

# Medical education governance based on strategic planning

## An example of Kazakhstan medical universities

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyze the medical education strategic planning to align with international best practices in university governance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Research methods used: content analysis, analysis of modern concepts of strategic planning in universities. The study used two main methodological approaches: analysis of medical education governance and analysis of strategic planning in universities.

**Findings** – Applied models of educational governance at most universities are not always effective in achieving their goals. A strategy is a complex and potentially powerful tool, with the help of which a modern university can withstand the constantly changing environment. By using such a tool, the university can gain prestige, leading positions and recognition in international scientific and educational spheres. Therefore, strategy and strategic planning deserve close attention as a higher education governance tool, suitable not only for a medical college but also for a wide range of other types of social organizations.

**Originality/value** – Education is a policy priority of any state determining the state's level of modern socio-economic development and building a productive workforce. The quality of human resources primarily depends on the system of higher education, which is carried out by universities. Foreign countries' experience shows that prosperity of the state and society is impossible without a healthy nation. Improving the quality of people's lives depends, in particular, on health education, so "medical education governance" is how we prepare personnel, which must be properly trained and qualified to provide high-quality health care services. Kazakhstan medical universities are increasingly becoming players in the medical education market, but the governance systems of universities are lagging behind. The success of universities largely depends on the results of their strategic planning, which is why special attention should be given to strategic planning analysis. Despite the importance of analyzing medical education governance, there has been insufficient research in this area in Kazakhstan.

**Keywords** Medical education, Knowledge management, Management, Organizational learning, Political strategy, Health economics

**Paper type** Literature review

### Introduction

Kazakhstan's strategic interests require an increase in the competitiveness of its domestic economy, and recognition of the fact that at present time the quality of the country's human resources is, along with innovation and investment activity, a key factor in the transformation of the domestic economy toward postindustrial stage.

Health as the main macroeconomic factor is increasingly becoming an important component of business models and strategies. There are new health conditions, emerging infectious, ecological and behavioral risks; this is the time of rapid demographic and epidemiological transitions that threaten health security of the population. Professional education is not keeping pace with these changes, mainly because of the fragmented, outdated and static curricula that produce poorly trained graduates (Frenk *et al.*, 2010).

The challenges of the modern world, saturated with new and rapidly changing technologies, dictate the need for effective development for both health care and education. In a modern society, education serves as the basis for the reproduction of spiritual, cultural and intellectual potential. In many respects, education determines the development of the



country, being the most important means of transition of the society to a new qualitative state. This means, in particular, the creation of conditions that ensure the continuous updating of the education system in accordance with changes in the country and the world (Kulzhanova, 2011).

The need for strategic planning in Kazakhstan is currently associated not only with cardinal political changes, integration into the international educational space, but, above all, with the development of higher education in the country itself. The tasks of reforming medical education and medical science and establishing an effective personnel policy for the health care sector are envisaged in the state program “Densaulyk” for 2016–2019. Within its framework, the project to modernize medical education in Kazakhstan is being implemented, with the main goal to train health care personnel using best international practices and long-term strategic partnerships of medical universities with leading foreign universities. Strategic partnerships are expected to assist in the recommendations for effective medical education governance, improving teaching staff capacity, and in the implementation of the universities’ strategic plans.

The introduction of strategic planning in Kazakhstan universities was facilitated by such factors as increased prestige of higher education in general, Kazakhstan joining the Bologna process, and the development of a higher education policy based on European standards and international practice in the field of strategic and financial management.

The first conference of 30 European Education Ministers was held in Bologna in 1999. The resulting declaration “European Higher Education Area” has defined the main goals leading to the achievement of more comparable, compatible and coherent systems and, ultimately, harmonization of national higher education systems in Europe. The Bologna process began its existence with this declaration. Countries have joined the Bologna Process on a voluntary basis by signing its declaration. Kazakhstan signed the Bologna Declaration in 2010, which meant it officially recognized the alignment of the national higher education system with the European standards. Unified educational space should allow national education systems of European countries to incorporate the best that partners have by increasing the mobility of students, professors, management personnel and strengthening ties and cooperation between universities in Europe.

