

# Review of Bolashak Programme and Nazarbayev University using the Conflict Theory and Critical Pedagogy Theory

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Major revolutions across the business and educational world in the 21st century have increased internationalisation. According to Knight (2004), internationalisation is viewed as the process of incorporating international, intercultural, or global perspectives into the objectives, activities, and delivery of higher education. Additionally, Schoorman (2000) defined internationalisation as a continuous educational process dominated by countries, taking place within the global context of knowledge and practice, where societies are perceived as part of a broader, inclusive world. Recently, internationalisation has become a significant subject in the higher education arena, with higher education institutions being challenged to incorporate international standards into their system and principles (Knight, 2008). In this paper, I will explore the two major internationalisation policies implemented in Kazakhstan. Through the lenses of conflict theory and Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, I will examine how these policies perpetuate inequality in Kazakhstan.

## Internationalisation of Higher Education in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has made significant strides in internationalising its higher education system, particularly after becoming independent in 1991 (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024). The government has implemented various policies since its independence as a means of integrating into international standards. The Bolashak International Scholarship programme and the establishment of Nazarbayev University are the main internationalisation policies that have been implemented.

### Bolashak International Scholarship Programme

The Bolashak International Scholarship Programme is one of the main policies and the first internationalisation policy implemented in Kazakhstan after independence (Bokayev et al., 2020). In 1991, the Kazakhstani government made a declaration to launch this programme to tackle the economic and state-building challenges that arose following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Del Sordi, 2018). The programme seeks to improve the educational qualifications of Kazakhstani citizens by offering them the chance to study at top foreign universities and bring them back as skilled individuals who can help advance the country's development (Del Sordi, 2018).

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universities and bring them back as skilled individuals who can help advance the country's development (Del Sordi, 2018).

For a student to access this scholarship, the student must possess a CGPA of 3.3 or higher, must be proficient in foreign languages and must demonstrate the emotional maturity to survive independently in the host country. Additionally, students have to undergo an interview process with an independent Expert Committee that assesses their knowledge of their country (Dairova et al., 2013). Finally, to ensure that beneficiaries return and give back to the country accordingly, they must present collateral equivalent to the value of the total expenses of the scholarship (Bokayev et al., 2020; Dairova et al., 2013; Hwami & Bedeker, 2024). Alternatively, students may present a guarantor from one person to four people to secure this scholarship in the absence of real estate. This is done to ensure that people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who do not meet the financial requirements will be able to access the programme (Dairova et al., 2013).

Even though this scholarship programme has been able to address gender disparity in Kazakhstan, it is worth noting that spatial disparity remains a problem. According to Dairova et al. (2013), the number of scholarship recipients from rural areas is comparatively small. Most recipients are from Almaty and Astana, with very few coming from the other regions in Kazakhstan (Dairova et al., 2013).

## Nazarbayev University

The establishment of Nazarbayev University is another significant progress that has been made towards the internationalisation of higher education in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. In 2006, the then-president proposed its establishment (Katsu & Saniyazova, 2018). Unlike other universities in Kazakhstan, this institution was granted exceptional privileges, including complete independence from the Ministry of Education and Science in setting its academic policies and curriculum (Seidimbek, 2013). Additionally, it has an advanced infrastructure, and about 70% of its faculty are non-Kazakh nationals (Hwami, 2023). Moreover, the university receives a significant amount of state funding to attract leading international scholars. It has also established partnerships with renowned institutions like the University College London, the University of Cambridge, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Seidimbek, 2013). It eventually aims at integrating best practices in the international educational arena and the best practices in Kazakhstan, particularly Central Asia as a whole, to advance the country's development and to promote the best international practices (Seidimbek, 2013).

However, similar to other institutions, students must meet certain requirements to gain access to this institution. Firstly, students seeking to gain entry to this university must be proficient in the English language, which is marked by passing the International English Language Testing

System (IELTS) (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024). Additionally, students must pass the Subject Entrance Set (SET) to assess their knowledge in the chosen field (Seidembek, 2013). Among the general population, students who gain access to this institution are mostly from high-performing schools in the country, such as Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and Kazakh-Turkish Lyceum Schools (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024; Seidembek, 2013).

### Viewing the Policies Using the Bourdieu Theoretical Framework

This paper utilises Bourdieu's theoretical framework and critical pedagogy to understand how the various internationalisation policies implemented in post-Soviet Kazakhstan perpetuate or challenge societal inequality. Bourdieu's theoretical framework explains how these internationalisation policies continue to perpetuate inequality in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. According to Bourdieu (1973), various forms of capital shape an individual's success as they navigate education. Bourdieu (1973) identified four significant capitals that can facilitate the mobility of individuals in the social ladder. Firstly, economic capital refers to the financial assets available to the individual; cultural capital refers to other non-monetary assets such as education, knowledge, skills, and others (Bourdieu, 1973). Social capital, which considers the individual's social networks available and symbolic capital, which considers the value and prestige the individual gains in society due to their cultural capital, are the other important capitals available to the individual (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024).

