

Transnational Higher Education—The Case of Kazakhstan



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1 Introduction

The demise of the Soviet system and ideology toppled the Soviet—de facto Russian—monopoly in higher education. The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan had to remodel their national systems of higher education to adapt to new socioeconomic circumstances (Smolentseva et al. 2018). While all five states have struggled with the Soviet path dependency and enduring legacies (Azimbayeva 2017), they managed step by step to reform their higher education systems. This was not a linear process, but internationalization has become a key factor in the reform efforts and continues to be one of the major policy priorities. The five states at least partially adopted the European Bologna Process, launched and expanded academic and student mobility programs, globalized education by inviting international universities to set up their branches, and introduced new disciplines, such as marketing and business management. In Central Asia, this was a state-driven process with national leaders aiming to obtain modern technologies and improve human resources to ease the post-socialist transition (Varpahovskis and Kuteleva forthcoming).

As scholars of transnational education and soft power point out, inviting foreign institutions to establish a presence in the country can have an impact on the local culture and values (e.g., Altbach and Peterson 2015; Bertelsen 2012; Wojciuk 2018; Knight and de Wit 2018). The transformation of Central Asian education systems

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through opening up to foreign institutions is intriguing, as in addition to technological and market-oriented specializations, these institutions have introduced value-oriented subjects and, in particular, human rights education. The scholarship exploring the role and impact of Transnational Higher Education Institutions (THEIs) on human rights education is scarce and fragmented (e.g., Steiner 2002; Ó'Cuinn and Skogly 2016; Miller-Idriss and Hanauer 2011), whereas studies focused on the Central Asian republics as receivers of international human rights education via THEIs are almost absent. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the role of THEIs in Central Asia based on the case of Kazakhstan. The following sections discuss the conceptual and methodological framework of this study, present the key results, and highlight avenues for future research.

2 Transnational Higher Education Institutions: Global Phenomenon and Regional Practice

In the context of globalization, higher education is no longer limited to national societies but transcends borders. Despite being intuitively obvious, there are competing interpretations of the concept of “transnationality” in higher education. Transnational Higher Education Institutions (THEI) have different ownership structures, objectives, strategies, and types of students. Importantly, the legal status of THEIs varies from country to country as well, and while some states welcome THEIs and offer them a lot of freedom, others strictly monitor whether THEIs conform with national regulations and restrict curricula development in particular study fields.

In this study we adopt the definition of THEIs offered by Varpahovskis (2021), which captures the notion of “transnationality” in higher education based on its institutional and pedagogical features. As such, we classify a HEI as transnational if its ownership and/or management is designed and controlled by citizens and/or organizations from a foreign country. The pedagogical features include using a foreign language or languages as the medium of instruction, adopting foreign teaching materials and course designs, and employing a distinctive teaching philosophy. Transnational higher education institutions not only address the labor market needs of host countries and contribute to local internationalization of the education agenda, but they also promote intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural understanding.

Since independence, the five Central Asia states have made consistent efforts to modernize and reform their education systems in alignment with the broader social, economic, and political transformations. In the realm of higher education, internationalization has become one of the key priorities. Today, Central Asia hosts a total of 65 THEIs (see Table 1). Universities from Russia, Turkey, Germany, the US, the UK, and other countries have established branches in Central Asia. Not all Central Asian THEIs are linked to a parent institution abroad, however. The OSCE Academy in Kyrgyzstan and the University of Central Asia (UCA), with its branches in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are cases in point. The obvious outliers are Turkmenistan

Table 1 Total number of THEIs in Central Asia, as of 2021

Host country	Total number of THEIs in host country
Kazakhstan	14
Kyrgyzstan	19
Tajikistan	4
Turkmenistan	0
Uzbekistan	28

Source Compiled and updated by authors based on a policy brief by Varpahovskis (2021)

and Tajikistan. The two THEIs that operated in Turkmenistan—a branch of the Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas (2008–2012) and the International Turkmen-Turkish University (1994–2016)—abruptly lost their education licenses and were closed down by the decree of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Tajikistan made an exception for branches of four Russian HEIs and UCA’s Khorgos Campus (opened in 2017, but at risk of losing its education license in 2022). In contrast, Kyrgyzstan has rather liberal regulations for accrediting, registering, and licensing new HEIs, including transnational ones. The governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan support the growth of transnational education but tightly regulate and control its providers. For instance, Kazakhstan revoked the license of THEIs that included religious courses in their curricula (see Vilkovski 2011 on the Kazakh-Kuwaiti University) or failed to satisfy local academic quality assurance requirements (e.g., the Kazakhstani-Russian University).

