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Does internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan provide any opportunities for Russian universities?

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Since 2022 a new stage of higher education internationalization in Kazakhstan is going on. It is marked by more diversification of educational cooperation than before and Kazakhstan's attempts to consolidate its role as an educational leader in Central Asia. At the same time, the diversification of educational cooperation, which became a continuation of Kazakhstan's traditional multi-vector foreign policy, actually meant the strengthening of educational ties in geographic areas other than Russian ones. In particular, diversification began to clearly manifest itself in the dynamics of creating branches of foreign universities in Kazakhstan.

In 2021–2023 12 branches of foreign universities were established in Kazakhstan both in the form of strategic partnership, and as a part of Kazakhstani universities. British, US, Chinese, Korean universities established their branches in Kazakhstan (National Center for the Development of Higher Education, 2023). For example, in 2022 a branch of De Montfort University (UK) started functioning in Almaty, and University of Arizona (US) became the strategic partner of M. Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University that it is going to manage. In 2023, branches of Heriot-Watt University (UK) opened in Aktobe and Seoul National University of Science and Technology in Kyzylorda. In September 2024 it was planned to launch seven more branches of foreign universities (Iskakova, 2024).

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The number of branches of Russian universities has grown less than expected: in February 2022 it was planned to create branches of 9 Russian universities in Kazakhstan, but by mid-2024 only three were in place - branches of MEPhI, National University of Oil and Gas «Gubkin University» and Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology in Taraz. At the same time, the agreement between Russia and Kazakhstan included the obligation to open a branch of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Moscow, which was not set as a condition for other partners of Kazakhstan in educational cooperation.

Reasons for foreign universities in Kazakhstan

The task to create branches of foreign universities in Kazakhstan (at least 12 by 2029), as well as branches of Kazakhstani universities abroad, is included in the current Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science for 2023-2029. In addition, the priorities of internationalization are the development of the Central Asian Higher Education Area; creation of the Network University of the Organization of Turkic States; attracting foreign lecturers and international students to Kazakhstan (10% of the student population by 2029); development of joint educational programs (including double-degree programs); creating conditions for academic mobility and multilingual education (Decree of the Government, 2023).

Establishing branches of foreign universities in Kazakhstan is intended to solve, first of all, the problem of improving the quality and accessibility of higher education with the continued growth of the population. Thus, by 2030, the country is expected to have more than 1 million university students (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2023). In addition, it is assumed that the current strategy for the development of higher education will contribute to the adaptation of the educational system to the needs of the labor market, the digitalization of higher education, the development of infrastructure and the transformation of Kazakhstan into a hub for international students in Central Asia. In this regard, the choice of partners for international educational cooperation is based on their location (in OECD countries) and position in world and national rankings; in addition, preference is given to universities that provide training in technical specialties (Petrukhin, 2023).

At the same time, branches of foreign universities provide higher education both on a paid basis (tuition at a branch of De Montfort University costs 12.5 thousand dollars per year with the possible discount up to 3-10%), and through grants from the republican budget, which are distributed according to the strategic priorities of Kazakhstan. Thus, in 2023, 1200 grants were allocated for training in double degree programs with the University of Arizona (at M. Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University), 300 grants for training in double degree programs with Heriot-Watt University at Zhubanov University in Aktobe, 100 grants each for the branches of MEPhI and National University of Oil and Gas «Gubkin University» (Petrukhin, 2023).

However, the stated strategy has obvious limitations, including the lack of resources in the Kazakhstani higher education system and probable increased competition with Russia for applicants. In addition, in the medium and especially long term, Kazakhstan's plans to open foreign branches and

attract actively foreign “investors” into higher education system may redirect the brain drain from Kazakhstan. If previously it flew towards Russia, then with the expansion of branches it may reorient towards the West, Turkey, partly South Korea and China.

