

# Analysis on the Development of Higher Education in Central Asian Countries under the Construction of “the Belt and Road Initiatives”

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**Abstract:** As an important part of global development, Central Asian countries have always adhered to the principles of “openness” and “integration” in the process of higher education development. By reviewing the current situation of higher education in Central Asian countries, this paper holds that there will be three major trends in the education of Central Asian countries: First, Central Asian countries are increasingly recognizing the strategic importance of internationalization of higher education; Secondly, the consistency and coordination of policies are constantly increasing towards internationalization of higher education in various countries. Thirdly, in the context of economic globalization, the goals of the internationalization strategy of higher education in Central Asian countries are constantly expanding. In the future, Central Asian countries will pay more attention to and invest in higher education, and the development of higher education will also bring social and economic changes to Central Asian countries. The construction of the “Belt and Road Initiatives” will play a leading role in the cooperative development of higher education between China and Central Asian countries.

**Keywords:** Central Asian countries; Higher education; Development status; Trend analysis

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## 1. Introduction

In the deeply globalized 21st century, the internationalization of higher education has become an important strategy for countries to improve the quality of education, enhance international competitiveness and train global talents. With the continuous deepening of awareness of the importance of internationalization strategy in education, Central Asian countries<sup>①</sup> have gradually realized that higher education is not only limited to serving domestic socio-economic development, but also carries the important task of participating in global knowledge economy competition, and promoting regional cooperation and exchange. In October 2023, the First Central Asia China Higher Education Cooperation Forum was held in Kazakhstan. With the support of the Ministries of Education of China and Kazakhstan, the conference was initiated by Xi'an Jiaotong University of China and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University with the theme of “Integration of Industry and Education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution”. A total of 20 universities participated in it from China and Kazakhstan. Its goal is to build a platform for higher education exchange and cooperation, promote the deep integration strategy of industry and university under the “the Belt and Road” initiative, provide policy recommendations for international cooperation and exchange in the field of higher education, and contribute to the development of the “Silk Road University Alliance” as one of its regional alliances.<sup>[1]</sup>

With the construction of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, the governments of Central Asian countries have shown a trend of increasing consistency and coordination when formulating higher education policies, and are committed to promoting the internationalization of their higher education by attracting overseas high-quality education resources, strengthening international cooperation in running schools, promoting bilingual or multilingual teaching, and promoting the international mobility of students and teachers. In the Central Asian countries, higher education is regarded as the key to economic development and is attached great importance in their development strategies. For example, Kazakhstan's Strategy 2050 believes that the development of higher education can bring more labor opportunities; 2030 national development Strategy of Tajikistan considers higher education as a means of preparing learners

for entering the Labor market;The reforms in Uzbekistan's national Development Strategy for 2017-2021 include guiding 90%of learners to receive vocational and technical education and training to increase employment,and simultaneously promoting economic liberalization and modernization.while Kyrgyzstan's national development strategy focuses on human development,which represents its emphasis on education.<sup>[2]</sup>Although Central Asian countries are at different stages of development in terms of higher education,there has been a trend of liberalization,modernization and nationalization in recent years.

In the context of globalization,the goals of the strategy of internationalization of higher education are constantly expanding in Central Asian countries.In terms of internationalization of higher education,the ratio is 1:23 in Kyrgyzstan,1:9 in Uzbekistan,and 1:13 in Tajikistan between students receiving higher education abroad to those receiving higher education in their own country.<sup>[3]</sup> Under the Belt and Road Initiative,the growth rate of students from Central Asian countries studying in China has been rising,from 11930 in 2010 to 29885 in 2018,with an average annual growth rate of 12.33%,which is higher than other countries along the“the Belt and Road”in the same period.China has become the second largest destination country for Tajikistan students to study abroad.<sup>[4]</sup>The Central Asian countries'pursuit of higher education extends from simply improving the quality of education to enhancing the output of cultural soft power,building a global education network,and promoting the integration of local education systems with international standards.Therefore,an in-depth analysis of the current situation and trends in the development of higher education in Central Asian countries,and an exploration of effective ways to address their limitations are of great theoretical and practical significance for promoting the long-term development of education in China and Central Asia.

This paper systematically reviews the development process and current situation of the internationalization of higher education in Central Asian countries,then discusses its future development trend,reveals existing problems and challenges,and puts forward targeted strategic suggestions and countermeasures on this basis,in order to provide strong support and decision-making reference for the sustainable development of higher education in Central Asian countries under the background of globalization.

