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THE PROBLEM WITH PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an analysis of the Education Development Strategies of the Kyrgyz Republic for the years of 2012-2020 (EDS 2020) – a document developed by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of the Kyrgyz Republic. Analysis is made within the theoretical framework and methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The purpose of this paper is to expose issues that are being identified as ‘problems’ or ‘challenges’ of the Kyrgyz education in general, and of higher education in particular. Drawing on the specifics of the identified problems, this paper will also analyze theoretical assumptions upon which they are based. This is important because identified problems and their projected solutions are going to constitute further reform attempts, and ultimately shape the future of the educational system of the Kyrgyz Republic.

After more than twenty years of educational reforms, the state of Higher Education (HE) in the Kyrgyz Republic still has a large room for improvement. In current literature it is being described as “kasha” or real mess (Merrill, 2012, p. 5). The process and outcomes of higher education reforms are described as being “lost in transition” (DeYoung, 2010); situating “at crossroads” (World Bank, 2012), moving “painstakingly slow” (Silova, 2011, p.11), in short – “largely unsuccessful” (Tomusk, 2011 in Silova, 2011, p.11). These kinds of reform results make one question whether adequate issues have been addressed over the two decades of educational reforming.

So the main purpose of this paper is to find out why the abovementioned is happening. While the answer to this question requires extensive and comprehensive research, I decided to start its exploration by looking at what is currently being identified as problems in higher education, and the reforms that are being currently proposed to solve these problems. To do this I decided to study the EDS 2020, since according to the Ministry of Education and Science
(MoES) of the Kyrgyz Republic, it is the “theoretical foundation of the new education content” (MoES, 2012).

Having looked through the EDS 2020 and academic literature, as well as official reports of organizations involved in educational reforms I hypothesize that one of the reasons that leads to the aforementioned reform outcomes lies at the initial stages of the reform process, i.e. problem identification. In other words, what and how, as well as why is identified as a problem is problematic. To put it straightforward, I see the problem in prioritizing market driven goals, i.e. preparing qualified ‘labor’ for the market (EDS, 2012, p. 25) over the “traditional purpose of education” (Chomsky, 2012), which is to equip people with desire to learn even more in order to gain not only material, but more importantly – intellectual wealth, having which, young people would be interested and able to continue education on their own (Chomsky, 2012; Postman, 1995, p. xi), as well as be engaged citizens (Dewey, 1916) with developed critical thinking skills enabling them to engage in socio-economic and political discussions both locally and globally.

Prioritization of the market-driven goals based on neoliberal theoretical assumptions over education’s ‘traditional goals’ in the case of the Kyrgyz Republic is due to several reasons. The initial reason is the collapse of the Soviet Union, which resulted in declining economy and increasing dependency of the Kyrgyz Republic on external assistance. Economic dependency coupled with the fear of “falling behind” (Silova, 2010, p. 5) of the international community may have forced government officials to unquestioningly accept any available conditional and unconditional funding from international donors (e.g. Bretton Woods institutions). International donors, in turn, predominantly follow neoliberal theory, focusing on market driven monetary concerns that ignore social aspects of reform policies (Heyneman, 2009, p. 80).
Thus focusing mainly on structural and financial aspects of education (i.e. privatization, fee-based education, transfer to self-financing, performance-based and per-capita payment, etc.), other no less important, and perhaps even more important non-monetary problems are being ignored. These kinds of problems would include, for example, widespread faculty development program, curriculum design, corruption, etc. In this regard, a local expert notes that “we always try to imitate someone… All of the projects were always proposed and will be proposed by external subjects… [and] all of the projects were developed in order to receive donors’ funds” (IPP, 2011).

The significance of this analysis with regards to education development in the Kyrgyz Republic is that it attempts to provide critical view of the discourse, which is going on in the sphere of educational reforms. Neoliberal ideas, which are currently being promoted within the discourse, are apparently being taken for granted without any serious questioning so far. Thus one of the contributions would be a call to revisit the discourse of educational reforms in the Kyrgyz Republic. This paper also aims to contribute to discussions on the necessity of re-examining the values of education as well as exploring its alternative goals and perspectives. In particular, these alternative issues could be around possibilities of shifting from “instrumental” values of education to its “intrinsic” values; from “quantitate measures of success” to “qualitative” ones; from the interest in “producing economically productive employees” to upbringing “thoughtful and informed citizens” (Blackmore, 2000, p. 134).

In addition, the Kyrgyz Republic is a low resource country qualified as ‘developing’, and therefore has similar tendencies in its endeavors to ‘develop’ as other countries within the same ‘category’. In this regard, this paper will also provide some alternative ideas of looking at similar challenges in educational reforms of other ‘developing’ countries.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The problems of Kyrgyz higher education began to be addressed in international publications after the country gained independence in 1991. That was the time when the country suddenly and dramatically changed its socio-economic and political paradigm, marching from socialism into capitalism. The Kyrgyz Republic was not alone in doing so. There were other fourteen former Soviet republics in addition to the countries of the ex-socialist bloc (e.g. Eastern European states), which made a similar transition.

In this regard, Silova (2010) mainly talks about the theory of ‘post-socialism’ within the field of comparative education, and its viability and relevance in today’s debates (pp.1-24). In doing so she describes well the overall tendencies and characteristics of the educational reforms that took place in post-socialist countries (with different implications though) after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The following excerpt gives a good description of the theory:

“Post-socialism (just as other postmovements embracing the challenge of the uncertainty) provides a unique space from which we can challenge the metanarratives of globalization and interrupt their “clarity- and closure-seeking tendencies” (MacLure, 2006, p. 730). It is a space from which we can further complicate (not clarify) our understanding of ongoing reconfigurations of educational spaces in a global context” (Silova, 2010, p.20)

According to Silova (2010), collapse of the Soviet Union not only created a new ‘post-socialist’ theory, but also seemingly reinforced some of the ‘old’ theories like modernization and world culture that were widely discussed in 1970s (pp.1-20). She notes that these ‘old’ theories were possible due to the paradigm of “transitology”, which is described as a “recast of Sovietology” and studies educational reforms in post-socialist countries in ‘transition period’ (from ‘planned economy’ to ‘market economy’).

