



## MODERNIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: KEY STAGES AND TOOLS OF INTERNATIONALIZATION

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**Abstract.** This article presents a historical retrospective of the process of introducing and developing the internationalization of higher education in the Central Asian states, which found themselves in a difficult situation after gaining independence and had to search for new strategies, methods and goals for further development. Research on this topic is important because it can help identify priority areas for strengthening the international activities of universities in Central Asia, which, in turn, will strengthen the region's position in the geo-economic space. The historical stages of the formation of the educational policy of the countries of the region, such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, are presented in a structured manner from the 1990s to the present day. In Turkmenistan, which remains a closed state, the educational system is subject to strong politicization, but even there the internationalization of higher education is becoming important for the country's leadership. In recent decades, there has been an increase in interest in higher education in Central Asian countries, which poses certain challenges to the region. Thus, the internationalization of higher education implies the need to unify standards and quality control mechanisms, as well as to promote international mobility for teachers and researchers. Ensuring the quality of education is an important factor in competitiveness, but questions remain about their application to support student mobility and employment. The countries of the region are experiencing difficulties in coordinating the effectiveness of training in the context of a single qualification mechanism. In this regard, it is concluded that it is advisable to simplify the procedural points for the recognition of qualification characteristics in the format of a single educational space similar to the European Higher Education Area.

**Keywords:** modernization of higher education, internationalization tools, history of education system reform, Central Asian countries, unified educational space, academic mobility, research cooperation.

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## Introduction

Since gaining independence, the Central Asian countries have undergone significant changes affecting not only the economy, but also various aspects of public life, including higher education. In these countries, there is a particularly noticeable increase in the number of students entering universities, as well as an increase in the institutional autonomy of educational institutions. However, to adapt to rapidly changing economic conditions and student requirements, it is important that the educational system focuses not only on increasing the number of students, but also on improving the quality of education and developing practical skills. This contributes to the training of highly qualified graduates who are able to successfully integrate into the modern labor market. In this regard, it is necessary to analyze the current state and prospects of the higher education system in Central Asia, which will allow to identify strategic directions for modernization and effectively apply internationalization in the educational sphere.

In recent years, the internationalization of education has become one of the leading areas of its reform, taking various forms depending on the country. This process is enhanced by increasing integration in the economy, social and cultural spheres at the international level, which emphasizes the importance of internationalization of educational systems. The most complete definition of the term “internationalization of education” was given by J. Knight, pointing out that internationalization is the process of integrating the international aspect into the research, educational and administrative activities of higher educational institutions [1, p. 2]. This definition reflects the interdependence of all functions of higher education in the context of internationalization, as well as the complex impact of this process on educational institutions.

The relevance of the study of this topic is related to the fact that the countries of Central Asia inherited the Soviet education system, which has hardly changed since independence. This caused certain difficulties and pushed countries to search for new approaches, methods and goals in the development of higher education. It is important to note that students in this region actively seek to study abroad. The article provides a historical analysis of the introduction and development of internationalization in higher education institutions in Central Asia from 1990 to the present. The aim is to identify areas that contribute to strengthening the positions of Central Asian universities on the world stage.

## Research methods

To ensure the objectivity and scientific validity of the research findings, a set of diverse approaches and methods were applied that complement each other: methods of comparative analysis, scientific synthesis of specific materials, as well as inductive and deductive approaches for data generalization were used. Within the framework of general historical analysis, a comparative approach was also used, which allows for a comparison of higher education systems in Central Asian countries. In addition, well-known methods of historical research were used, such as historical-typological, historical-retrospective analyses, which helped to identify cause-and-effect relationships and patterns of the process of implementation and development of internationalization.

## Results and discussions

In the first years after independence, the Central Asian countries until the end of the 1990s followed a conservative approach, which consisted in preserving the key elements of the Soviet higher education system and adapting them to new national conditions. However, the 1998 crisis and the subsequent economic downturn clearly demonstrated the insufficient sustainability of these measures. The financial resources of the state were insufficient to expand the higher education system, and the centralized graduate distribution model ceased to meet the needs of the rapidly changing labor market. In several Central Asian countries, the formation of educational policy has gone through a consistent and carefully elaborated process, following a retrospective and step-by-step approach, which made it possible to identify and consider key lessons from the past.

The process of modernization and internationalization of the higher education system in Kazakhstan has passed several important stages, each of which has contributed to the development of the educational sphere, ensuring its adaptation to new conditions and international standards.

