Developmental Perspectives of Higher Education in the Post-Soviet Countries
(for the Cases of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan)

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Abstract

The system of higher education is the foundation on which training of professional staff and the potential for
development of a country are realized. The further development of the economy depends on the effectiveness of its
educational system. In this paper the results of the development of higher education in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan after 20 years of independent development are given. An outlining of
basic legal standards in the field of education in Central Asia is shown, general and specific features in the
development of higher education are identified, and on the basis of that the attempt to consider the perspectives for
the development of higher education will be made.

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1. Introduction

Central Asia is a region that includes several former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,
Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Central Asian region covers a vast area with huge natural resources. To make
better use of their potential and to ensure economic and social development, the region needs to modernize its
economy, which currently means the development of higher education, scientific research and problem of placing
universities in the world rating process (Times Higher Education and Shanghai rankings). The objectives of the

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paper are outlining the state of Central Asian higher education and proposing steps of perspective development in accordance with the international standards.

In preparation of this research, the authors relied on published materials and information, including the text of laws on education, statistics on the number of institutes, number of students, data concerning the qualifications of the teaching staff, and additionally the impact of the Bologna process. Also, the analytical reports on the development of higher education in the researched countries were given certain values according to the European Union Tempus Program. Comparative analysis allows us to show the pros and cons of the development of higher education on the example of the national educational systems in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

2. State and perspectives of higher education in Central Asia

The future of Central Asia is in the hands of its youth. Most of the region's population is under the age of 25 years, which represents a huge potential for development. Quality education is a prerequisite for the realization of this potential of the younger generation. Investments in education are investments in the future. Obviously, the government is constantly working on its human resources, demonstrating great success on all indicators (Zhusten, 2010, p. 1). Investments in education also mean reforming, modernizing and adapting educational systems to the needs of a rapidly changing global world. Higher education institutions play an important role in society, promoting economic growth and poverty eradication. Higher education is also the privileged means for the development of relations and friendship between the countries of Central Asia.

Since independence, each of the Asian countries began to develop their own educational models; the differences in the reform programs were due to differences in social openness and progress in the transition to a market economy.

Reforms in higher education in these countries of Central Asia are based on legislation and government programs. Thus, in particular, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Education" adopted in 1992 had a declarative character. In 1999, a new law "On Education" was adopted in Kazakhstan. The overall goal of educational reforms in Kazakhstan is the adaptation of the educational system to the new socio-economic environment. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev set the task of including the Republic among the 30 most competitive countries of the world. Improving the educational system plays an important role in achieving this goal. Since 2005 the State Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2005 - 2010, the State Program of development of technical and vocational education in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2008 – 2012 were adopted. On December 7, 2010 the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev signed a Decree on the approval of the State Program of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020 (Laws of RK on Education).

In Kazakhstan the basic principles of the Bologna process were introduced and the transition to a three-tier system of “Bachelor’s – Master’s – PhD” was implemented. Now, in the country is one degree - PhD and two academic distinctions are awarded by the ministry of education - associate professor (docent), and professor (Zhumagulov, 2012, Higher Education section, para.2).

Radical reforms in the educational sphere of the Republic of Uzbekistan began in 1997, when the Law "On Education" and the National Program for Personnel Training were adopted, which provided a strong legal basis for the further development of the educational system. The National Program for Personnel Training (NPPT), adopted by the Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan, is a long-term strategy for improving the educational system, the development of continuing education and the strengthening of a two-tier system of higher education. As a result of the reforming of the higher education sphere the transition to a two-tier system of higher education consisting of undergraduate and graduate programs (Bachelor’s and Master’s Programs) was fully implemented (Higher Education in Uzbekistan).

In 2002 the Concept of Education was adopted in the Kyrgyz Republic. The main priorities of this document particularly highlighted aspects of equality, accessibility and quality of primary education. A single law, the Law of Education from 30 April 2003, governs activities of higher education institutions, regardless of the legal form of ownership or institutional affiliation. The Ministry of Education and Science is the main agency responsible for the quality of education and the management of the educational sector.

Higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan provide the following training programs: Bachelor’s Program, Master’s Program, specialists’ graduates and also post-graduate and doctoral studies. In Kyrgyzstan, the Vocational
The National Assembly (Parliament) of the Republic of Tajikistan adopted the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Education" (1993); "Standard Terms of educational institution of higher education" (1996); "The State Education Standard of secondary and higher professional-technical education" (2002); and, "On the national conception of education in the Republic of Tajikistan" (2002). The Ministry of Education has developed certain key priorities in the reforming of higher education (HE) in the Republic of Tajikistan (the Strategic direction of long-term Reform of Educational System of the Republic of Tajikistan for the period 2004-2015) (Higher Education in Tajikistan).

In 1993, in Turkmenistan a new educational program was adopted, and a package of normative acts was prepared and adopted. From October 1, 1993 the Law of Turkmenistan "On Education" operates. After graduation from a HEI (higher educational institute) specialists receive certificates of completion of higher education and qualifications are awarded. After working at least 2 years on the recommendation of a university, a young specialist obtains a characterization from the place of employment and receives a university diploma. Regional state agencies direct specialists within the area. From September 1, 2002 new major changes have occurred in the higher education system. In particular, students of 1 - 2 courses are taught theoretical cycle resident in the university, and 3 - 4 courses are directed to the workplace. Training of specialists with higher education is implemented on the basis of general secondary education (Haitov, 2010).