Reforms that were studied within transitology were called “post-socialist education reform package” that would include typically such “travelling policies” as ‘student-centered
learning’, ‘decentralization’, ‘privatization’, per-capita financing, fee-based education, performance based payment, etc. The studies of transitology “perceived convergence of post-socialist societies toward the global norms” (Silova, 2010, p.3) and were mainly represented by “documenting the progress from authoritarianism toward market economies and democracies.” This sort of linear characteristic of transitology allowed Kapustin (cited by Silova) to consider it as “the second edition” of modernization theories flawed with intellectual inconsistency and political inadequacy” (Silova, 2010, p.3).

I think that along with return of the above mentioned ‘old’ theories, neoliberal ideas in education discourse have also been strongly reinforced (Fairclough, 2003, p.4-5). Reinforcement of neoliberal ideas occurs as a consequence of cooperation between governments and such international institutions as IMF and World Bank (along with other international financial institutions as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), etc.). According to Klees, the World Bank is “a major player in global educational policy and has been at the forefront of the Shift to neoliberal thinking” (2008, p. 312). And Sigley noted that these organizations “have become synonymous with global neoliberalism” (2006, p.489). Although Sigley discusses a particular case in China, I believe that the reason for these organizations becoming synonymous with neoliberalism is that cooperation with them always requires “programmes of economic rationalization and marketization in the fields of health, education and other social areas” regardless of the country they work in (Sigley, 2006, p.489).

At present, just as decades ago (in 1960-1970s), “the second edition of modernization” with its linear approach to development does not appear to work. In this regard, the first part of the title of Alan DeYoung’s book seems to be telling: “Lost in transition: Redefining students
and universities in the contemporary Kyrgyz Republic” (2010). The following quote gives the overall picture of what he found, and what is relevant to the purpose of this paper:

‘For all the talk of joining the international higher education community, few if any international standards trickling down to the classroom level in the universities I worked in between 2003 and 2009. Their problems related to quality are related to budgets, organization, and philosophy’ (p. 146).

One of the reasons why DeYoung decided to study the Kyrgyz higher education was to find out explanations for high enrollment rates, which seemed to stay stable regardless of the deteriorating quality both in secondary schools, where students are prepared for college, and in higher education (pp. vii-xiv). Besides, he talks about students being unable “to articulate instrumental visions of meaning of higher education” (2010, p.143). He found that they could not think of any other goals of higher education other than receiving diploma, which is “necessary [because of bureaucracy], but not sufficient” to get employed as personal connections are much more important in this regard (2010, p.143). This is one of the serious and alarming consequences of improperly identified problems in the process of reform planning – when students, and I am afraid not only them, but other adults involved in education reforms too, are unable to articulate the “meaning of higher education.” The majority of them are unable to connect it to anything more than just ‘receiving diploma’ which will be helpful for further employment, because anything else was hardly ever mentioned during discussions devoted to reforms in higher education. As a result, as time passes, this kind of ‘purpose’ of higher education becomes a common sense, which is taken for granted and never questioned.
Problem with problem identification

I see at least two problematic aspects in the “problem identification” process: (1) the very nature of issues identified as problems in education; and (2) the process, or the way they are being identified.

By claiming that I see problems in ‘problem identification’ with regards to its nature, I mean the dominance of neoliberal ideology in identifying problematic issues, i.e. its predominantly market-driven agenda (e.g. “gap between HE and labor market requirements”, MoES (EDS), 2012, p. 25).

Dominance of neoliberalism in education reforms is not unique to post-socialist region. It could perhaps be considered as an expansion of neoliberal frontiers from the West to the East following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of capitalism in post-communist bloc. A number of scholars have problematized the predominance of neoliberal ideology in education. The core of critique includes practices of standardized high-stake testing, privatization, marketization, competition and accountability in education. (Apple, 2001, 2003, 2013; Giroux, 1988, 2001; Klees, 2008; Hicks, 2004; Hursh, 2011; Harvey, 2005, Saunders, 2010, 2011).

Thus, for instance, Apple (2001) considers tests to be a neoliberal tool to measure the ‘outcome’ of school education, then to rate the school and put a tag price on it, so that those who can afford private schools could have more choice in selection and purchase of this commodity, i.e. education; and contributes to citizens becoming consumers, not active citizen. As for Giroux (1988), he thinks that testing undermines teachers as intellectuals by requiring them to have rather facilitation skills than teaching skills. Klees (2008), in addition to privatization and marketization of education, criticizes performance-based payment to school teachers, because student learning does not solely depend on teachers’ performance.
In discussing the neoliberal phenomenon, Saunders (2010) points to its “redefinition of individual as *homo oeconomicus*” (p. 47), which translates to higher education in the USA. He points that while in the USA principles of neoliberalism in higher education institutions (HEI) are not new, they have been immensely reinforced within the last forty years. This, he argues, resulted in invigoration of “nefarious purposes” of the universities at present, and to diminishing “their ability to realize their critical and emancipatory potential” (p. 66). This is how he describes this sort of reinforcement:

“What is new to the neoliberal university is the scope and extent of these profit-driven, corporate ends, as well as how many students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers explicitly support and embrace these capitalistic goals and priorities”(Saunders, 2010, p. 55)

While according to Saunders (2010), neoliberal ideas in US HEIs are not absolutely new, but just its reinforced form; in the case of the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan it is quite a new phenomenon. Moreover, these ideas are quite opposite to those that had been practiced for the last seventy years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. What the Kyrgyz Republic is experiencing at present is a leap from one radical ideology to another: from socialism to neoliberalism, or as Fairclough (2003) puts it – ‘new capitalism’, without experiencing the in-between phenomenon, which perhaps could be described as ‘moderate capitalist elements in education’.

