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## Higher Education in Tajikistan: Institutional Landscape and Key Policy Developments

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## Higher Education in Tajikistan: Institutional Landscape and Key Policy Developments

*Alan J. DeYoung, Zumrad Kataeva,  
and Dilrabo Jonbekova*

Higher education in Tajikistan has undergone substantial changes over the past 25 years. After an educational degradation in the early 1990s, a long period of educational reforms began aiming at dismantling the Soviet model and creating a new system of education based on national values, traditions and culture—while simultaneously responding to the challenges of globalization and transitioning toward world education space. The process of internationalization, however, was slower in Tajikistan compared to most of the Newly Independent States (NIS).

In this chapter, we examine progression of the Tajik system of higher education from the Soviet time throughout independence (1991–2015)

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in terms of its growth, the emerging institutional landscape and diversification, and key policy developments and issues. We analyze the impact of changes in the relevant economic, social and political spheres which is particularly important in the case of Tajikistan. The system of higher education is highly centralized, yet greatly affected by a complex mixture of cultural, religious, demographic and regional factors. Political decisions made under certain political circumstances influence it significantly. The landscape of higher education in Tajikistan has commonalities but also differences with others among the NIS. This writing is based on a variety of sources—statistics, educational laws, institutional documents, reports published by international organizations; English-language press accounts; and ethnographic interviews conducted by the authors in Tajikistan between 2011 and 2014.

### THE SOVIET LEGACY AND A SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE TIME OF INDEPENDENCE

Soviet education, with all its shortcomings, has been widely praised as a success in the USSR, including Tajikistan. Although lagging behind in most major educational outcomes compared with other Soviet republics, by the time of its independence in 1991, Tajikistan was a country with almost 100% literacy and 10 years of compulsory secondary education. An especially important (early) Soviet education legacy was bringing girls to school, under the auspices of a wider movement known as “The liberation of a woman of the East.” Before 1917, there were no formal higher education institutions in Tajikistan. Schooling took place in religious schools (*madrasas*), where students learned the Quran and other religious books and read masterworks written in Persian and Arabic. Students were also able to learn geography, geometry, algebra and other sciences. Graduates of these religious schools such as Avicenna made significant contributions to modern science. After the socialist revolution, the Soviet government closed all *madrasas* due to their religious connections and created a system of new public and postsecondary schools. Over the decades, various sorts of post-secondary education opportunities were also created for high-achieving secondary school graduates to become skilled workers and professionals.

The first higher education institutions in Tajikistan were these pedagogical institutes. The first established were in Dushanbe (then Stalinabad),

the republican capital (1931) and Khujand (1932), a more than 2000-year-old cultural center of the country, renamed Leninabad during the Soviet era. Also in the 1930s, an agrarian institute was separated from an institute in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and placed in Khujand. Later (1939), a medical institute was founded in Dushanbe (Tajik State Medical University [www.tajmedun.tj](http://www.tajmedun.tj)). Further developments were slowed due to World War II, but were resumed in the late 1940s and 1950s. Evacuated from the European part of the USSR during the war (1941–1945) and also exiled by the Stalin regime, many professors and academicians came to work in Tajik HEIs, helping to lay the foundation for a high-quality system of education.

The first and only university in Soviet Tajikistan—Tajik State University—was created in 1947 in Dushanbe (Tajik National University [www.tnu.tj](http://www.tnu.tj)). The agrarian institute was relocated to the capital (1944) (Tajik Agrarian University [www.tajagroun.tj](http://www.tajagroun.tj)), and a polytechnic institute was established there in 1956. In the 1960s and 1970s, two regional pedagogical institutes in Khatlon were founded—Kulob Pedagogical Institute (1962) and Dushanbe Branch of the Pedagogical Institute in Kurghon-Teppa (1978), bringing the total number of pedagogical institutes in the country to four. In Dushanbe, meanwhile, the Institute of Physical Culture (1971), the Institute of Arts (1973) and the Tajik Pedagogical Institute of Russian Language and Literature (1980) were added to the system.

The last wave of transformation happened during *perestroika* and immediately before independence. In 1987, the Institute of Russian Language and Literature was reorganized into the Tajik State Institute of Languages. Around the time of announcing independence, some institutional upgrades happened quickly. For example, the now prestigious Technological University of Tajikistan (TUT) traces its history back to 1990 when the Tajik High Technological College was founded, renamed later (1991) as Tajik Institute of Food and Light Industry and eventually as the Technological University of Tajikistan in 1993.

There were ten HEIs in Tajikistan by the end of the 1980s. Higher education was free, and students received stipends. As graduates, they were then assigned by the government to work for 2 or 3 years in schools and HEIs. There were also quotas which advantaged rural students who may not have had high-quality preparation in secondary schools to enter HEIs. Apart from teachers, engineers, doctors and agricultural specialists—requiring higher education diplomas—other specialists for the economy were prepared at lower educational levels—secondary specialized education (*technicum*s and *uchilishcha*) and vocational training schools (*uchilishcha*).

