

Conceptualizing paradoxes of post-socialist education in Kyrgyzstan

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Since national independence, university enrollments in Kyrgyzstan have at least tripled, and the number of higher education institutions has increased from nine or ten to almost fifty. In industrializing nations, transitions from elite to mass higher education are usually attributed to demand for more sophisticated technological and professional skills. In Kyrgyzstan, however, growth in higher education has been in liberal studies fields, while enrollments in technical fields have withered. This paper reviews some competing notions of the purposes of higher education internationally and in Kyrgyzstan. It is particularly concerned in Kyrgyzstan with the seeming paradox of increasing university enrollments without economic demand for highly skilled workers. An exploratory study of how this paradox is experienced at the personal and family levels is then presented, the focus of which is how students and parents perceive the desirability or need for university education. The research is also interested in how students pay for their studies; how they make university and specializations choices; and how well prepared they feel they were for university academic life. Data for the research came from open-ended survey questionnaires administered to several student cohorts at one Bishkek public university in Spring, 2007.

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1. Introduction

Official government educational pronouncements and policy in the Kyrgyz Republic have called for wider access and participation in higher education as an essential part of the general strategy of building democracy and a market economy. The number of higher education institutions (*vuzy*) increased from approximately ten at the end of the Soviet period to 50 institutions, with over 200 thousand students now in attendance. ¹ Some international statistical sources show that higher education enrollments peaked above 70% of secondary school graduates in the early 1990s. For the past decade, these figures are lower yet still substantial. UNDP reports between 53 and 63%, while the World Bank and UNESCO between 41 and 45%. In any of these

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calculations, however, higher education enrollments in Kyrgyzstan have at least tripled since independence, which is even more remarkable considering that the Kyrgyz system of higher education has become almost entirely paid for by students and parents rather than by the national government. **2**

On the one hand, increased higher education enrollments would seem a positive step for contemporary Kyrgyzstan. In Soviet times, only a small percentage of Kyrgyz secondary school graduates (14%) went on to university studies, while currently approximately half attend some form of university. Kyrgyz tertiary enrollments were lower than any of the other former Soviet Central Asian republics in 1991, but today they are among the highest. **3** In Martin Trow's typology, higher education in Kyrgyzstan has moved virtually overnight from elite through mass to universal participation. **4** Yet there is a paradox in this transformation for the Kyrgyz Republic, as increased higher education participation and completion is typically explained internationally with regard to skills required for an expanding economy and a more complex division of labor. Increases in higher education participation are related to skill acquisition for new and different sectors of the economy, and what formerly passed for university knowledge in the humanities and theoretical sciences is now expanded in universal higher education systems into more technical and applied fields. None of these economic transformations are happening in 21st century Kyrgyzstan, which makes it difficult to understand how higher education has been a growth industry itself for almost twenty years.

Western advisors and advocates for educational reform working in Central Asia today tend to conceptualize higher education as the site for preparing students in emerging occupational and technological fields, and national governments in transitional nations have been urged to by Human Capital theorists to consider investments in education as investments in people for economic return. **5** This logic has dominated university change and growth in America, for instance, for over a half century, and some argue this logic drove the provision of higher education in various European countries earlier than that. **6** Contemporary champions for increased higher education expenditures claim universities are and need to continue being primary sites for new knowledge creation that technological societies require.**7**

But the Kyrgyz situation is more problematic. Kyrgyzstan was expected by the West to transition rapidly to democracy and a market economy following independence, where the new republic quickly adopted a national constitution, created a parliamentary-style government, and several years later also became the only Central Asian nation to join the World Trade Organization. **8** Unfortunately, the Kyrgyz economy has been in serious decline for over a decade now. Unemployment has been running at around 20% since 1994, double-digit inflation rates have ravaged spending power of average citizens, and approximately half of all wage earners live below the official poverty line. **9**

“Market” demand for highly educated university graduates in Kyrgyzstan’s static or declining economy thus remains marginal, and underemployment is the norm. Depending (again) upon the source, unemployment among recent university graduates runs anywhere from 53% to 80%.**10** Adding to the paradox is that the technological and industrial jobs typically related to increased higher education demand in many Western countries are the very fields in most decline in Kyrgyzstan. In the current era, university growth in Kyrgyzstan has invariably been in the professional (e.g., law, economics, management) and humanities sectors, and the other sorts of post-secondary opportunities have languished. Higher education graduates in natural and applied sciences over the past decade have averaged between only five and seven percent of the total. **11**

The economic problems of the country have led to serious labor force out-migration, and acknowledged erosion of secondary education infrastructure, teacher salaries, and other indicators of school quality. International observers have subsequently noted various inefficiencies and corruption in secondary education, which has led to low levels of school achievement. **12** Some economists suggest that a more efficient system of higher education in Kyrgyzstan would seek to close and limit the field of higher education choices and opportunities. Instead, the total number of degree specializations in Kyrgyz universities increased from 83 to 206 in five-year programs, and the period between 1992 to 2001 saw the creation of 87 new bachelors’ and 36 new masters’ degrees. **13** Universities in Kyrgyzstan today have announced their intention in joining the European “Bologna Process,” in order to expand curricular opportunities for students.

