

Aspiring International Standards: challenges and outcomes of project management in the context of Kazakhstan Higher Education

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Abstract: Universities in Kazakhstan are striving to improve their practices in a highly competitive education environment. The purpose of this paper is to review the progress of the project initiated by the senior management of Turar Ryskulov Kazakh Economic University to introduce changes based on accreditation agencies' standards. The results of the critical review indicate that the anticipated results of the change process were not fully achieved due to lack of consistency in management decisions, low support from the management and staff, which could be attributed to organizational culture, limited funding, poor understanding and practice of action research and project management.

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1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Kazakhstan started the process of adapting its educational system to a new social, political and economic reality. Between 1995 and 2000 legal and administrative steps were taken to modernize the educational system and decentralize management. It is argued by the OECD (2007) that Kazakhstan's educational system has made significant progress compared to other Central Asian countries that were also part of the USSR. Since 2007 a number of initiatives and changes have been undertaken, including: Bologna process which was reflected and introduced officially in the Law on Education though the 3 level study (bachelors, masters and PhD) in 2004 (Merrill, Yakubova & Turlanbekova, 2011). There are a number of problems, however, that need addressing, for example the understanding of Bologna requirements by educators (ibid). Moreover, there are other issues that need to be solved in the areas of internationalization, academic mobility, quality of education and infrastructure.

In 1993 the government allowed the establishment of private higher education institutions and since then, motivated by profit, the number has risen dramatically. The dominance of private Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Kazakhstan is evident, for instance in 2012 there were 96 private institutions (62%) out of 149 (Rating Agency RFCA, 2012). This has raised concerns regarding the quality of education, its graduates and led to the so called "optimization" of universities across the country. The optimization process involves consolidating small entities into one

(Tengrinews, 2013). Currently, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) aims to have 100 HEIs by 2015 and the process of optimization has highlighted the main problematic issues, such as coming to consensus in a new area of HEI, top management appointment and staffing (ibid.). On the other hand HEI is likely to become an even more competitive environment in the near future due to decreasing number of school leavers and low birth rate in 1995-2012, which varies from 217 000 to 278 000 as compared to 362 000 in 1990s. Thus a strongest shortfall in prospective students is anticipated for the years 2014-2019 (Geldora, 2012). Therefore HEIs are attempting to maintain high quality and good reputation through ISO-9000 certification and accreditation by independent agencies (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development & the World Bank, 2007).

2. Background to the research project

Turar Ryskulov Kazakh Economic University (KazEU), the oldest and leading economic university in Kazakhstan, was established in 1963 and since 2000 operates in Kazakhstani higher education as a private university. It is a big educational holding that has its own college and around 15 thousand enrolled students in 2012-2013. Following MoES regulations KazEU passed national institutional accreditation for 5 years in IAAR (Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating) and international specialized accreditation in European Council for Business Education (ECBE) for four programs (BA and MA in Economics, BA and MA in Finance) in 2012. The process of preparation for national and

international accreditation aimed to improve existing practices and led to initiation of some projects. The purpose of this paper is to review the progress of the project on website renovation of the University. The authors, as participants, review and reflect on the process retrospectively.

3. Methodology

Making an inquiry into the university processes is challenging in the Kazakhstani context because action research project or inquiry are relatively new approaches in education. This process demands not only planning skills but also strategic thinking, creativity, anticipation of possible or unplanned issues and subsequently adopting a flexible approach. However, even good planning may not always correspond to the reality and cause tensions between thought and action (Atkinson, 1994). Thus, in practice it may turn out that the design of the inquiry methodology or project has shortcomings or potential inconsistencies.

Research which involves systematic investigation of a situation and promotes change and collaborative participation is considered as action research (Burns, 2010), which may have three dimensions: professional, personal and political (Noffke, 2010). Elliott (2010, p.28) argues that educational research is 'the practical intention of

changing a situation to make it more educationally worthwhile'. For this reason usually the situation to be investigated is somewhat problematic, or needs to be clarified, questioned or understood better.

