

The Transformation of Post-Soviet Higher Education Systems

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Abstract

In the future, higher education will be student centered and at the service of society, according to global research on the futures of higher education led by UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education (UNESCO IESALC) in 2021–2022. This article focuses on the implications of these findings in the post-Soviet space, where such transformations are not currently the reality.

Conducted within the framework of UNESCO's broader [Futures of Education initiative](#), a recent UNESCO IESALC [research project](#) studied future pathways for higher education development. The two-year project was informed by consultations with 25 higher education experts based in 22 countries, a public consultation completed by 1,199 individuals in 97 countries, and workshops with 150 youths in 43 countries. While there is no single route to achieving higher education that is better for all, two of the key findings of this research support a future scenario that is on the one hand student centered and on the other hand at the service of society.

This article discusses the transformations that may need to take place for these two key shifts to become a reality in the post-Soviet space, a region where the imprint of the Soviet Union on higher education remains evident more than three decades after its collapse.

The Soviet Union was an enormous state with multiple cultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts leading to a governance structure with central command and an overarching ideology. Such shared principles of vertical governance and one-man rule were

integrated into the content of education, resulting in an organization of knowledge where the teacher was an unquestionable authority. Rigid reporting lines to the authorities left little space for engagement with society, because higher education mainly fulfilled top-down expectations.

Can Pedagogical Authority Give Way to Student-Centeredness?

Soviet education was shaped by the ideas of communism. The state relied on the unquestionable authority of the teacher to promote these ideas in society. For the state authorities, teachers were a means to ensure the spread of communist ideas, classroom after classroom. The post-Soviet countries inherited this strongly established teacher-centered higher education system, where the educator is the key source of information.

In contrast, participants from all over the globe in UNESCO IESALC's public consultation commented on the need to put students, not teachers, at the center, and to reflect a diversity of opinions in the higher education classroom. Participants explained that student centeredness makes students cocreators of their own learning, enabling them to develop their own trajectories depending on their personalized expectations.

This finding resonated among participants from post-Soviet countries. As a participant from Tajikistan noted, higher education in 2050 could be "flexible and less standardized," with a participant from Kazakhstan adding that in general higher education could be "more inclusive, based on diverse teaching methodologies."

Student-centric higher education, in the future, would also make higher education more relevant for employment and individual/societal wellbeing. As a Russian respondent in the public consultation recorded, "I expect higher education to provide not only theoretical knowledge but, to a greater extent, help students acquire hands-on experience."

Over the past 30 years, with the delegitimization of communist ideology and the unfolding of independent economic and political development trajectories in post-Soviet countries, gradual moves toward more student-centered approaches in higher education have been observed, and pockets of innovation and creativity flourish. However, there is no indication that systemic transformation has taken place: For the most part, power and authority within and beyond the classroom remain top-down.

Socially Engaged Higher Education Systems

Respondents in UNESCO IESALC's public consultation recognized higher education's social responsibility, its significance within local contexts, and its larger global function of contributing to knowledge. In the future, participants noted, higher education institutions should become hubs for knowledge production and research that is supported at local, national, and global levels through active engagement to meet local needs.

Such a construct jars against the Soviet system, for which the set purpose of education was to serve the economy as delineated by the expectations of the central government. Links with communities, as understood by the "third mission" of higher education, were not prioritized. This was reflected, for example, in highly standardized curricula through which students from across the vast Soviet Union were taught the same content despite wide-ranging societal differences.

Nevertheless, research respondents from the post-Soviet space expressed hope that higher education could have wider benefits in the future by looking at both local and broader contexts—as one participant from Kazakhstan proposed, "by increasing its role in the development of local society; by enhancing the impact of research and projects for the benefits of everyone; by further strengthening the international cooperation among higher education institutes." Greater engagement with communities would also have a domestic orientation, as recorded by a respondent from Kyrgyzstan, who stated that "higher education should contain concepts that overcome the existing situation of social tension."

To do this, higher education would need to be a "place of free debate and scholarly inquiry," according to another participant from Kazakhstan, and be "fully autonomous from the Ministry of Education," in the words of a participant from Tajikistan. As the research was conducted before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we also include the views of a participant from Russia, who poignantly noted the role of higher education in "conveying the ideas of human treatment [and] equality regardless [of] race [or] origin."

More than 30 years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet many of the higher education systems in the post-Soviet space are still characterized by a high degree of centralization and control.

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Concluding Remarks

More than 30 years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet many of the higher education systems in the post-Soviet space are still characterized by a high degree of centralization and control. Academic freedom is curtailed, students typically have limited course choices, and claims of a mismatch between what is taught and what is needed in society abound. Because students are viewed as silent consumers rather than active participants of learning, they lose their ability to bridge external realities and the learning process.

Given this reality, the calls for a more student-centered approach and greater engagement with communities—irrespective of the root causes—clearly demonstrate a desire for improved human experiences, as we collectively look ahead to 2050 and beyond. In a region where geopolitical challenges have a global impact, it becomes ever more urgent for higher education systems to seek ways to incorporate these messages and respond to people's hopes for a better world. ▲