

CULTURAL CONTEXT OF IMPLEMENTING INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS IN TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES OF KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

To enhance the quality of education, Kazakhstan is implementing international standards into its educational system, and technical universities are not an exception. Though the demand in such changes in the era of globalization is obvious, and many reforms in the system of education have already been introduced, the transitional period is accompanied by a variety of challenges. This paper deals with the ones of cultural and intercultural origin involving such aspects of culture as norms, rules, attitudes, values, national mentality, stereotypes, thinking and behavior patterns. The major areas of university education analyzed in the cultural context include student body, faculty and program administration. The research data helps to conceptualize cross-cultural variables and define the best ways technical universities could adapt and adjust to the process of internationalization and foster student learning.

Keywords: Cultural Context, Intercultural Variables, Internationalization of Higher Technical Education, Kazakhstan.

1. Introduction

Kazakhstan, being the ninth largest country in the world with multiethnic population over 17 million people, for almost three last decades now, after having appeared on the geopolitical world map in 1991, has stepped up international cooperation in higher education. Integration of the country's higher education system into the world educational space is one of the long-term strategic priorities of the country. Modern reforms in Kazakhstani education are part of the state policy to meet the needs of the developing economy, on the one hand, and to make the country a competitive member of the global community, on the other. (Abdygapparova, 2008) Large-scale reforms are implemented in Kazakhstan to modernize all levels of education. In March 2010, Kazakhstan became the 47th member to join the Bologna Process. The main aims are to increase access to EU education, to improve further the quality of the national system of education, as well as to enhance academic mobility of students and teachers through adopting a comparable system of degrees, using the system of credit accumulation, and awarding Kazakh graduates with the EU diploma supplement. In accordance with the State Program for Educational Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2011-2020, Kazakhstan, as a full member of European Higher Education Area, will continue to implement the Bologna principles and enhance internationalization of Kazakhstani higher education. To achieve the objectives, it is necessary to carry out further implementation of systematic measures to proceed institutional and substantive renewal of higher education, as well as to radically increase the competitiveness of the Kazakhstani educational services, achieving the goal of high qualifications of scientists and teachers. (Enic-kazakhstan.kz, 2018)

2. Insights to Current Situation in Higher Education of Kazakhstan

The differences between Kazakhstani and European education systems are too great for a quick and simple adaptation of the Bologna standards. The results of what has been done and current situation can be described shortly as follows:

- Beginning in 2011, a system of transferring national Kazakh credits into ECTS was initiated. More than 75% of institutions and programmes are using ECTS for both transfer and

accumulation purposes. Allocation of ECTS is based on learning outcomes and student workload. (Eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2018)

- The system of higher education underwent restructuring. The three level model of education was introduced: Bachelor’s program, Master’s program and doctorate.
- Thus, the legal framework for development of academic mobility has been created (User, 2018). It is one of the effective ways to increase the quality of training personnel. The first steps in development of academic mobility have already been made. Besides, the mechanism of internal academic mobility was developed. The principle of this mechanism is 'regional higher education institution – national university' and it means that the students from the regional higher education institutions will be able to study in the leading higher education institutions of the country.
- New principles of financing of higher education were introduced. The program on development of education for 2020 provides for the measures that will promote autonomy of the national research universities since 2015, national higher education institutes – since 2016 and since 2018 all the rest higher education institutions of the country.
- The fulfillment of the parameters of the Bologna Process in the education system of Kazakhstan will allow for quality services at the level of world standards in view of integration into the European Higher Education Area.

In general, the society treated the changes brought to the higher education system of Kazakhstan as impressive. The situation when all Kazakhstan universities had to teach an absolutely identical, unified set of disciplines in each specialty does not exist anymore, but as everything new, these alternations were accompanied by doubt and fear. There are some reasons for it: for instance, the older generation educated in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics believes that despite the ideological nature of the educational system in the Soviet Union, its effectiveness, especially the quality of engineering and technical training, was recognized worldwide. Therefore they did not and still do not want to make any changes in the system of higher education.

Moreover during the transition to European system of higher education some critical attitude to "endless reforms" and a number of challenges has been aroused. These challenges deal with:

- student body,
- faculty
- and program administration.

Annually in Kazakhstan, graduates of secondary schools take the United National Testing (UNT)(Egov.kz, 2018). From 2004 until 2016, this test was taken both for obtaining a certificate of secondary education and for admission to universities and allocation of state grants. The reason why it had been criticized everywhere was that the test being in a multiple choice format had been trained and prepared for within the last two years at schools during the classes. It is obvious that future students had neither been practiced study skills nor developed their critical thinking abilities without mentioning communication, creativity or collaboration, so called “21st century skills” or “Four Cs”. Of course, at the university students should catch up in order to meet the requirements of the higher education institutions. It takes time, effort and not everyone can cope with that. Sometimes, they prefer to fall back on cheating, plagiarism or other ways of breaking Academic Policy. Since 2017, the format and requirements have changed. And it is difficult to judge the effectiveness and changes of the new format since it was introduced only a year ago.

