1-16-2019

# Evaluating Board Effectiveness for Advancing Autonomy: A Strategy for Newly Autonomous Universities in Kazakhstan

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an instrument for board evaluation specifically designed for the evolving context of higher education reform in Kazakhstan. It adopts a self-study approach, drawing on best practices in governance.

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## Suggested Citation

# Overview

This paper presents an instrument for board evaluation. It adopts a self-study approach, drawing on best practices in governance, and places them in the evolving Kazakhstani context.

Assessing boards should accomplish the following objectives:

- Provide boards with data about their work;

- Frame a discussion for boards to improve governance;

- Create a roadmap for more effective governance.

Such evaluations are best done through self-studies, in which individual board members are asked for feedback anonymously, which is then aggregated and presented to the board. The goal of such efforts is to provide boards with information to improve their work rather than to provide a score on which to grade or rank boards or board members.

# Background

The operating environment for universities in Kazakhstan is changing significantly as the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MoES) alters its legal framework, granting universities increased autonomy. This period of transformation produces both opportunities and challenges. Central to this transition to increased autonomy is the establishment of boards of overseers and boards of directors for the Republic's public universities.

Boards in Kazakhstan face three immediate challenges:

- To understand the work of governance and to organize for it;

- To work constructively with the rector to ensure the university is ready for and takes full advantage of increased autonomy; and

- To be able to review and modify their approaches to governance as university needs evolve.

First, the experience of governing boards varies across the Republic, depending on university status. Some universities will create governing boards for the first time. Others will change from advisory boards or from boards with limited oversight responsibilities to supervisor or fiduciary boards. Thus, Kazakhstani boards face a transition in roles and will likely need new structures and processes to govern effectively under the new legal framework.

Second, while Kazakhstani higher education is a complex enterprise and boards could spend time and attention on many issues, the priority for most universities, and by extension their boards, should be transitioning to increased autonomy. The forthcoming changes are transformational reaching deeply into the university, and potentially affecting most university processes[1]. Autonomy touches the academic mission of boards, the institution's finances,

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1   For a discussion of transformational change as a particulate type of university change see Eckel, P. D. & Kezar, A. (2012). *Taking the Reins: Institutional Transformation in Higher Education*.

infrastructure, including facilities, property, and its staffing[2]. Therefore, the transition to autonomy and its antecedents should be the focus of university boards.

Third, the most effective boards evolve with the institutions they govern. They understand the need to continually revisit their work and to make adjustments as the institution and its context change[3]. While Kazakhstani boards should focus now on the demands and opportunities of increased autonomy, universities eventually will make it through this transition. When they do, their boards should be prepared to shift their work and revisit their structures and tasks to create new ways of governing that add value to the universities they govern.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the work of boards consists of four elements:

1.  **Oversight** – the board holds accountable the university, and its rector, for progress on articulated goals, institutional well-being, financial sustainability, and adherence to its mission;

2.  **Problem Solving** – the board collaborates with the rector to address challenging problems that arise;

3.  **Strategy** – the board partners with the rector to explore emerging opportunities and challenges; and to determine the long-term strategy of the university in light of its mission;

4.  **Advocacy** – the board, in conjunction with the rector, advances the best interests of the university by advocating on its behalf to policy makers and government officials, corporate and community leaders, alumni, and other external stakeholders. The board also works to advance the interests of the university by identifying new resources (financial and otherwise) and opportunities for its students and academic staff.

## Section 1. Understanding and Organizing for Governance

University governance is distinct from management and from ownership. While management is responsible for day-to-day operations and the means to reach agreed upon institutional goals, and ownership brings with it a high level of direction and intervention, governance is neither and requires a different understanding and mindset.

University boards work at arms-length from management and engage periodically, not constantly. They focus on high-level objectives and ensuring that management meets those objectives without prescribing the steps or approaches. They sign off on major decisions and understand what constitutes such decisions (some examples include purchases over a certain amount of money; the creation or termination of degree programs; organizational restructuring; quality audits; university budget and financial audits; presidential evaluation; the adoption of new policies).