Yet, there is great debate about means and ends of joining Bologna, and what the implications will be for students and universities who claim interest in being involved. **14**

To the Western eye, then, increased higher education demand where there seems little marginal utility for investing in personal skills and where secondary school preparations are deteriorating is confusing or irrational. Why **do** students and their parents continue to press for higher education opportunities in Kyrgyzstan? How do they understand the connections between investing in higher education and life chances for their children? And why does the alleged corruption in higher education continue there if and when parents are interested in post-secondary skill acquisition and careers for them? For many who work in the higher education field in Kyrgyzstan, these questions center on a variety of paradoxes we witness as educators, but there is virtually no literature that addresses them. In the following pages I discuss some preliminary research I undertook on such themes in Spring of 2007 in Bishkek.

Some Soviet Legacies

Since interpreting the meaning of higher education in contemporary Kyrgyzstan must have some connection to the previous era, several pre-independence themes should at least be mentioned if not specifically studied. Part of the lack of understanding about how and why higher education remains so highly valued in Kyrgyz society no doubt lies in non-market higher education factors inherited from the former USSR, which might well continue to influence student and parent thinking on the meaning of university entrance. **15** Most Soviet citizens came to believe that their system of education and higher education was among the best in the world, and that borrowing from the West would primarily be borrowing from mediocrity. **16** “Human Capital formation,” whereby students are exhorted to invest in themselves for future private sector rewards, was not a compelling idea during Soviet times when job placement was the function of ministry officials, not job seeking by individuals. At worst, obtaining a higher education diploma would be a means to a ministry job somewhere and a way to avoid working in the fields or factories, but even here obtaining a high level position depended as much on being seen as a committed to the social aims of the state, and not just having some appropriate set of occupational skills.

Soviet universities focused heavily upon humanities study, and even science, technical training institutions and non-humanities departments of pedagogical institutes were heavily infused with humanities values and instruction in both the curricular and social upbringing processes (*vospitaniye*), which were intended to help create Soviet identity. **17** Save for the dialectical materialism embedded in all Soviet educational studies, this non-instrumental humanities concentration at the university in many ways approximates the liberal arts focus of the Western university in the late 19th century. But unlike the American tradition of popular skepticism toward an intellectual elite, the Soviet heritage emphasized becoming a cultured person (*kul'turnyi chelovek*) irrespective of one's profession or occupation.**18** Soviet educational policy was (at least officially) diametrically opposed to tracking and streaming in general secondary education, as this was viewed a bourgeois ploy to divide workers from intellectuals in capitalist countries. Soviet pedagogy was to focus on history, foreign languages, literature, philosophy, geography etc. – with an additional commitment to socialist labor for all. **19** Given the above orientation, even post-secondary institutes in Kyrgyzstan dedicated toward math and science careers and technological skills had a heavy humanities component.

And certainly worth mention are the non-educational functions of universities that affect choices to attend universities in Kyrgyzstan just as they do in the West. University attendance in the USSR was one way that children living in the periphery could move to the center; where they could find different social groups to interact with; and where boys might be able to delay or alter their military obligations to join the army. In Kyrgyzstan, all of these non-educational reasons are also important today, as well as a couple of others soon to be suggested. And intellectualism and respect for knowledge is also part of the pre-Soviet and Russian eras among ethnic Kyrgyz too. Here, poets, artists and singers are celebrated as major figures in Kyrgyz history. Some of the perceived paradoxes related to the market and higher education about to be analyzed are thus partly to be explained with reference to the legacies of the former Soviet educational model, to values for knowledge in Kyrgyz tradition, and to a variety of other social purposes of higher education.

2. Research objectives, data collection and survey questions

There is little published research in Kyrgyzstan about how students make choices concerning university entry or about how Kyrgyz universities actually create new specializations and negotiate their certification by the education ministry. Both considerations are critical for understanding how individuals and institutions might adjust and contribute to needs and demands of the market. Although my larger research interest is concerned with both individual and institutional thinking about the meaning of higher education and how it should be organized, this particular study is focused at the individual level. As the Principal Investigator of an institutional partnership project between the University of Kentucky and several Kyrgyz universities, I had occasion to teach and advise in several universities there between 2003 and 2007. In my various teaching roles in Kyrgyz universities (since 2001), I have been struck by (among other things) high absentee rates and lack of academic persistence by sizable numbers of students in my classes and in the classes of other foreign teachers. Such observations have led to various studies of “academic corruption” among Kyrgyz students and institutions, as well as similar research in other CA countries. **20** To my mind, such work is interesting but sometimes overlooks more basic questions about how the university is understood within post-socialist and Kyrgyz culture and how students and their parents think about and plan for university entrance. “Corruption in higher education” seems not to be diminishing in Kyrgyzstan’s public universities, even though everyone complains about it. So, if students are not learning useful academic skills in the universities and/or seem little concerned about missing coursework potentially related to obtaining gainful employment as a result of university entrance, why are they there exactly and what do they hope to gain from the experience? These are the sorts of questions I was interested in pursuing in the Spring of 2007 at one of the universities I routinely work in: Kyrgyz International University.

