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Challenges in contemporary higher education in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia

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perspective

Challenges in contemporary higher education in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia

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Largely unknown to most of the world, Kyrgyzstan has a flourishing higher education (HE) sector, with more universities per head than other countries with similar populations. Kyrgyzstan is also a major regional importer of international students in Central Asia. This paper opens up this understudied country in three ways: first, through a brief analysis of the HE sector in Kyrgyzstan; second, by offering a personal view of life on the HE coalface through the findings of primary interviews with university managers in Kyrgyzstan, and third, by identifying five key contemporary challenges of working in Kyrgyz universities. The paper therefore contributes to the limited academic and practical study of HE in Central Asia by offering a new perspective on contemporary global challenges in HE administration and management. The key findings are relevant to organisations seeking to understand the context of working in the HE sector in Kyrgyzstan, and also to individuals and organisations wishing to deepen their comparative understanding of HE sectors around the world.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan; Central Asia; higher education

Introduction

It may surprise readers to discover that Kyrgyzstan has a flourishing higher education (HE) sector, with more universities (52) per head than countries with similar populations, such as Denmark (8), Finland (14) and (although not, post-2014 referendum, an independent country) Scotland (19). Kyrgyzstan is also a major regional importer of international students in Central Asia, hosting more than 40% of all international students studying in Central Asia. These international

students come mainly from other Central Asian countries but also from South Asia (particularly Pakistan and India), Turkey (where there is a great deal of linguistic similarity) and, increasingly, neighbouring China (Jenish 2012).

In total, the number of students in Kyrgyzstan grew from just over 58,000 at the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 to over 200,000 in 2006 (Roberts 2010). That number is even higher today, indicating that most institutions are fairly small in size. As Roberts notes, the expansion in participation in HE is not unique to Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia:

like young people in most other world regions today, Central Asian youth are remaining in education partly due to 'push' factors (the absence of jobs for teenage labour market entrants) and partly due to 'pull' factors (the hope that further qualifications will lead to labour market rewards) (2010, 541)

Yet despite the impressively high number of HE institutions in Kyrgyzstan, this is not viewed in the country as a uniformly positive good. In fact, President Atambayev used a speech on the country's Day of Knowledge (1 September, coinciding with the start of the new school year) to criticise what he perceives to be a lowering in the quality of HE as exemplified

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through the growth in the number of institutions and lack of graduate preparedness (Shamshiev 2014). The Education Minister has been directed to review both the number of universities and their effectiveness (Bengard 2014).

This article takes as its starting point the 1990s transition from the highly planned and centralised era of education policy under the Soviet Union to a policy and context defined by Kyrgyzstan becoming an independent country. The article has three parts. First, given that Kyrgyzstan is in general little known and studied, it provides a brief analysis of developments in HE since 1991. This sets the context for the subsequent section, which summarises the main observations and findings of primary research undertaken with university managers in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, thereby offering a snapshot of four personal views of life on the HE coal-face. Finally, the article identifies five key contemporary challenges of working in Kyrgyz universities drawn from the empirical research and the findings of these original qualitative interviews.

Methodology

A literature review drawing on contemporary news articles, development agency reports and the little academic literature that is available on HE in Central Asia provides the data for background information about Kyrgyzstan and its HE sector. This section also draws on the author's blog on HE and contemporary society in Central Asia.¹

There is almost no academic work in either English or Russian² about HE administration/management in Central Asia, which makes it similar to the UK and other English-speaking sectors where this element of university life remains understudied (Gander, Moyes, and Sabzalieva 2014). More generally, research on HE in Central Asia remains markedly underdeveloped and although there is a growing body of literature addressing the importance of tertiary education on development, this mostly relates to sub-Saharan Africa and South and South-East Asia (Oketch, McCowan, and Schendel 2014).

The primary research for this article took the form of four face-to-face interviews with senior university managers at HE institutions in the capital Bishkek. Given the lack of literature in this area, the high-level aim of this empirical research was exploratory in nature, aiming to find out more about how universities are organised and managed in Kyrgyzstan. The interviews were semi-structured, in that there were a prepared set of questions/themes, but there was also flexibility for the interviews to be guided by the interest and opinion of the interviewees. This method can often uncover new or unexpected information, which was important to an initial study like this one.

