Universities and Society in Kyrgyzstan: A Historical, Political and Economic Perspective

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Abstract

Kyrgyzstan – a low-income Central Asian country with a population of 6.4 million – inherited its educational infrastructure from the USSR, including a system of social and spatial stratification. In the post-Independence era, demand for higher education has ballooned. Today there are 51 universities, but connections to knowledge production, labour market demand and social need are weak. This chapter charts the role of higher education in Kyrgyzstan's development path from the pre- to the post-Independence era, outlines challenges facing reform and highlights some innovative approaches from the region.

Keywords

Central Asia – Kyrgyzstan – higher education

1 Introduction

The fate of the Kyrgyz and their homeland Kyrgyzstan – a small, mountainous, landlocked country in Central Asia – has been largely shaped by Soviet colonialism, which established the political, economic and social orders that also moulded higher education. The attainment of independence in 1991 provided an opportunity to advance a Kyrgyz agenda. This low-middle income country entered a period of transition and formidable reforms, including nation and state-building and economic, political, administrative and policy reforms in almost every sector. Higher education was expected to fulfill its core social responsibility of providing the human resources for tasks whose roadmaps were riddled with uncertainty. As Central Asia's most open society, the system of higher education has a unique opportunity to play a major role in helping

shape the country's future. However, the sector has under-delivered amidst its growth and expansion.

This chapter explores the political economy of social responsibility and higher education in Kyrgyzstan in four parts: (i) the social structures and inequalities that emerged and impacted post-secondary education in the pre-independence period; (ii) the dramatic changes in the economic and social order that reshaped higher education post-independence; (iii) the role that higher education plays, and fails to play, in meeting development needs today and; (iv) prospects for reform and lessons to be learned from select case studies, focussing on the exercise of universities' social responsibility.

2 The Soviet Inheritance of Higher Education: Social and Geographic Stratification and Inequality

Kyrgyzstan became an 'internal colony' as a result of 19th century Imperial Russia's conquest of Central Asia, where the Kyrgyz were given the status of 'aliens' (*inorodtsy*).¹ In the wake of conquest, there followed a large-scale wave of Russian colonisation: by 1912, 87,000 armed colonists (Galuzo, 1926) held 4.5 million hectares of arable and pasture lands, leaving the 780,000 Kyrgyz with 3.7 million hectares (Bartol'd, 1963, p. 31).² Although overall development occurred, stratification based on observed cultural differences persisted. Higher education became a terrain of contestation, given its critical role for social, occupational and geographic mobility.

Kyrgyzstan's modernisation occurred after World War II. Drawing on the lessons of the Second World War, Soviet leaders implemented an industrial locations policy that, for strategic reasons, dispersed capacity deeper into the hinterland. In Kyrgyzstan, between 1940 and 1980, the volume of industrial production increased 38 times (Statistika vekov, 2003, p. 93). Development was concentrated in urban centres, namely Bishkek and its surrounds. This growth brought with it another wave of Russian migration, tripling their numbers in the republic, along with other European ethnic groups.

This wave of modernisation did not, however, result in any significant changes in national-cultural stratification. Classical rural-urban migration theory would expect an accelerated exodus from villages, given development conditions (Harris and Todaro 1970). However, geographical mobility was hampered because, until 1974, collective farmers (comprising 70% of the Kyrgyz population in 1959) were not given an internal passport and were prohibited from leaving their villages (Ariutunian, 1972, p. 13).³ Moreover, the state's job

distribution policy (*razpredilennia*) directed almost all Kyrgyz graduates to work in the villages. This produced an anomalous situation where 6.7% of Kyrgyzstan's rural population had higher education, the second highest among the 15 republics (USSR, 1979). Kyrgyz represented 17% of the urban population and a mere 10% of the population of their capital (USSR, 1970b, p. 286; Zhorobekov, 1997, p. 224). Occupational mobility was limited because most enterprises were under the direct control of Moscow and paid little attention to the training and recruitment of personnel from the indigenous population,⁴ and calls by the leadership of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan for a change in policy ended with Moscow's dismissal of the First Secretary for "errors in nationalities policy" (Vospominaniia, 1996, p. 68). As late as 1990, the Kyrgyz, for example, accounted for only 6% of employees in the electro-energy sector – a leading sector of the economy (Osmonalieva, 1990, p. 81).