The faculty, foremost, cannot completely depart from the old methodology, where they decided completely what and how the student should be trained. Classes are more teacher-centered than student-centered, more book oriented than activity-oriented, whereas the essence of the new technology is that the teacher should teach how to learn, thus preparing students for lifelong learning being a facilitator and a motivator at the same time, so teachers cannot be the source of knowledge any more. One more social phenomenon called corruption still continues to exist now in some of the institutions of higher education as a relic of history. (Heyneman, 2008).

A number of problems persist in the way the reforms are administrated, managed and controlled. Higher education is being reformed, but most schools largely functions in the old way. For instance, though the reforms plan the transfer to 12 years of schooling, the implementation of the change is postponed from year to year. The main reason of resistance is very cultural and it comes from previous Soviet period. Current situation demonstrates resistance to reforms by some older instructors, a staunch hierarchy and bureaucracy at most Kazakhstan universities, thus, there is an urgent necessity for at least a generation change. University administration from their side should lay the groundwork for productive, creative and result-oriented work in new matters and situations.

3. Methodology

To analyze how the international standards are implemented and what challenges are met by students, one of the leading technical universities of Kazakhstan was chosen. The major object of the research was the freshmen student body.

General information: The number of students within three academic years changes as follows: 3100 in 2015-2016, 1811 in 2016-2017 and 1254 in current, 2017 – 2018. In the current academic year - 1254 students are represented by the local citizens that come from all 14 regions of Kazakhstan and two largest cities Astana and Almaty, plus 54 students from abroad (from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Tajikistan, Mongolia, and Russia). There are 935 males and 319 females 17-18 of age. 1122 of them are awarded state scholarships and 132 pay for their studies.

The reason why freshers are chosen is that the first year of study at the University is considered to be the most difficult and important due to several reasons: they learn to take decisions themselves and take the responsibility for them. During the first year of studies, students encounter the following difficulties:

- a new environment (big city temptations),
- new people (missing parents, friends),
- new study rules, including study requirements (that differ from secondary schools' ones).

The first year is an adaptation period, within which students study general subjects such as the Kazakh or the Russian languages (due to the medium of interaction at school), English (level-based learning in accordance with CEFR), Math (1,2,3), Modern Kazakhstan History, Philosophy, Physical training, Introduction into a professional field and in correspondence with the chosen specialty, they study Physics or Chemistry.

To research the motivation, expectations and challenges of the students of the first year of study at the university a survey was conducted among them at the beginning of their second semester. The purpose of the study was to examine diverse issues. The survey included one open-ended and 20 multiple-choice questions so that students could choose several answers and they also were given the opportunity to leave comments under each question. The questions covered several areas of analysis: (1) student motivation, (2) expectations, (3) teaching and learning process, (4) student life and (5) logistics and schedule.

The survey was voluntary, anonymous and it was conducted online (through Google forms). 823 respondents (that is 73,4% of the total number) filled in the survey within 7 days. Student responses were reviewed and grouped for further analysis.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

All the results were analyzed statistically and calculated in percent.

Items related to student motivation and awareness

- Students' motivate onto study at the university was analyzed on the basis of the following data:
 - state scholarship – **35%**
 - chosen specialty – **28%**
 - influenced by a close environment (parents, friends etc.) – **7%**
 - interesting student life – **6%**

- Students awareness of their future profession
 - have a clear idea of their future professional activities– **50%**
 - have a vague idea of the chosen profession and they hope that it will be more clear when they are at their undergraduate training –**22 %**
 - question their decision – **11%**
 - haven't even thought about that – **17%**
- The most important thing for students at the university is
 - Interactions with friends – **33%**
 - Fascinating classes – **29%**
 - Comfortable timetable–**24%**
 - Interesting teachers – **19%**

The data give floor to the opinion that more attention should be paid to vocational guidance in specialties and specializations during the first semester or even the first year of studies to help students to be aware of their future specialty. For example, "people from the industry" should be invited as guest lecturers especially, those who have rich experience and know the subtleties of work "in the field" and others. Consequently, it is necessary to work on the image, so that the university's reputation becomes the main criterion in choosing a university.

4.1 Student Expectations

The data received demonstrates that only 7% of students admit that the university fully (for all 100%) meets their expectations, while 30% of freshers consider that the majority of their expectations are met (up to 75%). For 24% of students only half of their expectations (50%) are met. The biggest group of 39%, admit that what they have met does not practically meet their expectations. Most students expected that studying at university should be more difficult, more interesting, more challenging, more involving than studying at school. But, as the survey show, the expectations are too high and they are not met.

