



HIGHER EDUCATION IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA SEARCH FOR NEW IDENTITIES

GOLAN MOSTAFA*

ABSTRACT

Five Central Asian nations emerged as independent states as a result of the collapse of the USSR in 1991. As post-Soviet states, they are faced with numerous difficulties and complicated issues and challenges in their state and nation-building process. As any independent state, the new Central Asian states aspire to reform the old education system and build and develop a new ones reflecting their respective national, political and ideological goals and objectives. But the process has been extremely difficult and complicated because of the absence of a tradition of higher education during the pre-Soviet era (except Uzbekistan) and the legacy of a heavy-handed ideological, communist, “Russified” and “Sovietised” education system. Soviet Union built huge numbers of higher educational institutions and modernized and universalized the education system but the objective was to promote, expand and sustain communist ideology and Soviet rule in the region. Central Asian nations are now facing with numerous problems and difficulties in modernizing the old education system and creating new ones. Each country is trying to resolve this problem by taking various steps and measures and searching for new outlooks and identities.

Keywords: Higher education, modernization, universalization, educational institutions

* Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP) Almaty,
Kazakhstan gmostafa95@yahoo.com

The role and importance of education, and for that matter higher education, cannot be neglected and underestimated as it helps to form, mould and sustain socio-political, cultural, ideological and moral religious values and perceptions of the society on a permanent basis. The process is, however, not automatic and spontaneous rather it occurs as a result of long-term socialization process and planning and implementation of a carefully designed policy and strategy by the state usually on behalf of the dominant/titular ideology (philosophy) of the society. In general, goals and objectives of higher education seem to be similar for all nations but methods and policies for implementation are different. Some countries plan, develop, design, redesign and implement educational policies more rigorously and heavy-handedly (mostly ideological, fanatic dictatorial and fascist states) while others follow slow, long-term evolutionary paths by involving all stake holders in the society through social dialogue and consensus building process (mostly democratic countries). For post-Soviet Central Asian states the tasks for developing new education systems reflecting ideas, visions and aspirations of the independent nations were more difficult and complicated for a number of reasons. There was no heritage of higher education in pre-Soviet Central Asia. Although, cities like Samarkhand, Bukhara and Kiva served as well-known centres of education and students and scholars from India, Persia, Middle East and Africa came to study and research in those schools but they were mainly religious and theological in nature and the medium of instruction was Arabic and Persian languages.¹ The access to education was very limited and only boys from rich and wealthy families could afford to study there.

During the Soviet time, the higher education system in Central Asia was developed and modernised rapidly; numerous universities and institutions of higher education were established and thousands of teachers and experts were brought from Russia to run these institutions.² They were created for achieving the goals and objectives of promoting, expanding and sustaining communism and communist ideology in the region. The whole education system was gradually “Russified” and “Sovietised” replacing the old ones. So, when the five Central Asian states emerged after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, one of the most difficult and complicated tasks was to reform the old education system and to develop and create new ones that could reflect and promote the nationalist aspirations of the newly independent states and of the titular elites.

1 Oliver Roy. *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York; New York University Press, 2000), 97.

2 Alexei Vassiliev, ed. *Central Asia: Political & Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 11.

Higher education system in the Soviet Union was a closed and isolated one. Students and teachers were not familiar with Western books and materials because they did not have access to them. After independence, Central Asian states faced with serious problems in the education sector because of the shortage of books and teaching materials, skilled and trained teachers and scarcity of resources.

After 18 years of independence, fundamental changes and reforms, at various degrees, are taking place in many sectors of national life including higher education. Every country is designing and developing a higher education system, in its own way, depending on political, social, economic and cultural needs of the society and political and ideological orientations and aspirations of the regimes. In more authoritarian and dictatorial states, the education system is more controlled and dominated by the bureaucratic, authoritarian, ethnic and often tribal values. While in more liberal, democratic countries, with free market economies, changes and reforms are more substantive and far-reaching with strong emphasis on making the education system competitive and integrating it into the Western education space. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have embraced noticeably more ambitious and radical plans for higher education than others in the region.

The objective of the paper is limited and specific. We are not going to discuss the whole gamut of education systems in Central Asian countries rather the focus will be on higher education with specific emphasis on humanities and social sciences as these fields were more affected and ideologized by the Soviet system, and, after independence, become easy targets of political control and ideological influence of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes and leaders. In terms of time frame, the paper will concentrate on the post-Soviet period only.

The paper will provide a short historical background of higher education in Central Asia before the Soviet rule; briefly describe the Soviet legacy and impacts in higher education; changes and reforms occurred and are occurring in individual countries during the post-Soviet era and challenges and difficulties facing by these countries.

I. HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRE-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia consists of the 5 independent states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan) that were created in 1991 as a result of the collapse of the USSR. Central Asia is a vast area (larger than Europe) endowed with rich natural resources and huge

economic potentials.³ Central Asia is located at the crossroads of many civilizations. The area was invaded and ravaged by many emperors and conquerors.⁴ As mentioned earlier, famous cities like Bukhara, Samarkhand and Kiva in Uzbekistan flourished in the medieval era as intellectual centres for Muslims all over the world mainly because of such famous scholars, philosophers and leaders as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ulugh Beg, Nawaiy, Babur Shah, Tamerlane and so on.⁵ Despite this handful of world-famous educational institutions, the state of overall education in Central Asia was poor and deplorable.⁶ As Imperial Russia was expanding its influence towards Central Asia, measures were taken to introduce and promote Russian language into the region. By 1915, 1.2% of Kazakhs could read and write in Russian language. But no serious attempts were made to establish higher educational institutions in the region. Those who were interested in higher education had to go to Russia but it was not easy and accessible to all. An imperial administration for the Muslims, headed by a Mufti, was created which determined the whole direction of Central Asian Muslims until 1917.

