

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN CRISIS,
or
What is the impact of a Ph.D. and if there is a need for a doctorate to practitioners?**

Kazakh-British discussion

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‘Bulletin of Kazakh National Women’s Teacher Training University’ recently received an article from three authors - two from Kazakhstan and one from the UK. The article is about cross-cultural communication, but I was interested in a foreign co-author Rosemary Sage, former professor and dean at the London College of Teachers, now a scientific consultant to a number of universities in Europe and Asia.

In 2020, Professor R.Sage published an article *The Role of Higher Education in Developing Policy and Practice for the Development of the New Industrial Age*¹.

The article made a strong impression on me. We traditionally treat British education with reverence, considering UK universities to be the right place for higher education, master's and PhD degrees. Even Brexit has not affected the perception of British power in the intellectual and scientific spheres.

Dr. R. Sage writes that their education system is in crisis. The metaphor of "Swiss Cheese Learning" is given by her as proof of weaknesses. The testing system is not sensitive to the individual characteristics of students, but encourages memorization and unification. It is not difficult to enter universities even for graduates with modest grades; as a result, every year millions of bachelors and masters cannot find a job according to their requests. The process, the author notes, begins already in schools, where 90% of graduates are determined to go to universities. The situation in education reflects the problems of the economy. In terms of patents,

¹ Sage, R. (2020). The role of higher education in developing policy and practice for the development of the new industrial age. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, 1(1), 64-76. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.29252/johepal.1.1.64>

Britain is not in the top 10 countries in the world. Engineers from other European countries excel in knowledge and training of English specialists. British business is shrinking, falling under the control of foreigners. The country is like a turtle, slowly crawling after the world's giants in the field of IT, it does not have its own Amazon, Facebook, Google. According to surveys, some British students spend less than 2 hours a day studying. As long as universities work according to the business format, there will be no changes for the better, Sage concludes.

I wrote to the author of the article and offered her to speak on this topic in more detail. Also, I invited to the discussion my colleagues and friends from the UK and Kazakhstan.

Participants from the UK:

Dr. Rosemary Sage,

Dr. Sandy MacDonald (Professor of Northampton University),

Aina Christodoulou (teaching assistant, Nottingham),

Polina Bishenden (PhD candidate at Kent University),

Dr. Rauza Vercoe (UCL),

from Kazakhstan:

Dr. Marina Khan (owner and general director of 'Intellect' agency, Almaty)

Zhanna Mendybaeva (director of the Agency of educational technologies 'UniverSity', Almaty).

I hope that teachers of universities in Kazakhstan will be interested to read the article by R. Sage and find out what reaction her theses caused among British and our scientists and teachers.

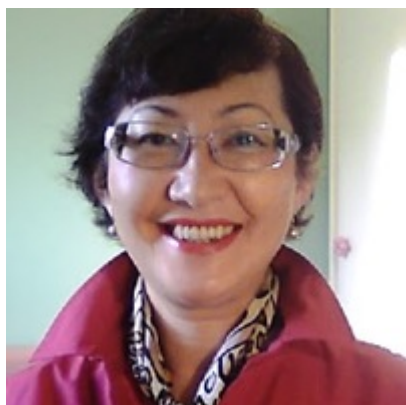
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Rosemary SAGE: I am glad you found my article to the JHEPL food for thought! I am just writing one on how philosophy can help solve today's challenging problems.

Unfortunately, UK academia now works a business model with the goal of making money and cutting costs. This means that cheap labour is the rule of the day! When starting university studies I was taught by the best professors in the subject area and the course bought them in for modules if there was no one with that level of expertise on the staff. Now you can get a professional EdD one month and be running a doctoral programme the next!!! This is the trend - many experts in universities have left to work on their own as they do not like the system. There has been huge dumbing down as now over 50% of UK students go to university when they would be better off pursuing more practical courses. In my student days, only about 5% went to universities. We need many more people with practical intelligences in this country, but do not value this expertise so people do not want to go into these careers as a rule. However, I know someone with a PhD in Genetics who went into research but was fed up with spending all his time making proposals. He is now a plumber, earning 4 times what he did as an academic! Also, another friend with a first class degree in Chemistry was fed up with the corporate world and now is a bus driver and loves it! When working in the Czech Republic, I found that people, like *builders*, had as much status in their society as *brain surgeons*! You often found these people in book shops flicking through psychology texts.