Higher education in the Soviet period was driven by an economic-instrumentalist paradigm. The development of a broad university system was never a priority, and Kyrgyzstan, along with nine other republics, had only one university (Obrazovanie, 1977, pp. 226–227). Universities were not centres of research; that was the purview of the Academy of Sciences and scores of specialised research institutions (Graham, 1994). Higher education was dominated by eight specialised 'Institutes' and 45 technicums (middle specialised education).⁵ In both types of institutions, planning authorities set quotas on enrolments and the total number of students in higher education was relatively small – 41,437. In 1991, there were 13 students per 1,000 population; by 2002, this number rose to 40 (USSR, 1970a, p. 286; Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR, 1971; Shaburov, 2015, p. 257). Entrance examinations and instruction in post-secondary institutions (with few exceptions) were in Russian, placing graduates of Kyrgyz language schools at a disadvantage in admissions.⁶ In 1966, Kyrgyz formed 39% of students in higher education (primarily in pedagogical and agricultural institutes) and 28% of enrolment in secondary specialised institutions (Narodnoe KR, 1971, p. 285). Thus, access to higher education in the Soviet system was very unequal.

The various barriers to mobility were a source of frustration that would rise to the fore with independence. In 1991, the Soviet construct imploded. The institutional arrangements that sustained national-cultural stratification were removed and the higher education system had to abruptly face the reality that the economy it was shaped to serve no longer existed.

3 Post-Independence Economic Tumult and Educational Expansion

The USSR was dissolved in 1991. The national movements in the republics wanted independence; however, they did not bargain on the economic shock

therapy that followed (Asankanov, 1997, pp. 56–57). The structures of the planned economy were dismantled, but none of the stakeholders had any real understanding of how a market economy should function. The newly independent Kyrgyz government had very little capacity to deal with the complex issues it was facing. From 1992, Kyrgyzstan's 'economic transition' followed the templates laid out in Russia, with international financial organisations and foreign advisors playing a key role – macroeconomic stabilisation, privatisation and liberalisation/deregulation proceeded apace (Dabrowski, 1998). Education was not given much consideration, since it was thought the existing stock of human capital could drive growth if market reforms were implemented.

The economy went into a downward spiral. GDP per capita dropped by almost 50%, from \$1,096 in 1990 to \$535 in 1995, and recovered the 1990 level only in 2018. In 2000, 78% of the population lived below the poverty rate (\$3.20 per day); by 2017 it had dropped to 20%.⁷ The major drivers of economic recovery were unanticipated. Hundreds of thousands of people started to make a living by becoming astute traders engaged in the re-export of goods brought from neighbouring China to Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and other countries.⁸ The other was labour migration to Russia and Kazakhstan.⁹ Otherwise, there is relatively little formal employment: only 13% of the total working population has formal, contractual employment in the private sector; 17% in the public sphere. The remaining 70% work informally, based on a 'patent' obtained by paying a lump sum monthly tax (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020c). In the meantime, the ethno-demographic picture had changed dramatically. The Russian population decreased and the Kyrgyz now represent 73% of the total population, 62% of the urban population and 66% of Bishkek's (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020b).

During this time, higher education developed according to its own logic. While playing an important role in meeting the social aspirations of youth and keeping them engaged during vulnerable years, the connections between higher education and labour market demand were weak and it played a limited role in knowledge production and societal engagement.

4 Higher Education Today: Educational Expansion amidst Low Standards

Post-independence, higher education policy and reform were a low priority for the Government of Kyrgyzstan. This is hardly surprising, given the extent of economic and social uncertainty. The government's major decision was to liberalise procedures for establishing universities: institutes and technicums were converted into universities. The government permitted private institutions to be established by domestic entrepreneurs as well as foreign entities.

Whereas in the Soviet period students paid no tuition and received a stipend, now the government allowed the almost limitless recruitment of fee-paying students. Quality, relevance and innovation were not high on the agenda. The central government focussed its limited resources on the primary to 11 school system, a move heavily influenced by donors' emphasis on the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of "access to free primary schooling" – a goal that had been achieved in the Soviet period.

Universities responded to pent-up societal demand by expanding their enrolments, regardless of graduate outcomes or labour market demand. The expansion was also incentivised by heads of state institutions, who needed revenues to survive, those who viewed universities as a new business opportunity, and foreign organisations for whom establishing universities was part of their assistance mission. The expansion also occurred because of the demographic 'youth bulge', and the remarkable growth of secondary education enrolments: in 2015, the overall net secondary enrolment rate was 80.5%, and in the case of women, 80.7% (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020c).¹⁰

By 2018, Kyrgyzstan had 51 universities, of which 35 were state-run and 16 were private. State-run universities accounted for most of the total enrolment (86% in 2017). They were concentrated in Bishkek, 66% of the total, with the remaining 12% in Osh, the second-largest city, and 21% in the rest of the country, which accounts for two-thirds of the population (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020c). Kyrgyz are now the majority of students, as are women. While enrollments increased threefold between 1991 and 1999, they have declined by 35% in more recent years (2007–2017) (Table 11.1).

