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Patterns and State Strategies of Transnational Higher Education Institutions in Central Asia

by Dr. Eriks Varpahovskis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Central Asia's emergence into independence necessitated adapting higher education systems originally intended to train state cadres to the new realities of the free market and globalisation. Transnational higher education institutions (TNHEIs) – institutions that provide higher education services and award higher education degrees either from foreign institutions or via foreign pedagogical systems – have been at the forefront of reform. Arguably, a 'boom' of TNHEIs has been occurring in the region: as of 2021, there are at least 67 TNHEIs across the five Central Asian republics. Beneath the surface, though, are numerous problems, as TNHEIs struggle to sustain themselves and provide quality education, while local governments pursue discordant strategies that complicate the situation.

Eriks Varpahovskis is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of International Regional Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Russia), where he works on a variety of public diplomacy-related research projects, including how transnational higher education institutions function as instruments of public diplomacy. In 2019, Eriks received a Ph.D. in Political Science from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (South Korea) while being sponsored by the Government of the Republic of Korea. His other research activities can be found on his [Academia.edu page](#).

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Introduction

The end of communism dismantled not only the Soviet Union, but also the Soviet model of higher education (HE). The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were compelled to re-design their national HE systems to adapt to new economic and social realities.¹ Over the years, internationalisation has emerged as a key vector of their efforts to reform. The Bologna Process have been undertaken in fits and starts, and until the recent establishment of the Central Asian Higher Education Area (CAHEA), region-wide coordination has been lacking.² Many Central Asian higher education institutions (HEIs) now offer a mélange of Soviet-era and Western-style degrees, as well as student mobility programs and academic collaborations with Western and Asian counterparts. Crucially, there has also been a proliferation of transnational higher education institutions (TNHEIs), viz., institutions that provide higher education services and award higher education degrees either from foreign

institutions or via foreign pedagogical systems. TNHEIs are a complex phenomenon. They can be simultaneously a successful form of surrogate development for, and instigator of reform within, a host country's HE system, yet also a drain on the very same domestic human capital they are intended to cultivate. They can also serve as sources, real or perceived, benign or malignant, of foreign influence.³ They can bring much-needed technologies and train much-needed talent, not to mention legitimacy to the host country, but they can also disrupt domestic values and ideologies, as well as embarrass domestic HEIs, exposing subpar quality and even corruption. Depending on the nature and strength of their affiliation with a foreign country, they can also serve as tools of diplomacy.⁴ For all these reasons, TNHEIs are not just a vector of HE reform, but also a vector of domestic politics and international relations, making it important to examine their presence in the region, as well as Central Asian governments' strategies for dealing with them.

Defining TNHEI

Devising a proper definition and taxonomy of TNHEIs is immensely difficult.⁵ This study uses a broad definition, according to which the 'transnational' (TN) component concerns

one or both of two factors: institutional and/or pedagogical. Institutional factors concern whether ownership and/or management is designed and controlled by citizens and/

¹ Anna Smolentseva, Jeroen Huisman, and Isak Froumin, 'Transformation of Higher Education Institutional Landscape in Post-Soviet Countries: From Soviet Model to Where?' in *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in post-Soviet Countries* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018), 1-43.

² Emma Sabzalieva, 'Creating a Central Asian Higher Education Area', Professional blog, last modified 26 July 2021, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://emmasabzalieva.com/2021/07/06/creating-a-central-asian-higher-education-area/>; Emma Sabzalieva, 'The Bologna Process in Central Asia', Professional blog, last modified 6 June 2019, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://emmasabzalieva.com/2019/06/06/the-bologna-process-in-central-asia/>.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Verso books, 2006); Anna Wojciuk and Antoni Górny, *Empires of knowledge in international relations: Education and science as sources of power for the state* (Routledge, 2018); Daiva Dumciuviene, 'The impact of education policy to country economic development,' *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, is. 191 (2015): 2427-2436; Seye Abimbola, Rose Amazan, Pavle Vizintin, Leanne Howie, Robert Cumming and Joel Negin, 'Australian higher education scholarships as tools for international development and diplomacy in Africa', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, v. 70, is. 2 (2016): 105-120.

