EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN KAZAKHSTAN: A LONG ROAD BUT WITH REAL SIGNS OF PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

The Kazakh National Agrarian University and eight other national universities in Kazakhstan are by order of the Ministry of Education making major changes in their educational programs, moving from the Soviet System to the European system, named after the 1999 Bologna Convention. Foreign universities are assisting with this transition. This paper describes how this foreign assistance might be better utilized, and proposes a strategy for employing this support more effectively. Since the focus is the National Agrarian University, the paper deals with the extension function as well as research and learning.

Keywords: Kazakh universities, Reform of education, Extension.

INTRODUCTION

The nine national universities of Kazakhstan are changing their educational programs to conform to the European university system, named after the Bologna Convention, signed in this Italian town in 1999 by the Education Ministers of 29 European Countries. The Kazakh National Agrarian University (KNAU) is one of the nine national universities, and the focus of this paper. The reforms underway will develop the in the lead national Kazakh universities Baccalaureate, Masters and PhDs, a system that is more consistent with international higher education institutions. An additional and highly important charge to the universities from the Government is to produce PhD graduates that are competitive in international markets. Attention is given to the PhD, but there are major implications for both the Baccalaureate and Masters programs, the building blocks for successful PhD programs. The availability of an improved and well educated workforce for Kazakhstan is recognized as a key to economic development. The KNAU has
been selecting international universities with which to cooperate for successfully making the transformation. Activities of these partnering universities involve technical assistance for Extension programs; training of teachers and administrators; introduction of new curricula; and modern University infrastructure and laboratories consistent with producing competitive PhDs. This undertaking will require the dedicated effort of the administrators, faculty and students of KNAU, and technical assistance from American, European and Asian universities. The theme of this paper is to suggest an explicit “strategy” for using foreign universities to assist in the transition.

EVOLUTION OF THE KAZAKH LAW ON EDUCATION

Education systems and universities and their key role in producing a workforce leading to modernization and growth of the economy of Kazakhstan received greater acknowledgement after the separation from the Soviet Union. In many ways the attention to higher education can be seen as a continuation of a trend that started during Soviet period. This transformation in its comprehensive sense came into law on 22/11/07, N566 “Rules of Organization of the Educational on the Credit System Program”. This law was preceded by a Declaration related to higher education on 27/07/2007 (www.kazinform.kz and System of Higher Education in Kazakhstan 2009), the law that stipulated the transformation to the Bologna Convention.

The lead up to the declaration for the Bologna Convention educational structure was complicated involving significant changes in the Kazakh higher education system. Some of these reforms were: standards for degrees, implementation of Baccalaureate and Master's Degree programs, freedom of students to choose among universities and maintain their education subsidies, expansions of the university curricula, and elimination of the candidate degree and the related old version of the PhD, with these administrative changes, the universities are in harmony with international institutions

NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES – PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The national universities of Kazakhstan have accepted these declarations and laws as an opportunity for development and
improvement. Not only does this align them with lead international universities, but the objective of becoming competitive with other international universities has set an external standard. Most rectors are appreciative of the government setting high standards, but at the same time searching effective strategies for meeting them. The strategies adopted by universities for meeting this challenge are different by department or area. Science and engineering subjects at the universities have been for many years separated in the research institutes. Under the old system, doctorate degrees were allocated to professionals who had distinguished themselves in research or other academic fields. The research institutes were the places that awarded most of the doctorates. Universities were mainly teaching institutions. Currently the universities are making affiliations with research institutes and developing research institutes to enable their faculties to better gain the experience and access to the tools of research. The Kazakh National Agrarian University is addressing this problem in three ways. First, it is of course developing closer relationships with the existing research institutes. Second, the universities are developing research capacities in what might be called non-traditional areas. These new institutes are partly funded by international donors and related to food safety, biotechnology, environmental issues and the processing of foods, all growing areas of interest in Kazakhstan. Third, given the emphasis on developing a successful Extension system, more attention is devoted to the development of applied research capacities on campus and the private sector. For the social sciences and especially in economics, business and the management sciences, there is a different problem. Most of the students in Kazakh universities do not read or speak English well enough to benefit from mainstream external literature. Not only are the students limited by language capacities, but their professors have little access (other than by the web which is not widely used) to the main journals in their fields. The universities do not subscribe to these international journals and appear not to have requested them (as a part of their transformation strategy) or from their international supporters. Proceeding with this task and making literature available needs to be more strategic.

