

Access and Privatization of Higher Education in Central Asia

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Higher education privatization started rising as a global phenomenon in the 1980s. Central Asian countries are no exception. It was a common policy introduced in the region in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union with the goal of reducing dependence on government funding. The shared practices of privatization included partial privatization of educational services in the public sector, such as starting to charge tuition at public universities while retaining state-funded places, and allowing private higher education institutions. This article discusses the varying extent of privatization experienced by the higher education sectors in four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and its impact on higher education access.

Context

The fundamental political, economic, and social changes that took place in the 1990s have brought numerous challenges to the higher education systems in the region. Despite historical and geographical ties, the newly independent Central Asian countries chose different approaches regarding higher education reforms, including privatization. All viewed education as a transformational tool for socioeconomic development. However, each country had its own pace of development, and dynamics of change, and processed transformations on its own terms. Yet, what they had in common was their inability to allocate adequate budget funding to education. The search for alternative sources of funding led to the initiation of privatization in higher education, which had previously been state-owned, state-controlled, and state-funded. As a result, the degree of higher education privatization determined the enrollment rate in each country. Access expanded where greater privatization of higher education was allowed. In the early 1990s, the gross enrollment rates in the four Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan (18.5 percent), Kyrgyzstan (12.5 percent), Tajikistan (11.6 percent), and Uzbekistan (14.8 percent)—did not differ significantly, but these rates have changed substantially since then. Thus, according to Martin Trow's concept, Kazakhstan has entered the universal stage, the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have moved to the mass education stage, while higher education in Uzbekistan still remains elite.

The Path of Privatization

In the 2000s, all four Central Asian countries started admitting fee-paying students in public higher education institutions alongside state-funded students. Furthermore, as the data collected from UNICEF and UNESCO databases, and the statistical agencies of these countries shows, tuition has become the primary source of funding for public institutions. The share of self-funded students in public universities has grown, while the share of government funding has decreased. As a consequence, increased access to higher education without involving the public purse is a common feature in the region. Governments now fund only a small percentage of education: approximately 33 percent of students in Uzbekistan are now funded by the state, 27 percent in Kazakhstan, and 21 percent both in the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Nevertheless, in contrast to Kazakhstan, higher education in the Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan is predominantly public, as the expansion has largely occurred and continues to occur in the public sector.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Public vs. Private Sector Expansion

On the whole, Kazakhstan, where a large-scale three-folded privatization of higher education took place, is an extreme case compared to other countries in the region. It is the only country in the region that legally allows establishing private institutions and

Abstract

Higher education enrollment rates in Central Asia are closely related to the level of privatization. The higher the degree of privatization, the higher the access to higher education. Although public higher education has been partially privatized in the region's four countries, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have also facilitated access to higher education by permitting private universities, while Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have maintained strict state regulation. The number of tuition-paying students vs. state-funded students is growing, too.

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enrollment to public universities on a fee-paying basis. Also, it has fully or partially privatized some state universities inherited from the Soviet era. Therefore, its private higher education sector has a powerful role. Nonstate institutions dominate in numbers there: more than 50 percent of the total 122 higher education institutions in the country were private in 2017. This became possible due to a dramatic proliferation of private institutions in the 1990s and 2000s; they remained high in number despite closures and mergers caused by government regulation. Besides, in the 2000s, 12 state universities were transformed into joint-stock companies. Some became entirely private, while shares of others are co-owned by the state and private entities. Also, more than 50 percent of students in Kazakhstan are enrolled in the private sector. The gross tertiary enrollment rate reached 54.3 percent in 2017 and continues to grow. Thus, not only has the growing number of fee-paying students in the public sector enabled the high enrollment rate in Kazakhstan, but the private sector has also served as a significant driver for growing access to and massification of higher education.

Kyrgyzstan exemplifies dual privatization in the region. It is caused both by the growth of private institutions and by allowing state universities to charge tuition fees. However, in contrast to Kazakhstan, private higher education in Kyrgyzstan is not as prevalent in terms of institutions and students. Out of 51 higher education institutions in 2017, 16 were private; they accounted for 14 percent of all students in the country. Nevertheless, they also contribute to better access to higher education: the gross enrollment rate in the Kyrgyzstan reached 42.8 percent in 2017.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: Privatization of the Public Sector with Limited Access

Uzbekistan is another extreme case in the region, as the state has largely retained a selective access model. Despite the unmet demand for higher education, the public sector remains limited in size. The authorities keep a tight grip on higher education enrollment by limiting the number of both state-funded and fee-paying students at higher education institutions. Moreover, the gross enrollment rate has actually declined since 1991. This made Uzbekistan the most populous country in the region (32.3 million) with a very low participation rate of 9 percent in 2017.

In Tajikistan, too, the state controls both the supply and demand sides of higher education. Similar to Uzbekistan, higher education institutions are fully state-run. The percentage of the relevant age group admitted to universities was 31 percent in 2017. Furthermore, private higher education officially remains nonexistent in Uzbekistan. Although the country initially allowed the emergence of nonstate actors in education in the 1990s. The authorities withdrew the permit soon after. In the 2000s, there were a few attempts to establish private institutions in Tajikistan but only one of them survived state interference. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are examples of countries where foreign universities offer state-recognized degrees. In Uzbekistan, there are seven branches of international universities, and they are permitted to select, admit and educate students on their own. Tajikistan has several branches of Russian universities. In fact, all the four countries have Russian universities or branches of Russian universities established on the basis of intergovernmental agreements.

What to Expect?

Although the region faced a slight decline in the 1990s, the population has been rising since the mid-2000s. By and large, the region's population is growing steadily. Besides, unlike other post-Soviet countries, the demographic profiles of the four Central Asian countries are predominantly young, with the average age of 27.6 years. Moreover, the average age of the population under 14 years was 30.8 percent in 2017. Considering the favorable demographic trends with high birth rates, there will be a great demand for higher education everywhere in the region. However, the participation rate dynamics depends on the country. In the case of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it is more a question of quality than access to higher education per se, whereas in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with limited access, the need to expand educational opportunities is a bigger concern.

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