IUK was created in 1993, a period of increasing demand for higher education opportunities in the nation. During Soviet times, aspirations for higher education had increased ever since mass secondary education had been achieved in the 1960s and 70s. Later, Perestroika saw increased calls for improving and expanding educational possibilities throughout the USSR, but not until independence in the 1990s was the promise of higher education made explicit in a number of NIS countries. In the late 1980s, Kyrgyzstan had ten regional pedagogical, medical and technological institutes, but only one national university in Bishkek:

the Kyrgyz National University. Major new “public” universities in Kyrgyzstan included IUK and the Bishkek Humanities University (BGU) - which by the mid 1990s were competing for students with the National University - and a reconfigured Arabaev (Women’s) Pedagogical University which now offered a variety of non-pedagogical specializations. Around the same period, several “intergovernmental” universities also entered the fray, including the Turkish Kyrgyz Manas University, Russian Slavonic University, and the American University of Kyrgyzstan (now AUCA). Each of these alternative universities opened ostensibly because the demand for professional and humanities oriented higher education was increasing, while the alleged quality of Kyrgyz state university offerings was reputed to be low.

While lecturing and working with junior faculty in Bishkek in the Spring semester of 2007, I decided to administer a brief pilot survey to students in the three specializations of the IUK unit with which I had developed a long-term relationship, the Institute of Foreign Languages, organized under the “Virtual Academy” of IUK. Like many Kyrgyz universities, IUK has created administrative units that are quasi-private; meaning that they offer programs and charge fees for students within a public university (using public buildings and state supported staff) that are in many ways private. The Virtual Academy at IUK has a variety of specializations driven by student demand rather than by government allocation. Within the Institute of Foreign Languages are three faculties or programs all paid for by student tuition. These include American Studies, Translation Studies and International Journalism. Ostensibly, training in any one of these specializations ought to be understood as career related: to working with foreigners in Kyrgyzstan; to becoming a translator, or to working as a journalist in the country or overseas. If anything, the several student cohorts in the Foreign Languages Institute ought to be more focused on the instrumentality of their studies than many other higher education students in the country, since none were subsidized by the government, and all programs were theoretically oriented to future job possibilities. I surveyed 40 students in two out of three programs during the month of April, 2007, unable to collect data from the two International Journalism groups at the university. These first and second year students rarely came to classes during the first two weeks of April for a variety of reasons beyond the scope of this analysis.

The original intent of the survey developed was to focus upon secondary school students, so the actual survey of first and second year university students required some conversion of the items to make them more relevant to the experiences of beginning at the university. The survey contained ten open-ended questions that for us logically clustered into three categories. The first cluster dealt with why students come to the university (Q #1; Q #4); how they perceived quality differences among Bishkek universities (Q #9), and what they might have done instead of going to the university after secondary school (Q #10). The second cluster probed the link between parent interest and involvement in their child's admission and university studies (Q #3; Q #6), as well as that of personal friends (Q #7). The third cluster focused upon linkages between secondary school preparation and the requirements of the university (Q #5; Q #8).

Students and the university

Question #1 was actually a primary one in our survey, and yielded a complex set of answers that on the one hand need some discussion, but actually require further conversations. Answers to Question #4 reveal some elaboration, but follow-up research planned for the Spring of 2008. In Question #1, I asked "Why did you want to come to the university after finishing school?" Thirty-two students responded that "to get an education" (*"получить образование"*), or "to get higher education" (*"получить высшее образование"*), or "education is a must," or is "very important." Among these, ten students gave no further elaboration: Education was an end in itself. In only eight answers were such terms as "profession" or "specialist" to be seen. For example, one student who responded to the "why" question indicated this had been a life-long dream: "I have had a dream since I was in the first grade – to enter the university - because in our time, without higher education – there is nowhere to go" (*"без образования – никуда"*). Two students responded that love of English as a subject was their reason for coming to the university, and at least half a dozen indicated that becoming a translator had become a personal goal since their studies in secondary school, which they had found compelling.