A related problem exists with the development of an Extension program at KNAU. There have been a number of efforts to initiate to Extension programming at the University and at the Ministry of
Agriculture (see later discussion and developments in other New Independent States, Albrecht et. al. 2010). National Extension programs have been shown to provide major benefits to national society and especially to the agricultural and rural societies (Alston et al., 2000, Evenson and Kislev 1975, McDowell 2001, McGrath et. al. 2007, Moose et.al. 2009 and Rivera and Cary 1997). Finally, the national universities are exploring ways to get their PhD students at least partially educated in international universities. This has been mainly related to giving them short stays at international universities to study with professors that have some past affiliation with the KNAU. This activity is expanding, mostly in summer training and largely in European universities. This is a start but what is really needed is for students to seek advanced degrees at international institutions.

A STRATEGY FOR THE WAY FORWARD
We see the more explicitly defined strategy for international cooperation at KNAU as occurring in two phases, with sets of components for each phase.

Phase one, component one, involves academic strategic planning for each of the programs at the KNAU that have been selected for offering internationally competitive PhDs. Currently between 10 and 13 program areas at KNAU have been selected for full conversion to the International style PhD degree program (and Baccalaureate and Masters Programs). The academic planning process can be thought of as involving five steps.

1. Determine the emphasis of the PhD programs in the academic areas selected. That is, in all disciplines there are areas of expertise that are the specialty of the university offering the PhD. It is likely that a number of areas of emphasis will be selected for concentration in each discipline.

2. Review of curriculum and courses for all three degrees (Bachelors, Masters and PhD) to assure that the PhD degree graduates from the KNAU will be competitive in international markets, Once the areas of emphasis have been identified, there should be a detailed analysis of the existing the course content and a determination of whether or not new courses or revisions of existing courses are necessary.
3. Provide examples of the international level and content of research for PhD dissertations. Research is a critically important element of PhD programs, and will be different under the new orientation of KNAU. It is important to give the faculty and administration of the KNAU an idea of the content and depth of the research by PhDs who succeed in the American, Western Europe, and Asia.

4. Develop faculty educational exchanges and training to insure the KNAU faculty and staff are prepared to deliver the restructured curriculum. From the two points above, there will be conclusions about the types of educational exchanges and timing of the training necessary to bring the selected disciplinary faculties of the KNAU to a competitive international level for PhD production.

5. Assist with technology to ensure that the labs and other facilities are equipped at a level to make possible the planned level of PhD education. The departments/disciplines will need to improve their laboratories and other facilities for training internationally competitive PhD students.

The second component, phase one will involve administration, staff and the general technology support personnel of the University. There are two aspects to this second component of phase one. First, we would expect a continuing set of exchanges by both administrators and faculty to develop systems for managing the PhD program. Second, the investment aspects component one is difficult to estimate. It is evident that internet accessibility, computers and software are high priorities. The library will also likely need improvement, but more on web access capacities than in terms of volumes and space.

The third component, phase one will involve largely the additional education of faculty and PhD students to prepare them to offer the PhD programs, assuring the PhD graduates from the KNAU are internationally competitive. Each department or discipline should have a plan including students coming to the American, European and Asian universities for PhD training, exchanges of senior faculty for less than a year, and faculty coming to Kazakhstan for short periods to deliver seminars to faculty and graduate students at the KNAU, and perhaps other training programs conducted by professional associations, including Extension.
Phase two of the proposal is more related to developing the KNAU into an “institution” that can compete effectively, internationally. Components relate to the Extension or outreach activities, completion of an academic plan suggested in phase one and the development of a budget model to assure the administration of the KNAU understands and anticipates the financial demands of an international style PhD program. In short, phase two deals with aspects of KNAU that affect all programs, not just the Bachelors, Masters and PhD programs selected for the transformation.