Our analysis has shown limited information and research on medical education governance, quality assurance and institutional quality assessment of education contributing to the achievement of strategic goals of medical education and science organizations.

Rob Coward (2010) in his review argues that “given the acknowledged relationship between effective education for health care staff and service improvement, it is perhaps surprising that there is relatively little literature on the subject in health care journals. The dearth of grey literature also suggests that educational governance is not yet widely practiced within health care organizations.”

### **Strategic interests of universities in the world**

A university’s status is determined by its system of governance, resources and staff talent. In recent decades, the system of higher education in Europe has undergone a major transformation under the influence of national and international events. This is facilitated by the rapid increase in the number of students, the relative decline in public funding together with the lack of private financing, the increasing importance of research and innovation in the global knowledge economy and the broader competition between higher education institutions. Universities need managerial autonomy because the speed of decision-making is of great importance in a rapidly changing world.

Salmy (2016) indicates several ways to achieve leadership in the world education market. The first way is to build a university from scratch. Not everyone can afford it, but

Kazakhstan, for example, opened Nazarbayev University a few years ago; new universities appeared in Saudi Arabia and Singapore. The rest have to improve existing structures, for example, through university consolidation, as it happens in China, Russia and some other countries. Among the “acceleration factors” that make it possible to move faster, the first is internationalization, i.e., attraction of foreign professors, teaching in English. The second factor is the development of niche programs, i.e., specialization because to achieve excellence across the entire spectrum of disciplines is costly and challenging (even Cambridge and Oxford do not rank first in all disciplines). The third factor of acceleration is innovative technologies of teaching and governance. The transition to the principles of strategic management helps to create mechanisms for attracting external financial, material and humanitarian resources for the development of universities by creating an attractive image and a favorable investment climate for forming a business environment. Therefore, it is critical to master the technologies of strategic management and practical skills in developing an education governance strategy oriented toward international education.

A university’s strategy assumes multidimensional, long-term, thoughtful, active, consistent yet flexible actions by management and all personnel that facilitate an effective and phased approach toward problem resolution and achievement of university’s goals and mission (Reznik and Kurdov, 2016). The development of a strategic plan should take into account all available information about the current and projected status of the university, the national education system and the environment in which it operates. Thus, the analysis of strategic plan development at universities shows that the main competitive advantages of the best world universities are: high concentration of talented students, provision of resources and infrastructure for better learning and development, constructive management approach, practice-oriented education and research.

### **Strategic planning at universities**

One of the main functions of strategic governance is flexible regulation and timely change in the structure of the organization. Integral elements of the general theory of strategic governance are the development of the mission and strategic plan for the organization development. These concepts also arose in university governance. A key tool for strategic governance of a modern university should be an innovation mission that sets the general direction and priorities for the development of initiative project teams of teachers and researchers (Grudzinsky, 2004).

The need for long-term planning and development of a strategy for higher education is widely recognized in Europe. Thus, in most EU countries – Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Great Britain, Portugal, Norway, Sweden, the Baltic countries – preparation of strategic plans is mandatory for universities. In Estonia, a strategic development plan is a prerequisite for the formation of a university. In Latvia and Iceland, a strategic plan is necessary to obtain state accreditation. In Austria and Finland, a strategic plan is a necessary document for signing a contract between a government agency and a university. Thus, strategic planning at the university level is widespread in European countries, even in countries where budget allocations for institutions of higher professional education are not directly linked to the results of their activities or to the implementation of specific government contracts for the performance of work or the provision of services. In some countries (France, Malta), preparation of a strategic plan is not mandatory, but it *de facto* impacts the amount of government funding (Eurydice, 2008). Eurydice, Education Information Network in Europe, defines a strategic plan as a document that sets out the mission and strategic aims of a higher education institution and links these aims to detailed objectives and activities for a period of variable length.

