

April, 30 2024

## Central Asian Higher Education Area: goals and prospects according to member-states

**Anastasia Pogorelskaya, Evgeniy Troitsky, Vitaly Pakulin, Nikolay Pogodaev,  
Olim Turdikulov, Sergey Yun**

A number of Russian initiatives for higher education integration in the post-Soviet area remained on paper due to the lack of support from other countries, for which the harmonization of higher education systems with Russia implied growing educational migration towards Russian universities. The initiative for higher education integration within Central Asia came from Kazakhstan, which thereby not only tried to distance itself from Russia in matters of higher education, but also to declare its own interests in the region.

On June 17-18, 2021, a Ministerial conference for education in Central Asian countries was held in Turkestan (Kazakhstan). As a result, a new project in higher education was launched, namely the Central Asian Higher Education Area (CAHEA). It was based on the Turkestan Declaration signed on June 18, 2021, and all five countries in the region - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - agreed to participate in it. However, there is also, and potentially will be, growing competition among them for students, and therefore they have diverging interests towards CAHEA. In this regard, it is difficult to expect a quick filling of this initiative with real content and rapid achievement of its goals.

**The research was supported by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation, Project № 23-78-10036, <https://rscf.ru/en/project/23-78-10036/>**

The opinions expressed in the publication reflect solely the personal views of the author and may not coincide with the point of view of the Center for Eurasian Studies of TSU

## Is the declaration in effect?

In the Turkestan Declaration, the goals of higher education systems harmonization and the coordination of educational policies among Central Asian states were included. There were references in the text of the declaration to the need to increase the chances of youth in Central Asian countries to find employment, achieve national goals in the field of education and attract international partners to the development of academic mobility in the region.

Officially, among the tasks of the CAHEA were stated:

- development of comparable National Qualifications Frameworks
- optimization of procedures for recognizing documents on education, academic degrees and titles
- introduction of a comparable credit system, in particular, European credits and European Credit Transfer System (mutual recognition)
- supporting the mobility of students and representatives of the academic community by ensuring mutual recognition and assessment of periods of study in other countries in the region
- ensuring the quality of higher education to introduce comparable criteria and assessment methodology
- cooperation in the development of educational programs, joint educational programs, internships and scientific research
- provision of grants for higher education by citizens of signatory states of the Declaration
- participation in joint research projects (Turkestan Declaration, 2021).

In order to ensure the implementation of the tasks, regular work of the CAHEA Secretariat was planned, as well as annual ministerial conferences and university rectors' forums of Central Asian countries. In addition, it was planned to create the Alliance of Central Asian Universities, the Association of Qualifications Recognition Organizations, the Central Asian Education Quality Assurance Network and the Students' Alliance.

However, the declaration was general in nature and did not contain technical details, for example, it avoided the issue of financing the CAHEA. In addition, despite mentioning European partners, each of the Central Asian countries had to develop educational cooperation with them at a bilateral basis, as well as independently decide on the implementation of the Bologna principles.

However, with the formation of CAHEA, the member-states tried to make interaction in higher education regular. In particular, ministerial conferences and forums of rectors started to be held. On May 12–13, 2022 Almaty (Kazakhstan) hosted a Forum of rectors of Central Asian countries. At the forum it was decided to create an Alliance of Central Asian Universities.

On October 6, 2022, a Conference of rectors of Central Asian Universities was held in Astana with the participation of educational ministries, Bologna Follow-Up Group, Council of Europe, UNESCO, etc., where it was decided to create the CAHEA Bureau - an analogue of the Secretariat, which included representatives of three from five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), as well as the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

On October 31, 2023, a Conference of rectors of Central Asian universities was held online under the title "Development of quality assurance systems for higher education in the CAHEA". The Kazakh side offered to "link the holding of the Ministerial Conference with the annual Consultative Meetings of the Heads of Central Asian States" in order to improve the status of the Conference (Kobenova, 2023).

