

## ACADEMIC MOBILITY IN KAZAKHSTAN: RHETORIC AND REALITY

Martin O'Hara

Kazakhstan joined the European Higher Education area in 2010. The implications are profound - the state and the universities will have to fundamentally change the way they conduct their business as the country adopts the three cycles of the Bologna Framework and the European Credit Transfer System - ECTS.

A key objective of the Bologna process is that students can move between different universities and different countries, with their previous learning explicitly recognized in terms of learning level and the number of ECT credits gained by previous study. Similarly, graduates can expect to see their qualifications recognised automatically across the European Higher Education Area and beyond, provided they were awarded by an accredited or recognized institution.

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) has begun the process of implementing the Bologna agenda but there's a long way to go before the new required approaches become a reality.

KIMEP University has been a pioneer of the internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan from its foundation, over 20 years ago. However, being a pioneer has meant that KIMEP has frequently been in tension with the regulatory basis of higher education in Kazakhstan, which is still deeply concerned with compliance requirements, as represented by the State Classifier of degree titles. Additionally, prescriptive GOSO requirements govern, for example, admissions, curricula, assessment patterns, and examination weightings for courses taught.

This paper examines some of the current tensions experienced by KIMEP University during the last year, because they illustrate the extent to which urgent change is still needed as the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) guides higher education into the new Bologna era. In particular, there needs to be clear articulation and implementation of the principals of institutional autonomy and academic freedom as applied to recruitment of academic staff, outbound and inbound mobility of students, admissions processes, and control of degree awards and curricula. This paper concludes that the compliance and control role of the MES should be to provide a flexible regulatory framework in which programs and institutions are assessed against the:

- quality and consistency of educational processes,
- adherence and achievement of Mission,
- quality of outputs, in terms of learning outcomes at course and program levels, and the knowledge and skill sets of graduates.

### **Current status of higher education in Kazakhstan**

Currently the MES determines the degree purpose, degree structure and much of the degree content: basically the system is still one of compliance and control whereas in the Bologna Framework, the emphasis shifts towards systems based upon regulation, university autonomy and academic freedom.

Equally fundamental will be the shift from present didactic teacher-led learning based teaching to a new holistic learning paradigm based upon student-centered, outcomes-driven and innovative approaches to learning and assessment. The role of the lecturer will change from one of determination of what the student learns, to one based more upon encouraging and supporting the student to engage increasingly in independent learning and self-discovery, based upon a much wider range of learning and assessment techniques.

The MES is committed to Bologna reforms. It has established a Bologna Process and Academic Mobility Center to lead and co-ordinate the process of change. Various training workshops and other awareness raising events have taken place. Most recently, in July 2013, a short conference at KIMEP university was followed by a three day training program developed and run jointly by KIMEP University and the Bologna Process and Academic Mobility Center.

The MES has developed an outline National Qualifications Framework, which addresses the need to have a three cycle approach (Bachelors, Masters and PhD qualifications). The next step is to provide more detail with regard to ECTS credit hours; credit transfer mechanisms; teaching, learning and assessment strategies; and learning agreements and diploma supplements.

The sector is beginning to recognize that the Bologna agenda represents fundamental change. The MES has stated the intention to give universities greater autonomy and academic freedom by 2015. However, it remains unclear to what extent the current system of control of degree titles through the State Classifier and curricula controls being exercised through GOSO standards will remain in force. What is not yet clear is the extent to which inspections will remain focused upon compliance issues. What is essential is for the MES to establish how well institutional quality assurance and quality enhancement mechanisms deliver high quality learning outcomes.

Ideally, universities should be free to determine and develop degrees in response to both market demands and market opportunities with regulatory frameworks and inspection regimes focusing upon achievement of stated outcomes. In other words, the emphasis should shift from control to assuring an ever-increasing level of quality at institutional and subject levels. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK provides a good example of how to safeguard standards through a single national body without compromising the autonomy of universities to determine content and delivery of programs.

The QAA conducts reviews at both institutional and subject levels of institutions according to ensure that the sector meets students' needs; safeguards standards in an increasingly diverse UK and international context; drives improvements in UK higher education; and works to improve public understanding of higher education standards and quality (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk>). The QAA publishes a range of reference points and guidance, including subject benchmark statements in support of standards but does not dictate the structure, nature or content of academic programs, other than requiring them to be compatible with the UK Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS): CATS maps easily onto the European ECTS. It is worth stressing that UK universities have the authority to award degrees, have the freedom to determine degree titles, degree content, and approaches towards teaching, Learning and assessment. The focus during inspection visits is not upon compliance but how well the program is meeting the remit determined by the university itself. Inspection visits operate on the basis of *"You say you do this (in the self-assessment documentation) - now prove it. Show us the evidence."*

The value of this approach is that it encourages innovation and enable universities to respond rapidly to changing market conditions and market opportunities.

In contrast, in Kazakhstan, universities have to comply with excessive levels of control including program licenses, restrictions in degree titles and heavy controls over curricula. This is not helpful as it stifles innovation and distorts the links that universities should be building with their key stakeholders, the students and the employers. Higher education in Kazakhstan should move away from mechanistic controls requiring specific numbers of contact hours and assessments to an approach that enables universities to develop and deliver learning strategies that best meet the needs and aspirations of their stakeholders. The learning needs of increasingly diverse groups of students should be central, and how well their knowledge and skill sets at graduation meet employer and society expectations, needs and requirements.

