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Comparative analyses of trends in the development of national higher education systems: the case of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

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Abstract. The article presents a comparative analysis of current trends in the development of higher education systems in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Key aspects are considered, including education financing, relevance of curricula, the state of science and innovation. Despite the common Soviet past, the countries demonstrate both similar problems - the mismatch of graduates with labor market requirements, lack of flexible skills, limited scientific base - and differences in approaches to reforms and the pace of their implementation. Both countries have typically implemented education reforms since independence, developing educational policies and programs consistent with the new economic regime and expanding investments in the physical and qualitative improvement of education. They view the education sector as a key component of their poverty reduction and economic growth strategies. Uzbekistan, a former Soviet republic, undertook a bold transformation of its education system, initiating a full-scale education reform in 1992. By 2015, the reforms were aimed at universal access and improving the quality of education. In the case of Kazakhstan, since independence in 1991, education development programs have also been continuously developed and implemented, along with institutional preparation for education system reform. The Programs until 2015 resolved to expand state financial support, recognizing the need to reform the education system and qualitatively improve the content of education. The analysis allows us to assess the current state of higher education in the region and identify areas for its further development.

Keywords: Higher education, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Financing, Relevance of programs, Science and innovation, Digitalization.

Introduction

Education systems around the world are rooted in historical, social, and economic contexts and have developed differently depending on each country's cultural background. Education is a fundamental element of national development and functions as a crucial mechanism for

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determining the quality of human resources. Education in the Central Asian region has recently become part of national development projects. This sector is given significant weight, both because it accounts for a significant share of the economy and because of its potential to ensure future growth without physical limitations. In today's global society, the importance of education is becoming increasingly evident, and a comparison and analysis of the education systems of leading countries in the region – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is essential to deepening this understanding.

Higher education in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is in the process of deep transformation due to global and regional economic, political and social changes. In the context of post-Soviet development, the educational systems of these countries, once unified, are undergoing diversification, adapting to national conditions and priorities. However, despite the differences in approaches and pace of reforms, it is possible to identify a number of common trends that define the development of higher education in the region.

Research methods

The study employs a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) and a comparative-historical approach to examine the evolution of higher education systems in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan since 1991. The research methodology includes a systematic review of official policy documents, state educational programs, and legislative acts to track the trajectory of institutional reforms. Additionally, secondary statistical data from national and international agencies were analyzed to evaluate trends in education financing and scientific output. Content analysis of labor market reports was also utilized to identify systemic challenges, such as the gap between academic curricula and industry requirements in both nations.

Results and discussions

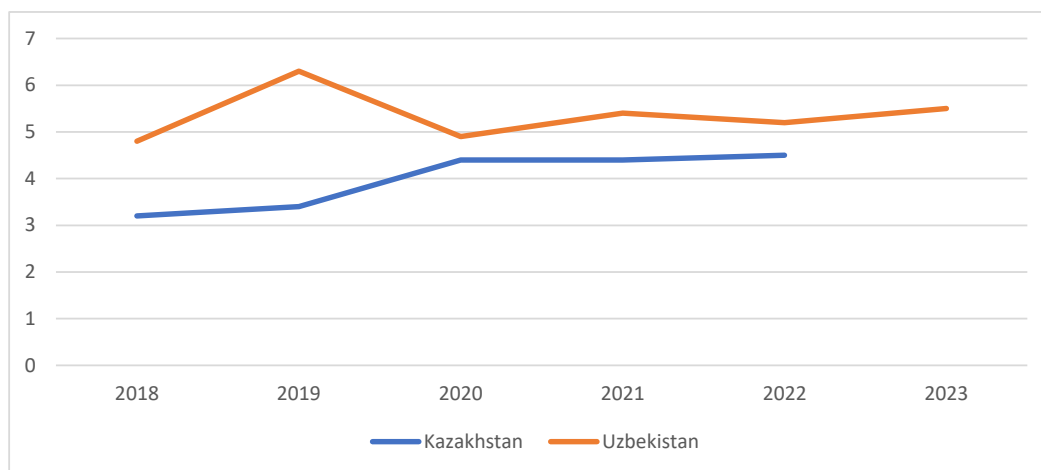
The purpose of this study is to systematically compare and analyze current trends in the education systems of these two Central Asian countries. Through comparative analysis, we will examine the key trends influencing their education systems; this analysis can serve as a basis for improving education policy. Thus, the analysis of general trends in the development of higher education in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan allows not only to identify the current state of higher education in the countries of the region, but also to assess their impact on the future of educational systems and society as a whole. In general, the article will examine the funding system, the relevance of education programmes and the state of science, research and innovation in higher education in a comparative manner in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

State of financing of the education system. The problem of education financing in Central Asia is explained by two factors. Firstly, there is still a significant need for funding to implement educational reforms, improve the quality of education, and create systems adapted to the new environment following the transition to the new system. Secondly, there is a growing demand for alternative financing methods. Education is primarily financed by central and local government budgets, although informal expenditures by students and parents also exist. The countries in question have high youth populations, leading to significant public expenditure on education. Furthermore, they have structural features that lead to high costs, particularly due to their vast territories, low population density, and extreme weather conditions.