The first stage (1991 – 1994). During this period, the basic principles of the national educational system were laid. The focus was on the development of legislation regulating all levels of education, including higher educa-

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tion. During this period, the first foundations of the autonomy of educational institutions were laid, which was an important step towards further reforms.

The second stage (1995-1998) was characterized by the beginning of an active process of modernization of the education system. New educational standards were introduced, an important step was the introduction of new educational programs and the beginning of integration of world educational practices.

The third stage (1999-2003) was a period of decentralization and expansion of economic freedom of universities. Higher education institutions have gained more independence in financial management. This helped to accelerate the internationalization process, since universities could now more actively interact with foreign partners, participate in international projects and exchange programs.

The fourth stage (2003 – 2010). During this period, emphasis was placed on the introduction of international quality standards and harmonization of Kazakh education with the Bologna process. This stage is also characterized by active cooperation with foreign universities, the development of academic mobility programs and the integration of Kazakhstani universities into the international educational space.

The fifth stage (2010 – present): strengthening internationalization and digitalization of the educational system. This stage is characterized by integration into the Bologna process, digitalization of education, the development of international partnerships, academic mobility, increased accreditation and the involvement of foreign teachers to improve the quality of student training.

The development of the education sector in Tajikistan, which survived the civil war, was as follows:

The first stage (1996-2000) was devoted to the development of an educational policy focused on consolidating limited resources, updating teacher training for new disciplines and adapting the education system to changes in the labor market. The focus was on strengthening human resources and increasing the competitiveness of graduates.

The second stage (since 2000) has become a stage of decentralization of management, implementation of standards and expansion of international cooperation. Partnership agreements were signed with foreign and private universities, which contributed to the integration of Tajikistan into the regional and global educational space.

The modernization of higher education in Uzbekistan has undergone through several stages:

The first stage (1997-2001) became fundamental when the existing education system was structured and codified to serve as a basis for further reforms. The basic principles of reform were established, including the standardization of education and training of specialists.

The second stage (2001-2005) was characterized by the launch of the state program of comprehensive reform. During this period, the emphasis was placed on updating educational standards, improving the research base and attracting resources for the development of universities.

The third stage (2005-2016) focused on improving the education system, considering the economic realities and needs of the country. Programs aimed at training specialists for key sectors of the economy were implemented, and ties with the domestic labor market were strengthened.

The modern stage (since 2016) began with the coming to power of the second president. This period was marked by the openness of the country, the active involvement of foreign universities and the introduction of international educational standards. An important step was the creation of branches of foreign universities, the development of academic mobility programs and the reform of universities to increase their competitiveness in the international arena.

There are 5 stages in the development of higher education in Kyrgyzstan:

The first stage (1990 – 1995) was characterized by the formation of a sovereign state education system. During this period, the development of national standards began, reflecting the new realities of the independent state.

The second stage (1995-2000) focused on the transition to personality-oriented learning. Innovative approaches aimed at developing critical thinking and creative abilities of students were introduced.

The third stage (2000 – 2012) was the time of institutionalization of educational reforms. The State doctrine of education and development concepts have been developed, which has made it possible to modernize legislation in the field of higher education.

The fourth stage (2012-2020) was marked by the active implementation of reforms aimed at integration into the single European educational space. The Bologna System has been implemented, international cooperation has been strengthened and academic mobility and internationalization have developed.

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The current stage (from 2020) is characterized by an emphasis on the digitalization of education and the strengthening of international partnerships. Distance learning programs are developing, and cooperation with foreign universities is expanding. During this period, the emphasis on the international competitiveness of Kyrgyz universities is being strengthened.

The process of implementing and improving mechanisms for the internationalization of higher education in Central Asian countries is determined by differences in their political position (the level of openness of national leadership at both the domestic and international levels) and economic strategy (the ability of the state to provide financing for educational reforms and to counter the negative consequences of poor-quality “education exports” from donor countries).

Turkmenistan has long held a position of isolation, limiting the influence of external factors on the education system. In 2009 and 2010, the country stopped sending students abroad, including studying at the American University in Central Asia. In February 2011, new restrictions were introduced for students and teachers, although in March the authorities recognized foreign diplomas. The educational system remains highly politicized, but gradually global trends in higher education have begun to be considered by the country's leadership and partially implemented for managed modernization. All initiatives for change come exclusively from the state, while the role of the academic community is limited to fulfilling the tasks set, and the private sector is not yet involved in the development of the educational system. Internationalization, as a global trend, has been included in the national reform program. However, given the lack of international recognition among Turkmen universities, the President of the country set a goal to achieve the inclusion of Turkmen universities in the list of world educational institutions by 2024 [2, p. 157].