Using Teichler's (1988) framework of horizontal and vertical system differentiation and organizational interrelationships, the most prominent bifurcation in Tajikistan was the "university" versus the "institute." However, the university was not exactly commensurate with those of the West, as it was more tightly controlled by the government and primarily focused upon teaching at the expense of independent research. Tajik State University, however, did have better funding and more freedom and enjoyed much greater prestige than did the institutes. The other primary axis of differentiation occurs at the level of region. Initially, the higher education system started as "dual-centered"—with HEIs operating in Dushanbe and Khujand; but the educational dominance of the capital eventually gained momentum. Meanwhile, the fact that a pedagogical institute in Khujand is one of the first Soviet era institutes greatly impacted the regional landscape. Throughout Soviet history and today, "in its scientific and pedagogical potential and the number of students, it is considered second only to the Tajik (National) University" (websites, KhSU).

Sectoral expansion of the system was specifically tied to the needs of the socialist economy. There was one institute per sector in agrarian, medical and polytechnic fields (except, as we have seen, for the last year before independence). The rest of the system was overwhelmingly pedagogical: Not only were there four pedagogical institutes and one branch of Dushanbe in Kurghon-Teppa, but the graduates of the Physical Culture Institute and (most) graduates of the State University were assigned to work as secondary school teachers. And as a Soviet state, no private HEIs were allowed. Table 14.1 represents the classification of HEIs by the time of independence (1989/1990).

In sum, the Tajikistan higher education system during Soviet period was maintained as a response to the direct need of the planned economy with well-developed technical, engineering, medical and pedagogical education. However, the high centralization of the Soviet educational system was not responsive to changes in the labor market. A number of other characteristics contributed to the weaknesses of higher education such as restrictions on faculties and student enrollments in fields like history, linguistics, genetics and sociology; poor management of financial and human resources; and narrow and rigid vocational and professional curricula (Johnson 2008; Anderson et al. 2004). This would all change with independence.

**Table 14.1** Classification of HEIs as of 1989/1990

#	Name	Year	Location	Profile	# of students
1.	Tajik Agrarian Institute	1931 in Khujand/then moved to Dushanbe in 1944	Leninabad (now Khujand) and then moved to Dushanbe	Agricultural education	5,916
2.	Tajik Medical Institute	1939	Dushanbe	Medicine	5,816
3.	Tajik State University named after V.I. Lenin	1947	Dushanbe	Comprehensive university	12,128
4.	Tajik Polytechnic Institute	1956	Dushanbe	Technical and engineering education	7,046
5.	Institute of Physical Culture	1971	Dushanbe	Physical/sport education	1,055
6.	Institute of Arts	1973	Dushanbe	Art and cinematography education	2,180
7.	Tajik State Pedagogical Institute named under T.G. Shevchenko	1931	Dushanbe	Pedagogical	31,445
8.	Leninabad State Pedagogical Institute named under S. Kirov	1932	Leninabad (now Khujand)	Pedagogical	
9.	Kulyab State Pedagogical Institute	1940	Kulyab	Pedagogical	
10.	Tajik State Pedagogical Institute of Languages	1980	Dushanbe	Pedagogical	

## CHANGES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE: RISE OF THE UNIVERSITIES

After the events of 1991, the higher education landscape significantly changed in Tajikistan. Its growth and diversification were challenging during the time of the Civil War (1992–1997), considered another major factor in the history of independent Tajikistan. During the war tens of thousands of people were killed, and hundreds of thousands more displaced. It also destroyed the economy and much of the educational infrastructure; and subsequently led hundreds of thousands of (mostly) men to out-migrate to Russia, where they have been seasonal and unskilled workers remitting wages home. These remittances continue to be substantial, comprising almost half (42%) of Tajikistan's GDP, and making the country vitally dependent on Russia (Eurasia Net 2014). The narcotics trade has also flourished (Olcott 2005). In terms of financial provisions, funding allocated for the educational sector in the state budget declined from 11.6% (1989) to 2.3% (2000) and rose again to 4.0% in 2014 (World Bank 2005, 2014). It is below the OECD average of 4.8%, but just about the average of countries with similar economic development status and demographic compositions of the former Soviet Union (Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Azerbaijan) (World Bank 2014). The government intends to increase educational spending up to 6% of GDP by 2015 and not less than 7% of GDP by 2020 (NSED). The higher education enrollment rate of 13% is lower than most Europe and Central Asian countries, but much higher than many countries at a similar level of economic development.

