

Abstract

The higher education systems of Central Asian countries have been rapidly impacted by global changes. New international universities and a high rate of student mobility are promising steps of internationalization in this landlocked region. Recent developments show the overall importance of quality, recognition, and scientific cooperation in the region, despite gaps between national internationalization policies.

Central Asia: Crossing the Threshold at Different Speeds

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Despite being located in a landlocked region, Central Asian countries have been significantly influenced by global changes when shaping their higher education policies. Although experiencing similar challenges during the transition period after the end of the Soviet Union, five countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—developed internationalization policies showing sharp differences. For instance, in 2010, Kazakhstan joined the Bologna Declaration and became a member of the European Higher Education Area, while Turkmenistan adopted a two-tier bachelor-master system only in 2013.

Big changes start with small steps. In the early 1990s, some universities (such as KIMEP University in Kazakhstan and the University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan) and faculties (schools) in the region started to offer programs in English. A few years later, new universities with foreign partners (Kazakh–British Technical University, Kyrgyz–Slavic University) and branches of foreign universities (Westminster International University and Turin Polytechnic University in Uzbekistan) were introduced in the region. Currently, the governments of these three countries are introducing significant reforms in diploma recognition and the recruitment of international staff and students, demonstrating attention to internationalization.

Student Mobility, A Priority in Internationalization

Student mobility plays a major role in all five countries. Currently, the majority of Central Asian students who study abroad are “free movers.” Their numbers may further grow in future years given the increasing number of actors involved in international student mobility in the region, reduced interference against outbound mobility, and swifter recognition. With a ratio of outbound mobility of more than 10 percent, student mobility from Central Asia is the highest in the world according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. In 2016, there were about 90,000 Kazakhstani students abroad (and around 70,000 in 2019), representing a net flow ratio of over 11 percent. Yet, this is well below the goal stipulated by the Strategy for Academic Mobility in Kazakhstan 2012–2020, of 20 percent of the total cohort of Kazakhstani students mobile by 2020. Although the number of Uzbekistani students abroad is lower compared to Kazakhstan (34,000 in 2017), outbound student mobility, at over 12 percent, is increasing steadily. Turkmenistan is the only country in the region where the number of students studying abroad (47,456 in 2014) exceeds the number of those studying at home. UNESCO data shows that with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which has a positive net flow of internationally mobile students—3,397 in 2017, the four other countries are all “student-sending” countries.

Russia hosts almost 60 percent of all Central Asian students. Its preeminent position is the result of the relatively better quality and ranking of Russian universities, along with historical, practical, and linguistic reasons. Web of Science data shows that Russia is the main scientific partner of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Dr. Maia Chankseliani, associate professor of comparative and international education at the University of Oxford, explains post-Soviet outbound student mobility in terms of world-systems theory: “While peripheral for the core countries, Russia is a core country for post-Soviet states.”

Central Asian students do not have, as a group, one main second destination country. Many factors such as political stability and economic performance, tuition fees, and living costs in the destination country may influence their choice. For example, the political crisis in Ukraine had a direct influence on the mobility of Turkmen students, and migration flows were partly redirected to Belarus. The Czech Republic, Latvia, Hungary, and Poland have also become destination countries, showing changing dynamics related to the increasing interest of Central European countries in attracting international students. The rapid increase in the number of Kazakhstani students heading for the Czech Republic and Uzbek students for Latvia shows how outbound mobile students from the region spread out to new destinations. The choice of some host countries may also be influenced by immediate work possibilities, as student status also provides part-time job opportunities—an important factor for self-financed students.

Internationalization, A Strategy with Long-Term Objectives

In the majority of Central Asian countries, the internationalization process is reaching an important milestone, slowly moving from being a tool to becoming a target. Governments and higher education institutions show changing rationales and attempt to focus on structural changes. Internationalization is considered a way to provide a better quality of education and introduce new teaching trends and research methods. By targeting quality, international scientific cooperation, and harmonization, the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek governments show their concern for the increasing role of education as a means to widen intercultural competence and knowledge of other cultures. Scimago-based data of the performance of Central Asian countries also shows that their research outputs are increasingly dependent on international cooperation. Consequently, Kazakhstan, a

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leading student-sending country, is also becoming a leading host country with increasing numbers of international students. According to the Kazakh ministry of education and science, in 2019, Kazakh universities hosted more than 25,000 students—9,000 more than the previous year.

International rankings and international recognition play a growing role in national higher education strategies and plans. Although academic rankings show that Central Asian universities hardly fall into the category of top-ranking institutions, it is noteworthy to point out the presence of two Kazakh universities among the top 1,400 universities, according to the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2020*. According to *QS World University Rankings 2020*, there are 10 Kazakh universities among the top 1,000, showing the efforts of academia and policy makers to improve institutional standing. Uzbekistan is also determined to move its internationalization process forward by providing increasing opportunities for foreign universities (e.g., exempting them from all taxes until 2023).

Currently, Central Asian universities try to take advantage of opportunities arising through internationalization. Erasmus+ results show that the International Student Mobility and Capacity Building in Higher Education programs have a higher rate of participation in Central Asia (particularly in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan) than in many other Asian countries. Cooperation with the European Union may also increase regional cooperation and provide new windows of opportunity. Tripartite cooperation with external partner universities (from Russia, China, or the United States) in new mobility frameworks may also influence the rate of interregional mobility and of regional identity among Central Asian youth.

In sum, the internationalization process of this landlocked region shows that besides mobility, other important elements such as quality and international cooperation have gained importance over time. Every country, however, is at a different stage of its internationalization process, and the gap between them may further increase. ▲

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