

## Internationalizing Quality Assessment in Central Asia

Martha C. Merrill, Shakhnoza Yakubova, and Zhazira Turlanbekova

Martha C. Merrill, who worked in Kyrgyzstan from 1996–2001, is an associate professor of higher education at Kent State University in Ohio. E-mail: mmerril@kent.edu. Shakhnoza Yakubova is the registrar at the Kazakhstan Institute for Management and Strategic Research. E-mail: syakubov@kent.edu. Zhazira Turlanbekova is a graduate student in higher education administration at Kent State University. E-mail: zturlanb@kent.edu.

Higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have started internationalizing quality-assessment procedures, while those in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have not. The differences concern politics (the willingness of national leadership to be transparent, internally and externally) and economics (the nation's ability to finance educational reform and to resist inappropriate "educational exports" of donor nations) more than educational quality. Quality assessment refers to evaluation, whereas assurance implies an audience: Who needs to be assured of quality? The implementation of transparent assessment processes is a first step in assuring students, funders, and potential partners of an institution's quality.

### **TURKMENISTAN, UZBEKISTAN, TAJIKISTAN: RESISTANCE**

Turkmenistan's president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, prefers that Turkmen students and professors avoid external influences. In 2009 and 2010, Turkmenistan

refused exit to students planning to study abroad, even at the American University in Central Asia. In February 2011, the government imposed new restrictions on students and faculty, although in March it recognized foreign degrees. However, in April 2011, reports circulated that students returning from abroad for the summer would not be allowed to leave. Educational content and processes are highly politicized; candid assessment by external reviewers is unthinkable.

Uzbekistan participates in a broader range of European Union–funded education programs, than does Turkmenistan, and hosts three international universities. It claims intentions to adopt Bologna process reforms on its TEMPUS (Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies) Uzbekistan Web page. However, higher education remains under strict government control, and Uzbekistan is unlikely to establish a nongovernmental assessment agency, as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area require. Even less likely is evaluation by international specialized accrediting agencies or agencies in the European Quality Assurance Register that are certified to conduct audits outside their home countries.

Tajikistan is the poorest of the former-Soviet republics, with a gross domestic product per capita of US\$2,000. Political leaders discourage alternative ideas; even before the current Middle East unrest, parents were asked to bring students home from foreign Islamic schools; and Tajikistan's only private university regularly is threatened with closure. Both Tajikistan's ability to support higher education reform financially and its willingness to insert external critiques into its unsteady political balance are limited.

## KYRGYZSTAN: COMPLICATIONS AND “KASHA”

Kyrgyzstan’s picture is complex. With 40 percent of its population in poverty, yet the only central Asian member of the World Trade Organization, it has made commitments in four of the five education sectors of the General Agreement on Trade in Services and therefore could be open to providers from WTO members who see education as a “service.” Both the most politically unstable and the most internationally open nation in central Asia, Kyrgyzstan hosts universities established by Russia, Turkey, Kuwait, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Aga Khan Foundation, and a Turkish Sufi order, plus the American University in Central Asia, which gives dual degrees with Bard College; branches of seven Russian universities, and two medical schools that teach in English, to attract South Asian students. Kyrgyzstani universities have programs based on contact hours and credit hours (sometimes both in the same institution); Soviet-style diplomas, candidates of sciences (*kandidat nauks*), and doctor of sciences (*doktor nauks*), three-year European-style bachelor’s degrees; four-year US-style bachelor’s degrees and one- and two-year master’s degrees. Local educators call the system *kasha*—literally, porridge, but in slang, “a mess.” Kyrgyzstan actively participates in Soros-funded, European Union-funded, and US Agency for International Development-funded programs, has a nationwide network of Bologna process centers, and, with TEMPUS funding, developed “Tuning Project” learning outcomes in 11 disciplines in 13 institutions.

The European Tuning Project, however, is based on different assumptions than those operating in Kyrgyzstan, including institutions’ ability to change curricula in response to employer and alumni perceptions. Similarly, the assumptions of the Manual for Organizing an Internal System to Guarantee the Quality in Higher Education Institutions in the Kyrgyz Republic—produced in 2007 by the Ministry of Education,

Soros Foundation, and the Educational Association “EdNet”—also raise concerns. Whereas the Tuning Project focuses on the design and fulfillment of learning objectives, the European Foundation for Quality Management model emphasizes business functions, with minimal attention to assessing learning. Another externally funded project, the TEMPUS-supported Central Asian Network for Quality Assurance and Accreditation—involving Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan—holds useful conferences but has limited influence.

In August 2009, the Ministry of Education signaled intentions to implement Bologna process reforms, and Kyrgyzstan attended the First Bologna Policy Forum in Louvain-la-Neuve in April 2009. Yet, a 2008 report on accreditation (by Amy Kirle Lezberg, a US Agency for International Development contractor) seems more widely known in Bishkek than the European quality-assessment processes; and in March 2011, the US agency sponsored a conference on accreditation and assessment at Issyk-Kul.

#### **KAZAKHSTAN: BOLOGNA REFORMS AND EXTERNAL EVALUATORS**

Kazakhstan began internationalizing higher education soon after independence. Between 1991 and 2000, universities with ties to Turkey, Russia, the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Aga Khan Foundation were established; and the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics, and Strategic Research—which, like half a dozen others, teaches in English—opened in 1992. Nazarbayev University, named after Kazakhstan’s president and aiming to be a “world-class” university, was inaugurated on June 28, 2010.

Kazakhstan introduced bachelor’s, master’s and PhD degrees in 2004; in 2007, the Law on Education confirmed this structure. Universities seek dual-degree partners in Europe and the United States. The former minister of education, Zhanseit

Tuimenbayev, frequently called international-program accreditation an important goal. However, a national accreditation process began only in 2005, with the creation of the National Accreditation Agency, followed in 2008 by the independent International Quality Assurance Agency. Kazakhstan's initial Bologna Process National Report says the National Accreditation Agency approved 10 institutions, in 2009. The International Quality Assurance Agency ranked 60 institutions in 2008 but accredited only 6. Nevertheless, many Kazakhstani universities seek program accreditation through international agencies such as ASIIN (the German science and engineering accrediting agency), ACQUIN (the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute from Bayreuth, Germany), ABET (the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology), AACSB (the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business), and others. Staff member Magdalena Lieb says ACQUIN has reviewed six universities in Kazakhstan. ABET accredited the Kazakh National Technical University's Metallurgical Engineering program in 2008.

Although Kazakhstan was accepted into the Bologna process in March 2010, many educators may not thoroughly understand the requirements. For example, the National Qualifications Frameworks, described in the State Plan for the Development of Education 2011–2020, sound more like Soviet-era classifiers than the Bologna definition of broad skills all degree holders at each level require.

### **UNEVEN PROGRESS**

Internationalized quality assessment is progressing unevenly throughout central Asia, due to political choices and finances, not educational needs. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan do not desire external scrutiny. Tajikistan is too poor and too unstable to finance and accept the disruptions that reform might cause. Kyrgyzstan, equally poor

and unstable, seems willing to accept whatever donors are willing to fund. Kazakhstan, economically stable and a Bologna process signatory, boasts the most internationalized quality-assessment processes in the region. However, since its president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was re-elected in April 2011 with 95 percent of the vote, observers might question the determinants of institutional rankings and national assessments. Transparent assessment processes are not yet the norm, even in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.