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Knowledge Dependency and Institutional Decoupling in Global Education Governance: A Case Study of Higher Education Reform in Kazakhstan

Qifang Deng

Faculty of Humanity and Social Science, University of Nottingham Ningbo, Ningbo, China
dengqfcynthia2005@163.com

Abstract. In the aftermath of World War II, higher education became a key focus of international development. International institutions such as the OECD have actively channeled educational resources to support global economic reconstruction, particularly in war-affected developing countries that lacked systematic educational infrastructure. While these efforts aim to establish universal educational standards, policy formulation often overlooks local conditions, generating unintended problems. Existing scholarship separately examines these potential outcomes in educational policy transfer yet overlooks their mutual circular feedback relationship. Focusing on the case of Kazakhstan, this paper uses a qualitative case study approach and argues that a subtle hegemony rooted in global educational programmes, may lead to knowledge dependency in developing countries and further result in institutional decoupling. Such decoupling can ultimately generate new rounds of knowledge dependency and impede educational development in developing countries like Kazakhstan. It also calls for developing countries' attention to the indigenous institutional autonomy in higher education.

Keywords: Knowledge dependency, Institutional decoupling, Higher education, global education governance, educational development

1. Introduction

After World War II, the rise of global education governance saw international institutions such as the OECD actively promote standardized educational assessments and benchmarks worldwide, as education was increasingly recognized as central to economic reconstruction and productivity convergence [1]. While these efforts were framed as neutral technical tools for improving education, critics have revealed that they are not value-neutral instruments but rather vehicles through which international organizations exert epistemic power and construct their own legitimacy. According to Komatsu and Rappleye, this legitimacy rests on a dualistic opposition between science and politics [2]. This reveals that such projects prioritize their own rules, which are derived from statistical data, and regard them as "science" while doubting local knowledge and educational systems [3]. Building on this, this analysis will explore the bias hidden behind these projects and try to explain the reasons

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why some developing countries could not break the barriers and promote their educational development.

This paper adopts a qualitative case study approach, taking Kazakhstan's Bologna Process reforms in higher education as its case, and draws on dependency theory and new institutionalism as analytical tools to unpack the circular mechanism behind it. It focuses on the negative effects brought by international programmes on education and highlights the subtle hegemony embedded in these projects. This paper not only challenges the neutrality claims of international educational standards but also offers a critical lens for understanding how global governance reproduces dependency, with practical implications for developing countries seeking self-determined higher education reform.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Knowledge dependency and dependency theory

Knowledge dependency is not a new thing. In fact, it absorbs core ideas from dependency theory, which highlights the relationship between core and periphery countries. It mainly focuses on the economic perspective and argues that the dependent relationship traps periphery countries within the structural power of developed countries. Without consideration of some local socio-cultural contexts, institutional capacities, and indigenous knowledge traditions, this relationship further creates a cycle and prevents these countries from comprehensive development.

Drawing on this, the structural logic manifests as a form of knowledge dependency in the context of higher education, and this dependency has been shown to have long-term effects. The western-led educational system tends to rely on statistics to design the educational policies due to their belief that data have the power to measure learning outcomes [3]. Therefore, this measurement standard is incorporated into the educational system in many developing countries and enhances this dependency. According to Lee and Chen, rankings and the numbers of publications are creating pressure on society and reinforcing the existing global division of academic labor [4]. This logic also provides a lens for explaining the dilemmas faced by East Asian transition countries regarding their higher education reform. As a result, gradually reducing educational dependency remains highly significant even though Asian countries have achieved substantial development and now have large numbers of local scholars [5]. This theoretical foundation establishes knowledge dependency as a structural condition of contemporary global higher education.

2.2. Institutional decoupling

Apart from dependency theory, the intrinsic motivation of developing countries is still of significance. Policy borrowing theory explains why these countries want to adopt other systems or policies. Due to the ignorance of local culture and politics, a Western-led model may not match the real situation and may produce unsatisfactory outcomes. Lodhi and Ilyassova-Schoenfeld found that borrowing policies cannot help to achieve the original aims because these policies are usually less clear [6]. As a result, the borrowing process and its outcomes are separated, revealing the institutional decoupling embedded in this process. In this paper, institutional decoupling denotes the gap between the formal adoption of global educational policies at the regulatory level and the lack of substantive change in local practices, leaving formal institutions disconnected from operational realities.

