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# 9 Kyrgyzstan

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## 9.1 NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

The Kyrgyz Republic, also called Kyrgyzstan, is a small, mountainous, landlocked country bordering Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and China. Kyrgyzstan is a former Soviet republic that proclaimed its independence in 1991. As of January 1, 2020, the population of the Kyrgyz Republic is 6,500,000, with almost 35 percent of the population under fifteen years of age (National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2000). The ethnic distribution of the country consists of Kyrgyz (73.5 percent), Uzbek (14.7 percent), Russian (5.5 percent), Dungan (1.1 percent), and other (5.2 percent), which includes Uyghur, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Korean, and German (CIA Factbook, 2019). The country is rural, with only one-third of the population living in urban areas.

At the time of independence, more than 60 percent of the population was employed by collective farms placed to produce for the Soviet Union. In addition, the industry sector, accounting for more than 30 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), was also geared toward serving the Soviet industrial complex (Asian Development Bank, 2015). Like other former Soviet republics, the economy of Kyrgyzstan has faced an economic and financial crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For instance, GDP per capita declined by almost 50 percent, from \$1,096 in 1990 to \$535 in 1995, and recovered to the 1990 level only in 2018 (Krawchenko et. al, 2021). In addition, 78 percent of the population lived below the poverty rate (\$3.20 per day) in 2000; however, it dropped by 20 percent in 2017 (World Bank 2020). As a result, the country's

Human Development Index value for 2019 is 0.697, placing it in the medium human development category (United Nations Development Program, 2020).

The national governing context according to the World Bank's Governance Indicators is as follows: Across the indicators, none cross the 50th percentile. Only regulatory quality approaches the mean. That said, the trends across the other indicators are for the most part positive. Those making the most progress – again from a relatively low base – are control of corruption, rule of law, government effectiveness, and voice and accountability. This suggests that the national context of governance is improving, but is still low comparatively (Figure 9.1).

Regarding the economic competitiveness, the Global Competitive Index of the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks Kyrgyzstan 89th out of 141 countries regarding public sector performance with a score of 47.2 out of 100 and the burden of regulations ranked 82nd with a score of 39.2 for 2018–2019 (Schwab, 2019).<sup>1</sup> It scored the future orientation of the government at 37.1, ranked 129th. For the Skills pillar, most closely related to higher education quality, WEF scored the country 36.8 out of 100 for the skillset of graduates and a score of 34.1 on the ease of finding skilled employees indicators. This ranked the country 130th and 119th respectively on those indicators out of a total of 141. Regarding corporate governance, which arguably is different from public University governance, WEF ranked Kyrgyz Republic with a score of 58.3 (ranked 78th). None bode well for higher education governance. The burden of regulation is high, the future orientation of the government is low, and the current educational system is underperforming.

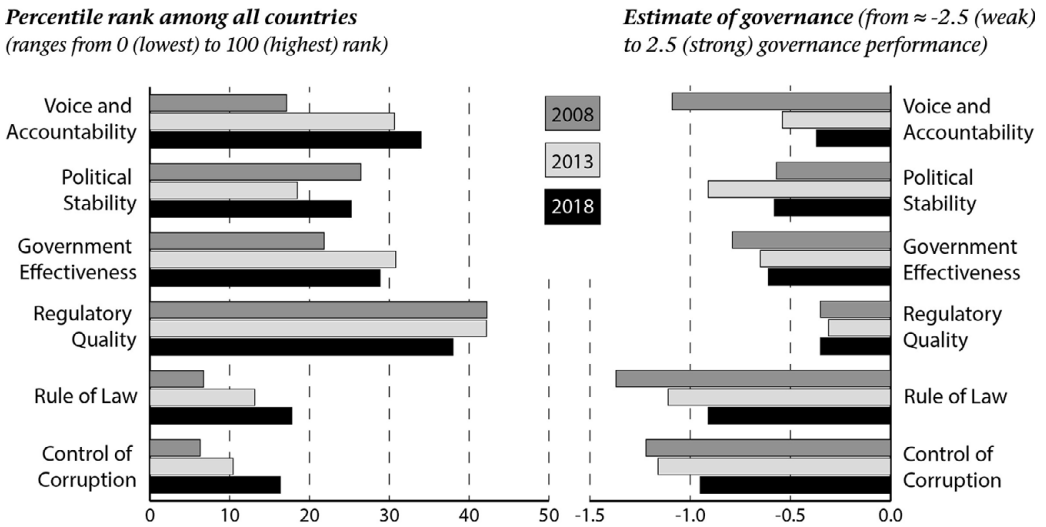
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### **Shape and Structure of Higher Education**