Consultants applied Elliott's (2010) inquiry method for identifying areas that needed actions based on discrepancies between the real and desired situation. The following questions were asked: What do we want to improve based on our knowledge of real practice and accreditation criteria? What could we do to improve the situation? How can we do it? The chain of questions became the basis for defining a number of areas for change: absence of adequate single source of information that stakeholders could use, absence of functioning alumni association and poor work of career's service for students, absence of clear division of responsibilities and duplication of functions between the Centre for Academic Mobility and International relations department, poor infrastructure, non-transparent decision making procedure and lack of stakeholder involvement in decision making, unclear strategy or a well defined mission and others. However, it might be suggested that such issues are relevant to other HEIs operating in an educational market currently characterized by a state of ambiguity.

Table 1. List of events where consultants were involved

	Start time	Event	Time spent
1	January 2012	Introduction to KazEU: attending meetings on the level of top-management, reading departments reports and documentation. Consolidation of all accreditation criteria to inform project work scope.	2 months
2	March 2012	Individual work of consultants on project proposals in order to bring university closer to accreditation criteria	1 month
3	April–May 2012	Presentation of individual project proposals to Rector, Vice-Rector and department head Writing a first draft of self-evaluation report for ECBE	1 day 1 month
4	July 2012	Approval of one individual project Finding an external company for project realization	2 months
5	September 2012	Official contract between KazEU and external company, finance allocation and project start-up. Information requests Finalizing EBE self - evaluation report.	1 month
6	October- November 2012	ECBE commission visit Project work: information collecting and editing, working with sub-contractors regarding design and functionality	5 days 2 months
7	December 2012	Review of project and inquiry of additional information from departments or re-request of information that was failed to be provided for the project. Involvement into National Institutional accreditation work	2 months
8	February 2013	Project work: creation of web pages and filling of the content, information collection and processing	3 months
9	April 2013	Discussion of project with department heads and amendments to on-going project	2 months

Project work was initiated once the consultants had familiarized themselves with KazEU and accreditation criteria in January 2012. Criteria of all accreditation agencies that KazEU management had decided to apply to were consolidated and divided into relevant sections, for example, strategic management, decision making process, client-oriented education and administrative processes, internal and external connections and others. The following accreditation agencies were selected by the top management: European Council for Business Education (ECBE), The Central and East European Management Development Association (CEEMAN) and Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). However, KazEU applied to and accredited only by ECBE.

The problematic areas were discussed with top management and the decision was made to focus on projects that were easier to implement to begin with. Each consultant took responsibility for a project that was of interest or appropriate to their knowledge and started working on it. Reconnaissance stage of action research was achieved through ongoing discussion with other consultants, university department representatives as projects were directed to their daily activities and students. For the website project, which is discussed here, there were 8 discussion sessions with staff and 8 discussion meetings with students from all levels of study doing different degrees. The aim of these discussions was to promote staff and student involvement and inclusion of their vision or advice in the project. In practice, however, staff treated discussions formally and provided little commentary. This could be attributed to the consultants' failure to clearly communicate the aims of the discussion or lack of employee commitment due to prevailing top-down style of management and poor motivation, which corresponds to the findings of Somusundaram and Badiru (1992). Students on the contrary provided a large amount of commentaries and suggestions, most of which were taken aboard.

The decision regarding project implementation was made by the management two months after the consultants presented their projects to the top management: KazEU's new web-site, project to improve the work of the International relations department and Centre for Academic Mobility, project to improve the Career Center practices and creating a practically non-existent Alumni Association, project to improve buildings and student accommodation facilities. Only the new website project was approved for implementation. The reasons for these decisions are not known as is the case for all the other management decisions that consultants were aware of. This appears to be a common attribute of the post-soviet management type, where the system was

centralized and top-down. However, the issue of educational management is being discussed on the governmental level, particularly the State Program of Education development for 2011-2020 aims to adopt principles of corporate management in 90% of HEIs and have trained all leaders and managers in the sphere of management (The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010).

4. Project Implementation

The implementation stage of the project was based around the following main aspects: design and functionality negotiation work with sub-contractors, collecting and processing information from departments for publication on the website, creating web pages and filling the content. The process of planning was neglected due to the following reasons: lack of experience and knowledge of project management, lack of resources and management pressure to complete website project by the 16th of December 2012. The initial plan of the top management had involved hiring 14 accreditation consultants; each of whom would be working on specific projects as project managers and would have a working group (project team) that would consist of university staff. In reality only four consultants were hired and further efforts to seek candidates were not pursued. Moreover the working group for the website was not created and the consultants realized the project themselves with the project manager doing most of the project related work herself. Consultants' requests for more human resources were satisfied partially by hiring a part time intern. Additionally despite having no human resources for project work and simultaneous involvement in the accreditation process, management set unrealistic deadlines. The situation experienced by consultants corresponds to Weiss & Wysocki (1992) projects in which project managers are involved doing part of the work are likely to experience problems and delays in completion. It implies that financing is not enough for successful project implementation and human resources play the key role.

