



TRANSFORMING THE FUTURE: NEW VISIONS OF YOUNG UNIVERSITIES IN CENTRAL ASIA: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PHIL BATY & ALAN RUBY

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How Has Higher Education Developed in the Region over the Last 30 years?

Higher education policies in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan & Tajikistan have some similarities since Independence.

There are two common aims: increasing participation and modernization.

The two key rationales for these two aims are.

1. economic diversification, creating industries and enterprises that are not reliant on oil, gas, and agriculture, and
2. a desire to be self-sufficient, self-governing, and self-regulating and to reduce dependence on imported skills.

The result is that we see national education development plans nested in national development policies and tied to national identity and independence. Not unusual when you look at the experiences of India after the English left, or China after the Party took control.

How Have these Aims been Pursued?

While there are differences all four nations have reduced the role of the State Plan as the determining framework and adopted some version of a market approach to higher education. Their main features of the move from Plan to Market have been allowing or encouraging private providers, shifting some of the cost to the individual through fees and charges, and allowing greater student choice.

What Are Some of the Differences?

Kazakhstan moved earlier and more enthusiastically to allow private providers to set up and operate. And they did create a lot of new entities and some of them enrolled significant numbers of students. But there were mixed results which led to some re-regulation of the sector and greater attention to quality.

It also allowed the famed Bolashak program to be market led with the individual choosing their field of study. And it created and financed different models of higher education by concentrating resources both on its national universities and more observably in KIMEP, KBTU, Eurasian National University and NU.

Tajikistan's 1993 Law of Education was also based on market forces and allowed for private providers and tuition led programs (contract places). The law really

came into force in 1997 after the civil war was resolved. The private providers faded by the 2000's and most of the education development in the subsequent decades were led by tuition dependent programs.

Uzbekistan moved on a less abrupt path until recently. In its 2022 to 2026 Development Strategy the Ministry has set a participation target of 50% by 2026 and we heard this morning at the opening of the forum that the government has encouraged a very steep increase in the number of non-governmental higher education institutions.

How Has the Aim of Increasing Participation Been Pursued?

One response is to increase supply, widen the number and range of opportunities to learn. For states with constrained public revenues, it is hard to significantly increase the number of available places. New places are expensive particularly if you want them to be in high-cost programs that need equipment and laboratories. Even when you have oil and gas revenues there are plenty of competing priorities, so a common strategy is to attract non-State or private providers to create new programs or branches or new universities. In Uzbekistan we see the branching-in strategy which aimed to attract four overseas branch campuses to an education oasis in Samarqand and efforts to create branches of national universities outside the major cities to reach less well served communities.

To help reduce or avoid the burden of the recurrent or operating costs and these persist year after year governments shift costs to the family or the consumer through tuition-based programs which will absorb demand. An example is the contract places which are open to those who do not win a state scholarship or grant.

To attract potential private providers and to encourage existing institutions to expand governments set targets for higher education participation. These targets are market signals, communicating to potential students and the public about the importance of qualifications.

The scale of the goals and when they were set varies of course. Tajikistan starting with a modest 23% of the cohort going to tertiary education in 2013 sought to lift that quickly citing the need for engineers and teachers it set a goal of increasing higher education enrolments to about 32% of the cohort in its 2016-2020

Development program. This would give opportunities to the increasing numbers of young people successfully completing general secondary education. It seems to have been a success.

Modernization sounds straightforward but what does it mean in practice?

It certainly comes in different forms and the details under the banner of modernization vary within and between countries over the last twenty years.

A lot of attention has been paid to modernizing laboratories and equipment, partly as an attempt to draw research into universities, and partly because it is a type of expenditure that is tangible, visible, and believed to be tied to economic development.

There are other strands like Kyrgyzstan's interest in the credit transfer system to increase student mobility and flexibility in learning programs. The current education development strategy emphasizes "improving the quality of teaching."

Uzbekistan's interest in modernizations has ramped up in the last ten years with more attention to learning environments and improving the "labor market relevance" of academic programs.