For example, some of the important and positive elements of this ‘in-between’ phenomenon, which exist in the US HE, and never were thought about (or suggested to reform) in Kyrgyzstan are a tenure system and flexible curriculum that allows students to choose courses in addition to core courses. These are some of the important aspects that promote academic freedom and creativity without which it is difficult to ensure quality education. These kinds of
important and positive ‘in-between’ practices are being skipped, which brings to “largely unsuccessful” (Tomusk, 2011 in Silova, 2011, p.11) results of the reforms. In other words, the problem of problem identification in this case would be ‘skipping’ the problems that are prerequisites for successful reforms. In this regard, the fact that the tenure system has been attacked by radical proponents of the neoliberal regime in the US as “bad investment” (Horowitz, 2004 in Saunders, 2010, p.54) makes one think as to what extent that skipping might have deliberate character in the process of promoting neoliberal agenda in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Another important problem that has been ignored by policy makers is professional development program for university faculty. They are expected to ‘produce high quality products’ that would get employed upon graduation. While I argue that employment should not be presented and perceived as the final and only goal of education, even to achieve this goal faculty need to know how to do that. Many of them were not taught to teach in a way they are expected to teach today, i.e. produce graduates who will be able to ‘sell themselves’ to employers; or talking about the ‘higher’ purpose of education – to be engaged, active, and critically thinking citizens. It is unclear how university faculty who in their turn received ‘teacher-centered’ education based on memorization and replication are able to use ‘student-centered pedagogy’ and teach ‘critically thinking and creative’ individuals.

In this regard, Silova and Steiner-Khamsi (2008, p. 32) note that there is no any study done as to why governments and international donors have ignored in-service university teacher training, and talk about donors who consider teachers as “lost generation”, who have been “indoctrinated” by socialist thinking and teaching, and therefore “not worth investing.” Another reason is that “higher education reform is not a priority of international aid.” Then Silova and Steiner-Khamsi mention that to address this issue the Soros Foundation designed and ran
programs for in-service schools and university teachers. To this I would add another international organization that runs secondary school and university teachers’ development programs – the Aga Khan Humanities Project at the University of Central Asia (AKHP, UCA). However AKHP, UCA does it in an unsystematic way, and at selected locales, for selected target group of teachers and university faculty.

To address the problem of quality teaching, international experts proposed to introduce ‘differentiated salaries’ or performance-based payment to faculty, which basically meant that “younger faculty with newly equipped skills” needed to be paid higher salaries compared to their older and more experienced colleagues (Heyneman, 2010, p. 79). In other words, this was the introduction of market elements into education: ‘competition’ among faculty members (Hursh, 2001). The concept of “newly equipped skills” usually means a degree from a western university. Training abroad is not something affordable for the majority of university faculty (due to economic and language constraints), and thus represents a serious problem. Rarely it is raised as a subject to consider within the reform programs (this is from my personal observation during five years of involvement in the faculty development program funded by the Aga Khan Development Network).

The second problematic aspect is a process of identifying problems. In other words, the problem concerns such questions as who decides particular issues to be ‘the problems’, why these issues are identified as problems, and how these ‘problems’ are proposed to be solved? To a certain extent, it has common roots with the first aspect discussed above, i.e. the nature of problems. That is mainly because what is found to be a problem depends on who is involved in the process of problem identification and why, which is largely related to ideology and power dynamics.
Dominance of neoliberal ideology is the result of unequal power dynamics practiced in the process of problem identification that is followed by further policy development. With regards to this paper, I will be looking at unequal power dynamics in the process of cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic and international donor organizations.

With regards to post-socialist countries moving towards the market economy, Silova & Steiner-Khamsi (2008) talk about “travelling policies” which were either imposed by the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and/or ADB, or implemented voluntarily “out of fear of falling behind” (Silova, 2010, p. 5). Since the World Bank and IMF are often considered synonymous with neoliberalism (Sigley, 2006, p.495), policies that are promoted within reforms are also considered to be neoliberal. Hence the discourse of neoliberal policies would contain such concepts as ‘market’, ‘labor market’, ‘accountability’, ‘financing’, ‘monitoring’, ‘evaluation’ ‘standard’, ‘competition’, etc., i.e. concepts that relate to control and economic/monetary concerns, which are at the core of the neoliberal ideology.

I argue that one of the main problems that contribute to deterioration of education quality in the Kyrgyz Republic is widespread corruption at all levels of education system. As Engvall (2011) states: “In Kyrgyzstan, corruption is not a problem for the state, it IS the state”. While some scholars believe corruption is taking place due to absence of the tradition of academic honesty and integrity (Heyneman, 2008, p. 21) others see its reason in wider and more complex situation that involves economic (in terms of faculty salary rates) and systemic (national curricula load) issues (Reeves, 2004).

I am more inclined to agree with the latter explanation for the corruption problem. In this regard, I think that the reason why the problem of corruption is given less priority in reform
policies is because the dominating ideology is more concerned with economic and monetary issues in terms of their accumulation, not spending. Therefore I argue that the order of discourse in educational reforms area needs to be balanced by alternative ideology and be expanded to such concepts as ‘corruption’, ‘academic honesty’, ‘ethics’, ‘payment’, ‘salary’, ‘faculty’, ‘faculty development programs’, etc.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Critical Discourse Analysis

Before proceeding to the CDA as the theoretical framework of this paper, it is worthwhile to discuss the definition of discourse as a term. While talking about Foucault and discourse, McHoul & Grace distinguish at least two kinds discourse: Foucauldian and non-Foucauldian. Non-Foucauldian discourse is basically related to texts, whereas Foucauldian discourse usually means discourse-as-knowledge (social knowledge). They also say that Foucauldian discourse can be called critical, because it was Foucault who counter-read the historical and social conditions (McHoul, A. W., & Grace, W., 1997, pp. 27-41).

However, Phillips and Jorgensen mentioned that there is no clear consensus” regarding the definition of discourse. Therefore, they suggested the following ‘preliminary definition’ of discourse, which is also supported within the framework of this paper: “particular way of talking about and understanding the world” (2002, p.1), which seems to be resonating with the Foucauldian discourse as well.

As the title of the methodology speaks for itself the object of analysis is discourse (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 21). With regards to this paper, both Foucauldian (discourse of educational reforms) and non-Foucauldian (EDS 2020) forms of discourses will be analyzed. Analysis of both text and social practice, as well as discursive practice is suggested by Norman Faircough, whose three-dimensional approach I am going to use in this paper.

