

A “Third Way” Model of Higher Education for Kazakhstan

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In Kazakhstan, the future of the students is often determined by their socio-economic background rather than their talents and merits. To solve such problems, various models have been proposed around the world. The most notable examples are the opposing models of the USA and Nordic countries, which focus on innovation and competition and equity and collaboration, respectively. There have been numerous discussions about which model should be adopted by Kazakhstan. On the one hand, the Nordic model offers equal opportunities for students. On the other hand, others argue that innovations are feasible only through the practice of competition. Nevertheless, I think that Kazakhstan should not base its higher education fully on one type of model. Instead, another approach that is suitable for the country must be practiced in order to solve the current problems of Kazakhstani higher education. This essay will first discuss the US model of higher education, then the Nordic model, and finally why the “third way” is the best solution for Kazakhstan’s case.

U.S. Model of Higher Education

The U.S. higher education system is often viewed as the world leader in higher education because it affirms a long-standing commitment to innovation, promotes stratified competition, and supports economic and technological advancement. A significant characteristic of the U.S. model is its competitive environment, which enables a hierarchy that motivates promising scholarship and the accumulation of resources. Kaganovich et al. (2020) provide an analysis of this phenomenon, noting that the U.S. system is characterized by “increasing segmentation of the market, with a particularly strong rise in selectivity of the most selective universities” (p. 9). A competition-based system is what drives institutions to enhance their quality, to raise significant funds, and to strengthen their reputation to attract more talented students. As a result, a strong cycle of innovation and development is created.

This model of competitiveness is one of the key factors in promoting the university’s “third mission,” which expands the role of universities from research and teaching to contribution to the economy. To clarify this concept, Guerrero and Menter (2024) suggest that universities should develop “dynamic capabilities” (p. 1322), which is the ability of institutions to innovate, adapt, and participate in knowledge transfer. This is the key definition of the U.S. system, where innovation and new opportunities are encouraged. It is a system where research is made to be applied in the real world and solve problems in the market. Davidson (2019) agrees that higher education is vital for individuals to advance in the socioeconomic ladder and notes that people with higher education degrees are “much more likely to pay into the system than to take from the system” (7:32). Therefore,

she classifies postsecondary education as an investment in society. The U.S. model’s ability to promote an economically productive and innovation-focused system is valuable for any nation that desires to compete on the world stage.

Nordic Model of Higher Education

Compared to the market-driven U.S. model of higher education, the Nordic model has equal access to education, equity, and collaboration as its foundation. One of the most important aspects of that model is the principle that education is a social good, which means it is not a product to be sold but a right of each citizen. As Rinne and Antikainen (2022) assert, the Nordic model emphasizes “equal opportunities and minimizing the inequalities” and is “based on public and free education” (p. 294). Accordingly, access to higher education is offered for everyone irrespective of their socioeconomic background. Additionally, this principle supports social mobility, because it improves social unity and reduces division between classes. The aim of the Nordic model is to recognize and support talented people, not worsen social inequality.

The Nordic higher education model functions by the cooperation of the coordinative government and institutions that are strongly interlinked. Rinne and Antikainen (2022) mention that one feature of the Nordic model is a “dense” higher education network that is present even in “sparsely populated areas” (p. 306), which is not considered as an ineffective use of resources but as a policy to foster balanced national growth. This is the complete opposite of the U.S. model, where significant segmentation occurs because of investment being based on geographical closeness and social access. Rice (2023) suggests that higher education should not be based on individualism, competition, and profit but on trust and collective social responsibility. He argues that higher education can be enhanced in the future through collaboration, a notable feature of the Nordic model. Another noteworthy aspect of this model is it has shown that education can result in a sustainable and fair society, where success is determined by an individual’s potential, not socioeconomic status.