The basis for developing a university strategic plan includes forward-looking analysis of the university's development based on certain assumptions about changes in its external operating environment. The most important element of this analysis is the determination of the university's position in a tough competitive environment. This analysis serves as the foundation for the development of the university's strategic goals, strategic units and specific implementation strategies. Finally, strategic plans should be designed to be flexible enough to modify and reorient them if necessary. The university can strategically develop using several strategic paths. Porter (2008) in his classic strategies, with regard to universities, includes four main alternatives: production of educational services at the lowest cost; differentiation of educational services; orientation toward a broad market; and orientation toward a narrow market niche.

State bodies retain a central role in the regulation and coordination of higher education in most countries of Europe, but in recent years there has been a gradual shift from the current state control to external governance by various stakeholders. The governance structures of the universities have shifted from the traditional way of academic self-governance to new models. Those new conditions make higher education institutions work in accordance with a concept that is reasonably chosen and unique for each university, and which corresponds to the realities of the regional social and economic situation and takes into account the prospect of dynamic development of external conditions. Universities faced the problem of implementing strategic governance. Strategic governance concept was introduced in the late 1960s, when the conditions for doing business began to change significantly, and it became necessary to actively think about a development strategy for the future as an independent field of activity, separating it from the existing management of the production process (Grudzinsky, 2004).

The scientifically based strategy of the university should now take into account the integration of educational, research and professional activities.

Pilipenko (2017) believes that with a well-organized forecasting process positive effects of the strategic planning can be achieved. Therefore, strategic planning can be used as an effective tool for improving the quality of life of society when supported by long-term state and regional policies.

### **Strategic planning in Kazakhstan universities**

The impact of the Bologna process on curriculum reform, quality and mobility has become one of the key drivers of change. In this regard, the importance of effective strategic governance at universities has dramatically increased. In some countries, this is due to the dissolution of direct control from the Ministries of Education; in others, the need for strategic governance is caused by the fact that most HEIs (higher education institutions) organize their activities in a competitive environment, which includes acquiring the best students, funding of scientific research, etc. At the same time, it is necessary to point out some shortcomings. Specifically, university administrators have weak administrative and financial powers to formulate strategy; many college staff work part-time at several universities because of financial reasons (low wages); frequent changes of rectors give rise to a feeling of instability, which interrupts strategic planning as new management offers new ideas that result in delays of the planning process. The above factors reinforce each other and inhibit strategic planning. It should not be forgotten that the pace of changing conditions and the increasing amount of information in today's world is so high that planning is the only way to formally predict future problems and opportunities. It provides an organization with means for creating an action plan, both for the prospective and current periods and provides the basis for making managerial decisions.

Some studies have shown that strategic planning, if properly used, leads to a significant improvement in the institution's function and results. Other studies indicate that there is a

resistance when the university conducts periodic changes in its strategy and that this resistance causes an imbalance in the new strategy and the existing management capabilities. The experience of strategic planning in Kazakhstan's universities is in the stage of information collection, initial analysis and reflection. "Detailed planning of work allows to overcome two extremes: unjustified optimism and confidence that the strategy can be developed in 1-2 months, and the attitude toward strategic planning as a process that does not have an exact time frame. The success of the university strategy development project is determined by a number of factors: preparedness of participants for the strategic planning process, support and participation of university top officials and the team nature of their work" (Kulzhanova, 2011).

One of the most interesting works on strategic planning is the study by Pupysheva (2014). According to the results of the survey conducted by this author among the leaders of Kazakhstani universities, terminological confusion is characteristic for many of them. Quite often, under strategic planning, they understand any long-term plan or use this term as a synonym for the word "policy" while the term "strategy" is understood as implementation of local solutions. In the course of the study, it was revealed that the system of strategic planning exists in 95.5 percent of Kazakhstan universities. At the same time, 86.4 percent of it is carried out on a "top-down" basis, when senior management independently develops the plan. In 13.6 percent in addition to senior management other university staff is involved in strategic plan development. In 9.1 percent of cases independent consultants, experts and analysts are also engaged, and in 4.5 percent of universities the business community are also involved in the formation of the strategic planning process.