⁴ Atheer Abdullah Mohammed, Abdul Hafeez-Baig and Raj Gururajan, 'Talent management as a core source of innovation and social development in higher education', in *Innovations in Higher Education-Cases on Transforming and Advancing Practice* (London: IntechOpen, 2018): 1-31; Rasmus G. Bertelsen, 'Private foreign-affiliated universities, the state, and soft power: The American University of Beirut and the American University in Cairo', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, v. 8, is. 3 (2012): 293-311.

⁵ Jane Knight, 'Transnational education remodeled: Toward a common TNE framework and definitions', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, v. 20, is. 1 (2016): 34-47; Stephen Wilkins, 'Definitions of transnational higher education', *International Higher Education*, is. 95 (2018): 5-7.

or organisations from a foreign country. Pedagogical factors concern whether the language of instruction, educational philosophy and teaching materials and design are at least partially foreign in nature.

As for ‘higher education institution’ (HEI), this is understood to signify organisations that provide undergraduate and graduate education

services and award tertiary educational degrees, whether Soviet-era (i.e., Spetsialista, Kandidat Nauk, Doktor Nauk) or Western-style (i.e., Bachelor’s, Master’s, Doctorate). This analysis has not actively sought to include kolledzhi (vocational colleges), even though arguably such institutions overlap with tertiary education.⁶

TNHEIs in Central Asia

Per the definition provided above and according to official government sources, as well as databases and other figures derived from university websites, news sources and

academic articles, there are currently 67 TNHEIs operating in Central Asia. This may be broken down by country:

Host country	Total number of TNHEIs inside host country
Kazakhstan	16
Kyrgyzstan	19
Tajikistan	4
Turkmenistan	0
Uzbekistan	28

Turkmenistan has previously had two TNHEIs that, as of this writing, are either closed or likely closed: a branch of the Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas and the International Turkmen-Turkish University. The calculations for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan include the OSCE Academy in Kyrgyzstan and the University of Central Asia (UCA), respectively. UCA has offices and campuses

in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (and intends to open a campus in Kazakhstan). Neither have a foreign country and/or parent HEI. The OSCE Academy is affiliated with, and supported by, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), while UCA is affiliated with the Aga Khan Development Network and is sponsored by the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Nizari Ismaili community of Muslims.

⁶ This analysis also has not actively sought to include HEIs that have been established by Central Asian governments with ‘international’ in their name and which proactively recruit from beyond the region, e.g., the International Silk Road University of Tourism in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the International Turkmen University of Humanities and Development in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, and the International University of Kyrgyzstan (IUK) in Bishkek. Their exclusion is due to the fact that institutionally and pedagogically they are patently ‘indigenous’ or ‘domestic’ in nature.

Affiliated country	Total number of TNHEIs inside Central Asia
Russian Federation	33 ⁷
Republic of Turkey	6 ⁸
Republic of Korea (South Korea)	6 ⁹
United States of America (USA)	7 ¹⁰
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)	2 ¹¹
Federal Republic of Germany	2 ¹²
Republic of India	2 ¹³
Italian Republic	1 ¹⁴
State of Kuwait	1 ¹⁵
Republic of Singapore	1 ¹⁶
Republic of Latvia	1 ¹⁷
Republic of Belarus	1 ¹⁸
Arab Republic of Egypt	1 ¹⁹
Without country affiliation	3 ²⁰