The process of information collection lasted from September 2012 to April 2013. Requests were based on website project proposal that was discussed and reviewed by department representatives prior to the project approval. Nevertheless this did not result in faster response rates. On the 6th of December 2012 consultants presented the results of their work to top management and requested that they issue an official order requiring departments to provide the necessary information. The order was issued after the second project progress presentation in the second half of April 2013. Perhaps the absence of an official order from the rector or the lack of consultants' authority

within the organization made the requests not worth replying to. This situation to a certain extent corresponds to what Self and Schraeder (2008) refer to as passive resistance that is the expression of negative attitudes towards change by withholding information, support or through procrastination. Passive resistance might be caused by personal factors, organizational factors, including credibility of the change agent, previous experience of changes in organization, and change specific factors, such as lack of shared opinion regarding the need for change. Despite the consultants efforts to discuss the need for a new website it is possible that staff did not see the value of it or had concerns that the new website might have a negative effect on them. The latter is discussed by Project Management Institute (2008) as one of the factors that might cause difficulties in project implementation.

The process of action research demands practitioner's abilities such as observation and reflection. The emphasis on self-reflectivity in action research is defined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as: "... a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (p.162). Reflecting on the project now shows inconsistencies in many areas of it, both at planning and implementation stages. In its turn survey done by White and Fortune (2002) amongst 236 people previously involved in a range of projects prevailing found that factors that contribute to success of projects include: clear goals/objectives, support from senior management, adequate funds/resources, provision of adequate communication and controlling mechanisms, support from stakeholders, effective risk management and having a clear project boundary. Thus it might be that the consultants as direct participants of project implementation have done differently in some definite situations such as the case for information gathering process.

5. Final comments and conclusion

In this paper we have reflected on the progress of the project implementation conducted in KazEU. The anticipated results of the change process were not fully achieved due to lack of consistency in management decisions, support from both the management and staff, which could be attributed to organizational culture, limited funding, poor understanding and practice of action research and project management. However, lessons can be learnt for the future. Nowadays, HEIs in Kazakhstan are trying to achieve international standards and integrate to world educational arena. Universities choose

different pathways. In case of KazEU, management tried to kill two birds with one stone, i.e. be accredited and implement changes at once by hiring consultants. Accreditation was done successfully as compared to website change initiations that turned out to be more complicated.

Reflecting on the process of project development it is possible to highlight that the lack of skills in project planning was not due to organizational constraints but rather consultants' knowledge and experience. Moreover, whole project implementation looked as a severe interference to the used mode of organizational culture since resistance to novelties was high. The website was gone through the process of feedback collection from departments, some changes were made and was launched on the 25th of May. The final and logical point of the project completion was the elaboration of standards and procedures. Further the management and future maintenance of the website was officially transferred to marketing department of KazEU.

Though there are limitations to this paper since the reflections are those of only two of the project participants, the paper may still draw a general overview of the prevailing situation in the context of Kazakhstani education. As Bush (2008) emphasizes, 'leadership and management are now of global significance as governments recognize the importance of education, so that they can compete effectively in an international economy...' (p. 284). KazEU needs to urgently revisit their policy of strategic development and management. Moreover, human resources is a point which has to be dealt in details since the experience of consultants show that being inside as full-time staff were not beneficial for them because of additional workload. There should be a realistic balance between number of personnel involved in project and anticipated outcomes. It might more beneficial for KazEU to attract external company who could implement projects more professionally while consultants could suggest new project ideas and concentrate on accreditations.

Seen from above it is evident that KazEU may regulate internal issues such as enhancing the cooperation and communication, especially electronic communication, management and human resources; issues that are within the power of the university since external issues are hardly managed. Moreover, if KazEU regulates internal issues successfully and comes closer to international standards given in accreditation agencies' criteria the University may keep its leading position and reach sustainable development by shaping the setting for economic and business education in Kazakhstan. Hopefully, KazEU will benefit from the present experience since the University is a member of such international

accreditation agencies as CEEMAN and ACBSP and more changes are anticipated.

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