To date, the level of the population with higher education in percentages (%) in Central Asia is as follows: Kazakhstan - 39.5%, Turkmenistan - ?, Uzbekistan - 9.8%, Kyrgyzstan - 50.8%, Tajikistan - 19.8% (Human Development Reports).

First of all, the structure of specialties is important, on which the preparation is followed in higher education. Education of professionals in management, marketing, and of course specialists in manufacture are necessary in the modern situation of Kazakhstan. Technical staff is the foundation of development of the industry for any economy. And our economy, above all, needs to focus on training in higher education institutes and preparation of manufacturing staff (manufacturing, high-tech industry, and so on.) (Kazakov, 2010). The Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Education has defined as priorities the following specialties: small business entrepreneurs, importers/exporters, managers, office managers, secretaries, farmers, managers of hotels, travel agents, IT professionals and typists with computer skills (5). In Uzbekistan during the process of distribution quotas on the state order for future specialists are addressed, in particular, the following priority areas of the economy: agriculture, the energy sector, telecommunications, the chemical industry, and the food industry (4).

In 2009 in Kazakhstan there are 144 higher education institutions (55 State HEIs and 89 private). The number of non-state (private) institutions was gradually increasing until 2001 and began to decline in 2002. On November 26, 2012 after an optimization process there remained in Kazakhstan - 139 universities. For the 2009 - 2010 academic year, the total number of students in higher education institutions was 610.2 thousand. On average, there are 232 students per 10 thousand persons in the world. In Kazakhstan, this figure is 422.5 people (Higher Education in Kazakhstan). In 2009, 65 HEIs operated in Uzbekistan (4). A network of 50 institutions of higher education, including 34 public and 16 private institutions, represented the higher education system in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2009. Private higher education institutions (HEIs) consistently increased their role and in 2008-2009 they had trained 10.5% of the total number of students (5). In Turkmenistan there were 16 HEIs (2010), including three universities: Turkmen State University, Turkmen Agricultural University, International Turkmen-Turkish University, two Academies - Academy of Arts and Academy of Police; Military Institute, Institute of Culture, Institute of World Languages, Institute of National Economy, Institute of Transport and Communication, Institute of Physical Culture, Sports and Tourism, a Conservatory, a Medical Institute, a Pedagogical Institute, a Polytechnic Institute, and the Institute of Energy; in addition, a Banking College was established (7). In the Republic of Tajikistan are registered 29 universities and 9 of their branches. Twenty universities are located in Dushanbe. All higher education institutions of the country have licenses, besides the branch of the University of Technology in Kulob and Humanitarian Russian-Tajik University in Khujand, which also has campuses in Isfara, Istapravshane, Penjikent and Khorog. They operate on the basis of an authorization letter. The number of students in Tajikistan totaled 156,182 and there is a dramatic increase of students from year to year (6).

In recent years in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, priority has been given to the development of regional universities. Previously, most of the students were taught in major cities.
In the last 5 years, the education budget has increased more than 4 times (6). Payment for university education, which did not exist before independence, is growing in the region. Universities have a negative impact on educational standards, and it has forced the administration of the universities to reduce the number of teaching staff in higher education institutions. Over the past few years, they have consistently exceeded 10% of GDP; while in 2009, they were 10.8%, which is the highest not only in Central Asia but also in Europe (4). The share of funding of Kazakhstan is still insufficient to provide sustainable development of the education system at the level recommended by UNESCO - 6.7% of GDP. At present, the share of government funding for higher education in the overall education budget remains low - less than 10.0% (10). In Tajikistan, the share of education in GDP increased from 3.5% in 2005 to 4.7% in 2008. In general, over the last 5 years, the education budget has increased more than 4 times (6).

The analysis of the development of undergraduate and postgraduate education in leading countries shows that the most popular and widespread system in the world is a three-stage model of training, with undergraduate, and graduate degrees and doctorates, based on the credit system of education, and therefore the process of reforming of higher education continues to be conducted in the states of Central Asia.

The objectives of the reform of higher education are very serious in the whole region, and there is a significant difference in the approaches in different countries. Despite the strong reduction of the state budget, the number of universities is growing in the region. Payment for university education, which did not exist before independence, limits access to education for poor young people, especially girls. The gap in education between rich and poor families is growing rapidly, and also between the inhabitants of large cities and rural areas.