## **Views of the Central Asian countries regarding the project**

### **Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan became the initiator of the CAHEA and therefore the country's leadership evaluates this project extremely positively. In particular, President K.Zh. Tokayev, at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States on July 21, 2022, stated that "An urgent task is to expand cooperation in science and education. The basis for this is the Declaration on the creation of the Central Asian Higher Education Area that was signed last year. As part of this initiative, Kazakhstan supported partners' proposals to expand interuniversity exchanges and significantly increased quotas for training young people from Central Asian countries. We are also ready to create branches of our leading universities and advanced schools in the countries of the region. For example, a branch of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University was established in Bishkek. The opening of educational centers on a reciprocal basis with Uzbekistan is on its way" (Central Communications Service under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022).

The website of the Higher Education Development National Center at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan states that "... the creation of a Central Asian Higher Education Area (CAHEA) today is an objective necessity determined by the time and fully meets the fundamental interests of our peoples" (Analysis of the educational market, 2022) .

S. Nurbek, Minister of Science and Higher Education of Kazakhstan, at the Conference of University Rectors of Central Asian countries in October 2022 stated that CAHEA is considered by Kazakhstan as a "free zone in which students and academic staff of universities will be able to freely move for training and exchange of knowledge, experience, to participate in research. In the current academic year, Kazakhstan, within the framework of the scholarship program for foreign citizens, provided 186 grants to citizens of CAHEA countries" (Analysis of the educational market, 2022).

However, in reality, Kazakhstan has not yet allocated targeted quotas for students from Central Asian states. The country has a general scholarship program for foreign citizens, providing opportunities to study in Kazakhstan for persons of Kazakh nationality who are not citizens of Kazakhstan, i.e. a special quota is allocated only for Kazakh foreign citizens (Satbayev University, 2023). In addition, Kazakhstan's promise to launch a special scholarship program for citizens of Central Asian countries (Al-Farabi scholarship) remains unfulfilled (Sputnik Kazakhstan, 2022)

Interviews with national experts in higher education held in 2025 have shown that representatives of the academic community do not consider CAHEA influence on Kazakhstani higher education system to be significant, and therefore they mostly assess it neutrally. Although the dynamics of educational cooperation development between Kazakhstan and its regional neighbors have been clearly positive in recent years, this cannot be unambiguously attributed to the effects of the CAHEA.

Thus, under the terms of a bilateral agreement with Uzbekistan, signed in April 2022, an annual exchange of students is carried out on an equivalent basis in the amount of up to 20 people (14 Bachelor, 6 Master students). Ahmet Yassawi University in Kazakhstan provides 200 scholarships for students from Turkic-speaking countries and related communities, but this practice has existed since the 1990s. and is not connected to CAHEA.

New joint educational programs and double degree programs are launched with universities of Central Asian countries, although there is no obvious connection with the CAHEA. In 2021 one new agreement on the double-degree program was signed with Tajikistan (became the first and so far the only one with this country), 2 agreements on double-degree programs with Kyrgyzstan, 2 agreements on the implementation of joint educational programs with Uzbekistan, 1 agreement on a double-degree program with Uzbekistan. In 2022, 2 new agreements on double degree programs were concluded with Kyrgyzstan, 1 - with Uzbekistan. In 2023, 5 new agreements on double-degree programs were concluded with Kyrgyzstan, 1 with Uzbekistan. The total number of double degree programs implemented at the end of 2023 with Kyrgyzstan was 11 (102 students), with Uzbekistan - 6 (128 students), with Tajikistan - 1 (19 students). The number of joint programs implemented with Uzbekistan at the end of 2023 was 3 (12 students). However, in reality European credit units have not been introduced in Central Asian countries yet and there is no mutual recognition of study periods with universities of Central Asian countries, with the exception of double-degree or joint educational programs.

There is one branch of Kazakhstani university in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) and a Center for Kazakh Language and Culture in Osh, a representative office of Zhetysu University in Bishkek - 3 branches, centers and representative offices of Kazakh universities in total in this country. In Uzbekistan there are 2 branches in Namangan and Chirchik, a representative office of Zhetysu University in Andijan, a representative office of the West Kazakhstan Agrarian-Technical University named after Zhangir khan in Samarkand, a representative office of the Kazakh Automobile and Road Institute in Nukus -

in total 5 branches and representative offices of Kazakhstani universities in this country. Since 2023, one branch of an Uzbek university has been operating in Kazakhstan.