3 International Human Rights Education: A Conceptual Frame

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948) is the first formal international instrument to describe education as a means of disseminating human rights (Paragraph 2, Article 26). Hence, as early as 1948, the principle of human rights education was a means of promoting these rights, and education became an integral part of human rights discourse. The UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training defines human rights education as encompassing all “educational, training, information, awareness-raising and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviors, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights” (UN General Assembly 2011, p. 3). Yet, a single definition of human rights education cannot reflect the diversity of ways in which people around the world understand and practice their rights and respect for the rights of others, and the importance they attach to them (Dufourt 2021). In this

sense, the key to the definition of human rights education lies in its purpose because, regardless of methodology or context, it always aims at developing a culture of human rights (Dufourt 2021). The essential components of such a culture therefore inform the general objectives of human rights education. This lack of conceptual clarity opens the door to a problematic all-inclusiveness and on the one hand, it makes it possible to add educational activities and programs aimed at promoting the equal dignity of human beings to the curricula of various disciplines, ranging from political science and sociology to mining engineering and computer science.

4 THEIs in Kazakhstan: A Case Study

4.1 Methodology

Kazakhstan, with its population of more than 18 million, has 122 HEIs as of the 2021-2022 academic year (Kapital.kz 2022). Among them are 14 THEIs: six are affiliated with Russia, three with the US, two with Turkey, and the UK, Germany, and Egypt each have a single representation. The UCA campus in Tekeli, several Russian HEIs, and US-affiliated branch campuses were not included in our calculations since their status could not be confirmed for the 2021–2022 academic year. We based our selection of THEIs on the study by Varpahovskis (2021) (see Table 2).

Very few of the THEIs located in Kazakhstan have a strong humanities and social sciences orientation. Instead, most of them are either Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) only or offer mixed curricula with an explicit leaning toward STEM subjects. We examine the publicly available curricula of each THEI currently operating in Kazakhstan to determine whether they offer human rights-related courses and programs. The degree of international human rights teaching is presented in our research summary in Table 2. We marked those programs that at least mention international human rights in their curricula with “yes”, even when only a fraction of a course touches upon human rights. The “Details” column in Table 2 indicates the extent to which human rights are taught as part of human rights education endeavors in the selected THEI.

4.2 Human Rights Education and Country Affiliation of THEIs

Descriptive analysis of Kazakhstan-based HEIs showed that 14 institutions represent six countries: Russia, the US, Turkey, the UK, Germany, and Egypt. This

Table 2 Profiles and summary of curriculum analysis of THEIs studied

THEI name	THEI affiliation country	Curricula orientation	Human rights education in the curriculum	Details/notes	International ranking position
Chelyabinsk State University	Russia	Mixed	Yes	Required introduction to human rights courses for students majoring in International Law and an upper-level elective course International Cooperation in Human Rights and Freedom Protection	3,190 (parent university)
Lomonosov Moscow State University	Russia	Mixed	No	–	20,511
St. Petersburg Humanitarian University of Trade Unions	Russia	Mixed	No	–	22,151
Kazakh-Russian Medical University	Russia	STEM	No	–	20,399
Synergy University	Russia	Non-STEM	No	–	9,186 (parent university)
“Voskhod” branch of the Moscow Aviation Institute	Russia	Mixed	No	–	2,050 (parent university)
Ahmet Yesevi University	Turkey	Mixed	No	–	4,928
Suleyman Demirel University	Turkey	Mixed	Yes	A required Human Rights course for undergraduate students majoring in Law and Social Sciences	5,103