Interviews were secured through personal contacts that the author has maintained and developed since working in the region a decade ago. Two interviews were undertaken in English and two in Russian.

From Soviet to independent HE policy

Like the other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union until declaring independence in 1991. As a consequence of Soviet education policies, the country maintains near universal levels of literacy and great respect and support for education. Development of HE across the Soviet Union accelerated after the Second World War with the expectation that students would continue to HE to qualify in specialisms that would help reconstruct and develop the economy (Shpakovskaia 2007).

A number of changes and challenges have arisen for HE in Kyrgyzstan since the fall of the Soviet Union, which can be summarised as follows:

- Education policy is no longer funded and decided by Moscow;
- Public expenditure on HE is low, especially compared with the overall education budget;
- The specialisms taught in each country have now become disaggregated from local production needs (this used to be centrally coordinated);
- Pedagogy relying on Marxist–Leninist traditions has lost legitimacy, but no single philosophy has replaced it;
- Market reforms have led to the rapid growth of a private HE sector as well as greater prevalence of tuition fees and other cost-sharing measures;
- Cross-border educational networks have broken down;
- Academics face lower salaries and job security, and greater levels of professional alienation;
- However, there continues to be high levels of demand for HE.

HE in twenty-first century Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is the first parliamentary state in Central Asia and currently making progress towards democracy following parliamentary elections in October 2010 (Collins 2011). Despite low trust levels in political leadership, frequent protests and periodic ethnic and border tensions with neighbouring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, it is the most open country in Central Asia in political terms (see e.g. 'Politics in Kyrgyzstan', 2012).

Thirty per cent of the population of 5.7 million were aged under 15 in 2013, a young nation with good prospects for transition into the many HE institutions noted in the introduction. Kyrgyzstan has high

expectations for education and steady participation rates – 41% in 2011, compared to 21% across all lower-middle-income countries. One hundred and twenty-four women enrol in tertiary level education for every 100 men, which is also higher than the average for lower-middle-income countries where there are 106 women for every 100 men (World Bank).

Overall HE policy is oriented towards improving quality. Until the most recent assessment in 2012, it was the only Central Asian country to have participated in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)-run Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), demonstrating a commitment by the government to assessing educational levels and development at international standards. The government has increased investment in HE, for example, beginning the process – like in Kazakhstan – of making the system more compatible with the Bologna Process.³ However, in the 2009 PISA assessment, the country was ranked last out of all participating countries for maths, science and reading (Hou 2011).

The poor result of the PISA assessment must be set against the context of recent political challenges, but nevertheless indicates that the sector needs to be modernised and managed more efficiently, primarily by the Ministry of Education and Science but also by universities themselves. The post-PISA report also recommends that quality be improved, which will be complicated by the growth in the private sector HE market. Amsler notes that the shift towards non-state-funded HE has led to ‘extremely uneven educational “markets” in which academically weak but wealthy students can purchase university places and competent but poor students are excluded from higher education altogether’ (2008, 119).

The state retains a strong role in HE in Kyrgyzstan, both through direct control of state-funded universities and by the regulation of private institutions. Interviewees for this article commented particularly on the state’s intervention in the curriculum, primarily through a quality assurance regime, a recent accreditation initiative and frequent new directives concerning HE. That said, in a recent report comparing Central Asian countries, Soltys reported that ‘Kyrgyzstan has made the most significant attempts to reform its education, though the country’s poverty allows it little capacity for change’ (2014, 11).

University managers in Kyrgyzstan: four case studies

The main findings of each of the four case studies are presented below, the aim being to personalise a setting that will be unfamiliar to most through a brief description of the interviewee’s reflections on working in HE in a Kyrgyz university.

Case study 1

Case study 1 is currently Director of the School of Professional and Continuing Education in a post-Soviet, private university. She has always worked in HE institutions although her first degree was in engineering.

The interviewee defines herself as an academic although she does both academic and administrative work. Case study 1 reported natural tensions between academic and administrative staff, whether this is because a person cannot be expert in all areas or because information does not flow well enough between academic and administrative departments.

