

Executive summary

Kazakhstan finds itself at a crossroads. Recent market volatility has highlighted the risks of dependence on resources, and has put into relief a corresponding need for economic diversification. Various studies by the OECD and others have explored this issue from different perspectives. This review examines how Kazakhstan can respond to current challenges by strengthening its higher education system to ensure that it develops the skills, knowledge and potential for innovation that underlie economic and social well-being.

The OECD and the World Bank undertook a previous review of higher education in Kazakhstan in 2007. While progress clearly has been made since that time, much remains to be done in the areas of quality, access, internationalisation, research and innovation, funding and governance. Kazakhstan’s State Programme for Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan 2011-2020, which was recently updated for 2016-19, recognises many of these challenges and has set ambitious targets and goals.

Kazakhstan needs to place additional emphasis on high-quality, relevant “21st century” skills – not just technical skills and knowledge (however important these may be) but also transversal skills that include, for instance, literacy, problem solving, teamwork and adaptability. Such skills are critical for labour market success and for social well-being more generally. To this end, Kazakhstan needs to enhance the quality of higher education “inputs” (e.g. student and faculty preparation). In addition, “processes” used in higher education also require improvement: things like instructional methods, faculty development opportunities, work-integrated learning and university/employer linkages to help shape curriculum. Finally, the absence of good, reliable data on skills outputs and labour market outcomes remains a key challenge for Kazakhstan, as does a related over-reliance on the state grant system to steer student choices.

Despite some positive measures, there is still comparatively little attention paid in Kazakhstan to equity of access to affordable higher education. The groups most affected in this respect include students from rural areas (despite a set-aside of study spaces), students with disabilities and

students of lower socio-economic status (about whom Kazakhstan lacks good data). Significant reforms are needed in the system of state grants, which is skewed towards students who are typically already somewhat privileged. Moreover, Kazakhstan needs a viable student loans programme to help students who face affordability challenges. It is perhaps especially important, though, to improve the quality of primary and secondary education so that students are prepared for higher education; and to work to raise the educational aspirations of students who would otherwise not consider further studies. Finally, an expanded use of technology-enabled learning, and better linkages between vocational education and training, could also enhance access and tackle problems of inequity.

Kazakhstan has made some impressive strides forward on internationalisation, in particular via the Bolashak scholarship programme. Nevertheless, limited academic autonomy still restricts institutions' ability to engage in partnerships and develop joint programmes, and gaps in quality assurance reduce other countries' (and other countries' students) interest in Kazakhstani higher education. Like many policy issues, internationalisation would be best dealt with in Kazakhstan from a whole-of-government perspective that aligns it with broader development goals. Moreover, additional efforts are needed to encourage collaboration across higher education institutions. Kazakhstan should also make more use of digital technologies to expand in-country "internationalisation through the curriculum"; take better advantage of the accomplishments of the Bolashak programme; and increase the English proficiency among the youth. Gaps in data hinder progress in many of these areas.

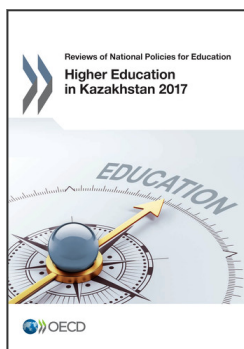
Kazakhstan has been quite active in promoting higher education research over the past decade – creating a new grants process, for instance, and providing faculty access to research materials. Nevertheless, the country still has little capacity for high-quality research. This challenge is linked to low public funding for higher education; to gaps in current funding instruments; and to poor supports at the institutional level. The low number of doctoral graduates and the absence of a post-doctoral stream are further concerns. Moreover, the government's focus on a single aspect of innovation (commercialisation) is problematic. While the commercialisation of university research clearly has its place in innovation systems, returns on investments are likely to be small. More emphasis should be placed on building engagement between higher education and the potential users of its knowledge. Finally, while Kazakhstan is right to seek a more differentiated higher education system, it needs to adopt a more strategic approach to this system change.

Low overall levels of public funding for higher education in Kazakhstan are aggravating the system's underperformance. The main vehicle by which

funding is directed to higher education institutions – the state grant system – has perverse effects on students, on the mix of programmes higher education offers and on the efficiency of public expenditures. Moreover, the formulae which drive funding do not appear to be well-matched to their purposes. Recent incremental investments in higher education have tended to be for new additions to the system that have not adequately addressed fundamental weaknesses in the system as a whole. Finally, controls on how Kazakhstan's higher education institutions spend their funding are both excessive and counter-productive. Reform in the area of funding is particularly challenging to undertake – but reforms here are key to progress on a whole range of fronts covered in other chapters.

There have been some significant shifts in the governance of higher education in the last ten years. For example, the government has sought a gradual movement towards more autonomy for institutions. Yet authority remains highly centralised. The new governing boards that have been created still play a predominately advisory role, and significant operational autonomy – even at the national research universities – is far from being realised. Shortcomings are evidenced in a variety of ways. The level of financial regulation of Kazakhstan's higher education institutions inhibits flexibility and responsibility; a lack of academic autonomy discourages faculty and institutional creativity, initiative and responsibility; the organisational autonomy of higher education is weak; and regulation of the public and private sectors is excessive and lacking in the strategic differentiation that should shape the distinctive roles of the two sectors.

True educational reform is very challenging for any country: there are always a variety of interests and path dependencies that stand in its way. Often, new funding is required for reforms to be effective. This review recommends that, given the critical role that investments in skills and innovation can play in building a well-diversified economy and in ensuring well-being, Kazakhstan find new incremental sources of funding for higher education. In addition, as it moves forward, the country should embrace a comprehensive reform process. It is important to tackle change in an inclusive way, working with civil society and all stakeholders to build a working consensus on the direction of change and on the reasons behind it. Concrete efforts to build trust and capacity are critical. It is also important to recognise that progress will typically be incremental – but if it is to gain momentum, progress requires an ability to act and learn quickly. Finally, as reforms progress, results need to be carefully monitored and used to make course corrections where necessary – or to further invest in approaches that can be shown to be working.



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