TABLE 11.1 Enrolments in higher education, 1991–2017

Year	Total enrolment	Women (% of total)	Kyrgyz (% of total)
1991	58,023	50	42
1999	159,209	50	48
2007	250,460	56	71
2017	161,406	53	80

SOURCE: GOVERNMENT OF KYRGYZSTAN (2020A)

Several factors account for the recent decline in student numbers. Migration is a significant factor, since the majority of those who leave have completed secondary education and see no point in going to university only to join the army of unemployed graduates (Sagynbekova, 2017, p. 10). Demographically, the youth

bulge is slowly shrinking. Moreover, many secondary school graduates now choose technicums (renamed colleges), offering two-three year specialised professional education, whose enrolments grew from 27,000 in 2003 to 92,000, with women accounting for 56% of the total (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020c).¹¹ Some have simply lost interest in higher education because of low returns on investment in higher education, given the labour market. A 2017 household survey found that the monthly salary of households headed by someone with higher education is only 4.1% more if the person has only primary vocational training (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2018).

Looking at the annual output of graduates by fields of study, one would think that higher education exists in a parallel universe. A country of six million people does not need over 5,600 law graduates. Some 13,000 students (27% all graduates) complete economics and management programmes, yet there are hardly any enterprises to manage.¹² In a country where agriculture is the largest employer, universities graduate just 300 students in agriculture and veterinary sciences per annum (see Figures 11.1 and 11.2). Universities continue to produce graduates in mismatched fields, and those in relevant fields are so poorly trained that they are unemployable without significant retraining. For example, although thousands complete IT programmes, as one of the leaders of the industry noted at a recent conference, “We are not getting graduates capable of working in our company. We must train them for 3–6 months before they can start any work. Their degrees are useless”.¹³ Small and medium business across most sectors face the same issues (Tilekeyev, Bakytbek, Kirbasheva, Niiazaliev, & Abdrazakova, 2019). The lack of qualified personnel is a critical factor blocking the expansion of foreign investments (International Business Council, 2020). A major problem in this regard is the quality of faculty: in 2017, only 6% had a doctorate, 66% bachelors and 28% a candidate of sciences credential (an MA equivalent) (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020a). One consequence is that universities have poor capacity to produce research or keep abreast contemporary scholarship.

In 2018, government expenditure on education (overall) was 5.5% of GDP: 18% of the state budget. These proportions are high by international comparison; however, given Kyrgyzstan's small GDP, the expenditure per student in education is just US \$377, and per university student around US \$382 (Ministry of Finance, YEAR).¹⁴ Higher education stays afloat because state institutions can charge fees: only 16% of students do not pay tuition and receive a modest fee; 84% are fee-paying students (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020a). Given the purchasing power of the population, annual tuition fees are low, around \$500 at the Kyrgyz National University, for example (Rysmambetova, 2020). Total revenues are enough to cover modest salaries and basic operating costs. The bottom line is better if enrolments remain high and costly disciplines requiring equipment are

FIGURE 11.1 Kyrgyzstan, number of graduates by field of study, 2007–08 and 2017–18
(Source: Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020a)

FIGURE 11.2 Kyrgyzstan, employment by sector, thousands of persons, 2012 and 2018
(Source: Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2020c)

not taught. This situation provides fertile ground for corruption, where grades and diplomas can be bought. A recent survey found that 82% of students felt that such practices were common in higher education (Rakisheva, 2017, p. 22).

Universities have the basic social responsibility of providing the human capital required to progress society and the economy, but they are also a place that should nurture informed and compassionate citizens. Today, most are doing neither and are instead breeding grounds of cynicism. It is a sad commentary that a recent survey found that the majority of students state that “the goal of education is to obtain a diploma, not to receive knowledge, skills or know-how” (Rakisheva, 2017, p. 22).

5 Conclusions: Socially Responsible Higher Education and the Case for Reform

Regarding the university's core responsibility of providing relevant, quality education, government measures, to date, have been piecemeal and often dependent on donor preferences, leading to incoherence in the system (Merrill, 2011). Half-measures have stalled innovation. With government spending only \$382 per student, universities would collapse without income from fees. However, since the state taxes tuition income and has done little to foster an enabling environment for philanthropic giving, universities remain in dire financial straits (Ministry of Finance, 2021). While the Ministry of Education has minimised its role in dictating the curriculum, this function is now carried out by various university departments and continues to stifle innovation.¹⁵ The higher education reform agenda is widely recognised, including in the government's declarations (Dzhaparova, 2005; Sabzalieva, 2019). However, how these goals can be achieved is analytically complex and universities have a special responsibility in the search for solutions. Some national experiences provide insights for reflection, especially regarding social responsibility.