The transition from the planned to the market economy has led to a number of key policy decisions, which also has led in the Tajik case to a quadrupling of the number of higher education institutions since 1990. The graphs below illustrate this “massification” of higher education in Tajikistan since independence; however, it also shows that while the number of HEIs grew rapidly in the 1990s, enrollments did not—until more recently. By the academic year 2014/2015, there were 38 institutions enrolling 167,660 students, with 10,675 faculty members (Figs. 14.1 and 14.2). Of the 167,660 students, 69% were enrolled in full-time programs and 31% in part-time correspondence programs; 62% of 2013/2014 full-time graduates of HEIs received a specialist diploma (master's degree equivalent) and 38% a bachelor's degree.

The rapid emergence of universities (13 by the mid-1990s) significantly changed the Tajik higher education landscape. A list of the previous Soviet



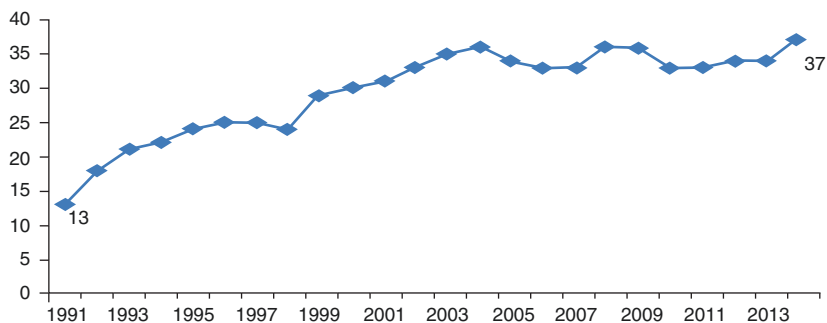


Fig. 14.1 HEIs in Tajikistan, 1991–2013

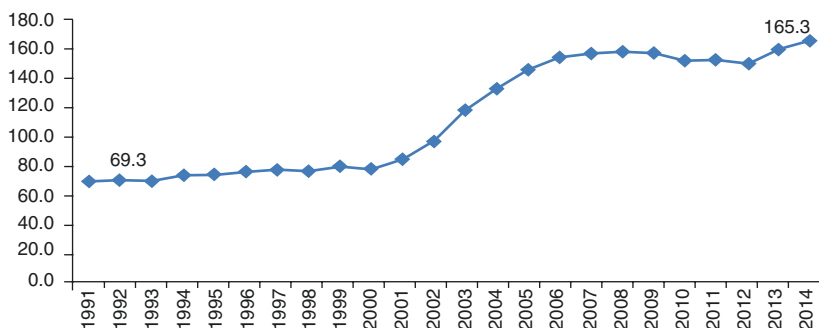


Fig. 14.2 Student enrolments in Tajikistan (in thousands): 1991–2013

institutes has quickly become a list of the universities, as all the institutes commonly known as *ped*, *med*, *politech* and *selkhoz* (originated in student slang from the beginning of institutes' types) have been transformed (see Table 14.2). Four pedagogical institutes have been reorganized into state universities (three regional and one “pedagogical” in Dushanbe) and have become the largest HEIs, enrolling currently from 8000 to 15,000 students—Khujand State University (Khujand State University [www.hgu.tj](http://www.hgu.tj)), Tajik State Pedagogical University, Qurghonteppa State University and Kulob State University. The medical institute has become the Tajik State Medical University. The rest of the transformed—the Tajik Technical University, the Tajik Agrarian University, the Tajik State University of Commerce and the Technological University of Tajikistan—are also among the now largest universities, enrolling from 5,000 to 9,000 students.

**Table 14.2** Typology of higher education institutions as of 2014/2015

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number/location</i>	<i>Example/prestige</i>	<i>Educational profile</i>
1. National flagship university	1/Dushanbe	TNU (programs in law and economics among the most prestigious)	The largest university (118 programs) with bachelor, specialist, master's degrees and candidate of science; PhD will start in 2015/2016
2. State specialized universities	8/Dushanbe (7) and Khujand (1)	TSPU, TAU, TTU, TSMU (prestigious), TUT (prestigious), TSUC, TSIBPL	Multidisciplinary large- and medium-size universities with bachelor, specialist and master's degrees and PhD will start in 2015/2016
3. Regional state universities	5/regional centers	KhSU, KSU, KTSU, Khorog SU, DSU	Multidisciplinary large- and medium-size universities; with bachelor, specialist and master's degrees; PhD will start in 2015/2016
4. International bilateral institutions	4/Dushanbe	RTSU; MSU; MISA, MIE—All highly prestigious	Multidisciplinary medium-size university with bachelor, specialist, master's degrees and candidate of science; and small recently established branches of prestigious Russian universities and institutes with bachelor's degree: PhD only in RTSU
5. Institutes in the capital	12/Dushanbe	TSIL, TSIA, TIAD, TIPC, TIEF, TIES, IPA (prestigious), MIMD, AMIA, HSBPNCS, HSNCS	Small- and medium-size HEI with specialist, bachelor and few master's degrees
6. Regional institutes	8/regional centers	EIKT, TMMI, PPI, PIR, KulobTUT, IsfaraTUT, IET, PITTU	Small-size HEI with few disciplines with bachelor, specialist and few master's degrees