CDA is considered to be a good method for analyzing policy texts because “they are particularly important expressions of social power in that they convey the values of authoritative actors and institutions whose particular forms of knowledge about the social world are reflected in these texts” (Vavrus, 2010, p.77). It is also helpful in formulating “unmet needs; to disclose misinterpretation: mismatch between reality and people” (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 77).
METHODOLOGY

Data of analysis

The discourse of the educational reforms in the Kyrgyz Republic is analyzed through the official paper called the Educational Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012-2020 (EDS 2020). The Minister of Education and Science states that the EDS 2020 is a “theoretical foundation of the new education content” that is ahead of other spheres since it is education that deals with the development of human potential and that prepares leaders for reforms in other sectors (Sydykov, 2012).

According to the Chief of the Monitoring and Strategic Planning Sector of the MoES of the Kyrgyz Republic, the EDS 2020 was developed with the involvement of experts from MoES of the Kyrgyz Republic, Kyrgyz Academy of education, NGO representatives, National Evaluation Network, International and Donor Organizations (Marchenko, 2012). Marchenko claims that it was developed in a democratic manner, i.e. it was discussed twice in four years by various stakeholders during regular meetings or focus groups. She also mentions that the strategy was constructed without “financial disruption” (“finansovyrazryv”), i.e. all events within the EDS 2020 were planned in accordance with defined financial sources – republican (national) budget funds and donors’ funds (Marchenko, 2012).

The EDS 2020 is a text in the intertextual chain of similar papers developed by the MoES, for example, the Education Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic (2007-2010), which was an education section of the Country Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic 2006-2010 (Marchenko, 2012); or Country Development Strategy for 2009-2011 (Sydykov, 2012). It consists of thirty-nine pages, and provides information on the vision, objectives, and principles of the strategy. It has sections on all levels of education: from early childhood to adult
education. It also contains sections on management, monitoring and planning in education; monitoring and evaluation of the EDS 2020; expected results; and challenges and risks.

**Method of Analysis**

*Three-dimensional model of the CDA*

This paper used CDA tools with two main purposes. First, to expose the theoretical background (assumptions) of the EDS 2020 in overall and of the Higher Education (HE) sector in particular. Second, to explore the degree to which identified problems are aligned with local needs, i.e. ‘locally-born’ (Merrill, 2012), which leads to the issue of power dynamics influencing the process of the EDS development.

To do this, I used discourse analysis approach suggested by Norman Fairclough – the three-dimension model: discourse-as-text, discourse-as-discursive practice, and discourse-as-social practice (Fairclough, 1992).

Thus on a *textual level*, with the purpose of identifying theoretical background and assumptions underlying the issues presented as “problems” I first paid attention to semantic and lexical relations of the part that describes the “situation analysis” of the current HE system (EDS 2020, pp. 22-25). The same analytical tool was used for the sections discussing ‘highlighted problems’ in the sector, as well as recommendations for their solutions, i.e. “policy priority areas” (EDS 2020, p. 25).


‘budget’. I paid attention to their repetitiveness, contextual and semantic relations with the subtopics of the EDS 2020.

For the lexical or ‘wording’ analysis I used NVivo Program (Nud*IST – Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing). I checked the document for the first hundred most frequently used words. This helped me see the nodes that are related to the neoliberal discourse and the frequency of their use in the document.

At the level of discourse-as-discursive practice I use interdiscursivity and intertextuality as tools to trace the power dynamics in the process of text production, as well as to analyze the ways of its consumption. Thus I explored interdiscursivity within the text of EDS 2020 to analyze mainly the process of text production (which is well reflected in the Introduction part of the text). I tried to identify genres and discourses in it, which in turn, contributed to the discourse and knowledge of the document.

At the stage of text consumption I analyzed intertextuality of the EDS 2020 and its implications at the level of discursive practice. I did this by exploring the way the EDS 2020, as well as education reforms in general are being discussed in the media by people having interest in the topic on governmental and non-governmental levels by scholars and practitioners. Media materials represent different genres: interviews, articles and discussions. By doing so I tried to analyze whether interdiscursivity of the media is creative that promotes socio-cultural changes, or conventional that supports the dominant ideology (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 73). Some of the quotes represented in this paper were translated from Russian to English by me.

At the level of discourse-as-social practice I explored what kinds of discourses are being articulated at the discursive practice, how they are distributed across the texts, as well as what are their ideological consequence (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, pp. 86-87).
**Limitations of the Methodology**

Analysis of the EDS 2020 would have been stronger if I had a possibility to interview people involved in the policy development process on the different levels: administration and faculty of educational institutions, government officials, donor organizations, local and international NGO representatives. This paper therefore lacks ‘voices’ of immediate actors, that perhaps resulted in somewhat laid-back analysis. Interviewing people involved in the document development process would help to clarify nuances not visible otherwise. Also interviewing government officials, educators, parents, and other stakeholders would help in making more bold statement regarding the ‘appropriateness’ of the identified problems and priorities for further development actions.
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS:
Educational Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012-2020 (EDS 2020)

Text Analysis

Semantic analysis of the EDS 2020 section on Higher Education

The following is a semantic and lexical analysis of the section of the EDS 2020 devoted to HE issues in the Kyrgyz Republic. The section of HE consists of “Situational analysis”, “Highlighted problems”, “Policy priority areas”, and a table with “Main indicators” of HE, which basically bears statistical data on the number of private/public HEIs, graduates holding various degrees, etc.

The situation analysis of HE section in the EDS 2020 (pp. 22-26) starts with the following sentence:

“The market of educational services for youth and adults is increasing and becomes more and more competitive” (EDS 2020, p. 22).

From the above sample the language of neoliberal discourse is easily recognizable. Being the first sentence of the entire section, it also arrays the tone for the rest of the text. This manifests that the official ‘author’ of the text, i.e. the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, has internalized the idea of commodification and marketization concepts of the neoliberal discourse (or is acting as if it has internalized it, which I will discuss more in the discursive and social practice analysis part of this paper).

