
Higher Education in the Kyrgyz Republic: Problems of Modernization and Internationalization

キルギス共和国における高等教育——近代化と国際化がもたらす諸問題

Ishengul S. Boldjurova
イシエングル・ボルジュロワ

In XXI century our world is facing new challenges and threats. Such are, to name a few, social polarization of the human society (which manifests itself in widening and deepening of cleavages among poor and rich individuals and poor and rich countries), global ecological crisis and exhaustion of natural resources. As a repercussion of those processes we observe phenomena of unemployment, terrorism, drug and human trafficking and other kinds of organized crime, as well as large-scale legal and illegal migration. Today the key challenge of the humanity lies not in the crash of western and eastern civilizations. In my opinion, the problem is whether we will be able to transform technocratic civilization of consumerism into civilization of noosphere – sphere of reason and morality, the vision of which was advocated early in XX century by the great thinkers – Teyar de Sharden and V. I. Vernadsky. Concern of the world community about the worsening of the aforementioned social anomalies as well as fear for the future of the humanity conditioned adoption of the “Millennium Development Goals” by the United Nations. This program formulates, among others, Goal 2 – achievement of universal primary education.

Education and enlightenment in general philosophic sense are founding stones of the new sustainable development paradigm for the XXI century. An educated, knowledgeable person who is well-informed of the human history, laws of nature and society can correctly estimate modern challenges and threats and react adequately with the view of preventing or, at least, mitigating negative consequences.

Process of globalization of various political, social and economic spheres of life has many negative effects (among all, loss of national identity), but it also has a very positive outcome. I see it as a fantastic opportunity of creating a global educational space, of universal access to a magnificent ocean of knowledge which has been accumulated by humanity throughout its long history. This is also an opportunity to better understand and know each other, to exchange life experience, state-of-the-art technologies of production and environmental protection. Therefore, this is also an opportunity to begin transforming technosphere into noosphere (by noosphere, we understand sphere of storage and amassing of common human values, production and dissemination of knowledge about evolution laws of nature and human society, which are constantly enriched by creative innovations in science and culture).

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It is widely known, that education and information are efficient methods of combating such negative social perils as drug trafficking, terrorism, extremism, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, etc.

Mountainous Kyrgyz Republic is located in the heart of a potentially explosive Central Asian region. Major landmarks of the Great Silk Road were situated on the country's territory during ancient and middle times. Today the Kyrgyz Republic is becoming a communication crossing between East and West, South and North. The country's geopolitical and geostrategic importance in XXI century is growing. Kyrgyzstan could become the place of either dialogue or confrontation of civilizations.

Kyrgyzstan found itself in a profound social and economic crisis after the break-up of the former USSR. One of the most well-doing republics of the Soviet Union with developed industry and agriculture and an almost 100% literacy, Kyrgyzstan turned into one of the poorest countries of the world with a 2 billion USD external debt (the prospect of entering HIPC is already looming). As a result, there has been an enormous increase in the scale and gravity of social problems: corruption, poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, prostitution, human trafficking, child labor exploitation, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and so on. The country has become a staging post for drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Exacerbating tensions and growing discontent led to the revolution of 2005.

Despite decrease in the quality of secondary education, massive difficulties in social infrastructure, absence of lucrative oil and gas incomes, the Kyrgyz Republic has chosen to invest in human capital by education and training.

Thus, there has been initiated modernization of education system, which had for an aim internationalization of education and access to the world educational space. In the process, there have emerged problems of education management and adaptation of education system to market procedures; there has also appeared necessity of introducing international education standards. This is life itself that was imperative of modernization measures. After the collapse of the iron curtain and attainment of independence population of the Republic becomes more mobile and goes on study and job visits abroad more often and for longer periods.

This is to be stressed, that education reforms are not only characteristic of Kyrgyzstan, but are constitute a global process, a component of societal changes in a larger scale. There is probably no country in the world which is completely satisfied by its education system and does not carry out education reforms.