Three new universities were born in the mid-1990s: the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University (RTSU), The Tajik State University of Law, Business and Politics (TSULBP) in Khujand and the Khorog State University. Established by a bilateral agreement between the two governments and now one of the most prestigious, RTSU offers instruction in Russian (arguably understood to be of better quality just because of that) and has technology better than most; and its degrees are recognized in both countries (Russian Tajik Slavonic University [www.rtsu.tj](http://www.rtsu.tj)). Its “founding” rector A. Sattarov, reported the history of its founding. While working for the Ministry of Education, parents often complained to him that Russian language groups in HEIs were being closed. So he came up with the idea of creating an HEI, where Russian was the only language of instruction. Then in 1992, the Russian minister of Foreign Affairs, A. Kozyrev, visited Tajikistan: and with his support and the support of the government of the RT, the RTSU was founded (Asia-Plus 2011). “Slavonic” has symbolized a trend—still less common in Tajikistan compared to the NIS and or its Central Asian neighbors—the establishment of international universities.

The creation of TSULBP was the result of a merger of the branches of the two higher education institutions in Khujand. It represents yet another trend—capitalizing on the popularity of law and business degrees that would attract “contract” or fee-paying students (in this case, in a regional setting). Continuing the institutional expansion into the regions, the establishment of Khorog State University (where Tajik is the language of instruction) has provided historic opportunity for Pamirian people in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) to receive higher education for the first time without going to the capital.

The latest (2013) addition to the system—the Danghara State University (2,000 students)—started as a branch of the Agrarian University with 200 students in 2005. It represents a recent trend (seen also with institutes and branches) to go beyond the large regional centers (Kulob, Qurghontepa and Khujand) to reach smaller towns. There are currently 14 universities—8 in Dushanbe and 6 in the regions. Ten of them existed as HEIs before the 1990s. All of them are “state” universities, meaning that they belong to the state system of education of Tajikistan. Some universities also have “state” in the title—reflecting a vertical hierarchy among them. Importantly, there will be one more university soon in Dushanbe. Tajik Islamic Institute (2000 students) is expected to be transformed into a university. It prepares specialists in Islamic studies: Quran study, History of Islam and Arabic language study.

Some of the newly born universities were small, with only several hundred students. They were modest attempts (sometimes private) to start from scratch that did not survive. One of the latest private universities (2003–2009) was originally known as the University of International Relations. It kept changing titles under the pressure of the Ministry of Education, but was widely known by an unofficial name—“American” University. It was founded by a Tajik-born US citizen and funded primarily from Western sources. It also was the home of several prominent opposition leaders who were on the faculty, proclaimed to be transparent in a national sea of corruption and provided higher quality and more affordable education than the others. Its founder, S. Akramov, insisted the reasons it was closed were all political, but he lost his court battle against the Ministry of Education (Najibullah 2009). In neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz-American University had a different experience. Ironically—or not—the Moscow State University appeared on the Tajik map at approximately the same time as the “American” university was being closed.

#### “BRANCHING-IN,” “BRANCHING-OUT” AND THE GROWTH OF INSTITUTES IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Established in 2009 under the initiative and by the Decree of the President Emomali Rahmon, who personally attended the opening ceremony, the Dushanbe Branch of the Moscow State University (now one of the most prestigious HEIs in Tajikistan) provides a “fundamental, classical university education,” based on the latest Moscow educational standards. Highly qualified instructors are from Tajikistan (30%) and the Russian Federation (70%) who work in changing rotation. Students (600) have digital access to the Moscow State University (MSU) library and cutting-edge technology. And it seems that they have already acquired an elitist mindset: Those in International Relations, for example, see their future careers as working no less than for the UN, European Council, government and the largest analytical think tanks (websites, MSU, *Gazeta* 2014). Recently, the Dushanbe MSU has been given a new status—a “regional branch.” (Branch of the Moscow State University in Dushanbe [www.msu.tj](http://www.msu.tj)) As the President Emomali Rahmon has envisioned, it has been developing into a regionally significant HEI for neighboring Asian countries. With this move, another attempt of creating an international HEI can be seen. Although there will soon (2018) be a functioning international university in Tajikistan, the University of Central Asia, this university is being subsidized by the Aga

Khan Foundation and will be in distant Khorog. International student enrollments (for 2014–2015) in Tajikistan remain small: Around 900 students—mostly from Afghanistan, Iran and India.

