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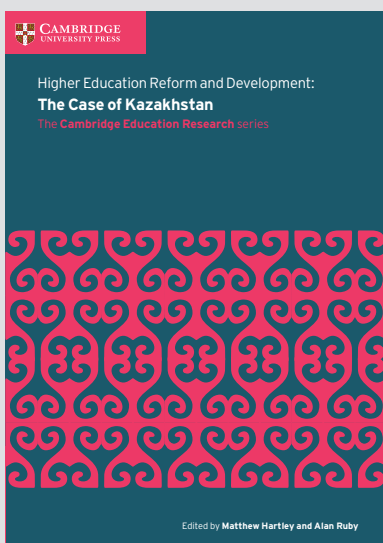
Parallel Reforms: Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools and Nazarbayev University

Looking Back & Taking Stock

Education reform and development in Kazakhstan post-independence has some distinctive features. One is the government’s willingness to concentrate its resources; investing in a relatively small number of people and in a few institutions. This willingness was and is demonstrated by the creation and continued operation of the Bolashak scholarship program, which supports the full cost of participation in some of the most expensive and best universities in the world. It is more starkly illustrated by the establishment of Nazarbayev University (NU) as an English language, research intensive highly selective institution with a largely international faculty employed at global market rates. It is also illustrated by the creation of the network of trilingual Intellectual Schools with

new facilities, cadres of international teachers and customized curricula aligned to global standards. These “greenfield” projects, “a start-up investment in new facilities” (Kogut & Singh, 1988) are powerful symbols of the government’s commitment to reform and its willingness to focus on a limited number of sites.

In 2016-2020 state program the Ministry of Education and Science extended its concentration strategy in higher education by identifying 10 national universities to receive additional support for research aimed at strengthening particular fields or programs and to deepen links to regional industries or enterprises. It also refocused its support for internationalization away from wide spread short term visits by larger numbers of foreign faculty to focus on a smaller number of national institutions and on



Cambridge University Press has produced two volumes about education reform on Kazakhstan. One by edited by David Bridges concentrates on schooling and the more recent one edited by Matt Hartley and Alan Ruby focuses on higher education. Looking across the two books it is possible to discern some common approaches to the reform efforts in the two sectors as Kazakhstan has moved to become an independent nation with a fundamentally different political, economic and social environment.

programs of national economic importance.

These rationing decisions result in some individuals getting greater state support than others, either directly through merit based scholarships or indirectly through participation in more richly resourced programs or institutions. While this is not unusual in developed economies it is a marked contrast to the norms and values of the Soviet regime that preceded independence. These norms which favored common treatment and the equal allocation of state resources are still embedded in the institutional cultures of many universities and colleges in Kazakhstan. They also continue to shape how Ministries and older officials approach the regulation and control of educational programs. The tension between the two approaches has become more observable as oil prices have fallen constraining the State's capacity to support greater expenditure on higher education. Looking ahead, population growth and increased demand for high quality education at all levels will further limit the government's capacity to concentrate public expenditures on higher education. It will need to pay greater attention to policies that allocate public resources on the basis of need, shifting more of the cost of higher education to the individual. Institutions will be encouraged to become more entrepreneurial and generate their own revenues. But these changes will also mean that regulations and financial controls will need to change so that colleges and universities can keep surpluses and earned income.

NIS and NU were conceived and operate as "beta sites" where new products and services can be field tested to "eliminate performance problems prior to market introduction" (Dolan and Mathews 1993). One of the arguments for establishing the NIS network and the university was that they would be places where innovation, experimentation and customization could safely take place. Teacher faculty, researchers and administrators could try, test, evaluate, adapt and customize successful practices from other countries so they suited local circumstances and addressed local priorities.

Beta testing is also attractive because it tends to increase the likelihood that the new policy

or practice will meet local needs and this in turn encourages implementation and adoption (Fellores, 2007.) Maximizing take up of new policies and practices is especially important in large geographically dispersed systems like Kazakhstan, where there are relatively few incentives for reform and change.

The very presence of new or different practices at NIS sites and at NU has stimulated the leaders of other educational institutions to advocate for wider change. The autonomy of NU is already being used to make the case for change at national universities and the MOES is looking to NU to support and prepare rectors of national universities and other leaders for institutional autonomy. In the school sector thousands of teachers have participated in substantial programs of professional development through the Centers of Excellence and the number of schools adopting trilingual educational programs is increasing.

While NIS and NU are substantial and important projects that seek to modernize and improve education they are nested a comprehensive and coherent national strategy for economic and social development. This broader, wide reaching strategy is necessary if the nation is to meet the goal of being one of the top thirty global economies by 2050.

Looking Ahead

There are still a lot of Soviet norms embedded in the carpet of the long halls of the ministry building in Astana, in the offices of the akimats and governors and in the meeting rooms of the academy. And there are many older Kazakhs who remember and sometimes long for the "more secure minimum social benefits" that characterized the Soviet era rather than the uncertainties of a market economy. These norms are entrenched in the financial code and in the system of state control and supervision that limit innovation and change. "It is but an open secret that many officials do not understand as yet that today the role of the state doesn't consist in taking decisions which should be taken by people themselves. On the contrary, it must consist primarily in shaping up conditions in which free citizens and the private sector will be able to take effective measures in support of their families and themselves" (N. Nazarbayev, 1997).

Structural changes
in the economy and
economic growth
stimulated upward
social mobility



The strong regulatory environment generates and is sustained by a culture of compliance. Some senior managers tend to be rule driven and adhere to long established administrative practices even when these are no longer required or are “fit for purpose”.

Yet the nation’s leaders continue to stress the importance of education, training and retraining as a part of the country’s future economic development. It needs a stronger skill base to underpin the diversification of industries and to reduce dependence on extractive enterprises like oil, gas and rare earths. There have been notable shifts in employment opportunities with the agricultural sector contracting while construction and service sector jobs have increased. These shifts increase opportunities for those with higher skill levels encouraging high school completion and participation in post school education and training.

Structural changes in the economy and economic growth stimulated upward social mobility. As a result the size of the “middle class” doubled from 2006 to 2013 to around 20% of all households (World Bank, 2015:12.) This has driven up demand for secondary and higher education and increased the capacity of families to pay some of the costs of participation. But not everyone has benefitted. Households headed by people who have not completed secondary education have had slower

growth in incomes and many are dependent on pensions and social benefits. These families tend to be concentrated in rural areas and many are at the poverty line.

Maintaining growth will be difficult while oil and energy prices remain volatile. Spreading the benefits of economic growth to rural areas is a persistent public policy problem. The first steps will be to increase high school completion in more remote and less prosperous communities and supporting greater access to higher education. These will be necessary if the nation is to meet its ambitious economic and social goals.

In December 2016 (Seisembayeva) and in February 2017 (Orazgaliyeva) the nation’s President restated the government’s commitment to proving a high quality education to all regardless of location and reaffirmed the goal of having some universities among the best in the world. He also confirmed the implementation of a tri-lingual 12 year-long school system which would have significant flow on effects for colleges and universities. These are significant resource intensive undertakings and ones that change the very fabric of educational processes.

The graduates of the Intellectual Schools and Nazarbayev University will play a major part in maximizing the nation’s chances of meeting its ambitious goals. There is still a lot to be done. •



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