

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER AND POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: FOCUS ON BUSINESS EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article deals with the background and the need of internationalization in higher and postgraduate education sector in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Internationalization is considered a high priority and a key instrument in quality enhancement. The main trends in education internationalization have been identified. The article examines the recent developments in business education internationalization. Based on results of research on the impact of internationalization, this paper reveals several gaps and gives suggestions on their elimination.

Key Words: Internationalization of education, Academic mobility, Business-education

JEL Classification: I23

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and definitions

Internationalization of higher education has its roots in the medieval times. Since the days of wandering scholars, universities have always been considered as a social and cultural phenomenon, and their purpose was to spread knowledge beyond its territory. At the same time, most higher education institutions, formed in the 19th and 20th centuries, focused on performing their traditional functions of training and developing science and technology at national level. They mainly served the administrative and economic interests of their states. The scholars became from wanderer a citizen (De Wit, 2011:1). Since the second half of twentieth century, learning again has become international and universities have been involved in a powerful movement of educational expansion and

democratization of educational opportunities. The massive expansion of higher education has been regarded as a guarantee of national competitiveness in the new global economy. The boundaries of educational market have become narrow under the influence of information and communication technologies. Today it is considered normal to study on online programs of leading universities without leaving a job place. Students can use free Web resources (lectures, case studies, etc.), communicate with teachers and coaches using the latest digital information technology. Today, educational systems introduce the concept of Smart Education that suggests flexible learning in an interactive learning environment using the content from around the world, freely available on electronic resources. So, the primary task of education is to ensure the development of information technologies and make them useful both to society and the individual. In order to strengthen curricular internationalization, some scholars suggest creating an inter-university educational environment, where the materials of one university in a digital format would be available for another university.

A significant development in the conceptualization of internationalization during the last years has been in the introduction of terms “internationalization at home” and “cross-border education”. Campus-based strategies are most often referred to as internationalization at home, and off campus initiatives are called cross-border education. Both directions have significant implications to each other; many of the new developments and unintended consequences are associated with the cross-border aspects of internationalization. In terms of the definition of internationalization, the commonly used definition in the higher education sector describes internationalization as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution” (Knight, De Wit, 1999:1). According to Jane Knight’s updating definition, internationalization at the national sector and institutional levels is defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003:2). This definition understands internationalization (1) as a process, (2) as a response to globalization, and (3) as including both international and local elements.

In fact, internationalization of higher education is a respond to the impact of globalization and integration. New economic realities set up new requirements to institutions of higher learning. Today’s students need to be prepared for the global market and meet the requirements of interconnected world. This is why

internationalization has become an important priority in the higher education sector.

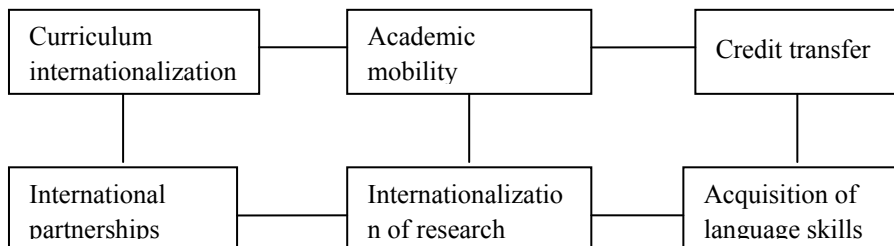
2. INTERNATIONALIZATION OF EDUCATION SECTOR IN KAZAKHSTAN

2.1. Ways of internationalization

Nowadays, the main activities in internationalization of education include the following key components:

- Curriculum internationalization, embedding new courses and international study trips abroad;
- Academic mobility, student and faculty exchange;
- Credit transfer;
- International partnerships, network and strategic education alliances;
- Internationalization of research;
- Acquisition of language skills.

Figure 1. Key components of education internationalization



There is a clear recognition of the fact that internationalization needs to be managed in order to prevent negative consequences. This management should be done at all levels including regional, local and institutional level. Bologna process is a good example of management on regional level. It has set up common requirements on harmonization and internationalization of higher education. European policy toward internationalization has been provided through target programs such as TEMPUS, Erasmus Mundus, Socrat, as well as the specific country programs like DAAD, British Councils, etc.

Today the question of vital importance for many countries is the development, adoption and implementation of internationalization strategy. In this regard, Kazakhstan has a certain positive experience. The main focus of reforms in higher

education sector is enhancement of education quality that suggests shifting toward internationalization.