All managers name the development of a strategic plan as a stage in the formation of the strategic planning process at a university. The importance of internal and external environmental factors and their assessment is understood by only 65.9 percent of Kazakhstani leaders; implementation of the strategic plan by 52.3 percent; and control and evaluation of its implementation by 45.5 percent.

The strategic plans of all Kazakhstan HEIs mainly include the mission, goals and objectives of a university. A plan is usually developed to cover the period of 3–10 years. The average time period is five years and six months. In most cases, senior management is involved (90.4 percent) in strategic plan development, as well as in the case of the strategic planning process. Heads of organizational units are involved in 52.3 percent of cases. As methods of developing a strategic plan, only SWOT analysis (88.6 percent) and PEST analysis (27.3 percent) are applied. The system of control over the implementation of the strategic plan exists at 72.7 percent of universities. It is carried out using quantitative indicators for the key priority directions of the university.

The strategic plans of Kazakhstan universities, as the author stated, are compiled by senior managers. All of them, without exception, contain the mission of the organization, its goals, and objectives. Some universities formulated rather broad mission statements while others are more narrow. The goals are formulated by all in different ways, but, in general, they represent the main directions of the university development and are supported by more detailed tasks. The implementation of strategic plans is mentioned only in 69.2 percent of cases and 30.8 percent of universities do not discuss any phases or steps of their strategic plan implementation. This is a significant shortcoming of strategic plans. In general, the conducted studies revealed a number of problem areas in strategic planning by Kazakhstan universities.

### **Medical education governance in the Republic of Kazakhstan**

There are five state medical universities in Kazakhstan as well as two non-state medical institutions: the Kazakhstan-Russian Medical University and the South Kazakhstan Medical Academy. Additionally, four medical education departments are a part of

multidisciplinary educational organizations: International Kazakh-Turkish University named after A.Yasavi, Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi, Bolashak Academy and Caspian Public University.

Training of personnel for the national health system is conducted by HEIs for 6 specialties of the bachelor's degree, 37 clinical specialties in the residency, 5 specialties of the master's degree, and 3 specialties of the PhD. The training is funded both publicly, requested under the state order of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and privately on a tuition basis. The average annual number of students under the state order is 3,584 people including 2,917 in residency, 420 in magistracy and 247 in doctoral studies. The total number of students in medical universities during 2017–2018 academic year was 32,806 people; 55 percent funded by the state budget and 45 percent on a fee basis. Annually medical universities produce an average of 4,500 professionals.

All medical universities in Kazakhstan have received institutional accreditation and are included in the World Database “Avicenna Directory” of the World Health Organization /World Federation of Medical Education. Kazakhstan developed national standards for specialized accreditation (WHO/WFME), and accredited a number of educational programs for bachelor's, residency, magistracy and doctoral studies based on these standards. A new procedure for certification of health professionals and graduates of medical education organizations has been established. The Republican Center for the Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and a network of regional simulation centers in 16 regions of the country have also been established. Key faculty competencies for medical universities have been defined. Education curricula for all levels have been revised in accordance with European education standards and the country's health care needs. With the goal of bringing Kazakhstan's medical science closer to international standards and to use the research potential of medical schools effectively, an emphasis has been placed on the development of university science through the creation and development of laboratories for collective use enhancing research potential of teachers and students and training research and pedagogical personnel.

The leading medical university of Kazakhstan, having the National status, is the Kazakh National Medical University named after S.D. Asfendiyarov (KazNMU). In 2011, the KazNMU was among top ten innovation-oriented universities of the country. The University is included in the WHO/WFME Directory and in the International Directory of UNESCO Universities. The student body consists of up to 39 nationalities from 29 countries. Citizens from India, Jordan, Iraq, Japan, China, Israel, Mongolia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, South Korea, Palestine, Tajikistan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Moldova, Georgia and other countries are studying at KazNMU.