In addition, according to data at the end of 2023, 1 research project was implemented with Kyrgyzstan, 4 - with Tajikistan, 6 - with Uzbekistan, but CAHEA has little influence on this aspect of cooperation.

## **Kyrgyzstan**

Higher education in Kyrgyzstan has been undergoing optimization since 2022, and the spontaneous internationalization of higher education has been replaced by a controlled one. There is an increase in funding for higher education, but the vast majority of universities in the country still depend on recruiting students on a contract basis. In this regard, Kyrgyzstan is aimed at diversifying the geography of its educational cooperation, as well as labor migration. Therefore, Russia is becoming less a priority partner, giving way to the influence of Turkey, European countries, etc.

Despite the positive attitude towards the creation of CAHEA, there are still no practical steps for its implementation. There are problems with quotas for students from Kazakhstan (quotas are not filled) and non-recognition of Kyrgyz diplomas by Uzbekistan. In research issues, work is being carried out more actively: grants are being allocated for the study of Kyrgyz identity (which also includes some Turkic-speaking peoples living in Kyrgyzstan), and a major conference on the issues of “Kurultai” is planned to be held with Central Asian countries.

Kyrgyzstani universities strive for international rankings and encourage their researchers to publish in Scopus journals, which should help improve the international competitiveness of universities. Some universities operate under the European credit system, but there is no recognition of study periods in other Central Asian countries.

The main funding for research and educational projects comes from international and foreign funds, for example, Open Society Foundations, the European Union, USAID, etc. However, given the current plans of the country's leadership to strengthen the national higher education system, it is quite possible that Kyrgyzstan will look among its CAHEA partners for potential investors in its higher education, therefore, in the medium and long term, the scale of educational cooperation and the range of their formats will grow, as well as competition for students.

## **Tajikistan**

Tajikistan at the Ministerial Conference of Central Asian countries in June 2021 was represented not by a minister, but by a lower-ranking official. Thus, adoption of the Turkestan Declaration on the part of Tajikistan took additional time due to national procedures. Expert interviews with

representatives of the relevant ministry and the academic community in Tajikistan, however, indicate that CAHEA is not widely known in Tajikistan even by a narrow professional circle. Thus, Tajikistan has not yet prioritized the development of CAHEA or promoted it as actively as some of its neighbors. However, given that the authorities of Tajikistan tacitly agree to the active departure of young people to study abroad, CAHEA creation and, in particular, the development of academic mobility in the region stated in the declaration is fully in the interests of Tajikistan.

## **Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan traditionally remains a closed country and has very selective educational cooperation. Today, there are no branches of foreign universities in the country, and the implemented joint or double-degree programs are sporadic. In the same spirit, Turkmenistan approached the formation of the CAHEA, preferring interaction on a bilateral basis. In October 2022, during the visit of the President of Turkmenistan S. Berdimuhamedov to Kazakhstan, the countries agreed to increase cooperation in research and education (Greater Asia, 2023).

Considering that Turkmenistan is trying to diversify its educational cooperation and at the same time strictly control the degree of higher education internationalization, CAHEA fits well into this logic. Most likely, Turkmenistan will continue to take a declarative approach to updating its higher education system, despite the goals and objectives of CAHEA stated in the Turkestan Declaration.

## **Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan has witnessed a recent increase in attention to the educational integration of Central Asian countries. This trend started after the election of Sh. Mirziyoyev as President and his introduction of systemic reforms and a policy of openness in the country. Since 2018, after the creation of joint educational programs with foreign universities and the development of academic mobility was allowed for universities, they joined many cooperation agreements with the universities of neighboring countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Based on these documents, various formats of educational cooperation were launched, including joint educational programs, which led to a significant increase in the number of students from Central Asian countries studying at universities in Uzbekistan - more than 9 times from 364 people (2016/2017 academic year) up to 3317 (2021/2022 academic year) The increase was mainly due to the influx of students from Turkmenistan and had nothing to do with CAHEA. Then there was a drop in the number of foreign students, which the creation of CAHEA could not prevent.