## **2. The Current Situation of Higher Education in Central Asian Countries**

Since its economic transformation,Central Asia has gradually adapted to the development needs of the global market economy,gradually improved internal and external quality assurance mechanisms,completed the modernization of doctoral education,adopted standardized admission procedures,and supported the establishment of private higher education institutions.Central Asian countries have all expanded their national higher education systems and increased participation rates,with Kazakhstan nearly doubling the number of higher education institutions and Uzbekistan,Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan more than doubling the number of higher education institutions since their independence.There are currently more than 430 universities in Central Asia with 1.8 million students.<sup>[5]</sup>Each Central Asian country has its own advantages in the development of higher education.For example,Kazakhstan has given universities more financial and managerial autonomy,focuses on educational reform,has successfully established a modern research infrastructure,encourages private investment in academic research and development,emphasizes the improvement of school education quality,and continuously increases the number of university admissions.Kazakhstan has actively cooperated with China in education.Tajikistan is a successful example of international cooperation between Central Asian countries and the private sector and is currently implementing a number of reforms to enhance the capacity of academic staff and internationalize the higher education sector.Uzbekistan has adopted an attractive model for the remuneration of teaching and research staff,including junior researchers.The country is rapidly increasing participation in higher education and has taken successful measures to improve the quality of training.<sup>[6]</sup>The field of higher education in Uzbekistan has undergone rapid and profound changes,with the number of universities increasing from 70 at the beginning of the 2016-2017 academic year to 194 in the 2022-2023 academic year;From 2016 to 2022,the number of students has almost quadrupled,while the gross enrolment rate in higher education has increased from 9%to 21%,Its goal is to increase the total enrolment rate in higher education to 50%by 2030.<sup>[7]</sup>

Within the framework of international cooperation in education,Central Asian countries have closely strengthened education cooperation with China.Relying on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,Kazakhstan,Kyrgyzstan,Tajikistan,and China jointly established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization University.Under the Belt and Road Initiative,the“New Silk Road University Alliance”(later renamed“Silk Road University Alliance”)was established in 2015,with seven Central Asian universities including Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and International University of Innovation Technologies.The“China-Central Asia University Alliance”was established in 2016,and in 2017,China jointly established the“Teacher Education Alliance”,“Humanities and Social Sciences Alliance”and“B&R Academic Publishing Alliance”with countries and regions along the“Belt and Road”.It has contributed to the construction of education bases and further promoted the development of higher education in various countries that the joining of Tajik State Pedagogical University named after Sadridin Ainy,Tashkent State Pedagogical University named after Nizami,Uzbekistan

State University, National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek, Samarkand State University, Kazakhstan Turan University and other universities.

However, in recent years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are new challenges for the global situation and socio-economic factors and higher education in Central Asia. The national education system, labor market demand, and international competitiveness are the determining factors of globalization, while international competitiveness is the determining factor for the development of higher education in Central Asian countries. Although the Central Asian countries are guided by European principles of higher education, the current situation in higher education in Central Asia is characterized by low teaching quality on average, poor learning infrastructure, still low participation rates and mismatched skills, weak links between industry and universities, inconsistent educational programs and labor market needs, and low fairness, which pose new challenges for internationalization. At the same time, the transformation towards an innovative green economy requires highly skilled professionals and continuous improvement of human capital productivity, especially in priority economic sectors. However, most national higher education systems in Central Asia are not fully equipped to provide the necessary skills and competencies required for this transformation. In addition, demographic pressures, brain drain, poverty and unemployment have also exacerbated the challenges facing higher education systems in the region.<sup>[8]</sup> Therefore, the quality of higher education remains a major concern for Central Asian countries, and although the participation rate in global higher education is gradually increasing, Central Asia still lags behind the average level.

In response to these problems, the Central Asian countries have also recognized the urgency and importance of strengthening the quality and management of higher education. At the successful first China-Central Asia Summit Meeting held in 2023, leaders of all countries expressed their willingness to actively promote cooperation in education and training. Since independence, the five Central Asian countries have been striving to modernize and reform their education systems to adapt to broader social, economic and political changes, economic and political transformations, and in the field of higher education, internationalization has become one of the main goals.<sup>[9]</sup> On the whole, education in Central Asian countries has achieved leapfrog development.

### **3. An Analysis of the Development Trend of Higher Education in Central Asian Countries under “the Belt and Road Initiative”**

Under the background of globalization, the analysis of the current situation and trend of the development of higher education internationalization in Central Asian countries shows that the awareness of the strategic importance of education internationalization is constantly strengthened. This recognition is not only reflected in the demand for international educational resource sharing, academic exchange and cooperation, but also in the strategic intention of promoting the quality improvement of domestic higher education and the reform of talent training mode through internationalization.

#### **3.1 The consistency and coordination of policies are constantly increasing for internationalization of higher education in various countries**

The analysis of the status quo and trend of the internationalization of higher education in Central Asian countries shows that the consistency and coordination of policies are showing an increasing trend in the internationalization of higher education in various countries, which greatly promotes the deepening of regional educational cooperation and the effective integration of educational resources.

In the context of globalization, Central Asian countries fully realize that it is difficult to achieve comprehensive improvement in higher education solely through the power of one country. Therefore, the member states have strengthened consultation and cooperation when formulating policies for internationalization of higher education. For example, by participating in international seminars, signing bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements and other forms, we will jointly explore the path of education reform in line with regional characteristics and international standards. As important inter-governmental platforms for international cooperation, the Institute of Area Studies and the Institute of Central Asian Studies of Chinese universities have played a positive role in promoting education and training, academic education and jointly formulating relevant policies. At the same time, every country actively responds to the initiative of UNESCO and other international organizations to participate in the discussion and implementation of the global education agenda, and ensure that their national higher education policies are consistent with the development trend of international education.