Case study 1 noted that during the Soviet Union, there was strong state control over the administration of universities, for example, in defining the student–teacher or space–student ratio. Much of this has continued in the post-Soviet era (1991–date) which is why she believes that university management is already quite clearly defined and managed by the government.

The interviewee says that it is not common to stay in the same employment sector in Kyrgyzstan although generally not through individual choice. Research by her university in 2009 showed that people in Kyrgyzstan change career path four times during their working life, particularly in the post-independence period. This is due to changing economic and political priorities and the closing of state companies. The interviewee believes that this trend will continue into the future.

Case study 2

Case study 2 is Head of the Inter-agency educational cooperation unit in a post-Soviet, intergovernmental (joint Russian–Kyrgyz) state university. She has worked for the university since it opened in 1993, having been headhunted from another HE institution where she had been a lecturer for 20 years.

The interviewee felt that she had progressed in her career as far as she wanted to; she reported that her career was not foremost in her life, but that a job she can do well and enjoy doing was more important.

Case study 2 noted that when she first joined the university, she attempted to combine teaching with her administrative role, but that owing to the frequency of business trips she needed to undertake, she decided to drop the teaching element. Although in hindsight she felt that this was the wrong decision, she nonetheless takes pride in her role and feels that her academic background makes her role easier as she can understand academics. She described some of the projects she manages as academic related, such as organising summer schools for Russian-language teachers, so a certain element of hybridity was clearly something she valued.

Case study 3

Case study 3 is Pro-Rector (Curriculum) in a Soviet era, state university. He knows his institution well, having been a student there himself and having then re-joined and stayed with the university from a junior academic position. He reached his current position, a wide-ranging role covering everything from introducing a module rating system to initiating online distance education, through internal promotion.

Case study 3's role is considered an administrative post and is part of the Rectorate. He also continues with his academic work and continues to supervise students. The interviewee felt strongly that he has an obligation to continue his research and continue to develop the next generation of researchers.

The interviewee confirmed that at least a doctorate (or better, Doctor of Science⁴) would be required to progress to a senior administrative post and to be accepted as a senior member of an academic community. Without a doctorate, his view was that one would at most be able to progress to Deputy Dean or possibly even Dean of a department, but possibly higher in a non-curricular role such as international affairs. He considers the administrative roles at his university to be in the Rectorate, Human Resources, International Affairs and Finance.

Case study 4

Case study 4 was at the time of the interview the Vice-President for Academic Affairs for a small English language post-Soviet private university. In October 2014, the interviewee was appointed to the national government as Deputy Minister for Education and Science.⁵ As with case study 3, this interviewee's links with her institution were longstanding, although in this case the interviewee had progressed up in the institution by obtaining experience at other organisations.

Case study 4 explained that her move up from Head of Department to Vice-President was not considered unusual as the university is such a young institution. Her role as Vice-President for Academic Affairs encompasses the student career from recruitment to graduation, incorporating the Registry, Admissions, Timetabling/Exams, Human Resources, Library, the Central Asian Studies Institute, and the Continuing Education Department.

During the interview, case study 4 admitted that she felt that she had hit a ceiling at her current university, but said that she would not want to move to another university in Bishkek because of her university's uniqueness and owing to corruption in other institutions which she felt negatively about. She had been planning to stay in her role for a couple of years, but it looks like she was once again enticed to move early with the offer from the government.

Contemporary challenges of working in universities in Kyrgyzstan

Drawing on findings from the interviews with the case studies, five key challenges emerged. These are identified below, as are some of the potential challenges and opportunities these create, both for policy-makers in Kyrgyzstan and for practitioners and institutions seeking to build or deepen links with the HE sector in Kyrgyzstan.

To be a senior university administrator, one needs an academic background

This does not necessarily mean that one has pursued an academic career before switching to a senior administrative role as case study 1 showed, but in general there was a strong sense that to have credibility in a senior university role, one needs to have an academic background. Case study 2 argued the case for those without an academic background, noting that skills/experience such as financial management or commercialisation can be transferred over to HE, but also felt that those with experience in HE would stand a better chance of progressing than those who come in from other sectors. And as case study 3 notes, it would be difficult to progress to a very senior role without a doctorate. This finding has similarities with attitudes towards becoming a vice-chancellor in the UK (Gander, Moyes, and Sabzalieva 2014), although in the British setting there is greater recognition of professional qualifications for senior roles in areas such as finance or human resources.