KazNMU has adopted a number of important conceptual documents aimed at achieving the university's global competitiveness in education, research and clinical practice.

The adopted concept document for improving quality of education in KazNMU includes general strategy, main directions, priorities and objectives of KazNMU policy that are in line with the mission, vision and strategic plan of the university.

The concept for postgraduate medical education and continuous professional development in KazNMU is to ensure the quality of ongoing postgraduate training programs and continuous training of health professionals through compliance with health needs and the principles of best clinical practice, harmonization and internationalization, integration into the European Higher Education Area and scientific research, development of KazNMU teaching staff and the introduction of innovative technologies in the system of training specialists and researchers ensuring their competitiveness.

The concept of UNIClinic is based on the university's intentions to make the United University Clinic the leading Kazakhstan academic, research and clinical center. The research activities development concept of the KazNMU includes priority directions

for the development of university science, mechanisms for improving management of research, developing the scientific potential of teachers and improving student science.

The adopted concept of “KazNMU – International-Level University” for 2015–2020 is a document that unites all university initiatives to achieve leading rankings in all areas of activity and at all educational levels, as well as to gain international recognition in international rankings of world universities. The goals and objectives of this concept are the basis of the strategic plan for the development of KazNMU 2014–2020.

Innovative structures have been created in KazNMU to improve the quality of education and the integration of education, research and practice. The new organizational structure of the university and the system of educational governance have shown their effectiveness. The main principles that guide the university are: leadership, recognition of the contribution of each employee, equality of opportunity, teamwork, initiative and innovation, continuous professional development and the ability to learn throughout life, adherence to traditions and values of the University. KazNMU is focused on continuous improvement of service quality and recognition as a leader in the field of medical education, both internally and abroad. KazNMU actively develops international cooperation with more than 100 universities exchanging students and teachers. Together with world-renowned strategic foreign partner Duke University, on the basis of its own university clinics, KazNMU began work on the integration of education, clinics and science through the development of the Academic Health and Science System. A strategic partnership agreement was signed between KazNMU and Duke University (USA).

Medical school governance has direct impact on the quality of medical education and the ability of the organization to fulfill its goals. International experience shows that senior managers should motivate teaching staff and other employees, ensure that the staff has professional and interpersonal skills (Adams and Bezing, 2011).

Management effectiveness analysis in the world's leading medical schools identified three key factors, the combination of which ensured their success: the availability of appropriate resources, the concentration of talents (both teachers and students) and effective management.

The development of medical education requires leaders and managers to lead their organizations and develop their managerial capacity in such a way as to ensure an increase in the level of performance. The results of a medical education managers' study in Canada concluded that modern medical education environment is very promising due to interactions between the medical school and university clinics, sponsors and professionals in the provision of medical care (Saxena, 2010). The study examined five aspects: personal and interpersonal characteristics; effective leadership skills; skills of an effective manager; skills in providing medical education; pedagogical and research skills.

In a recent Kazakhstani study (Kabdrakhmanova *et al.*, 2013), researchers interviewed 382 representatives of the administrative and managerial and teaching staff of six medical universities in Kazakhstan. According to the results of the questionnaire, respondents from all six medical schools indicated that they had high knowledge and skills in communication and management (from 78 to 90 percent in individual universities), leadership (74 to 94 percent in individual universities) and professionalism (79 to 91 percent in some HEIs). On the other hand, a significant number of respondents indicated low knowledge levels of the health care system (only 56 percent of respondents noted knowledge and competence in this field). When asked about knowledge of business skills and practices, only 39 percent of respondents indicated knowledge in the field of financial management, 53 percent – risk management, 60 percent – marketing and strategic planning knowledge. The results show that administrative and managerial staff as well as teaching staff noted leadership and management as the main areas in which to develop education manager competencies. At the same time, the leadership of higher medical education organizations is well aware of the importance of improving leadership

and management in their organizations, which facilitate the achievement of strategic goals and objectives in all areas of activity – teaching, research and other services. With regard to other areas of medical education manager competence, more emphasis was placed on aspects of professionalism than on the management of resources and people. At the same time, the experience of leading medical schools shows that effective work of educational institutions requires a balance between professionalism, skills, and competence in planning, organizing and implementing changes in the educational process. A university strategic plan should demonstrate the position of all stakeholders in achieving success and leadership by overcoming challenges (dependence on external factors).

