Reforming of System of the Higher Education in Kazakhstan
(Based on Results of Sociological Research)

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Abstract

Actuality and value of education is difficult to overestimate in modern society. Transformations in higher education system of Kazakhstan aim at adapting the educational system to new socio-economic terms and calls of time. This article studies the results of the sociological research conducted within the framework of the project "The Kazakhstani model of education: international experience, national traditions" (2011) conducted with the support of the Public Fund of the First President of Kazakhstan to find out attitudes of young scientists and students towards transformations in the educational system of Kazakhstan.

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1. Introduction

Educational systems have long been a subject of different evaluations, considerations and criticism. This is quite a natural approach taken by various stakeholders: there is no need to explain that the educational system – a system of considerable importance for a society – should be analyzed in itself as well as by various state and public subsystems. The education in Kazakhstan is now being considerably financed and regulated by the government which sets rules for its transformation and controls its performance.

To what extent is education flexible for changes, and is it effective? Today these questions have already become issues of prime importance on a global scale. The second half of the XX century is noted by various changes in the educational systems of many countries. Transformations evolved in one country and were adopted by other countries.

Talking about the development of education in Kazakhstan, it should be noted that common global issues of education are supplemented both by regional and particular issues relevant to the national system of education.

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2. Topicality of the issue

It is necessary to note that Kazakhstan is one of the first Central Asian states which were recognized as a full member of the European educational space. Accession of Kazakhstan to Bologna Process was supported by the Committee of Ministers of Education of Bologna Process signatories. This step is a high appreciation of reforms carried out by the Republic of Kazakhstan in the sphere of the higher education. It is certainly important in the international positioning of the domestic higher school system.

While integrating into the world educational system, modern experience of Kazakhstan should combine both global (mostly European) standards, and traditions, best practices, education technologies inherited from the Soviet education system. In this regard, it is crucial to not to allow either substantial or structural technologies and educational content while the general orientation is focused on the quality of vocational training and is directed at Kazakhstan labour market.

Certainly, the quality of education is a universal criterion. Nevertheless, difficulties and different interpretations may occur even in this regard. Increasing academic mobility, which is a declarative condition for implementation of the Bologna Process, looks a difficult task. No less important is the availability of reform itself. Reforms should be in place at the level of higher education institutions and organizational structures to enable the implementation of new educational purposes and tasks. Another issue is related to the fact that specific people are engaged in science and education; their instructions and orientation to introduce new educational concepts often play a defining role.

All these circumstances require detailed researches into the issues of higher education. The subject under consideration is certainly extensive and conceptual framework of the research does not claim to identify all the acute issues in the educational system of Kazakhstan (Mukhamedzhanov, Abdirayymova).

3. Research procedure

The main objective of the research was to choose the perspective which could enable us to assess the condition of higher education system in Kazakhstan, primarily, by identifying attitudes of educational process participants towards reforms (through opinions and conditions of students, young scientists, postgraduate students, doctoral candidates and teachers).

The survey was carried out in 7 regions of Kazakhstan and involved students of 12 higher education institutions of the country; 1,500 respondents participated in the survey.

The research was to pay a special attention to those tendencies of education reforms that are most demanded according to young scientists and students, and are respectively potentially productive.

At this stage, the main aspect of higher education transformation in Kazakhstan is directed at further development of a multilevel education system. Major changes of 2011 in this respect pertain to PhD programme. The introduction of two-stage model (Master’s Degree and Bachelor’s Degree) dates back to 1992-1996, i.e., the main difficulties have already been overcome; improvement and further development are in perspective.

While studying the transformation of higher education system in Kazakhstan, it is necessary to find out both advantages and disadvantages of Bologna Declaration general provisions. Advantages of higher school reforms within the Bologna Process are the followings (Smirnov):
- focus on strengthening positions of national higher education systems in the world;
- increasing the amount of financing for scientific researches (as implementation of the Bologna declaration requirement);
- transition to qualitatively new levels of study modes and methods of students’ performance control;
- more possibilities for students to make quality assessment of university departments and their activities given their freedom to choose their major (Nechayev, Sharonov);
- more freedom for students to choose subject disciplines;
- promotion and motivation of students’ independent works. Reforming higher education system within Bologna Process can have the following disadvantages (Smirnov):
- the Bologna Declaration is exclusively oriented on solving purely intra-European issues, whereas global issues are covered only partially;
- there is a threat that the outflow of human resources and a human capital to foreign countries may acquire a mass scale at entering into single European space due to intensive orientation of mobility on the West;
- lack of clear and accurate criteria for quality of education.

4. Analysis of sociological research results

Taking into account the need of comparative analysis, critical judgments provided in response to the survey were compared to data obtained by research projects conducted on a similar topic.

What is the attitude of students towards reformations in higher educational institutions in capital cities and regions of Kazakhstan?