Some while ago, I had input into the EU *Hero* project, which aimed to evaluate the training and education of the practical professions across Europe. The coordinator came from Belgium and was shocked at the lack of status and inadequate training and education that UK practical professions receive in comparison with other European countries. Our education is mainly directed at academic pursuits and those with strong personal and practical abilities get short shift in our system. One hopes it will change. I am always shouting about it but throughout my life have found myself ahead of the game so as to speak, with not enough people thinking this way in politics to push through a more sensible agenda! Here's hoping...



Rauza VERCOE (UCL):

The article by Rosemary Sage has the right comments: the isolation of academic education from the practical realities of life, the low social status of practical professions (plumber, bartender, etc.), the lack of a sufficient number of jobs for undergraduates and defended doctoral students. This is all true, and I personally know people who have invested many years in defending their dissertations, but have not been able to find a job in their specialty. But we should not forget that England, especially London, has always been a place of attraction for young, talented and enterprising people from all over the world, which caused the fiercest competition. Not everyone could withstand the competition, and not everyone could find their place.

At the same time, the British education and employment system is very flexible and diverse. First, many people get jobs in areas that do not correspond to their degree, and this is a normal practice. In my life, I have met people with a master's degree in theology from Oxford or with a degree in English literature, who successfully work in the field of finance in international companies. In Britain, there is no mandatory attachment to a university degree and the scope of future work. Secondly, there is a system of internships that allows you to select the best graduates as a result of careful selection and employ them in various companies, subject to additional training and conditions for obtaining work experience.

For young people who prefer more practical professions and do not want to gnaw the granite of academic sciences, there is also a sufficient choice - the so-called apprenticeship schemes, where they can get a practical specialty and start earning from the age of 16. There is a huge variety of vocational courses (Vocational courses), where students can gain practical skills, gain experience and then enter higher education institutions, if they deem it necessary and necessary. Some schemes include sponsoring university courses for the very best.

In any case, the education system here is very developed. Anyone can find something based on the type of training, interests, abilities, and natural inclinations. You just need to invest a lot of time in studying and analyzing the available opportunities. And this sometimes complicates the situation, since the choice is very wide and it will take some time to understand everything. But for young people, there is a well-developed system for vocational guidance, starting from school years. For example, my daughter's school has repeatedly hosted fairs of various educational institutions with presentations about various educational opportunities.

It is impossible to describe all the possibilities in such a brief discussion. The only thing that depresses me today is how the UK's separation from the European Union will affect it. I am sure that this will lead to negative consequences in the field of education, since isolation never contributes to a positive exchange in any field. Time will tell, but I think that young people will lose a lot in terms of opportunities for their future, as their mobility will be significantly limited under the new circumstances. The break with the European Union is an unforgivable mistake caused by the inflated political ambitions of some figures, the consequences of which are yet to come.



Aina CHRISTODOULOU (teaching assistant, Nottingham): All the problems discussed in this article have long been discussed both in narrow circles and at the top. It is important to understand that the problem began with the dawn of Thatcher's liberalism and her programs of denationalization, privatization, fighting trade unions, deliberately destroying local industry and closing mines. What is happening now with higher education is the result and continuation of the same neoliberal policies and globalization.

It is a well-known fact that British universities operate according to the business scheme. Everyone knows that universities accept foreign students not because they shine with academic results, but because they can pay twice as much in cash as local students. Even Oxbridge does it. You may have heard how a Chinese woman demanded compensation from a British university because her knowledge was not used in the search for a career.

The fact that there is no demand for humanitarian subjects is a real fact. And that only 50% (and maybe less!) PhD applicants manage to complete their dissertation and that the dissertation does not guarantee employment is a real fact. The quality of knowledge is more or less strong in the Russell group of universities and weak in all the rest. Employers do not even look at the diplomas of those universities that are not included in the top ten universities.