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The sociological institutionalism tradition offers a powerful lens for understanding why this gap between policy adoption and policy outcomes emerges. In terms of that, new institutionalism could explain the process after borrowing policies. Meyer and Rowan pointed out that organizations tend to adopt external structures in order to attain legitimacy even though these structures cannot match the requirements in practical operation [7]. DiMaggio and Powell also provided three types of isomorphism, including coercive isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism and normative isomorphism, to explain the external pressures on recipient countries to adopt these structures [8]. Therefore, developing countries are forced to meet the requirements to get more educational resources, revealing the inequality embedded in the educational programmes.

3. The circular causal mechanism between knowledge dependency and institutional decoupling

3.1. The formation of knowledge dependency

Knowledge dependency is rooted in the knowledge standards defined by international institutions and is further reinforced by the acceptance of developing countries. Global institutions, such as the OECD, gain legitimacy by a promise that positions educational reform as the pathway to national prosperity [9]. This promissory discourse effectively compensates for the OECD's lack of a formal mandate in education, which UNESCO possesses [9]. Subsequently, they proceed to design a global standard for education based on a dualistic relationship between "science" and "politics" [2]. Through this mechanism, these international institutions regard themselves as official educational institutions, attracting developing countries to involve into their system. Complementing this is their control over educational data and statistics [3], which enables these organizations to define what counts as "legitimate" educational knowledge. Developing countries, in turn, adopt these externally constructed benchmarks—not because they are locally appropriate, but because non-adoption risks exclusion from the global education community and further makes them difficult to gain international resources and reputation. This dynamic constitutes the inception of knowledge dependency. However, this dependency is not merely imposed from outside; it is also actively co-constructed by domestic elites who pursue international legitimacy for their own institutions, viewing alignment with global standards as a marker of quality and progress.

3.2. From knowledge dependency to institutional decoupling

Once knowledge dependency is established, it naturally triggers institutional decoupling through two mechanisms. Knowledge dependency directly causes policy borrowing due to their acceptance of the global educational system. For winning legitimacy of domestic institutions and attaining more educational resources, developing countries often actively adopt policy frameworks modeled on Western systems without systematic adaptation to local conditions [10]. As Lodhi and Ilyassova-Schoenfeld demonstrate in the case of Kazakhstan's Bologna Process implementation, policy transfer success does not necessarily translate into the achievement of original policy objectives [6]. Some countries adopt an approach called "ceremonial adoption for formal commitment," meaning that they signal compliance rather than genuinely improve their internal efficiency [11].

Once this borrowing process is implemented, the gap between the policies and the reality emerges. According to Meyer and Rowan, organizations adopt externally prescribed structures to gain legitimacy, even when these structures do not align with operational needs [7]. Without attention to local contexts, institutional decoupling becomes inevitable and results in some unpredicted outcomes, which may further trigger a new round of dependency.

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3.3. The circular causal mechanism

However, institutional decoupling is not a terminal outcome. Instead, the failure it creates usually reinforces knowledge dependency and prevents developing countries from educational progress. This occurs partly through a pattern documented by Lee and Chen: when borrowed PhD requirements fail to produce expected outcomes, policymakers tend to attribute the failure to "insufficient capacity" rather than to the inappropriateness of the standards themselves [4]. This misdiagnosis is then actively mobilized by international organizations: the crisis narrative highlighted by the OECD reinforces the demand for external intervention [9]. As a result, centralized regulatory frameworks tend to create "captive learning" trajectories, revealing the lack of flexibility during the learning process [12]. This self-reinforcing cycle ultimately traps developing countries in a paradoxical position: the very policies adopted to achieve "global competitiveness" undermine their capacity for self-determined educational development. The following section empirically examines this dynamic through the case of Kazakhstan's higher education reform.

4. The case of Kazakhstan

4.1. The background of Kazakhstan educational reform

Kazakhstan's education reform dates back to 1997, when the government introduced the "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy. It prioritized education as one of the most important long-term goals, revealing the country's early efforts on pursuing educational reform [13]. According to Agbo et al., its core aim is catching up with developed countries and participating into the European Union and OECD [14]. Instead of responding to their local educational demand, this aim is mainly driven by achieving global competence. In this process, knowledge dependency is deeply embedded because the country has come to regard the OECD and its knowledge standards as an official system it wishes to join.

This pursuit of international legitimacy was institutionalized in 2007 when Kazakhstan adopted the Bologna three-cycle degree system, becoming the first Central Asian country to join the European Higher Education Area in 2011 [15]. Even until now, this country is still participating in the annual conference and discussing better ways to adapt the Bologna process, showing its active attitude towards the OECD and its educational system [16]. Moreover, Kazakhstan has also begun embracing newer global trends. In May 2026, President Tokayev signed a decree to introduce artificial intelligence into the country's secondary education system, tasking the government with approving a 2026-2029 action plan covering personalized learning, digital infrastructure, and teacher training [17].