- ⁷ Kazakhstan (7): Kazakh-Russian Medical University; Chelyabinsk State University; Kazakhstan branch of the Lomonosov Moscow State University; St. Petersburg Humanitarian University of Trade Unions; Synergy University; 'Voskhod' branch of the Moscow Aviation Institute; Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Information Technology. Kyrgyzstan (9): Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University; Moscow State Social University; Kyrgyz-Russian Education Academy; International Slavonic Institute; Russian State Trade and Economics University (now belongs to Plekhanov University of Economics); International University of Innovative Technologies (incorporates Kyrgyz-Russian institute of business management automatization); Russian State Social University; Baltic State Technical University 'Voenmeh' D.F. Ustinov; Moscow Institute of Entrepreneurship and Law. Tajikistan (3): Russian-Tajik Slavonic University; Moscow State University; Moscow Power Engineering University. Uzbekistan (14): Plekhanov Russian University of Economics; Moscow State University; Russian State University of Oil and Gas; National University of Science and Technology MISiS; All-Russian State University of Cinematography (VGIK); National Research Nuclear University MEPhI (Moscow Engineering Physics Institute); Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO); Moscow Power Engineering University in Tashkent; D. Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia; Kosygin Russian State University; Astrakhan State Technical University; Russian State University of Physical Education, Sport, Youth, and Tourism; Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University; Ural State Medical Academy.
- ⁸ Kazakhstan (3): Ahmet Yesevi University; Taraz Innovative-Humanitarian University, Suleyman Demirel University. Kyrgyzstan (3): Toktomamatov International University; Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University; Ala-Too International University.
- ⁹ Uzbekistan (6); Inha University; Bucheon University; Yeosu Technical Institute in Tashkent; Korea International University in Ferghana; AKFA University in Tashkent; Ajou University in Tashkent.
- ¹⁰ Kazakhstan (3): Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research; Kazakh-American University; Kazakh American Free University. Kyrgyzstan (3): American University of Central Asia; International University of Central Asia (not the same as IUAK); KEIIN International Institute. Uzbekistan (1): Webster University.
- ¹¹ Kazakhstan (1): Kazakh-British Technical University. Uzbekistan (1): Westminster International University.
- ¹² Kazakhstan (1): Kazakh-German University. Kyrgyzstan (1): Kyrgyz-German Technical Institute.
- ¹³ Uzbekistan (2): Amity University; Sharda University.
- ¹⁴ Uzbekistan (1): Turin Polytechnic University
- ¹⁵ Kyrgyzstan (1): International Kuwait University
- ¹⁶ Uzbekistan (1): Management Development Institute of Singapore in Tashkent."
- ¹⁷ Uzbekistan (1): ISMA University of Applied Sciences.
- ¹⁸ Uzbekistan (1): Belarusian-Uzbek Inter-Sectoral Institute of Applied Technical Qualifications.
- ¹⁹ Kazakhstan (1): Nur-Mubarak University of Islamic Culture.
- ²⁰ Kyrgyzstan (2): OSCE Academy, University of Central Asia. Tajikistan (1): University of Central Asia

TNHEIs and quality control

Arguably, TNHEIs have been undergoing a ‘boom’ in Central Asia. The governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have openly acknowledged their countries’ lack of high-quality HEIs and are actively seeking TNHEIs to redress the balance. For example, Kazakhstan is expected to host five campuses of world-class universities by 2025,²¹ while UCA is expected to open its long-awaited third campus in Tekeli in 2022. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan plans to host branch campuses of universities from Russia, China, Malaysia, Hungary, Turkey and South Korea.²² Additionally, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have expressed their intention to open a joint HEI in Khujand, Tajikistan.²³

With this in mind, it is important to note that quality control of TNHEIs has been a significant

problem in Central Asia. An example is the Moscow Institute of Entrepreneurship and Law (MIEL, also known by its Russian acronym, MIPP). MIEL is a private HEI that has a head office in Moscow that manages branches inside Kyrgyzstan. Itself established by a private company,²⁴ a significant portion of its programs appear to be taught inside Kyrgyzstan through an Osh-based ‘non-commercial’ affiliate.²⁵ As evidenced by its shockingly low academic ranking – 17,464 in the world, and 538 inside Russia²⁶ – it is difficult to imagine how either the head office or the host country can regulate such an entity to ensure that students are getting their money’s worth, or worse, to ensure that MIEL is not a ‘diploma mill’, meaning a fraudulent HEI that grants illegitimate credentials for a fee.²⁷

²¹ Dana Karina, ‘K 2025 godu v Kazahstane otkroyutsya kampusy pyati vedushchikh zarubezhnykh vuzov’, *InBusiness.kz*, last modified 11 March 2021, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/k-2025-godu-v-kazahstane-otkroyutsya-kampusy-5-vedushih-zarubezhnyh-vuzov>.