As the debate on the quality of HE progresses, one implication could be that the government also turns its attention to the quality and level of training of university managers. Rather than this necessarily being about the academic credentials, this discussion could be focused instead on the types of skills needed to reach senior roles. In this sense, there is an opportunity for providers of courses in areas such as HE management and public sector finances to create a market in Kyrgyzstan, either to offer such courses (probably at the graduate level) in-country themselves or through local partners, or by attracting university managers to study in the university's home setting. Case study 4 highlighted the difference this can make when describing how the University's Director of Financial Aid was promoted after completing a Master's degree in HE administration in the UK.

Senior university administrators are not being recognised as 'blended' professionals

Case study 4 says that she is a blended professional because she chose to be one by continuing with

research and advising students. Although only one of the interviewees specifically referred to herself as blended professional, all four could easily be described as such. In her study of third space professionals in the UK, US and Australian settings, Whitchurch identified a growing number of staff who are being 'recruited to dedicated appointments that spanned both professional and academic domains' (2008, 384). Such roles commonly work on projects that span a mix of what might previously have been undertaken either by an academic colleague or by an administrator. Whitchurch offers examples such as regional partnerships, student well-being and academic/professional practice.

Research from Eastern Europe suggests that managers feel frustration at the lack of institutional recognition for their work and may consider leaving the sector for business roles (Nastase, n.d.). As only one of the four interviewees self-identified as a blended professional, it would be unwise to assume that the same frustration is present among Kyrgyz university managers, but there is an important point here about recognition. All four of the case studies gave examples of working well beyond the scope of their job descriptions and demonstrated their commitment to teaching and research as well as to their administrative roles. Some, such as case study 2, expressed regret at having had to make the choice between an academic or an administrative role. It could therefore be argued that reframing senior roles in universities to acknowledge these boundary spanning functions could not only serve to formally recognise that blended roles do exist, but could also enable those in the roles to justify their academic work rather than thinking of it as an 'add-on' to their administrative role.

The concept of a career in university administration is not well embedded

While the interviewees were not averse to the author's suggestion of the concept of a career in university administration, their responses did not suggest that this is a widely recognised notion or necessarily one that could be successful. The research cited by case study 1 on employee mobility implies that those who begin their working life in university administration may not necessarily continue in that sector, or that there are particular career paths (linear or otherwise) that could be followed.

However, case study 2 gave the example of a graduate of her university who she supported up to a deputy manager role, and, after achieving Russian government accreditation as a federal education expert, has moved on to a higher position. Case study 2 also pointed to her two deputies as possible replacements for her if she moves on. Case study 4 also gave examples of supporting more junior colleagues with career

development, but pointed out the lack of specific training programmes.

As with the points made earlier, this potentially presents an opportunity for HE institutions outside Kyrgyzstan to introduce specialised programmes to develop the skills of university administrators. It could also be argued that organisations such as the UK's Association of University Administrators, or the Russian institutions that drive the Russian-language *University Management: Practice and Analysis* journal, could play a role in supporting the development of university administration as a career in Kyrgyzstan.

There are skills gaps between potential employees and job roles at universities

Case study 2 explained that applications to work at her university are generally poorly completed and that there may not be many applications for junior roles. To counter this, she has offered voluntary work in her office both as a means of identifying possible candidates and to determine whether their work is of a sufficient quality. Case study 4 similarly emphasised that her university has to be proactive to fill vacancies and use a variety of recruitment methods. To some extent she felt that the lack of well-qualified candidates was caused by the university's very different operational structure to that of many local universities; this university has a structure that would be more familiar to those used to a UK or US institution. Case study 4 commented that many candidates simply would not have had the opportunity to build up relevant work experience unless they had worked abroad or were already employed by her university.

