university system. Therefore, international participation is reported as an achievement, because it means recognition in the international arena.

#### **Impact Of Internationalization On Higher Education: Developmental Trends**

Analysis of the internationalization of higher education includes study of its sources and its impact on the complex patterns of university life. It is definitely a challenge to university development and may lead to not so positive shifts. Several questions can be postulated:

Does impact of internationalization on the system of higher education have a positive character? Does it include the organizational culture of the universities? Is it good for us? What is the future of the internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan? Can we say that internationalization of higher education institutions occurs autonomously under state control or under public control? Who initiates it? Who are beneficiaries? Who runs it? Is it eclectic or systematic?

#### **Goals and Costs of Internationalization**

The main rationale for internationalization is: recognition of our diplomas and degrees abroad; improvement of educational quality; equal partnership on the global level (higher education institutions, scholars, research teams, faculty, students, etc.); equal participation of our higher education institutions in the world educational arena (education, research, debates); participation in the development of the global educators' community; better adjustment to the market economy in a new political and economic environment; learning from the international experience; broad access of Kyrgyzstani citizens to the global educational and research opportunities, marketing on the global

level; attraction of foreign students and faculty; learning from the best international experience in expanding democracy in higher education; getting support for the development of democratization of higher education; provision of better opportunities for our citizens in terms of the best world educational standards; and equal employment opportunities outside of the country.

#### **Current Objectives of Internationalization**

First is the process of the developing of human capacity in the area through higher education. The second goal is getting Kyrgyzstani universities accredited through prominent international accrediting agencies. Further, we need to develop institutional capacity for planning, organization and management of higher education. Related to this is setting up institutional linkages with other universities and having the quality of individual courses evaluated by foreign partners. Lastly, we are seeking financial assistance for reforms.

#### **Why do we seek it?**

We seek internationalization in part because of a desire and need to compare our higher education system with foreign systems. We think that "foreign " is always "better." We need support for our young reforms, taken from abroad. There is a trend toward globalization including the realm of higher education, and we want to participate in it. Further, we want other people, countries, and cultures to recognize us as an equal partner. We want to compete on the global arena. At this historical moment, international assistance is a substantial support to our development. It is in human nature to like to travel, to want to go on a human pilgrimage.

#### **Do we really need it?**

What is the relation of internationalization to reaching higher education's sustainability when many colleges and universities are being founded and state funding is decreasing? Internationalization of higher education exists on the framework of international donor assistance to the country's development. In many cases it includes visiting experts on various issues to the higher education sector for various reasons. I think that it is time to consider sustainability issues of the current directions in higher education and to spend funds and time to develop our own local corps of higher education experts, instead of always inviting foreign experts to do the job for us. We should use our own professionals, who have greater knowledge in the local situation. The reason for saying this is very simple - we received credit for the improvement of higher education and a tremendous amount of money was spent on international experts.

#### **Indirect Effects of Internationalization:**

Internationalization has produced a wide range of changes in Kyrgyz society. One is the support of the human right for the mobility of Kyrgyzstan citizens. Internationalization has also contributed to the development of civil society in Kyrgyzstan, to the development of a global community, and to personal individual development. Academic internationalization has resulted in recognition of our professionals and specialists abroad, democratization of decision making within colleges and universities, and decentralization of power.

Colleges and universities have become independent from the state through the possibility of direct financing of institutional projects by donors, and setting up institutional linkages without approval from state authorities. This contributes to the

future of decentralized system of management in higher education and to the development of the academic freedom through placing faculty in various academic settings abroad, via high valuing of the idea of academic freedom and the process of its implementation. A final indirect effect is the development of integrated new information and communication technologies.

#### **Beneficiaries of Higher Education Internationalization**

Beneficiaries of higher education internationalization include: Kyrgyzstani students and faculty, Kyrgyzstani colleges and universities, Kyrgyzstani economy, Kyrgyzstani civil society, educational quality, foreign colleges and universities, international research, international trade, and globalization.

Let me examine, for example Kyrgyz-European linkages. Is there an interest in including Central Asian higher education institutions into the European Credit Transfer System and making the System a Eurasian one? We hope that the answer is yes, we think that it is better to be ahead of the economic and political processes and to prepare people, organizations, and business to benefit of the social processes. This is a goal of education. For instance, there is increasing trade cooperation among our countries, but higher education is not preparing people to work adequately and to deal professionally in this situation. For example, we could offer better opportunities for trade cooperation by providing more language courses either in a formal or informal educational setting, or by introducing trade law courses. There will be more such examples in the future. Internationalization in this case will be definitely of mutual economic interest to Kyrgyzstan and to European countries.