²² ‘V Uzbekistane otkroyutsya filialy yeshche trekh rossiyskikh vuzov – spisok’, Sputnik, last modified 10 February 2020, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20200210/V-Uzbekistane-otkroyutsya-filialy-esche-trekh-rossiyskikh-vuzov--Minobrnauki-RF-13433214.html>; ‘Chinese University of Traditional Medicine to open its branch in Uzbekistan’, *Kun.uz*, last modified 25 August 2020, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://kun.uz/en/news/2020/08/25/chinese-university-of-traditional-medicine-to-open-its-branch-in-uzbekistan>; ‘Private University of Malaysia intends to open a branch in Khorezm’, *Kun.uz*, last modified 5 October 2019, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://kun.uz/en/news/2019/10/05/private-university-of-malaysia-intends-to-open-a-branch-in-khorezm>; ‘The University of Debrecen is opening a new campus in Uzbekistan’, *The Debrecen Sun*, last modified 18 February 2021, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://www.debrecensun.hu/uni/2021/02/18/the-university-of-debrecen-is-opening-a-new-campus-in-uzbekistan/>; ‘A Branch of Kyung-in Woman’s University to open in Uzbekistan’, *Uz Daily*, last modified 22 April 2019, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/49352>.

²³ ‘V Khudzhande otkroyut novyy tadzhiksko-uzbekskiy universitet.’, *Sputnik*, last modified 5 February 2021, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210205/tajiksko-uzbekskiy-universitet-1032766122.html>.

²⁴ Moscow Institute of Entrepreneurship and Law, ‘Document of registration’, Corporate website, last modified 11 April 2018, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://mipp.ru/pdf/Устав от 19.02.2018r..pdf>.

²⁵ Moscow Institute of Entrepreneurship and Law, ‘Table of operations, branches, etc.’, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://mipp.ru/about/International-activities/international-department/index.html>; State Registration of the Educational Entity, ‘Osh branch of the autonomous non-profit organization of higher education “Moscow Institute of Entrepreneurship and Law”’, Corporate website, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://map.obrnadzor.gov.ru/application/university/view/4101>.

²⁶ Ranking web of universities, ‘Homepage’, Corporate website, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://www.webometrics.info/en/detalles/mipp.ru>.

²⁷ In fairness, MIEL is far from the only institution culpable of being accused of fraud. See: David Trilling, ‘Kyrgyzstan: Indian Medical Students Caught in Diploma Mill?’ *EurasiaNet.org*, last modified 6 December 2011, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-indian-medical-students-caught-in-diploma-mill>.

Central Asian strategies toward TNHEIs

Central Asian states have pursued two broad strategies with respect to TNHEIs: isolationism and active welcoming. Isolationism is found in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, while active welcoming is found in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan once pursued isolationism, but today is actively welcoming TNHEIs, to the point that it could potentially become the HE hub of Central Asia.

These strategies are not monolithic. For example, Tajikistan permits some rare exceptions, specifically Russian HEIs (since 1996) and UCA (since 2017).²⁸ While Kyrgyzstan is well known, even notorious, for being extremely lax, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are generally quite strict despite being welcoming.

While isolationism can be damaging for a country's HE system and human capital, there are several reasons why a Central Asian government may opt for it. They seek to prevent, e.g., the spread of religion and religious radicalisation of youth, prevent disruption of national values or state ideologies, and/or 'brain drain', insofar that TNHEIs facilitate the emigration of their alumni to foreign countries.²⁹ The issue of religious radicalisation is especially relevant for Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as these countries have borders with Afghanistan, which has been in the throes of an insurgency waged by Islamic radicals.

By actively welcoming the establishment of TNHEIs, a Central Asian government may stimulate not only internationalisation of their domestic HE system, but also the production of highly qualified personnel for international and national projects, competition between domestic HEIs (thereby incentivising increased educational quality), and the acquisition of previously unavailable technologies.³⁰ Increasingly national self-awareness coupled with positive public relations abroad, and in doing so, attracting direct foreign investment, are also possible.

Despite these positives, actively welcoming TNHEIs invites new challenges. For example, how can a Central Asian government monitor educational quality without tipping over into censorship? TNHEIs also open the door to influence, even geopolitics. Foreign stakeholders that seek to open TNHEIs in Central Asia naturally want secure environments for their efforts,³¹ whether in terms of pedagogical freedom, financial return on investment, predictability in accreditation processes, etc. Governments can also intervene, as in the case of Turkmenistan, which was pressured by Turkey to close several schools established by the Hizmet spiritual movement.³²

²⁸ Alan J. DeYoung, Zumrad Kataeva, and Dilrabo Jonbekova, 'Higher education in Tajikistan: Institutional landscape and key policy developments', in *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018): 363-385.