Teaching and learning process

- If students know the requirements of the course (syllabus, learning outcomes, assessment criteria, deadlines etc.)
 - Yes – 66%
 - Not everything – 27%
 - Partly – 6%
 - Not at all – 1%

In general, students know the requirements. However, they have concerns regarding their studies. They want to have an opportunity to make changes, thus:

Students want to increase the number of office hours – 45%

Students want to increase the number of laboratory and practices – 37%

Students want to increase the number of lectures – 18%

As the survey showed, about half of respondents want to increase the number of office hours, this demonstrates the desire of students to receive additional individual consultations on disciplines, as well as the desire to get more knowledge. A third of the respondents would like to increase the number of practical and laboratory studies, which confirms the greater effectiveness of contact hours. According to the credit technology, the schedule is compiled individually, and groups are always different for different disciplines. Students choose the courses and the teachers for themselves. It infers that the best teachers are always in demand and sought after. Moreover, students of various specialties and years of study can meet in a class. The students in their comments noted not once that "it would be better if they were taught in the same groups". First, it comes from school, second, earlier, before the credit system was introduced, there were study groups for the whole study period. It means that students feel themselves more comfortable studying in the same group for the whole period of study.

Student life

Students about student organizations and extra-curricular activities:

- do not participate - 57%
- have positive influence – 18%
- have negative influence – 15%
- have no influence – 11%

For one third of students, it is very important to communicate with peers, which can be supported through student clubs and organizations. To do this, it is necessary to create conditions for their work and development, to provide all possible support, to motivate students to organize social events that will unite them and create a "university spirit and patriotism". However, more than half of the students do not belong to any of the student organizations. As it is seen from their comments, the studies take much time and they choose to spend more time studying than participating in different events.

Almost half of surveyed students (48%) do sports only at the physical training lessons, 36% do sports three times a week despite the classes. 5% do not do any at all, while 11% do sports every day.

Logistics and schedule

24% of respondents answered that for them the most important thing in the university is a convenient schedule. 60% of respondents positively assessed their schedule, respectively – 40% negatively. At the same time, the most criticism is the early start of classes and the presence of "windows" (breaks between the classes). A convenient starting and finishing time of daily classes is also very important for students, because 29% of students spend more than 1 hour to get to the university. Moreover, this is explained by the fact that Office Registrar schedules the time table for the students. Students don't have to compile and/or make changes in their time table, which leads to their disappointment, dissatisfaction and decrease in motivation. Within the credit system of education it is supposed that students have the right and opportunity to choose courses to study and teachers to learn from. The administration tries, but still cannot manage this function in the university's portal.

Half of those who live in the dormitory are dissatisfied with the living conditions. Lack of acceptable living conditions de-motivates students and it is obvious that this has a very negative impact on their academic performance. It is necessary to exert maximum efforts to improve the conditions in the dormitory, which will positively affect the progress and overall satisfaction level of students and their parents.

The majority of respondents are confident in the importance of infrastructure and technical support, while a quarter of respondents rated the auditorium as negative. It is also obvious that even a brilliant instructor cannot effectively develop the interest in fundamental sciences without necessary equipment for educational laboratories and classrooms with the necessary training and research equipment, measuring instruments, reagents, audiovisual and other provisions.

Students spend most of the day at the university catering facilities which are also important for them. 51% of the responders are satisfied with catering organization at the Uni. While 34% eat outside of the campus of the University.

Administration and academic policy

For the first year students there is an institute of advisers. Three quarters of the respondents positively assess the work of their adviser. While carrying out a similar anonymous survey among the advisers, it turned out that the advisers themselves are not sufficiently motivated (The same survey was done among advisers, though advisers' survey is not included into this paper)

To improve communication with freshmen, an account was created in Instagram, which showed its effectiveness in practice. Moreover, students positively assess the work of the Dean's office that is in contact with students twenty four hours a week. This means that from the survey, the

level of student satisfaction with the services provided by our university is quite low. From the comments to the questions, it can be concluded that the problem areas are the schedule, as well as the living conditions at the university and the dormitory as a whole. It is important to note that many students of the 1st year point out in their comments incorrect and rude communication from administration and even teaching staff. Students' negative moods can adversely affect the image of the university in the eyes of potential students.

Conclusion

Implementing international standards into the higher education of Kazakhstan takes not only time, but should also be treated as a process with difficulties to overcome. These difficulties have a cultural background, thus the whole process related to the student body, faculty and administration should be adapted to a cultural context. Students should learn the new rules, the ways to make decisions by themselves and to take the responsibility for that. Teachers should develop their professionalism and be achievement-oriented in order to be in tune with all the changes in the educational system, to be competitive and demanded. Moreover, in order to teach the 21st century skills, teachers themselves should possess those skills. The university administration should create better conditions for a favorable working environment for all students and teachers. Internationalization in Kazakhstan is in its very beginning, there is much to be done: the difficulties to overcome, the minor processes to be analyzed and some cultural issues to be solved.



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