However, Kazakhstani authorities deny such a prospect. In particular, the Minister of Science and Higher Education S. Nurbek said in an interview that “by providing access to education at the world's leading universities, we reduce the risk of outflow of young talent” (Petrukhin, 2023). First of all, this is supposed to be done by locating branches of foreign universities outside the capital city (see Table 1), and the creation of branches of foreign universities on the basis of Kazakhstani universities is intended to directly introduce foreign teaching experience and attract foreign resources to improve the quality of work of Kazakhstani universities. However, taking into account Kazakhstan’s membership in the European Higher Education Area, which ensures widespread international recognition of Kazakhstani higher education diplomas, there are no guarantees that young specialists will remain in the country. And creating conditions to encourage the return of students to their homeland still poses difficulties for Kazakhstan. Under the Bolashak program, a student signs an agreement under which he is obliged to work for a year in Kazakhstan after graduation, but such obligations have never been extended to students who received their education abroad or in branches of foreign universities in Kazakhstan.

Table 1. Branches of foreign universities in Kazakhstan

The parent university and its country of origin	Year of establishment	Location	Specialties	Approximate number of students
MAI "Voshod" (Russia)	1964	Baikonur	Bachelor's programs in Applied Mathematics, Informatics and Computer Science, Management; Specialty program in Aircraft testing	250
St. Petersburg University of the Humanities and Social Sciences (Russia)	1984	Almaty	Bachelor's programs in Social and Cultural Activities, Psychology, Applied Informatics, Economics, Law	1000
Lomonosov Moscow State University (Russia)	2000	Astana	Bachelor's programs in Mathematics, Applied Mathematics and Computer Science, Philology, Ecology and Environmental Management, Economics; Master's programs in Applied mathematics and Computer Science, Philology, Economics	600
Chelyabinsk State University (Russia)	2000	Kostanay	Linguistics, Philology, Law, Economics, Management, Translation and translation studies	2300

Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (Russia)	2001	Ust'-Kamenogorsk	Bachelor's programs in Management, Applied Informatics, Economics, Law	-
De Montfort University (UK)	2021	Almaty	Bachelor' programs in Business Management, Business and Marketing, Business Entrepreneurship and innovation, Business Economics, Finance and Investment, etc. as well as in Computing, Arts and Design	500
National Research Nuclear University "MEPhI" (Russia)	2022	at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty	Physics of elementary particles and cosmophysics; Secure High Performance Computing Systems	200
National University of Oil and Gas «Gubkin University» (Russia)	2022	at Atyrau University of Oil and Gas in Atyrau	Construction and operation of gas and oil pipelines and gas and oil storage facilities, Oil and gas technologies, Geological modelling of natural oil and gas reservoirs	60
University of Arizona (USA)	2022	at M. Kozybaev North Kazakhstan University in Petropavlovsk	Programs in Biotechnology, Management Information Systems, Electronics and Telecommunications, Food Safety, Plant Science	600
Technische Universität Berlin, Technische Universität Darmstadt, Freie Universität Berlin, Hamburg University of Applied Sciences (Germany)	2022	at Caspian University of Technology and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov in Aktau	Electrical Engineering, Process Engineering, Mechatronics, Water Environment and Technology, Data Management, Artificial Intelligence, etc.	60
Heriot-Watt University (UK)	2023	at Zhubanov University in Aktobe	Petroleum Engineering, Electrical Power Engineering, Computer Engineering	300
Seoul National University of Science and Technology (SeoulTech) (Republic of Korea)	2023	at Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda University in Kyzylorda	Computer Science, Information Systems, Cyber Security, Computer Programming and Software Development	100 grants
Northwestern Polytechnical University (China)	2023	at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty	Master's programs in Materials Science and Technology, Information Technology and Communication Technologies, Computer Science and Technology	?

Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia (Russia)	2024	at M. Kh. Dulaty Taraz Regional University	Chemical technology of inorganic substances	30 (plan)
Université de Lorraine (France)	2024	at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University in Almaty	Bachelor's programs in Training of Foreign Language Teachers, International relations and diplomacy, Management and administration, Finance, economics, banking and insurance, Marketing and advertising, Restaurant and hotel management	95
The University of Hong Kong	2024	at Satbayev University in Almaty	PhD in Artificial Intelligence	?
Beijing Language and Culture University (China)	2024	at Astana International University	programs with the study of Chinese language and culture	25 (plan)
Hochschule Anhalt (Germany)	2024	at Almaty University of Power Engineering and Telecommunications	Bachelor's programs in Systems Engineering; Biotechnical and medical systems and devices; Master's program in Energy Policy and International Trade	20
Queen's University Belfast (Ireland)	2024	at Narxoz University in Almaty	Bachelor's Degree Programs in Management	?
Università Politecnica delle Marche (Italy)	2025	at Zhetysu University named after Ilyas Zhansugurov in Taldykorgan	programs in the specialties Agronomy, Agriculture, Bioresources	
Gazi Üniversitesi (Turkey)	2025	at South Kazakhstan State Pedagogical University in Shymkent	pedagogical specialties	
Korea Advanced Institute of Science & Technology (KAIST) (Republic of Korea)	2025	at the special zone "Nauograd" near Almaty	programs in specialties related to nuclear physics	

Woosong University (Republic of Korea)	2025	at one of the Kazakh universities in Turkestan	programs in Cybersecurity, Computer Engineering, Data Science	
University of Minnesota (USA)	2025	at Akhmet Baitursynuly Kostanay Regional University	?	
Cardiff University (UK)	2025	in Astana	?	
MGIMO University (Russia)	2025	at L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana	?	
Dong-Eui University (Republic of Korea)	2025	at Akhmet Baitursynuly Kostanay Regional University	programs in Mechanical Engineering specialties; Technological machines and equipment	
University of Debrecen (Hungary)	2025	at Astana IT University	?	

Uneven internationalization of Kazakhstani universities

Meanwhile, there is a huge gap in the degree of internationalization both between those universities, whose branches are established in Kazakhstan, and local ones, as well as between Kazakhstani capital universities and the bulk of Kazakhstani universities. The preferences of Kazakhstani universities in the choice of internationalization formats are also uneven, however, the diversification of geographical areas of cooperation is evident, for example, in the statistics of interuniversity agreements: in 2023, compared to 2022, the number of agreements decreased with universities in Russia (by 20%), Belarus (by 17%), South Korea and China (by 13% each), Turkey (by 8%). However, the number of interuniversity agreements with universities in Uzbekistan has increased noticeably (by 30.5%) (Results of monitoring, 2023, p. 3).

Instruments for internationalization of higher education such as joint educational programs (JP) and double degree programs (DD) are actively developing. In 2023, the number of agreements on the implementation of joint programs increased by 30% (up to 84) compared to 2022, and the number of students studying under them increased by 65% (to 1976 people). However, the success of joint programs varies between universities: those with the largest number of students were implemented by the Almaty University of Power Engineering and Telecommunications and Aktobe

Regional University named after K. Zhubanov. While Almaty Management University, Innovative University of Eurasia in Pavlodar and Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University in Almaty were the leaders in terms of the total number of students enrolled in joint programs. The geography of the joint programs is not wide: 27 programs were implemented in 2023 with Russian universities, 25 – with American, 6 – with French, 4 – with German ones (Results of monitoring, 2023, pp. 7, 22).

The number of students enrolled in double degree programs has also increased significantly – in 2023 by 48% compared to 2022, reaching 1974 people. In terms of the total number of students enrolled in double degree programs and the number of such programs in 2023, the leaders were L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty, in terms of the number of double degree students, they were followed by Aktobe Regional University named after K. Zhubanov, M. Kozybaev North Kazakhstan State University in Petropavlovsk and the Kazakh-British Technical University in Almaty (Results of monitoring, 2023, p. 24). However, we must assume that with the development of a network of branches of foreign universities based at Kazakhstani universities, they may soon be included in this ranking.