4.2. The empirical evidence of knowledge dependency: PhD requirements

The most concrete manifestation of knowledge dependency in Kazakhstan's higher education is found in the mandatory PhD graduation requirements. Drawing on multiple studies, the core dilemma is threefold: doctoral candidates lack adequate research methodology training and supervisor support, struggle with academic English proficiency, and face a fundamental gap between their existing writing traditions—rooted in Soviet-era literature-review approaches—and the internationally expected standard of peer-reviewed publication [14, 18]. These capacity deficits, compounded by the misalignment between the three-year study duration and the typical 2-3 year publication cycle for Scopus-indexed journals, have resulted in significantly extended study lengths

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and low graduation rates [19]. The doctoral policy thus reflects a direct borrowing from Western models without due consideration of local educational conditions. These findings reveal a pattern of dependency: the standards are not locally generated but externally imposed, and students are expected to meet them without the institutional infrastructure that would make such achievement possible. This institutional dynamic, as Lee and Chen observed in the East Asian context, ultimately reinforces rather than reduces dependence on Western academic centers [4].

4.3. The empirical evidence of institutional decoupling

The decoupling between borrowed international standards and local practice is evidenced across several dimensions. One of the most obvious gaps is that between Kazakhstan's academic traditions and the newly introduced Western model. The local model rooted in Soviet traditions focuses on writing literature reviews for dissertations instead of doing research [14]. Because of a lack of research training, students can hardly meet the requirements set by Western institutions, which creates pressure and limits their academic development. This shows a decoupling between global standards and the local context. Apart from that, temporal decoupling emerges from the mismatch between the 3-year study duration and the typical 2-3 year publication cycle for Scopus-indexed journals. As Kuzhabekova documents, 40% of PhD candidates cannot complete their studies within the intended period, and only 33% ultimately defend their dissertations [19]. Moreover, local and social knowledge is also out of consideration. Thematic decoupling also emerges from the tension between Scopus's preference for "international" research agendas and Kazakhstan's local research needs. Little space is left for Kazakhstan's language, culture, and national legal frameworks in the international journals. The language barrier also provides challenges for Kazakhstan's students and teachers to participate in international forums [20]. These forms of decoupling collectively demonstrate that the formal adoption of international standards has not translated into substantive institutional transformation.

The failures produced by institutional decoupling are not terminal outcomes but catalysts for intensified dependency. However, this failure is attributed to the capacity instead of the system itself. Empirical evidence from Agbo et al. supports this opinion. An interview showed that when students were asked about improvements concerning the PhD programme, their suggestions mainly focus on adding compulsory research and academic writing courses instead of changing the system [14]. Similarly, Kuzhabekova, despite documenting the policy's failure to improve research quality, recommended investing in "methodological training and research capacity" rather than questioning the publication requirement itself [19]. All these cases show a deeper reliance on the system rather than trying to avoid it.

Moreover, there is no alternatives for Kazakhstan, making it harder for the country to quit the existing system. Yergebekov and Temirbekova documented that Kazakhstan's PhD reforms dismantled the Soviet-era Candidate of Science system without replacing its structural foundations [20]. The official abolishment of the old framework left no indigenous institutional infrastructure to fall back on, yet the borrowed Bologna framework could not function as intended. This situation makes it unaffordable to give up the international system.

5. Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the case of Kazakhstan presented in this paper challenges the existing framework provided by global institutions, which are mainly dominated by Western countries. As a result, it leads to knowledge dependency in developing countries. Drawing on the dependency theory, this

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paper details and explains the process of being dependent in an academic context and argues that this may further lead to institutional decoupling. The failures resulting from this decoupling are then misdiagnosed as local capacity deficits, triggering demands for even stricter adherence to international benchmarks and deepening the very dependency they were meant to overcome.The Kazakhstan case provides empirical evidence for each stage of this cycle: the pursuit of Bologna integration and Scopus-based PhD requirements exemplifies initial dependency; the gap between formal adoption and substantive practice confirms decoupling; and the persistent commitment to "continue to adapt" fifteen years after joining, despite policy failure, demonstrates how the cycle becomes locked in. These findings suggest that international organizations should ground their educational standards in diverse institutional realities, while developing countries must prioritize localized adaptation and safeguard indigenous knowledge and institutional voice in the policy borrowing process. While this single-case qualitative study offers in-depth insights into Kazakhstan's experience, its generalizability is limited. Future research could adopt a multi-case comparative design encompassing other developing countries in Central Asia and Africa to further test the circular causal mechanism identified here and assess its applicability across diverse institutional contexts.

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