Kazakhstan's marked increase in the percentage of course content that can be determined at the program and course level is a very important step in modernizing. It reduces the regulatory reach of the Ministry in determining course content, allows for greater customization, faster adaptation to new technologies and new ideas and greater responsiveness to student interest. In concrete terms that means increasing the elective content of a bachelor's degree to over 75%.

And there is a stress on internationalization like the MOU signed last month between Turkmenistan and Kent State University to facilitate academic and cultural exchange. Uzbekistan is also stressing internationalization as a way of modernizing.

How Realistic are These Ambitious Participation Targets? There are some commentators questioning the value of more than 50% of young people going on to further study. Are targets of 60 and 70% too high?

I do not think so. Often the critics of these targets talk about the absorptive capacity of economies and over-qualified people in undemanding jobs.

The flaw in this line of argument is that it assumes that demand is known and knowable. The failure of the planned economies challenges the proposition that we can and should match supply and demand of skills and channel young people's talents accordingly. Leaving them to choose is regarded as inefficient or contrary to the interests of the State.

It also tends to assume that individuals transition from study to work and stay in that field or function for a lifetime. The evidence shows that as economies diversify people change jobs and jobs change in terms of skills and responsibilities.

The absorption proposition also assumes that occupation structures are static. As we heard from Eric Grimson of MIT that artificial intelligence (A.I) and other technological development are disrupting workplaces, creating new opportunities, reshaping roles, and responsibilities, and making some redundant. This increases the premium on skills like flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity for lifelong learning: all skills that are enhanced by higher education. Then we were reminded by Yerkin Tatishev of the Kutsa group and the Almaty Management University that entrepreneurship and creativity widen the types of opportunities available to young people. These personal qualities and the capacity to imagine and invent, to communicate and motivate, and to take ideas to scale are strengthened and developed through higher education.

In summary, the absorptive capacity critique assumes that the structure of economies is static. It also assumes that the discipline structures of universities are fixed and immutable. Yet we see the emergence of new fields like biostatistics and solar power that are vitally important to modern societies. Without biostatistics and inter-disciplinary teams, the Covid pandemic would have been more devastating and still assailing the world.

Another assumption embedded in the questioning of aspirational participation goals is that the pool of talent is finite, with only a fraction of the population able to benefit from higher education. In the past, that fraction lined up with the size of a nation's elite, say the top 1 or 5 % who also benefited from the best primary and secondary education. As societies became more inclusive and wealth and power more evenly distributed participation in higher education increased. The composition of higher education enrolments changed to include women, to

include people from all social classes, from all ethnic and religious minorities and with different prior learning experiences.

When you listen to debates about setting quotas or limiting participation targets it is informative to identify who will be excluded. It is usually the groups who don't look like the advocates of limits. It is the children of "others" or those from "away." They are believed to be unable to benefit. Another fallacy based on the assumption that societies are fixed and static.

The third flaw in the arguments that advocate limiting participation is that it sees the value of higher education solely through the lens of economic utility. But just as economies diversify and change so do societies. Social institutions have grown in number, and opportunities to participate in the governance and leadership of these institutions have widened. Political participation is more inclusive and more contested. Understanding political discourse, separating truth from fiction, assessing claims and promises is harder as the number of sources of information and misinformation has spiked.

Our social institutions are stronger when more people participate. Our democratic institutions are stronger when more people participate. The health of our population improves when people are more actively engaged in decisions about their health care. Our societies are more robust when their people understand the values and norms that hold them together. All qualities that are more likely to be realized through a well-educated community.

So, I do not see a great deal of virtue in criticizing a sovereign state for setting an ambitious, aspirational target for higher education participation. I might caution them about overly hasty expansion, large classes, limited infrastructure, gaps in learning materials and so on. But aspirational targets are better than the regressive proposition that only the elite deserve and benefit from higher education.

Where Do Rankings Appear in the National Strategies?