#### **3.2 The development of transnational and transregional higher education projects**

In order to accelerate the internationalization of higher education, Central Asian countries have actively carried out transnational education projects, such as joint school, co-construction of courses, credit transfer, and teacher exchange. These programs not only

help to improve the overall quality of educational resources in the region, but also provide students with a more diversified learning environment and growth opportunities. For example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with the support of the World Bank and UNESCO, have jointly promoted a number of transnational cooperation programs aimed at improving educational quality and promoting educational equity. In addition, education cooperation under China's Belt and Road Initiative has also brought new development opportunities for Central Asian countries, with many double degree programs and joint research centers coming into being.

The construction of regional higher education organizations is an important means to enhance the coordination of higher education policies in various countries. The existing or emerging higher education cooperation mechanisms in the Central Asian region, such as the Educational Cooperation Agency under the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other relevant organizations set up specifically for regional economic cooperation in Central Asia, are committed to building platforms for information exchange, resource sharing and policy coordination in the field of higher education. Through regular meetings and the formulation of joint declarations and action plans, countries have reached broad consensus on expanding international student exchanges, optimizing the educational structure, and improving the quality of personnel training, and have made joint efforts to promote the implementation of relevant programs.

### **3.3 Under the background of economic globalization, the goal of the internationalization strategy of higher education is constantly expanding in Central Asian countries**

Under the background of economic globalization, the internationalization strategy of higher education in Central Asian countries is undergoing profound changes and development. This process is not only reflected in the deepening of educational exchanges and cooperation, but also in promoting national economic development, increasing employment opportunities, and enhancing scientific research and innovation ability and academic influence through internationalization.

Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan pay attention to the introduction of international educational resources and advanced teaching models, and training professionals who meet the needs of the global market in the process of internationalization of higher education. By establishing cooperative relationships with well-known overseas universities, offering dual degree programs, joint training programs, and other means, the international competitiveness of domestic graduates has been enhanced, and human resources support has been provided for domestic enterprises to enter the international market. At the same time, the flow of international students and scholars has also driven the development of local consumer markets and service industries, which indirectly creates more job opportunities.

In addition, Central Asian countries are also trying to attract foreign investment in education, build international education parks and branch schools, which are aimed at creating regional education hubs that not only help improve the quality of local education, but also attract foreign investment and promote the diversified development of economic structure.

### **3.4 Enhancing scientific research innovation ability and academic influence**

In the context of globalization, Central Asian countries have realized the importance of scientific research and innovation capacity for their long-term development. One of the core objectives of the internationalization strategy of higher education is to improve the level of scientific research and enhance the ability of international cooperative research. By joining international research networks, participating in transnational research programs, and encouraging scholars to participate in international academic conferences and present papers, Central Asian countries seek to narrow the gap with developed countries in scientific and technological innovation, and to form their own competitive advantages in certain fields.

At the same time, higher education institutions in Central Asian countries are actively seeking international accreditation to improve their position in the world university rankings, and thus to enhance their influence in the international academic community. It will not only attract more outstanding international scientific research talents to work and study here, but also help domestic scientific research achievements gain international recognition and further transform into economic and social benefits.

### **3.5 Promoting national culture and values**

The internationalization of higher education has also become an important way for Central Asian countries to display and spread their own culture and values. On the one hand, integrating local cultural elements into the curriculum is to attract international students to learn the history, language, art and social system of Central Asia, so as to enhance the international community's understanding and respect for the civilization of Central Asia; On the other hand, with the help of overseas branch schools, Confucius Institutes and other forms, domestic language education can be promoted, and soft power can be enhanced. In addition, through international academic conferences, cultural exchange activities, and other means, it can strengthen dialogue between Central Asian countries and the world

and achieve two-way cultural interaction and mutual learning.

The strategic goals of higher education in Central Asian countries have expanded from simple knowledge acquisition and personnel training to multiple levels such as a booster for economic development, a driving force for scientific research and innovation, and a carrier for cultural output.

#### 4. Conclusion

By analyzing the current situation of the development of higher education in Central Asian countries, we further recognize the importance of the development of higher education for the development of Central Asian countries. Governments of various countries not only actively construct and optimize the relevant policy environment, but also strive to improve the consistency and coordination of policies, and constantly expand their strategic goals of the internationalization of higher education in the context of economic globalization. It aims to improve the overall quality of education and international competitiveness by deepening international cooperation, introducing high-quality education resources, and promoting academic exchanges and talent flow.

In the future, Central Asian countries should further grasp the global development trend of education, continue to increase investment based on the "Belt and Road Initiatives", strive to solve the existing limitations, and promote the in-depth implementation of higher education internationalization by innovating cooperation models, improving education quality, and cultivating talents with international vision. At the same time, flexible and forward-looking education internationalization strategies should be formulated according to their own national conditions, in order to achieve sustainable development of higher education in the global competition, and provide strong intellectual support and talent guarantee for social stability, economic development and cultural prosperity in Central Asia.

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#### Annotate :

- ① The Central Asia in this research relates mainly to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.