In Kazakhstan the system of financing higher education is diversified. Amid the economic crisis of the mid-1990s, the Kazakh government attempted to decentralize education funding to overcome funding shortages and diversify finances. This initiative aimed to develop the private education market by expanding financial support through local government budgets and increasing the volume of paid educational services. The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) of Kazakhstan finances higher and postgraduate education [1]. Currently, about 40 % of Kazakhstani students receive higher education for free (those who have received state grants). Access to grants is open to both public and private HEIs that have passed the accreditation procedure. In turn, state educational institutions also have the right to admit students on a fee basis - it ranges from 40 to 50 % of earned income. In private universities, this share is from 70 to 99 %. Revenues from research, innovation and other activities in universities are insignificant and are completely overlapped with revenues from educational activities. In Kazakhstan, education funding has increased slightly since 2018 from 3.2% to 4.46% at present, occupying one of the lowest places in the region [2].

Compared to Kazakhstan, the share of education funding in relation to GDP and the national budget in Uzbekistan is high and has shown a slight upward trend since 2020 from 4.9 % to 5.5 % for 2023 [3]. This can be seen as a reflection of the Uzbek government's recognition of the importance of education and its strong commitment to education policy. On the other hand, it can be explained by the high enrollment rate, which is due to the country's unique demographic structure, in which people under 24 make up approximately half of the total population [4]. The graph below (figure 1) shows the dynamics of public spending on education in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from 2018 to 2023, expressed as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP).

Figure 1. Public expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan [5]



As we can see, Uzbekistan, despite fluctuations, allocated a higher percentage of GDP to education over the analyzed period compared to Kazakhstan. At the same time, Kazakhstan has demonstrated steady growth in this indicator, particularly noticeable between 2019 and 2023. However, according to global education spending, the minimum level of financial support necessary to ensure the continued provision of quality education for all is approximately 6-7% of GDP [5]. The first problem caused by this shortage of educational funding is the difficulty in recruiting and retaining properly qualified teachers. Along with the reduction in the education

budget due to cuts in government spending, high inflation and wage reductions have led education personnel to move to other fields (small businesses, trade, etc.), making it difficult to secure qualified teachers.

Relevance of higher education programmes. The programs offered by higher education institutions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan do not adequately meet the demands of the labor market. Just as during the Soviet era, half of the higher education system is still training professionals for social sectors such as education and healthcare. Under the planned economy prior to the transition, graduates were assigned jobs based on social demand, and the education system was structured with curricula and fields that met the system's needs; consequently, employment issues did not emerge as a serious social problem.

However, during the economic crisis caused by the transition in the early 1990s, many people were laid off due to the restructuring and privatization of state-owned enterprises. Subsequently, despite economic recovery, widespread unemployment occurred as the private sector failed to provide sufficient jobs. In particular, unemployment among the youth, who constitute a significant portion of the population, and the increase in non-regular employment emerged as serious issues. While overall unemployment rates across countries show a stable trend, the problem is that a large number of non-regular workers are employed, making it an urgent situation to expand high-quality jobs.

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, about one in four university graduates earns a degree in pedagogy. In addition, medical specialities cover 7% to 20% of the total number of university graduates.

The market economy is characterized by high competition and development potential, particularly a high utilization of technology. However, when looking at the share of graduates from advanced technology (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), the countries perform well by world standards: between 20% and 34% [6]. And these indicators are still below the level achieved in developed countries. Moreover, it remains unclear whether the quality of education in these areas meets international standards. In general, the countries in the region have a highly educated labour force: the share of workers with a high level of education ranges from 70%. However, surveys of employers in the region show that skills mismatch is widespread [7].

Therefore, it can be seen that Central Asian countries currently require creative and critical thinking abilities, information processing skills, action skills, decision-making skills, conflict resolution skills, and teamwork skills to adapt quickly to the market economy.