Unlike Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan actively participates in educational initiatives supported by the European Union, although the higher education system remains under strict state control. The internationalization of higher education has acquired strategic importance for the current leadership of the country, as it helps to achieve several key goals at once. Among them are improving the quality of educational services, expanding their accessibility to more students, promoting quality education in the regions and strengthening Uzbekistan's political position in Central Asia.

The internationalization of higher education in Uzbekistan is developing in two directions: internal and external. Internal internationalization is the integration of international and intercultural aspects into the curricula for all students. The external side is expressed in active cooperation with foreign universities, including joint programs. This indicates significant changes in the Uzbek leadership's approach to international education and support for academic mobility of citizens [3, p. 165].

Modernization and development of higher education in Tajikistan have become a key part of the large-scale transformations initiated in the 1990s as part of radical socio-economic reforms. During this period, the formation and implementation of programs in the field of higher education were carried out in conditions of political and scientific pluralism. The internationalization of education has manifested itself through the strengthening of international cooperation between national educational institutions and foreign organizations, as well as through participation in supranational structures, programs and foundations. Higher education in Tajikistan shows a tendency towards unification, which contributes to solving common tasks and strengthening global ties, but sometimes ignores national and regional peculiarities [4, p. 16].

Kyrgyzstan has several educational institutions established with the support of Russia, Turkey, Kuwait, the OSCE, the Aga Khan Foundation, as well as the Turkish Sufi Order. A special place is occupied by the American University of Central Asia, which offers degrees in partnership with Bard College. To attract students from South Asia, there are seven branches of Russian universities and two medical institutes with training in English. Kyrgyzstan actively participates in educational initiatives supported by the Soros Foundation, the European Union and the United States Agency for International Development. The country is developing a network of centers of the Bologna process, and within the framework of the Tempus program, the Tuning project has been implemented, covering 11 disciplines in 13 universities [5, pp. 16-17].

The internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan began shortly after independence. In the period from 1991 to 2000, universities were established in the country with the participation of Turkey, Russia, the USA, Germany, Great Britain and the Aga Khan Foundation. A landmark event was the opening of Nazarbayev University

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on June 28, 2010, which aims to achieve the status of a “world-class university”. In 2004, Kazakhstan switched to a multi-level system of higher education, introducing the training of bachelors, master’s and PhD doctors, which is enshrined in the law “On Education” of 2007. Universities are actively looking for partners among leading European and American universities [6].

A key stage in the development of Kazakhstan’s international educational policy was the approval of the strategy for the internationalization of higher education until 2025. The main goal of this strategy is to increase the openness of Kazakhstani universities to international students. As part of the initiative, a scholarship program was launched aimed at attracting foreign citizens, including representatives of the Kazakh diaspora, regardless of their citizenship. Thus, Kazakhstan is actively expanding the access of foreign students to its educational space.

To strengthen the positions of Kazakhstani universities in the international arena, it is planned to open foreign branches. By 2029, it is planned to create at least 12 representative offices of the world’s leading universities in the country, which will allow implementing the best management standards and providing a high level of educational services.

At the same time, work continues to attract foreign teachers and students, as well as the introduction of multilingual education, which contributes to the integration of students at Kazakhstani universities into the global academic community [7].

The state of higher education in Central Asian countries varies significantly depending on the stages of its development, the level of accessibility, completion rates, as well as the ratio of public and private educational institutions. The internationalization of higher education and the employment opportunities of graduates also vary between countries in the region.

A landmark event was the creation of the Central Asian Higher Education Area (CAHEA) in 2021, which took shape because of the signing of the Turkestan Declaration by the countries of the region [8]. In 2022, a Forum of Rectors of Central Asia was held in Almaty, where an Alliance of universities in the region was established. This Alliance has become a platform for dialogue aimed at the development, harmonization and synchronization of educational systems in Central Asian countries. Within the framework of the forum, many bilateral agreements were signed: 18 universities in Kazakhstan, 15 universities in Kyrgyzstan, 11 universities in Uzbekistan and 7 universities in Tajikistan agreed on cooperation.

As a result of the analysis of the processes of internationalization of higher education in Central Asia, F. Alimukhamedov concluded that over time, in addition to mobility, the importance of other elements, such as the quality of education and international cooperation, has increased. But different countries in this region are at different stages of internationalization development, and in the future the gap between them may increase even more [9].

