

February 22, 2011

American Chief of Khazar U., in Azerbaijan, Faces System Plagued With Problems



Osman Karimov, AFP

John Ryder, a former administrator at the State University of New York, recently became president of Khazar University to help modernize the 20-year-old institution.

By Amanda Erickson

Baku, Azerbaijan

In the seven months since becoming the country's first foreign rector of an Azeri university, John Ryder has been a busy man. He has created new Ph.D. programs, revamped the structure of the institution's administration, and wooed its first potential donors.

Mr. Ryder has pledged to transform the 20-year-old Khazar University, a private institution with 1,700 undergraduate and graduate students here in a regional capital of three million on the Caspian Sea, into the region's first internationally acclaimed university. "Khazar is like a laboratory," he says. "It's a chance. We'll see where we succeed and fail."

To succeed, he must navigate a system plagued with problems. According to the World Bank, Azerbaijan—a former Soviet republic that is developing as fast as it can spend its newfound oil wealth—spends less than 1 percent of its GDP on higher education. This is notably less than is spent by its regional neighbors of similar size, Georgia and Armenia. And although Azerbaijan joined the Bologna Process, Europe's effort to harmonize degree cycles and university systems, higher-education experts say they see little evidence of real progress.

Mr. Ryder, a former administrator at the State University of New York, was brought in with a mandate to modernize. He is a philosopher with an interest in Russia by training, and he previously ran the Alliance of Universities for Democracy, which promotes democracy and civil engagement through international exchanges.

An Azeri friend at the alliance suggested he apply for the Khazar presidency. After a few phone calls with the university's founder, Hamlet Isaxanli, Mr. Ryder traveled to Baku for an interview.

Until he arrived at Khazar, he didn't know if he'd be expected to meet with a series of top officials or present a detailed plan for dealing with the university's most pressing issues.

But when he reached the university, it quickly became clear that the process would be much less formal. Mr. Isaxanli took Mr. Ryder through the university's main campus, which consists of two Soviet-style buildings and a courtyard. The pair discussed the changes Mr. Ryder might make. At the end of the day, he was offered the job, eventually signing a two-year contract with an option to renew.

Until his appointment, he had no direct experience with the Azeri higher-education system, which is infamous for low standards and widespread corruption. Bribes for grades and admission are common, and the teaching culture emphasizes rote memorization and dictation from textbooks.

Education scholars in Azerbaijan also say professors aren't equipped to teach the advanced curriculum required by the Bologna reforms. "The teachers are not ready for the Bologna Process," says Ragsana Mammadova, executive director of the Azerbaijan English Teachers' Association, which specializes in education and teacher development. "No matter how communicative your curriculum is, if you do not train the teachers, they will still employ old methods."

In a way, Khazar is the exception to the rule. When it opened in 1991, Khazar was billed as the first Western-style university in Azerbaijan. Classes are taught in English, and professors are encouraged to teach critical thinking. Bribery for high marks has never been tolerated.

But problems remain. For instance, Khazar's professors—like nearly all instructors here—are paid too little to attract top talent. The average salary for many faculty members is less than \$200 a month. Mr. Ryder wants to increase their pay substantially and to make scholarly research part of their job descriptions. "To explain this shift to professors is going to take some time," he says. "It's 'don't work less, but teach less.' That's a huge leap."

Unlike students at the country's public universities, Khazar University students pay a relatively hefty tuition, about \$3,000. As a result, most come from affluent families.

He also hopes to give department heads more autonomy and responsibility; he now signs off on dozens upon dozens of decisions every day, even issues like whether an office can buy a tea

maker. And he plans to create a university endowment, and establish a board of trustees, and allow individual departments to develop their own budgets.

Some of his reforms have already begun to take effect. For the first time, the university will offer Ph.D. programs in subjects like international economics, archaeology, Azerbaijani literature, and computer engineering. Mr. Ryder also hired a director of development to solicit donations from alumni and businesses in Azerbaijan and the United States. The move, he said, will help diversify Khazar's income beyond tuition.

Baba Bayramli, director of the university's international-relations program, said professors have supported Mr. Ryder's reforms. He and other instructors have been advocating for professorial salary reform and an increasingly international faculty on their own.

"I'm an optimist for the future," he says. "The coming of Dr. Ryder brings new breath to Khazar."

Still, despite this support, Mr. Ryder must strike a balance between his American experience and the Azeri tradition. "This is not a matter of change for the sake of change," he says. "I don't want to be the ugly American."

Partly for that reason, Mr. Ryder tends to listen more than he talks in meetings with university colleagues. That is a change for professors, who are accustomed to formal lines of authority, rather than the frequent decisions-by-committee found in American universities.

Early on in his tenure, Mr. Ryder convened a series of roundtables about potential changes in the job responsibilities for deans, assistant deans, and other members of the university leadership. He presented a series of different ideas and asked for feedback on each one. Eventually, a professor leaned over and told Mr. Ryder to just make a decision instead of expecting everyone to weigh in. "You're the rector—do what you want," Mr. Ryder recalls her saying.

But the new university leader must tread lightly in some areas, given the role the Azeri government plays in education. The state places strict controls on all higher-education institutions, public or private. Universities' curricula and admissions policies are approved by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education. Heads of public universities are appointed by Azerbaijan's president, making it difficult for them to carry out their own academic agendas.

Both Mr. Ryder and Mr. Isaxanli say they have been granted free rein when it comes to what content is taught in classes, and that the Ministry of Education has been supportive of Mr. Ryder's changes so far. He, in turn, is careful not to promote his plans as quick fixes for Azerbaijan's higher-education system at large.

"I need to be careful not to say that I know better," Mr. Ryder says. "I'm rector of university, not minister of education."