Currently, financial resources for internationalization come from:

1. International assistance (loans, grants)
2. State budget
3. Internal revenue of the university
4. Special programs, like Presidential Commission

International assistance

As a source of internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan, international assistance has played a particularly valuable role since higher education's transformation after independence. As the document of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) indicated in its report about the education sector in 1996: "The Law on education permits the involvement of foreign bodies in the sphere of education and training in Kyrgyzstan. A number of donor countries, bilateral and multilateral organizations have executed projects in the field of education and training since independence in 1991. These organizations include both governmental and non-governmental organizations." International assistance has included a number of activities supporting international educational linkages including the TEMPUS program of the European Union, the Fulbright program of the USA, and others. In the above mentioned report the ADB notes that priority areas for international assistance in the transition period are:

1. "Provision of support of sustainable development and appropriate aspects of the current system; Assistance with reform processes"
2. "International assistance remains fragmented and many potential synergy effect unexploited as a result"

### **Impact Of Internationalization on the Organizational Culture of Universities**

The Education and Training Master Plan of the Kyrgyz Republic, in Section III, "higher education" indicates a strategy of the program as "increasing the quality of teaching and research" (6, P. 111). This area of "increasing the quality of teaching and research" is a main area for the contribution of international experience. Areas of internationalization include the following parameters: staff and student mobility; curriculum; financing higher education; faculty and staff development; faculty, staff, and students exchange; research; administration; governance; accreditation and credit recognition; institutional improvement. It is only due to internationalization that faculty started working in the form of projects, which were not very widely used previously.

*Curriculum:* A good example of internationalization is our joint work with San Francisco State University in the area of curriculum development for economics courses, which included long-term faculty capacity development. This project was sponsored by the American foundation "Eurasia." At the moment we are working on preparing Economics courses to be taught in English, jointly with the Dutch Amhem and Neimegem Business school. We hope that it will be one of the first steps towards participation in the European Credit Transfer System.

*Financing higher education:* An analysis was prepared by Kyrgyzstani higher education specialists for the Asian Development Bank for financial support of our educational system. Financial support is provided to higher education through various channels, including, but not limited to, funding joint projects (academic, research, faculty and staff mobility, capacity development). Internationalization in terms of finance doesn't necessarily mean direct or indirect financing of higher education. Sometimes, as in the present case, it means internationalization of the colleges' and universities' financing structure. So foreign experience, not money, can improve our system. For example, the development of fundraising in universities is a direct impact of the foreign experience.

*Faculty and staff development:* Probably this area is the most important area for the future sustainability of the higher education of Kyrgyzstan. We highly appreciate all the efforts and finances involved in the support of our teachers and scholars. For future success we need to strengthen this side of internationalization in our country. The President of Kyrgyzstan, being himself a scientist, launched a special Presidential program supporting young specialists' preparation abroad. Part of this trained group will work in institutions of higher education.

*Faculty, staff, and student exchange: Research:* At the end of the XXth century it is crucial for faculty and scholars to have updated information. Open political doors created the possibility for Kyrgyz scholars to collaborate with foreign colleagues. There is no doubt about the intellectual capacity of our scholars to contribute to the world research, but there are certainly not enough information channels. Not all scholars have open access to information nor are they able to set up valuable contacts. Enhancing the information system in international academic exchange is identified in the "Education and Training Master Plan" of the Kyrgyz republic as an important strategy. Step by step, research and faculty contacts are increasing. One of the major obstacles in internationalization of our academic life in higher education is language and available funds. Nevertheless, there are certain possibilities in this area.

*Administration. Governance:* The Asian Development Bank, in its "Education and Training Master Plan" of the Kyrgyz Republic recognized higher education needs for

administrative staff retraining and for capacity building, and acknowledges that we now lack our own internal training resources for this purpose. It suggested training sessions for high- and middle-level administrative personnel, organized in Kyrgyzstan in cooperation with international agencies, as well as participation in the short-term training abroad (6, p. 114).

Foreign colleges exhibit a strong trend to work strategically. During our process of transforming higher education we can benefit from international experience in terms of learning and implementing the methods and systems of strategic thinking, strategic management, enhancing strategic plan development and university community's participation in this process. So we are close now to other lessons from our foreign colleagues - democratization of university life, expanding faculty activities to include broad participation and encouraging the initiation of new processes in higher education. Internationalization is now for us a process of developing democratic values, like academic freedom, in the academic life.

International experience may help us in the process of faculty and staff empowerment, which will be a key element in the strengthening of higher education in the country. Our experience in empowering our faculty has revealed a strong resistance to take advantage of initiatives, a major loss of faculty commitment in decision making (due to incredibly small salaries and lack of any benefits), and an inherited tradition to be outside of the process of decision making and planning for the future. Speaking about democratization, one should mention a tradition in Western education to organize interest groups and lobby at various political levels. As one American scholar writes, "organized interests are playing increasingly influential role in American policy"(3, XII).