There are five issues identified as ‘problems’ of the Kyrgyz HE sector. Each of them is presented in a separate box below, which is followed by their analysis. I added emphasis by italicizing each.
1. Inadequate level of skills, knowledge of university graduates. Expert assessments made by employers revealed that graduates had inadequate level of knowledge and skills. Qualification requirements for graduates of HEIs are rather broad, and diploma exams are of formal nature. The gap between demand at the labor market and the structure of programs of higher education generates an excess of graduates or specialists in one area and shortage in others (EDS 2020, p. 25).

Statement of this problem is closely tied to the neoliberal theory. The nodes signifying the dominant discourse are skills, employer, demand, and labor market. It presents HE education as an area that needs to serve and satisfy the market. Any other purpose of HE, given the framework, is not mentioned.

2. Inefficient system of quality assurance. Two of the existing quality assurance mechanisms – licensing and certification – do not bring much effect because of the fact that they are not used as tools to monitor quality and improvement. There are no appropriate criteria or standards for evaluation of HEIs from the perspective of an independent accreditation institute (EDS 2020, p. 25).

The second problem does not have much of the neoliberal lexicon other than standard and evaluation, though semantically the articulated problem has roots in the neoliberal theory, which comes out of necessity to make schools accountable. In the early 1900s, education was considered as an investment and had to be productive, which in fact is being still considered in the same mode. In this regard Hursh (2001, 13-14) mentions policy makers of the last and present centuries, David Shedden and Puiggros respectively, who emphasized practically the same thing – necessity to measure/evaluate the school training to make sure it “fits the needs of production and labor market.”

3. Low quality of staff. 60% of teachers do not hold any degrees. HEI practically do not organize events aimed at improving professional skills of the faculty (EDS 2020, p. 25).

The problem number three does not have any explicit lexical or semantic relation to the neoliberal theory. However, the fact that the government is not considered to be responsible for
faculty development trainings makes one think about neoliberal aspiration – free market with minimum or absent government.

This problem has another kind of problem with the way it is being identified as such. It states that 60% of faculty do not hold any degrees, which in fact, is not required by local legislation. Most of the Kyrgyz HEI still offer 5-years of undergraduate education, just like during the Soviet Union, and award nothing but ‘diplomized specialist’ degree, i.e. ‘higher education’, which was for the last ninety years, and still is enough to pursue a career as a HEI faculty member. These sort of statements seem to have ‘foreign voices’, which in turn creates doubts about whether the MoES is the ‘principal text producer’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 78).

4. Inefficiency of the budget costs on the students’ education. Almost half of the budget-financed places at universities represent state order for pedagogic staff training; but most students do not fulfill the obligations and transfer from their specialty to a more prestigious one in the final year of their studies. Only 76% of students are graduating, much less works according to their specialty. According to the statistics, only about 45% of pedagogic staff works according to the placement”.

The fourth problem is also not loaded with any particular neoliberal terminology except for inefficiency. However, semantic analysis tells us that it is supportive of the neoliberal idea of cutting down government spending (“budget-financed places”) on student-grants that is awarded to students with highest national testing scores. Although the state finances specialties where there is a deficit of cadres, mostly teaching positions, this policy is being discarded as inefficient, due to the fact that students change their specialties in their third or fourth year of study.

5. Insufficient science development in higher education institutions. There is no sufficient connection between science and higher education. There is almost no dynamics in shaping scientific schools in HEIs. Many questions, such as the development of scientific skills and mechanisms to attract students to scientific work, were not covered.
Finally, the problem number five claims that science development is insufficient in HEIs. Here it is unclear what is meant by ‘science’. If what is meant relates to natural sciences, than it is one thing. Once more or less developed Academy of Sciences is currently declining just like the entire education system and therefore needs close attention. However if the concern is about the absence of policy ‘think-tanks’ similar to the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. or university-based research centers like at Harvard or Stanford universities, then this problem can also be categorized as neoliberal (Harvey, 2005, p. 22).

Below are the suggested outlines of the policies considered to be necessary to solve the problems identified above. Most of the policy areas directly correspond to the aforementioned problems, and therefore have the same semantics and analysis. However the fifth policy area is a little bit questionable, since it talks about re-forming in-service training system, which hardly exists per se. Having worked for the INGOs dealing with faculty development program throughout the Central Asian region for seven years, my concern was the absence of the in-service training system on a national level, which is needed for post-socialist countries, where teachers are continuing to exploit “memorize-recite-forget” approach (Reeves, 2004, 24) in teaching. In this regard, perhaps a policy on “establishing the in-service training” would be more appropriate.

“Priority policy areas:
1. Improving higher education quality assurance systems.
2. Optimization of the structure and levels of higher education.
3. Level the gap between HE and labor market requirements, paying particular attention to regional differences.
4. Reform the in-service training system.
5. Review existing higher education financing mechanisms, taking into consideration transfer of state HEIs to self-financing.
6. Development of university science” (EDS, 2020, p. 25)
‘Wording’ analysis with NVivo

The most frequently used one hundred words that were identified by the NVivo data analysis tool, shows that among others, the following economic/monetary and controlling terms are used to support the neoliberal discourse in the EDS 2020 (see Figure 1): Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Number of references</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Market</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
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<td>Budget</td>
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<td>Management</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0.57%</td>
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Figure 1: The most frequent 100 words

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<th>'Word trees'</th>
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<td>education</td>
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‘Word trees’
To see the way they are used in the text I created ‘word trees’ (for words, such as market, financing, and evaluation) that makes it possible to see their linkages to other words and concepts. So Figure 2 demonstrates the ‘market’ word tree, from which it is clear that it is most often used in combination with the words ‘labor’ and ‘requirement’. Frequent use of the word combination “labor market requirement” in the paper on national education strategy makes it evident that the nation prioritizes meeting the “labor market requirement” in education sector in the projected period of time (i.e. in years of 2012-2020).

