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Policy Brief

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Autonomy and governance in Kazakhstani higher education institutions

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education

In close cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

Research Team:

Aida Sagintayeva, Matthew Hartley, Peter Eckel, Fatima Zhakypova, Darkhan Bilyalov, Dauren Aben, Renata Apergenova, Dina Gungor

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Autonomy and governance in higher education in Kazakhstan

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SUMMARY

The present policy brief addresses trends in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which influence the development of shared governance¹ and autonomy in higher education institutions (HEIs). Research was carried as a part of a longitudinal research project entitled “**Advancing Models of Best Practice in Academic Governance and Management in Higher Education Institutions in Kazakhstan**” (2014-2016) jointly conducted by the **Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education** and the **University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education**. Over the three years the research team investigated the topic of shared governance and autonomy in Kazakhstan with the purpose of developing a set of recommendations that will assist the reform efforts and offer guidelines for action. The move toward shared governance and increased autonomy are global trends as governments move away from centralized control. Given the importance of proper governance structures and mechanisms to the success of higher education systems, the study elucidates perceptions of various stakeholders on the governance reform and discusses the trends pertaining to governing HEIs in Kazakhstan.

¹ In the context of this report we use the European notion of shared governance between the university and the state, rather than the U.S. notion of governance shared between academic staff and university administrators. In the Kazakhstani legal framework the word “corporate” is a wide-known term in all policy documents.

THE CONTEXT FOR AUTONOMY

Kazakhstan has undergone a remarkable change since gaining independence in 1991 driven by President Nazarbayev's goal to make the country one of the world's most competitive countries, driven by his Strategy Kazakhstan 2050. In the area of higher education, it has enacted a series of reforms aimed at improving the quality of the nation's colleges and universities. These include sweeping changes in university governance and management through the creation of model universities such as Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics, and Strategic Research (KIMEP), Kazakh-British Technical University (KBTU) and, most recently, Nazarbayev University. A number of national universities have also been established on the basis of Soviet-type classical universities since independence.

In 2010, new ambitious goals articulated in the Ministry of Education and Science's (MoES) document—initially the State Program for Education Development 2011-2020, which was later updated by the presidential decree on March 01, 2016 as the State Program for Education and Science Development 2016-2019 (SPESD). This strategic document calls for significant changes in institutional oversight between 2016 and 2019. The SPESD emphasizes the need to implement shared governance principles through the gradual expansion of academic freedom, organizational, administrative, and financial autonomy at HEIs. Along with increased autonomy, central to these university reforms is the establishment of boards of trustees, overseers or directors² that will be relied upon for key oversight and strategic issues. As the research team has described elsewhere (Hartley, Gopaul, Sagintayeva, Apergenova, 2015), the reforms associated with autonomy are multidimensional and include not only the establishment of governing boards, but curricular, financial and human resource autonomy. Progress on these facets of autonomy are dependent upon three factors identified in the previous research: the policy and oversight structures of the Soviet past, including reporting requirements and a strong ministerial presence; cultural norms and belief systems; and the environment and context in which the reforms must occur.

Kazakhstan is the part of an international trend in which higher education institutions move toward more autonomy and corresponding accountability through shared governance mechanisms. In this reform effort, autonomy includes increasing freedom from direct oversight and involvement by the MoES and greater responsibility to universities and their boards regarding strategic direction, financial sustainability, curricular development, and educational and research quality. Similar to other higher education systems around the world, governance reform in Kazakhstan seeks to diminish the role of the MoES and shift increased responsibility to the universities themselves. Boards of overseers, trustees or directors are essential to this transformation.

² Depending on the legal status of the university, three governance bodies have been established. Each board has slightly different scopes of responsibilities and roles. We group them together in this report.

SELECT DATA AND KEY FINDINGS

The research on governance and autonomy in higher education in Kazakhstan generated information on the current state of governance practices. It revealed some specific strategies that seem promising. It also gave a sense of how these issues are playing out at different kinds of institutions.

The analysis in this policy brief uses data from two surveys which were conducted in 2016. One survey was sent to university rectors of Kazakhstani universities and the second to board members. The following findings from the surveys stand out:

- **Three-quarters of rectors** indicate that their **boards continue to evolve** as the university gains more autonomy. However, this means that **for a quarter of rectors**, their **boards have advanced very little** in the way governance operates.
- **Almost one-third (30.4 percent)** of rectors of public institution are not satisfied with progress toward autonomy. Meanwhile, **all** of the respondents from private universities report significant progress toward autonomy. A similar pattern exists regarding financial autonomy, while both public and private institutions seem to have equally progressed on curricular autonomy policies and practices.
- Rectors of private institutions seem to be **considerably more satisfied** with the levels of change related to autonomy. Close to **4/5 of private institution rectors** report being **satisfied**, while **half of all public university rectors** were **dissatisfied** with the **changes**.
- Rectors of both public and private institutions have similar views of the easiest and most challenging areas to make progress in institutional autonomy. **Academic/curricular autonomy** is defined as **the easiest area** to make progress on. **Budgetary/financial autonomy** has been pointed out as **the most challenging area**, when it comes to implementing autonomy.
- Autonomy **did not affect** private institutions and **affected less than half** of public institutions (who reported significant changes due to autonomy).
- **More than half** of private university leaders report that their universities do not provide orientation to board members. Meanwhile **almost 80% of public institutions** board members benefit from an orientation.
- The majority of rectors and board members say that **time is well spent at board meetings**, although the meetings tend to be short, **lasting 1 to 2 hours** and are **infrequent**, at **four-times** a year.

