

How Do International Organizations Impact The Kazakhstani Higher Education System?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of international organizations on Kazakhstani higher education. After Kazakhstan gained independence from the Soviet Union, one of the main challenges was the transformation of Kazakhstani universities from their structure and knowledge based on Soviet ideology to European educational standards. Consequently, Kazakhstan began actively cooperating with international organizations such as the Bologna Process, OECD, and UNESCO. However, the influence of each organization was analyzed separately. Therefore, the aim of this study is to provide an overall balanced assessment of the influence of international organizations on higher education in Kazakhstan and to describe the reactions of faculties to the higher education's internationalization under the influence of global organizations. This study uses a qualitative approach based on previous research and reports on this topic. Literature reviews were used to identify the main challenges of adaptation, the changes that occurred under the initiatives of international organizations, and a comparison was made between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, both post-Soviet countries and participants in the Bologna Process.

INTRODUCTION

“Education is the most important weapon that individuals and the society can use to fight different forms of vulnerabilities.” Niyi Jacob Ogunode[1].

As stated in the quote, realizing the importance of education in the twenty-first century can solve existing problems such as poverty, it is therefore important to pay great attention to its development and invest in it in order to promote "quality education" as stated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) [2]. Nowadays, the trend of globalization affects all spheres of life including the educational environment as it is perceived on a global scale as a powerful tool for implementing and supporting social transformations in society, as well as for determining its future [1]. Therefore, in many countries like United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Poland there are international organizations (IOs) working in the educational sphere of the state. In the early 1960s, the introduction and use of foreign assistance in education as a tool for development began, despite the fact that its effectiveness was challenged due to some problems. Then, during the 1980s, it began to be used in various education systems such as secondary education and higher education system[3]. Since the 1990s, international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

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have been actively involved in the educational sphere of countries such as UK [4]. Such activity coincided with the time of gaining independence of Kazakhstan, which became an excellent opportunity for a developing country, which is moving from the Soviet totalitarian system and planned economy to democracy and market economy, to implement international standards of education. By participating in IO events, local educational organizations are increasingly interacting with colleagues from other areas [5]. However, they work most likely as advisers than implementers of policy regarding education [6]. The first step towards cooperation of IOs began in 1992 when Kazakhstan became part of the UN, which led to the accession of UNESCO in the same year. It is equally important to note that Kazakhstan, striving for the European system of education, became a member of the European Higher Education Area in 2010. This community was created for the integration between the countries of the European Union (EU) and countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Thus, Kazakhstan became the 47th participant in the Bologna Process, generating hopes of gaining international recognition. The Bologna process is “the main voluntary process concerning Higher Education at European level”, which was implemented in 49 countries including Kazakhstan[7].

In 2017, Kazakhstan became a full member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This organization challenges the structure and range of education policies and programs around the world through tests such as The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)[8]. Joining this organization shows Kazakhstan's openness to criticism and feedback to improve its higher education system. Also in Kazakhstan the Erasmus+ program has been operating since 2005, the purpose of which is to support through lifelong learning the educational, professional and personal development of people in the field of education, training, youth and sports in Europe and beyond, and the Tempus program since 1995, which cooperates with domestic universities such as the Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi , Eurasian National University named after L.N. Gumilyov, Kazakh National Technical University named after K.I. Satpaev [9]. These programs were implemented within the framework of the Bologna process and universities of Kazakhstan received a unique opportunity to cooperate with European universities. For example, the Erasmus+ ENINEDU Project (2017–2020) aimed to unite universities and businesses in accordance with the Bologna standards. As part of this consortium, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University worked together with universities in France, Greece, Spain, and Hungary [10]. The project achieved important results: Entrepreneurship Centers, which is a center for supporting students through the structural formulation of a new ecosystem of entrepreneurial education and ensuring their maximum employment implemented through the above-mentioned Erasmus+ ENINEDU project and an effective mechanism for cooperation between higher education institutions and the business sector, were opened in each of the partner universities, a specialized online portal was created, and two new educational courses were developed: “E-Commerce” and “Financial Management and Big Data”, which complies with the Bologna Process standards and provides courses for professional development in the fields of business and medicine in integration between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and the Erasmus program [11,12]. Furthermore, Nazarbayev University had an agreement with UNESCO and UNDP in 2023, which intended to strengthen ties in supporting gender equality and increasing opportunities for women and, through the integration of the library, to exchange global knowledge [13]. Despite these important actions in the educational sphere of the country, the question arises about what impact they have on higher education. Furthermore, there is a large gap in the literature review of all

actions by international organizations on this environment, which I will fill thanks to the analysis of previous studies.