In essence, there were three sorts of responses to the question of "why" education from the perspective of its instrumentality for future careers. Most who elaborated upon why they came to the

university suggested that higher education was for personal enrichment first and career needs should come second. These students indicated that “knowledge” (*znanie*) and/or a diploma was their reason for entering the university. For example, one student claimed s/he had come “because my future is important for me. The way I will live further (depends on higher education). It is very important for a person –to study, then to work. I have to realize myself in this life.” Such students had a realization that higher education was useful for the future, but had not narrowed the general belief in such an education to actual skills they would need in order to be successful. As mentioned before, a small subset (8) of students did use the word “profession” or “specialist” in explaining what they were after at the university, like the student who claimed: “I want to get a good education in order to find a better job. (I want) to become a specialist with a diploma (*дипломированный специалист*), and to study at the university opens big opportunities.” Finally, a very few others also linked their reason to being at the university to social status and national progress, like the student who argued: “In the future, I want to be a successful person; I want to get a high-paid job. I think it is impossible to achieve it without a higher education. I believe that in future I will be a needed person (*нужный человек*) - for my family, and for my country.”

Given an outsider’s construction of the purpose of higher education, I pushed further in Question #4 for students to links connections between the world of employment and the world of higher education. The question read: “Do you think that the university will help you to get a good job after graduation?” A second part of the question inquired about other reasons why students might have come. Many students believed that the university could help them to find work, but only indirectly. They suggested that acquiring knowledge while at the university would be important in finding work later, but did not suggest any formal ties between the university and careers. They would have to find work independently once they had a diploma. Some students only suggested that they “hoped” the university would be of help, but expressed no idea of how. A few even despaired of this, and thought their primary chance for work lay outside the country. Among the many who were confident they might find work upon university completion argued: “Yes, I think my university will help me to get a god job, and I will be able to become a translator or a teacher. I want to study at the university because it is interesting, prestigious,

and I will be able to get the knowledge I need.” And a second who claimed: “the university will help to get knowledge that might help me to find good job. But it is not only knowledge I will get at the university, (but) also experience in communication, of working with people, and meeting new friends.” Among the more pessimistic were the two students who opined: “I hope that after the university I will find a good job for myself, but sometimes I worry that this will not happen. It is difficult to find a job in Kyrgyzstan. There are a lot of unemployed (people) here,” and “I hope very much for a good ending. But if I cannot find a job in my motherland, will be looking for one in another country.” Nevertheless, many students seemed to share the belief that going to the university had general utility where there was little anywhere else. As one student argued: “of course, everybody dreams about it – about a good job and a high salary; but then we will see; it is still only uncertainty (*neizvestnos)t* for us. But you have to study, because, I will repeat it again, without higher education you are nobody (*без образования ты – никто*).”

I have found in other fieldwork that Kyrgyz secondary school students and parents have clear views on higher education quality in the country, and can articulate which universities have higher or lower prestige. **21** Most of the students in our sample had views on university quality, and pointed to characteristics of teachers and materials as part of the differences. This was the focus of my Question #9. On the other hand, many students opined that individual initiative was a big factor in university studies. Since all programs are approved by the education ministry, students who studied hard could do well in any location, while those who did not, would get an inferior education. Some universities, according to one respondent, seem to allow weaker students to continue even if they do not work hard: “Yes, one university differs from another one, but in general, there is no big difference, because the system of education is identical everywhere, what differs is preparation; if a student wants to study he/she will study at any university, everything depends on his/her desire. Several alternative universities in Bishkek had reputations for rigor that seemingly would prevent weaker students from graduating: AUCA, Turkish Manas and Slavonic. Several students mentioned these, as did this one: “Well, I can say with confidence that in Slavonic everything is very strict and they teach excellently. But to get there you have to pass

testing, etc. And in AUCA it is better, and education is cheaper (since there are available scholarships for some students).” University quality was also linked to differences in teacher quality, to materials used in classrooms, and availability of computers. Reputed corruption in other universities (not IUK) was mentioned several times among the answers to Question #9, while significantly, the presence of international teachers/lecturers was associated with program quality (at least in the English language specializations). All students in our survey felt that Bishkek universities were the best in the nation. One student put it this way: “In Bishkek, there are a lot of good universities, but there are shortcomings, too. There are not enough computers, small classrooms, a few good teachers and a lot of bribes; but on the positive side we have foreigners and volunteers”.

In Question #10, I asked students what they would be doing were they not in the university. The responses to this were as culturally revealing as most of the other answers so far. Of the forty answers to this, eleven claimed such thoughts never entered their minds. They were going to the university and they had not thought of other options. Another eight did not even answer the question – which can be treated either as missing data or perhaps as further testimonial that they had no other plans. About a quarter of the students said they would be working if not in the university, although there was not specification at what sorts of jobs or if this would be temporary work until the next university admissions process. And eight students said they would study independently in hopes of entering the university in a subsequent year. Typical of the responses to this question was the student who said he would try to take correspondence courses, but “if not successful, I will work for a year, and enter next year. Only I will try with my own capacities, without corruption.”

Summary reflections on cluster one

Answers to questions posed for Cluster One reflect several themes already visible in item discussions. It seems clear from these responses that higher education in Kyrgyzstan is not considered as an opportunity to collect some discreet set of occupational skills related to later employment. Higher

education is considered as an opportunity to sit for and receive some collection of knowledge as delivered by teachers. This knowledge is thought to be within the texts and lectures given, and not to be selectively chosen by students in accordance with particular outcomes (beyond the choice of specialization).