In terms of higher education, the enrollments witnessed rapid growth after independence due to the expansion of the higher education system and rapid growth of youth enrollment due to various reasons (see DeYoung, 2011). The Law on Education adopted in 1992 created conditions for diversification and expansion of the system, resulting in growth from twelve HEIs in 1991 to fifty-seven in 2020. However, there were fluctuations within these years as new institutions opened and then quickly closed (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018). The diversification of the system emerged due to the creation of new institutions in all regions and the establishment of new branches, departments, and

<sup>1</sup> The prior competitive framework included a higher education pillar and a quality score. These no longer are included in the 4.0 version of the WEF framework.

Figure 9.1 Worldwide governance indicators for Kyrgyzstan



educational centers within existing institutions and the reorganization of vocational institutions (*technikums*) into higher education institutions to offer market-oriented programs (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018). Nevertheless, similar to other Central Asian countries, universities in Kyrgyzstan continue to produce graduates in fields that are not relevant to the demands of the labor market, and those in relevant areas are so poorly trained that they are unemployable without significant retraining (Krawchenko et al., 2021).

According to the government website, higher education in Kyrgyzstan represents a very diversified system with thirty-three public and forty private educational institutions as of 2020 ([edu.gov.kg](http://edu.gov.kg)), including two jointly sponsored HEIs (sponsored by government agreement with Turkey [Manas] and Russia [Slavic]), American University of Central Asia (AUCA), the Ala-Too International University, and International University of Kyrgyzstan. In addition, higher education became more linguistically diverse after independence. Therefore, improving the quality of education in both the national language (Kyrgyz) and English and Russian became a focus of educational policy. Although the state law on language promoted Kyrgyz as a national language, the lack of adequate textbooks, dictionaries, and teaching materials in Kyrgyz hindered the implementation of this policy (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018). In addition, some universities have started programs in English, particularly medical universities, that attract students from South

Asia. International HEIs such as the American University of Central Asia and the Kyrgyz–Turkish Manas University, in turn, offer programs in English or Turkish and have degrees recognized jointly by both governments (Merrill et al., 2021).

As part of educational reforms, Kyrgyzstan aims to promote the principles of the Bologna Process. In August 2011, the government issued a decree requiring all universities to implement bachelor's and master's degrees, using credit hours, by the following fall (Merrill & Ryskulova, 2012; Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2011). According to the 2011 decree, bachelor's degrees in Kyrgyzstan were four years and a master's two, except for medical degrees, conservatory degrees, and a few other specializations. The transition took place in year-by-year phases (Merrill et al., 2021). First, in 2012, all first-year entering students pursued bachelor's degrees, while those who had entered a year earlier continued in five-year specialist diploma programs. The transition continued until 2016 when the first bachelor's degree and the last specialist diploma recipients graduated simultaneously (Merrill et al., 2021). The PhD programs were introduced first in some specialties, which also were piloted in six universities. The PhD programs now have a duration of three years with 180 credits; however, some of the PhD programs are longer, such as medical programs with six years and 360 credits.

Kyrgyzstan was the first state in Central Asia to introduce a merit-based national University admission exam or General Republication Test (Obshee Respublikanskoe Testirovanie [ORT]) with the funding of USAID and by the initiation of the former Minister of Education Camilla Sharshkeeva to combat corruption in University admissions (Drummond, 2020). By introducing the ORT, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) attempted to ensure equal access to higher education and support for rural youth. In addition, the ORT aimed to achieve an independent, objective, merit-based selection of secondary school graduates to study in higher educational institutions based on government scholarships (Shamatov & Bahry, 2020).

As mentioned above, Kyrgyzstan's 1992 Law on Education introduced tuition fees for students to study in higher education (Brunner & Tillet, 2007). It meant that in addition to allocations from state budgets at state universities, "contract" or fee-paying places for students were introduced. Currently, a significant part of higher education institutions' budgets is based on students' tuition fees. Every year, the government of Kyrgyzstan allocates around 5,000 budget places based on the country's needs for different specialists. Priority is given to teaching specialties, and about half of the

budget grants are for “future teachers.” However, due to low salaries, lowering status, limited future opportunities, and hardships of the work demanded from the profession, studying to be a teacher is in less demand (Shamatov & Bahry, 2020).