Kazakh author K.Ch. Baisultanova highlights several challenges faced by all Central Asian countries: the need to modernize outdated curricula, improve the quality of teaching, ensure equal access to education and adapt the educational system to economic and socio-cultural changes [10]. At the same time, each State, despite common trends and challenges, develops its own strategy and approach to educational reforms based on its national priorities and needs.

In 2022, the Center for the Bologna Process and Academic Mobility of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan conducted a detailed analysis of the educational market of Central Asian countries and recommendations for the development of higher education systems in Central Asia [11]. However, given the changed geopolitical situation, it is necessary to update the data and, accordingly, clarify previously formulated recommendations, considering what has already been achieved and the emergence of new challenges.

In general, integration implies the development of international cooperation in the field of education at the state level and leads to the convergence of national educational systems [12; 13].

For example, the creation of the Central Asian Higher Education Area (CAHEA), as described in the work of A. Muratbekova, is an innovative attempt to combine the efforts of the countries of the region to increase the mobility of students and teachers, as well as to recognize educational qualifications [14]. Russian authors also consider the prospects for the development of the Central Asian Educational System, since Russia is one of the main stakeholders in attracting applicants from Central Asian countries [15].

Kyrgyz researcher A.T. Baltabayeva proposed possible directions for the international integration of higher education in Central Asia, based on the example of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek International University [16].

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Russian researchers mainly focus on problems related to the development of effective international cooperation between universities [17], ensuring the quality of education [18], combating brain drain [19] and supporting the modernization of universities [20]. It is indicated that Kazakhstan faces similar difficulties in internationalization as Russia, which are associated with contradictions between the new model of the university as a participant in the global higher education market and traditional approaches to the organization of higher education in the post-Soviet countries [21].

Most of the research by Kazakhstani authors is devoted to rethinking the development of cooperation between Kazakhstan and the countries of Central Asia against the background of changing political elites, complex cross-border problems in the field of water supply and energy resources, trade, economic, humanitarian and other areas [22; 23].

Education is also considered as an instrument of the soft power of the foreign policy of Central Asian countries and a holistic program of S.B. Bulekbayev's national identity is proposed based on understanding the state of the Turkic world and the revival of Turkic self-awareness, Turkic spirituality [24].

Thus, Central Asia is a unique region where the processes of internationalization of higher education take place against the background of post-Soviet transformation, cultural diversity and geopolitical challenges.

**Conclusion.** The internationalization of higher education, which involves the inclusion of an international aspect in the goals and activities of universities, became a global trend 20-25 years ago and continues to develop actively at the international, national and institutional levels. In Central Asian countries, the process of implementing internationalization tools is not uniform, due to differences in government policy and the level of financial capabilities.

It is important for the countries of the region to consider not only Western educational models, but also to adapt the experience of other Asian countries, where significant knowledge has been accumulated in the field of modernization and globalization of higher education. Such a selective approach to the reform of the system, including its restructuring, decentralization and internationalization, will help to create an effective national educational policy taking into account local characteristics.

The Central Asian countries are aware of the need to strengthen governance and quality assurance mechanisms in higher education, as well as the importance of a strategic approach to the internationalization of universities and other educational institutions. The priority direction is the development and improvement of the regulatory framework and educational programs that provide equal opportunities for education and its successful completion. For this, it is important to eliminate barriers and systematic monitoring.

Special attention should be paid to training programs focused on the needs of employers to align learning outcomes with the requirements of the labor market, which will allow graduates to develop skills and increase their chances of employment. The internationalization of higher education plays a key role in the harmonization of learning outcomes between the countries of the region within the framework of a common qualification system, which contributes to improving the quality of graduate training and their competitiveness.

There is an increase in migration of citizens in the region, and Kazakhstan is no exception. The number of requests for recognition of qualifications of specialists who have graduated from universities in Central Asia is especially increasing. This underlines the need for a simplified procedure for the recognition of diplomas within a single educational space, similar to the European model. However, the implementation of such an initiative requires the creation of coordinated higher education systems. The Central Asian Higher Education Space project is a free educational space where students and teachers can move freely to study, share experiences, knowledge and participate in scientific research. Such an initiative contributes to the development of cultural and scientific cooperation, as well as strengthening the common educational space of the Central Asian countries.

