



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Sustainable
Development
Goals

Almaty Office

CENTRAL ASIA SERIES

Policy Brief

Lifelong Learning in Central Asia

Learning throughout life is crucial to fulfilling human potential and presents the most holistic approach for countries to develop their education systems. This policy brief draws upon findings from a sub-regional study conducted in Central Asian countries¹ in order to explore the challenges, best practices, and policy options when it comes to building lifelong learning systems.

What is lifelong learning?

UNESCO defines lifelong learning as rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages in all life-wide contexts, and through a variety of modalities, which together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands.²

Lifelong Learning		
All ages	All	Modalities
Children	Family	Formal
Young people	School	Non-formal
Adults		Informal
Elderly people		

Lifelong learning therefore requires a sector-wide approach which captures the various levels of the education system from pre-primary to primary and secondary, and then tertiary education pathways such as higher education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). In addition to these education levels in formal contexts, a lifelong learning approach also takes into account non-formal and informal education modalities, as well as the creation of flexible learning pathways between these modalities.

The importance of learning throughout life

Today's fast-paced world faces constant transformation. Technological advancements and changing demands

in the labour market have meant that knowledge and skills can quickly become outdated, requiring education systems to keep up in order to ensure that people of all ages are equipped for decent life and work. Moreover, our knowledge societies also need to go beyond purely academic subjects to enable learners to acquire transversal competencies³ such as critical thinking, empathy, and entrepreneurship, among others. Continuous education is crucial, particularly in terms of higher education, TVET and adult education that can offer flexible pathways to keep learning throughout life. Lifelong learning also ensures the inclusion of different social groups, especially those that are the most vulnerable. For instance, non-formal distance education provides opportunities for those living in rural and isolated areas, or adult education programmes can give a second chance to those that had to drop out of formal education earlier in life, or never had the opportunity to attend school in the first place. A lifelong learning approach to education allows for flexible and continuous learning, and therefore ensures that we can fully realize human potential.



1 The sub-regional study on lifelong learning was conducted in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from 2017 until 2019.

2 UIL. 2013. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning Technical Note.

3 These competencies have been given different names: 21st Century skills, soft skills, transversal competencies etc. For UNESCO's framework please see UNESCO's report on Assessment of Transversal Competencies.

The Global Education Agenda

Lifelong learning stands at the very core of the global education agenda and SDG 4, with a commitment to ensure 'inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all'.⁴ Moreover, the Education 2030 Framework for Action explicitly states the importance of TVET, adult education, and various learning modalities:

TVET and tertiary education, including universities as well as adult learning, education and training, are important elements of lifelong learning. Promoting lifelong learning requires a sector-wide approach that encompasses formal, non-formal and informal learning for people of all ages, and specifically adult learning, education and training opportunities. It is necessary to provide opportunities for equitable access to university for older adults, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups.²

In addition to Education 2030, UNESCO has contributed to normative frameworks and initiatives with regard to lifelong learning. These include:

- **1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education**
- **2015 Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training**
- **2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education**
- **UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities**

UNESCO is committed to promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all through:

- Standard Setting
- Technical Assistance
- Capacity Building
- Knowledge Sharing

Lifelong learning in Central Asia

Central Asian education systems have been successful in ensuring near-universal literacy, including among adults, as well as the universal provision of education at the primary and secondary levels. However, the legacy of the Soviet Union has resulted in a certain inflexibility of education systems in the sub-region, as well as their inability to rapidly adapt to the diverse needs of learners—posing a significant challenge to ensuring lifelong learning.

The transition to a market economy over the last decades led to significant structural transformation and industrial modernization for economic diversification, private sector development and job creation. This puts inevitable pressures on education systems to evolve in

order to effectively prepare learners for the changing demands of the labour market. While Central Asian countries have undergone significant education sector reforms, these have often taken place at specific levels and subsectors of education rather than establishing a holistic lifelong learning approach. Education policies and practices would therefore need to be revisited to develop lifelong learning systems which encourage and recognize learning outcomes in the form of increased knowledge, skills and attitudes attained from both inside and outside the formal education system.

Average structure of the formal education system in Central Asia

Level	Years		
Pre-school	2–3 years		
Primary and Lower Secondary	9 years		
Upper Secondary	2 years	Technical and Vocational	2 years
Bachelor's/ Specialist Degree	4–5 years	Professional Diploma	2–3 years
Master's	1–2 years		
Doctorate degree/Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	2–3 years		

Source: UNESCO Almaty (2019)

The duration of free education influences the likelihood of accessing higher levels of education and can be the cause of unequal opportunities to lifelong learning in adulthood. Evidence from many countries shows that investing as early as possible in high quality basic education for all, particularly in supporting pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, yields higher returns. This is because early cognitive development makes it easier to acquire skills and knowledge later in life and to engage in lifelong learning in adulthood. The key to lifelong learning in Central Asia also lies in expanding the pathways and different forms of access to education. For instance, the recognition of a qualification from non-formal education, or the provision of education in a minority (or other) language.⁵

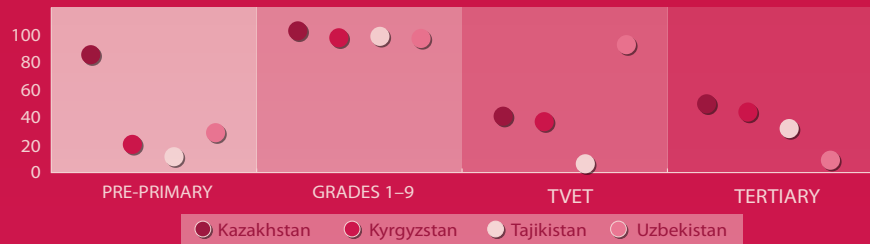
Challenges to creating lifelong learning systems in Central Asia

There are a number of challenges when it comes to implementing a lifelong learning approach to education systems in Central Asian countries. These can be organized in three broad categories: 1) governance, 2) access to education, and 3) quality of education.