After peak values in 2011–2014, when the number of foreign specialists invited to Kazakhstani universities was more than 1.5 thousand people, this trend began to decline, but throughout 2021–2023 the number of invited specialists grew steadily, reaching 973 people in 2023. The possibility of remote collaboration, which received an impetus for development due to the pandemic, makes it easier to attract foreign specialists. Most of the specialists came from Russia, much fewer from Turkey, Uzbekistan, Germany, the US, Poland, Ukraine, and the UK (Monitoring the attraction of foreign specialists, 2023, pp. 25-32). The leaders in the number of attracted foreign specialists in 2023 were L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University, Aktobe Regional University named after K. Zhubanov and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University.

In 2023, 59 Kazakhstani universities were involved in international educational projects, mainly with foreign partners such as the EU countries, especially Germany, Poland, Greece, as well as the US, the UK, Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan. Only 4 educational projects were implemented with Russia, which is fewer than with the partners listed above (Results of monitoring, 2023, p. 16). The leaders in the number of such projects among universities in Kazakhstan in 2023 were Narxoz University in Almaty, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Kazakh National Agrarian Research University in Almaty (Results of monitoring, 2023, p. 17).

The establishment of their own branches abroad still remains a less popular instrument of internationalization among Kazakhstani universities due to high costs and the lack of resources. By 2023 17 Kazakhstani universities had 34 foreign offices, including branches and centers. Their number, however, has decreased compared to 2022. The geography of the offices is uneven - the majority are in Russia (8), the US (6), Poland (4). In addition, 3 offices are based in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, 2 more in China, as well as 2 in Vietnam and 2 in Belgium. However, only 3 of them worked

in the format of branches - branches of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) and Istanbul (Turkey), as well as a branch of the Sarsen Amanzholov East Kazakhstan University in the city of Ulgii (Mongolia).

Thus, the universities of Almaty are significantly ahead in terms of internationalization, although individual universities in Astana (L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University, for example), Aktobe, Petropavlovsk, Pavlodar also manage to noticeably succeed in introducing certain formats of internationalization of higher education. However, it is unlikely that branches of foreign universities created in Kazakhstan will be able to provide significant competition to them in the coming years due to their location, limited number of programs and format of activities - most of them are opened at Kazakhstani universities, which means they partly depend on the resources and the will of the leadership of the latter. Using the example of a capital university – L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana – the authors are going to identify the difficulties that Kazakhstani universities face in the internationalization policy.

Internationalization of higher education at L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University

In the QS World University Rankings 2025, L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University took 321st place, receiving high results in the ratio of teaching staff and students (92.6 out of 100), the share of foreign teachers (68.7 out of 100) and reputation among employers (62 out of 100). In terms of overall score and place in the ranking among Kazakhstani universities, L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University is the second only to Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (163rd place) (QS 2025).

L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University has introduced a three-level system of higher education in three languages (Kazakh, Russian and English) and today implements 64 bachelor's programs, 65 master's programs and 30 doctoral programs. The university actively cooperates with foreign universities; it has 62 double degree programs (9 bachelor's programs, 52 master's programs and 1 doctoral program) (Double degree education, 2024).

Since the signing of the Magna Carta of European Universities in 2005, L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University has strengthened its ties with European universities. In 2015, the university participated for the first time in the Erasmus+ program “Capacity Building in Higher Education” with European partners. Today, L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University participates in 29 projects (22 scientific and 7 educational), of which 7 are international and the rest are Kazakhstani programs with the involvement of foreign researchers (Monitoring the activities of universities, 2022). The only foreign office of L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University today is located in Belgium - at the Modern Education & Research Institute (MERI) in Brussels. The remaining foreign offices operate in the format of joint centers or laboratories (International Office of L.N. Gumilev Eurasian University).

The internationalization of L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University was partly facilitated by its entry into international university associations (including the International Higher Education Academy of

Sciences, the Eurasian Universities Association, the International Association of Universities, the European University Association), which are designed to facilitate the exchange of experience.

