

Italian contribution to University Autonomy in Kazakhstan: the Erasmus+ project “Transition to University Autonomy in Kazakhstan” (TRUNAK)

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ABSTRACT

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University autonomy is the capacity of universities to be self-governing, aimed at ensuring and safeguarding, on a collective level, the freedom of research and teaching of university professors from constraints that politics might have on science and culture.

When analyzing university autonomy, four important dimensions need to be considered, that have been set out in the European University Association's (EUA) Lisbon Declaration (2007) [1]. Namely, organisational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy.

- Organisational autonomy refers to the institutional governance and its ability to establish recognizable governing bodies and define a leadership model;
- Financial autonomy refers to the ability to fully control and allocate a budget; to charge tuition fees, and to ensure universities' accountability

and reporting for their financial issues;

- Staffing autonomy refers to the capability of university to recruit their own staff, the responsibility for negotiating terms of employment;
- Academic autonomy refers to the faculty's freedom of defining the academic profile, the structure and content of curricula, roles and responsibilities regarding the quality assurance of programs and degrees, closely linked to the Bologna process reforms [2].

Since 1980, university autonomy and evaluation systems have been fundamental instruments that have significantly strengthen the central role of universities in Europe. Despite periods of lack of public resources, these systems have been fundamental for expanding training offers, increasing the number of students and reducing their dropouts, but also enhancing the quality of teaching,

research and research tools.

Such a concept of autonomy is differently understood and adopted across Europe: a gap still remains between the Western value systems supporting the Bologna reforms and the post-Soviet legacies, producing discrepancy in the goals, priorities and initiatives [3]. Even more, associated insights and terminology can diverge significantly if we geographically move in a transcontinental country, such as Kazakhstan.

Over the 25 years since independence in 1991, higher education sector in Kazakhstan has been a concern of significant reform and development, and its crucial role has been recognized to facilitate Kazakhstan's strategic goal of becoming one of the 50 most developed countries in the world in the near future [4].

During this last period many Kazakh universities were signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum, a document written in 1988, on the proposal of the University of Bologna, that established the indispensable principles of freedom, knowledge, research and teaching and free international exchange and that promotes closer connection among European universities [5].

Furthermore, the Republic of Kazakhstan signed the Bologna Declaration in 2010 and became the 47th member country of the Bologna process and the first Central Asian state to be recognized as a full member of the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna process enables Kazakhstan to improve access to European education, professional recognition of degrees and qualifications, introduction of credit transfer system (ECTS) and diploma supplement, increased employability, assessment of education quality assurance, development of the European higher education area (EHEA) in a global context promoting academic mobility, as well as the implementation of lifelong learning [6].

Granting the autonomy will generate many opportunities but also some challenges for Kazakhstan. Kazakh universities need to search for an optimal balance between their autonomy and state regulation to suit strategic needs and interests of society [7]. Several factors can complicate a successful implementation such as a highly centralized and opaque governance, weak institutions, ineffective bureaucratic practices, low quality assurance processes, inadequate training, poor learning outcomes and corruption in higher education [3].

For the purpose of fostering a model and implementing a sustainable institutional autonomy reforms in higher education, from 2017 to 2020, Kazakhstan is carrying out Transition to University Autonomy in Kazakhstan (TRUNAK), an Erasmus+ Capacity Building Higher Education project,

with a financial support by the European Union (EU), considering Universities autonomy issues as a national priority [8]. The project consortium is composed of eight Kazakh partners, seven EU partners and two associated partners¹.

The aim of the project, coordinated by the Karaganda State Medical University (KSMU) is to provide a basis for consensus around a feasible model of university autonomy for Kazakhstan that can facilitate decisions about the levels of organisational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy that are desirable in the national context.

The project promotes an inclusive approach to autonomy by fostering a dialogue between the higher education sector and the relevant public authorities, to ensure ownership of the reforms and achieve change in regulations towards more autonomy. It will equally foster the transfer of good practice from the EU countries to Kazakh institutions, in order to promote efficient and effective governance reforms.

Activities proposed for the achievement of the objectives are structured in five Work Packages (WP): WP1 Preparation, WP2 Development, WP3 Quality Plan, WP4 Dissemination Exploitation, WP5 Management.

The Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) lays the foundation of its contribution from the historical roots that make Italy one of the main promoters of the concept of university autonomy in Europe and in the rest of the world.

Foundations of the university autonomy in Italy are laid in the art. 33 of the Italian Constitution, enacted on 1947, stating that "[...] Higher education institutions, universities and academies, have the right to establish their own regulations within the limits laid down by the law [...]"[9].

But it is only in 1989 that the law 168/89 officially established autonomy of the Italian universities, which became independent public bodies with their own legal entity and responsibilities [10]. From that moment, the State started to support the endowment of Universities: the distribution of the funds is linked to the activities and results achieved and can be considered as a quality indicator. This responsibility is carried out by the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR), a public body which works to ensure the quality of higher education and research in Italy and the correct allocation of public funding [11].

UCSC is involved in all WPs, contributing:

- to the analysis of the state of the play and need of university autonomy in Kazakhstan, suggesting a model of university governance and the roles of key stakeholders on the basis of the indicators of the EUA University Autonomy Scorecard [12];

1. For the complete composition of the project consortium visit <http://trunak.eu/>

- to the development of a model of autonomy, providing knowledge about how the Italian model of University Autonomy influences the university system, and expertise about university governance policy in Italy and its impact on the institutions;
- to the development of a basic model with a pilot implementation through communication and information strategies and the development of guidance material to support higher education institutions in Kazakhstan in their efforts to implement the governance reform;
- to the networking and formation of the Autonomy Implementation Consulting Group for assistance to universities implementing the governance reform and the long-term sustainability of the project results;
- to the Quality Assurance Plan (QAP) through the creation of effective operational groups: evaluations and auditors report based on the control of the scheduled activities;
- to the dissemination of results and achievements and the experiences gained by the Partner universities and the Ministries;
- to the effective management and operational structures of the project, performing the activities in the operational VWP, delivering annual report, taking part in the overall management and decision-making processes.

During the entire life of the project, targeted stakeholders are the Kazakh Ministries and the pilot universities that will actively contribute to the implementation of the proposed model of autonomy. The expected impact of the project is to create a model of transition of Kazakh universities towards a modern system of governance and management of higher education institution, in the perspective to guide a new model of autonomy, bounding the concept not only to more “freedom”, but also to quality assurance and accountability.

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Conflict of interest statement

The Authors have no conflicts of interest to declare for this project.

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