In my work, I rely on the research of such authors as Maudarbekova and Kashkinbayeva (2014), Sarmurzin et.al.(2021), Kuzhabekova(2020) and other works to demonstrate the complexities and characteristics of international interactions of Kazakhstani universities [14,8,15]. Moreover, I rely on the works of researchers e.g. Azhibayeva et al. (2024), who analyze the reactions of teachers and changes in the institutional structure of universities[16]. Secondary sources for this study were selected using the CRAAP test to verify the reliability and relevance of the sources.

1. Currency: Since the study included historical context, no specific publication year limit was considered. However, newer studies from 2020 onward were prioritized to ensure the relevance and consistency of the analyzed data with current trends in the higher education system.

2. Relevance: The selection focused on studies that addressed the topics of internationalization, the Bologna Process and other international organizations, reforms in higher education in Kazakhstan, and the challenges of adaptation. This narrow range of studies provided a more accurate and information-rich synthesis on the topic.

3. Authority: The authors of the sources were qualified professors from higher education institutions, official websites of universities and international programs, and government agencies. This criterion was established to prevent information fraud and falsification and to ensure the reliability of the information.

4. Accuracy: Each secondary source was screened for the accuracy of the information provided, the presence of supporting references, empirical data, and the transparency of the methodology used. Preference in this step was given to sources containing verifiable data and consistent with the findings of other authoritative publications.

5. Purpose: Given the research question, to identify unbiased conclusions about the influence of international organizations. This step paid particular attention to sources that did not reveal the authors' personal opinions. Furthermore, a key goal of selecting secondary sources was to ensure sufficient information on the role of international organizations in Kazakhstan's higher education system, necessary for a conceptual analysis of this topic. These sources provide a theoretical and practical basis for studying the impact of international organizations.

This study will examine specific examples of cooperation, conduct a literature review, and identify problems and prospects for integration. Therefore, reading all the data from the research, the question arises at the end of how international organizations influence Kazakhstan's higher education, and whether the influence is positive or negative. Consequently, my research question will interrogate: «How do international organizations impact the Kazakhstani higher education system ?»

The main purpose is to provide a balanced assessment of the influence of international actors on higher education in Kazakhstan, considering not only reforms but also the reactions of teachers and universities to them.

This research applies to qualitative literature review for several reasons. Firstly, a qualitative research approach is permitted to examine the issue more thoroughly from a variety of angles, perspectives and viewpoints ‘by integrating findings and perspectives from many empirical findings’[17]. Secondly, a literature review is an appropriate method for qualitatively synthesizing the experience of combining Kazakhstani and international educational systems. This approach allowed for a critical analysis of the effectiveness of international organizations. Furthermore, the use of this research approach ensured the systematization and construction of a historical chronology of key stages in the development of higher education in Kazakhstan under the influence of international organizations[18].

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACED IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN?

Internationalization of higher education is the process of introducing an international, intercultural or global dimension into the goals, functions and provision of post-secondary education[19]. Every year, this process begins to be implemented in research projects, exchange programs and other specializations of universities for the purpose of wide knowledge exchange[20]. This trend has affected many Kazakhstani universities such as Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi, making internationalization a key tool for modernizing the higher education system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has been actively using international practices and partnerships to reform its educational system, including cooperation with international organizations, with a particular focus on the development of academic mobility and participation in global scientific networks. The implementation of these practices can be divided into 3 stages:

1. Higher education institutions that adapt a foreign model of education, for example, the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP) is the first university in Central Asia to switch to the American education system.
2. Universities that are created thanks to a corporation between two countries. A striking example is the International Kazakh-Turkish University, which is the result of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan.
3. The internationalization of Nazarbayev University which the author assessed as a unique initiative in higher education, opening doors to new partnerships with other countries, including the Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan.

