

EDUCATION IN THE FUNCTION OF GLOBAL INFORMATION COMMUNITY IN KYRGYZSTAN

OBRAZOVANJE U FUNKCIJI GLOBALNE INFORMACIJSKE ZAJEDNICE U KIRGI- STANU

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Abstract

Being in the spotlight, not only of Central Asia but of the entire Asian continent as well, Kyrgyzstan holds the key to global power's differing interests. Neighboring Kyrgyzstan are great powers with developed markets, democratic processes in public governance, free market relations, and the openness of the country. The whole world is building a global information community, and high-tech and service industries are generating the maximal added value in the global GDP. That is based on knowledge, information, and human resources.

Sažetak

Budući da je u središtu pozornosti, ne samo u Srednjoj Aziji, nego i na cijelom azijskom kontinentu, Kirgistan je ključar globalne moći je različitih interesa. Susjedi Kirgistana su velike sile s razvijenim tržištima, demokratskim procesima u javnoj upravi, slobodnim tržišnim odnosima, te otvorenosti zemlje. Cijeli svijet gradi globalnu informacijsku zajednicu, i high-tech i uslužne djelatnosti generiraju maksimalnu dodanu vrijednosti u globalnom BDP-u. To se temelji na znanju, informacijama i ljudskim resursima.

With all the existing difficulties, Kyrgyzstan now has a more successful service infrastructure than neighboring countries; already the per capita number of Internet cafes in Kyrgyzstan greatly exceeds that of neighboring countries. Despite the existing drawbacks in our education system young Kyrgyz IT specialists work for the world's leading companies at home and abroad.

Education: The Main Instrument of Economic and Social Development.

Education is a business in the service sector with a large market whose customers include: the state, science, society, parents, and students themselves. In this case, the education system must be very flexible and susceptible to any changes in the national and international labor markets. While fulfilling the order of its consumers, the education system can also be a budget-maintaining sector of the national economy, if the nation's education policy is prudent.

Problems that hinder the development of education in Kyrgyzstan.

- *Lack of investment.* Kyrgyzstan now has a private sector in both secondary and higher education. Private education institutions are also good tax payers and employers, and they are also more open to innovations. However, for some reason neither the state nor donors fancy supporting education institutions. Educational institutions cannot afford bank credits because the terms are too high. While declaring support of the private education sector, the laws actually hinder its development. International experience has proven the efficiency of venture funds, and our potential donors should pay more attention to secondary, vocational, and higher education.

- *Education standards at all levels of the education system are conservative.* The concept of the term "quality of education" has changed. As information is rapidly outdated the education system must provide both academic knowledge and professional skills. However, existing education standards at all levels of the education system only list academic subjects and the hours designated for them. As a result, both secondary schools and universities produce young special-

ists that know something but can do almost nothing. The education standards do not reflect the competences graduates must have. The standards do not guarantee any result of education and do not even tell what it should be - they only reflect the education process itself. In this situation, universities tacitly deceive students, for they do not guarantee any professional competence, which does not make them successful in the labor market.

- *Monitoring and assessment.* The absence of methods of monitoring and assessing the output of education creates conditions for corruption. Corruption is an indicator of the transparency or non-transparency of monitoring and assessment procedures. Uncertain criteria and forms of assessment create favorable conditions for subjectivism. In universities, it is necessary to separate the procedure of academic assessment from professional competence. Academic assessment is done by Universities while professional competence and qualification must be assessed by an independent body.

- *Management in the education system.* Although the political system in Kyrgyzstan has significantly changed the management model still remains authoritarian. Free market relations and the wide range of customers of the education system demand a drastic change in the management system from authoritarian to corporate. Also, the values and norms of behavior must be compulsory for all workers of education institutions - from top officials to the lowest-level employees. That means that academic honesty must be an ideology in the establishments. Otherwise, there will be protectionism and corruption that will undermine the confidence in Kyrgyz diplomas both inside the country and internationally.

- *System of Financing and forms of ownership.* Public universities now have facilities and equipment that meet accepted standards, while all private education institutions are located in buildings that have been adapted to teaching purposes. Actually, all public universities have a mixed ownership form. However, payments from the state are not subject to the independent control of the universities. For better development, the universities need the right to spend money they earn and make up their budgets without interference from the Ministry of Education. A university budget must be approved and supervised by the Univer-

sity's Board of Trustees, and controlled by fiscal agencies.

Resolving these shortcomings will help the country gain a very effective and efficient instrument for economic, social and ideological development. We must not forget that education is the most important sphere, and neglecting it will result in a disaster.

What Kyrgyzstan needs to improve in its educational system? Kyrgyzstan needs a combination of talent, time and treasure. It needs to nurture more and more students. It needs to guide students in appreciation of entrepreneurship and public service that is based on core values that are democratic in nature. There is need to have more investment, external as well as internal into the educational system. It needs to spend a lot of time, systematic careful time on developing the educational sector.