Interviews with the experts and international students of L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University indicate a number of difficulties that the university faces in the development of international educational cooperation. Thus, training at L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University takes place exclusively in an offline format, which contributes to adequate control of the quality of education, but limits the enrolment of international students who cannot come to Kazakhstan.

Despite the formal availability of training in three languages, the level of teaching in English-speaking programs depends on the level of language proficiency of teaching staff, which still remains at an insufficient level to fully conduct lectures, practices and seminars.

One of the obvious challenges in expanding internationally is the limited infrastructure available, particularly the lack of places on campus and especially in dormitories. Since there are not always enough rooms in dormitories for Kazakhstani students, it will be difficult to find places for the growing number of international students.

Specialists of the university International Office highlight a problem with the creation of educational programs with universities outside the EHEA, due to the difficulty of adapting partners to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). For instance, initiating partnerships with the universities in Southeast Asian countries, university management is forced to individually develop an educational program with each university, which requires a large amount of time and resources and thereby slows down international interaction. Difficulties arise from the lack of priority country areas and regulation of mechanisms for opening branches/offices/centers abroad.

Foreign students studying at L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University consider as the strengths of the university the streamlined process of admission to the university (from submitting documents to arrival at the university and registration in the dormitory), the presence of a curator who is assigned to an international student, the opportunity to study at the university at the expense of a grant, that is free for the student. Among the shortcomings, students note the lengthy process of resolving migration issues, especially obtaining medical certificates, and the lack of scholarships for exchange students who came to study for 1 or 2 terms. The financial stability of international students is hampered by the lack of opportunity to legally work while studying.

Russian universities' work in Kazakhstan

Due to its long history, Russian direction still remains dominant in international educational cooperation of Kazakhstan. So far, the largest number of interuniversity agreements (1710) have been concluded with Russian universities, although their number is declining, and Russia also hosts the largest number of offices of Kazakh universities (8). Although so far none of them operate in the format of a branch, like the one that Al-Farabi Kazakh National University plans to open in Moscow.

Enrollments at Russian universities have shown negative dynamics recently: for 2021-2023 the number of Kazakhstani students decreased by 11.6% (see Table 2) (Form No VPO-1, 2023). Although students from Kazakhstan have the right to study at the expense of the Russian budget and under a quota (in the 2023/2024 academic year, 1789 quotas were allocated - this is the 4th place after Belarus, Tajikistan and China).

Table 2. Number of students from Kazakhstan in Russian universities

Education level	2021	2022	2023
Bachelor's degree	42 539	38 855	37 077
Specialty level	8 748	7 884	7 318
Master's degree	9 753	9 994	9 562
TOTAL	61 040	56 733	53 957

Traditionally, the majority of Kazakhstani applicants prefer the universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the country's leading universities are located (MSU, HSE, MISiS, St. Petersburg State University). Universities in Chelyabinsk and Omsk regions bordering Kazakhstan, as well as Tomsk and Novosibirsk regions are also popular (see Table 3). At the same time, quite a lot of Kazakhstani students receive education part-time and in private universities.

Table 3. Number and share of Kazakhstani students in Russian universities, by region of Russia, 2023

	Bachelor programs, number of people	Share, %	Specialty programs, number of people	Share, %	Master programs, number of people	Share, %
Omsk region	4 709	12,7	899	12,29	1 557	16,28
Tomsk region	3 462	9,34	1 099	15	1 213	12,69
Novosibirsk region	3 396	9,16	532	7,27	569	5,95
Chelyabinsk region	1 045	2,82	337	4,61	754	7,89
Total in Russia	37 077	100	7 318	100	9 562	100

The specialties chosen by Kazakhstani students are the following ones: humanitarian ones (40%), engineering and technical specialties (35%) and the ones in natural sciences (25%) (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). Specialties in IT, robotics, and biotechnology are becoming increasingly popular. Within bilateral agreements regions of Russia and Kazakhstan promote the

enrollment of Kazakhstani students in Russian universities in those areas that are necessary for the economy of a particular region of Kazakhstan.