These universities use the modernization process in their own way, combining them with the traditional method like directive model of learning. However, since internationalization has a dual nature: on one hand, it can create one environment for international knowledge exchange, thereby providing broad opportunities for growth; on the other hand, it requires deep structural and cultural transformations, in which it is impossible not to consider regional characteristics. This is the first barrier in the process of integration with international organizations (IOs). In this case, the success of modernization does not depend entirely on external borrowings, but on the ability to integrate international experience, considering the national context[15]. After all, some universities formally introduce international elements to improve their positions in rankings, without changing their deep academic and organizational

practices, which creates the illusion of the cooperation process itself. For example, Sarmurzin et al. (2021), agreeing with this opinion, shows this problem using the example of the OECD[8]. First of all, OECD is an organization that evaluates knowledge of the country using such tests as PISA for schoolchildren and an international survey for universities. A full-fledged analysis of higher education by OECD was carried out because of the country cooperation program between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the OECD dated 22.01.2015 [21]. After identifying some problems, the organization intended to introduce new financing structures and update innovative technologies at the university. However, these recommendations did not give the desired result because the national context of the country was ignored. The author emphasizes that uniform educational policies for all countries may be ineffective, since each system has its own cultural and social characteristics. Transferring someone else's experience ("policy borrowing") does not guarantee a successful result in another context and may even cause harm. Thus, the first barrier is the national context, that is, effective practice for other countries is not effective for Kazakhstan.

Secondly, most often international organizations are assessed as consultants in the process of transforming organizational and academic work[8]. Therefore, funding for changes depends on the state, which is one of the most important barriers to the implementation of appropriate changes. In order to identify the main barriers, Maudarbekova and Kashkinbayeva (2014) conducted a survey among 126 students and lecturers at Zhezkazgan Baikonurov University and Zhetsu State University named after I. Zhansugurov[14]. As a result, all participants indicated that the main barrier to the modernization of higher education is the lack of finance. (Image 1)

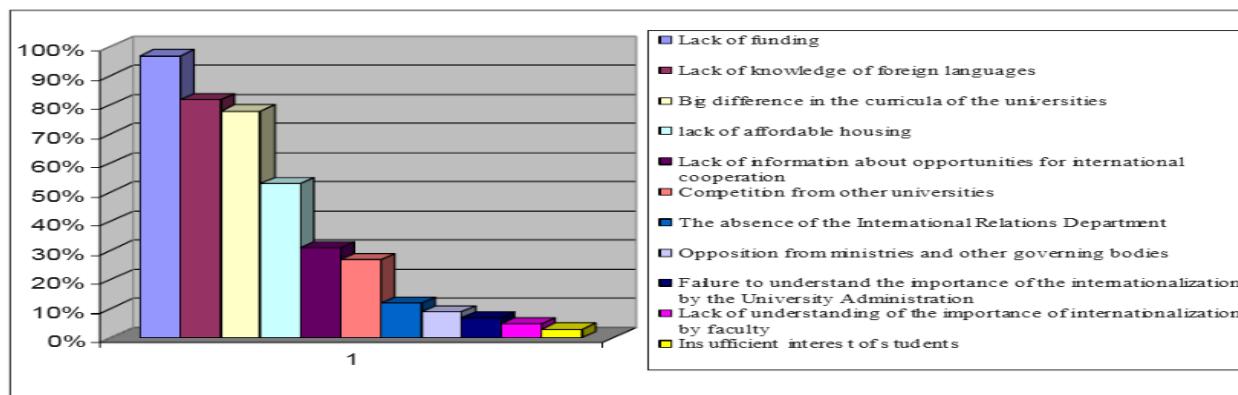


Image 1. The answers, derived from students and lecturers at Zhezkazgan Baikonurov University and Zhetsu State University named after I. Zhansugurov, to the question of "What is the main obstacle to the internationalization of your university?".

This results (Image 1) correspond to the report of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2015), which was made in the framework of cooperation with the OECD, revealed similar challenges[21].

As a result, the organization provided systemic recommendations for solving these problems. One of them is to pay more attention to the development of skills required in 21st century graduates such as using computers and digital technologies. To help students develop skills along with knowledge, it is necessary

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to systematically update equipment and resources for practice and the training program. However, updating technology and laboratory facilities requires a lot of money, which is why some universities remain formally modernized to international standards, but in fact do not have innovative transformations recommended by international organizations.

This problem is also indicated in the study of Yergebekov and Temirbekova (2012) in the implementation of the Bologna Process[22]. The authors note that one of the challenges in funding the implementation of the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan is the need to ensure accessibility and inclusiveness of quality education. At the same time, linking faculty teaching loads to hourly standards (600–700 hours per year) forces universities to consider the number of courses[22]. This practice reduces the importance of each discipline in calculating credits, which is why the use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) becomes a formality and loses its effectiveness. Instead of promoting the quality of education and providing flexibility of choice for students, the system focuses on fulfilling the established volume of academic workload[22]. This indicates the existing financial and administrative restrictions that hinder the full implementation of the principles of the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan's higher education.

WHAT POSITIVE CHANGES AND REFORMS HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED IN KAZAKHSTAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS?