As indicated in a study of the impact of management systems (See Baldrige, Policy-making and Effective Leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978 ), technical, financial, and political support to internationalization coming from abroad strengthens participation at various levels in the decision making process. The fact that many educational endeavors that received foreign financial and other support are shaped in the form of projects and that the people involved in the project are not, for the most part, top administrators, encouraged people to participate actively in the decision-making process.

*Accreditation and credit recognition:* One of the key words when we are talking about higher education in terms of internationalization is accreditation. This is an area where foreign experience and foreign contacts are very valuable but so far are limited. The existing national institutional assessment system of higher education is working, but it seems not to be able to fulfill the demands and needs of the Kyrgyzstani citizens, as well as the needs of Kyrgyzstani higher education institutions to be recognized for equal opportunities abroad. We have to convince foreign universities, companies, foundations, educators and various organizations that our degrees, diplomas, programs, colleges and universities are of good and high quality by means of international assessment, which is provided by accrediting agencies. Certainly, that it is not enough, but we can't influence time and this is only a first step. The usefulness of accreditation is its effect on institutional improvements in higher education.

Entering the market economy with a destroyed social and economic system gives education, especially higher education, specific tasks for preparing people who are able to build a wealthy country and makes the question about educational outcomes a very critical one. For Kyrgyzstan now, it is extremely important to evaluate and to have people

with expertise in the evaluation of educational outcomes. This area of assessment of educational outcomes is an area in which we need to get lessons from abroad. We need international partners, international skills, and international evaluation.

It is important for Kyrgyzstani higher education educators to participate in higher education assessment discussions. We have a strong tradition in some aspects of educational assessment and we definitely can contribute to the world discussion as well benefit from it.

### **Challenges**

During the internationalization of higher education, we in Kyrgyzstan made a lot of changes which now are being reviewed and sometimes we returning to the previous patterns. For example, some universities are shifting back to offering to students a 5-year degree with Diploma. It is a bridge. Functionally, internationalization is a way of bringing the best experience, to improve public policy concerning internationalization. I would like to share with you some contemporary higher education policy issues on internationalization in Kyrgyzstan:

- Legislation
- Role of key public officials
- Policy issues, shaping the future of the internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan (5)

Areas of challenge include:

#### 1. Institutional

- Academic (credit transfers, curriculum development as a response to market demands )
- Financial
- Lack of understanding of the ways, forms, and perspectives of cooperation with the world
- Difference in approaches both at ontological and epistemological levels.
- Our limited knowledge about the foreign experience, resources
- Lack of understanding of the ways, forms, perspectives of cooperation with the world

#### 2. Personal- Language

#### 3. Wide social level- macro level

- Political (recognition between countries, for example India, Sweden)
- High level of financial and political instability
- Lack of vision for future external perspectives (at the moment limited trade relations exist between countries and benefits of relations with Kyrgyzstan are not visible)
- Cultural (as a result of this challenge, special training programs in Intercultural communication and Orientation appeared in the curriculum of various foreign and Kyrgyzstani universities, for example OTOP in the SFSU and an analogous course is being developed in the IUK )
- Difference in understanding the key issues of higher education
- Lack of understanding of higher education problems in the world and in general of higher education development or inter-university cooperation

- Limited knowledge of international higher education and agencies supporting higher education cooperation
- In Kyrgyzstan the process of decision making on internationalization of higher education. (For example, a state agency "Goscominvest" which for the State Committee for Investment is "a principal body responsible for the coordination of international activities in the field of education and training" [6, p. 56])

### **Perspectives**

Speaking about perspectives, we mean perspectives not only in the internal university structure, but also very much in the external relations of colleges and universities. International experience in this sense is really a treasure. We, stepping into the market economy, can benefit from foreign experience in serving its community well, developing a community orientation, fund raising, participation of stakeholders in decision -making, marketing, and careful analysis of the community needs. Researchers recognize that it is this area that made American education successful and a leader. This leads, of course, to external assessment of academic and research institutions, like colleges and universities. So we can start developing our assessment tools which will later contribute to better serving the community. One of the key elements of internationalization is internationalization of assessment concepts, tools and processes.

We can identify a range of possible perspectives of the internationalization of higher education:

- Eurasian educational space development
- Higher education internationalization as a substantial support to the integrative
- Trends in Central Asia and Eurasia
- Spin-off effects of internationalization will be quality improvement and quality assurance in higher education
- Easy credit transfer among higher education institution of the Kyrgyz Republic and

the outside world

- Growth of self confidence
- Joint course development (transnational, inter-institutional, etc.)
- Stable faculty and student mobility flow
- Participation in the ECTS
- Providing of academic courses in English
- Strong research contacts
- Strengthening of the internationalization process
- Improvement of university management
- Support of democracy building in the Kyrgyz Republic

### **SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)**

What are the strong sides of internationalization? Internationalization has shaped a great deal of our development since independence. Shifting to the bachelor's and master's degree programs is one example. Internationalization influenced the trend towards the independence of central bodies and the ability to answer to the demands of the economy. What are the weak sides of internationalization? Strong dependence on foreign support, tremendous lack of internal resources for internationalization, lack of

human capacity in the development of international ties. It can destroy the advantages of the previous higher educational system if implemented without careful analysis of the needs and mission of Kyrgyzstani higher education institutions.

