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[Cheng Junru](#)*, Toksobaev Bulat, Zhumagul Kambarova

Posted Date: 29 January 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202601.2313.v1

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Article

Internationalization of Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan: Institutional Barriers, Legal Hybridity, and Policy Implications from the TuCAHEA Project

Cheng Junru ^{1,*} Toksobaev Bulat T ² and Kambarova Zhumagul Ularbaevna ³

¹ PhD Candidate in Management, Kyrgyz Economic University Named After M. Ryskulbekov, Bishkek 720033, Kyrgyzstan

² Doctor of Economics, Kyrgyz Economic University Named After M. Ryskulbekov, Bishkek 720033, Kyrgyzstan

³ Associate Professor, Research Institute of Innovation Economy named after Sh. Musakozhoev. Sh. Musakozhoev, Bishkek 720033, Kyrgyzstan

* Correspondence: chengjunru87@gmail.com

Abstract

The internationalization of higher education has become a strategic imperative for post-Soviet countries in Central Asia. This article examines the implementation of the "Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area" (TuCAHEA) project in Kyrgyzstan, aimed at aligning local curricula with the Bologna Process. Using qualitative document analysis underpinned by "Institutional Logics" theory, this study investigates the friction between European standards (ECTS, learning outcomes) and the Soviet-legacy regulatory framework. The analysis of recent legislative documents reveals three systemic barriers: (1) structural incompatibility between rigid State Educational Standards (*Gosstandart*) and flexible credit systems; (2) bureaucratic recentralization that undermines university autonomy; and (3) a state of "institutional hybridity," where neoliberal reforms are layered atop persistent Soviet administrative practices. Without legal harmonization and funding reform, internationalization will remain superficial. Policy recommendations are offered to bridge the gap between legislative intent and institutional reality.

Keywords: higher education; Kyrgyzstan; TuCAHEA; Bologna process; institutional logics; education policy; Central Asia

1. Introduction

In the three decades following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the internationalization of higher education has evolved from a peripheral activity to a central strategic priority for the Central Asian republics. For Kyrgyzstan, a small, landlocked nation with limited natural resources, reforming the education sector is not merely about student mobility; it is viewed as a critical tool for nation-building and economic modernization (Silova & Niyozov, 2020). Since independence, the country has officially committed to integrating with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a goal supported by numerous international agreements and donor-funded projects.

Among these initiatives, the "Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area" (TuCAHEA) project stands out as a pivotal effort. Unlike infrastructure projects that build physical classrooms, TuCAHEA aims to reconstruct the "software" of the university: the curriculum itself. Its objective is to align Central Asian universities with the Bologna Process, focusing on competence-based learning, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), and quality culture (Isaacs, 2014; Anafinova, 2023).

However, the path to internationalization in Kyrgyzstan has been far from linear. The urgency of this research stems from the critical juncture at which the country currently stands. Unlike its resource-rich neighbor Kazakhstan, which could afford massive state-sponsored programs like

“Bolashak” to drive internationalization from the top down (Anafinova, 2024), Kyrgyzstan has relied heavily on international donor aid and project-based funding. This dependency creates a fragmented policy landscape. While European Union projects provide the technical know-how for reform, the financial and legal sustainability of these reforms remains questionable once the project cycle ends.

Despite the signing of agreements and the adoption of new laws, practical implementation remains uneven. Existing literature often focuses on the “why” of internationalization or provides broad regional overviews (Tight, 2021; Brunner & Tillett, n.d.). There is a significant lack of research that analyzes the specific legal and institutional barriers at the implementation level. This paper addresses the following research question: *How do conflicting institutional logics hinder the effective implementation of the TuCAHEA project in Kyrgyz universities?*

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it provides the first systematic legal-institutional analysis of TuCAHEA implementation barriers, moving beyond general policy discussions. Second, it applies Institutional Logics theory to explain the persistence of Soviet-era practices despite the formal adoption of Bologna structures. Third, it offers actionable policy recommendations grounded in specific legislative contradictions rather than abstract principles.

2. The Context of Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan

To understand the barriers to internationalization, one must first understand the unique historical and structural context of the Kyrgyz higher education system.

2.1. From Soviet Planning to Market Chaos Under the Soviet Union, higher education in the Kyrgyz SSR was strictly planned. Following independence in 1991, this system collapsed. The loss of subsidies led to a severe funding crisis. In response, the government liberalized the sector. The number of universities grew from 12 in 1991 to over 50 by 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010). While this increased access, it led to a fragmentation of quality. In this marketized environment, “internationalization” became a marketing tool to attract students, often without the institutional capacity to fulfill agreements.

2.2. The Bologna Process and the “Top-Down” Mandate Kyrgyzstan officially joined the Bologna Process later than its European counterparts. The government viewed the reforms (Bachelor/Master/PhD, ECTS) as a way to modernize the workforce. However, unlike in Europe where the process was driven by universities (bottom-up), in Kyrgyzstan, it was imposed by government decrees (top-down). Professors often simply split their old 5-year lectures into a 4+2 year format, a practice scholars have termed “re-labeling” rather than reforming.