In response to some of the urgencies, new universities and educational institutions have appeared. In the regional education market, universities offer traditional state and western diplomas, and they all depend heavily on tuition fees, as both public and private universities are struggling for funding and students. At the same time, the collapse of state atheism, and the revival of religion, particularly Islam, has led to the emergence of new religious educational institutions throughout the region. Students from Central Asia are also trained in the madrassas, or religious schools in the Middle East and South Asia. UNICEF, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Open Society Institute and other organizations have participated in the creation of professional communities and associations for universities and experts, among them the Central Asian Foundation for Management Development, and the International Education Network (EDNET). EDNET unitizes 266 universities in Central Asia and has a program for the exchange of international professors from neighboring countries. It is an effective and high-quality solution to the problem of the shortfall of teachers in certain subjects at many universities in the region. Another initiative is called the Central Asian Network of cooperation in the field of education and is supported by the Asian Bank of Development and the Institute of Open Society. This network helps to strengthen the bonds between individuals, groups, and educational institutions through a system of electronic networks.

Given the weakness of the system of higher education, some governments of Central Asia have adopted programs to finance the education of students abroad. Special programs of providing presidential scholarships were established in many countries of Asia. The Soros Foundation helps students from Central Asia to study in Europe and the United States under the Program of the support of higher education (2.3 Higher education section, para. 4).
With the joining of Kazakhstan to the Bologna process in 2010 Central Asia is moving faster towards inclusion in the European area of higher education. Higher education in the countries of Central Asia aims to achieve a world level of education and entry into the unified educational space. The mechanism for achieving their goals is the implementation of the Bologna process parameters.

The Bologna process is based on international cooperation and academic exchange that is attractive to students and teachers. Its purpose is to:
(1) Facilitate the mobility of students, graduates and staff of higher education institutions;
(2) Prepare students for future careers and to become active citizens in democratic societies, and to support their personal development;
(3) Ensure broad access to high-quality higher education, based on democratic principles and academic freedom.

Kazakhstan became a member of the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe in March 2010, thereby gaining full membership in the Bologna process. Currently, the work of implementation is in progress in Kazakhstan. Other Central Asian countries are not members of the Bologna process, but follow its principles on a voluntary basis.

3. Cooperation in higher education

Thanks to the EU program Erasmus Mundus (European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students - European Action Plan on Mobility of University Students) which supports partnerships between universities and research centers from different countries of Europe and Central Asia in order to strengthen the skills of teaching and learning, and to promote individual mobility of students and teachers there are annually about 350 scholarships allocated for the countries of Central Asia.

In the period from 1995 to 2004 about 40 million euros was invested on the Tempus program to Central Asia: 9.9 million euros - Kazakhstan, 6.1 million euros - Kyrgyzstan, 2 million euros - Tajikistan, 4.5 million euros - Turkmenistan and 15.4 million euros - Uzbekistan. The Tempus program has also contributed to the adaptation of higher education to labor market needs. The program has implemented a number of projects that have helped higher education systems of partner countries to react better to the emerging demand for new qualifications in the economy of these countries. The program has had a huge impact on improving cooperation, the strengthening of international cooperation, the development of good neighborly relations and on measures for confidence-building between the countries of the region, where there are many reasons for the occurrence of grievances that can be solved through making similar reforms and rapprochement and harmonization of the legal processes in each country. Many general Central Asian problems would be easier to solve on a joint basis in order to eliminate the growing differences between and within countries.

**European Foundation of Education.** Vocational training is a key aspect of economic development, contributing to the opening their potential of human capital in transitional and developing countries of through the reform of education, training and labor markets. The European Foundation of Education bases its activities on the following principles of support, EU Education Initiative for Central Asia:
(1) Reform program in curriculum development
(2) Development and management of vocational training
(3) Strengthening the capacity of the participants
(4) Exchange of knowledge and involvement of partners in vocational training

**Regional Programme - European Education Initiative for Central Asia.** The support for the EU Education Initiative from funding of the European Commission's project is 1 million euro. Special emphasis is on capacity building. There was close cooperation with Central Asian countries on the issues of project development in 2009 and 2010. The platform strengthens the capacity of individuals and organizations in order to promote the modernization of the education sector through dialogue, exchange and discussions between the EU and Central Asia (Zhusten, 2010).

To enhance the stability, security and prosperity in Central Asia it is necessary to create a zone of shared values, such as:
- Reform of the system of higher education in the region, including the issues of introducing the credit system of education in higher education of the region;
- Integration of the system of higher education of Central Asian countries in the Bologna agreement, strategic management of universities in the region;
- Increase of the role of information technology in the globalization process of higher education;
- Development of higher education, vocational training, especially, development of a regional higher education in terms of the market and globalization with quality management of education (Hemshemayer, 2010, p. 169).

4. Conclusion

Because our future depends on the youth, giving them the best opportunities is undoubtedly the key to a dynamic aimed at the development of new advances. National authorities in the countries of Central Asia have set the reform of higher education at the heart of their actions in support of national development strategies. There is a need to review the structure and content of higher education. University system should be brought in line with international standards: to bridge the gap between universities and the labor market and improve the system of admission to universities; to increase public control over the quality of education through corporate governance; to give autonomy in administration of universities; to develop a strategy for academic mobility (transfer of credits) of higher education within the country and abroad; to successfully develop higher education on the basis of the synthesis of three major components - education, science and innovation. Because, the higher education is a privileged means to provide better perspectives for future generations. Education is a key element of better relations, both in terms of support and the development of close physical relationships between the nations of Central Asia, and in terms of further modernization and development of human capital for sustainable growth.

References