A. Soviet Legacy of Higher Education in Central Asia

Soviet power was not established in Central Asia immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917; rather it was done gradually by manipulating various groups and factions and by promising of giving national, cultural and religious sovereignty and

independence to various nations in the region. Soviet power and control was fully established in all Central Asian countries during the 1930s. Through a series of administrative reforms and boundary changes over a period of about 20 years five Soviet Republics were created in Central Asia in late 1930s.

Russian Language was made compulsory and the only language for instruction at all levels of education. In fact, it was during the Soviet time that a modern, secular, education system was introduced in Central Asia and it was made mandatory and universal. Hundreds of universities and specialized institutions were built in order to meet the growing needs and demand. Huge state universities were built in the capitals of each of the five Republics (which later on converted into National Universities). At the same time, hundreds of students, mainly from families of political and party elites, were sent to universities in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Omsk and Kiev for higher education. The first real university in Central Asia—Turkestan State University—was opened in Tashkent in 1920 which, later on, named as Tashkent State University and became National University of Uzbekistan in 1999. In Kazakhstan the first complete higher educational institution was the Kazakh Pedagogical Institute established in 1928. In 1934 the Kazakh State University was established (became National University of Kazakhstan after independence) and subsequently a number of other universities and specialized higher educational institutes were established. By 1940, there were 12 higher educational institutes in Kazakhstan and 11 scientific and technological organizations for conducting research and practical works. Sixty-three higher educational institutions were functioning in Kazakhstan in 1980.⁷

These universities and specialized educational institutions served as centres for propaganda and preparation of cadres for the Soviet Communist Party and the state. Ideological dogma and propaganda was integrated in all aspects of the education system but the most affected areas were humanities and social sciences. In the Soviet education system, such subjects as History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (KPSU), Scientific Communism, Political Economy (Socialism and Capitalism) and Fundamentals of Marxism and Leninism, were compulsory not only for students in humanities and social sciences but for all students in higher educational institutions. Texts and reference books were written in Russian language and published in Moscow under the strong control and supervision of Communist party leaders. The same rule was applied for academic journals and periodicals. Thousands of teachers, educators and academic administrators were brought to Central Asia

⁷ For details, see Ibid, 11.

³ The five Central Asian states all have reserves of oil, gas, uranium, coal, lead, zinc, copper, iron, gold and other precious metals. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are the three prime cotton growing regions in the world. Turkmenistan, in addition, has large deposits of natural sodium sulphates, and Kyrgyzstan was the number one producer of antimony and mercury in the former USSR. Uzbekistan is the largest cotton exporter in the world and Kazakhstan has the world's 6th largest oil and gas reserve.

⁴ In 328 BC Alexander the Great established Greek domination in Central Asia. Islam was brought here by the Arabs in the 8th century. In the 11th century the area was conquered by the Seljuk Turks. In 1221, the area was conquered and ravaged by the Mongol horseman Genghis Khan. He was followed by other oriental invaders like the "earth shaker" Tamerlane and others. For details see, Oilver Roy, *The Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, (New York; New York University Press, 2000), pp. 6-7. Imperial Russia had a control over the vast region of Central Asia and has an access to the warm water of the Indian Ocean. The first Russian invasion of Central Asia started in 1552 when Ivan, the Terrible conquered Kazan and started the process of Russification. For details, see Edward Allworth, *Central Asia 130 Years of Russian Dominance: A Historical Overview*, Third Edition, (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1994), 540-52.

⁵ Fazilat Khalilova, "Educational Developments in Uzbekistan", *OSEAS, Europe*. Accessed from <http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/oseas/uzbek.html>, accessed on October 10, 2009.

⁶ There were primary and secondary educational institutions in Kazakhstan but that served the needs and requirements of only a tiny fraction of population. For example, in 1915 there were more than 2000 schools and 22 gymnasium and technical schools where more than 105,000 students got their education but that only about 11% of the total children of school-going age. For details, see Rasul Zhumali, "skvoj ternii—k zvezdam? Uli neckolko slob ob istorii obrazovnia v kazakhstane?", (To the stars through Hardships or few words about the History of education in Kazakhstan?) *Exclusive*, No. 88 (July 2009), 10.

from Russia to train the locals. Education was used a vehicle for “Russification” of Central Asia and expanding and consolidating of Soviet power and authority in the region. There was no attempt to preserve and promote local cultures, languages and literature. By the 1950s, the process was completed. Education was made accessible to everybody and the literacy rate increased significantly. By the 1980s, 100% of adults in Central Asia were educated but the success came at a high social, cultural and political cost with long-term implications for the whole region.

After independence, each Central Asian country opted for specific path and orientation for social, political and economic reforms and development but the higher education sector proved to be the most difficult and complicated one. In a comprehensive study on educational development in three Central Asian states –Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—conducted by the Open Society Institution in 2002, identified several key challenges in the education system; lack of funding, lack of reform capacity and non-participatory governance, outdated curriculum and student assessment, poor quality and lack of textbooks.⁸ Each country is trying to attend this difficult but very important issue in its own ways and means. Following, we look into individual country and their efforts, policies and strategies in higher education.

B. Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the largest (by territory) and most resourceful country in Central Asia.⁹ The country enjoys a stable social, political and economic system since independence under the benevolent leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The importance of higher education and its modernization is mentioned by the President repeatedly. A number of steps and measures have been taken for reform and modernization of higher education system. The government welcomed foreign help and assistance in higher education from the very beginning and enacted various laws allowing opening private universities and establishing foreign universities. During the initial years, Turkey played a key role in helping Kazakhstan in developing and modernizing its education system by establishing universities and specialized schools.¹⁰ One of the pioneering initiatives of the President in higher education was the

creation of the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP) in 1992 with the purpose of educating and training young people who will have the “skills and knowledge to pursue prosperity for the nation through leadership in business and government”¹¹

All previous higher educational institutions were converted into universities and a number of private universities were permitted to operate in order to expand higher educational facilities throughout the country. As a result of government’s open door and liberal policy in higher education many private universities emerged. By the end of the 1990s, there were more than one-hundred sixty universities in Kazakhstan (with a population of about 15 million). But government policy was criticized from different sectors and questions were raised whether all the private universities had the necessary resources (buildings, classrooms, furniture, books, library and computers) and qualified teachers to offer quality education. Government conducted a thorough review and cancelled registrations of several private universities for failure to comply the rules. Currently, there are 158 universities in Kazakhstan and 107 of them are private ones. But in terms of student registration, majority of students (52%) study in state universities. Students prefer to study in state universities for a number of reasons: tuition fees are lower in public universities, they have more experience and reputation, they have more infrastructural (library) and other facilities, more scholarships and they offer more specializations in demanded spheres like--Technical, Technological, Engineering, Pedagogical, Agricultural and Medical. Private universities usually offer courses in so called “commercial programs”, Economics, Business, Finance, Marketing, Management, Accounting, Information Technology and so on.¹²

The Government has also taken a number of initiatives in restructuring the higher education system and the delivery process. The old Soviet-style 5-year diploma program has been changed to a 4-year Bachelor degree; a 2-year Master program is introduced in place of the old Candidate of Science (aspirantura) degree. An international standard Ph.D program was introduced in 2004 and seven regional universities were authorised to offer these degrees. The 11-year school program is also changed to a 12-year program.¹³ All these reforms and

8 “Education Development in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: Challenges and Ways Forward” prepared by *Open Society Institute-Education Support Program*, (April 2002), 11.

9 Kazakhstan with a territory of 2,727,900 sq km is the largest country in Central Asia and 9th largest in the world. The country has the second largest uranium, chromium, lead and zinc reserves, the third largest manganese reserves, the fifth largest copper reserves, and ranks in the top ten for coal, iron and gold. Although the figures vary Kazakhstan has the 11th largest proven reserves of oil and natural gas.

10 The Süleyman Demirel University was opened in 1996 when Turkish President Suleyman Demirel visited

Almaty. The name was given by President Nursultan Nazarbayev. There are number of other Turkish universities and specialized schools are operating in Kazakhstan.

11 The Charter of KIMEP, adopted in 1992, p. 1, www.kimep.kz.

12 For details of the differences between private and public universities, see Abu Aliev, “gosudarstvennii u chastnie vyju; naidi decyt otlichii” Public and Private Higher Educational Institutions, Find 10 Differences, *Exclusive*, Number 88, (July 2009), 26-29.

13 All these changes are outlined and elaborated in various laws and decrees issued by the Ministry of Education

structural changes are made with the view of bringing the Kazakhstani higher educational system at the level of international standard and to integrate it into the international education community.

In order to coordinate and standardize the programs and to maintain the quality in higher education, the Ministry of Education and Science has adopted numerous policies and issued various Decrees on higher education. A National Attestation Commission is created under the Ministry of Education and Science to assess and evaluate the degrees offered by higher educational institutions and to renew Registrations in every 4 years based on success. The Kazakh National University in Almaty is declared as the depository of all programs and documents on higher education and assigned to standardize the higher education in Kazakhstan by developing study plans and syllabus for all universities. The Government is also taking steps and initiatives in decentralizing the higher education system by involving local administration and businesses. An organization called “Union of Rectors” is created for policy planning and making suggestions for reforms, including administrative and financial reforms. Another initiative is taken to create regional centers for higher education by combining several universities together and to use them as centers for training and skill development. In order to decentralize the supervision and administration of higher education, special divisions are created in local administrations (Akimat) with administrative and supervisory power to control and regulate higher educational institutions locally. Since 2008, the Government is encouraging universities and developing rules and principles for corporate development in higher education. Already several universities and institutes are running as “Corporate University” and “Trustee Councils” are created in 27 universities. The ideas for creating According to the laws in higher education, Kazakhstani higher educational institutions have the right for self-management and independence in decision-making process, including staff recruitment and financial matters.