However, in these countries, policies to provide adequate educational opportunities are lacking, and curricula and teaching methods are insufficient to teach the skills required by the market. Furthermore, since these curricula are primarily developed by educators, they fail to adequately reflect the realities and demands of the actual field. There is also a lack of systematic information and analysis regarding the skills and qualifications required by the market. Opportunities for vocational retraining for currently employed workers are limited, making it difficult to adapt to the changing business environment and acquire necessary new skills. While workplace training is conducted in some cases, its proportion is very low, indicating a need for increased corporate participation.

A 2020 survey of university students and professors in Kazakhstan shows that about half of the respondents have low or no soft skills [8]. In Uzbekistan, employers regularly report that even employees with higher education lack both professional (hard skills) and flexible skills,

especially in the areas of digital competences and foreign languages [9]. This phenomenon can be understood as a signal effect regarding the skills (IT, English, critical thinking, action skills and others) required by contemporary labor market.

In addition, Uzbek students themselves note that universities do not provide them with the necessary flexible skills for successful integration into the labour market [10]. For example, one study found that only 7 per cent of economics courses in some universities in Uzbekistan specifically target the development of flexible skills [11].

As examined above, both countries commonly face serious issues regarding the linkage between education and the labor market. To overcome the supply-demand mismatch in the labor market through change, the following measures appear necessary. First, higher education must be expanded through increased participation of the private sector, such as industry-academia collaboration. In particular, private sector involvement should be encouraged in technical and vocational education. Furthermore, enterprises and educators must share roles to develop vocational education standards based on labor market analysis. Specifically, cooperation with employers and relevant associations should be strengthened in determining the key content of the curriculum, and opportunities for participation should be opened to influence educational policies. Second, changes in curriculum and teaching methods are required. We must move away from theory-centered curricula and rote-learning-based, one-way instruction to enable the acquisition of flexible and active thinking and behavioral skills. Third, the capacity for understanding and analyzing the labor market must be strengthened. We must cultivate national capabilities to conduct labor market surveys to provide information and professional advice to job seekers. Furthermore, regionally, by jointly evaluating employment opportunities in Central Asia, which is emerging as a new market, the research results can be shared and reflected in policy.

Development of science, research and innovation in higher education. The World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index lists higher education as one of the nine criteria for evaluating national competitiveness. This includes quantitative aspect as research and innovation. Prior to independence, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan served as R&D centers of the Soviet era based on advanced science and technology; however, they are currently in a situation where it is difficult to sustain this status.

The problem is considered even more severe because the scale of government investment for R&D is very small, with over 90% allocated to state-owned universities and research institutions, leaving the budget allocated to universities negligible. Furthermore, the supply of new research personnel is not adequate, and cooperation among research institutions, both domestically and internationally, remains minimal. Since R&D during the Soviet era was limited to science and technology, social science and policy research were significantly underdeveloped. Furthermore, since research began to be emphasized as a major field of universities only after independence, cooperation and exchange are necessary to revitalize research in the areas of strengthening national competitiveness, economic growth, and socioeconomic policy.

In recent decades, all Central Asian countries have demonstrated a significant increase in publication activity. The greatest increase in the number of publications is observed in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. However, the growth of publications is not always accompanied by an improvement in their quality. Many papers are published in low-quality or so-called 'predatory' journals, which reduces their impact and international recognition.

Table 1. Number of publications in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in academic journals in all disciplines (2013-2023) [12].

Year	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan
2013	1813	568
2014	2432	548
2015	2575	489
2016	3566	629
2017	3696	598
2018	4273	660
2019	5298	1600
2020	5843	3447
2021	6196	3346
2022	6465	3621
2023	7043	6637

As it can be seen from the table Kazakhstan leads the region in the number of scientific publications, especially in the social sciences (80% of all publications in the region), computer sciences (75%) and engineering (73%). In Uzbekistan, the priority areas are biochemistry, genetics, molecular biology and mathematical physics [13].

Conclusion. In conclusion, a comparative analysis of the higher education systems of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan shows that, despite the common post-Soviet legacy and aspirations for modernization, both countries face similar challenges: inadequate alignment of educational programs with labor market requirements, limited funding for science and innovation, and a gap in digital skills and infrastructure. At the same time, Kazakhstan demonstrates more sustainable growth in a number of indicators, while Uzbekistan is taking active steps towards reform. It is particularly important to note that literacy rates are very high in both countries, so the main trends in education in the Central Asian region lie more in qualitative improvements than in quantitative achievements.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to streamline educational management systems and strengthen the financial and administrative self-reliance of educational institutions. Therefore, to meet the mid-to-long-term educational goals and needs of Central Asian countries, it is necessary to expand long-term programs, such as strengthening institutional capacity, establishing educational infrastructure, and supporting educational programs. Additionally, support is needed to ensure that research reflects market demand, technological progress, the needs of domestic companies, and the government's science and technology priorities.