Kazakhstani universities, including Kazakh National Women's Pedagogical University, as mentioned earlier, actively integrate international standards set by international organizations and processes, such as the Bologna Process. The main reason for this is the desire to focus on meeting national and international accreditation criteria to increase their credibility and attractiveness to more students[16]. To meet these criteria, the higher education system of Kazakhstan is undergoing both structural and academic changes. These transformations towards the internationalization of higher education have acquired particular significance for post-Soviet countries due to the need to modernize universities previously based on Soviet ideology and approaches to education. The Bologna Process, which is often characterized as “the largest cooperative education area of the world”, puts forward 10 key reform directions (action lines) for participating countries[23]:

1. Introduction of a degree system that is understandable and comparable at the international level, which facilitates the recognition of qualifications.
2. Transition to a two-tier structure of higher education (Bachelor and Master) as the main model.
3. Creation of a system of academic credits (e.g. ECTS) that takes into account the study load and facilitates academic mobility.
4. Promoting the mobility of students, teachers and researchers within the common educational area.
5. Developing European cooperation in the field of quality assurance in education.
6. Strengthening the European dimension in higher education through joint programmes, modules and teaching materials.
7. Supporting the concept of lifelong learning.

8. Active involvement of universities and students in the process of education reform.
9. Increasing the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for other countries and regions.
10. Developing doctoral programmes and establishing links between the European Education and Research Areas (EHEA and ERA)[22].

Later in the chapter I will explicitly analyze the implementations of several action lines such as 1° and 2°.

In addition, the important fundamental principles of the Bologna Process are:

- Creating conditions for academic mobility of students and university staff between countries to exchange experiences and improve the quality of education.
- Strengthening the independence of universities, allowing them to independently formulate a development strategy and make decisions in the academic and administrative spheres.
- Involving students in university management, participating in decision-making regarding the quality of education and the educational environment.
- Recognizing the important role of the state in managing and supporting higher education as a public good.
- Taking into account the social context when implementing the Bologna Process, which involves ensuring equal and inclusive access to higher education for all segments of the population[22].

All of the above requirements and principles became the starting point for transformations in Kazakhstan's higher education. One of the most important reforms was the introduction in 2010 of a three-tier education model (bachelor's, master's, doctoral), which meets the first two requirements of the Bologna Process. This allowed Kazakhstan to unify its education system with the European one, increase academic mobility and improve the international recognition of diplomas. Furthermore, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan began to confer PhD, associate professor and professor degrees in the country. Thus, the transformation in higher education affected the financial support of students, thereby opening up more opportunities for academic mobility. In 2025, there are 45 universities and 117 programs in Kazakhstan implementing double-degree education, 131 universities conduct the educational process using credit technology(Figure1)[24]. In comparison, Georgia has in the total of 17 universities and 6 of them offer dual degrees which is one percent more than in Kazakhstan[25].

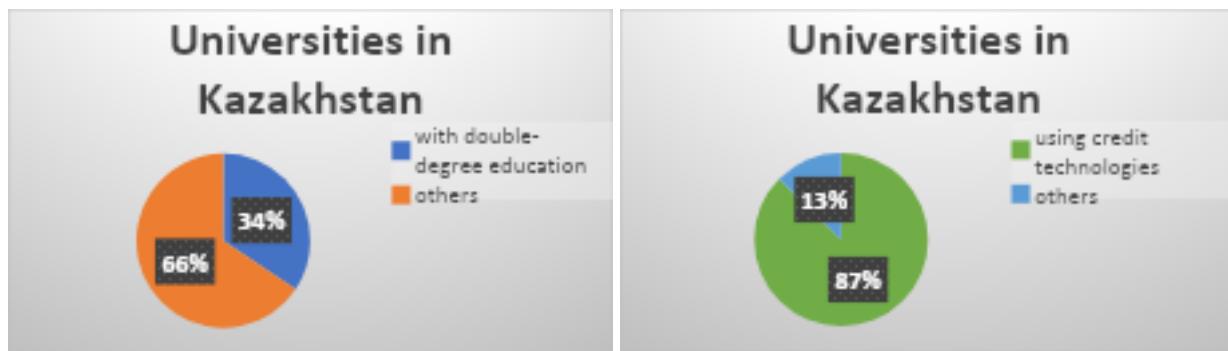


Figure 1. Kazakhstani universities, which have double-degree program and credit technologies.