The characteristics of a representative Kazakhstani board can be illustrated by the following graphics:



Representative Board

(Survey conducted in 2016)

➔ Membership

13 members
28 percent are women

➔ Terms

3-4 year terms;
No term limit

➔ Chair

Determined by the board;
Serves 3-4 years

Board Meetings

- Meets 4 times per year
- For 1-2 hours each time

Attendance

- 75-100 percent

Frequent Agenda Topics

Implementing Strategic Tasks

Increasing Competitiveness

University Performance

Attracting External Funds

Improving Educational Processes

Typical Board Committees

Academic Affairs

Finance and
Budget

University
Strategy/Development

Other

Rectors, when asked in the survey, indicated the following as the most common challenges to implementing autonomy:

Obstacles to Implement Autonomy

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Shortcomings of the legal framework of universities: “Lag of the current legislation from the required pace of autonomy development”</p> | <p>Financial limitations: “Raising additional funding resources”, “achievement of financial autonomy, diversification of revenues” and “funding issues, including assets increase at the expense of non-budget means”</p> | <p>Lack of will on the part of university personnel needed to move ahead: “Modification of the mindsets of the employees who are not accustomed to bear full personal responsibility for quality of their work” “Total absence of will to have autonomy”</p> |
|---|---|---|

In the survey rectors mentioned the following common challenges to implementing shared governance:



RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The three year research project (2014-2016) developed significant materials in the following areas:

- Analysis of the multiple **case studies** of implementation of shared governance in a variety of higher education institutions across the country;
- Development of a **toolkit** for the use by the new governing boards to include such instruments as board self-evaluation, president evaluation toolkits, and board functions and responsibilities toolkit;
- **Survey analysis** of individual board members and institutional leaders' attitudes toward shared governance in their institutions, as well as key trends and issues related to the implementation of shared governance in Kazakhstani higher education institutions;
- A **national profile of rectors** that explored their career trajectories and backgrounds, the nature of their work and their professional development;
- Development of **teaching cases** to demonstrate how institutional governance is changing across institutions;
- Development of **recommendations** for the enhancement of shared governance in Kazakhstan.

Scholarly papers describing the governance practices, including the use of the governing boards at the institutions, have been developed. More information on the research can be found in the monograph soon to be published by Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. Please see the NUGSE website: www.gse.nu.edu.kz

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The reforms of Kazakhstani higher education aim to make this sector a foundation for the country's economic and innovative development. This effort is based upon the comprehensive and structural transformation of higher education, primarily through the introduction of improved governance and increased autonomy at Kazakhstani HEIs.

Much has been done to modernize Kazakhstani higher education. Evidence from the research project repeatedly demonstrates that movement toward increased institutional autonomy is generally supported at both the institutional and at the national government levels. This general support for the reform has translated into a series of concrete steps to implement shared governance. Yet, the work is difficult due to many factors. Throughout the years of implementation of the present study, governing boards were created in every public institution, albeit with different levels of authority and functioning at different capacity levels. As we have established, many governing boards were not necessarily in the center of the major decision making processes. Instead, they operated as advisory councils, mainly acting as a link between employers and institutions of higher learning. This is an important function, but incomplete when considering the goals of autonomy and accountability.

While the MoES continues to modernize its normative base to allow more institutional authority in decision making through the governing boards, there remain important areas for improvement. The new regulations pertaining to higher education governance are still limited in their ability to ensure the success of the comprehensive governance reform envisaged in strategic documents.

Recent attempts to ensure a coherent alignment of the existing legislation are reflected in the concept of the draft of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On amendments and additions to some legislative acts of Kazakhstan on the issues of expansion of academic and governance autonomy of higher education institutions". The bill has not been approved yet, being under review and consideration. However, it will be the first general attempt to introduce necessary amendments to the array of existing legislative acts, as well as to present the definitions and description of the dimensions of autonomy.

SELECTED LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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ABOUT NUGSE

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education aspires to become an influential, world-class graduate school of education, effecting change in educational thinking, policy and practice at all levels of education through scholarly research, quality teaching and persuasive argument. Through its research, teaching and scholarship, NUGSE is committed to working to improve education for all, sustaining a vision of education which enables individuals to maximize their own potential, free from the constraints of poverty and background, within a context of mutual understanding and global interdependence.

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53 Kabanbay Batyr Avenue
Astana, Kazakhstan
Phone: +7 7172 70 64 38, 70 65 76
E-mail: gse.research@nu.edu.kz
www.gse.nu.edu.kz