“Branching-in” and “branching-out” has been a prominent feature on the Tajik education landscape. “Branching-in” is the Moscow HEIs: In addition to the first comer (Dushanbe Moscow State University (MSU)), two more branches have settled in the Tajik capital—the Branch of the Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloy and the Branch of the Moscow Energy Institute. “Branching-out,” on the other hand, is the Tajik universities—from Dushanbe into the regions. There are two branches of the Technological University—in Kulob and in Isfara (Sughd); The Tajik State University of Commerce and the Tajik Technical University have their branches in Khujand. With regard to student enrollment, Dushanbe universities expanded overwhelmingly into Khujand. Notably, as well, moving to the regions were the branches of other than “pedagogical” institutions; and no branches crossed the mountains to reach GBAO.

Sixteen institutes operate in the country, including institutes remaining from the Soviet times. Established in the 2000s the Pedagogical institute in Rasht and the Penjikent Pedagogical Institute in Sughd demonstrate a trend of reaching to the smaller towns. They also symbolize a (modest) attempt “to revive” pedagogical education in the regions, that is, “to correct” at the regional level a largely unfavorable development in teacher training, when all the former regional pedagogical institutes have become universities. Yet “university” graduates in pedagogical specializations are often in no hurry to actually teach—given the economic situation. Teachers have little salary or prestige to work in the education sector. Teacher shortage, especially in rural places, has become a serious problem. The Penjikent Pedagogical Institute occupies a unique place in the higher education system of Tajikistan. It is a “non-state” institution. It does not proclaim it is “private” in its charter (*ustav*); but still, it is the only “non-state” institute out of 38 HEIs.

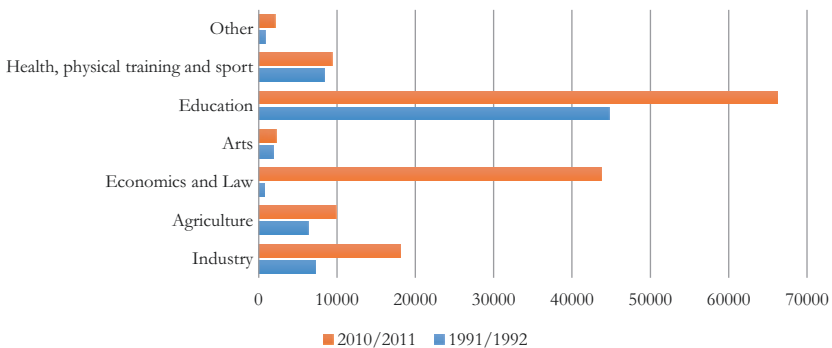
The Tax-Law Institute in Dushanbe, with more than 13,000 students in 2003–2004, was an exception among the institutes with regard to enrolment. “Tax” and “law” programs have become magic words in Tajikistan. Meanwhile, we heard during an interview with a respected and skeptical senior higher education administrator that even the MoE was having trouble obtaining exact numbers of students enrolled there. It was a puzzle to figure out how so many thousands of students could physically sit at the desks in the available building space (interview, Dushanbe 2011). Clearly an educational “bubble” previously, it was eventually reorganized

into the Tajik Institute of Economy and Finance. We summarize the current higher education landscape in Table 14.2.

Looking at the regional distribution of HEIs, it must be noted that the expansion into the regions, although important, has not solved the historically established center-periphery gap in Tajikistan, as almost 60% of students enrolled in higher education institutions located in the capital of Dushanbe.

Moreover, instructors with advanced degrees and best qualifications are clustered in the six largest universities in Dushanbe. In 2014–2015, 10,675 faculty members were employed in HEIs. Only 25% of them hold candidate of science or doctor of science degrees; and most of those with degrees are approaching retirement age (Mirzoev 2014; Kataeva 2014). The ministerial affiliations affirm the increased horizontal differentiation of the HEIs. It can be seen, in particular, by the fact that the number of the institutions under the auspice of the Ministry of Industry and New Technologies has increased; and that RTSU and Russian branches brought with them an oversight of the Russian Minister of Education (MoE)—in addition to the MoE of RT. The number of the programs offered by universities and institutes has also increased. The most significant enrolment growth (by almost 30%) has occurred in “economics and law” programmes: from 1% in these specializations in 1991 to 29% in 2011 (see Fig. 14.3).

However, the existing market cannot absorb graduates from these programmes. “Who needs so many lawyers and economists?” has been a rhetorical question among educators for two decades now. Furthermore, a disconnect between the production of graduates by specialty and the actual job market has brought about new discussions centering not only



**Fig. 14.3** Number of enrolled students by specialization, 1991 and 2010 (Source: The Ministry of Education and Science)

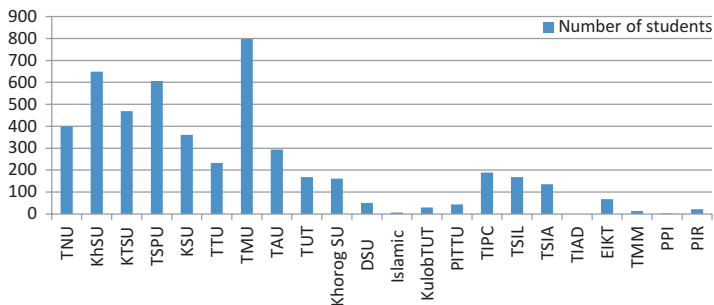


Fig. 14.4 Higher education institutions by presidential quota, 2014/2015

on the lawyers and economists, but upon higher education specialists in general. The current discourse about interrelationships between higher education and market now finds many asking the question, “who needs so many higher education graduates at all?” There are also quality concerns. Employers are often dissatisfied with the skills of new graduates, especially in terms of subject areas (see Jonbekova 2015).