During the past two decades, the following initiatives have been taken to improve the higher and postgraduate education: implementation of credit system of education; joining the Bologna process, introduction of the three-tier training system (Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, Ph.D.); setting up a national system of quality assurance; elaboration of quality indicators and efficient methodology for measuring learning outcomes; curricular modernization; creation of National Accreditation Center; legislative provision, adoption of laws and regulations by the Government. Much has already been done in terms of curriculum modernization and quality improvement. In order to meet market needs in highly skilled and globally competent specialists, universities have to change their approaches to education, develop new competences and learning outcomes. As a result, universities apply a quality assurance approach to all areas of their activities, and some institutions of higher learning have obtained international accreditation. The most dynamic sector in higher education – business education was among the first who adopted new approaches. Today business students need the competences such as: understanding global market perceptions and realities, effectively communicating and managing across cultures, facilitating global teams, creating innovative solutions to global business challenges.

Quality education and integration into the world educational environment is a strategic goal of Kazakhstan's system of education. By joining the Bologna process, accepting its standards and requirements, Kazakhstan has made significant steps toward internationalization of higher education. The three –tier system of training has been introduced (Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, Ph.D.). This reform provides the opportunity to recognize Kazakhstani diplomas abroad, as well as to strengthen positions on the world educational market as a whole. Today, many students and faculty members participate in academic mobility program with international partners.

Kazakhstan government puts much effort to reformation and internationalization of education process. In his annual address to the People of Kazakhstan, President N.A. Nazarbayev emphasized that "quality of higher education needs to meet the highest international standards" (Nazarbayev, 2012:37). State program of education development for 2011-2020 years suggests that "the structure and content of higher education should meet Bologna requirements". Annually, government provides financial support to the selected talent students (about 3000) under Presidential "Bolashak" scholarship program to study on degree programs

in the top universities abroad. Today Bolashak students successfully study in 27 countries of the world both on undergraduate and graduate level. Under support of the Ministry of Education and Science, best university faculty members are awarded a title "Best lecturer of the year" and get funds for scientific research and professional development in leading universities abroad. The government also provides financial support to some national universities to host top level professors and researchers from abroad, working as visiting international scholars. Another big evidence of education internationalization in the country is an opening of "Nazarbaev University" in Astana. New university is considered to be a top international institution of higher learning in Kazakhstan and in the region as a whole. Most faculties in this university are top level university professors and researchers from leading universities abroad. Program curricular have been designed jointly with the education experts from the prominent world universities.

2.2. Academic mobility

Current reforms in higher and postgraduate education have strong impact on both students and faculty in terms of academic mobility. More than twenty thousand Kazakhstani students are currently studying abroad, and about ten thousand international students study in Kazakhstan. Most of them use scholarships such as Bolashak program. The recent monitoring of the academic mobility process in universities (conducted by the Center of Bologna process and academic mobility) has shown that in 2011-2012 among 2343 participants (number of respondents) of academic mobility programs in local universities, 834 studied in Kazakhstani institutions of higher learning, 809 – in foreign countries, and 700 – in the near abroad.

Table 1. Quantitative characteristics of academic mobility in Kazakhstan

Status of universities	Number of respondents (students and staff) from			Total
	Kazakhstan	Foreign country	The near abroad	
National	24	194	56	274
State (public)	342	202	364	908
Private (stock-shared)	25	87	73	185
Medical	176	58	53	287
Private	267	268	154	689
TOTAL	834	809	700	2343

67% of respondents highly evaluated the quality of teaching in the host university, 81% put high mark to the quality of staying in host university (administrative help, accommodation, etc.).

Results of monitoring revealed the limitations and set up priorities for development and improvement academic mobility. Among the main priorities:

- Promotion of internal mobility;
- Providing quality of external mobility;
- Strengthening partnerships with foreign universities and international organizations;
- Improvement of legislation on academic mobility;
- Development of social support program for mobility staff and students;
- Improvement of students' foreign language skills.

Apart from academic mobility program provided by universities, students and staff use Bolashak scholarship program, as well as other sources. Many students get funding from international scholarship programs offered by governments within the frameworks of intergovernmental agreements. Many Kazakhstani students annually participate in scholarship programs administered by IREX, ACCELS, DAAD, British Council, etc. With regard to the mobility flow of foreign students to Kazakhstan, it is regrettable that their number is not big. Today education managers in Kazakhstan work on the elaboration of national system of credit transfer based on ECTS model. Universities curricular have been modernizing in terms of including relevant international dimensions. Universities try to embed cross intercultural training into their curricular. In this context, Kazakhstan offers for international students the opportunity to study or to spend a part of study (semester or year) in universities. International students have good opportunity to integrate into a highly diverse culture. In fact, Kazakhstan has multicultural environment, people of more than 100 nationalities live in peace and friendship in this country. Today international students in Kazakhstan are mostly represented by other Central Asian states, Russia, China and India. Reformation process and further internationalization of higher education provides opportunities for students from other countries and continents to visit Kazakhstan.