The University of Central Asia (UCA) is a greenfield project that has addressed spatial inequalities by locating its campus in a small mountain town, in one of the poorest regions of the country: 70% of students hail from small towns and rural areas.¹⁶ Moreover, it began operations by launching the School of Professional and Continuing Education, offering young people and adults low-cost, quality, short-cycle programmes, focussed on skills development, professional qualifications and international certifications, and has engaged over 30,000 learners (61% female) to date. An alumni survey found that 75% report to have found new or better jobs and 12% started or expanded a business because of the courses; 77% increased their civil engagement; 88% said it helped them stay in the community.¹⁷ UCA's undergraduate specialisations are integrative and cover a wider range of subjects, expanding career opportunities, and a co-operative programme secures paid internships, starting the second year, to make students work-ready. Entrepreneurship is taught across the curriculum preparing students to *create* jobs, not just apply for them. Student community engagement is an integral part of the educational programme, and activity is reported monthly. These are some leading practices in the region for socially responsive and engaged higher education.

More generally, measures that granted greater autonomy to universities have seen some reform-minded rectors seize the opportunity to improve their curriculum; the establishment of a Boards of Trustees is the first step in giving voice to community interests. However, more significant changes are a matter

for the future. Optimism that these will occur lies in the societal changes that have taken place. In the past, Kyrgyzstan lacked leading sectors of society with any meaningful experience of governing or thinking about policy at a national level. Democracy saw forces come to power in Bishkek, representing specific regional interests rooted in traditional structures of Kyrgyz rural society that have remained strong, even after collectivisation.¹⁸ Clan politics and rent-seeking became the bane of the Kyrgyz polity (Collins, 2004). Always a minority of the capital's population, Bishkek had not concentrated the nation's talent and ambitions, acting as a hot-house for the development of new cadres. This is happening now. The groups that could coalesce around higher education reform agenda include civil society organisations, the most vibrant in the region; the new layer of entrepreneurs (many of whom studied abroad) committed to improving the quality of education¹⁹; reform-minded senior civil servants in the Ministry of Education and elected representatives. Through their combined efforts innovative roadmaps for reform could emerge.

Notes

- 1 Some 90% of the population of Russia's possessions in Central Asia was classified as 'aliens'.
- 2 Data is for the Semerich region.
- 3 After 1974, the propiska system (which involved getting police permission from the Ministry of the Interior to live in town) posed a hurdle in Kyrgyz efforts to migrate to urban centres, where educational and economic opportunities were concentrated.
- 4 The largest enterprises held 'All-Union' status, and 'Union-Republic' enterprises for practical purposes, and were also under control by the centre, leaving small enterprises under Republic jurisdiction.
- 5 Institutes specialised in fields such as engineering, medicine, agriculture, pedagogy (*Statistika vekov*, 2003, p. 256; *Encyclopedia*, 1998, pp. 168–169).
- 6 In 1979, only 33% of Kyrgyz knew Russian.
- 7 The poverty rate in 2011 PPP. GDP index is 1990=100; GDP per capita in constant 2010 USD. Data from World Bank, World Development Indicators. Last updated 20 December 2019.
- 8 In 2018, imports from China were valued at \$5.5 billion (United Nations, 2020).
- 9 By 2018, some 800,000 migrants sent remittances from Russia equivalent to 38% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, which was more than the domestic manufacturing and agriculture sectors combined (The World Bank, 2020).
- 10 The 'youth bulge' has occurred due to the significant reduction of infant mortality, with mothers still having a high fertility rate.
- 11 Nurses are trained at colleges; are no university-level nursing programmes.
- 12 The economics specialisation in Kyrgyzstan is a mixture of economics, accounting, finance and business.
- 13 Statement by Andrew Minkin, Co-Founder and CTO of Mad Devs Company, "Future of the IT Sector in the Kyrgyz Economy", Conference of IT leaders, 6 December 2019.
- 14 Ministry of Finance, authors' calculation at 2018 exchange rate of 1 USD = 69.85 Kyrgyz som.

- 15 Establishing a broadly-based independent quality assurance agency to monitor and provide guidance on curriculum development would have been a preferred approach.
- 16 See www.ucentralasia.org
- 17 The survey was part of an external evaluation carried out in 2017 by the College of the Rockies, British Columbia, Canada.
- 18 Collectivisation was not as brutal and devastating of rural society as in other republics because it was only through pastoralism that the resources of mountain lands could be used (Isakov, 2016, p. 55).
- 19 Examples of initiatives by entrepreneurs are: a new national network of schools (<https://www.inai.kg/ru>); and a new institute of applied informatics (<https://www.inai.kg/ru>).

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