Among the social and cultural factors affecting higher education has been the role of women in society. Since independence, a more traditional definition of the role of women in Muslim society has been reintroduced as a part of national identity building (Johnson 2004; Whitsel 2009; DeYoung 2012). These include strong cultural traditions and values where extended multi-generation and patriarchal families are the norm, and expectations and opportunities for young women outside the household limit their involvement in secondary and higher education. Arranged marriages are typical, and young women are now marrying at younger and younger ages, affecting women’s enrolment in the HEIs. Therefore, in 2006 the Presidential Quota was introduced into the higher education system to provide free places for girls and boys from disadvantaged families and those residing in remote mountain areas to provide them with the opportunity to obtain higher education. Though it is still very small, the number of Presidential quotas since 2008/2009 has been increasing and in 2014/2015, 3.4% of students in HEIs of Tajikistan were awarded scholarships under this quota. The chart below (Fig. 14.4) shows that 21 HEIs out of 38 receive places funded from the state budget for quotas. Most of quota seats are distributed among medical, pedagogical and two regional universities (KhSU and KTSU); a bit lower number for national and technical universities to cover the labor market needs with physicians, teachers and engineers.

## UNIVERSITY STATUS AND UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY: THE CASE OF TAJIK NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

The rise of the universities has brought an end to a higher educational landscape overwhelmingly populated with institutes. The vertical “university”-“institute” differentiation has become more profound and nuanced—regionally, as well as nationally. Importantly, all the universities have come into existence by the decree of the Tajik government. Back in Soviet times, HEIs were founded and regulated by the government, and this *modus vivendi* continues now. State university relationships, although under international pressures to introduce serious changes, are still managed and operated as they were during Soviet times.

Meanwhile, higher education system expansion has not changed the leading position of the university that used to be the only university in the country—Tajik State University. Currently enrolling over 21,000 students, it offers the largest number (188) of programmes (22 bachelor’s, 68 specialist and 28 master’s) and continues to be the republican HEI flagship. To distinguish this (only) pre-independence university in Tajikistan from all those which appeared later—and to re-enforce its higher status—the Tajik State University was first renamed (in 1997) “Tajik State National University” (TSNU); and then, in 2008, “Tajik National University” (TNU). Both decisions were made by a Decree of the President of Tajikistan; and the university’s charter, or *Ustav* (2008), was approved by the government (*Ustav TNU, 2008*).

TNU was the first and for some time the only university that was given university autonomy. The 1997 Decree of the President of RT “On the Status of the Tajik State University” has declared TNU as an “autonomous, self-governing higher education institution.” A new status has brought more funding and—importantly—*directly* from the republican budget. Notably, the Decree came at a time when the national system of higher education was operating on the legal base of the “Law on Education,” adopted in 1993 (Tajikistan, 1993). University autonomy was not specified there, but was included later into the Law on Higher and Professional Education (Tajikistan, 2003).

The definition of university autonomy in the Law on Higher Education differs profoundly from what is generally understood in Western higher education (DeYoung and Valyayeva 2013). In Tajikistan, “university autonomy is the highest form of the learning process and academic activities, determining the state responsibility of the institutions of higher professional



education before their founder” (Law on Higher Education, definitions; we used the amended 2009 version). Unless a HEI is private—which does not apply in Tajikistan—“the founder” is always “the government.” As part of university autonomy, students and instructors are given “academic freedoms” defined in Tajikistan as “freedom of delivering the content of learning in one’s own way – within the learning programmes” and “a freedom of those who study [students] to acquire knowledge in accordance with their own inclinations – within the learning programmes” (Law on Higher Education: Definitions; Article 5).

There is very minimal academic freedom or university autonomy in Tajikistan. If we apply the European University Association (EUA 2009) university autonomy framework—which employs indicators of financial, staffing, organizational and academic autonomy—most observations in the Tajik case would yield scores of “none” to “low.” In reality, it is only rectors who now have some autonomy. Universities are governed by rectors’ orders; and in most of the interviews with faculty and administrators, it became clear that few members of the academic community in the country can speak or comprehend the language of university autonomy. Yet, the concepts of university autonomy and academic freedom are now in the Tajik Law on Higher education and in the TNU *Ustav*.