Higher education quality in Kazakhstan should be evaluated in terms of process and outcomes while teaching and methods of assessment should become much more student-centered and outcomes driven. In the process, graduates become more desirable in terms of their subject and knowledge and analytical skills, their ability to engage with research demands, their ability to continue self-learning and to apply their knowledge and skills to new problem solving situations.

#### **KIMEP university international experience**

In line with the University Mission, as established by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, KIMEP aims to provide a high quality learning experience based upon best western practice. In September, 2013, all established programs received accreditation from AO Austria, an international accreditation agency recognized formally by both the European Quality Assurance Register and the Ministry of Education and Science. Other international accreditations have been received from:

- Foundation for International Business Administration (FIBAA):  
for the Executive MBA
- Asian Forum for Business Education (AFBE): Level 3 accreditation for all business undergraduate and graduate degrees
- European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA):  
accreditation for undergraduate and graduate programs in public administration
- American Communication Association (ACA): accreditation for undergraduate and graduate programs in journalism.

Over 10% of students and 40% of academic staff are international. The University has over 100 international partnerships with universities in Europe, Asia, North America and elsewhere. Around a third of partners are ranked in the top 400 universities worldwide. There are 9 double degrees whereby students exchange between partners and receive two degree awards, one from KIMEP and the other from the partner institution. A further 6 dual degree programs are due to be established shortly. In 2012-2013, there were 89 incoming and 175 outgoing student exchanges. There is little doubt that such exchanges add greatly to the student learning experience at KIMEP, adding value in terms of diversity, sharing experiences, broadening horizons, and enhanced employability of graduates.

### **KIMEP university academic mobility issues**

Despite the clear commitment that has and is being made to progress the regulatory environment to one which better supports and is attuned to the Bologna Framework, there are several operational realities indicate that traditional control and compliance requirements continue to exert an unhelpful influence upon operational realities.

Problems are especially acute for KIMEP, precisely because the University is committed to promoting and developing its international mission. Yet, since becoming a University in January 2012, KIMEP has become increasingly subject to unhelpful and arguably unnecessary controls. These controls have made it increasingly difficult to deliver the University Mission because, in reality, they undermine the concept of academic autonomy and academic freedom which lies at the heart of the Bologna Framework. The remainder of this section explores some of the issues that have impacted adversely upon KIMEP during the last year.

#### **Student mobility**

KIMEP used to admit students throughout the academic year, this supporting and facilitating more flexible student recruitment within Kazakhstan but also, critically, enabling in-bound international exchanges based upon credit transfer and double degree arrangements with partner universities. However, admissions for the 2013-2014 academic year have had to comply with MES requirements, which restrict admissions to August only. Additionally, applicants have to take National Testing Center examinations in either Russian or Kazakh (academic programs at KIMEP are taught in English); the first degrees of graduate students have to be nostrified by the MES; and 1E1\_T54OEP1\_ certificates are required, even when the students are coming from English speaking environments such as the U.K. and the U.S.A. In a recent case, the MES refused to nostrify a student with a first degree from Belgium, seemingly contrary to the commitment made by Kazakhstan as a signatory to the 1999 Lisbon Convention on degree recognition. Collectively, these compliance requirements undermine the Bologna expectation that universities have the academic freedom to determine their own admission standards and procedures.

#### **Recruitment and retention of foreign staff**

Recruitment and retention of foreign staff has become increasingly difficult. KIMEP lost several academic staff during 2013 because of work permit issues. Qualifications have to be nostrified, a process of formal recognition that can take between 4 months and a full calendar year. Nostrification is by no means guaranteed and the University has had to release staff whose qualifications have not been recognised.

The situation is worst for qualifications gained from universities in countries not recognised in partner agreements with Kazakhstan. KIMEP has encountered difficulties gaining work permits based on qualifications gained in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands.

The situation regarding initial appointments and promotions to Associate and Full Professorships has become more difficult in recent months with recent regulatory changes requiring such appointments to have MES approval. (Order 128, March 31, 2011). MES criteria include a requirement of a minimum of 10 publications in recognised local journals for Associate Professor and 20 for Full Professor appointments. This undermines the ability of

internationally qualified academic staff to move into higher education in Kazakhstan, yet such inward faculty mobility is a fundamental tenet of Bologna.

Other constraints include requirements that applicants for academic management experience have at least 5 years previous management experience in other institutions. This makes it difficult to make internal promotions to Dean positions, thereby undermining staff development within the University.

#### **European credit transfer system (ECTS): implications of the Bologna agenda**

To implement Bologna in a timely manner, so as to enable European accreditation and engage in the development of dual degrees, the following issues need to be addressed.

1. The MES should move away from the tradition of control and compliance towards a developed a system of greater autonomy and academic freedom at institutional level, within an accountable structure that holds universities accountable for the outcomes of their actions and decisions.
2. Regulation is necessary to ensure quality but the focus needs to shift from control and compliance to checking integrity of quality assurance and enhancement, and the measurement of process and quality of outputs against stated learning outcomes, benchmarking statements, professional requirements etc.
3. Academic mobility, both inward and outward, requires full adoption of the Bologna process. Specifically with regard to:
  - academic freedom
  - institutional autonomy
  - recognition of international qualifications
4. Specifically, universities need to be able to:
  - Determine student admission requirements
  - Determine university application and admission procedures
  - Determine criteria for academic staff appointments, promotions and contract renewals.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, regulation is necessary to ensure quality of higher education programs but the focus needs to shift from control and compliance by government to only checking by an independent quality assurance agency recognised by the MES and registered with the European Quality Assurance Registry. This agency would check the integrity of the quality assurance and enhancement process and the quality of the outputs against stated intentions, benchmarking statements, professional requirements etc.