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### Higher Education Governing Context

The amended 2021 Law on Education proclaims that the governance of the education system is carried out by the government of the Kyrgyz Republic, central and regional government education authorities of the Kyrgyz Republic, and local government bodies. The structure of the education system is developed and approved by the government of the Kyrgyz Republic within the powers assigned to it by law. In addition, the governance of educational organizations is based on the principles of democratization, decentralization, independence, and self-government. The Ministry of Education and Science is the primary organization setting and approving the organization and governance of education. However, some specialized higher education institutions are also affiliated with the other ministries in the country. For instance, the Academy of Management is established under the president of the Kyrgyz Republic, MIA Academy under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Kyrgyz State Medical Academy under the Ministry of Health, the Diplomatic Academy under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Bishkek Higher Military School under the Ministry of Defense, and the Osh Pedagogical Institute is accounted to the Local Regional State Administration (Erasmus Plus, 2017).

As a part of the Bologna Process reforms, Kyrgyzstan established independent accreditation of academic programs to assure the public about the quality of higher education programs. To achieve quality assurance of higher education institutions, the working group, including the Ministry of Education and Science (MEoS), developed specific regulations approved by the Kyrgyz government that created the legal basis to start independent accreditation of University academic programs in September 2016 (Ryskulova, 2019). According to the Law on Education, the National Accreditation Council (NAC) is a body that recognizes or denies the activities of independent accreditation agencies based on the regulations established by the government of the Kyrgyz Republic. The National Accreditation Council (NAC) chair is the minister of education, and NAC functions on a pro bono basis. Although the accreditation system is under the control of the MoES, and while the relationship between the MoES and newly established

independent accreditation agencies is not clear, accreditation of higher education institutions is nevertheless a requirement for granting University degrees (Ryskulova, 2019).

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## 9.2 GOVERNING BODY PROFILE

The governance of higher education institutions varies based on the status of universities – public, private, or universities established based on international treaties/agreements. For instance, the governance of Turkish Manas University is significantly different from Kyrgyz–Russian Slavic University. Likewise, private universities have different approaches to University governance structures. However, the governance of public/state universities is outlined in the Law on Education. This chapter describes the governance of public universities that are prevalent in the Kyrgyzstan higher education system.

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### Body Structure

Most public higher education institutions are governed by the Academic Councils and headed by rectors of universities. For instance, the republic's largest University, Kyrgyz National University (KNU), named after Jusup Balasagyn in 2002, is a national University in Kyrgyzstan. It is located in the capital city of Bishkek. KNU is the oldest University in Kyrgyzstan as it was founded in 1925, first as a Kyrgyz Institute of Education with an affiliate campus in Osh. As a prominent University in the country, it has more than twenty faculties with various specialties in social sciences, linguistics, medicine, business, law, teacher education, engineering, and computer science. The main governing body of this University is the Academic Council; however, the rector of this only national University is appointed by the president of the country.

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### Membership

Members of the public higher education institutions' Academic Councils consist by default of rector, vice-rectors, deans, department heads, and senior faculty. The size of this body consists of up to twenty to thirty members.

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### Member Appointment Processes

Not all members of the Academic Councils are elected. They consist of the rector (who also serves as chairman of the Council), vice-rectors, deans of faculties, heads of specialized departments, heads of various scientific and pedagogical departments, and representatives from trade unions and student nongovernmental organizations. This contingent should not exceed 50 percent of the total number of Academic Council members. Other Council members include representatives of faculties and other educational structural units such as research institutes, professors, and associate professors. These individuals are appointed. Members of the Academic Council may include the heads of scientific and research institutions, significant scientists, artists, and cultural workers with a specialist training profile who are not employed in the specific institutions. Still, they may be either well-known figures in education or alumni.

The rector approves the composition of the Academic Council of a higher educational institution for a period of two years in agreement with the Ministry of Education and Science.

