

Old and new questions about regional universities

Past and present initiatives towards decentralization have substantially reshaped the HE system. As announced by the Russian ministry of higher education, the new strategy emphasizes the further development of regional universities. This strategy calls for the creation of regional ecosystems by integrating all stakeholders and involving leading central universities to support and contribute to regional initiatives. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has made us revisit possible scenarios in HE, which has been substantially and, possibly irrevocably, pushed online. Several important issues should be addressed, even for a conservative development of regional universities. To what extent should regional universities respond to the industrial structure of their region? Can local stakeholders provide for the financial stability of the regional universities? How should regional centers cooperate to advance their educational markets? Given the new challenges, new questions must also be answered. Will geographical educational boundaries blur within countries and beyond? How will the decisions of future students be affected by new opportunities for distance learning? Can regional universities potentiate their cost advantages over universities in capitals under these conditions? How can the new advantages of non-metropolitan universities be supported by their reputation?

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The Reputation of Higher Education Institutions in Kazakhstan: the Creation and Development of a Paradigm

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Reputation: not what you say, but what your identity conveys

Recognition is important but it cannot be self-declared. The impact that institutions generate includes what they affirm about themselves, but it is first and foremost, what others say about them and how others perceive the organizations' behavior. Reputation has become a crucial aspect in evaluating the quality of organizations, including higher education institutions (HEIs). Even it is unclear or controversial from different perspectives, reputation is now widely considered an intangible asset of any organization.

These assets can be measured, enhanced, and managed as the organization evolves and impacts society.

HEIs have become market-oriented and many of their services can be evaluated according to mercantile criteria; there has also been a rise in their values commercially. Internationalization is also important for measuring and enhancing reputation. Reputation can be considered as a tool for promising good quality products and services to international customers using these two dimensions. In this article a brief overview of reputation in Kazakhstan is provided.

Kazakhstan HEIs discovering Reputation Management

In Kazakhstan, HEIs are showing a growing interest in reputation, as globalization, with all its opportunities and challenges, affects the institutions. International students, accreditation standards, global frameworks for common educational programs, and many other factors are driving a process whereby HEIs increasingly consider Reputation Management in their strategic plans.

Since independence in 1991, the entire educational system of Kazakhstan, including HEIs has undergone many changes. The process included many steps, many success stories and many actions taken by different agencies: government, private capital investors, researchers, educational agencies, and even international actors such as think tanks, accreditation organizations, international educational societies, and others. To respond to the growing interest in this perspective on reputation—although there has been little academic attention to its importance—this article focuses on some of these milestones, reviewing them and reflecting on how Reputation Management has emerged in Kazakhstan.

Internationalization and the Bologna process

The Bologna process represents a significant milestone in university education. As in other countries and cultural contexts, it gave HEIs a deeper perspective on quality and how it is recognized by different actors, that is, on reputation [1]. But for Kazakhstan, some preliminary steps need to be highlighted as they created the foundation for a better understanding of quality and reputation.

In October 2004, former President Nursultan Nazarbayev signed the first State Program of Education Development (SPED) for 2005–2010. The importance of this measure can be summed up in two words: internationalization and accreditation. These two concepts shape the reputation of any HEI, but for Kazakhstan, as a young country adhering to new standards, their importance cannot be overstated.

In terms of internationalization, SPED 2005–2010 created an environment for the country's HEIs to incorporate international standards which made it easier for Kazakhstani HEIs to open up to the world. The same can be said in terms of accreditation: thanks to this measure, in 2007 accreditation was introduced into Education Law as a voluntary procedure allowing for the elaboration of standards by the government, and the possibility of establishing Quality Assurance agencies in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan signed the Lisbon Convention and joined the Bologna process on March 12, 2010, as the 47th member and the first Central Asian Republic. Quality assurance has gained importance with the development of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. With these two factors, the way was opened for the incorporation of accreditation agencies in the country, and many HEIs are joining international accreditation processes, internal and external.

Another factor to consider in this solidification of the concept of reputation is the constant struggle to increase the autonomy of Kazakhstani universities. During the last decades, many different measures have been taken to provide the necessary independence of HEIs. Many of the advantages of this process were highlighted in the revision of Kazakhstan's education system proposed by the World Bank and the OECD in 2007, and in the "State Program for the Development of Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan" for 2010–2020. This new program also paid special attention to the development of independent accreditation and a new independent agency was created changing accreditation practices in the country.

In February 2021, in a move announced a few years earlier (in 2016 by the Minister of Education and Science of Kazakhstan), degrees are no longer issued by the state but are the responsibility of each HEI (with the sole exception of doctors, whose degrees must be standardized by law). This decision may be considered spurious from a reputational perspective, but for many experts it could lead to fairer efforts by each HEI to devote their attention to their stakeholders. Among the agents influenced by this measure are those that could affect reputation significantly more intensely, such as employees, students—local and international—and their families.

Conclusions

Many questions arise in this long (even when chronologically short) discovery process of Reputation Management in Kazakhstan. The challenge for HEIs seems to be in finding a way to transmit these internationalization, accreditation, and autonomy efforts to those actors hungry for reliable institutions. Further research could record communication efforts in Reputation Management. This holistic vision must consider all the previous milestones as a stable base to transform those desires to inspire confidence in concrete actions undertaken by different universities.

References

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