However, individuals and groups certainly have varying forms of these capitals. Economic capital allows the wealthy to invest in education and cultural experiences, building cultural capital and reinforcing cycles of wealth, an opportunity the poor are denied (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Social capital, or access to extensive networks, provides resources and opportunities which facilitate the beneficiaries' upward mobility, a luxury that is not available to everyone, therefore deepening social inequality (Cleaver, 2005). Lastly, symbolic violence enforces the dominant culture's norms and values, devaluing the cultural capital of marginalised groups and solidifying their lower social status (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024). Using the lens of Bourdieu's theory, it can be asserted that the internationalisation policy in Kazakhstan favours only the wealthy while neglecting the struggles of the poor. This is because the requirements attached to the internationalisation policies favour those who have the financial capacity to gain quality pre-tertiary education and extra tuition for the various exams attached to the accessibility of these opportunities.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, it can be said that the internationalisation policies in Kazakhstan are ways through which neoliberalism continues to commodify knowledge and prioritise efficiency over critical thinking (Giroux, 2021). The strict requirements attached to the major internationalisation policies in Kazakhstan compel people to focus only on the accumulation of sufficient wealth to fit into the policy while neglecting the importance of critically considering the essence of the knowledge they are acquiring. Education must be a tool

that ensures social transformation and advocates for policies that empower students to challenge the status quo and engage in critical thinking (Giroux, 2021). However, in the context of Kazakhstan's internationalisation policy, real-life issues associated with the marginalised groups who cannot meet the requirements attached to these policies are neglected (Mayo, 2009). Additionally, students who prepare to benefit from these policies overlook critical thinking while focusing only on passing the various exams to meet the requirements. Through this, the ability to think critically, which is one of the important purposes of education, is ignored, while the neoliberal goal of producing labour for the market economy is achieved.

### Reflection on Internationalisation

Reflecting on the internationalisation of higher education in Kazakhstan provides insight into the country's skewed and discriminatory efforts to improve educational quality, enhance human capital, and expand access to global knowledge networks. These efforts are perceived to be discriminatory because they primarily benefit students from affluent backgrounds, leaving economically marginalised groups at a disadvantage (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024). It can therefore be said that these policies not only perpetuate inequality but also sustain social class reproduction.

The Bolashak Scholarship Programme is a key example of this inequality. Although it provides Kazakh students with opportunities to study abroad and return to contribute to their country's development, the scholarship's strict requirements, such as the use of real estate as collateral, subtly exclude students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who lack this form of assets. Moreover, students who are accepted into the programme have a distinct advantage over their counterparts studying in Kazakhstani universities, gaining international experience that is often more highly regarded by employers (Dairova et al., 2013). This compounds inequality, as students from rural or economically disadvantaged areas who face diverse barriers to accessing these benefits continue to encounter challenges in securing future employment (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024; Seidembek, 2013).

The notion of meritocracy in Kazakhstan's internationalisation policies is, therefore, highly debatable. Although the policies are presented as open to all qualified students, the structural inequalities inherent in their requirements reveal a hidden bias. Bowles and Gintis (2002) argue that inequality in education systems is often intentional, designed by policymakers to perpetuate social class structures. In Kazakhstan, access to internationalisation opportunities is uneven, favouring wealthy and well-connected students who can afford the high costs of studying abroad and preparing for English-based programmes at Nazarbayev University. This deliberate structuring of opportunities further entrenches social class divisions, making it challenging for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to climb the social ladder. Consequently, Kazakhstan's higher education internationalisation efforts, while contributing to educational and economic development, simultaneously

reinforce the dominance of the affluent, making it nearly impossible for economically disadvantaged students to benefit equitably from these initiatives (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024).

Furthermore, the internationalisation policies in Kazakhstan align closely with the general global tendency in which the educational systems are associated with economic performance (Kim et al., 2024). Consequently, an individual must be economically sound to be able to prepare to meet the requirements of these policies. Additionally, the goal of these policies, which aim to adopt Western educational models and meet Western educational standards, risks localised education being robbed of pertinent cultural values (Kim et al., 2024). The purpose of internationalisation, according to critical pedagogy, is to lead students to critically apprehend world knowledge while at the same time promoting respect for local cultural practices and differences (Pitts & Brooks, 2016). In Kazakhstan, the current educational process emphasises integration with the Western educational systems rather than providing contextually relevant conditions necessary for further successful learning. The Bolashak international policy sends students to Western universities only, which may result in a type of cultural imperialism, where local cultures are dominated by Western cultures, and thus, the social change by internationalisation may be reduced. In the case where students come from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, this shift can put them off the few available programs in their own country since the cultural and language barriers to accessing such programs are compounded.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this analysis of higher education internationalisation in Kazakhstan through Bourdieu's and critical pedagogy frameworks reveals deliberate inequalities. Even though internationalisation initiatives aim to elevate the quality of education and contribute to human capital development, they have perpetuated social inequality by favouring students from affluent, urban backgrounds over their economically disadvantaged counterparts. The emphasis on Western standards and the high requirements attached to international programmes like Bolashak systematically exclude students who lack the necessary economic, social, and cultural capital. To ensure that all students in Kazakhstan benefit from internationalisation, policymakers need to find a balance between connecting with the global community and supporting local needs. This means creating opportunities that are accessible to students irrespective of their socioeconomic background. This approach would help Kazakhstan unlock the full potential of its diverse population, creating a fairer and more inclusive higher education system which improves academic standards and promotes social equality.

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