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

THEI name	THEI affiliation country	Curricula orientation	Human rights education in the curriculum	Details/notes	International ranking position
Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP)	US	Humanities and social sciences	Yes	Specialized elective course, 5 ECTS credits. Bachelor of Law (LLB)	7,811
Kazakh American University	US	Mixed	Yes	An undergraduate elective course International Mechanisms for Protecting Human Rights and Freedom No specialized graduate courses Some international studies and political science courses briefly mention human rights (e.g., Introduction to International Relations)	Not listed
Kazakh American Free University	US	Humanities and social sciences	Yes	International human rights law is briefly mentioned in the description of Theory of State and Law course	19,109
Kazakh-British Technical University (KB TU)	UK	STEM mixed with business administration	No	–	6,365
Kazakh-German University	Germany	Mixed	No	–	16,148
Nur-Mubarak University of Islamic Culture	Egypt	Humanities and religion	No	–	30,161

Note For THEIs that are not listed in Webometrics' university rankings, we include the parent university's ranking results

finding indicates that Kazakhstan does not hesitate to import higher education services and knowledge as well as certain cultural features that accompany higher education from multiple supplying countries, some of which may even belong to opposing political camps (e.g., the US vs. Russia). It corresponds to the idea promoted by the former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev that modern Kazakhstani development should incorporate the best achievements and knowledge from various cultures (e.g., Western, Russian, Turkic, Islamic) (Varpahovskis and Kuteleva forthcoming).

While THEIs in Kazakhstan do not offer specialized degrees in international human rights law, the range of human rights education varies from a brief mention as a topic of one of the lectures to a full-scale course. Alternatively topics on human rights are incorporated and included in courses offered at the Kazakh American Free University (e.g., as a component of the course on Issues of Theory of State and Law) and Suleyman Demirel University (e.g., as a component of the International Relations undergraduate program).

The intuitive assumption that THEIs affiliated with countries designated as the “West” (e.g., the US, the UK, and Germany) provide a greater variety of human rights training than their “non-Western” counterparts is only partially correct. Some of “Western” THEIs (e.g., KBTU) have a narrow focus on STEM and do not offer any human rights courses as part of their curricula. Among “Western” HEIs, only THEIs affiliated with the US include human rights education in the form of special topic courses. Curiously, branches of HEIs affiliated with states classified as authoritarian in the Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit Limited 2021) do provide general human rights courses. As such, students majoring in Criminal Law at the Chelyabinsk State University are required to take a course on International Cooperation in Humans Rights and Freedom Protection. Even the most basic analysis of the syllabus reveals that “Western” and “non-Western” THEIs opt for contrasting approaches to human rights education¹ and reporting violations.² Thus, international human rights education is not monopolized by THEIs representing democratic regimes.

Even though international university rankings are quite subjective (Stack 2021), the rather low international ranking of the majority of THEIs raises questions about the quality of education they offer (see Table 2). Some THEIs rank high by subject (e.g., Ahmet Yesevi University was ranked 201st of 250 in modern languages by the QS World University Rankings in 2022 (QS 2022)). However, these are not subjects that include human rights education.

Transnational higher education institutions in Kazakhstan currently do not offer courses or programs that examine how international human rights norms and standards are localized at national and regional levels. Similarly, THEIs do not offer specialized courses that examine the particularities of human rights implementation

¹ Course specification for Jurisprudence, criminal law specialization, 27 August 2020, Chelyabinsk State University, available at: [https://csukz.ru/sveden/files/B1.V.1.09_RPD\(8\).pdf](https://csukz.ru/sveden/files/B1.V.1.09_RPD(8).pdf), p. 3.

² LAW4504 International Human Rights Law, 2019-2020, KIMEP, available at: <https://www2.kimep.kz/anon/StAffairs/SyllabusPDF?code=LAW4504>.

with a focus on gender equality and the rights of ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities. Human rights are not taught outside programs on law and international relations. This means that human rights education in THEIs emphasizes the legal dimensions of human rights, ignoring learning by skills and learning by service approaches. Simply put, only potential lawyers and those aspiring for careers in international communications are taught about human rights.