In Responses to the Models

While both the U.S. and the Nordic models offer myriads of advantages, they cannot be adopted directly by Kazakhstan due to their significant drawbacks. The U.S. model of higher education, despite its innovative capabilities, leads to massive inequality due to its market-driven and competition-based nature. The high competition reported by Kaganovich et al. (2020) results in a situation where funding, influence, and opportunity are located in a few institutions. Consequently, only a small portion of elite institutions exist, while the majority of universities have limited capacity and lower status. This phenomenon creates a hierarchy that can lower social mobility, a case that Kazakhstan must avoid. Moreover, expensive tuition in the U.S. higher education model poses another aspect that is difficult to adopt for the

country. For a country like Kazakhstan, in which building a broad and inclusive middle class is a desired outcome, adopting a system that may restrict access based on wealth, along with burying a generation of young graduates in debt, is a profoundly failed strategy that may hamper economic mobility and result in potential social dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, while the Nordic model can serve as admiration and inspiration for its goals of equality, it is also tied, deeply and perhaps uniquely, to a specific socio-political context: a high-tax welfare state, a rich historical consensus on the role of government, and high levels of social trust. Rinne and Antikainen (2022) readily acknowledge that the Nordic model is currently being pressured by globalization and a shift towards “neo-liberal values and market drive” (p. 303), implying that even within its context, the Nordic model is undergoing a transition. The possibility of generating extensive public funding, comprehensive social safety nets, and a cultural strategy that would be needed in Kazakhstan’s current economic, political, and fiscal conditions to sustain a Nordic model is in serious doubt. Moreover, while the Nordic model has much to recommend in terms of equity and social welfare, its long-standing emphasis on uniformity, consensus, and public service may too often, in some readings, lack the extreme, disruptive, risk-taker vitality that powers the rapid, market-driven innovation stimulated within top American research universities, with their ability to connect ecosystems. For Kazakhstan, cognizant goals of rapidly diversifying its economy, modernizing its technologies, and its stated intention to become more fully part of the globalization age mean that a system that did not actively and aggressively seek to stimulate competitive excellence along with strong ties to the economy sufficient appetite for entrepreneurial zeal, and sufficient robustness to challenge the status quo through cutting-edge research and innovation processes could impose limits on its strategic needs, which are both urgent and ambitious.

Consequently, the most sensible and visionary path for Kazakhstan is not to pick a flawed option between these two systems but to synthesize the good parts of each to create a particular and context-sensible third way that would willfully seek to avoid the unjust inequalities of the USA system and the potential bureaucratic inertia or lack of competitive drive of the Nordic model. The theoretical conception of a “third space,” as proposed by Whitchurch and Healy (2024), represents a potentially rich, informative, and practical way to implement this amalgamation. The third space refers to a co-generated, frequently virtual, interstitial space that arises between, and is not limited by, the traditional academic and professional occupational settings, hence allowing new hybrid roles and practices in organizations that did not previously exist in strict and formal job roles or organizational charts. A Kazakhstani third-way intentionally designed model could proactively institutionalize any of these practices. For example, there could be a national priority for the development of publicly funded, industry-connected “applied innovation institutes” embedded within universities. As permanent third spaces, these institutes could facilitate exchanges of knowledge, perspectives, and research with academics, undergraduate and graduate administrators, engineers from national

corporate partners, and public policy-makers to socialize and co-generate problems of high national importance such as sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, or digital infrastructures. In the deep collaboration, Whitchurch and Healy argue there is production of complementary “collaborative capital” as well as the production of “Mode 3 knowledge” (p. 2), which is transdisciplinary, application-focused, and cognizant of individual contexts. This framework enables the intentional development of the “dynamic capabilities” articulated by Guerrero and Menter (2024)—for instance, “sensing” new educational opportunities (e.g., micro-credentials for the digital economy) or “seizing” chances for the commercialization of research—while still being mission-focused and aligned with higher-order national development priorities rather than in pure market-based competition or profit. In this way, Kazakhstan could construct a system that is more nimble, innovative, and cosmopolitan than the more traditional Nordic model but more embedded, equitable, and mission-focused than the U.S. system.

I have provided a review of two main models of higher education. It is argued that the U.S. model is a powerful driver of innovation and global competitiveness, and yet by nature and structure it causes significant social inequality and financial exclusion. In contrast, the Nordic model offers a persuasive and ethical roadmap to equity and social cooperation, but it is predicated on a specific and historically grown welfare-state setting, which may be challenging to reproduce in full and possibly does not have the use of the market-responsive attributes that Kazakhstan’s development strategy requires. Therefore, a third way is needed for Kazakhstan’s higher education development. This distinct model must be integrated into the country’s higher education by providing equal access to education and allowing for innovation as well. Kazakhstan must develop a unique higher education system, which is neither the Nordic nor the U.S. model. By building such an adapted and future-oriented system, Kazakhstan will be able to promote social solidarity, attain long-term national growth, and hold a top position in the global knowledge economy.

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