Figure 2: ‘Word tree’- ‘market’ (27 references, 0.15% coverage)
Figure 3 demonstrates another priority of the EDS 2020 – transferring education to “per-capita financing” system, because otherwise the meager public funds are being spent inefficiently (EDS 2020):

Figure 3: ‘Word tree’ – ‘financing’ (39 references, 0.33% coverage)

Another aspect the EDS 2020 is largely focused on the term ‘evaluation’ in combination with the words ‘monitoring’ as well as ‘and’ (see Figure 4) that is used for accountability.
purposes. One of the implications of this is that “monitoring and evaluation” is a considerable area of concentration for the EDS 2020, which is going to be used to measure the scope of reforms in transferring to “per-capita financing” and satisfying “labor market requirements”.

**Figure 4: ‘Word tree’ – ‘evaluation’ (37 references, 0.35% coverage)**

In addition to the most frequently used words, I also considered such terms as *salary* (Figure 5), *faculty* (Figure 6), *curriculum* (Figure 7), and *corruption* (Figure 8). I argue that issues around these terms should be considered as problematic; in other words, problems of salary, faculty professional development, revisiting curriculum issues, and last but not least –
problem of corruption should be addressed by both local and international policy agents involved in the processes of problem identification and policy design. However, the NVivo results show that these issues are far from being priority areas (comparing to the aforementioned) for the next several years of education reforms.

Figure 5: ‘Word tree’- ‘salary’ (7 references, 0.04% coverage)

Figure 6: ‘Word tree’- ‘faculty’ (1 reference, 0.01% coverage)

Figure 7: ‘Word tree’- ‘curriculum’ (5 references, 0.05% coverage)

Figure 8: ‘Word tree’- ‘curriculum’ (1 references, 0.01% coverage)

Analysis of Discursive and Social Practice

Analysis of interdiscursivity and intertextuality of the Introduction part of the EDS 2020:
Power dynamics in the process of text production

The introduction of the EDS 2020 contains a number of manifest intertextualities that represents a certain degree of influence of the earlier international social events on the process of the strategy development. Thus the second sentence of the first paragraph refers to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Education for All (EFA):

First paragraph: “Education Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012-2020 (hereinafter referred to as the EDS 2020) is based on the vision and goals of the country development. It aims to achieve the goals of global programmes: Millennium Development and Education For All”

While the first sentence of the introduction of the EDS 2020 states that it is “based on the vision and goals of the country’s development’” (EDS 2020, p. 3), which suggests certain national autonomy in the text production process, the next sentence says that the EDS 2020 “aims to achieve the goals of global programmes”, which ultimately undermines the autonomy, suggested in the first sentence.

This is one of the problematic aspects that demonstrate ambiguity of the goals identification; it is not really clear whether the EDS 2020 pursues the goals of the country, or the goals of the global programs. Perhaps the country goals are equated to those of the global programs, but that is not clear either. And if the latter is the case, then it is important to scrutinize the Millennium Development Goals and Education For All programs for their alignment with the local context and local needs. The reasons for the importance of examining the MDGs’ alignment with local needs are given in the Discussion part of this paper.

The Paris Declaration and the Accra Development Effectiveness Agenda are the instances of other social events that EDS 2020 refers to. These are located in the fourth paragraph of the Introduction part and are presented as following:
Fourth paragraph: “The Strategy is designed with the consideration of external financial support provided to the education sector in the Kyrgyz Republic based on the principles of the Paris declaration and the Accra Development Effectiveness Agenda which state that all types of donor assistance, including SWAp, will ensure observance of human rights and equal conditions for women and men”

Analysis of this paragraph explains two issues that relate to power relations: first it clearly states that the EDS 2020 is contingent on “external financial support” and was designed keeping that in mind; besides, the financial support is to be provided “based on principles” of the mentioned social events. While texts of those events contain discourses of “ownership” (“partnership”), “harmonization”, “mutual accountability” as principles for policy development and implementation (OECD, 2013), that does not exclude the necessity to scrutinize implications of the abovementioned social events in practice, given the fact that these discourses are also being criticized for their mostly nominal character (McCormick, 2012; Vavrus, 2010).

Besides external social events, the Introduction part exposes information on direct and indirect actors involved in the EDS 2020 production and implementation. The second paragraph describes who and how manages policies to be developed based on the EDS 2020:

Second paragraph: “Authorized executive state bodies engaged in education will develop education policy based on the priorities laid down in the EDS 2020 given systematic implementation of national measures designed to improve the quality of education in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2012-2020”

Drawing on the above sentence (of the second paragraph), one can see that “state bodies” have autonomy to develop policy. At the same time, however, as in the case with the first paragraph, this autonomy is conditioned by the “EDS 2020 priorities”, which in turn largely “aim to achieve the goals of global programs, i.e. MDG and IMF. Here again questions arise as to what extent “state bodies” are able to independently develop policy, and to what extent the EDS 2020, which aims at global programs (or at least claims to do so) will contribute to the improvement of “quality of education in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2012-2020”, given the issues
under debate around compatibility of international programs with local needs (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Merrill, 2012).

A sentence in the third paragraph indirectly demonstrates involvement of another actor that has to do with the “basis” for reforms, which continues analysis of autonomy and dependency:

Third paragraph: “Coordination of donor assistance and complementary investments will put the basis for further reforms in the education sector”

The third paragraph allows the reader to understand that funding of reforms comes from donors and some sort of “complementary investments.” However it does not provide information on mechanism of “coordination”, and what is no less important – on who is going to “coordinate” the funding process. Hence, while the reader cannot recognize who is responsible for “coordination”, it is quite clear that the process of reforms is dependent on external funding, which in turn, leads to the question of power relations in identifying issues to be reformed. The fact that the reforms are dependent on “donor assistance and complementary investments” demonstrates lack of power and autonomy of the state in carrying out the reforms.

Analysis of interdiscursivity and intertextuality in media discussing the discourse of educational reforms in Kyrgyzstan

As outlined in the methodology description, analysis of discursive practice on the level of text consumption is made by review of media articles available online that discuss either reform in Kyrgyz education in general or the EDS 2020 in particular. This is being done with a purpose of identifying the kinds of discourses that are being articulated at the level of discursive (text/discourse consumption) and social practices.