In 2023, at the international conference on the development of dialogue and cooperation between the countries of Central Asia in higher education, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Ibrahim Abdurakhmanov, stated that "it is necessary to create a common platform for training and advanced training of personnel in pedagogy and

methodology. At the same time, studying the experience of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the development of private, academic and financially independent higher educational institutions, as well as strengthening cooperation with them, will lead to good results” (Markaziy Osiyo mamlakatlarning, 2023).

Uzbekistan has set the goal of expanding the share of foreign students up to 15% by 2030, and therefore the development of academic mobility in Central Asia is important for it. However, in future, Uzbekistan may face increased competition with neighbors for Central Asian students.

### **Prospects for the CAHEA development**

Given the lack of resources for the development of their higher education systems, which all Central Asian countries experience, it is unlikely that they can afford to allocate significant funding for CAHEA. Rather, the initiative is designed to attract the attention of external partners and potential donors - primarily the European Union, UNESCO, possibly the Council of Europe, etc. However, given the fact that they do not have effective instruments of influence on Central Asian countries in matters of Bologna principles implementation, one can expect that despite the appeal to partners, the high degree of declarativeness of the CAHEA will remain.

Another scenario for CAHEA may be the loss of Kazakhstan’s role as the main driver of the project and the interception of this initiative by Turkey, which is aimed at attracting foreign students from Turkic-speaking countries. The latter include four of the five countries in Central Asia (except Tajikistan, whose official language belongs to Indo-Iranian ones).

In this regard, Russian universities will experience growing competition for students with Central Asian countries, who currently make up more than half of foreign students in Russia. Considering that Russian initiatives to create regional academic mobility programs have failed, it is worth launching a similar program on a bilateral basis as a pilot project, which, if successful, will attract the rest of Central Asian states. One of the promising partners in this regard may be Kyrgyzstan, where the higher education system is currently being optimized and six universities are being identified, which are intended to become points of growth for the whole system.

### **References**

Analysis of the educational market of Central Asian countries and recommendations for the development of higher education systems in Central Asia // Higher Education Development National Center at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022. URL: [https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/uploads/additional\\_files\\_items/170/file/analiz-obrazovatel'nogo-rynka-stran-ca.pdf?cache=1682576071](https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/uploads/additional_files_items/170/file/analiz-obrazovatel'nogo-rynka-stran-ca.pdf?cache=1682576071)

Cooperation of Central Asian countries on higher education will expand // KRIA Karakalpakskoe informatsionnoe agentstvo, 22.09.2023. URL: <https://kknews.uz/uz/166493.html>

Declaration on the creation of the Central Asian Higher Educational Area (Turkestan Declaration) // Council of Europe, n.a. URL: <https://rm.coe.int/turkestan-declaration/1680a2eac7>

Grants for foreign citizens from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan - 2023 // Satbayev University, 05.04.2023. URL: <https://satbayev.university.ru/news/granty-dlya-inostrannykh-grazhdan-ot-ministerstva-nauki-i-vysshego-obrazovaniya-rk-2023>

Kazakhstan will launch the “al-Farabi” scholarship for students from Central Asia // Sputnik Kazakhstan, 05.14.2022. URL: <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20220514/kazakhstan-stipendiya-al-farabi-24811691.html>

Kobenova G.I. Speech by the Chairman of the Committee for Higher and Postgraduate Education of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the Conference of Rectors of Central Asian Countries // National Center for the Development of Higher Education, 10/31/2023. URL: <https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/files/1698984410/1-osnovnye-orientiry-capvo-po-obespecheniyu-kachestva-vysshego-obrazovaniya.pdf>

K. Tokaev outlined five key areas of work within the framework of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia // Central Communications Service under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 07.21.2022. URL: <https://ortcom.kz/ru/novosti/1658382494>

Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan will strengthen partnership in the field of higher education // Greater Asia, 08/11/2023. URL: <https://bigasia.ru/turkmenistan-i-kazahstan-ukrepyat-partnyorstvo-v-oblasti-vysshego-obrazovaniya/>