In Kyrgyzstan, university attendance is theoretically a full time undertaking: students are formally required to be in class between 36 and 42 hours per week. None of the 40 students in my sample worked part time or had other preoccupations. To be a student was to be a student in the first two years of the university – even if classroom attendance might have appeared optional on different days and for different classes. To be honest, I did hear of students who sometimes had outside employment, and by the third year of study, some students reputedly had real jobs and rarely came to classes. But even in these cases those involved remained officially on the books and at the university. In the official ministry standards for approved programs like my students were in there are no internships or work-study possibilities. So, the fact that students go missing from class so often and still pass can only be surmised in pages ahead.

Comprehending how a contemporary university student can talk about their studies without mentioning skill acquisition as central, nor where part time work is possible on the side or in addition to studies, gives a cultural perspective to the statistical paradoxes discussed earlier. The world of work and the world of university studies are not tightly coupled in Kyrgyzstan as they increasingly are in the West. One reason seems to be that the contemporary Kyrgyz university is a holdover from that of the Soviet period, where these worlds were not directly connected either. And absent private sector demand for different skill sets among graduates, what impetus is there for alternative ways of conceptualizing Kyrgyz Universities today?

Parents, friends and the university

Cluster Two of our survey was interested in the link between parent interest and involvement in their child's' university career, as well as that of friends. Question #3 inquired who was paying for student education in the two specializations which were the site of the survey. Unlike the western (and

for sure the American) experience, almost all students reported that it was their parents who were footing the entire university bill for their studies. Thirty – two of forty students reported that their parents were paying university fees, while three reported that they were also contributing to school costs. Two claimed that other relatives were paying, and only one student claimed that he (or she) was the primary payer. Two reported that they were “budget” students who were subsidized by the national government in their studies, but many other students argued this was not possible. The budget spaces underwritten by the national government were not created for any of the faculties in this division of IUK, and thus students who had entered here knew they were entering a tuition based course of study. Most of the students indicated that they had competed for budget spaces in the national competition for open slots, but none of them had become eligible via this process. So, they had chosen these faculties to study in at their own expense. This is all in contradiction to the former Soviet times when access to higher education was limited, but once admitted to a university, pedagogical or other technical institute - all costs were paid by the government and students also received stipends.

In Question #6, students were asked about their parent’s opinion about their entering the university and what was expected from them. Considering that most students reported their parents paying tuition for higher education, it was not surprising to find that virtually every student reported happy parents on this item. Many also indicated that their parents had expectations for them to be successful in their studies. One responded: “My parents are very happy that I have entered the university; and, of course, they expect that after graduating I will become a good translator and a specialist in demand.” Another replied: “Every parent thinks of course positively about entering the university;” and another: “My parents are very happy, expecting that I will turn out into a good specialist.”

Finally, we asked in Question # 7, “Did your school friends apply for the university? Have they come to the same one as you have?” Twenty-eight students reported that most of their friends entered a university, but some had gone to other places dependent upon interest and resources. Some also admitted that university costs had kept friends from going into higher education. Six students said their friends had not gone further in their studies; four that a few had. One student answered: My school friends –

who had opportunities – entered; others entered correspondence departments – to work and study at the same time – but later plan to transfer to the day (regular) classes. Still somewhat 96% have entered.” Another student said: “The majority of my former class entered the university, but not the same one. Everybody has a different social status, and they are choosing specialties in accordance to their desire.”

Paradoxes of parental support and peer networks

Either the 40 students who were in our sample are atypical, or their substantial support by parents and from friends to attend higher education is laudable. IUK is not an elite university, and as indicated earlier, students do not perceive direct links from their studies to the world of work. Almost half of our respondents were also from rural backgrounds, and not from the capital city. We do not have income data on these students, but at best, our sample of students must approximate the population norms of the country, where per capita income is around \$2,000, about 20 % of the potential labor force is unemployed, and 40% of the population lives below the official poverty line. Tuition at IUK in these specializations in 2007 was about \$400 per year, and this included no living or material support. Most Bishkek students live at home while in the university, and those from the village live with sisters, uncles or other relatives while studying. The fact that all forty of our students aspire to higher education even in the face of uncertainty about its utility is impressive (or foolish, if we think of the university only as utilitarian to a career). And, that most of the students report all or most of those they went to school with are also in a university somewhere only corroborates that the culture of higher education in Kyrgyzstan is different than that of the West.