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Contribution of the authors:

Atayeva T.T. – prepared the theoretical framework, conducted the data collection and primary analysis of educational programs in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and drafted the initial manuscript;

Ospanova A.N. – provided the conceptual guidance for the research, defined the methodology for the comparative analysis, performed the critical revision of the text, and supervised the final synthesis of findings.

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Жоғары білім беру жүйесінің даму тенденцияларына салыстырмалы талдау: Қазақстан мен Өзбекстан мысалдары негізінде

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Қазақстан мен Өзбекстандағы жоғары білім беру жүйелерінің дамуындағы қазіргі үрдістердің салыстырмалы талдауы ұсынылған. Білім беруді қаржыландыру, оқу бағдарламаларының өзектілігі, ғылым мен инновацияның жай-күйі сияқты негізгі аспектілер қарастырылады. Кеңестік өткеннің ортақтығына қарамастан, елдер ұқсас мәселелерді - түлектердің еңбек нарығының талаптарына сәйкес келмеуі, икемді дағдылардың болмауы, ғылыми базаның шектеулілігі - және реформаларға көзқарастар мен оларды жүзеге асыру қарқынындағы айырмашылықтарды көрсетеді. Екі ел де тәуелсіздік алғаннан бері білім беру реформаларын жүзеге асырып, жаңа экономикалық режимге сәйкес білім беру саясаты

мен бағдарламаларын әзірлеп, білім беруді физикалық және сапалық тұрғыдан жақсартуға инвестицияларды кеңейтті. Олар білім беру саласын кедейлікті азайту және экономикалық өсу стратегияларының негізгі құрамдас бөлігі ретінде қарастырады. Бұрынғы кеңестік республика болған Өзбекстан білім беру жүйесін батыл түрде өзгертіп, 1992 жылы толық көлемді білім беру реформасын бастады. 2015 жылға қарай реформалар жалпыға қолжетімділікке және білім беру сапасын жақсартуға бағытталған болатын. Қазақстан жағдайында, 1991 жылы тәуелсіздік алғаннан бері білім беруді дамыту бағдарламалары да білім беру жүйесін реформалауға институционалдық дайындықпен қатар үздіксіз әзірленіп және жүзеге асырылып келеді. 2015 жылға дейінгі бағдарламалар білім беру жүйесін реформалау және білім беру мазмұнын сапалы түрде жақсарту қажеттілігін мойындай отырып, мемлекеттік қаржылық қолдауды кеңейту туралы шешім қабылдады. Талдау бізге аймақтағы жоғары білімнің қазіргі жағдайын бағалауға және оны одан әрі дамыту бағыттарын анықтауға мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: жоғары білім, Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, қаржыландыру, ғылым және инновация, цифрландыру.

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Сравнительный анализ тенденций развития национальных систем высшего образования: на примере Казахстана и Узбекистана

Аннотация. В статье представлен сравнительный анализ современных тенденций развития систем высшего образования в Казахстане и Узбекистане. Рассмотрены ключевые аспекты, включая финансирование образования, актуальность учебных программ, состояние науки и инноваций. Несмотря на общее советское прошлое, страны демонстрируют как схожие проблемы – несоответствие выпускников требованиям рынка труда, недостаток гибких навыков, ограниченную научную базу – так и различия в подходах к реформам и темпах их реализации. Обе страны, как правило, проводили реформы образования с момента обретения независимости, разрабатывая образовательную политику и программы, соответствующие новому экономическому режиму, и расширяя инвестиции в физическое и качественное улучшение образования. Они рассматривают сектор образования как ключевой компонент своих стратегий по сокращению бедности и экономическому росту. Узбекистан, бывшая советская республика, предпринял смелую трансформацию своей системы образования, начав полномасштабную реформу образования в 1992 году. К 2015 году реформы были направлены на обеспечение всеобщего доступа и повышение качества образования. В случае Казахстана, с момента обретения независимости в 1991 году, программы развития образования также постоянно разрабатывались и внедрялись наряду с институциональной подготовкой к реформе системы образования. В рамках программ до 2015 года было принято решение расширить государственную финансовую поддержку, признавая необходимость реформирования системы образования и качественного улучшения содержания обучения. Анализ позволяет оценить текущее состояние высшего образования в регионе и определить направления его дальнейшего развития.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, Казахстан, Узбекистан, финансирование, актуальность программ, наука и инновации, цифровизация.

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