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During the period of 1990-2005 due to transformation processes and impact of inner and external factors affecting Kyrgyz society, national education system has been undergoing significant change. Particularities of the transition period define new conditions for the national education system and pose urgent tasks, namely: ensuring equality in access to education; adaptation to constant change and uncertainty; improving education quality; ensuring efficiency in resource use and management optimization.

While possessing certain individuality in its social and economic rearrangement, Kyrgyzstan shares some common features with other transition countries, especially post-USSR states.

As majority of CIS countries, Kyrgyzstan aims for democratic re-shaping of social relationships and transition to market economy. Just like all other counties, Kyrgyzstan

experiences positive and negative influences of the transition period.

In this situation, Kyrgyzstan encountered a plethora of ideological, conceptual, methodological and economic hardships which have unfortunately not been overcome up till today.

Those are weak and incomplete elaboration of international quality appraisal standards, international accreditation of specializations, international recognition of university diplomas, principle of student mobility, demand for specialists trained abroad and so on.

It is to be noted that in Soviet times a very small circle of young people had access to study abroad (in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other Soviet republics). These youth leaders have constituted a core of political, scientific, cultural and military elite of the Republic; they assumed responsibility for the country after the acquisition of independence. In this regard, causes and consequences of study abroad have to be scrutinized.

We believe that the main reason for studying abroad is a home country education system that is far from satisfying demands and necessity of getting a competitive education. Among other reasons are: young people's desire to gain deep knowledge about the culture, language, history and geography and life style of other countries; plans to stay for permanent residence abroad or for family reunification; but also a purposeful policy of the government aimed at foreign training of experts. For the accepting countries, foreign students are an advantage from economic and political aspects.

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In a developing and globalizing world one of the most prominent tendencies is the internationalization of education, namely, of higher education.

One of the most renowned forms of higher education internationalization is students' mobility. At present, Kyrgyzstan has established education cooperation ties with more than 60 countries of the world. The presidential program "Personnel of the XXI century" is in function starting from the middle of the nineties; in its framework, more than 3 thousand young Kyrgyz citizens have studied in Japan, the USA, Great Britain, Germany, Australia, China and countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Similar programs function in Uzbekistan ("Umut") and in Kazakhstan ("Bolashak").

Legal base of the Kyrgyz Republic in education comprises more than 75 treaties, whereas there are more than 150 bilateral agreements among Kyrgyz and foreign universities. Thus, in 2005 – 2006 one hundred two students from Kyrgyzstan were seconded for bachelor and master programs on budgetary (non-commercial) basis to Russia, to Ukraine – 12 students, to Egypt – 15 students, to Jordan – 3 students. At present, there are 613 Kyrgyzstani students who study on budgetary (non-commercial) basis in universities of Russia, 1053 – in universities of Turkey, 52 – in Ukraine, 30 – in China, 40 – in Egypt and 10 – in Jordan.

With an objective of further strengthening of international cooperation and integration of the Kyrgyz Republic in the world educational space, Kyrgyzstan has set forward basic aims and goals in this direction, namely:

- enlarging and consolidating legal and normative basis of international cooperation of the Kyrgyz Republic;

- elaborating mechanisms, channels and means of creating favorable conditions for study abroad for Kyrgyzstan citizens;
- education export with attracting foreign students;
- Experience exchange with foreign countries.

International education programs play an important role in stimulating exchange processes; JICA academic exchange and education grants, USAID (USA) and DAAD (Germany) programs contribute significantly to development of local and regional human resources market.

Quota restrictions and limitations that exist in state-sponsored programs encourage students to search for alternative ways of studying abroad. Countries which host such students are mainly the USA and Great Britain, but also Canada and Australia. It is almost always that students combine study and work abroad.

International mobility of students is not only an intercontinental, but also a regional phenomenon. Integration of regional economics stimulates mobility of students, and a large role is played here by international agreements – NAFTA, ASEAN and APEC. Treaties and agreements in the framework of CIS are of particular importance for the Central Asian region.

