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Conceptualizing Local Research Capacity in Kazakhstan

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The global competition in higher education increasingly demands that governments and universities invest in research in order to rise in university rankings and thrive in the knowledge economy (Altbach, 2013). The “mission creep” toward research is evident in many higher education systems despite the diversity of higher education institutions and the contradictory functions of contemporary universities (Castells, 2001; Scott, 2006). This pervasive rhetoric of research often emphasizes output metrics rather than the realities of conducting research or the divergent rationales that affect the research environment (e.g. funding distribution, grant review, and research evaluation). For many developing countries, engaging with research is not simply about output such as publications and patents but also about building research capacity to tackle pressing local problems that may not attract global attention. The lack of infrastructure, resources, and expertise can present tremendous challenges to countries that are in the midst of building research capacity. One strategy in facilitating the development of research capacity is to recruit expatriate faculty members as evident in many parts of Asia and the Middle East (Wildavsky, 2012).

This paper examines the process of research capacity building in a middle-income, transition economy in Central Asia: Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has a history of recruiting expatriate faculty members to assist the development of its higher education system. From Russian scientists and Turkish instructors who arrived decades ago to the recent influx of international faculty at a new university in the capital city, this brain gain receives scant attention. Rather, the attention on transnational higher education in Kazakhstan is often about institutional features that set a university apart from others in the country (e.g. medium of instruction, joint degree programs). This study focuses on expatriate academics who hold full-time positions in Kazakhstan and pursue research. The following questions guide this study: How do expatriate academics define local research capacity? To what extent do they collaborate with local researchers? What barriers do these expatriate academics face when conducting research?

While divergent definitions of research capacity exist in the literature, some conceptual ideas about the research mission of a university are useful for this study. In the context of international aid and development, some scholars view research capacity as largely a technology transfer with resource importation (Kharas, as cited in Jones, 2007), while others emphasize the strengthening of local expertise and

capacity (Harris, 2004). Capacity building could be uni-directional or bi-directional to accrue benefits for the parties involved (Harris 2004; Stein & Ahmed, 2007). Research capacity building can also occur at different levels: individual, institutional, and system-wide (Jones, 2007).

This study employs qualitative research methods to understand the experiences of expatriate faculty members in their engagement with research in Kazakhstan. Through semi-structured interviews, 46 participants shared their perspectives on research capacity building and research collaborations. These participants include both expatriate faculty members as well as local faculty members (some of whom collaborate with expatriate faculty members on research projects). The selection criteria required that participants must be active researchers working full-time in Kazakhstan (i.e. not visiting scholars or consultants).

The results indicate that faculty members define research capacity in ways that illustrate the divergent perspectives on globalization as identified by Held and colleagues: skeptics, transformationalists, and hyper-globalists (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999). Participants' engagements with research are mediated by fundamental beliefs and values about science and modernity. Therefore, a faculty member's research agenda may be driven by a variety of pressure points: local issues that demand attention, global developments in his/her discipline, an idealism of "good" science, and practical considerations such as funding and publication opportunities. While some expatriate faculty members problematize "local research capacity" as ambiguous and limiting, local faculty members are very cognizant of the imperative to pursue locally relevant research topics and cultivate human capital. On the issue of research collaborations, the bulk of the activities remain at the level of faculty-to-student partnerships that are dynamic, productive, and mutually beneficial to both parties. The level of collaboration between expatriate faculty and local faculty unfortunately remain quite low despite national and institutional interests to cultivate these relationships.

This study contributes to the broader discourse of research capacity building in developing countries and transition economies. As national governments and higher education institutions worldwide focus more attention on research, the issue of capacity building through the employment of foreign experts demands more attention. The experience of Kazakhstan in investing in research and higher education development is informative for other societies aiming to engage with the knowledge economy in productive ways that also recognise the local context.

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