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### Chair Appointment Processes

According to the 2021 amended Law on Education,

the head (Rector) of a state higher educational institution, except for the leaders of specialized state higher educational institutions such as internal affairs, foreign affairs, and defense, is elected at a general conference of the faculty and staff of a state higher educational institution from among specialists who have academic degree, as well as the relevant qualifications, by secret ballot with a simple majority of votes. The nomination of candidates for the position of the head of a state higher educational institution is carried out by its educational and other structural subdivisions or in the order of self-nomination. Elections of the head of a state higher educational institution are held and considered valid if more than half of the total staff of the state higher educational institution took part in them.” (Law on Education 2003 last amended in 2021)

Further, the Law states that

a candidate is considered elected if they receive more than 50% percent of the votes from the number of those who took part in the election. If none of the candidates has received the required number of votes, a repeat voting is held, in

which the two candidates with the largest number of votes participate. A candidate who has received more than 50% percent of the votes from the number of those who took part in the repeated voting is considered elected. The elected candidate is approved in the position of the head of the state higher educational institution within ten days from the date of the elections by the head of the authorized state body in the field of education. (Ministry of Education and Science)

Therefore, while the University community elects the rector, the final appointment lies with the ministry.

The head of a state higher education institution is elected and approved for the position for five years. However, the same person cannot be elected and approved for the role of the head of a state higher educational institution for more than two consecutive terms. Regular elections of a new head of a state higher educational institution are held no later than thirty calendar days from the date of termination of the powers of the current leader. The head of a state higher educational institution shall exercise powers until the newly elected head of this higher educational institution takes office. The composition and procedure for forming the organizing committee for the conduct of elections are determined by the Academic Council of the higher educational institution and approved by the “authorized state body” in the field of education of the Kyrgyz Republic (The Republic of Kyrgyzstan, 2003).

The recall of the head of a state higher education institution may be initiated by at least two-thirds of the votes of the total number of members of the Academic Council of a state higher education institution. The decision to recall the head of a state higher educational institution is made at a general meeting of the staff of a state higher educational institution by a simple majority of votes and approved by the prime minister of the Kyrgyz Republic. The approval of the decision on the early termination of powers entails the dismissal of the head of a state higher educational institution from office.

In the event of early termination of the powers of the head of a state higher educational institution, the “authorized state body” (The Republic of Kyrgyzstan, 2003) in the field of education of the Kyrgyz Republic shall appoint an acting head of the state higher educational institution before the election of the head of the state higher educational institution. The interim head of a state higher education institution shall not have the right to admit new employees to the collective of a state higher education institution. The election of a new head of a state higher education institution must be held no later than sixty days from the early date.



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### Scope of Work

The scope of work of Academic Councils is outlined in the regulation of the government of Kyrgyzstan on Academic Councils (Polojenie ob uchenom sovete visshego uchebnogo zavedeniya Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki, May 29, 2012, #346) and is of a recommendatory nature; decisions of the Academic Council on the issues of selection and dismissal of personnel and financial and economic activities are also recommendatory to the rector.

According to the same regulation, the main functions and tasks of the Academic Council of a higher educational institution include approval of annual and long-term plans for the development of higher education institutions; consideration of structural changes within faculties, departments, and other units; approval of reports from academic and administrative units; and approval of curricula, timetables, and teaching technologies. The Academic Council also considers and determines financial resources for research and evaluation of the effectiveness of resources. Members of Academic Councils consider faculty promotion applications, doctoral students' progress, issues of awarding personal and state scholarships established for students and postgraduates, and the nomination of scientific and pedagogical personnel of a higher educational institution for government awards.

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### Commentary

The overall context for University governance seems comparatively weak, given the World Bank assessment and WEF indicators. The country performs at a low level across factors that would seem to matter to University governance, such as rule of law, control of corruption, and voice and accountability. Similarly, factors such as a future-oriented government and the quality of graduates are also comparatively low. These create contextual challenges for University governance.

Similar to other post-Soviet countries, Kyrgyzstan's higher education system went through a significant transformation, increasing the number of HEIs. Several adopted policies allowed the establishment of new higher education institutions, including private and international universities. As a result, Kyrgyzstan higher education represents one of the most diverse systems in Central Asia, given the scale of the country, and includes universities such as the American University of Central Asia, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, and Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University. The governance of HEIs depends on the status of universities – public, private, or

international. The Law on Education allows public universities to elect rectors; however, the scope of work of a governing body, such as the Academic Council, is outlined by the governmental regulation and is only of recommendatory nature. In addition, the president of the country appoints the rector of the only national University in Kyrgyzstan. In sum, although Kyrgyzstan's higher education institutions have autonomy and decision-making power in terms of the election of heads (rectors) of universities, the candidate still needs to be approved by the government bodies along with the members of Academic Councils.