

Neoliberalism and the Developing Higher Education System in Kazakhstan

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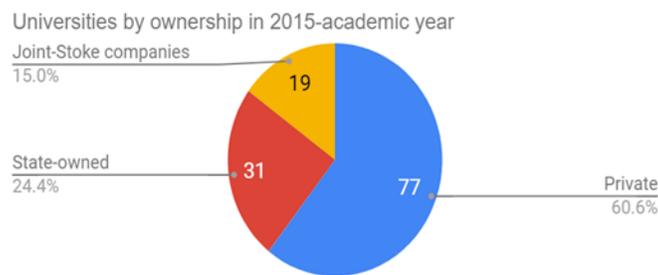
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The Republic of Kazakhstan is one of the Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union. The Kazakh Social Soviet Republic's Supreme Court declared the transition from a planned economy to a market economy in the early 1990s (Kzyzkeyeva and Oskolkova 2011). The new market model in Kazakhstan has a major impact on its evolving higher education system. Less government spending and the creation of private universities in Kazakhstan were the core strategies that have been implemented under the neoliberal policies. The central question of this study is how neoliberal educational policies have transformed the emerging higher education system since the collapse of the Soviet Union. By applying grounded theory as a methodological tool, this research examines texts of legislation and formal statements by leaders in higher education from 1991-2019.

Kazakhstan's economic policy agenda emphasizes the social significance of comprehensive research universities to compete strongly in the global knowledge economy. The most noticeable changes, which occurred in higher education, are adequately aligned with the core tenets of neoliberalism, in particular, the sanctity of private ownership, competition, and a knowledge-driven economy (Tolymbek 2006). As a result, dozens of alternative private institutions emerged after Kazakhstan adapted the marketization and commercialization policies in higher education (Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev 2015) (see table. 1). Neoliberal policies influenced the privatization of state universities that led to the creation of joint- stock companies (Bayetova and Robertson 2019). Joint-stock companies have the lawful status of private universities albeit still subject to government guidelines. They appreciate more autonomy in leadership and greater flexibility regarding administration.

Table 1. Types of universities in Kazakhstan by ownership in 2015-16 academic year



Source: Data adapted from Energy Prom, *Nearly Two-thirds of Universities and over 40% of Colleges in Kazakhstan are Private* (2016). <http://www.energyprom.kz>

Although many critical scholars have recorded how the introduction of neoliberalism and a free-market economy has severely impacted higher education in the United Kingdom (Radice 2013; 2014), the United States (Bamberger, Morris and Yemini 2019; Radice 2013; Saunders 2013), and Australia (Connel 2013), little research has been done to indicate how neoliberalism has impacted the higher education system in Kazakhstan. Since 1991, Kazakhstani higher education has undergone sweeping changes by carefully introducing laws, comprehensive policies, and standard procedures. Some distinguished scholars (Koch 2014; Hartley, Gopaul, Sagintayeva, and Apergenova 2015; Silova

2011; Tolymbek 2006; Ahn, Dixon, and Chermareva 2018) have attempted to provide a critical analysis of the rules and official policies on academic education in Kazakhstan, but no comprehensive research has been conducted to examine how neoliberalism was progressively introduced through them to Kazakhstan's higher education system.

To understand that process, it is necessary to explore the role of Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in the complex formation of business operation, privatization, and commercialization of higher education, as he is a chief proponent of the free-market economy establishment in Central Asia. Neoliberalism was an important informing paradigm in Nazarbayev's regime (1991-2019). I was unable to find any study that analyzed the president's speeches in the context of higher education, in particular, President Nazarbayev's comprehensive vision for higher education in Kazakhstan. Nor I was able to find research on conceptualizing neoliberal educational policies in the official documents. There is a need for a better understanding of changes that occurred after the introduction of neoliberal policies in Kazakhstani higher education. More specifically, it is necessary to address the following research questions:

1. Which changes took place in the higher education system after the introduction of market-based policies from 1991 to 2019?
2. How do national political priorities and critical decisions, as articulated by President Nazarbayev, influence higher education policy?

To address my research questions, I employed a theoretical framework and methodological approach called grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2006). A grounded theory (GT) approach was chosen to analyze the themes Nazarbayev prioritized in the relation to education in his speeches presented to the nation, because, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued, grounded theory is "the best approach for an initial, systematic discovery of theory from the data of social research" (p. 3). GT provides research with much flexibility and mobility. Strauss and Corbin (1990) called grounded theory a technique "for analyzing data that will lead to the development of theory, which can be carried out regardless of the philosophical perspective, the phenomenon under study, or the research situation; a position that shows enormous flexibility" (p.27).

Analyzing the speeches of Nazarbayev is important because he introduced massive reforms in education aligned with neoliberal policies while he was the president for 26 years. President Nazarbayev is a vocal advocate of market economies in Central Asia (Radice 2013). Osipian (2018) concluded that "compared to other former communist rulers, whose speeches and politics are full of empty rhetoric, Nazarbayev's ideas have resulted in bold reforms" (para. 2). For my analysis, I have gathered 24 speeches (each entitled *Message from the President* and totaling 445 pages of text) delivered by Nazarbayev from June 1994, to March, 2019.

In addition, to track the changes and to evaluate how presidential speeches impact higher education, I collected written documents of state programs, such as (a) *Strategy for the Development of Kazakhstan as a Sovereign State - 1994* (63 pages), (b) *Strategy Kazakhstan 2030* (49 pages), (c) *Strategy of Kazakhstan 2050* (17 pages), (d) *State program of education development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020* (55 pages), (e) *Law on Higher Education 1993* (66 pages), and (f) *Law on Education 2007* (51 pages). The analysis of strategic planning, educational laws, and country reports in relation to the market economy is an essential part of my study. These documents provide a sense of direction and outline measurable goals of the country to achieve a free market system. They are useful tools for guiding day-to-day priorities and decisions that influence higher education reforms and are essential in evaluating progress and change.

Speeches and policy documents coded, based upon Charmaz's (2006) open coding techniques, according to content within each paragraph to determine which themes are present. To conduct open coding and axial coding (Charmaz 2006), I used the NVivo computer software program. Presidential speeches were collected from the official site of the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Educational laws and strategic plans have been accessed via the websites of the Ministry of Education of Science and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

By conducting this study, I intend to fill the research gap in the comprehension of how Kazakhstan, a nation outside of the worldwide center, has realized neoliberal strategies in developing its emerging higher education system. In fact, during the last 28 years, Kazakhstan has been experiencing tremendous social, economic, and educational transformations. All these changes have been implemented under the leadership of Kazakhstan's first president, Nazarbayev. By analyzing presidential speeches, laws, and strategic plans, the goal of this research is to fill the gap in the understanding of how Kazakhstan country outside of the global core, has introduced neoliberal policies in higher education. Potential findings are beneficial in the field of comparative and international higher education by providing an example of the adaption of a new market policy after the long history of a centralized government system. In addition, it will help to evaluate the role of education and country leaders in implementing a disruptive change to the system. Countries with similar experiences and histories can practically learn from Kazakhstan's example of constructing a new citizenry that embraces competition and self-interest in the market-driven society by introducing new higher education reforms.

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