Thus, an article by Abdyjaparov, Professor of the Academy of Management under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, contains various discourses (often opposing each other)
around goals and functions of the HEIs in the Kyrgyz Republic. For instance, he uses neoliberal discourse as he claims that the main function of education in the future will be “innovation and marketing.” The next sentence talks about the main goal of education, which he believes is “cultivating intellectual and ethical norms” in individual, as well as “perfecting [individual’s] style of thinking” (Abdyjaparov, 2007, para. 2) that arguably belongs to discourse around ‘traditional’, or ‘intrinsic’, also articulated as ‘emancipatory’, purposes of education that are often being opposed to neoliberal purposes (Chomsky, 2012; Postman, 1995; Saunders, 2011).

The interesting part of Abdyjaparov’s article is the one that fully embraced the idea that education is a business. In other words, it is being discussed as a current transformed form of education system that in fact, has already become a part of a big business, and is presented as something of a common sense. The following quote demonstrates the influence of the neoliberal ideology on the perception of the education as business within the market economy (my translation):

“The higher education system in Kyrgyzstan has become a business, a part of the market economy and has turned into a producing field. The most important features after reforms should be: focus on new products (creative people); standards of education; formation of the education market; switching funding from objects to subjects; combatting corruption mechanism” (Abdyjaparov, 2007, para. 5).

Another example of both criticizing and supporting neoliberal ideas that penetrate education system is a speech of Dastan Bekeshev, Member of Parliament. He believes that education “should be one of the main resources of the nation.” Therefore Bekeshev criticizes the MoES for following the requirements of international organizations and cutting funding for education and reducing school hours:

“Someone's overloaded brain decided to do everything according to international standards and to reduce school hours, while they all forgot one thing – abroad they do much emphasis on after-school leisure” (24.kg, 2013, para. 4).
He further argues that the MoES should analyze the curriculum and see if it contains all necessary things our youth needs to know, instead of just following reforms suggested by international organizations. He then concludes that: “*Human capital* should become our main resource” (24.kg, 2013, para. 7). So, while Mr. Bekeshev criticizes MoES for following recommendations that have predominantly neoliberal purposes (though not necessarily identifying them as such), at the same time he uses neoliberal order of discourse in expressing his opinion by referring to individuals as ‘human capital.’

Kanybek Osmonaliev, Chairman of the Committee on Education, Science, Culture and Sports, maintains that the education system needs reforms because it is in deep crisis. He argues that the main problem is that all educational institutions “turned into business-centers”, which is the influence of the free market economy on education. At the same time, as a member of parliament, he supports reforms that promote neoliberal agenda, the outcome of which he criticized (Central Asia Online, 2012, para. 5-7).

Svetlana Musaeva, a Philology Scholar, Melis Nagaev, Department Head of Innovative Teaching, and Gulya Arkanova, Head of the Registrar Office of the Talas State University were mainly concerned with employment issues after graduation, which is also main concern of the neoliberal ideology in education (Times KG, 2012, para. 4-18).

Others, for example Kengeshbek Usenov, the First Vice-Rector of the Jalal-Abad University and Boris Kubaev, Rector of the Institute of Modern Technologies in Education, try to bring into attention what is called “intrinsic” values of education by criticizing results of reforms oriented at fulfilling neoliberal agenda – such as employment as a purpose of education, and national high-stake testing. In particular Mr. Usenov says that the purpose of higher education should be not only Diploma [which is a formal necessity for employment], but also
cultivation in students of eagerness for education and life-long self-education. And Mr. Kubaev says that the national testing “should not be compulsory for student applicants, but just an additional characteristic of the knowledge quality” (Times KG, 2012, para. 16-19).

Talking about reforms in education, Anara Musabaeva, a local analyst, is critical about implemented reforms, claiming that education sphere is “over-reformed” by now. She thinks that constant experiments resulted in ‘deprofessionalization’, brain-drain, and degradation, which is rooted in the absence of future vision. She points outs that reforms so far were the outcomes of projects that were written just to get access to donors’ funds (IPP, 2011, para. 2). This kind of a view provides with a critical discourse of the development work often based on neoliberal assumptions.

Rahat Joldoshalieva, a PhD student at Toronto University, in her article on teacher professional development suggests that teachers’ opinion was rarely taken into consideration by the policy making authorities, which resulted in what she claims “token approaches, not genuine reforms, in in-service teacher education” (2007, p. 229).

Finally, in his speech on educational reforms in Kyrgyzstan, and on the EDS 2020 in particular, Almazbek Atambaev, the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, maintains conventional discursivity by supporting ideas of neoliberal origin (i.e. around market and efficiency), presented in the EDS 2020. In particular, among other issues, he emphasized that education system should provide the labor market with qualified cadres. He also expressed his concern regarding inefficient expenditures of state funds:

“At present we make big expenditures on renovation of infrastructure and technology of the past century. The school curriculum is overloaded; there are no educational institutions of the “new type” at any level of education. There is no access to modern learning programs and technologies. As a result, poor quality of education creates new problems in the society” (Atambaev, 2012, para, 4).
Summing up the discourse analysis of the EDS 2020 as well as of educational reforms in general, one can state that the text of the EDS 2020 is largely supportive of the neoliberal ideology. Analysis of discursive practice on the level of text production illuminates the degrees of influence of actors who were involved in it. Thus it was clear that the national document on development – the EDS 2020 – is heavily influenced by outcomes of international initiatives, such as MDGs, EFA, Paris Declaration and the Accra Development Effectiveness Agenda.

