

Executive summary

Education reforms have been a persistent element in the political and social development of the Kyrgyz Republic since the first years of its gaining independence in 1991. The effort to establish a new political structure, to cope with a changing economic environment, to build a new civic and social order is still underway, demanding much of the financial and human resources of the country and the attention of its policy makers.

The dramatic political changes which started in the months of completion of this report (see Chapter 1) are unlikely to diminish the importance attached to education by policy makers and parents. Education is in fact considered to be “the most important indicator and priority direction of public development”.¹ Yet, even after 15 years of transition, the Kyrgyz Republic still faces daunting challenges in re-shaping and developing its education in line with a new value system and a changed social policy and structure.

The present report was prepared to support the authorities in the Kyrgyz Republic in better understanding the reasons for the unsatisfactory performance of Kyrgyz students in the 2006 PISA round (last place of 57 participating economies), despite significant resources and efforts invested in education by schools, parents and government. The report reveals that a number of policy areas are in need of attention, such as curriculum, textbooks, teaching materials, modes of pupil assessment, teacher education, governance and funding arrangements, data, higher education and vocational and education and training.

To achieve major educational reform in any country has been shown to be a complex and time-consuming process, involving sophisticated policy, good resources, competent leadership and time. The present report finds that to date, there has been a gap between policy aspirations and the achievement of major reform in the Kyrgyz Republic. The State has made admirable strides in the provision of educational opportunities for a large proportion of the population, but significant shortcomings still exist, and the biggest challenge remaining is to ensure that the education provided is of good quality.

Finance, governance and management of the system

Despite the impressive effort to devote resources to school education (the share of GDP for education rose from 3.9% in 2001 to 6.5% in 2007, with over 20% of total public expenditure reserved for education throughout that period), the Kyrgyz Republic fails to achieve satisfactory returns in terms of education quality. A high proportion of the population (37%) is under 18 years of age and puts a heavy financial burden on the schooling system. The teaching force is large and expensive, and pupil teacher ratios and teacher contracted hours are very generous by international standards, albeit with limited educational value.

Much of the spending inefficiencies are due to shortcomings in budgetary management and governance arrangements. The indicators used in drafting the budget are not quality oriented and need to be linked to results to address both quality and efficiency. The Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) has neither insight in the overall spending for the sector, nor in the execution of parts of its own budget (donor spending for reforms), and its capacities to assess the needs of the system and to monitor reform implementation are limited. There is considerable dependency on external expertise and funding, and a top-down policy approach without stakeholder involvement.

The review team recommends strengthening the capacities on local level and creating incentives for decentralised delivery of educational services, while equipping the Ministry of Education and Science with the means to meet its responsibilities for the definition and monitoring of policies and quality standards. The Ministry should further be in position to keep track of and control (all) educational transferences, and integrate pedagogical with administrative policies. The analytical capacities of the Ministry should be expanded through access to information from all relevant institutions, in particular the Ministry of Finance (MOF), and through a better mobilisation of the analytical resources currently resting with the Kyrgyz Academy of Education (KAE). The review team further recommends introducing mechanisms for more equitable distribution of resources in the system.

Early childhood care and pre-school education

Eager to reverse a longer lasting trend of declining enrolments in early childhood education, in 2009 the Kyrgyz Republic introduced a new Law on Pre-School Education. The government also entered a number of international partnerships for promoting good international practice, and guidelines for the education and care of young children were elaborated and integrated in the State Standard on Pre-School Education.

The successful implementation of these commendable policies will depend on how well the Kyrgyz Republic succeeds in co-ordinating the currently

fragmented services for young children, and on the quality of pre-school education. The review team recommends revisiting the pre-school curriculum and making it more flexible, modernising the pre- and in-service training for pre-school teachers, and ensuring adequate pre-school provision in remote and rural areas and for disadvantaged children.

Curriculum, textbooks and learning materials

The structure, conceptual basis and content of the curriculum at present impede student achievement and the quality of teaching and learning. There is an overload of subjects and hours, and the time for practical, creative or integrated learning is too limited. The conceptual framework is narrowly subject-based and academically oriented, and offers limited choice to the students. The textbooks and learning materials are inadequate to support the curriculum, are in short supply and, where available, are often out-of-date.

These problems highlight core concerns relating to the quality of the education available to pupils in schools. To help remedy such problems, the review team recommends introducing a National Curriculum Framework (NCF) to provide a coherent (also cross-subject) view of overall educational objectives for each major stage of education.² Schools should have the freedom to adapt parts of the Framework to their own needs and the number of subjects should be reduced to allow for more in-depth studying.

The report suggests a longer-term plan for textbook renewal, reforming the textbook development process, and a revival of the previously existing textbook rental scheme. Ideally, the effort would be complemented by a better supply of school libraries with books.

Assessment and examinations

Pupil assessment is an in-built, regular feature of schooling in the Kyrgyz Republic, but assessment tends to focus on the reproduction of content rather than on how well pupils apply, analyse and understand the material. Undue emphasis is placed on coaching the small percentage of high-ability students for success at the “Olympiads”, with insufficient attention to the needs of the average pupils and the low-achievers. The review team considers that it is crucial for the Kyrgyz Republic to establish standardised educational goals and a standardised assessment system. Formative assessment should be used to build pupils’ self-confidence based on realistic levels of achievement.