Britain is proud of creative achievements, and in fact, they do not exist. No progress with creativity! Progress ended during the industrial Revolution. We need to change the priorities in the academy and focus on those jobs and higher education that will enable Britain to compete with technologically advanced countries.

I think that it is necessary to radically change the curriculum in primary and secondary schools. It is necessary to close universities that stamp out diplomas, and democratize the elitism of private schools. However, this is not possible.

Svetlana Shakirova: Are you happy with the education your children have received?

In general, I am satisfied. They graduated from prestigious universities with good diplomas. It all depends on whether they will be able to withstand the competition and find a job for their vocation. In the current crisis, it is still difficult to guess.



Polina BISHENDEN (PhD candidate at Kent University):

I spent some time reflecting on Rosemary Sage's article and indeed, there are some very real and deep problems with Higher Education in the UK. At times however, my vision of our situation differs from hers. My thoughts stem from my experience as a student of Politics and International Relations at each level of Higher Education (from BA to now PhD).

I would like to comment on Rosemary Sage's characterisation of education in the UK. To begin with, there is a difference between education in school and in university. In school, it is true that critical thought is encouraged in theory but not in mark schemes, and students tend to leave with a shallow knowledge of their subjects. I really can't comment on school too much, as I do not have an understanding of the institution. I have heard, anecdotally from teacher friends, that in many cases those in senior leadership have less experience teaching and may be rather detached from the situation 'on the ground'.

Turning to the Swiss cheese knowledge analogy, which Rosemary Sage uses to comment on higher education in the UK. In my experience, this is not entirely accurate. It is true that in the UK a passing grade is 40% and a first-class grade is 70%. However, I do not think that this means that the top students in the UK are missing 30% of the knowledge that they need. I don't think that this is inscribed in official policy, but the way I see it, is undergraduate degrees in the UK train students in a generalisable way (as Sage wrote in her article). I believe that it is later on in an academic career that specialist knowledge is developed. I was recently speaking to a friend about how much of our philosophy class we had forgotten since finishing our studies. We came

to the conclusion that our course didn't teach us facts to be used for all-time, but rather developed our reasoning as a transferable skill to be applied to many different jobs. In university, we are taught to think critically and encouraged away from rote learning. Our assessments are approached accordingly. Thus, a 70% grade is not given for a student that knows 70% of the answers. Instead, it is given to the student showing above average (but not perfect) critical thought and understanding of their subject. When the mark is higher, it is given not for only knowledge, but for excellence. From what I have seen on my course, grades above 80% are reserved for only the highest achievers. Grades above 90% are so rare, that they become the talk of the faculty. Rosemary Sage argues that developing this kind of non-specialist knowledge hinders the UK's progress. Personally, I think that in our modern, ever-changing world this is a positive way to approach undergraduate studies. Students enter higher education training for a career that does not yet exist! It is having a collection of skills that are applicable to many different settings that will give them the flexibility needed to compete in this fast-paced environment.

I think that, further, Rosemary Sage has mischaracterised writing a PhD thesis. She suggests that it follows a model of learning that is positivist, objective, and generated from a linear research design. This is, of course, not the case for all doctoral projects in the UK. There are plenty of interpretive, constructivist projects that practice reflexivity, abductive reasoning, and an open-ended research process. Perhaps I have misunderstood Sage, as this appears a very harsh inaccuracy. Rosemary Sage has also referenced the mental health problems that students experience as a way of proving that the PhD does not work. To my mind, this is not the outcome of the research process per se, but rather a product of the wider challenges facing academia in the UK.