Another important aspect of Kazakhstan’s higher education is its international aspect. Kazakhstan’s higher educational institutions are developing close links and cooperation with foreign universities. Following, the President’s call for making Kazakhstan as one of the fifty most competitive states in the world, the Administration of higher education is taking many steps towards integrating Kazakhstan’s education into the world education community. The

Government declared the task of “bringing the system of education and in-service training in conformity with the world standards” as one of the thirty most important strategies for Kazakhstan.¹⁴ The education budget has been increased significantly during the recent years. In 2008, expense on education was increased 2.8 times compared to 2004. Kazakhstan spent 3.7% of GDP for education in 2008 which is not very high in terms of percentage but with a total GDP of about \$176 billion and a population of only about 15 million people the real per capita expense is high.¹⁵ Number of scholarships for students studying in public universities has increased significantly.¹⁶ Starting from 1994, hundreds of Kazakhstan young students are sent to study abroad through the Government funded and controlled program “Bolashak (future)” and the number of students and diversity of countries have increased significantly during the last few years. In 1995, only 17 students were sent to three countries--France, Germany and USA—for higher education. In 2005, after 10 years, the number increased to 1796 students and they were sent to 26 different countries (about 78% went to only three countries; USA, Britain and Russia). The number decreased during the last 3 years and the focus is also shifted from the US to Europe, particularly to Britain.¹⁷ A generous grant is provided to universities for professional and skill developments for faculty members in higher educational institutions abroad. Each year 200 best university teachers and researchers get grants in the amount of about \$18,000 each for scientific research and training in leading universities in the world.¹⁸ A national data base of best teachers and researchers has been created for on-line access to local and foreign universities. Government is also encouraging universities to promote exchange programs for students and inviting foreign experts and consultants for teaching and training local teachers.¹⁹

Kazakhstan is the first and only country in Central Asia that signed and ratified the Lisbon Convention in 1997 that recognizes higher education qualifications in the European

14 Speech by Zh. K. Tuymebayev, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Higher education aims of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the way to the Bologna process”, February 05, 2009 at the Kazakh National University, Almaty, 2.

15 In terms of per capita expense on education, Kazakhstan corresponds to the levels of such countries as Germany, Slovakia and Spain. Ibid.

16 In 2008, a total of 633,000 students studied in higher educational institutions and about 20% of them got funding from the state budget, *ibid*.

17 For details, see Appendix 2.

18 Speech by Tuymebayev, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 3.

19 The 2 largest national universities in the country, Kazakh National University in Almaty and Eurasian National University in Astana were given \$1mln each for inviting well-known scholars and experts in their fields. For details, see *ibid*, 6.

and Science (MOES) from time to time. Regulation # 976 issued on, July 19 2001, Regulation ARGK of RK, 2001, # 27, art. 338, Regulation # # 98, January 24, 2002, Regulation # 976”, July 19 200, Regulation # 964, September 29 2005, Regulation # 36, art.500, ARGK of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2005.

region. Kazakhstan is also very actively preparing the higher education system for joining the Bologna Process. Already 18 higher educational institutions have signed the Magna Charta Universitatum, the base of the Bologna Declaration.²⁰ The expectation is that in 2010, when Kazakhstan will assume the Presidency of the OSCE, the country will be ready and prepared for the Bologna Process.

The influence of European education systems is obvious in the higher education system in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh-British Technical University was opened in 2004 with a joint collaboration of a consortium of five British universities.²¹ There are also number of universities that maintain close links and cooperation with European universities, particularly with Germany and France. The presence of higher education marketing experts from European universities is visible in Kazakhstan and it is paying off. More Kazakhstani students are now studying in European universities (at private initiative) than those in the US. Although Turkey played a pioneering role during the initial years of Kazakhstan's independence in reforming and developing the higher education system, the focus and orientation seem to have shifted towards the European higher education model and joining the European educational space.

C. Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is the largest country in Central Asia (by population) and second largest in terms of GDP. As a post-Soviet state, Uzbekistan inherited similar problems in higher education as other countries in the region. But it had some advantages over others; with a long, rich and glorious historical past with strong traditional, religious and cultural values it was comparatively easier for Uzbekistan to rebuild its higher education system. The country had its own pool of qualified teachers, experts and academic administrators compared to other countries in the region and thus the collapse of the USSR and repatriation of Russians experts did have less impact in Uzbekistan's higher education system.

Immediately after independence the "Law On Education" was adopted in 1992 which provided the guidelines of education policy, structure and system of administration as well as the rights and obligations of students and teachers.²² The primary focus of education was

defined as socio-economic, spiritual and cultural development of the country. Later on, the "National Programme for Personnel Training (NPPT)" was adopted in 1997 which was implemented in three stages with the main goal and objective of training qualified people for all sectors of national economy.

Reforms were also carried out in the structure of higher education system by changing the old 5-year diploma program into a 4-year Bachelor degree and a 2-year Master program was introduced. A 3-year Doctorate program was also introduced. The goals and objectives of all these reforms were lofty and ambitious; to integrate the national education system into the international education community but the success was very limited due to lack of resources and willingness on the part of the political regime to make such radical changes. Many aspects of the old Soviet era educational system, mainly in terms of management and administration, are still in place. Some changes are taking place in the higher education system in Uzbekistan but critics argue that those are not serious and substantive rather symbolic and cosmetic ones.

