

HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES IN KYRGYZSTAN: CASE OF OSH STATE UNIVERSITY

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In this article, I describe some key aspects of higher education reforms and what have been the Osh State University's experiences in relation to these reforms.

Long Proud History

Osh State University (former Osh State Pedagogical Institute) is among the oldest higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan and we celebrated 75-year anniversary this year. Osh State University (OSU) is also the largest higher education institution in the south of the country. OSU has always been one of the leading higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan, and it serves students from all parts of the country. Many of OSU graduates work and study abroad, and many of them had worked and work in key government and public positions in the country. Nowadays, OSU enrolls around 27,000 students including over 1500 students from abroad.

There have been many reforms in the field of higher education since the breakup of the USSR, and OSU also goes hand in hand with all those reforms. The reforms are related to making university a high quality education centre where faculty would engage in effective teaching and research, while students get quality education.

Fair and Transparent Admission

I want to comment on the admission processes at OSU. Higher education was free during the USSR and most students were eligible for state stipends. However, there were very few higher education institutions and only 15% of secondary school graduates were able to attend higher education institutions. After the fall of the USSR, the number of higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan increased from 10 to 50. However, there were many issues with corruption and nepotism during university admission procedure in the past.

Nowadays, we enrol students on the basis of National Scholarship Test. Unfortunately, many universities were criticised for not being very transparent about how they admit the students when they apply based on the National Scholarship Tests. In this field, we were the first to adopt the improved and modified technology of admission procedure. The whole process of applicants' admission to OSU is now broadcasted on-line in the Internet and via the website of OSU live in the real time. Thus, parents and applicants can follow their admission process on-line from the screens which are placed for public viewing in front of the OSU building. We hope that this builds trust in higher education institutions as a place which is not corrupt, but fair and transparent.

Internalisation

A very important initiative for OSU is related to its internalisation and assessing the quality of university education by an independent accreditation to replace the previous system of centralised licensing, attestation and accreditation. In 2012, OSU was among the first to achieve international accreditation of one of its specialisations "Economics" with the help of Association EdNet².

In addition, with the fall of the USSR, higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan got opportunity to establish direct links and partnerships with international universities. These

² EdNet Agency on Quality Assurance and Accreditation of higher education institutions of Kyrgyzstan was established with the Tempus project "Central Asian Network for Quality Assurance and Accreditation".

collaborations are very important for us as we can compare our education programmes and learn from each other. Both students and professors of OSU benefit from these partnerships by participating in exchange programmes, joint research and education courses with some of the leading institutions abroad. But we also would like to further work in this area.

We are also mindful about what criteria which are relevant for assessment quality of education. Therefore, we should carefully and purposefully study and adapt the elements of the international accreditation, and all the activities of the university should be available for the society's viewing and inputs. Only then international experts can assess and evaluate the quality of education at particular universities objectively. Consequently, higher education institutions would have reputation and prestige not only because of the state status but also due to internal and external assessments. When a university is trusted and recognised internationally, then students of that university may get opportunity to continue their education in any university of the world. Graduates who get quality education at a university, can find a job in any part of the world. Their diplomas will be recognised internationally.

To align our education standards with international standards, we are working on improving material and resources bases of the university. Computerisation, connecting OSU campuses to the Internet, providing access to electronic libraries are some of our priority areas.

Following Bologna Principles

Nowadays, Osh State University is a cohesive and holistic structure of education institution, and it includes its own kindergarten and school. While re-structuring the education system in accordance with Bologna principles, we also adopted the three-level international masters and PhD programmes, and in this way, we can be more meaningfully integrated to international academia. Our diplomas can be recognised abroad in the future and quality of education that we provide at OSU will further improve. While fully integrating with the international academia, we strongly believe that we should not forget our origin and core values. We should instil in our students our traditional values which our ancestors protected since its ancient history and passed from generation to generation. Owing to these values, we know that our people survived through harsh history.

Currently, there are active discussions in Kyrgyzstan about shifting towards masters and PhD degree system. We are starting our PhD programmes and we are searching for ways for further improvement. We mostly participate in joint projects with international universities which have rich experience in this direction. Thus, we have started joint projects with the University of Milan, Goteborg University and Tartu University, and we signed agreements on preparing of PhDs. According to these agreements, one thesis supervisor is assigned from our university and another co-supervisor from the partner university abroad. Nowadays, eight PhD candidates are conducting research under their supervision.

Retaining Traditional Values

We are now working hard on internalisation of higher education and meeting international standards. However, we should never forget who we are and what are our traditional values and long history. We want to find a right path of development by taking all valuable and useful from the international education and adapting them to our Kyrgyz context. It would be incorrect and unsustainable if they try to copy everything from abroad without deep analysis of who we are and which ideas are good and can work in Kyrgyzstan. Thus, we are working on introducing credit technology of education to further integrate OSU with the world education space, and we are confident that it also helps us improve our education system.

Role of Faculty in OSU

The Leadership of OSU strongly believe that all professors of OSU should be active and participatory members of the university's life and they should have a voice in the future direction and growth of the University. We are pleased that every faculty member of OSU actively participates in the life of the university. They seek to work creatively and we always encourage them.

It is important to establish intellectual elite at higher education institutions. In this regard, it is extremely important to coach and prepare young leaders, and by identifying honest young professionals with leadership skills to trust and assign them to key decision making positions. We have unwritten rules and we are actively pursuing it by encouraging and assigning young professionals under 35 years old to the key positions such as Dean of the department, director of institute, and so on. The reason for this is that we want to capitalise on their youthful energy as well as creativity capacities. These young people always have new initiatives, new ideas, and they think unorthodoxly and in new ways.

It is always necessary to maintain and improve the capacity of professors at higher education institutions. so that highly intellectual and professional people could educate younger generation of students. Students apply to universities with their high expectations and hopes and our challenge is to meet their expectations. So, if the student acquires knowledge and skills which can be useful after 10-20 years, and if the student is pleased with the quality of education they are getting, then we can say that the university is offering good quality education. By aspiring to achieve new things, we need to get rid of some old stereotypes and standards, and adopt new models.

Future Opportunities and Employment of OSU Graduates

This expansion of higher education has not, however, been paired with a bustling job market. Unfortunately, a very large number of university graduates join the long list of unemployed youth in the country. In this regard, OSU has been working on the unemployment issue. By establishing a career centre and working closely with employers and by asking their needs and requirements, the University aims to prepare its graduates not only to get jobs, but also become active citizens of the society and contribute to the nation's social and economic development.

In addition, I would like to comment that community's trust in higher education institution has deteriorated since the collapse of the USSR. We are now working on re-building that trust between the university and society by establishing our image as an open and transparent university.