²⁹ Stephen Wilkins and Katariina Juusola, 'The benefits and drawbacks of transnational higher education: Myths and realities', *Australian Universities' Review*, is. 2 (2018): 68-76; Stephen Wilkins, 'Ethical issues in transnational higher education: The case of international branch campuses', *Studies in Higher Education*, v. 42, is. 8 (2017): 1385-1400; Jane Knight, 'Internationalisation brings important benefits as well as risks', *International Higher Education*, is. 46 (2007): 8-10.

³⁰ Jason E. Lane, 'Importing private higher education: International branch campuses', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 13, is. 4 (2011): 367-381.

³¹ Stephen Wilkins, 'Establishing international branch campuses: A framework for assessing opportunities and risks', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, v. 38, is. 2 (2016): 167-182; Nigel M. Healey, 'Transnational Education: Good Practice – Connecting the Dots', *UL Global Seminar*, is. 13 (April 2021).

³² Human Rights Watch, 'Turkmenistan: 18 Men Tortured, Sentenced in Unfair Trial', 9 June 2017, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/09/turkmenistan-18-men-tortured-sentenced-unfair-trial>; N. Ashdown, *Turkmenistan Cracking Down on Gülen Followers*, Eurasianet, 8 December 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-cracking-down-gulen-followers>; Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, 'Turkmenistan: Turkish Schools Closed Amid Concerns of Spread of Nurchilar Movement', *EurasiaNet.org*, last modified 22 August 2011, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-turkish-schools-closed-amid-concerns-of-spread-of-nurchilar-movement>.

Recommendations

- While simply giving into the demands of TNHEI providers can be problematic in its own right, Central Asian governments nevertheless should carefully weigh their need to develop their respective HE systems with actively welcoming TNHEIs. In other words, avoiding isolationism is recommended, but at the same time Central Asian governments establish regulatory regimes that are neither onerous to the point of interference, nor lax to the point of irrelevancy.
- TNHEIs spreading religious radicalism and/or engaging in fraudulent activities pose a serious threat to the integrity of Central Asian HE systems. Consequently, it is recommended that regional governments impose stricter quality assurance measures to ensure that proper curricula are being used and legitimate credentials are being granted by TNHEIs (as well as domestic HEs), while at the same time being sensitive to the slippery slope of censorship. For all their imperfections, university rankings may serve as benchmarks for assessing legitimacy.³³
- With specific respect to Tajikistan, because this country stands to develop its human capital and acquire technology and skills, it is recommended that the government facilitate opening not only Russian TNHEIs, but also campuses of other world-class universities from other nations. This is because TNHEIs can be used as networking facilitators and ‘good practice’ cases, thereby improving not only Tajikistan’s domestic HE system, but also Tajikistan’s integration with the wider world.
- Likewise, with specific respect to Uzbekistan, this country currently finds itself in the middle of higher education reforms and it may soon be approaching an inflection point. To prevent ‘brain drain’, the government needs to improve post-graduation working conditions. At the same time, through the accumulation of multiple world-class TNHEIs, Uzbekistan has the potential of becoming a Central Asian HE hub. Toward that end, it is recommended that the government ensure its HEIs provide enough vacant places for both domestic and international applicants, as well as to provide sufficient facilities to host international students and personnel.
- With all this being said, Central Asian host countries should not also be overliant on THEIs to drive domestic HEI reform. The recruitment capacity of TNHEIs is low and the majority of students enrol in local HEIs.³⁴ Governments should implement reforms that opportunise the presence of TNHEIs to spur on competitiveness of domestic HEIs.

³³ Michelle Stack, (Ed.), *Global university rankings and the politics of knowledge*, (University of Toronto Press 2021).

³⁴ Dilnoza Ubaydullaeva, “‘Franchise’ Branch Campuses in Uzbekistan: The Internationalisation of Higher Education as a Solution?” *Central Asian Affairs*, v.7, is. 2 (2020): 152-174.

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