The next reform in the path of internationalization of higher education according to the requirements of the Bologna Process was the adoption of new rules in the organization of the educational system regarding credit technology training. This is training in which students choose and independently plan the order of "studying disciplines and modules with the accumulation of academic credits." This adaptation was adopted in April 2011 and includes several important points. Firstly, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is an assessment scale, which is an integration of the Kazakh and European systems as a 100-point assessment[26].

Secondly, academic mobility is an opportunity for students to actively participate in various international initiatives, study abroad, and expand their knowledge by exchanging experiences. Academic mobility is the result of successful international cooperation. The reason is transnational courses create an intercultural environment in which students and teachers exchange experiences and gain access to the best educational practices. For example, in comparison with the United States, which has accumulated and studied the richest experience of academic mobility, Kazakhstan is rapidly developing the practicality of academic mobility. Evidence of this is the national policy of the Ministry of Education and Science - "Academic Mobility Strategy for 2012-2020" and its implementation plan, as a result of which by 2020, 20% of students should have participated in mobility programs. Comparatively, in India there is the New Education Policy adopted in 2020, which intended equality in obtaining quality higher education for all, has some similarities with the Kazakh strategy[27]. Both countries are trying to encourage student and faculty exchange, participate in global research initiatives. However, while the Indian government has been planning to implement a flexible modular system and is trying to attract foreign universities to India, Kazakhstan is only trying to implement the adaptation of credit technology and the recognition of ECTS - without revising the entire structure and focusing on sending students abroad[28].

Additionally, the strategy contained three main periods of reforms:

- 2015- national research universities will receive autonomy, which means independence in decision-making
- 2016- autonomy will be granted to other national universities.
- 2018- the autonomy process will cover a wider range of higher education institutions[26].

These dates are indicators of Kazakhstan's desire to get out of the influence of the totalitarian system because in the twentieth century in the Soviet Union, universities such as the Kazakh State University (later changed to the Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi during the years of independence) did not have autonomous action [29].

Thirdly, the modular construction of programs, which is a method of organizing the structure of the curriculum in the form of modules, plays crucial role in the adaptation. In this case, during the implementation of the above 10 directions of the Bologna process, Kazakhstan began to use ECTS credits to assess the labor intensity of each module. Despite the fact that this is a European system, its calculation in Kazakhstan differs significantly from it. While in Europe 1 credit means the entire volume of student work, in Kazakhstan it is most often a formality since in the country 1 credit is equal to 45 hours (bachelor's degree), 60 (master's degree without a dissertation), 75 (master's degree with a dissertation), 105 (PhD). This shows the remains of Soviet influence. Also, the Bologna process requires flexibility and freedom of choice for students, but such adaptation did not affect Kazakhstani universities because students cannot choose either teachers or subjects.

In changing such problems, the role of both university administration and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, as well as teachers is important. They act not only as mentors, but also as equal participants in scientific discourse, helping students master academic standards and develop critical thinking. Using the example of Nazarbayev University, the interaction between students and teachers in the framework of peer review and joint publications forms a sustainable academic environment[15]. In this case, improving the experience of teachers plays an important role in the full implementation of practice in conjunction with internationalization and the national context. Therefore, adaptations to the changes that were introduced by international organizations, especially the Bologna process, certainly affected followers. A striking example was the exchange of experience through a professorial exchange with Switzerland at the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University[30]. This integration allows teachers to integrate global citizenship, sustainable development and digital technologies into their courses, and also causes involvement from teachers.

In addition to this, internationalization does not only happen by sending students abroad, but also important is the adaptation of foreign students in Kazakhstani universities. Diplomatic relations with different universities thanks to the Bologna process or other foreign students can study in Kazakhstani universities, thereby influencing teachers, requiring changes in the content of materials in English and the form of presentation of the material. Moreover, joint projects and double degree programs will prepare students for inter-university coordination. And the implementation of international projects from Erasmus +, UNESCO and the World Bank create an environment in which teachers can actively participate in global projects. However, this does not mean that Kazakhstani teachers always react positively to such changes. After all, many teachers are concerned about the loss of cultural identity, since "Blind adoption of international practices may lead to the loss of the national culture"[15].Furthermore, a survey of 1024 teachers from different universities such as the Eurasian National University showed that most of the cases have a positive attitude due to some reasons such as improving academic quality, expanding research links[31]. Despite this, they mentioned concerns about the "brain drain" and the risk of losing cultural identity, which shows some mistrust of adaptations.