The current national examinations which are taken at grades 9 and 11 have a number of shortcomings, most notably the fact that in most cases the exam questions are known and published in advance. Students are hence never faced

with an exam question they have not seen before, or with a task that requires them to apply their knowledge in a different way.

Access and equity

While the access of children to schooling provision is very good in the Kyrgyz Republic, the key problem is the inadequate quality of education to which they have access. About 4% of school age children (approximately 35 000) are not attending school at all or not attending regularly. About 30 000 young people leave school completely after basic school, with inadequate skills to compete and cope in the labour market. The categories of children which face most difficulties with regard to participation in education are the children with special educational needs and those with disabilities.

The quality and availability of data on pupil attendance, transition and drop-out needs to be improved, and labour market oriented training needs to be provided for early school leavers. Kyrgyzstan needs to plan for improved provision for children with special educational needs/children with disabilities (SEN/CWD) so as to meet its national and international legal commitments in this regard. This will require increased funding.

Assessment and registration procedures need to be simplified, and health, education and welfare policies need to be better co-ordinated at national, *rayon* (district) and *aiyl-okmotu* (community) levels.

Vocational education and training (VET) and adult education

The Kyrgyz Republic has initial professional education (VET I), administered by the State Agency for Professional-Technical Education (SAPTE),³ and Secondary and higher professional education (VET II), administered by the MOES. This institutional separation reflects a conceptual separation, with VET I schools often serving as second-chance pathways.

Key strategic policy decisions are required to ensure that the country benefits to the optimum from its VET provision. Half of the age group 15 to 29 years is unemployed, as transition to market economy meant a decline of state-owned enterprises and the loss of traditional jobs. This gives rise to a major re-training challenge.

Sustained efforts are needed to build the capacity to provide adult education through appropriate methodologies, and to disseminate good practice to all licensed providers. VET should focus on the lifelong development. Career information and guidance need to be given much more attention in education and employment policies, coupled with reforms of information data on the labour market. The VET sector strategy needs to incorporate reliable monitoring,

transparent reviews, political support, stakeholder consultation, and needs to be linked to economic planning. Special attention should be paid to recognition and certification of learning. The establishment of a comprehensive framework of qualifications would provide valuable linkages between VET I and VET II, as well as improve student mobility in a lifelong learning perspective.

The teaching career and teacher education

Teaching as a career in the Kyrgyz Republic is experiencing major problems which, if not addressed, will undermine other efforts at educational reform. Despite good percentage salary increases in recent years, the salaries of teachers only amount to about 60% of the average wage. A number of pilot projects, undertaken with donor assistance, hold promise for improving teacher conditions, but need to be mainstreamed. Teacher contract hours and pupil teacher ratios are more favourable in the Kyrgyz Republic than in many richer, developed countries. Recruitment of high-quality candidates into teaching is very inadequate, and the retention of good teachers in the career is proving very difficult. Women provide the vast majority of the teaching force, which is also an ageing profession. The attractiveness of teaching career is low, and teacher education is provided by a diverse range of institutions, varying greatly in quality. In-service teacher education is taking place in regular intervals, but needs a re-appraisal in terms of content, methodology, evaluation and staffing.

The teaching career is in need of comprehensive, co-ordinated policy based on a consultative approach, with teacher remuneration as a core issue. The teaching workforce should be smaller but better paid, and the potential of good school leadership should be better mobilised. As to teacher training, the licensing and accreditation of teacher education institutions should be conducted by an independent agency, and a new framework for pre-service teacher education should be introduced, together with a raising of entry standards to teacher education.

Higher education and research

There is a pressing need to modernise higher education in the Kyrgyz Republic so that it can respond to the needs of a small economy for educated human capital, while also meeting individual needs. The government has embarked on a programme to align higher education with the Bologna Declaration, but the vast majority of undergraduate programmes still follow the traditional five year specialisation model. The review team recommends the MOES to take a leadership role in the development of a national strategy for higher education, addressing the size and efficiency of the sector and ensuring optimal use of resources, including buildings and equipment.

The establishment by the MOES of the proposed National Accreditation Council, covering all areas of the post secondary system, is the most important immediate step towards improving the quality of higher education. However, it is estimated that only about 20% of universities are ready for such a form of quality assurance at present.

In the area of research levels of investment are low, and there is a lack of co-ordination among the institutions involved. The research infrastructure is often old or obsolete, there are no resources to replace it, and salaries for scientists and researchers are low. The review team recommends to better focus funding for research. The emphasis should be on applied rather than basic research.

The existing testing system (*Obsherespublikanskoe Testirovanie* or ORT) for selection into higher education should be retained. It should be further strengthened by expanding the subject component of the test to better reflect student attainment and competences in relation to national curriculum standards and goals.

The development and introduction of the proposed National Qualifications Framework would greatly facilitate degree recognition and career progression. The Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labour should collect, analyse and disseminate labour market information, and the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should expand their career centres and involve employer input.

Notes

1. Country Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2007-2010, p. 61.
2. In the weeks of finalisation of this report, the review team was informed that the Ministry of Education and Science has approved a National Curriculum Framework.
3. The professional education cycle includes primary and secondary vocational training, and higher education under the heading “higher” and “post graduate” vocational (professional) training. See Chapter 3 for more details.