

An approach to university management and leadership competences in Central Asia: current trends and future challenges

Abstract

The Central Asia higher education systems are going through relevant transformations in recent years. In terms of organization of multi-level systems countries may vary, but higher convergence is observed concerning efforts of reforming the higher education systems to meet the needs of a modern competitive economy based on international experiences. Having to do with how universities are managed, principles of strategic planning, quality management and autonomy are being shaped. This paper sheds empirical lights on such efforts, providing on the one hand, a comparative analysis of the situation of the strategic university management in Central Asia universities and on the other, it identifies management skills and leadership qualities required of university managers across countries. The analysis of current trends and challenges of university management and leadership competences are drawn based on a survey data, which is used to explore the ongoing transformation across the region.

Summary

In this study the focus are on two levels: on the one hand it investigates the situation of the strategic university management, exploring its trends and challenges, and on the other, it focuses on the examination of the management skills and leadership qualities of the academics in the university across four central Asia countries, fostering improvement challenges on achieving an effective university management. The increasing changes and demands placed on higher education institutions in the 21st century have impacted on the roles and responsibilities of academic leaders. Several authors have addressed this topic (e.g. Sorcinelli 2000; Raines and Alberg 2003; Parker and Wilson 2002; Hecht 2004; Spendlove 2007). Specifically addressing the study of management competences, it may represent a holistic field of research from strategic, organizational to individual competences (Elliot and Dweck 2005, Tidd 2006, Mühlbacher 2007).

Overall, the literature on competence defines it as the capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to new tasks and situations (Warn and Tranter 2001). Botha and Camphor

(2008) regard the development of management skills and competencies in higher education institutions as essential. According to these authors, the focus of management training and development should be on developing the management skills and competence required in support of the university's vision, mission and strategy.

In this vein, Burquel (2012) on a report of training needs and training providers in higher education management have placed a very relevant question on "training university leaders and managers: why and how". She contends, based on an extensive European survey and literature overview on university management, that the transformations needed to enhance institutional performance require strong leadership and the professional management of all support services. Yet at an institutional level, there are wide gaps between highly performing institutions and low performers. Historical, contextual and institutional reasons do provide some limitations. The current reforms offer many opportunities for higher education institutions to rethink themselves and to exercise more fully the autonomy gained by an increasing number of them from the State, though many institutions seem unable to do so (ibid p.4).

Furthermore, the current trend across global higher education is towards increasing the level of autonomy for higher education institutions. It is accompanied by the implementation of new monitoring and supervisory instruments by the State and other stakeholders to hold higher education institutions more accountable for their contributions to national policy objectives, which is "often referred to as the development of the evaluative role of the State" (de Boer and File 2009, p.9). While the degree of autonomy that universities enjoy from state control is generally increasing in European countries, in Central Asia countries, this autonomy may vary. For instance, based on a report of the higher education systems (Tempus 2011), in Kazakhstan for certain aspects of the institutions operation they have some degree of autonomy both public and private HEIs can hire their own staff (except for the rector in public ones), can establish direct links with national and international partners, and conclude contracts on mutual cooperation in various fields. Compared to public universities, private HEIs have more operational autonomy and greater management flexibility.

Also in Kyrgyzstan nowadays higher education institutions have a high level of autonomy for defining their academic programmes (within the framework of the state educational standards), forms and methods of teaching, for developing international collaboration. Providing autonomy for higher education institutions became the main tool in the reform of the higher education system in Kyrgyzstan institutions and

adapting it to the changing social and economical conditions. Overall, mostly public institutions have more limited autonomy compared to the private ones and also the degree and scope of autonomy varied across country.

Such major transformation occurring across regions require modern governance arrangements, dynamic leadership and the professional management of university services, critical for the sustainability of higher education institutions. There is a need for the further professional development of university leaders and managers to learn to strategically manage all these new developments and to profile their institution strongly in the European (and global) higher education market. Strong leadership styles have become crucial to take on board the many changes. Adequate internal communication and the quality of the dialogue which senior leaders engage with various academic units (faculties, schools, departments) and the entire academic community have also become crucial issues Burquel (2012).

Therefore, following the initial literature review on university strategic management and leadership and management competence, two types of questionnaires were prepared. On the one hand, a questionnaire analyze several domains of strategy in the universities, exploring concepts related to the tools and mechanisms used to define, implement and review the institutional strategy. On the other hand, another questionnaire has been designed in order to examine the managerial competences of academic managers across different levels, exploring training themes and prospective. Both questionnaires were addressed to a sample of public universities across four central Asia countries: Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Furthermore, in this paper, drawing on our findings we will highlight how is the current state of the university strategic management in Central Asia countries, how it has evolved overtime and which challenges it may impose. Additionally, this study brings forth what are the trends, themes and prospective of academic managers training on management and leadership skills and competences across the region. The presentation paper will also include discussion on the extent to which the management and leadership training approach may provide useful insights into the effective strategic university management, comparing it with the challenges faced by European countries.

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