At the moment, there are international programs that allow the integration of not only higher education students but also middle and high school students to develop in research work with different universities around the world. The great example of this is the Lumiere Research Scholar Program, which is an international research program based on mentoring and individual project-based learning models. The program regularly attracts scientists from different countries and with different backgrounds. This multifaceted environment promotes the development of a global outlook, introducing students to different concepts, traditions and research methodologies. It broadens their horizons and prepares them for life in a globalized environment. Since 2022, 139 students from Kazakhstan have completed this program, of which 72 students received full financial aid and became part of the Lumiere Research Foundation[32]. This opportunity allows Kazakhstan to adapt to international standards of education faster and has a positive effect on academic mobility, since through this program, by personal example, I was able to become part of the international environment and contact PhD in Ancient Greek history and Sciences of Education Baptiste Marque at Lettres Sorbonne University Paris France. Thus, Lumiere reflects a shift from the traditional lecture format to digital mentoring, because it requires followers to be a mentor, checking for students.

WHAT FORMS OF INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS HAVE BEEN MOST DEVELOPED IN AZERBAIJAN AND KAZAKHSTAN, AND WHAT ARE THE KEY DIFFERENCES?

The last two decades have seen the beginning of strengthened international cooperation especially for post-Soviet countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan due to their independence[29]. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan was the first state to join the Bologna Process (2010), opening the doors to European standards of higher education in post-Soviet countries, yet other Central Asian countries have not become official participants in this process. However, among other post-Soviet countries, Azerbaijan is actively participating and implementing the European education system[33]. Therefore, to compare the level of internationalization and the influence of international organizations in higher education. Initially, after gaining independence in 1991, the main focus of the Azerbaijani government was on improving the education system and increasing its quality. Since both countries intended to get rid of the Soviet ideology that was firmly entrenched in higher education, they started to implement. After all, "the Soviet HE legacy in the Kazakh SSR included: a system which was fundamentally undergirded by political ideology; isolation from international trends and practices" and in the same way for Azerbaijan "during the Soviet period as shaped by economic planning, the emerging needs of industry and the ideological priorities of the system." [29]. Therefore, the first similarity between these two countries is the common goal which was to adapt to the new economic and political structure and the desire to introduce the western education system. However, historically after independence, the barriers to achieving this goal in higher education are different. On the one hand, Kazakhstan experienced an economic decline of 39% from 1991 to 1996 due to adaptation to a new economic system and the destruction of ties with other countries regarding mineral exports. On the other hand, Azerbaijan experienced an economic crisis, which was revealed from 1991 to 1994 their gross domestic product by about 60%, due to military activities in Karabakh with Armenia (1988-1994) [29].

The second similarity of both countries is the Bologna process. In Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, reforms in the educational sphere are closely linked to foreign reforms. This path in Azerbaijan began in 2001 by becoming part of the Council of Europe, and in 2004 it joined the European Neighborhood Policy. Azerbaijan joined the Bologna Process in 2005 at a conference in Bergen, Norway, which became an impetus for increasing academic mobility and opened many opportunities such as global training for teachers and students[29]. Although Kazakhstan has a three-tier system in higher education in 2010 and began to implement ECTS at the same time, Azerbaijan entered a two-tier system in higher education in 1993, ECTS began to be used only after joining the Bologna Process. According to ECTS in Azerbaijan, students who have completed 240 credits will be able to receive a master's degree, after which they can apply for doctoral studies[33]. However, the problem in Azerbaijan is that the credit system in doctoral studies has not yet been implemented. On the other hand, in Kazakhstan, the problems of the existing doctoral system are that the credit system is applied only formally. After completing a doctoral program and successfully defending a dissertation, a person receives a PhD degree, which is equal to the status of "candidate of science" and not the degree of "doctor of science". And in order to receive «a doctor of science», a citizen of Azerbaijan must defend another dissertation, which does not quite correspond to Western standards, in which there is no separate title of "doctor of science" along with the PhD degree[34]. Thus, in doctoral studies, the change affected only the change in the name - candidate was replaced by PhD, but the system remained practically the same[33].

Another difference between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan is that after joining the Bologna Process, Kazakhstan began to give autonomy to universities, while Azerbaijan is still governed by the Ministry of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This Azerbaijan's system is a certain limitation for universities in making decisions on cooperation with other countries because the country inherited a centralized higher education system from the Soviet Union[34]. In addition to the problem with the degree structure in Azerbaijan, there are problems with the quality of education in higher education institutions. After all, this issue was raised in 2015 at the meeting of ministers, which led to the creation of two important documents such as: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in EHEA and European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programs, which shows the state's desire to improve the university system. However, these implementations did not give the desired result, since the growth of progress in students was slow, showing the need for a complete reform of the educational system [33].