Preparation and Difficulties of University Study

The third cluster of our study focused upon linkages between secondary school preparation and the requirements of the university (Q #5; Q #8). Here we find interesting observations about preparedness for higher education and about perceptions of difficulty in the university. We asked in question #5 about if a student’s secondary school education was good enough for entering the university,

and what the weak links (if any) there were in their preparation. Of all the questions asked, answers to this question were the most interesting and at the same time paradoxical. Fewer than half of the 40 students who answered this question (16) responded that they had been well enough prepared to enter the university, seventeen (17) said “no,” and the rest gave either mixed replies or no answers. Many complained about school quality in the years before arriving at IUK, but many also claimed they obtain extra knowledge outside of their formal studies; meanwhile, one or two students argued that they themselves had not been diligent enough in their earlier studies and had to do some catch-up when they arrived at the university. Language of instruction issues also emerged in this discussion. Most students are ethnic Kyrgyz, and took their lessons in secondary schools in their native language. The language of the university, though, is still officially Russian. Some students argued that they were not prepared to speak and read in Russian at the level required to be successful in the university. And, some even argued that their training in English – which is a prerequisite in the IUK specializations discussed here – was completely underdeveloped or inadequate. One student from the village argued: “school education was not enough for me – because I did not finish school here (Bishkek), but in a village. I even have problems with the Russian language. But to know English – I am already better. You do not study the same way at school, (now) it is very difficult to study at the university.” Another student said: “No, I do not think that school education was enough for the university. School programs are easy, and there you will be given a (good /passing) grade for any (subject). We did not have any preparation for the university at school, we were preparing only for the exams.”

The earlier argument made about the declining status of secondary education in the country was corroborated by a number of students. Several observed that teachers were in short supply in many subjects, and non-existent in others. This did not seem to deter graduation from secondary schools however. One student claimed that there was enough preparation for university in general, “but there were weaknesses, for example, in the study of exact sciences (math, physics, and chemistry) and even English.” Another claimed shortages of teachers in geography and history, and therefore little preparation

in such subjects. At the end of the day, however, almost all students argued that lack of preparation was not the most critical element in entering the university: it was desire and effort to perform once admitted.

The paradox of how so many students could enter the university if they reported inadequate knowledge was partly addressed with reference to their answers to Question #8: “How difficult was it for you to be admitted to the university.” Here, only 14 reported some degree of difficulty, while more than half (21) said it was easy. Interestingly, some students reported that entry to the university was almost a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood. One young person claimed: “Yes, it is difficult to enter the university. To become a student means a person feels him/herself as an adult.” One student complained: “Well, there were very complicated questions and limited time to answer them. You have to think quickly and to solve everything quickly. The difficulty is that we got accustomed to school culture, and now you have to step into adult life. You have to work hard to prepare and follow the entire university program.” Finally, one student volunteered that corruption was part of the entrance process. S/he claimed that entry to the university was not difficult, “But we have corruption very well developed here, and you feel offended during the admission process. You count on your knowledge, but in our time, everything is decided by knowledge and acquaintance.”

The paradox of how secondary education can be in decline while higher education enrollments remain high is thus partly explained by the observation that without an objective accountability system in the country, educational “performance” in the university has become almost a secondary issue, although no one would publicly admit this. As in the above discussion, many parents feel (as reported by their children) that it is their responsibility to get their kids into the university by any possible means, their academic performance in secondary school notwithstanding. There is also the belief as testified to in student answers here that previous deficiencies can be overcome once in the university with some extra effort. And, since there is a strong academic market in a country where everyone wants to go to the university, corners are likely cut in the admissions and evaluation process, as so many other studies suggest. **22**

3. Discussion

It seems a paradox that Kyrgyzstan in the period of extended economic marginality continues to attract and retain about half of its secondary school graduates in higher education. The number of students in higher education almost quadrupled in the 90s, while the number of higher educational institutions increased five-fold. So too, it seems difficult to understand how enrollments have increased in the current era when most educational costs are borne by parents and not the state, as before. There are no loans or grants for study, save for several thousand “budget” or scholarship spaces in some specializations – that are often bid for as well under the table. This is all happening in a nation where the average salary is \$40 per month, while the annual tuition cost at different universities is \$300-\$800. And, it is also paradoxical to us how students can be admitted and become successful in the university when they often indicate they were insufficient prepared at their secondary school level.

Part of the explanation of the above paradoxes for us is that higher education in Kyrgyzstan today is valued almost irrespective of its potential for the job market. Students want “to get higher education” (*получить высшее образование*) as a goal unto itself. Kyrgyz and Soviet enthusiasm for “getting good knowledge” still survives. Meanwhile, students in their answers on our survey only rarely even used the concept of skill. While very few of the graduates of many university programs are likely to gain related employment in Kyrgyzstan today (and there seems no national office for collecting such data), our survey suggested that many students cannot imagine a life without having a higher education and to become a specialist with a diploma (*дипломированный специалист*). With regard to how students can be successful in the university while their secondary educations are less thorough than before, the general belief that deficiencies can be corrected later, combined with the suggestion that corruption is visible at various university levels may explain much of this.