This mismatch between the skills and preparedness of candidates for the jobs that are available at universities is in keeping with trends seen more broadly around the world as the concept of the 'knowledge economy' embeds. In its 2012 report *Skills, Not Just Diplomas*, the World Bank reported that many employers in Eastern Europe and Central Asia 'view the lack of necessary skills among potential workers as a major impediment to their operations and development' (Sondergaard and Murthi 2012, 18). Further, universities in Central Asia have been identified as not doing enough to equip graduates for the workplace – which of course includes working in universities, with the World Bank suggesting that they 'must learn to liaise better with firms, employers and past students to build up a picture of current market conditions' (Brunner and Tillet 2007, 79). While Kyrgyz universities, according to the World Bank, have progress to make to prepare graduates for the contemporary job market, they are not alone, as it could be argued that this is a common global problem. In the UK, this is starting to be addressed through, for example, the rise of graduate training programmes such as Ambitious

Futures.⁶ That these challenges are being addressed elsewhere presents universities in Kyrgyzstan with opportunities to learn from practice in other settings through partnerships and exchanges, or even for organisations to seek to create specific training programmes in Kyrgyzstan.

Universities may not be doing enough to attract good candidates to administrative roles

Case study 1's comment that Kyrgyz workers move between career sectors may be attributed to the broader context of economic and social change – as Roberts observes of post-independence Central Asia, 'modern economies are expanding rapidly but failing to draw in the whole population' (2010, 539) – but are universities doing enough to make people aware of the opportunities that exist to work in HE administration?

It is likely that part of the problem in recruitment and retention to university administrative roles is the lack of acknowledgement of university administration as a legitimate career route, and in the Kyrgyz context, the interviewees' experiences demonstrate that this is further complicated by the weight placed on academic, rather than skills-based, qualifications as a pre-cursor to progression. Progression routes within and between institutions are not mapped out and this is another challenge for universities in the country to address. A move in this direction could also, for example, help to establish salary scales and to create a job evaluation scheme like that created by Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA) in the UK.

The company now running the HERA identifies effective people management as consisting of: attracting, rewarding, training, educating and empowering.⁷ Employing these principles to jobs in Kyrgyz universities would not only make them more attractive as workplaces that retain and value staff, but also could help to counter the perceived benefits of working in the rapidly growing private sector, where 'young people [who started their careers in the public sector] were likely to have discovered early on that they could achieve significantly higher earnings in the private sector even if this meant a loss of occupational status' (Roberts, Kamruzzaman, and Tholen 2009, 73).

Conclusion

Little attention globally is paid to HE in Central Asia, whether that be in analysing developments in the region or through universities seeking to work in partnership with institutions or government in-country. However, using Kyrgyzstan as a case study offers a fascinating insight into a unique combination of circumstances:

- A highly literate and educated society with continuing great regard for HE but not, as you might expect, a rich country: Kyrgyzstan is a lower-middle-income country with 38% of the population in poverty (World Bank databank);⁸
- A relatively high proportion – around 18% (World Bank databank) – of the (small) national budget spent on education yet with calls from the Head of state downwards for reforms to known problems of inefficiency in the sector;
- University staff successfully undertaking senior administrative roles despite a general lack of recognition for careers paths in university administration, universities themselves not taking an active role in attracting good candidates, and a variably skilled pipeline of applicants into more junior roles in universities.

These factors demonstrate why it is important to understand the specific context of Kyrgyzstan, yet it is equally important to understand that much of what has happened in HE in the country since 1991 has also been played out in HE sectors around the world, from the debate about blended professionals to concerns about graduates' lack of skills. As such, perhaps Kyrgyzstan is not so unknown, after all.

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Notes

1. <http://sabzalieva.wordpress.com>.
2. Russian is widely used as a language for state and inter-agency communication in Central Asia owing to the countries' shared Soviet past, but the official language in Kyrgyzstan is Kyrgyz. Knowledge of English is increasing but is not widespread.
3. <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/about/>.
4. Doctor of Science in the former Soviet system is a higher doctoral degree, comparable to the *habilitation* qualification offered in some countries.
5. https://www.auca.kg/en/auca_news/1756/, accessed on 24 November 2014.
6. <http://www.ambitiousfutures.co.uk/>, accessed on 3 December 2014.

7. Source: <http://www.ecc.ac.uk/>, accessed on 17 January 2015.
8. For comparison, Russia has an 11% poverty rate and Kazakhstan is at 2.9%.

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