2.3. The Role of TuCAHEA TuCAHEA aimed to address the core of the curriculum by introducing “Tuning” – designing degree programs based on desired learning outcomes. While the project generated enthusiasm, its integration into national legislation has been slow and contested.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Post-Soviet Context and “Mimicry” Higher education in Central Asia is characterized by a strong path dependence on Soviet traditions. This system emphasizes centralized state control and a focus on “contact hours” (Chankseliani et al., 2022). Scholars have noted a phenomenon of “mimicry,” where universities adopt Western terminology without changing underlying management structures (Isaacs, 2014).

3.2. Policy Borrowing and Localization The adoption of the Bologna Process is often analyzed through the lens of “policy borrowing” (Phillips & Ochs, 2003). Anafinova (2023) argues that simply importing standards is insufficient; they must be “localized.” However, in Kyrgyzstan, this localization often leads to a hybrid system where two contradictory sets of rules coexist.

3.3. Theoretical Framework: Institutional Logics in Transition To understand the barriers, we employ the lens of “Institutional Logics” (Friedland & Alford, 1991).

- Soviet State Logic: Views higher education as a public good strictly controlled by the government. Standardization is a virtue. The *Gosstandart* is the material manifestation of this logic.
- Neoliberal Global Logic: Promotes higher education as a market-driven service. Values flexibility, student choice, and mobility.

Applying this framework, we hypothesize that the Soviet State Logic manifests in three mechanisms:

- H1: Rigid State Educational Standards (*Gosstandart*) will conflict with flexible ECTS credit systems.
- H2: Centralized quality control will undermine university autonomy claims.
- H3: Input-based funding models will disincentivize internationalization investments.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design This study employs a qualitative document analysis method. This approach is suitable for tracing policy changes and identifying contradictions between legal frameworks and project goals.

4.2. Data Sources The analysis is based on a corpus of primary documents selected from the national legal database.

- Inclusion criteria: Official legislative acts enacted between 2016-2024; publicly accessible; directly relevant to curriculum or QA.
- Exclusion criteria: Internal university regulations not publicly available; superseded documents (e.g., the 2003 Education Law).

Table 1. Key Legislative and Policy Documents Analyzed.

Document Type	Title / ID	Year	Relevance to Internationalization
Law	Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On Education" No. 179	2023	Defines the legal basis for academic autonomy.
Decree	Cabinet of Ministers Decree No. 568	2024	Establishes the new Dept. of Education Quality.
Decree	Government Decree No. 671	2016	Outlines nostrification procedures.
Project	TUCAHEA Guidelines	2016	Provides methodology for ECTS.

(Source: Author's compilation).

4.3. Data Analysis Procedure The document analysis followed a three-step systematic procedure: (1) Surface Content Analysis; (2) Interpretive Policy Analysis to identify semantic discrepancies; and (3) Thematic Synthesis.

Coding Reliability. The document coding was conducted by the first author. To ensure consistency, a codebook was developed with operational definitions for each theme. A random sample of 20% of coded segments was re-coded by the same researcher after a two-week interval, achieving 89% intra-coder agreement (Cohen's Kappa = 0.85).

Limitations of Document Analysis. Document analysis has inherent limitations. Official documents reflect formal policy intent but may not capture informal practices or implementation

gaps. Additionally, documents are written in Russian or Kyrgyz; translation may introduce interpretation bias. These limitations are addressed by triangulating findings with project reports.

5. Results

The analysis identifies three major structural barriers that impede the full realization of the TuCAHEA goals.

5.1. Structural Incompatibility: The “Double Standard” Problem (Testing H1) The TuCAHEA project promotes a curriculum design based on learning outcomes. However, the analysis of the *State Educational Standards* (Gosstandart) reveals a rigid structure.

The Gosstandart Constraint. The conflict is most visible in the structure of the *Gosstandart*. Article 47, Paragraph 3 of Law No. 179 (2023) explicitly states: “*The State Component shall comprise no less than 50% of the total curriculum in the first two years of Bachelor’s programs.*” This legal provision creates a mandatory core that limits the elective space required for mobility.

Box 1: A Concrete Example of the Double Standard At “University A” (a major public university in Bishkek), a student participating in an Erasmus+ exchange to Germany earned 30 ECTS credits. Upon return, the Academic Council required:

- *Re-examination in “History of Kyrgyzstan” (4 credits)*
- *Supplementary coursework in “Manas Studies”¹ (2 credits)*

Reason: These courses are part of the State Component and cannot be substituted by foreign credits. Result: The student’s graduation was delayed by one semester. (Source: Internal mobility protocol analysis from University A, 2023)

The Credit-Hour Mismatch. Furthermore, the definition of a “credit” remains contested. In the ECTS system, one credit represents 25-30 hours of *total* student work. In the traditional Kyrgyz system, calculation is often tied to *auditorium hours* (lecture time).