Currently there are 62 higher educational institutions, including 2 academics, 16 universities and 44 institutes in Uzbekistan and they are under the administrative control of several Ministries.²³ In 2007, Government allocated an estimated budget of 9% of GDP for educational purposes which are the highest (in terms of GDP) in Central Asia. Education is not expensive. Majority of students (about 70% in Bachelor and 75% in Masters) study on fee paid basis (individual contract) with the institute. The Government has established the Republic Fund "Istedod" for supporting professional development of teachers. More than 800 teachers got opportunities to develop and upgrade their educational skills at universities in developed countries through this fund. About 1000 foreign teachers and specialists are invited for providing short-term trainings and professional developments for local teachers. Uzbek universities are also developing and maintaining close links and cooperation with foreign universities. There are no private higher educational institutions in Uzbekistan which are prohibited by law but several international universities are established on contract basis.²⁴ Uzbekistan is not a signatory of the Lisbon Declaration but there are some debates and

20 For details of the Bologna process, see the site www.magna-charta.org.

21 The Kazakh-British Technical University was created in 2001 at the initiative of Kazakhstani President Nussultan Nazarbayev and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The University is run by a consortium of 5 British universities: Aberdeen University, Robert Gordon University, Heriot-Watt University and Westminster University in London, <http://www.kbtu.kz/?q=panel/histor>. Accessed on October 14, 2009.

22 Higher Education in Uzbekistan; National Programme for Personal Training, *Tempus, European Commission*, www.tempus.europahouse.uz/uzbhes.htm, p. 1.

23 Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education (MHSSE) controls 14 universities and 20 institutes, Ministry of Public Health controls 6, Ministry of Culture 5, Ministry of Public Education 5 and so on. For details, see *ibid*.

24 Westminster International University in Tashkent, branches of Moscow State University after M.V. Lomonosov and the Russian Academy named after Plokhonov, the Russian University of Oil and Gas after Gubkin and Singapore Institute of Management in Tashkent.

discussion within the government circle for joining the Bologna Process but these are at a very preliminary stage.

The education system in Uzbekistan is still very much centralized and under the strict control and influence of the authority. There is no academic freedom and flexibility of designing and delivering courses. Any new course must be developed by a group of leading experts of the Ministry of Education. All changes and reforms in curriculum and course materials, particularly for junior level courses, must be submitted and get approved by the Methodological Council or by the Scientific Council of the institute or by the Ministry of Education. A number of specialized, ideological courses are developed and being offered as required courses mainly based on the writings of President Islam Karimov that reflect and propagate his authoritarian values and philosophical views. For example, the course “ideology of national independence” includes the main principles of historical heritage (nation, nationhood etc), spirituality (tolerance, traditions, pride of great predecessors), democracy (democratic construction in Uzbekistan, civil society development) and economic development (Uzbek development model). All these ideas and ideals are available in 13 volumes of works by President Karimov and in his other works. The course on “Democratic Development of Uzbekistan” is also a required one by the Ministry of Education. On the top of that university teachers must take part regularly on ideological works in the universities on “Manaviyat va marifat” (Spirituality and Enlightenment).²⁵

Medium of instruction is strictly controlled and regulated; all textbooks and instructional materials are in Uzbek language (with the change to Latin alphabet from Cyrillic the situation has further complicated). There is a growing demand from the government of having textbooks and educational materials in Uzbek Latin.

The regime in Uzbekistan is considered as a pro-type of Soviet system in Central Asia. Political system is very much authoritarian and all sectors of life, including higher education, are strictly controlled and regulated by the state. There is no denying the fact that changes and reforms are taking place in higher education system but it is moving mainly from the old communist, totalitarian to a new authoritarian and dictatorial one based on the personal cult of the President. In terms of its identity search, Uzbek education system is apparently trying to create its own model and brand rather than looking outside.

25 This information is collected from a University Professor in Tashkent through personal contact on condition of not disclosing her name.

D. Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poor countries in Central Asia with the highest inflation rate of about 25% (in 2008). Kyrgyzstan started political, economic and social reforms, including in the field of higher education, immediately after independence at a faster rate and speed than its neighbours. Kyrgyzstan is widely considered as the most open, democratic and pluralistic society among all Central Asian states. Like in Kazakhstan, all Soviet style higher educational institutions and technical schools were converted into universities. By 2001, there were 43 higher educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan and they had 143 divisions and 16 branches over all the country (for a population of about 5 million).²⁶ Private education was encouraged and a number of private universities were opened including an international university in Bishkek; the Kyrgyz American School (KAS) which later on became the American University in Central Asia.²⁷ Well-known Russian universities have also opened their branches in Kyrgyzstan. International linkages with universities for student and faculty exchange programs are well developed and expanding gradually. International organizations and NGOs in the field of education are actively working in the country. But the Government does not have the necessary resources and funding for sending students and teachers abroad for education, training and skill development as the Kazakh and Uzbek governments are doing. Government funding for universities is also very limited; more than 80% of students pay for their own education. At the structural level, higher education is reformed along with the line of Kazakhstan; Bachelor, Master and Ph.D.

But the most serious problems facing by the Kyrgyz higher education system are: the low quality and standard of education, lack of available resources and widespread corruption. As a result of the huge growth of universities and their branches, the quality is suffering and the government cannot (or is not willing) control the situation. Many of these universities particularly the regional branches do not have the necessary resources; qualified teachers, textbooks and materials for providing quality education to students rather they turned into cash cows for corrupt officials and administrators. The Ministry of Higher Education is taking serious steps to close the branches and Divisions of some universities and, at the same time,

26 Aisha Aslanbekova, “System of Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan to be Reorganized”, *Analyst, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, www.casianalyst.org. Accessed on September 11, 2009.