## Results

Modernization of the medical education governance system, oriented at the strategic needs of the health care sector is required in Kazakhstan medical schools.

The most common institutional mechanism for managing the development of universities is the formation of structures for strategic analysis and planning. First, strategic planning is one of the tools for education governance, which is a process of defining the goals of the university and ways to achieve them. Second, strategic planning provides the basis for all governance decisions, the functions of the university, motivation and control that focused on the development of strategic plans.

Effective changes in medical education in the Republic of Kazakhstan, as in other countries of the world, depend on leadership and management structures, as well as on the skills and competencies of individuals and teams responsible for these changes.

European health systems face complex challenges regardless of whether they are funded by taxes or insurance. These challenges include: securing funding for both public health and health care services; ensuring equitable access to health care services, including financial protection; emphasizing the importance of empowering citizens and patients; using resources efficiently by such means as health technology assessment, competitive purchasing agreements, innovative service delivery methods and cost-effectiveness studies; monitoring and evaluation; knowledge-brokering: aligning research objectives and policy needs; interconnecting primary and specialized care; and training human resources including strengthening the role of universities (Kickbusch and Gleicher, 2012).

The development and implementation of an effective strategy require time, human and financial resources and especially active participation of university senior management in strategic governance. Senior management can develop an excellent development strategy for the organization aimed at external consumers. However, the success of this strategy will depend significantly on the quality of organizational arrangements, the capacity of management personnel. The university's strategy as a model for managing its development will improve the quality of graduates and raise the level of research and competitiveness of the services universities provide. Therefore, working out a strategy for effective development is a means of achieving university's intended goals, in other words, planning activities that will facilitate the successful transition of the university from the current state to the state it aspires to be.

The main problem areas of the modern university governance are:

- the inadequacy of university management structures to changed conditions;
- orientation toward achievement of short-term goals and objectives;
- unclear management procedures;
- focus on solving mainly internal tasks; and
- weak interaction with consumers of educational services to study their needs (Kulzhanova, 2011).

Thus, strategic planning and management are necessary for any field of activity. At the same time, there are still many problems and significant shortcomings that require an early resolution, which, in turn, will allow Kazakhstani HEIs to reach new heights and quality education.

### Conclusions

The experience of leading countries and authoritative medical schools suggests that effective governance is increasingly recognized as an important element in implementing changes and innovations in medical education.

It is established that the main priority directions of strategic planning of Kazakhstan universities are: the modernization of educational activities (primarily in accordance with the Bologna process) and innovative development directly related to the improvement of material and technical equipment.

Development and implementation of the university strategic plan is an urgent task for determining the level of management effectiveness of the organization. Studies have revealed that only 2/3 of the universities demonstrate implementation of strategic plans, the rest indicate an uncertainty of the planning stages, which is a significant drawback.

It is revealed that the existing model of medical university governance is not sufficiently focused on the interaction of the management team in order to achieve the set goals and objectives. It is necessary to systematically increase the potential in the field of medical education management for employees of all categories, administrative personnel and heads of departments of medical universities in Kazakhstan.

Review of current research literature shows that the problem of strategic planning for the development of the university in the environment of competitive educational services is not studied systematically.

In summary, strategic planning is a complex and potentially powerful tool with the help of which a modern university can effectively function in constantly changing conditions. By using such a tool, the university can achieve prestige, leadership and recognition in the international scientific and educational sphere. Therefore, the strategy deserves the most serious attention as an education governance tool, applicable not only to a medical college but also to a wide range of social organizations.

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