It is worth noting that foreign students are being perceived by the accepting countries from the point of view of economic profit, since in many cases foreign students cover their education and accommodation expenses.

International education and education services market is becoming a rapidly developing sector of economics, central elements of which are international education institutions' market and purposeful admission of foreign students. In Kyrgyzstan, export of education services has only recently started to come into the focus of attention as an income opportunity.

Mobility of professors and university lecturers is considered an essential component of higher education's internalization. Traditionally, mobility of teachers and professors is connected to scientific work. Last decade has seen growth in the number of the visiting scholars, i.e., in the number of eminent scholars who are invited to teach certain courses in various universities.

Kyrgyz universities do not have an opportunity to hire permanently highly-qualified foreign lecturers, so having visiting professors is a really good way of increasing education quality. Like in the case of students' mobility, there are very strong geographical differences. On the one side, there are countries with a high level of scientific immigration as a result of incentive-based approach of attracting highly-qualified personnel (example is Hong Kong). On the other side, there are countries with a low level of internationalization of teaching staff; Kyrgyzstan has until recently been in this category. However, the situation is changing rapidly. Our young teachers are rapidly learning foreign languages and participate in international research projects.

Programs of student mobility have led to creation of regional teaching staff mobility schemes (for example, Fulbright exchange program allowed for training of around 200 teachers from the USA in Kyrgyz universities; approximately the same number of Kyrgyz teachers visited the States).

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Students' and teachers' mobility programs have been developed with a view of stimulating curricula exchange, i.e., introducing changes and amendments to curricula of cooperating

institutions and faculties. Kyrgyz institutions of education had an objective of introducing common international standards into their curricula by developing students' and teachers' mobility. Process of curricula internationalization is not easy for our universities, since some parents, teachers and certain university structures are suspicious of changes and innovations. However, the logic of life itself makes even ardent opponents change their minds in favor of reform.

One of the most powerful stimuli for curricula internationalization is increase of influence that world professional unions have on the process of education. Rapid growth of international trade in services and goods encourages specialists to re-organize their activity on international level by uniting in professional communities. These unions concentrate on issues of quality guarantee, minimization of standard requirements, criteria of professionalism, accreditation, etc. Representatives of many professions are trying to elaborate international standards with an aim of better coherence and congruence of quality criteria and different curricula. These professional standards are often worked out and implemented by international organizations.

Thus, the European Union focuses on question of minimal education requirements in regard to workforce mobility. Free trade agreements like NAFTA and ASEAN contain provisions on mutual recognition of professional services' licensing and certification. Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have agreed on mutual recognition of academic degrees and titles at a recent meeting in Tajikistan. Due to this, many universities re-consider their curricula.

One factor that is also very important is desire of leading universities to create student body in countries with demand for their education services. Those institutions attempt to combine recruitment of foreign students with enlarging their education services offer in prospective markets by forming out-of-country branches and departments. This is a tendency which demonstrates shift from demand to offer in the overall process of internationalization. If a country of an affiliated institution is legally accepting and recognizing a foreign diploma, the students can follow the program of the affiliating institution from the first year till the graduation.

This form of curricula internationalization is especially characteristic of the transition economy countries. It is also becoming more rooted in the Kyrgyz system. One also has to note the swift growth of dual subordination universities phenomena. Those universities have emerged during recent decade; among them are the Kyrgyz-Russian (Slavic), Kyrgyz-Uzbek, Kyrgyz-Turkish universities. There are also private institutions: American University in Central Asia, Kyrgyz-Russian Academy of Education, Kyrgyz-Kuwait University, International University Ala-Too (Turkey). CIS countries are represented in this list by nine branches. The Kyrgyz National University has faculties that follow curricula designed on the basis of similar programs of USA, France, Poland universities.

Some voices are raised that that existence of such faculties is a direct interference in national higher education system and in national politics. Regardless of that, the majority of university teachers and lecturers consider functioning of such faculties as a catalyzing factor of international integration in education.