There is a clear recognition of the importance of multicultural education especially in the context of globalization process. It is truly important for institutions of higher learning to put efforts into intercultural education, since

universities are responsible to produce internationally competent global citizens. Multicultural education provides relevant classroom atmosphere and give opportunities to students to share experience of their countries and cultures as well. In this context, curriculum internationalization in business education sector is of vital importance, since managerial staff (top managers, current and future business leaders) has been trained in business schools. It is business school environment that develops leadership skills, social responsibility and ability to create competitive advantages. It is well known from the successful experience of top business schools that international environment in the classroom is one of the main advantages, and students benefit from learning best practices from each other.

2.3. Curriculum internationalization

In order to foster curricular internationalization, the government encourages development of joint and dual degree programs with foreign universities. Some universities now implement programs developed jointly with foreign partner institutions. Kazakh Economic University named after Turar Ryskulov (KazEU) is a leading university in the field of Economics, Finance, Business and Management in Kazakhstan. International development is one of the main priorities of the university. Among international partner schools there are leading universities from Russia, Germany, Japan, Korea, China, Switzerland, etc. University together with international partner schools has developed and currently offers dual degree programs both on undergraduate and graduate levels as well as exchange programs for students and academic staff. KazEU actively participates in European programs such as TEMPUS, Erasmus Mundus (EMECW), etc. Within the framework of these programs students, faculty and staff of the university have opportunity to visit European universities to study and learn best practices in their fields. Within the academic mobility program, IBS students participate in exchange program and spend one semester in partner schools in Japan, Germany, Korea and Switzerland.

International Business School (IBS) at Kazakh Economic University successfully implements the dual degree MBA program jointly with the Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, as well as with European university (Switzerland), Institute MIRBIS, Moscow Finance University. Upon the successful completion of the program and defense of Master thesis, students get two diplomas: of the Republic of Kazakhstan and of partner institution's home country. IBS has partnership relations with foreign institutions of higher learning in China, Malaysia, Singapore, Korea on realization of short-term courses and

seminars. International Business School practices to embed international study trips to curriculum of the program. This suggests that one or two courses have to be taken in partner school abroad. For the last years, IBS MBA and DBA students visited partner business schools in Japan, China, Russia, Switzerland, Spain, France and Korea. Usually, the program of study trip includes lectures and presentations on 1-2 courses, as well as industrial visits and meeting with managers and staff. As a result of such trips, program participants have opportunity to establish business contacts, learn new approaches and techniques to effectively manage companies. IBS has experience when MBA students launched new businesses in the result of visiting partner universities abroad and establishing business contacts with foreign companies. The recent survey on the impact of the international study trip to Executive MBA program participants (conducted by the author) shows that the students have benefited from the trip. There are some extracts from students' answers:

“The international study trip was helpful and beneficial to my professional development”.

“The Swiss module enhanced my understanding of global business. Lectures and industrial visits provided significant insights into both education and business”.

“We also had a good opportunity to acquaint with the European culture. Apart from lectures and company visits we had time to visit museums, theatres and shopping centers”.

“For those of us who work in the same field (as visited companies), the outreach module was a good opportunity to establish business contacts. For me it was also beneficial since I got acquainted with the new approaches to business development”.

“Overall, the study trip was important in terms of learning international experience. Today it is critical for many companies in the context of integration into the global economic system”.

3. CONCLUSION

In spite of the fact that substantial efforts have been made by the government to modernize the higher and postgraduate education system and to improve its quality, universities still face challenges in terms of curriculum

internationalization and development. In many ways, the problems relates to language barrier; few universities implement programs in English language (language of instruction in most universities is Russian and Kazakh). According the OECD data, "only around 2.7% of the total higher education enrolment in the country is able to study abroad". Therefore, universities need to offer more courses in English language. In terms of academic exchanges, university faculties still have limited opportunities for international mobility. Program curricular need to be more added by international component in order to prepare globally competitive graduates. Universities should provide more opportunities for international collaborative research projects as well. In this regard, government is responsible for the proper financial support by allocating budget to support international research projects.

In summary, many initiatives have been implemented in recent years in Kazakhstan to reform higher and postgraduate education system in order to integrate into the world education environment and to meet the needs of a modern competitive economy. The government recognizes the importance of internationalizing higher education, and puts much effort to support major initiatives. Joining the Bologna Process has given opportunities to institutions of higher learning to extend international dimensions. Step by step, higher education system of the country moves towards integration into the world educational environment.

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