Moreover, a significant difference in student activity is felt. There are no national strategies for supporting academic mobility in Azerbaijan, while as was said earlier, "Strategies for Academic Mobility for 2012-2020" were implemented in Kazakhstan [35]. This difference shows the level of modernization and internationalization, since support for student mobility is not only helping students migrate, but becoming part of internationalization and global trends. Realizing the importance of state support for student mobility, we can understand that there is no deep transformation to the Western education system in Azerbaijan, and adaptation occurs partially[33]. However, this does not mean that there are no international programs for academic mobility in Azerbaijan. After all, Erasmus + supported and strengthened the European integration of universities and contributed to the creation of scientific infrastructure. So, the Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Azerbaijani Universities (PETRA) project, which includes 14 cooperation with Azerbaijan and Europe in order to improve teaching and learning in Azerbaijan[36]. While Kazakhstan continues to actively benefit from Erasmus+

by expanding international mobility, improving academic standards, strengthening cooperation with the European Union and gaining concrete career benefits for students and teachers, in Azerbaijan the program has previously contributed to the expansion of academic opportunities and integration with the EU, but national office's suspension in 2025 significantly limits these achievements [37].

In Kazakhstan, teachers are actively involved in the Web of Bologna network: webinars, seminars and international forums are held where key documents of the European Higher Education Area, internationalization strategies and updates of the National Qualifications Framework are discussed. This directly expands professional horizons, promotes familiarization with best European practices and stimulates the renewal of curricula. Thanks to the reforms and greater autonomy of universities, which are emphasized in the Law on Education, teachers are given the opportunity to develop flexible educational programs, integrate new teaching methods and make greater use of digital opportunities[38]. This creates conditions for improving the quality of the educational process and integrating international experience.

Despite Azerbaijan's official participation in the Bologna Process since 2005, the country's academic environment faces a number of structural and institutional challenges, especially in terms of involving teachers in the processes of modernizing higher education. First of all, there are challenges in communication between the Ministry of Education, universities and the teaching staff[34]. As noted in the national report on the Bologna Process, information on the goals, objectives and mechanisms for implementing reforms is not sufficiently disseminated - both among students and teachers. Most official documents have not been adapted to the Azerbaijani language in an accessible form, and explanatory seminars and trainings are conducted sporadically, without systematic coverage. This limited awareness leads to a formal, declarative fulfillment of the Bologna Process requirements: ECTS credits and a modular structure have been introduced, but without a substantive transformation of approaches to teaching. Teachers do not see a direct connection between the new structures and the improvement of academic quality, which reduces their motivation to engage in reforms. Universities often lack clear internationalisation strategies, and curriculum modernisation initiatives come from above, without the participation of teachers themselves, which limits the implementation of innovative and results-oriented teaching methods[33].

FINDINGS

This chapter presents overview of key findings based on the data collected from previous studies. This study aims to investigate the following research question: How do international organizations impact Kazakhstani higher education. To address this topic, three sub-questions were developed:

- What are the challenges faced in international cooperation in the field of higher education in Kazakhstan?
- What barriers did Kazakhstani universities experience in implementing reforms related to international partnerships?
- What forms of international academic partnerships have been most developed in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and what are the key differences?

The data presented is organized according to the research questions and highlights key findings from the analysis of previously conducted studies.

Section I. What are the challenges faced in international cooperation in the field of higher education in Kazakhstan?

1. ***The first barrier is the regional characteristics of Kazakhstan.*** Despite the great potential for developing international academic cooperation, the insufficient adaptation of international practices to the national context reduces the effectiveness of the reforms being carried out.
2. ***The lack of funding is the second barrier.*** Insufficient government funding complicates the application of international standards, leading to superficial renewal of universities without the actual implementation of the proposed innovations.
3. ***The third challenge is academic workload and the administrative barrier.*** The administrative constraint of hourly assignments of faculty teaching loads reduces the effectiveness of ECTS implementation and restricts the flexibility of the educational process.

Section II. What positive changes and reforms have been implemented in Kazakhstani higher education system under the influence of international organizations?

1. Based on the requirements and principles of Bologna process, ***the introduction of a three-tier educational model*** in 2010 led to the unification of the system with the European one, increased academic mobility and international recognition of diplomas.
2. ***Academic mobility*** provided by international organizations has enabled students and faculty to participate in international programs. To address this opportunity, ***the "Academic Mobility Strategy for 2012–2020"*** was adopted.
3. ***The modular design of programmes and the use of ECTS credits*** since April 2011 have made it possible to assess the workload of study modules and facilitated adaptation to the requirements of the Bologna Process.