It might be the case that the actual technical skills needed in the emerging occupational markets of Kyrgyzstan would have been better facilitated in the now almost defunct technical institutes that worked during Soviet times, were they reinstated and refocused upon the emerging occupational needs of the country. The accounting and marketing skills required in small scale agriculture, retail (reselling)

of goods imported from China and Turkey, etc., and work in a growing service sector (in restaurants, stores, and tourism) do not require five year specialized training in the humanities. So, here is the rub: what ought to be the purposes of learning, and how in this case does the desire to be a cultured individual conflict with occupational training? The difficulty in answering this question lies partly behind the paradoxes in higher education we see in the Kyrgyz Republic.

“Corruption, “of course, is another important matter at any level in Kyrgyzstan. It is also a tricky matter to operationalize when a researcher enters a university under the guise of colleague and teacher. I attempted to avoid this ethical dilemma for purposes of this research, even though I indirectly heard a variety of practices occurring either at IUK or others nearby. If one has relatives highly placed in a university, you can get preferential treatment; if you become a personal favorite of the chair or dean, you can get the answer to exam questions before the test; if you are persistent enough to continually retake an exam from an overworked teacher, she can relax the standards in your case; and/or you can sometimes just pay money under the table for a grade or for a diploma itself. I did not delve into such matters in this survey, although I did hear (undocumented) tales

Unfortunately, in this first round of surveys many unanswered questions remain. I am convinced that non-occupational and non-pedagogical factors are both strong in the desire to go to the university today in Kyrgyzstan. One still needs some formal permission to be living in the center in this nation, and with the erosion of the rural infrastructure and loss of work in the country, getting to Bishkek under any circumstance is probably a higher priority today than it used to be. Parents are reported very proud when their children become university students, and likely also enjoy the possibility that they might stay in the city even after their university studies are over. But we did not interview parents in this work. And, there are gender issues in Kyrgyzstan today. One way to temporarily avoid conscription and/or to become an army officer rather than an enlisted man is via university military training. For rural girls, one way to avoid being pressured to marry and stay in the village is to become a student and move to the city. With bride kidnapping on the rise in Kyrgyzstan, surely this has been one additional reason to become a student. I am also sure there are other social reasons to attend the university in Kyrgyzstan – just as there

are a host of such reasons in developed countries. But these and others suggested above remain for further study.

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Notes

1. See these pronouncements by former President A. Akaev in *Education for All – A Resource for Social Transition in Kyrgyzstan*. Bishkek, KG: Innovation Center “ARCHI,” 2003. See also the *National Report on Higher Education in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan: Current Status and Prospect*. Prepared by S. Jusenbaev, and F. Ryskulueva. Paris: UNESCO (No Date). Available from http://www.unesco.kz/education/he/kyrgyz/moec_kg_eng.htm; INTERNET.
2. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) *The Influence of Civil Society on the Human Development Process in Kyrgyzstan*. National Human Development Report. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005; World Bank Education Statistics, available from [web.worldbank.org/servlets/ECR?contentMDK=2033452&sitePK=395767](http://www.worldbank.org/servlets/ECR?contentMDK=2033452&sitePK=395767); INTERNET; UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Available from (<http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/>) INTERNET. In 1993, only 7.6% of university students paid for their higher education, while in 1995, this figure was 39.9%, and in 2001, 84.6%. See the *National Report*, op. cit.
3. UNESCO (<http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/>) INTERNET reports that only 14% of eligible secondary school graduates in Kyrgyzstan were enrolled in tertiary institutions in 1991, while Turkmenistan and Tajikistan enrolled 22%; Uzbekistan 30%, and Kazakhstan, 40%. For 2005, Kyrgyzstan had 41% enrolled, Kazakhstan 52%, and Tajikistan only 17%. No data were given for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

4. Trow, M. *Reflections on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access: Forms and Phases of Higher Education in Modern Societies since WWII*. Berkeley, CA, Institute of Governmental Studies, 2005, paper WP2005-4.
5. See the international regional economists' overview of trends and needs in the region in Mertaugh, Michael. "Education in Central Asia, with Particular Reference to the Kyrgyz Republic." In *Challenges for Education in Central Asia*, edited by S. Heyneman and A. DeYoung. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishers, 2004, pp.153-180; and in Anderson, Kathryn, Pomfret, Richard, and Usseinova, Nataliya. "Education in Central Asia during the Transition to a Market Economy." In *Challenges for Education in Central Asia*, op. cit, pp. 131-152. Classical analyses and perspectives are presented by Schultz, T. *Investing in People: The Economics of Population Quality*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1981; and by Becker, Gary. "The Age of Human Capital." In *Education Globalization and Social Change* edited by H. Lauder et. al. London: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp.292-294.
6. See Collins, R. *The Credential Society*. New York, Academic Press, 1997. For a thorough analytical analysis of the transformation of American public universities toward more professional and technical fields over the 20th century, see Brint, S. et al., "From the Liberal Arts to the Practical Arts in American Colleges and Universities: Organizational Analysis and Curricular Change. *The Journal of Higher Education*, no. 76 (2): 151-180.
7. See Clark, B. "University Transformation: Primary Pathways to University Achievement and Autonomy." In *The Future of the City of Intellect*, edited by S. Brint. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 322-342; and Stromquist, N. *Education in a Globalized World: the Connectivity of Economic Power, Technology, and Knowledge*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002.
8. Gleason, G. *The Central Asian States*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press., 1997; Gleason, G. *Markets and Politics: Structural Reform and Political Change in Central Asia*. London: Routledge, 2003.
9. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2007. Available from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/kg.html>; INTERNET