Trends and orientation of reforms in various regions may be identified by calculating average values of data presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The trends of Kazakhstan’s higher education reform: Assessment provided by students of higher educational institutions in capital cities and regions

| No. | Higher educational institutions                              | Absolutely confident that reforms are in the right direction | In the right direction | In the wrong direction | Absolutely confident that reforms are in the wrong direction |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Higher education institutions of Almaty                      | 15.38%                                                       | 45.42%                 | 20.06%                | 14.02%                                                       |
| 2   | Higher education institutions of Astana                       | 25.85%                                                       | 45.75%                 | 14.25%                | 6.00%                                                        |
| 3   | Regional higher education institutions                        | 18.54%                                                       | 52.08%                 | 16.30%                | 6.62%                                                        |

Table 1 shows there are various opinions on the matter under consideration. Summarizing the obtained data, one should not draw a critical conclusion that reforms in Almaty higher educational institutions fail to be implemented or the quality of education is poor. The received results, first of all, indicate the tendencies of reconsideration and critical, pragmatic perception of innovative components.

For reference, major aspects and factors of innovative contradictions inherent in modern Kazakhstan society are summarized below:
1. Need for additional training, professional development (34.9 %)
2. Need for gradual introduction of innovations and their social adaptation (33.3 %)
3. Tiredness and fear of changes (19.1 %)
4. Psychological barriers in accepting innovations; need for destroying stereotypes (9.5 %)
5. Lack of sufficient material resources (9.5 %) (Smirnov, 2004).

On the other hand, a new stage of education reform in Kazakhstan requires training innovative managers who possess skills to manage scientific and educational teams, researches and developments, and capable to work at the market of innovations.

5. Main trends in implementation of reforms

Education is a complex multipurpose phenomenon consisting of equally important components such as purpose (result, qualification) and procedure (educational process). The research has focused on detailed study of higher education reforms in Kazakhstan in terms of the implementation of priority strategic tasks. Reforms in higher education system are directed on solving a range of strategic tasks. Students who participated in the survey
were offered to note which of the priority tasks in the educational system are being implemented and which are not.

![Graph](image)

*Figure 1. ‘Implementation of priority tasks in higher education reforms’*

The highlighted positions can also be structured on thematic activities of higher education institutions:
- Qualitative (qualifying) characteristics of education; ensuring high quality on a stable manner.
- Implementation of new educational programs and expansion of international cooperation
- Informational support of education and introduction of new technologies
- Personal development and civic education (see Figure 1).

Due to integration of Kazakhstan into the world educational space, Kazakhstan signed the Bologna Declaration which requires necessary modification and improvement of higher education, revision of the academic policies by higher education institutions and development of basic educational programs for new generation. Currently, the country continues to carry out intensive modernization of higher education: multi-stage educational system is being implemented, the range of educational services are being expanded, new trade qualifications are being introduced, structural transformations are taking place in higher education institutions.

In-depth interviews were conducted with young representatives of academic institutions with various scientific directions. Target group (object) of research consisted of young scientists – certified specialists in the field of natural, technical and social sciences. Ten people aged between 25 and 35 years participated in the interview in total.

Higher education of Kazakhstan is experiencing a range of tendencies due to integration of Kazakhstan into the Bologna Process, namely, complete transition to a three-stage model of education “Bachelor's Degree – Master’s Degree – PhD programme” based on credit technology; a particular attention in higher education is given to science (the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘On Science’ in a new edition). However, the attitudes to these transformations in the academic environment are characterized by polarity. Thus, majority of respondents (67%) admit expediency and efficiency of innovations to achieve high quality of education.

Moreover, young scientists confidently declare about theoretical validity and utility of a domestic science, as well as about Kazakhstani scientists who can make essential contribution to the development of global science:

- **Kazakhstan should take up a certain position in the world community, as well as in educational space. It must not be assumed that our system concedes to another. On some reforms we advance Russia and other CIS countries. A theoretical basis of the higher education in Kazakhstan is very strong. The only shortcoming in this field can be the practical side of education, namely the lack of practice. Scientific language uses a term such as ‘transnationalization of knowledge’, that means the knowledge does not belong only to the separate country, it is the property of the whole world. We study theories of the Western Europe, the USA etc. It would be also good, if other countries got familiarized with works and theories of Kazakhstani scientists that are worthwhile to stir up interests; they should be introduced to the world scientific community’** (Interview excerpts hereinafter are given in italics, stylistics of texts is preserved).

At the same time, some criticism can be seen in judgmental assessments of survey participants who speak against any changes in the educational system. According to their opinion, frequent system and organizational
transformations do not promote the quality of education at all. On the contrary, they lower the quality of education which is already in place:

✓ «I consider the introduction of ‘Master’s Degree – PhD programme’ model to be absolutely incorrect. In Soviet period, our education was recognized as the strongest. Thesis works for Candidate’s degree or PhD degree used to be written and prepared for years. I consider it is impossible to prepare a specialist with PhD or Master’s Degree within 2-3 years»;

✓ «In general, frequent changes in higher education system will not lead to a good result. It is necessary to accept a certain model and to work on it».