In some ways, I agree with Rosemary Sage. There deep problems with higher education in the UK. In my opinion, this is driven by the fact that academia has become a business in our country. When tuition fees were introduced (and subsequently increased) a shift in higher education happened. Universities began to market a student experience instead of a learning experience. I don't know about other countries- but in the UK it is common to have multiple bars and nightclubs on campus, with alcohol and nights out advertised by university-affiliated bodies. I am unsure where the money goes, but certainly more is put into management and resources than into fostering academic work. I read recently that Vice-chancellors' salaries have grown, whilst in real terms university staff's pay has fallen by 17%.² Furthermore, pension reforms led to substantial losses of university staff. PhD students regularly teach as a part of their scholarship scheme, which works out to about £8-9 an hour (for context- the minimum wage in the UK is currently £8.72). Casual labour and zero-hour contracts permeate the academic space, but there are many problems. People are unable to make financial plans and have fewer employment rights. The quality of service provided to students is also affected, with a lack of continuity from their lecturers.³ This situation has been the partial subject of higher education strikes in recent years. The dire state of things has become very apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. In my

² <https://www.ft.com/content/94c1d5ca-11e8-11ea-a7e6-62bf4f9e548a>

³ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6882/Zero-hours-contracts-a-UCU-briefing-Mar-14/pdf/ucu_zerohoursbriefing_mar14.pdf

opinion, not only has the workload increased for staff with the new online medium, but the already existing problems with education provision are made clearer when the allure of top facilities (both for education and leisure) are removed from the student experience.

Finally, I have a point about the way that academics are perceived in the UK. Rosemary Sage has presented a really good case for practitioner doctorates. I agree that this option should be made more available to everyone and can add a valuable dimension to academia. But the traditional route should not be tarred. I really believe it is a disservice to suggest that academics do not understand political, economic and social influences on their discipline. It seems like the ivory tower argument- that academics are secluded from the real world. Though this is a valid critique in many cases, in the UK the argument has led to politicians and right-wing media declaring 'enough of experts' and challenging fact with opinion. I've seen it fuel mass public misinformation. So instead, let's foster people's expertise, which is developed through different routes. Let's realise that academia is far more vibrant and grounded than described in the article. When it doesn't meet our standards, let's drive it in a more positive direction (including, for example through an emphasis on practitioner doctorates). But let's also recognise that there is space for us all.



Zhanna MENDYBAEVA, UniverSity, Almaty:

The article proves the commonality of the problems of higher education in the context of the priority of information and the coming "superiority of artificial intelligence". In Kazakhstan, we also read articles every other time that learning based on knowledge and memorization has no value, it is more important to learn to search for information. I.e., focusing on the process, not on the result, is also a trap. A person with an education is trained to find information, but not to use it. Found it and what's next? how to use it. I would call this the fetishization of information without content.

Further. The trend to an increasing transformation of the academic schools in the industry leads to the same results as the Assembly-line production: mass-produced product with low cost but high price.

In British education, I am concerned about the duration of training! What can be learned widely and academically fundamentally in 3 years, and even with a large share of independent training?

In this text, there is a reason that university education is becoming mass, accessible and therefore losing its value (but increasing the price for training). There are two dangers here: one in the ideas of technocrats-education should be expensive and elitist, i.e. not for everyone (veiled in a beautiful package of the category "human capital", so that no one understands anything except the dedicated owners of capital).

The second danger is the devaluation of academic knowledge and science, built on the principle of "process is more important than result" (when the search for information is like an entertaining game, and the product is not important).

I am concerned about the expansion of academic consultants and technologies in Kazakhstan's education, at a time when education at home has been severely criticized and has been for a long time.

Also interested in the question: Will modern graduates be able to convert their knowledge in the event of a sharp change in the economic and political, social and cultural situation, as happened in the post-Soviet space after 90s? When you had to retrain on the go or when you had to remember those sciences that were considered secondary at the institute. This was a test of the "Soviet diploma for endurance", and its owner for learning ability.



Marina KHAN, Intellect, Almaty: The author's opinion about schools most likely refers to the public sector, whose image was significantly changed first by the appearance of a gram of schools, and later-academies.

The state is aware of the problems and tries to take decisive steps from time to time. Private schools, where only 8% of the UK population teaches their children, differ significantly

from public schools for the better in all aspects. This is a recognized fact, which, in particular, is proved by the significant difference in the admission requirements for school graduates from different sectors. In good private schools, everything is fine with the formation of creativity, critical thinking and other components of the now so popular emotional intelligence.