27 The Kyrgyz-American School (KAS) within the Kyrgyz State National University (KSNU) was established in Bishkek in 1993. In 1997, by a decree of the President of Kyrgyzstan, KAS became the American University in Kyrgyzstan (AUK), and an independent, international Board of Trustees was established as the governing body. For details, see http://www.auca.kg/en/about_auca/history. Accessed on October 12, 2009.

has decided to strengthen central administration of universities by creating a strict registration and attestation system. But observers believe that the success will be limited because of massive corruption, mismanagement and nepotism in the higher education sector. Experts on higher education believe that the current education system does not reflect the economic reality of the country or bring any added value to the society and education is not connected to the labor market.²⁸

The education system in Kyrgyzstan is marred by widespread corruption. In a recent speech, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev mentioned three sectors—education, health care and legal system—as the most corrupt ones in the country. It is widely believed and accepted that the main reason for corruption is low salaries for university teachers. Educators argue that they are forced to accept bribes and “gifts” from students because of very low salary.²⁹ The positive thing is that, unlike in other Central Asian countries, in Kyrgyzstan the issue of corruption in higher education is openly debated, discussed and the government is trying to create a strong public opinion against this “greatest evil”.

E. Tajikistan

Tajikistan is the poorest of all Central Asian countries with per capita GNP of \$1800 (estimated) in 2008. The country is still suffering from severe economic crisis, high inflation rate and social and economic instability. The education sector is in shambles as a result of the long and devastating civil war that continued for almost a decade. Historically and culturally, Tajikistan is different from other Central Asian countries because of its Persian roots and traditions. As the only Persian speaking country in Central Asia, the education system in Tajikistan has Iranian influence, particularly in the primary and secondary levels but less in higher education. Iran is helping Tajikistan with teachers, books and other teaching materials. There is also a strong Russian influence in the education system in Tajikistan and Russian textbooks and other teaching materials are widely used. Tajik authors are writing and publishing textbooks but they are low quality and do not correspond to international standard. In terms of structure and delivery process, the higher education system in Tajikistan still follows very

much of the old Soviet style. The Government, through the Ministry of Education, controls almost all aspects of higher education; including the programs to be taught, hours of teaching, books and reading materials and number of students to be admitted.

As far as the central government is concerned, there are no concerted or coordinated efforts in developing/reforming the higher education system, and because of the lack of resources, government funding for education is very limited (lowest in Central Asia in terms of per capita expenses). There are not much of scholarship programs for students or funds available for training and skill development for teachers. Only recently, after the end of the civil war, international organizations and NGOs are working in Tajikistan and providing help and assistance for education but most them are targeted towards the primary and secondary levels.

Corruption is rampant in the education sector. Paying bribe for getting admission and getting degrees has become a common norm and the amount of payment depends on the ranking of the university and the subject (area) of study. Salary for university professors is very low (about \$80 per month).

In terms of international linkages, Tajik universities are trying to develop and expand relations with outside universities but the progress is slow. There are no private universities in Tajikistan but a number of international universities like, the Central Asian University run by the Aga Khan Foundation, Russian-Slavic University, a branch of Lomonosov Moscow State University³⁰, are operating in the country on contract basis.

F. Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is the least known country in Central Asia to the outside world. The country was ruled heavy-handedly by a despotic leader Saparmurat Nyazov until his death in 2006. Every reform and change, including in the field of higher education, was directed and controlled by the President himself. It was a one-man state. There were hardly any change or reform occurred in the higher education during his time. No private higher educational institutions operate the country. In fact, the President discouraged people to get higher education. The European Union, under the TACIS Program, German Foreign Aid, the Soros

28 “Kruglii stol BPC: Visshee obražovanie v Kyrgyzstane; problemi u perespiktivi”. Round-Table at Bishkek Press Club; Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan; Problems and Prospective, Februray 02, 2007. www.bpc.kg/events. Accessed on September 11, 2009.

29 In 2001 salary for university teachers was \$20 to \$40 per month by early 2009 it increased to \$45 to \$90 dollars. Abdullah Ahiyan, “Kyrgyzstan: Officials Strive to Curb Corruption in Education System”, *Eurasianet.org*, January 22, 2009.

30 Lomonosov Moscow State University is the largest and oldest university in Russia with the tallest educational building in the world. It was built in 1755. In 2004, there was about 4000 teaching staff with about 40,000 students. It has also branches in other Central Asian countries: Astana (Kazakhstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). Avaz Yuldoshev, “Moscow State University’s Branch Opens Its Doors to Students Today Dushanbe” *Asia Plus*, September 14, 2009.

Foundation and others wanted to help in reforming and modernizing the education system in Turkmenistan but they failed to get permissions to operate in the country. After his death in 2006, the new government is trying to bring changes and reforms in higher education but the process is slow and marred in corruption and inefficiency.

II. CHALLENGES

As we have seen in our previous discussion, as Soviet successor states, all Central Asian states inherited a heavily burdened ideological communist, Marxist-Leninist education system. But it was a modern and secular system with a very high literacy rate (100%). After independence, Central Asian states are reforming and modernizing the old education system. Some leaders are more open and forward looking and provide new outlook and fresh perspectives for change, reform and modernization of higher education sector in order to meet the new challenges, others are not. Different strategies and policies are adopted to reform the old system and to create new ones that can reflect the changed circumstances and fulfill the needs and requirements of each independent state. Central Asian states are facing numerous challenges and difficulties in higher education sector.