Practically all survey participants unanimously called integration of science, scientific and technical developments, production and higher education as a main condition for ensuring the efficiency of higher education modernization. At the same time, criticism is observed to some extent in assessments of respondents who speak against any changes in educational system. According to their opinion, frequent system and organizational transformations do not promote the quality of education at all; on the contrary, they lower the existing quality of education.

Practically all informants unanimously called integration of science, scientific and technical developments, production and higher education as a main condition for ensuring the efficiency of higher education modernization:

✓ «Kazakhstan has rich and powerful source of raw materials. It is necessary to activate manufacturing and intensify international cooperation to exchange experience with other countries»;

✓ «It is necessary to stay in touch with manufacturers. Following the results of expensive projects and our scientific works, we can say that we achieve valuable results which often remain unimplemented»;

✓ «Not all enterprises and organizations in Kazakhstan agree to invite students to internships, in other words, they are closed for cooperation. At the same time, students are expected to have a relevant experience at employment»;

✓ «The emphasis should be made on science development, introduction of new innovative technologies, and ensuring integration of scientific institutions and enterprises. Scientific research works should possess both fundamental and applied character».

Despite positive shifts such as «Students are more free in choice of subjects, teachers», «Students have the possibility to be trained in foreign higher education institutions within a year that will yield good results», many respondents consider that factors impeding the transition to a credit system of education are the mentality of Kazakhstan students and outdated educational and scientific support.

Opinions on rather real prospects of Kazakhstan’s accession to Bologna Process differ between supporters and opponents of reforms in the educational system. Thereby, more than a half (67%) of interview participants believe that the future of Kazakhstan’s higher education lies in adjusting and adapting it to modern international standards. Furthermore, active participation of students and teachers at all levels, as well as the state support is a key condition for successful integration of the country into the world educational space:

✓ «We joined the Bologna Process. In this regard, it is necessary for an academic community to take active part in various international projects, particularly, in TEMPUS, TASI, Erasmus Mundus. Moreover, the initiative should come not only from teachers, but from students as well. Students know foreign languages better; they are more advanced in computer technologies. Support of government is necessary as well in this field»;

«Having received the diploma in Kazakhstan, the youth can be employed abroad since their education will be in line with international educational standards».

As it became clear, difficulties in introducing standards and norms of credit technology within the Bologna Process arose because the country did not get rid of the remnants of Soviet educational system. Achievement of these goals requires time and additional financing of science and education.

Respondents have expressed concern with the low status of science, as well as weak motivation of young people to pursue science. Modern young scientists and teachers working in higher education institutions do not
possess profound fundamental knowledge, whereas true talents give up their scientific activities in pursuit of good salaries:

✓ «Qualitative structure of pedagogical staff in higher education institutions of the country deteriorated over the last 20 years; many of them left to other countries or retired. The prestige of science is low today; the youth does not show a great aspire to pursue science. Average age of teaching staff is 60 years; these are the people of a preretirement or retirement age. I think the situation will gradually improve in view of reforms in higher education system and establishment of research universities. Greater opportunities in this regard could be provided by research universities»;
✓ «The best minds work in industries pursuing high pay rates»;
✓ «Young teachers should adopt experience of teachers who worked and studied during the times of Soviet era».

Thereby, worthy replacement of old pedagogical staff with young specialists who are trained in completely different educational environment is another issue of urgency. This arouses the need to consolidate and build intellectual potentials of young teachers.

As it became clear, low level of academic mobility of students and teachers are explained by objective (deficiency of financing exchange trips of teachers and students to abroad; discrepancy of curriculum disciplines with international standards of education) and subjective factors (computer illiteracy, lack of foreign language skills).

6. Conclusion

In general, the attitude of young scientists towards the new Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘On Science’ is positive. Having called the new law "innovative", they pin great expectations on it. Summing up issues of educational system reforms, it is safe to note the followings:

1. Innovative process includes preparation and implementation of innovative changes and is developed of interconnected phases which form a single, complex whole. General researches which study the perception, adoption and adaptation of innovative activities claim that the nature of innovations is not absolutely conflict-free.

2. The system of higher education in Kazakhstan is experiencing its development. The complete transition to three-stage system ‘Bachelor’s Degree – Master’s Degree – PhD Programme’ based on credit technology is being carried out; the particular attention in higher education is being given to a field of science. In this context, the Bologna Process does not only facilitate to the integration of Kazakhstan’s higher school to modern world educational space, but gives opportunities to effectively utilize the international experience of educational processes to improve the quality and efficiency of training by strengthening research and practical components of the educational process.

3. Nevertheless, the considerable number of young scientists adheres to the viewpoint that higher education in Kazakhstan requires modernization and change of mentality, whereas the minority believes that the Soviet higher education, which has become the source of modern educational system in Kazakhstan, is better than its Western option. Furthermore, the majority of respondents are concerned with the low status of science, as well as weak motivation of young people to pursue science.

4. According to young scientists, the strongest points of vocational training are the experience and qualification of research workers and pedagogical staff at higher education institutions; the weakest points are the lack of effective link between the science and manufacture. Respondents indicated that provision of finance for high school sector of science, in particular, for programs developing research universities and introduction of scientific achievements into practice was at the lowest level.
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