The inclusion of general human rights courses in highly formalized curricula on law and international relations contributes to the spread of the approach that André Keet (2007, 2017) and other critical scholars of human rights (Dufourt 2021) describe as “declarationist”. These courses explore human rights through the prism of universal norms and standards and the role of international institutions in promoting them. Such framing of human rights education is less likely to create opportunities for adapting course content to the social and cultural realities of the lives of the local students and are eventually likely to contribute to marginalizing students’ experiences and their understanding of the world. In other words, students have limited opportunities to make meaningful connections between the context in which they are living and human rights, not as an international theory but as a potential reality for them. Moreover, although Kazakhstan strongly prefers institutions oriented toward STEM when importing THEIs (Varpahovskis and Kuteleva forthcoming), the focus on developing human rights culture implies that there is a place for human rights education even in STEM curricula. For example, human rights education is relevant for mining engineering students, since resource exploration activities often interfere with the lives of local populations.

Importantly, syllabuses of basic political science courses—an introduction to politics or political institutions—do not explicitly include human rights topics. As a result, citizenship and human rights are separated in the curricula, almost torn apart as if the rights of citizens were not based on human rights. This effectively ignores Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which establishes citizenship as a civil and political right of every human being: “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives”.

Overall, the number of disciplines that include human rights courses is limited (e.g., to an elective course or a few lectures in the International Relations or International Law syllabuses), which indicates that human rights education is overlooked and marginalized in the curricula of THEIs. Importantly, human rights education offered by THEIs in Kazakhstan is not rooted in the local contexts and thus cannot pursue its primary pedagogical objective, namely emancipating students and developing their power to act.

5 Human Rights Education in THEIs: Opportunities and Challenges

As the analysis of Kazakhstan's THEI policy (Varpahovskis and Kuteleva forthcoming) demonstrates, the Kazakh state perceives THEIs as media of knowledge and skills transfer that have the potential to advance national economic development. The state promotes transnational STEM training for various industrial sectors, as well as business administration and soft skills training (e.g., marketing) that would help Kazakhstan to integrate into the global market. To put it mildly, human rights education is not a priority for the state.

Human rights education has never been a part of the brand of Russia's or Turkey's universities, with both countries struggling domestically with promoting human rights literacy and developing respect for human rights among the citizens (Çayır and Bağlı 2011, Gerber 2017, Sen and Starkey 2017). Western THEIs in Kazakhstan seem to prioritize the steady streams of revenue, ignoring the local human rights challenges. Given that the public discussion of HEIs operating overseas is limited (if it exists at all), the significance of their human rights obligations is often overlooked. As Gearóid Ó Cuinn (2016) accurately puts it, "often there appears to be a misplaced faith that the campus gate insulates a branch campus from the ills of a local setting".³ In sum, there are no stakeholders—internal or external—interested in turning THEIs into providers of human rights education in Kazakhstan.

Besides expanding the scope of research to include other Central Asian countries when investigating the presence of human rights education in the curricula of THEIs, scholars might attempt to test the assumption that international human rights education is a specific feature of US-affiliated THEIs in Central Asia. As of 2021, there are four US-affiliated THEIs operating in the region: three in Kyrgyzstan and one in Uzbekistan (Varpahovskis 2021). Moreover, Arizona University has recently announced plans to open a branch in Kazakhstan (Bulatkulova 2022). Further, a comparative study of approaches to human rights education of THEIs affiliated with the US and Western European states would provide a more nuanced and balanced understanding of this field in Central Asia. Likewise, it is worth looking into the content of human rights education more rigorously to explore differences in interpretation and teaching models in THEIs representing "Western" and "non-Western" institutions.

Finally, even though human rights education is definitely an important subject of research and teaching, scholars and higher education experts should question whether the regional job market requires specialists in this field. Availability of professional opportunities may determine the progress of human rights education in the Central Asian region. Thus careful investigation into the links between human rights education and opportunities to act and change through human rights empowerment and implementation is needed. Otherwise, extensive teaching of international human

³ For a more detailed discussion, see Ó Cuinn, G and Skogly, S (2016). Understanding human rights obligations of states engaged in public activity overseas: the case of transnational education. *The International Journal of Human Rights* 20(6): 761–784.

rights-related subjects that do not address demand on the domestic job market could be seen as interference in internal affairs and an attempt at indoctrination. Further, scholars and educators should inquire about awareness of and interest in human rights among prospective students. These factors may also influence THEIs' intention to offer students human rights education (Wittke and Rabinovych 2022; Wittke 2022).

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