Being the most powerful within the university governance structures, rectors at the same time are vulnerable to political changes. They are appointed to and dismissed from their positions by the government (President) of the country. The events of 2012 provide an illustration of the extent the higher education system has been politicized, and the vertical power hierarchy within universities. In January, A. Rahmonov was “relieved from his position” as a Minister of Education—and later appointed to be the rector of the Tajik State Pedagogical University. Following this, TNU rector N. Saidov was elevated to become the education minister. At that time he had been TNU rector for approximately 3 years and, prior to that, the Tajik State Pedagogical University rector for less than a year. In August, H. Odinaev, who was then the TNU rector was “relieved from his position” to “be transferred to another job.” The vacant chair of the rector of the main HEI was given to M. Imomov, former rector of Slavonic University. The rector of the Tajik State Kulob University, in turn, became the rector of Slavonic (Asia-Plus 2012). During these domino effect changes, all rector appointments, as required by the law, were made by decrees signed by the President.

## KEY EDUCATION POLICY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Being the poorest among the NIS, Tajikistan is a country with relatively young and fast growing population. Approximately 44% of its eight million people are under the age of 18. The estimated 2.2 million labor force is divided mostly between agriculture and services, with only about 11% in industry. Industry is dominated by a small number of state-owned enterprises, and consists basically of an aluminum plant (one of the ten largest aluminum smelters in the world), several large hydropower plants and small factories in food processing and light industry. Tajikistan's exports are primarily cotton and aluminum.

Although the Civil War delayed the beginning of the reforms and transition to market economy, even during the war, a *Law on Education* (1993) was adopted. The adoption of the new Law was a part of the series of legislation reforms in Tajikistan, which were initiated by the parliament. Just 1 year before the adoption of this Law, the presidential system of governance was abolished. Then President Nabiev had resigned, and parliamentary power was established and lasted until the first after-war presidential elections in 1996. The turning point in educational policy decision-making was the process of signing the Peace Agreement with the United Tajik Opposition in 1997, which officially ended the Civil War, and the development of new educational policies then commenced.

The Law on Education of 1993 allowed a number of changes in education (Tajikistan, 1993; ERSU, 2006). Private education institutions were legally allowed and some were established; but those in higher education eventually closed in 2000s. As throughout the NIS, "contract places" for students who paid tuition has become a key higher education development (DeYoung 2011). By the 2000s, the formation of the new government was completed, and the Ministry of Education started adopting several policy documents, under the influence of key supra-national agencies such as the World Bank, UNICEF and OSI. The Ministry's efforts were driven by the rhetoric of including Tajikistan's education system into the "world educational space." Although the reasons for these policy decisions were made in an effort to democratize the system, equalize and diversify access to quality education, the educational system still remains under the tight control of the government. For instance, decentralization of the system of education and its management is widely perceived as incomplete. *The National Strategy for Educational Development of Tajikistan* (Ministry of Education, 2005, 2012) acknowledges that "today the system of public management of education is a legacy of a highly centralized and planned system of the

former Soviet Union and to a considerable extent remains unreformed. ... The dominant position in education belongs to the Government and participation of non – governmental and private sector is minimal” (p. 11). International agencies are also concerned that the country has “a centralized” and “non- participatory governance structure” which is “one of the main obstacles to effective educational change” that “policy key stakeholders, including NGOs, teachers, parents and students are rarely involved, and they have only very limited influence on key decisions at the national level” (OSI 2002).

Language of instruction issues were and remain contentious. Adopted during Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, the *Law on Languages* (1989) declared Tajik the “state” language and Russian a “language of international communication.” The current ethnic breakdown of Tajikistan is 84.3% Tajiks and 13.8% Uzbeks. The rest include Russians, Kyrgyz, Tatars and others. It also includes Pamiris, a small ethnic group primarily living in GBAO. Dozens of local language dialects are spoken there—Shugni being the most popular (see Niyosov 2002).

Over a quarter of century into independence, working knowledge of Russian among the Tajiks has almost been eliminated. While many from an older generation still speak Russian fluently (especially in Dushanbe), and while Russian is still used in business and government transactions, the younger generation as a group—especially in rural places—has limited Russian language skills. This process was also facilitated by a mass exodus of Russians during the Civil War. Following the process of a national identity building and cultural de-*russification*, secondary schools with Tajik as the language of instruction effectively replaced Russian language schools, and Tajik eventually also became predominant in HEIs. In 2014/15, approximately 82% of the students studied in Tajik and 17% in Russian. Meanwhile, replacing Russian as the language of instruction with Tajik has become an important challenge, especially for Medical and Technical Universities(ERSU, 2006). Now some subjects are being taught in Russian, although “officially” Tajik is required.

Today, an instructional language policy has re-emerged as a divisive political issue throughout all education levels. In Dushanbe, many ethnic Tajik parents now pay bribes to enroll their kids into Russian language schools, resisting the Ministry of Education’s “suggestions” that only ethnically Russian are eligible. This parents’ movement is driven by a quest for education quality and concerns about *Tajification* of the country (Parshin 2014). Elites and the upper classes in the country often still believe that Russian fluency is a prerequisite to upward social mobility.

