

Kyrgyzstan's Scheme for a New Degree System—But Is It Ready?

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On August 23, 2011, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic issued a decree (*postavleniya*) regarding all higher education institutions in the country—except for medical, art, and music, and some engineering programs. The institutions were required to adopt a two-tier system of higher education—a four-year bachelor's degree and a two-year master's degree—and to use credit hours, by the 2012/13 academic year. This plan, while well intentioned, will be impossible to implement effectively in the time frame.

BACKGROUND

Kyrgyzstan is a small, beautiful, deeply impoverished country in central Asia. Its per capita gross domestic product of \$2,200 puts it 187th out of 228 countries in the world. Moreover, according to a recent World Bank report, 21 percent of that gross domestic product forms remittances from workers abroad, primarily in Kazakhstan and Russia.

The countries Kyrgyzstan is ethnically or economically tied to—including Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkey—are in the Bologna process. Since Kyrgyzstan is dependent on labor mobility, adopting educational policies found in those countries has consisted Kyrgyzstan’s agenda since its independence in 1991, leading to considerable institutional diversity. While most of the 52 higher education institutions in the country use contact hours, some use credit hours, and some use both. Degrees such as a first degree (*Diplom*), a candidate of sciences (*kandidat nauk*), and a doctor of sciences (*doktor nauk*) are awarded. Also available are bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees, of various lengths—sometimes in the same institution. Curricula used nationwide are written by the Educational and Methodological Unions, expert groups appointed by the Ministry of Education. The ministry awards all diplomas and controls licensing and attestation for both public and private institutions.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE NEW DECREE

The August decree calculates credit hours as does the European Credit Transfer System—30 credits per semester. The four-year bachelor’s degree requires 240 credits and the two-year master’s, 120 credits. One credit is defined as 36 academic hours, including contact hours in class, independent work, and exams. The decree also states that students should not work more than 54 hours per week, and that 50 percent of the students’ time should be contact hours. The bachelor’s level curriculum will have five components: humanities, social, and economics courses; mathematics and natural sciences courses; professional (major) courses; physical education; and an internship and research work. Each of the first three components must have required and elective courses. The

required part should be not less than 70 percent for the bachelor's degree and not less than 40 percent for the master's degree. Curricula still will be written centrally, by instruction method boards (*UMOs*), and no changes are foreseen in licensing and attestation processes.

All of the requirements listed above are also found in the 2010 Russian Federal State Education Standards. The idea of 54 hours per week being the maximum allowed period comes from the Soviet Labor code.

PROBLEMS FORESEEN

The quick change to the bachelor's and master's degree and credit-hour system is likely to create many problems.

Regarding compensation, whether a professor should be considered in a full-time position and thus eligible for benefits currently is determined by the number of hours he or she is in the classroom. No alternative system has been devised for proving who is in a full-time position, nor has a new system of calculating salaries or workload been created. Most professors do not understand that the credit-hour system requires many more hours of preparation and grading outside of class than does the current system; they equate time in the classroom with workload. Indeed, some universities that claim to have adopted credit hours have added a category of "independent work with faculty" for periods when faculty supervise students doing their home assignments, thus keeping the number of contact hours the same for professors and avoiding the salary issue.

Another constituency that does not understand credit hours includes parents. Parents who were educated in the Soviet era often equate time spent

with the professor with quality, and they care about the completion of the five-year first degree (*diplom*). Shorter degrees were officially designated as “not complete higher education.”

Academics themselves also have little information about what the new system requires. Many professors believe that students who pay tuition for their studies—a new concept in the post-Soviet era—are purchasing their education and thus cannot be dismissed as long as they keep paying. Unfortunately, it is a short leap from the idea that one “buys” an education under capitalism to the concept that one can buy grades and diplomas as well. Many also believe that in a credit-hour system professors are not allowed to fail students. This statement was in a Russian-language document, “explaining” the Bologna process, published in Kazakhstan and widely distributed in Kyrgyzstan.

Academically, the purpose of the change is to permit Kyrgyzstan to enter “the world educational space,” yet no country except Russia uses a credit-hour system that demands 27 hours of seat time a week (50% of the maximum 54 hours of work) and mixes the US-style four-year bachelor’s degree with Bologna reforms.

Additionally, neither students nor faculty are prepared to learn and teach in a system that requires independent work, nor are library and computer resources available. The Ministry of Education has no plans for faculty development; when asked, ministry staff told the authors without a doubt, it will happen. Similarly, few administrators are familiar with procedures needed for the newly mandated elective courses: how to design, approve, publicize, and schedule them.

Also unaddressed is quality assessment; the criteria currently in use, such as square meters per student, are based on a contact-hour system. Each of the new bachelor's and master's degree programs will need to be licensed before it can begin to operate, but ministry staff told us no plans had been made to increase the number of those working in this area. When each program has its first group of graduates, state attestation is required, with institutional reports and visiting teams appointed by and responsible to the Ministry of Education.

Kyrgyzstan does not have an independent accrediting agency, although educators participate in the Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies (TEMPUS)–funded Central Asian Network for Quality Assurance, which holds conferences and issues papers. The nongovernmental organization, Education Network Association (EdNet), has said it is ready to be an independent accrediting agency, but it has not yet accredited any institution.

Funding is an enormous problem. In this country, to save money, who will fund the work of the instruction method boards that will write the new curricula, the commissions who will license all the new programs, the purchase of library materials, the faculty time used for writing syllabi, and the printing of new study plans?

CONCLUSION

Although Kyrgyz educators and political figures want to synchronize Kyrgyzstan's higher education system with "the world educational space," the lack of planning, of training for faculty and administrators, of evaluation procedures, and of funding mean that the reforms are likely to be impossible to implement successfully.