Developing an allocation system for the divisions/departments/colleges in the KNAU that is transparent and supported by the faculty, students and administrators is essential. This allocation system must be able to accommodate the major investments in technology that the University will make to get the PhD programs to an international standard, and to manage the up-keep requirements that are associated with these key investments. Modern equipment for labs, internet, etc. has a rather short depreciation schedule. What is needed is an “institutional research” capacity to develop the budget processes and to provide the administration with the financial information necessary to effectively operate the new University. In America, Europe and Asia many universities have such an institutional research office (sometimes called by different names). The responsibility of this office is to maintain revenue projection models and budget allocation mechanisms that enable the university to develop “what if” simulations that are the basis for final decisions on how to conduct. We propose that the international universities work with the KNAU to develop a comprehensive budget system and to train and put into place the personnel to operate it.

PROGRESS IN KEY PROGRAMS AT KNAU
We now review progresses in two of the key programs at KNAU: extension and academic education.

Agricultural Extension for Kazakhstan
Agricultural Extension or outreach is critical to the development and growth of the agricultural and food sectors in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh Extension is now officially operated by the Ministry of Agriculture with some selected contributions by the KNAU and other government and non-governmental organizations. The
contributions of the University are generally related to short term research contracts and educational programs that could use more systematic organization (the “agricultural high school” is an example). There is good reason to have the more of the Extension or outreach education programs managed by the University. An important reason is the potential conflict of interest between the Ministry of Agriculture and the national Extension or outreach system. The Ministry of Agriculture regulates and provides subsidies to the agricultural sector in Kazakhstan. The same is true in other countries. Having the same organization that regulates and subsidizes agriculture responsible for the Extension or outreach education programs can result in potential conflict of interest situations. The Ministry of Agriculture received a World Bank loan of $24 million with a local contribution promised at $22 million to officially provide Extension or outreach to the Kazakh farmers. The National Holding Company, KazAgro”, and the Joint Stock Company, “KazAgro Innovation” were formed. KazAgro is the company that manages the outreach system. “KazAgro Innovation” is in the delivery and knowledge generation business (Yespolov, et. al. 2012, ch.4). Re-organizing this service to more directly involve the KNAU will require delicate negotiations with the Ministry of Agriculture and KazAgro, but there are good reasons to make the change (Yespolov, et al 2012). First the KNAU is responsible for the curriculum in all agricultural universities in Kazakhstan - even those that do not specialize in agriculture. Second, universities can do the job more effectively with graduate students and other educated workers who can deliver Extension or outreach programs an integral part of their educational training.

Progress with the Academic Education
The progress that is underway in developing the University academic strategic plan at KNAU requires mention. Last year, the government of Kazakhstan allocated significant funding to two programs, a visiting lecturer program and a PhD supervisor program. Approximately 70 lecturers and 30 PhD Supervisors over a three to four year period are planned. Visiting lecturers and PhD supervisors are received for periods of two weeks to one semester. The PhD supervisors accept responsibility for participating in the training of KNAU. English speaking PhD students and lecturers are asked to review the PhD curricula. PhD students also come to the home universities of the supervisors for about one semester. Research institute affiliations are progressing as well.
CONCLUSIONS
We have articulated a strategy for KNAU for the transition to the Bologna Convention for their Baccalaureate, Masters and PhD programs. The strategy deals with the upgrading of the academic programs in the PhD granting departments, of the the labs and infrastructure, that is needed to bring the University to have competitive international standards, research capacities, and budgeting processes. This strategy also calls for a specific place for the University in the organization and management of the national Extension system.

REFERENCES

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