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**Zh.Ye. Nurbayev** – conceptualization, research design, and development of the theoretical framework;

**D.A. Kozhabekova** – data collection, comparative and historical analysis, and interpretation of the findings;

**S.B. Kishibayeva** – literature review, manuscript preparation, critical revision, and final approval of the article.

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### **Орталық Азиядағы жоғары білім беруді жаңғырту: интернационалдандырудың негізгі кезеңдері мен құралдары**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада тәуелсіздік алғаннан кейін қиын жағдайға тап болған және одан әрі дамудың жаңа стратегияларын, әдістері мен мақсаттарын іздеуге мәжбүр болған Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінде жоғары білім беруді интернационалдандыруды енгізу және дамыту процесінің тарихи ретроспективасы келтірілген. Осы тақырып бойынша зерттеу маңызды, өйткені ол Орталық Азия университеттерінің халықаралық қызметін күшейту үшін басым бағыттарды анықтауға ықпал ете алады, бұл өз кезегінде өңірдің геοэкономикалық кеңістіктегі позициясын нығайтады. Қазақстан, Тәжікстан, Өзбекстан және Қырғызстан сияқты өңір елдерінің білім беру саясатын қалыптастырудың тарихи кезеңдері 1990 жылдардан бастап бүгінгі күнге дейін құрылымдалған. Жабық мемлекет болып қала беретін Түркіменстанда білім беру жүйесі күшті саясаттандыруға ұшырайды, алайда сол жерде де жоғары білім беруді интернационалдандыру ел басшылығы үшін маңызды болып табылады. Соңғы онжылдықтарда Орталық Азия елдерінде жоғары білімге деген сұраныстың артуын байқауға болады, бұл аймаққа белгілі бір қиындықтар туғызады. Сонымен, жоғары білім беруді интернационалдандыру сапаны бақылау стандарттары мен тетіктерін біріздендіру, сондай-ақ оқытушылар мен зерттеушілер үшін халықаралық ұтқырлыққа жәрдемдесу қажеттілігін болжайды. Білім беру сапасын қамтамасыз ету бәсекеге қабілеттіліктің маңызды факторы болып табылады, алайда оларды студенттердің ұтқырлығы мен жұмысқа орналасуын қолдау үшін қолдану туралы сұрақтар қалады. Өңір елдері бірыңғай біліктілік тетігі контекстінде оқытудың нәтижелілігін үйлестіру мәселелерінде қиындықтарға тап болады. Осыған байланысты Еуропалық жоғары білім кеңістігіне ұқсас бірыңғай білім беру кеңістігі форматында біліктілік сипаттамаларын тану бойынша рәсімдік сәттерді оңайлатудың орындылығы туралы қорытынды жасалады.

**Түйін сөздер:** жоғары білім беруді жаңғырту, интернационалдандыру құралдары, Білім беру жүйесін реформалау тарихы, Орталық Азия елдері, бірыңғай білім беру кеңістігі, академиялық ұтқырлық, ғылыми-зерттеу ынтымақтастығы.

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### **Модернизация высшего образования в Центральной Азии: ключевые этапы и инструменты интернационализации**

**Аннотация.** В данной статье представлена историческая ретроспектива процесса внедрения и развития интернационализации высшего образования в государствах Центральной Азии, которые оказались в сложной ситуации после получения независимости и вынуждены были искать новые стратегии, методы и цели для дальнейшего развития. Исследование по данной теме важно, поскольку оно может способствовать выявлению приоритетных направлений для усиления международной деятельности университетов Центральной Азии, что, в свою очередь, укрепит позиции региона на геоэкономическом пространстве. Исторические этапы формирования образовательной политики стран региона, таких как Казахстан, Таджикистан, Узбекистан и Кыргызстан, представлены структурировано с 1990-х годов и до наших дней. В Туркменистане, который остается закрытым государством, образовательная система подвержена сильной политизации, однако и там интернационализация высшего образования приобретает значимость для руководства страны. В последние десятилетия можно наблюдать рост интереса к высшему образованию в странах Центральной Азии спроса на, что ставит перед регионом определенные вызовы. Так, интернационализация высшего образования предполагает необходимость унифицировать стандарты и механизмы контроля качества, а также содействовать международной мобильности для преподавателей и исследователей. Обеспечение качества образования служат важным фактором конкурентоспособности, однако остаются вопросы об их применении для поддержки студенческой мобильности и трудоустройства. Страны региона испытывают трудности в вопросах согласования результативности обучения в контексте единого квалификационного механизма. В этой связи делается заключение о целесообразности упрощения процедурных моментов по признанию квалификационных характеристик в формате единого образовательного пространства, подобного Европейскому пространству высшего образования.

**Ключевые слова:** модернизация высшего образования, инструменты интернационализации, история реформирования системы образования, страны Центральной Азии, единое образовательное пространство, академическая мобильность, научно-исследовательское сотрудничество.

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