Education enables people to see the strength in what others perceive as weakness or low value or waste.

Previously, we implemented such educational programs as "Bilim" (Knowledge) and the "21st Century Cadre", but without noticeable results. On one hand, we have created a large variety of educational institutions: from private schools to international universities. There are more than 200,000 university students in Kyrgyzstan now. On the other hand, however, we have not achieved the main result - to produce competitive specialists. So we are now set to improve the education quality and technical provision of universities.

Kyrgyzstan now has 33 public and 12 private universities, which unnecessarily teach many same professions. Some universities have not yet chosen a niche in the educational sector - that is the source of our problems. I do believe it distorts the point of Kyrgyzstan's education policy. Kyrgyzstan now needs highly qualified specialists in IT, biotechnology, and nanotechnology. Only handful universities can produce such specialists now. These are the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, the Kyrgyz National University, the Kyrgyz Technical University, American University in Central Asia, and the Kyrgyz-Turkish "Manas" University. The Bishkek State University of Economics and Entrepreneurship is trying to compete in training the economists. All other universities,

especially in the regions, mainly produce teachers for secondary schools.

The state intervention in the education policy requires strong budget support. Unfortunately, the budget spending on education still remains almost as low as in the previous years. For science purposes we have been allocated an additional three million som reaching \$35 million in total. This is a meager amount equal to 0.12 % of COP.

An important step to eliminate corruption was the introduction, in 2002, of a nationwide test of university entrants. The result of this test is an independent evaluation of the knowledge of secondary school graduates, and is used to select students for budget (free) and contract (paid) groups at universities and vocational schools. Along with the nationwide testing, we have introduced a new system to finance public universities through public scholarship grants given only according to the testing results.

The National Testing project is by the Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM, the newly created Kyrgyz independent testing organization), with financial support from USAID and technical support ACCELS.

Independent and objective assessment, through the administration of the NST, provided fair access to university scholarships for over 20,000 students in 2002-2005. Tests are available in three languages: Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek.

While the project is focused on fighting corruption and providing transparent processes, a significant accomplishment of this project is the nature of the pedagogical reform entailed. The assessment methods which are utilized elicit far more than just the student's capacity for rote memorization and factual recall (the standard assessment method in KR) and focuses instead on logical reasoning and skills assessment. This is significant as new approaches to education are needed in order to prepare students to work in a market economy and democratic society.

The number of part-time students is now by 5-6 times greater than the number of full-time university students, which is not good. For this reason, with the help of international organizations, we have started monitoring the knowledge of 2-to 4-year students. The Education Ministry and each particular university have started devel-

oping a strategic program, with an accent on the quality of education.

We are studying the experience of the United States and Western Europe. But we are making the first steps in this direction, taking into account the uniqueness and traditions of our people. This year we are going to start introducing international experience at 2-3 universities. We believe that all administration forms must be tried to create a competitive environment within system. With financial support from USAID, we are discussing a draft law, "On higher and post-graduate education." A similar law was passed in 1996 in Russia and in 1999 in Kazakhstan, so we lag behind.

Joining the Bologna process will become another mechanism to reform our higher education system, improve its quality, and integrate it with international education space. A pilot project is working to introduce a credit system, our universities have introduced a multilevel education system (bachelor's and master's degrees), and universities have been tasked to help graduates get employed by creating career centers. These measures will provide for the mobility of students and teachers and help to gain recognition of Kyrgyz diplomas abroad.

The Bologna Declaration is no big news for Kyrgyzstan, three universities –American University of Central Asia, International University of Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyz Turkish University "Manas" are working under this program already. The original purpose of the Bologna is to create the European Higher Education Area by harmonizing academic degree standards and quality assurance standards throughout Europe. It takes its origins back to 1999 when 29 Education Minister from European countries signed a declaration in Bologna (Italy).

The EU countries frantic of the upheaval caused by globalization and the challenges inherent in a new, knowledge based economy, set a new objective that of becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge – based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion".

This, however, was opened up to other countries with total of 45 to date, and further governmental meetings have been held in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005); the next

meeting will take place in London in Autumn 2007. The process has to be finalized by 2010.

Kyrgyzstan is trying to catch up with the "Bologna Train". One leg is in there with rest of system lagging behind. Not all lost. From existing members most countries do not currently fit the framework - instead they have their own time-honored systems. The process has many knock on effects such as bilateral agreements between countries and institutions which recognize each others degrees. More quality and competence based approaches are introduced thus making the system more competitive. From CIS countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia are signatories of declaration. Yet with many systemic problems the intention of the Kyrgyz Government is right to attain higher standards. The window will open, if properly handled not

only to better education but better life. We are working to improve the contents of education. We have revised the State Education Standards for universities and vocational schools. This was done with the participation of employers that checked whether the new standards meet the requirements of the labor market.

Literature

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