The reform of the A-Level, which is being completed, was intended to make it more difficult to obtain this qualification, "weigh down" the academic content, etc. IB is gaining popularity, not only among international but also local students. In many ways, in my opinion, this is a consequence of the childishness and difficulties of choosing a future career. Many schools popularize BTEC as a qualification that "brings" the applicant closer to the future specialty.

University education is often called delayed unemployment, but the flow of applicants, nevertheless, does not dry up. Universities, in my opinion, deliberately do nothing to "lure" and then keep students. In their opinion, students should come to them, clearly understanding why they do it and what they want to study. The problem, in my opinion, is that the school focuses "broadly", and the universities teach "narrowly". The problem of employment is solved by some universities through the creation of joint faculties with large corporations (Dyson in London, Siemens in Lincoln, etc.), mentoring is very actively developing. It is really not easy to find a job for graduates, but the guys often graduate from university and have sufficient training to start their own businesses.

Of course, education in the UK is a commodity. But the product is solid, well-made, and has no expiration date.

Svetlana SHAKIROVA: Could you please tell a bit about practitioner doctorate? Is this model effective?

Rosemary SAGE: If your university is interested in pursuing a practitioner doctorate you are welcome to have all my research on it for nothing! Harvard has now dropped their professional doctorates in favour of the practitioner model and the research PhD. Where Harvard goes others eventually lead. In medicine, the UK is pursuing the practitioner route and that was where I first started researching and implementing it, but education professions here are slow on the uptake as they do not consider research within practice as objective scientific method!!!! However, the students on the EU pilot have had their practitioner qualification well received as employers have noted the positive impact on everybody.



Sandy MACDONALD, Northampton University:

First of all, Dr. Sage is clearly very keen on having professional doctorates and in my experience people who advocate this route are often very vehement in their support. However I have experience of examining and also supervising these professional doctorates and in my opinion they are not equivalent to a full PhD because they are less theoretically driven. There is nothing wrong with them as such but they are not the same thing and should not be equated to a PhD. I see the point that there needs to be a practical focus for some higher level qualifications and that is fine and welcome but it is not to deny that there is a place for a much more theoretically driven qualification (the PhD) and that this ought to exist as well. Rosemary Sage works in a field (education) where the practical is clearly very important and I know from my university that many doctoral candidates carry out doctoral work on their own schools. This is also fine and probably does lend itself to the field of education very well.

I would take issue with the problems around completion as the numbers undertaking and completing PhDs have grown considerably over the last few years in both the UK and USA but the job opportunities for them are fewer. Rather than dismiss the qualification I would argue that fewer people should embark on a PhD degree and instead opt for a Professional Higher Level Qualification (currently known as a Professional Doctorate). I think the problem comes if you try to call that Higher Level Qualification a doctorate. In my experience many people just want the title "doctor" in from of their name so that is what they are really looking to get out of the qualification rather than development in research and theoretical understanding of a topic. This is not to say they are wrong, just doing the wrong qualification for them. Professional doctorates have an element of teaching in them here as opposed to the PhD in the UK where there is no formal classroom study or assessment although I know this happens in the USA.

I do think that in the UK we are getting pretty good at supporting doctoral candidates with programmes of study to complement the writing of their theses and that the ESRC put a lot of effort into doctoral training these days which was never available before. For example, look at their web site <https://esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/doctoral-training/doctoral-training-centres/> and also the Council for Graduate Training: <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/>

Rosemary SAGE: I recommend to read the report on practitioner doctorate implementation, that was requested by the European Commission ([Third generation doctorates: the practitioner model](#)). This provides more detail than the article you read. Unfortunately, new management at the University of Buckingham felt the Practitioner Doctorate was not research and so it was discontinued in 2020. Practitioner doctorates have had such good responses and are now becoming popular around the world because they show more impact on practice.

I also enclose another article on philosophy and calamities. I have been asked to be lead speaker at a London conference on the future of politics. There are many issues in this for education. Let the pandemic issue in much needed social change!

I am happy for any of my work to be promoted so hope your discussion forum goes well. Great initiative!

Svetlana SHAKIROVA: *We invite readers to continue the discussion. Both detailed and short comments are welcome.*