Section III. What forms of international academic partnerships have been most developed in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and what are the key differences?

1. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan share similar goals in ***adapting their education systems to the new economic and political conditions*** following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, they differ in the reasons for the barriers to their efforts: ***Kazakhstan***—economic transformation and the loss of foreign economic ties, ***Azerbaijan***—the armed conflicts in Karabakh.
2. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are ***advancing within the Bologna Process***: both countries have ***implemented the ECTS credit system*** and ***the three-cycle education model***, but differ in ***the timing and level of implementation in doctoral studies***. In Azerbaijan, the system has not yet been fully implemented, while in Kazakhstan, it is still a formality.
3. After joining the Bologna Process, ***Kazakhstan granted universities more autonomy***, while ***in Azerbaijan*** the government created effective institutions that continue to ***function within the Ministry***.
4. Despite the lack of a national strategy in Azerbaijan, ***academic mobility is developing*** in both countries, particularly through ***participation in the Erasmus+ programme***.

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5. In both countries, the implementation of university innovations, such as ECTS credits and modular structure, remains *largely formal*. Despite this, in Kazakhstan, *faculty are actively engaged through the Bologna Network*. In Azerbaijan, however, *institutional and communication barriers limit real transformation*.

CONCLUSION

The impact of international organizations on higher education in Kazakhstan may vary depending on how reforms and adaptation to them are going. Therefore, in this study, I examined the impact of international organizations on the higher education system of Kazakhstan, paying special attention to such structures as UNESCO, OECD, Erasmus+ and the Bologna Process. In a positive sense, joining international organizations such as the Bologna Process (2010) led to the use of credit technology, the introduction of a three-tier model of higher education (bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctoral degree) and the autonomy of universities. Furthermore, international organizations helped improve academic mobility for teachers and students and strengthened diplomatic cooperation with countries such as Switzerland. I found that the opportunities introduced through cooperation with international organizations had a significant impact on the modernization of the educational environment of the country, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when there was a need to update the education structure in the context of the transition to a market economy and democratic institutions. However, when adapting to internationalization, higher education institutions faced several challenges. The analysis showed that the effective implementation of international practices directly depends on taking into account the national context. Many international initiatives, despite their value, are not always successfully adapted to the Kazakhstani reality. Some universities resort to the formal implementation of external models (e.g. ECTS) without changing the underlying governance and academic mechanisms. Additionally, the results of faculty surveys show that, despite the predominantly positive perception of the changes, there are concerns about the loss of cultural identity and the increase in administrative workload. Realizing the importance of comparison in order to better understand the importance of an integrated approach to international cooperation, I made a comparative analysis of Kazakhstan with post-Soviet countries, in particular with Azerbaijan. Unlike Kazakhstan, where there is a consistent development of international academic integration mechanisms, in Azerbaijan the implementation of the Bologna principles and Erasmus+ has been faced with institutional difficulties in recent years: lack of university autonomy, weak communication between the ministry and faculty, as well as underfunding of programs. The closure of the Erasmus+ office in Azerbaijan in 2025 was a wake-up call for more sustainable and localized strategies for international cooperation. Based on the experience of these two countries, I can offer a number of recommendations for the further development of the Kazakh higher education system. First, adaptation should take into account the specifics of the national system and mentality, and not simply copy external models. Therefore, it is important to directly take into account local features and integrate international initiatives and the national context. Secondly, increasing the participation of teachers in the administrative approach is of great importance. After all, as Mark Van Doren, who is an American poet, teacher and great influence on literature and education, said, "The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery." [39]. It is important to consider them not only as executors, but as co-authors of reforms. Thirdly, it is necessary to

stimulate participation in international research projects such as Lumiere, which allow building horizontal links between young scientists and universities. One of the key limitations of this study is the limited access to detailed information on the activities of international organizations at individual Kazakh and especially Azerbaijani universities. Many projects implemented within the framework of Erasmus+, the Bologna Process or with the support of UNESCO are not accompanied by public reports or databases, making it difficult to objectively assess their real impact. As well, in both countries, there is a lack of empirical research reflecting the views of students, with most publications focusing on institutional or policy analysis. This gap creates an obstacle to understanding how reforms work in practice for a full assessment of the internationalization process.

Collaboration is important not just because it is a better way to learn... learning to collaborate is part of equipping yourself for effectiveness, problem-solving, innovation and life-long learning in an ever-changing networked economy. - Don Tapscott, Co-Founder & Executive Chairman of the Blockchain Research Institute[40].

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