**Lessons learned from abroad:**

We are not the only educators trying to learn from international experience and get some lessons out of it. I would like to mention the article of the respected scholar, Burton R. Clark from the University of California at Berkley (2, p. 365- 376). He examines issues of coordination of higher education, control over education, diversity of the forms of organization in the higher education sector, and the university's autonomy. After reading his article I was thinking very seriously about the question many of my colleagues were asking: Will the changes impacted by international experience promote success? Won't they "deny the grounds on which we have been successful to date" (2, 365)?

Educators in the USA are concerned with development, whereas we are not very much concerned, although we should be much more concerned by development process that they, due to the severe circumstances that we are facing now and the demands for identification of development strategies. Whether or not we realize the need for development, changes are coming rapidly and reflection can help us control and gain success instead of losing whatever we already have. Executive officers need an analytical framework to help them to make wise decisions. For example, we should pose questions such as: What kind of bureaucracy can effectively coordinate mass higher education: centralized or institutionally autonomous?

Lobbying for higher education is an other area of international experience. It is a tradition in the USA, for example, for "interest groups" to participate in the decision-making process. They are part of the policy networks and take part in developing policy networks that determine public policies. Looking at the results of our foreign colleagues, we may try to develop "policy communities," and intervene into the policy-making arena. Do we have an infrastructure for that? This is one of several questions now facing us. Do we need it? Who needs it and why? Can we identify private interests, community interests, state interests? What are the benefits of democratization in higher education? American experts consider participation in decision-making by many interest groups in higher education development as one of the key factors, which leads to the success of higher education. Are we speaking about civil society or education in civil society? Are we speaking about the contribution of higher education to the whole value structure, democratization of society via the set up of its "policy domain"(3, XII) or policy networks of the interest groups? We can see how different interests are dealt with so that they work for the benefit of higher education. Can American lessons help us in identifying our hidden conflicts, hindering the development of higher education? My question is - why, in the USA, do they pay so much attention to this sector? Because it is extremely important and we should also take it into consideration. Are European experiences more valuable in this sense? It is very close in many aspects to our previous system - Soviet.

Issues of academic freedom, which are very much discussed among international educators, and the foreign experience of professors enjoying "a fairly high degree of academic freedom" (2, p. 240), as well as the absence of structural constraints to such experiences, may effect positively the trends of development of the higher education sector in the future. History has shown that only free professors and scholars can produce

socially valuable education and knowledge. There is no doubt that academic freedom is one of the key factors promoting the development of excellent education and advanced knowledge. This is another lesson learned from our international experience. We, educators in Kyrgyzstan, after many decades of the totalitarian administrative regime, should use American experience in this area on large scale. P. G. Altbach wrote that academic freedom in American universities "is quite free from structural restraints and that external authorities, including both government and college and university trustees, have been overwhelmingly supportive of academic freedom during the past several decades" (2, p. 240-241).

#### **Policy Issues In Kyrgyz Higher Education Under the Influence Of Internationalization**

Discussions about evolution in the area of higher education administration focus on centralization versus decentralization (2, 369). Extensive research on decision making in the higher education sector, done in Western countries, gives us a lot to think about. For example, we can use well developed tools that support the decision making process and a participatory approach, and thus change the whole system of running institutions. Matthew J. Liberatore, Robert L. Nydick have illustrated "how the analytical hierarchy process (AHP) can be applied to those situations in higher education where a group must evaluate a large number of alternatives" (2, 593) In other words, educators in the world outside the former Soviet Union have developed tools to support a shift from a single decision maker to decisions made by committees or groups.

#### **Conclusion**

Internationalization has many benefits for higher education in Kyrgyzstan during its transitional period, but it raises many questions as well. The benefits include entering into the world system of academic research and innovation; increasing the mobility of students, faculty, and staff; participating in international accreditation and credit transfer; revitalizing the nation's economy; democratizing the administration of colleges and universities; broadening our understanding of academic freedom; and learning new approaches to a range of issues and problems, both academic and administrative. However, questions remain as well. We must not be too quick to discard everything about the old system, as parts of it were positive. We have to be wary of relying on external funding and of developing programs that are not sustainable. Overall, however, the benefits of internationalization outweigh the questions, particularly since any funding that supports the capacity development of people is indeed sustainable- even if the funding ceases to exist, the ideas remain. And ideas are what higher education is all about, in Kyrgyzstan or abroad.