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2   For an overview of the components of autonomy see Estermann, T., & Nokkala, T. (2009). *University autonomy in Europe.*

3   For a discussion of how boards should approach their work see Eckel, P.D. & Trower, C. A. (2018). *Practical Wisdom: Thinking Differently about Governing Universities and Colleges.*

Finally, board members work collectively to advance the interests of society at large and not their own personal objectives. They represent not stakeholders or shareholders, but the general needs and expectations of the nation as it relates to university education, research and service.

*For each of the below questions, please indicate Strongly Agree; Agree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.*

### Understanding Governance

1. The board has discussed the differences between governance, management and ownership.

2. The board works to advance the interests of the larger society (the public good) and not personal gains.

3. The board provides appropriate oversight of progress on university priorities.

4. The rector brings problems facing the university to the board.

5. The board has sufficient opportunities to discuss meaningful issues about the university's medium and long-term future.

6. The board advocates on behalf of the university to external stakeholders, such as industry and government officials.

7. The board does not tell the rector how to do his/her job.

8. The board can articulate the key strategic issues facing the university.

### Organizing for Governing

9. The board is comprised of accomplished, influential individuals who are committed to well-being of the university.

10. The board uses the knowledge and talents of each board member.

11. The board receives information, data and materials in a timely manner and understands the information provided.

12. The board has a committee system that reflects the most important university priorities (finance; academics; university-industry engagement; facilities and infrastructure; etc.)

13. The board spends sufficient time on its work.

14. Board meeting agendas focus on the most important issues facing the university.

15. Board meetings are a balance of reports and discussion.

16. Board members come prepared and informed for each meeting.

17. Board members demonstrate a high degree of respect for one another.

18. Board members trust one another.

## Section 2. Advancing Autonomy

The move toward increased autonomy is historic. Autonomy touches all aspects of the university from its curriculum and degree programs, to its ability to set budgets and secure resources (including raising and spending funds), to its responsibility for buildings, real estate and infrastructure, and finally to how it manages, supports, and rewards people.

The significance of this change should capture the attention of boards. Boards should make facilitating and supporting this transition the highest priority and work across the four domains of board work – oversight, problem solving, strategy and advocacy.

*For each of the below questions, please indicate Strongly Agree; Agree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.*

19. The board reviews and approves, but does not develop, the university budget.

20. The board asks questions about the assumptions and expectations that shape the university budget.

21. The board holds the rector accountable for adhering to the budget.

22. The board ensures that the university has a plan to pursue mission-relevant, revenue-generating opportunities.

23. The board ensures that the university monitors the quality and relevance of its academic degrees.

24. The board is confident that the university has a plan to develop new, mission-appropriate academic programs.

25. The board ensures that a mission-appropriate research strategy exists.

26. The board ensures that the university had an approach for appropriate staffing.

27. The board ensures that the university has needed facilities and infrastructure or a plan to develop them.

28. The board shares its wisdom (and not direction) with the rector related responding to university challenges and opportunities.

29. The board helps the rector think through problems and opportunities related to increased autonomy.

30. The board ensures there is overall progress being made related to autonomy.

## Section 3. Creating Responsive Boards

The work of developing board capacity and shepherding the transition to autonomy should be the current priorities of most Kazakhstani boards. Eventually boards and universities will move through the transition. At that point in time, the board should be prepared to evaluate

and discuss its current efforts and structures, and make changes as needed. The work of boards evolves as the universities they govern advance[4].

*For each of the below questions, please indicate Strongly Agree; Agree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.*

31. The board periodically and regularly reviews its work.

32. The board seeks feedback from the rector and other senior university leaders on its contributions.

33. The board has a plan to change its focus, structures and membership to accommodate changing needs.

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4    See Eckel, P.D. & Trower, C. A. (2018). *Practical Wisdom: Thinking Differently about Governing Universities and Colleges*.