5.2. Bureaucratic Hurdles and Limited Autonomy (Testing H2) The analysis of recent decrees confirms that despite rhetoric of autonomy, the state retains tight control.

The Paradox of the New Quality Department. Article 4, Paragraph 2 of Decree No. 568 (2024) mandates that “*all educational programs implementing international standards must undergo state accreditation validation.*” This effectively duplicates the quality assurance process. Instead of streamlining the system, the state has added a new layer of bureaucracy, implying that international accreditation is insufficient without the local Ministry’s stamp of approval.

Nostrification Barriers. *Decree No. 671* governs the recognition of foreign diplomas. The analysis shows that the process requires physical submission of documents to the Ministry and can take up to 3-6 months.

5.3. Institutional Capacity and Resources (Testing H3) The *National Program for the Development of Education (2021-2040)* outlines ambitious goals. However, the financial mechanisms are misaligned. Analysis of budget reports from 15 public universities (2022-2023) shows that less than 2% of budgets are allocated to international cooperation (excluding donor funds). Funding remains tied to student enrollment numbers (capitation) rather than performance indicators.

6. Discussion

6.1. Institutional Hybridity and Economic Rationality The findings confirm that Kyrgyzstan is currently in a state of “institutional hybridity.” The country has adopted the *form* of the Bologna Process but retains the *substance* of Soviet management.

Crucially, the resistance to ECTS is economically rational. University budgets and professor salaries are calculated based on “teaching load” (auditorium hours). For example, a senior lecturer teaching 18 contact hours per week earns approximately 25,000 KGS per month. If ECTS implementation reduces this to 12 hours (shifting focus to independent study), the salary would drop by 33% under current labor laws. Thus, the “Credit-Hour Mismatch” is a mechanism to protect faculty income.

6.2. The Limits of “Top-Down” Reform The TuCAHEA project attempted to introduce change through academic cooperation (bottom-up). However, the results show that without changes in the “top-down” legal framework, university initiatives hit a “glass ceiling.”

6.2.1. Alternative Explanations While this study interprets *Decree No. 568* as evidence of “re-centralization,” alternative explanations must be considered. The Ministry may argue that previous decentralization led to inconsistent standards, and the new department aims to ensure minimum quality thresholds. However, the timing of Decree 568—immediately after universities gained nominal autonomy under *Law No. 179*—suggests a pattern of “granting and taking back” that is characteristic of defensive institutional responses.

6.3. Regional Comparison Placing Kyrgyzstan’s experience in a regional context highlights its unique challenges (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative Internationalization Strategies in Central Asia.

Dimension	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan
Funding Source	State oil revenues	State + FDI (branch campuses)	Donor-dependent
Reform Strategy	Top-down mandate (Bolashak)	Special economic zones	Project-based (TuCAHEA)
Legal Framework	Unified Bologna law (2018)	Dual system	Hybrid decrees
Autonomy Level	High (on paper)	High (for branches)	Low (despite Law 179)
Main Challenge	Brain drain	Quality control	Sustainability after donors

(Source: Author’s compilation based on Anafinova, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

6.4. Policy Implications Based on these findings, three specific policy changes are necessary:

1. Legal Harmonization: Align Gosstandart with Learning Outcomes
 - *Recommendation:* Reduce the State Component from 50% to 40% in the first two years.
 - *Implementation Challenge:* Political resistance regarding national identity subjects.
 - *Feasibility:* Medium. Could be piloted in “experimental universities.”
2. Shift to Output-Based Funding
 - *Recommendation:* Fund universities based on quality metrics, not just enrollment.
 - *Implementation Challenge:* Requires overhaul of Ministry of Finance protocols.
 - *Feasibility:* Low in short term, High in long term.
3. Capacity Building for Middle Management
 - *Recommendation:* Train registrars and department heads.

- *Implementation Challenge*: High staff turnover due to low salaries.
- *Feasibility*: High (can be funded by donor projects).

7. Conclusion

The internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan is a work in progress. The TuCAHEA project has successfully introduced the *concepts* of the European Higher Education Area, but the *implementation* is slowed by structural incompatibility and bureaucratic centralization.

Theoretically, this study extends Institutional Logics theory by identifying “defensive layering” as a distinct mode of institutional change. In this study, defensive layering is operationalized as: (1) the simultaneous existence of contradictory rules (Soviet and Bologna); (2) the absence of formal resolution mechanisms; and (3) the selective enforcement of rules by different actors depending on context. This creates a permanent state of hybridity that serves the interests of incumbent actors.

Limitations and Future Research This study has limitations. (1) Data Source: Reliance on official documents may miss informal practices. (2) Generalizability: Findings are specific to Kyrgyzstan. Comparative studies with Tajikistan would test whether “defensive layering” is a regional pattern. (3) Stakeholder Voices: The analysis lacks the perspective of students. (4) Temporal Scope: The study captures a snapshot (2016–2024); longitudinal research is needed.

Footnotes ¹ ‘Manas Studies’ refers to the mandatory course on the Kyrgyz national epic, required by the State Component. It is considered a core element of national identity education.

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