However, alignment of the aforementioned global programs with local context seems to be arguable according to David Hulme, who claims that while MDGs “are commonly presented as deriving from technical and empirical analysis, in truth they are the product of intense political negotiation informed by analytical work” that took into consideration mainly interests of the rich nations (2009, p. 47). In this regard, the EDS 2020 appears to be one of the policies that are “important expressions of social power that conveys values of authoritative actors and institutions, whose particular forms of knowledge about social world are reflected in these policies/texts” (Vavrus, 2010, p. 77)

As for the ‘problem identification’ process, semantic analysis of this part in EDS 2020 shows that problems are still being identified in accordance with neoliberal agenda which was introduced more than twenty years ago by World Bank experts. One of those experts was Stephen Heyneman, whose retrospective reflections seem to recognize that perhaps proposed recommendations were not the most appropriate to the context:

“Most of the demand for my work has centered on issues of human capital development and the nature of the economics of higher education. However after two decades of working on these issues I began to be frustrated with their assumptions and impact. I began to feel that little of what we produced seemed to be compelling to policy makers. As a result, in the late 1990s I began to explore the nature of higher education as it relates to social, instead of economic, objectives” (Heyneman, 2009, p. 80)
Discursive practice on the level of text consumption is somewhat mixed up. Overall review of the articles suggests that individuals, informed and interested in issues of educational reforms have different views regarding the on-going reforming processes: some criticize them for becoming too business-oriented, whereas for some the business-orientedness of the education sector became something normal – a common sense. Although by large overall discursivity seems to be conventional and supportive of the dominant neoliberal ideology (Musaeva, Arkanov, Nagaeva, Atambaev), at the same time one can observe creative discursivity that challenges the dominant ideology (Usenov, Kubaev, Musabaeva, Joldoshalieva).

What is ironic is that sometimes two conflicting discourses were articulated within one social event and presented within one order of discourse (Abdyjaparov, Bekeshev). This sort of simultaneous utilization of the opposing discourses raises questions as to whether it was done accidentally or deliberately. This is also analogous to what was described by Fimyar in the similar context – post-Soviet Ukraine. In particular she talks about “tensions embodied in emerging hybrid rationalities of communism/neoliberalism – two distinct political projects that raise conflicts and incoherencies” (Fimyar, 2010, p. 69). Perhaps this sort of analysis outcome explains to an extent the condition of “kasha” mentioned by Martha Merrill (2012).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The literature review and the critical discourse analysis of the EDS 2020, as well as of the general educational reform discourse helped reveal the predominance of the neoliberal discourse in the processes of educational reforms in the Kyrgyz Republic. As Fairclough points out in this regard, the problem here is not about economic ambitions of neoliberalism or ‘new capitalism’, but “the particular form in which this is being imposed, and the particular consequences” such as
unequal distribution of wealth followed by increasing division between wealthy and poor groups of people, and deterioration of environment. He also mentioned the “disastrous consequences” caused by interference of international financial agencies in post-socialist countries (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 3-4).

I would argue that currently the education system of the Kyrgyz Republic is floating in “disastrous consequences” of the neoliberal discourse that have been dominating educational reforms since 1990s. One could think about a number of reasons for that, like poor economy, lack of technology, poor management, etc. However, the most crucial one seems to be corruption. Moreover, I argue that at this point it is the derivant problem for all other problems. Its burgeoning tendency since the collapse of the USSR is arguably linked to the burgeoning neoliberal ideology in the reform policies of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The reason for this is the sudden and radical change of the structure and ideology of society, accompanied with catching-up realization and rationalization of the on-going processes. Neoliberal norms and values were not even a new page in the history of the post-communist society, but rather a new book of a different genre in a different language. The public was hardly prepared for that, but nevertheless it started to ‘read’ it, ‘interpret’ and make conclusions on its own. Given meager resources and the advent of a free market economy, along with no previous experience in capitalist entrepreneurship, interpretation of the new ‘book’ on capitalism appeared in its ‘wild’ view – so called ‘wild capitalism’, which was characteristic of the post-communist countries, and even regarded by some as not deviant, but integral part of the transition process (Upchurch, M., & Marinkovic, D, 2011).

Elements of ‘wild capitalism’ constituted discursive practice of capitalism that penetrated virtually all aspects of life in the Kyrgyz Republic, including education. Frustrated by the current
implications of the recommendations made by a team of the World Bank experts (himself being one of them) two decades ago, Heyneman makes the following statement regarding the functioning of private universities introduced after the collapse of the Soviet Union:

“Where professional integrity is not based on tradition, “private” university may imply that all educational products are for sale. Codes of conduct and legal agreements spelling out the rights and obligations of students and faculty are only now beginning to appear” (Heyneman, 2008, p. 21)

However more vicious consequences of corruption are on the level of decision makers, who in the process of policy making in cooperation with international agencies pursue primarily their individual interests, even if it can be useless at best, and harmful at worst for the larger society he or she is part of. This, I would argue, might be one of the reasons why there are policies that address inadequately identified or prioritized problems. Decision makers first and foremost make all they can in order to get funding to implement whatever project is being suggested by international donor organizations. Then they are free to use the funds in the most beneficial way for their personal economic improvement. This sort of affairs is hard to prove, however, it is also something that ordinary citizen is aware of and accepts as a norm.

As stated above, the EDS 2020 reinforces the neoliberal agenda, which is focused on further reinforcement of marketization and commodification, as well as monetization of education. Students being ‘customers’ (Saunders, 2011) at HEIs and considering their education fees as investments (along with bribes they pay to instructors), upon completing their studies hurry to return the cost of investment with surplus. Elements of wild capitalism allow them to undermine ethical principles at work, which leads to further cycle of corrupt spiral.

In short, I would agree with Engvall (2011), who states that “In Kyrgyzstan the corruption is not the problem of the state, it IS the state” of the education system of the Kyrgyz
Republic. While education policies might be limited in their reach to in-service officials, it has full capacities to address problems of corruption within the education sector.

Other than corruption, there is a problem with qualification of university faculty. As it was mentioned earlier, society expects students to be creative, critically thinking labor, who would be immediately ‘bought’ at the labor market. I argue that fitting the labor market should not be the goal of education in itself; I think that education is there to assist individuals to grow personally on an intellectual and ethical level. However, even to fulfill the former goal, university faculty members need support in their professional development.

The problem of curriculum also deserves serious consideration given the grand shift in the socio-economic and political structure of the society.

To sum up, in my opinion the above mentioned three problems are interconnected and need a complex approach in addressing them. I argue that these issues are more important at this stage of the development of the Kyrgyz education than currently pursued purely monetary/economic purposes in education. I believe addressing these issues will also contribute to moral qualities of the society, which is crucial given the level of corruption in the country. However, drawing on analysis results of the EDS 2020, one can see that these problems are not in the scope of the educational reforms for the next several years.