Consortiums and university networks are another occurrence of modern world. As a rule, such formations are strongly limited in their rights, being regarded more as voluntary unions that conduct specific educational projects. Nevertheless, the work that those unions conduct on coordination of education criteria and standards facilitates promotion of the higher education

internalization's ideas and principles.

To cite an example, Global Alliance of Transnational Education (GATE) is an international foundation that has united business structures, higher education institutions and government structures which are in charge of university quality control, accreditation and certification offered outside the host country. GATE provides for several types of inter-institutional agreements:

1. Franchise: a foreign institute issues a permission to use its educational programs and to issue its diplomas on agreed conditions to a local university.
2. Twin-programs offer joint study curricula of higher education programs of two countries. Students in both institutions take the same courses and use same manuals; same examination tests are held at the end of the studies. Local teachers conduct the instruction.
3. Mutual recognition of programs: co-operating institutions do not develop joint programs. Students are enrolled at foreign university's programs and all grades are accepted and recognized by their home institution. Otherwise, students pass one study phase in a local university and get grades which are recognized by partner institution in a foreign country. At the second stage of their studies, students go abroad to the partner institution.

Proponents of international education regard abovementioned internationalization alternates as stages on the way of achieving a more complicated aim of harmonization and integration of national higher education systems. Growing universities autonomy, decentralization and powers' transfer from the central governments to regional ones are creating even more diversity in the national education systems. This, in its turn, makes international harmonization not more, but less easy. Study year structure and knowledge appraisal system are better suited for international standardization. When it comes to student and aspirant study curricula, we observe steady shift to the Anglo-American model.

Assuring quality standards is of main importance in this regard. During the eighties, active recruitment of foreign students with a view of increasing profits on the part of certain universities led to decrease in quality. Many institutions became an object of criticism for the significant decline in standards. As a result, special measures were taken and targeted mechanisms of quality control were elaborated.

This is high time for Kyrgyzstan to solve problems of education quality guarantee. It is impossible to safeguard sustainable development without an adequate higher education and quality guarantee institutions that form a critical number of well-trained and educated people.

Thus we find that internationalization carries great opportunities for Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, it exacerbates competition and generates tensions by creating new education services providers (training companies, telecommunication companies, distant learning centers and corporate bodies). Due to this, many universities try to unite in creating regional and international organizations which perform quality appraisal and educational programs accreditation. Every national university faces the task of making its degrees transparent and recognizable not only for its students and employers, but also attractive for foreign citizens and organizations. This goal is only to be attained by well-directed efforts of higher education internationalization which means mobility of students and teachers, internationalization of study programs and curricula, creation of international university networks and co-operation agreements, usage of international quality control models.

On the other hand, we witness the process of searching for a national education system that is better shaped to meet the needs of the civil society, needs of national identity in the global world.

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Processes of internationalization continue to play a major part in education development and modernization. Complex and ambiguous as these tendencies are, they still allowed Kyrgyzstan to enter the world education space.

Study abroad also forms a generation of youth that is really free in mind and spirit and has no boundaries in understanding other cultures, social strata and nations. This generation is open to change and innovation and is ready to take unconventional decisions. Studying abroad also fosters critical thinking in a way that makes it impossible to manipulate such person and to impose on her or him. Young people who have studied abroad are always ready to learn more and to continue their education which makes them very competitive workers.

Being cosmopolitan and very pragmatic, these students, however, do not loose ties with their homeland. Level of patriotism is usually quite high. Even the decision to stay in the country of study after graduation only demonstrates a student's ability to adapt to new environment and to contribute to the better image of his or her home country while living abroad.

All these factors allow for the students who study abroad to become an especially promising potential leaders in science, politics and business. Of course, the study abroad per se does not guarantee career success if it is not combined with an active civil position, business and personal qualities and abilities. However, examples of Japanese, Chinese and Hong Kong young students who were educated abroad and contributed to rapid economic and technical development of their countries is an inspiring model for Kyrgyzstan.