Russian fluency is also essential now at the other end of the scale. Annually, almost a million Tajiks (mostly men) go to Russia as seasonal workers; about half of the labor age males. The Russian Federation has adopted a new law (in 2015) requiring a Russian government Certificate of Knowledge of Russian for those who apply for a working visa. This makes Russian fluency important even for those not going to HEIs. Seizing upon the opportunity, the Dushanbe Branch of Moscow State University has already opened a testing center, issuing such a certificate and offering Russian language classes (websites; MSU branch).

Along with the *National Strategy for Education Development of the Republic of Tajikistan* (2006–2015) and the *National Strategy for Education Development of the Republic of Tajikistan until 2020*, there is also the *National Concept of Up-bringing of the Republic of Tajikistan*, adopted in 2006. Accordingly, HEIs constitute stage four in the process of the up-bringing of youth; the preceding stages accomplished by the family, pre-school and secondary education. Therefore, *vospitatelnaya rabota* (the system of up-bringing) is an essential responsibility of each university and institute; and they should organize activities to contribute to the moral, national, patriotic, ideological and physical upbringing of students. HEI websites in Tajikistan invariably contain a separate rubric—“*vospitatelnaya rabota*.” The MoE, in its turn, is responsible for continuously reviewing the programs “to strengthen” this component. Symptomatic of these developments is the imposition of a dress code for students, mandating conservative attire for both boys and girls, and a controversial decision prohibiting the hijab on campus.

The latest education policy initiative is the creation of the Unified Entrance Exam (UEE) for HEI admission. Developed by The National Testing Center founded in 2008 by the Tajik government and funded mostly by grants from the Russian Federation, World Bank and the Open Society Foundation, it was administered nationwide for the first time in 2014—replacing the previous Soviet practice. The rationale for this center and UEE relates to the rampant corruption in higher education widely understood in the country (Transparency International 2013). Other considerations have been the improvement of quality and equity throughout the entire system of education. The National Testing Center is considered to be the first step in establishing national education assessments.

While other countries, like Russia (2003) and Kazakhstan (2010), have already joined the Bologna Process, Tajikistan is currently a “non-Bologna signatory.” The Bologna Process is “being implemented by ad hoc groups

under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.” (TEMPUS 2012) The level of implementation of the Bologna cycle structure is judged “extensive but gradual,” according to TEMPUS (2012). Introduced Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees widely coexist with the previous (Soviet) degrees of *Specialist*, Candidate of Science and Doctor of Science. Ironically, graduates with Western PhDs sometimes report difficulty in having these degrees formally recognized in Tajikistan. Credit hours (European System of Transferred Credits, ESTC) are also being gradually adopted. In an inherited Soviet system curriculum, however, not all the classes are created equal, and to recalculate hours from the exiting learning plans into the required credit hours without revamping the curriculum has been difficult. For that matter, researchers find the borrowing of higher education policies and strategies in Central Asia poorly understood and applied (Merrill 2011). Adapting Bologna structures, like many other changes, often conflicts with the existing educational cultures and internal administration. Tajikistan is building Bologna structures basically within the MoE, instead of creating independent monitoring and implementation agencies. The “2020 National Strategy” envisions Tajikistan joining Bologna after this strategy has been implemented—thus by 2020. In official speeches, joining Bologna is cast as achieving “world standards” in higher education. In reality though, no Tajik HEIs has made it to the “Emerging Europe and Central Asia” (EECA) 150 top universities in 2015 rankings (QS 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Higher education in Tajikistan has undergone substantial changes over the past 25 years as a result of both its internal crises and those social and economic transition challenges seen throughout the NIS. Transforming major Soviet institutes into universities and establishing new ones has significantly changed the higher education landscape. Now universities—not institutes—dominate this landscape, enrolling most of the students. The only university from Soviet Tajikistan, TNU, retains its leading position. The number of HEIs and student enrollments have significantly increased. This has been fueled partly by the mass creation of new programmes that reflect the needs of an emerging knowledge-based economy but also the result of parental craving for higher education for their children—regardless of market demands. Specific features of the massification of higher education in Tajikistan are further explained by

internationalization according to the Bologna Process and other globalization agendas, the establishment of international HEIs under bilateral government agreements (with Russia) and significantly increasing the number of HEI programs and enrollments in far-flung regions of the country—especially those programs related to industry and technology. A deeper look at the higher education landscape reveals, however, that the major changes have occurred mostly within the preexisting Soviet structures and frameworks. Relationships between the HEIs and the state have not changed much, although nominally university autonomy was given to them. The system remains highly centralized; and MoE governance generally follows the old Soviet pattern. Tajikistan does not have private HEIs; and most important landmarks of the current educational landscape are the former Soviet institutions.

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