We often think of rankings as a tool for students who have limited access to information about different opportunities. They inform people whose access to data about institutional performance is limited by place, time, wealth, and politics.

State actors also use them to make comparisons, shape priorities, set goals and allocate resources. Rankings, whatever their imperfections in portraying all aspects of a university do help policy setting when the first-hand experiences government officials have of other institutions and ways of operating are constrained by distance, resources, and language. Rankings can serve as benchmarks and reference points and can be used to guide the formulation of goals and expectations.

And we see rankings used in national plans, usually as aspirational statements. Like having five national institutions ranked in the top 200 or 500.

Similarly, institutions can and do use them to help gauge how they are doing relative to domestic, regional, and international peers. They also use them to guide efforts to improve and motivate.

But we need to remember that there are large, very real differences in the wealth of institutions, both accumulated wealth and recurrent income. There are also differences in maturity, the age of the institutions, and mission, so we need to be judicious in using these tools.

What Can Institutions Do to Be More Impactful?

Too often the push to emulate research intensive comprehensive Mega brand universities, which cater for very few students, distracts us from doing things that will reach a lot of people and serve ends.

My Penn colleague Matt Hartley and I have been studying universities from around the world for the last 15 years, looking at places that are doing something very successfully or trying to achieve a specific national, social, or intellectual goal. These are places that might be well known locally or regionally or in a discipline but are not household names like Harvard, Cambridge, or Moscow State. They are not wealthy although some of them are better funded than their national peers.

They include the Tata Institute for Social Sciences in Mumbai and UMBC in Baltimore and Catholica in Chile. When we examine how these places try to be successful and make an impact locally and regionally, they do show some common qualities:

They are clear about who they serve (their students) and the work they are hoping to do in the world (their mission). This clarity sets them apart and is ultimately a competitive advantage.

There is usually a distinct and observable organizational culture.

The core values are widely held.

There is a shared narrative – a story or stories that reveal what is valued and celebrated.

They are grounded in the community, defined in part by place and national culture.

All of these are qualities that can be pursued without a lot of additional money, but they do take time and effort and continuity of direction.

They also are stifled by over-regulation, central direction and central planning and state mandated curricula.

They are fostered by academic independence, student choice and close relationships with local community groups and enterprises.

The book of cases, by Mathew Hartley and Alan Ruby “Pursuing Institutional Purpose: Profiles of Excellence”, will be released later this year by Cambridge University Press.

This is an edited and extended version of a conversation between Phil Baty and Alan Ruby at the [THE Central Asia Universities Forum](#), held on 16 October 2024, in partnership with New Uzbekistan University.

Phil Baty, chief global affairs officer, Times Higher Education is an authority on international higher education policy and university performance. He leads on government partnerships and global affairs at Times Higher Education (THE), the trusted data, insights and consultancy partner to universities, corporates and governments worldwide. With over 25 years in the sector, he developed the THE World University Rankings and its derivative analyses (as rankings editor for over a decade, 2008–2019) and created the THE World Academic Summit and oversaw its expansion into the world’s preeminent series of university leadership and policy events. Baty is also an award-winning journalist, a sought-after keynote speaker, media commentator and consultant.

Alan Ruby Senior fellow, Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania has had a substantial career in government, business, philanthropy and education, ranging from classroom teacher to the Australian deputy secretary of education. At the University of Pennsylvania, he studies the effects of globalisation on universities and the implementation of education reforms. His latest book, *Pursuing Institutional Purpose: Profiles of Excellence*, is a set of case studies with his colleague Mathew Hartley – it profiles eight institutions that are pursuing unique educational missions and making a profound difference to their students and society. Mr. Ruby has a degree in English from the University of Sydney and a Diploma of Education from the same institution. He also serves as a Trustee of Nazarbayev University. In preparing for this conference he was assisted by Meruyert Bizhanova, a Master of Science in Education candidate at the University of Pennsylvania who tracked down and interpreted various official documents about higher education in Central Asia.