A. Quality and Standard

Immediately after independence all Central Asian countries declared titular language as national language by replacing the Russian and issued executive orders to run the education system in native language. Some carried it out forcefully and vigorously (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan) others took time and did it slowly; step by step. One of the major problems was with the writing and publishing of new textbooks and reading materials in native languages. Native writers and scholars are already writing and publishing textbooks but they are very poor and low quality. Moreover, these books are expensive and not all students can afford to buy them. The most affected areas are Business, Humanities and Social Science as there were no good textbooks (with Western views, ideas, concepts and models) and no qualified teachers to teach these subjects during the Soviet time. Some countries are more successful in coping with this problem by training and retraining teachers and by attracting foreign support and investment. Another urgent problem is with the private universities. There was a popular view that opening private universities, privatizing higher education and establishing international universities

would solve the problems but it did not happen. Education in many private universities got worse compared to state universities because private universities do not get support and funding from governments, they enrol more students to survive but cannot not hire and retain qualified teachers because of shortages of resources. As a result, quality suffers and is compromised. Corruption is also rampant in private universities. International universities are doing better than state and private universities by offering new programs and expanding educational services and facilities. But not all students can afford to study there as the tuition fees are very high. As a result, a two-tier higher education system is emerging; one competitive modern education system equipped with latest technology offered by international universities where students get knowledge and expertise in modern fields of study, learn languages and graduate with good job prospects, the other is old, inefficient, uncompetitive and often corrupt.

B. Lack or shortage of resources

In general, public funding for education in terms of their GDP is not bad in Central Asia compared to many developing countries (Kazakhstan 2.3%, Uzbekistan 9.3%) but there are often complaints that management and administration systems in higher education are corrupt, inefficient and often they waste, misuse and mismanage resources. As we have seen earlier, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan spend huge amount of money for student scholarships, faculty training and retraining and for inviting foreign scholars and experts for training and skill development of teachers. Some Central Asian countries cannot update, upgrade or modernize their education systems and avail the advantages of modern information system and technology in the classrooms because of the lack of resources. Lower salary (from \$60 to \$500 per month and often are not paid regularly) is also an important factor for the degradation of quality. Local universities cannot attract and retain young Western educated and trained specialists as they prefer to work for private sector where there is more money and opportunities for mobility. There is also another reason why young people do not like to go and stay in the academia; in most universities the education administration and management is still very much controlled and dominated by the old guards with autocratic and totalitarian views and mind-sets and young people with more liberal, democratic, open-minded views and ideas cannot simply work with them. Many look for jobs elsewhere within the region and outside. An internal “brain drain” is also developing within the region; many qualified teachers and technical experts from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are working in Kazakhstan because the salary is higher there.

C. Administration and Management of Higher Education

During the Soviet time, higher education in Central Asia was administered and managed mainly by the Russians and after the collapse of the USSR most of those qualified experts and administrators either left for Russia or found jobs elsewhere. Thus a vacuum was created. As part of the nation-building process, independent states in Central Asia wanted to consolidate power and authority of titular nations in all aspects of national life in order to establish and promote the language, underlying values, perceptions and priorities of the society. So, it was imperative for the new states to take control over the management and administration of such an important sector as higher education. Russians and other nationalities were gradually removed from strategic important positions including higher education administration. Higher education is now controlled and directed by governments through the Ministry of Education and other specialized bodies. But there are complains that the system is not open, democratic and transparent. Appointments in high administrative and management positions are often filled in through personal connections or by the protégés of the regime or under direct patronage and influence of individual leaders. Academic administration and management is also hierarchical and bureaucratic in structure where teachers and students have hardly any voice and influence in decision-making.

D. Corruption

Corruption seems to be pervasive in higher education systems in Central Asia. Some countries recognize it, talk about it publicly and try to resolve it by administrative means and by creating social awareness against this evil. Others don't want to talk about it rather try to solve it quietly. But nobody denies it. However, it will not be appropriate to say that higher education systems in all Central Asian countries are equally corrupt. It is more rampant and widespread in some countries than others. Kyrgyzstan seems to be the most vocal about corruption. There are open debates, discussions, seminars, workshops and dialogue on the issue and the Government is seeking policy inputs and suggestions from the public on how to deal with this issue. Governments in all Central Asian states are taking some actions against corruption in higher education. Recently, several Professors and administrators in the region were arrested and fired in connection with bribery.³¹ This is, no doubt, a modest but good start but critics argue that these are just the tips of the iceberg and those people were fired not

because of corruption but because of personal conflicts and vendetta. People widely believe that it will not be possible to eradicate corruption from the higher education sector when it is so rampant in every sector of national life.

E. Political and ideological problems

Political orientations and ideological preferences of leaders and bureaucrats also create problems and impediments for reforms in higher education. In those countries, where leaders are more open, pragmatic, reform-minded, the higher education sector was opened up for foreign aid and investment and significant progress is being made. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan welcomed and accepted foreign aid and support from international bodies and agencies from the very beginning and were able to get some benefits of the internationalization process of higher education. Others could not because of autocratic and totalitarian policies and perceptions. There is no doubt that Central Asian countries need more and more specialists in the fields of economy, business, finance, administration, and information technology, management and so on for emerging economies and dynamic social change, and governments should come up with and implement long-term policies and strategies to resolve this issue.

CONCLUSION

Newly independent Central Asian nations are very young; more than 60% of the population is under the age of 25, and to provide them with quality education and training will be one of the most important, but difficult, tasks for the governments. Although different steps and measures have been taken and implemented by governments in higher education systems, there still remain numerous challenges and problems. There should be more open debate and discussion on this public issue. Governments, society, civil society, parents, students, businesses, employers--all should take active part in resolving this very important issue. What require now are open, flexible and dynamic policies on higher education, and that is possible only when teachers will get academic freedoms, educational institutions will have the real autonomy in decision-makings and students and teachers will have the rights to participate in administration and decision-making process.