10. See Olcott, M. *Central Asia's Second Chance*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005; also see Slaughter, R. "Poor Kyrgyzstan." In *Global Studies: Russia, the Eurasian Republics and Central/Eastern Europe*, edited by M. Goldman, (11th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002, pp. 231-236. Contradicting statistics on unemployment among university graduates can be found in *The National Report*, op. cit.; and also in *Update on State of Affairs in Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan* (undated). Available from

<http://www.ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/tempus/countries/higher/kyrgyzstan.pdf>;

INTERNET.

11. UNDP, 2005, op. cit.; *Update on State of Affairs in Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.

12. See such discussions in the Open Society Institute (OSI), *Educational development in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: Challenges and ways forward*. 2003. Available from <http://www.osi-edu.net/esp>; INTERNET; UNDP. *Corruption in Kyrgyzstan*. Bishkek: Center of Public Opinion Studies and Forecasts, 2000; and USAID. *The National Scholarship Test of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2003: First Look*. Available from <http://www.testing.kg/en/testing>; INTERNET. See also the recent Kyrgyz critique of education quality in the Kyrgyz Republic by Bisembin, D. "The Declining Quality of Schooling in the Kyrgyz Republic." *Polysphere*, Oct. 11, 2007. Available from <http://www.polysphere.org/news/?id=90>; INTERNET.

13. See Mertaugh, M., op. cit., for critique of expanding higher education in the republic. For statistics on the increasing number of degree programs and disciplines, see the *National Report*, op. cit.

14. See these discussions in Dzhaparova, R. "On whether Kyrgyzstan should Join the Bologna Process." *Russian Education and Society*, no. 48(10) (2006): 92-98; and in Merrill, M. "Internationalization of Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan: Three Potential Problems." *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, no 5 (2), 2006: 34-40.

15. For discussion of why and how universities were accessed during Soviet times, see Dobson, R. "Social Status and Inequality of Access to Higher Education in the USSR." In *Power and Ideology in*

Education, edited by J. Karabel and A. Halsey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 232-253.

See also European Commission. *Implementation of the Implications of the Bologna Process in Kyrgyzstan*. 2007. Available from

[Http://ec.europa.eu/education/programs/tempus/countries/higher/Kyrgyzstan.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/programs/tempus/countries/higher/Kyrgyzstan.pdf); INTERNET.

16. See this discussion in Pitt, J. and Pavlova, M. "Pedagogy in Transition: From Labor Training to Humanistic Technology Education in Russia." In *Education and Civic Culture in Post-Communist Countries*, edited by S. Webber and I. Liikanen. London: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 231-247. This view is also consistent with my personal conversations in-country during the past decade.

17. See DeYoung, A. "The Erosion of *Vospitanye* (Social Upbringing) in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan." *Communist and Post Communist Studies*, no. 40(2) (2007):239-256. See also Holmes, B., Read, G., and Voskresenskaya, N. *Russian Education: Tradition and Transition*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995.

18. Clark, B. "University Transformation: Primary Pathways to University Achievement and Autonomy." In *The Future of the City of Intellect*, edited by S. Brint. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 322-342. See also Kliebard, H. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (3rd edition). New York, Routledge, 2004.

19. Holmes, B., Read, G., and Voskresenskaya, N. *Russian Education: Tradition and Transition*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995.

20. Reeves, Madeleine "Cultivating "Citizens of a New Type:" The Politics and Practice of Educational Reform at the American University of Kyrgyzstan." In *Challenges for Education in Central Asia*, edited by S. Heyneman and A. DeYoung. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishers, 2004, pp.365-386. See also UNDP, *Corruption in Kyrgyzstan*. Bishkek: Center of Public Opinion Studies and Forecasts, 2000.

21. Aspirations for higher education were major themes in all four of the secondary school case studies presented in DeYoung, A.J., Reeves, M. and Valyayeva, G.K. *Surviving the Transition? Schools and*

Schooling in the Kyrgyz Republic since Independence. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006.

22. See this discussion in the UNDP report, *Corruption in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit. See also how the language of instruction debate is involved in how students and their parents think about university entrance in DeYoung, A. Instructional Language, National Identity, and Higher Education in Rural Kyrgyzstan: The Debate in At-Bashy. *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, no. 5(1);14-19.

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web.worldbank.org/servlets/ECR?contentMDK=2033452&sitePK=395767; INTERNET.