The trend towards diversification of educational cooperation in Kazakhstan away from Russia is based on the fears of the subsequent “settlement” of young people in Russia; in particular, a significant outflow of minds to Russia was noticeable in the northern regions of Kazakhstan (Abay, North Kazakhstan, West Kazakhstan, East Kazakhstan, Aktobe, Pavlodar, Kostanay regions). The situation proved both the need to increase the competitiveness of regional universities and the existing difference in employment opportunities and salary levels. In addition, Russia, like other countries hosting Kazakhstani students, creates favorable conditions for their employment. For example, graduates of Russian universities who are citizens of Kazakhstan can then obtain a temporary residence permit easier.

But while some politicians are sounding the alarm about brain drain, Kazakh universities have shown little interest in attracting students, relying on demographic growth and state budget support. Only certain universities have the opportunity to compete for the best applicants and for resources for increasing their positions in international rankings and attracting international students.

Recommendations for Russian universities

Due to the task to expand the number of international branches in Kazakhstan, there is still a small opportunity for Russian universities, although they experience not favorable conditions, and their difficulties are in many ways similar to those experienced by Kazakhstani universities during internationalization.

However, in order not to lose Kazakhstani applicants, Russian universities should intensify their efforts to create branches in Kazakhstan. For the Russian side, training Kazakhstani citizens means the opportunity to both transmit “soft power”, and potentially attract qualified labour to its economy.

The experience of Russian universities’ branches operating in Kazakhstan shows that they are inferior to many competitors in terms of the number of students, and therefore intensifying their marketing efforts and participation of the federal level in negotiations with the Kazakhstani side on the number of grants allocated to these branches are necessary. The further opening of Russian universities’ branches in Kazakhstan is unlikely without active promotion and financial support of this initiative from the relevant ministry and even the country’s top leadership.

Due to increased competition in Kazakhstan, ensuring high quality education in branches, which must correspond to the diploma received, has become urgent. In addition to the quality of teaching, that also means adequate material and technical base. To attract students, including

international ones, affordable housing is also important – the availability of places in dormitories can play a decisive role for certain categories of applicants who are in search of a suitable university.

Considering the limited resources available for Russian higher education in the current international situation, emphasis should be placed on the specialties that are in demand in Kazakhstan today – engineering, IT, and natural sciences. In order to ensure that the level of incoming applicants meets the expectations of the branches, it is worth investing in the launch of pre-entry courses for school graduates, which can become an additional source of income for the branches. At the same time, however, Russian branches will rather compete on the price of their educational services than on quality, which is typical for Russian universities in the global market of educational services (Didenko, 2014, p. 101).

Taking the focus on digitalization in Kazakhstan, it is worth more actively involving Russian educational online platforms in the promotion of Russian education in Kazakhstan, which began to develop first due to the pandemic, and then with the refusal of international platforms to host Russian online resources. Considering the desire of the Kazakh higher education system for multilingualism, Russian side may try launching several selective educational programs in English in the most popular specialties as pilot ones. Considering the weakness of the career guidance work of Kazakhstani universities, branches of Russian universities could try to occupy this niche.

It is important in the current situation to invest in the formation of a positive image of Russian higher education, both using the usual channels - exhibitions and on-site admissions campaigns, official websites of universities and positioning of universities in social networks, and “word of mouth” by maintaining connections with Kazakhstani graduates of Russian universities, especially those of them who have become bloggers and are ready to cooperate with their alma mater.

However, it is important for Russian universities and authorities to take into account the specifics of Kazakhstan and not carry out their activities there out of inertia. In particular, it is necessary to acquire a wide range of acquaintances not only in the capital, but also in the regions. Personal connections in this case can be both a source of up-to-date information and a channel for lobbying interests in certain regions and areas of activity. Since the Kazakhstani side fears a brain drain to Russia, it is worth developing various forms of cooperation between branches of Russian universities and Kazakhstani universities - in the format of joint educational and research projects, joint educational programs, and academic mobility.

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