In terms of identities and orientations of higher education; Kazakhstan seems to have opted for the European model; it has signed the Lisbon Declaration on education and is actively

31 Frangis Nazibullah, "In Central Asia, Corruption Undermining Education System", *Radio Free Europe*. www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1794065.html. Accessed on August 09, 2009, p. 31.

preparing for joining the Bologna Process. Kyrgyzstan is more inclined towards the American system with the home place of the only American University in Central Asia. Tajikistan is getting a lot of support and help from Iran but it prefers to keep the education system neutral and secular. Uzbekistan, with its strong historical and cultural past, is trying to create a brand of its own higher education system by blending of history, philosophy, ideology, religion and spirituality. Turkmenistan is still in the formative stage of creating and developing a higher education policy and strategy that will help and facilitate the reconstruction process of the country.

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Appendix 1

Basic Indicators for Central Asian states						
	Territory (sq km)	Population (July 2009)	GDP 2008 (in billion US\$)	GDP per capita, 2008	GDP real growth rate	Inflation Rate
Kazakhstan	2.724.900	15.399.437	175,8	\$11,500 (2008 est.)	2.4% (2008 est.)	17% (2008 est.)
Kyrgyzstan	199.951	5.431.747	11,61	\$2,200 (2008 est.)	7.6% (2008 est.)	24.5% (2008 est.)
Tajikistan	143.100	7.349.145	13,16	\$1,800 (2008 est.)	7.9% (2008 est.)	20.5% (2008)
	488.100	4.884.887	29,78	\$6,200 (2008 est.)	10.5% (2008 est.)	13% (2008 est.)
Uzbekistan	447.400	27.606.007	71,67	\$2,600 (2008 est.)	9% (2008 est.)	14% (2008 est.)
			<i>data are in 2008 US dollars</i>	<i>data are in 2008 US dollars</i>		
Social Indicators for Central Asian states						
	Life Expectancy at birth	Population Growth Rate	Literacy Rate (age 15)	Infant Mortality Rate per 1000	Education expendt, % of GDP	Unemployment
Kazakhstan	67.87 years male: 62.58 female: 73.47	0.392% (2009 est.)	total 99.5% male: 99.8% female: 99.3%	Total 25.73 male: 30.15 female: 21.06	2.3% (2005)	6.6% (2008 est.)
Kyrgyzstan	total: 69.43 male: 65.43 female: 73.64	1.396% (2009 est.)	total 98.7% male: 99.3% female: 98.1%	total: 31.26 male: 36.19 female: 26.06	4.9%(2005)	18% (2004 est.)
Tajikistan	65.33 years male: 62.29 female: 68.52	1.878% (2009 est.)	total 99.5% male: 99.7% female: 99.2%	total: 41.03 male: 45.9 female: 35.91	3.4% (2006)	2.3% (2008 est.)
	67.87 years male: 64.94 female: 70.95	1.141% (2009 est.)	total 98.8% male: 99.3% female: 98.3%	total: 45.36 male: 53.86 female: 36.46	3.9% (1991)	60% (2004 est.)
Uzbekistan	71.96 years male: 68.95 female: 75.15	0.935% (2009 est.)	total 99.3% male: 99.6% female: 99%	total: 23.43 male: 27.7 female: 18.9	9.4% (1991)	1% (2008 est.)

sources: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html>

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html>

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<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uz.html>

Appendix 2; Number of scholarships awarded by the Government of Kazakhstan through the “Bolashak” Program, 1994-2009 by country

	Country	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total
1	Australia			1					3				2	19	1	19	8	53
2	Austria				1				1				2	1			2	7
3	Bulgaria												1					1
4	Canada							5	1	1		1	56	59	9	32	36	1914
5	China												82	9	13	31	10	6
6	Czech Republic												51	6	17	23	12	268
7	Denmark												1					1
8	Finland												5					7
9	France	7	5	7		2	11	6	4	4	1	2	40	5	6	19	4	34
10	Germany	28	1	13	9	13	11	11	9	16	4	14	66	6	18	38	11	7
11	Hungary												2	1	2	1		24
12	Ireland													16	1	17		200
13	Israel													5			2	145
14	Italy					1						1	3	5	3	7	4	156
15	Japan			1									2	8	4	31	5	31
16	Malaysia												3	97	5	38	13	24
17	Netherlands											4	11	6	1	7	2	16
18	New Zealand												11	10		3		21
19	Norway												11	1			4	564
20	Poland												17	1		3		81
21	Russia			2	2	1						10	244	158	42	88	17	1755
22	Singapore												9	30	2	28	12	2
23	South Korea												3	10	0		1	28
24	Spain											1	1	1	2	2		5
25	Sweden												4			2	1	123
26	Switzerland											1	6	5	2	15	13	109
27	Turkey																	42
28	Ukraine															28		7
29	United Kingdom	32		10	11	10	25	13	12	18	10	27	523	156	72	635	360	14
30	United States	120	11	47	28	59	39	19	26	18	12	22	640	163	67	242	242	51
	TOTAL	187	17	81	51	86	86	54	56	57	27	83	1796	778	267	1311	759	5696

Source: official website of the “Bolashak” Program http://edu-cip.kz/eng/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=258&Itemid=302