4 UNESCO. 2015. *The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*.

5 UNESCO Almaty. 2019. *Lifelong Learning for all in Central Asia by 2030*. (Unpublished)

Enrolment rates vary by education level



Notes: data as of latest available year
Source: UIS Database and UNESCO Almaty (2019)

Governance

Governance and financing are key to supporting and recognizing educational institutions, especially in the case of systems that facilitate non-formal and informal modalities. For instance, there is an absence of national policies, strategies or legal frameworks when it comes to non-formal adult education, as well as a need to strengthen **National Qualifications Frameworks**.

Moreover, the lack of integration between the formal education system and non-formal or informal learning modalities means that any qualifications acquired lack Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA)—making it difficult to transfer these qualifications to pursue education in the formal system. This is further hampered by the lack of data on adult and non-formal education, which are needed to estimate the quality of learning outcomes. Finally, evidence from the sub-regional study shows that the lack of financing for non-formal adult education, TVET, and Higher Education also means that the most vulnerable social groups become excluded as a result.⁵

Access

The exclusion of certain groups remains a key issue with regard to access to education, especially when it comes to those who are the most vulnerable. This includes those who have dropped out of school earlier in life, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and those with disabilities. More broadly, participation in pre-primary education remains uneven, with the Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) ranging from 80 per cent in Kazakhstan to just 12 per cent in Tajikistan. In primary and secondary education (Grades 1–9), however, high enrolment rates can be observed in all four Central Asian countries. While Uzbekistan sees a very high participation rate in TVET at 93 per cent, it also sees only a minority participating in tertiary education at just 9 per cent. Looking more specifically at participation in tertiary education, a gender imbalance can be observed on both sides—while men are disadvantaged in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, women are disadvantaged in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE LIFELONG LEARNING IN CENTRAL ASIA?



Quality

Finally, there remain a number of impeding factors when it comes to the quality of education in Central Asia. Overall there is a lack of relevance between curriculum content and the knowledge and skills that are needed for life and work. The mainstreaming of transversal competencies at all levels and modalities of education would allow learners to be better able to apply their knowledge into practice. Innovative teaching methods and transversal competencies are therefore crucial in order to prepare students for the future. This also links to the skills mismatch between education and the demands of the labour market, especially when it comes to TVET. Careers counselling programmes would play an important role in aiding the transition from school to work in all types of education. Finally, teacher readiness, especially in terms of preparing adult educators, would be crucial for continuing education to be better recognized through certifications and programmes.

Best practices in Central Asia

Despite the various challenges faced with regard to lifelong learning in Central Asian countries, evidence of

good practices can be observed in each of the four countries in terms of governance, access to, and quality of education.

With regard to **governance**, there have been important developments in **Tajikistan** to recognize lifelong learning in legal and policy frameworks. For instance, the Law on Adult Education was declared in 2017, which recognizes non-formal education, while resolutions on vocational guidance (2016–2020) as well as continuing education (2017–2023) were also passed.

Efforts to improve **access** to education can also be identified. For instance, 45 per cent of public schools in **Kazakhstan** offer inclusive education to children with special needs, and there is also a growing number of evening schools that offer supplementary and equivalency education programmes for young adults who had dropped out of school⁵. In **Uzbekistan**, the government introduced several policies that provide financial support to access education. This includes interest-free loans for orphans and students with disabilities, a 50 per cent discount on interest for students from low-income families, as well as tax exemptions for parents on the amount spent on the education of their children under the age of 26 years old. Students are also offered subsidized tickets for public transport to go to school, while students in rural areas are offered accommodation in student dormitories.

Innovations can be found in enhancing the **quality** of education. In **Kyrgyzstan** for instance, a tracer study approach was adopted for TVET in 2016, to be used by TVET providers and national authorities to collect feedback from graduates on their teaching and learning experience, transition to the labour market, and employment status. The country has also made the TVET system more accessible for adult learners by offering shorter courses, and has implemented a career guidance strategy to advise TVET students on the transition process.

Policy options

Based on the findings of the sub-regional study on lifelong learning, a number of policy options were identified in order to support the building of lifelong learning systems in Central Asian countries in each of the three categories observed:

Governance:

- Establish a **national committee** for the promotion of lifelong learning.
- Support **legal frameworks and initiatives** that can integrate formal and non-formal education,

collect statistics, establish NQF and RVA systems, and improve access to education for vulnerable groups.

- Develop **policy seminars on lifelong learning** at both national and sub-regional levels to promote the sharing of best practices and common policy options.



Access:

- Support **non-formal educational institutions** to organize educational, cultural, recreational and environmental activities for the local community.
- Increase the **attractiveness of TVET** and ensure that qualifications are valued and recognized, especially with a view to progressing to education at higher levels.
- Provide **subsidies, incentives and infrastructure** to facilitate access to education for vulnerable groups, such as transport and accommodation, interest-free loans in higher education and accessibility for learners with disabilities.

Quality:

- Mainstream **transversal competencies** in curricula and content at all education levels, modalities and contexts, especially with regard to TVET and non-formal adult education.
- Prioritize **training programmes** for the professionalization of adult educators.
- Provide **career guidance** to ensure learners are equipped with the right skills and knowledge to respond to the needs of the labour market.