



Network of Education Policy Centers

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## Structural Inequalities in Access to Higher Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan

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## Introduction

This Policy Brief reports on the research conducted by the Network of Education Policy Centres (NEPC) in Kazakhstan on the structural disadvantages limiting access to higher education for students of Uzbek and Uyghur ethnic origin. The Policy Brief makes use of the 2008 survey conducted by NEPC in 7 countries of East-Central Europe, the Balkans and Central Asia where ethnic minorities are educated in separate schools.

Kazakhstan is a multiethnic country with a large number of ethnic minorities. Article 14 of the Constitution of Kazakhstan says that all citizens independently of their ethnicity are equal before the law. The Constitution also stipulates equal access to free higher education, on the basis of academic competition and in state-funded higher education institutions. The actual situation on the ground, however, differs significantly from the formal equality stated in the Constitution, with students of Uzbek and Uyghur schools suffering systematically from unequal access to tertiary education - not only due to lower standards of teaching materials and underfunded schools, but also because of the unequal principles on which the access to Unified National Tests is based.

## The situation of Uzbek and Uyghur schools

Kazakhstan maintains state-funded primary and secondary schools teaching in a number of languages, including Kazakh, Russian, German, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Uyghur and Tajik.

According to the Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Uyghurs constitute 1,5 % of the population of Kazakhstan, while Uzbeks (settled mostly in south Kazakhstan) make up 2,8 % of the total population of the country. In 2007, there were 80 851 students studying in the Uzbek language, some of them in the 72 schools that teach only in Uzbek, and others in schools teaching both in Kazakh and in Uzbek (71 schools in total).<sup>1</sup> The so-called 'mixed-language' schools do not usually implement bilingual education programmes: they teach Kazakh students and Uzbek students in separate classes, the curriculum being mostly in one language of instruction. There were 7260 teachers teaching in Uzbek in 2007, and only 706 of them were Uzbek language teachers.

For the students of Uzbek schools (and Uzbek classes of mixed-language schools), difficulties are created by the disparity between current linguistic practices in Uzbekistan (from which a large part of the teaching materials came in the previous years) and in Kazakhstan. While Uzbeks use Latin alphabet since 1994, educational materials from the Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan are written in Cyrillic letters. From 2000, according to a government decree, all textbooks used in Uzbek schools should be written in Cyrillic. Despite some material for Uzbek schools being translated from Kazakh or Russian into Uzbek, there have been problems of delays, poor translations and insufficient amount of teaching materials provided for Uzbek schools.<sup>3</sup> The situation is further aggravated by the relative poverty of the families in the region: South Kazakhstan, where most Uzbek schools in the country are situated, is one of the lowest income areas in Kazakhstan (OECD/ World Bank).

The number of students in general education in the Uyghur language is also significant. There have been 14 schools teaching in Uyghur and 49 mixed-language schools teaching classes in Uyghur in 2007, with altogether 16 377 students studying in the Uyghur language.<sup>2</sup> There were 4002 teachers teaching in Uyghur in 2007, including 226 Uyghur language teachers.

The inadequate supply of teaching aids is a common problem of Uyghur and Uzbek schools.<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to the National Centre of Uyghur Culture, in 2008 there was a shortage of approximately 52 000 textbooks in Uyghur schools. While textbooks for Uyghur schools are sometimes developed specially by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences, the textbooks for Uzbek schools are either developed by scholars from Uzbekistan or translated from Kazakh and Russian.

The greatest problem of teaching aid supply to Uzbek and Uyghur schools may well be the lack of methodological literature for teachers that would reflect the goals and approaches of national curriculum. Teacher's aids orientated towards the Kazakhstan national curriculum are not available in Uzbek and Uyghur languages, nor are dictionaries of terminology. Some educators claim that the difficult translations of special terminology in natural sciences create an extra barrier for students of ethnic minority schools (not only Uzbeks and Uyghurs, but also Tajiks and others) when they have to sit the National Unified Tests in order to gain access to higher education.

The teachers of both Uzbek and Uyghur schools sometimes attempt to compensate this lack of adequate textbooks by using textbooks from other countries. Thus, the survey conducted by NEPC in 2008 shows that in Uyghur schools 49% of teachers sometimes use textbooks published outside Kazakhstan, and in Uzbek schools 51% of teachers do the same.

Another important tendency that the NEPC survey reveals is the lower trust in Kazakhstan national curriculum among teachers of Uyghur and Uzbek schools. 35% of teachers in Uyghur schools and 45% of teachers in Uzbek schools confirmed that they have noticed overt and covert ethnic stereotypes in textbooks and curriculum (in Kazakh

schools the percentage of teachers who have noticed such stereotypes is much lower – 23%). In Uyghur schools, 53% of students have noticed that their history teachers have disagreements with the Kazakhstan national curriculum, and have stressed in class that the role of Uyghurs in history was different from that described in national curriculum.

The perception that history curriculum does not serve the needs of minority groups was reflected in focus group discussions conducted by NEPC in Uyghur schools:

*We don't even study the history of our ethnic group in elective courses, so we have to learn it ourselves* (student, Uygur School, Kazakhstan)

## Access to higher education and National Unified Tests

Since gaining its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan witnessed a rapid growth of the higher education sector. In the years between 1999 and 2005, the number of students almost doubled, but the number of state-funded study places shrank.<sup>5</sup>

Access to higher education for students of secondary schools in Kazakhstan is regulated by the National Unified Tests (NUT) which were introduced in the 2003/4 academic year. According to the OECD and World Bank report on Higher Education in Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Education and Science introduced the Unified National Tests in order to ensure a transparent procedure excluding opportunities of corruption.

For school graduates of previous years, for the graduates of foreign secondary schools and for the students of Uyghur and Uzbek schools, the so-called Complex Test (based on the same principles as the NUT) was introduced. The NUT is only available in Kazakh and Russian, and it consists of three mandatory components – history of Kazakhstan, Kazakh or Russian language test and Maths, as well as one elective component. Only students who have successfully passed the NUT can hope for government-funded study grants. The accessibility of such grants is particularly low in the South Kazakhstan oblast, where most Uzbek schools are situated, and where income levels are among the lowest in Kazakhstan (OECD/ World Bank).

According to the order of the Minister of Education and Science, the students from the Uyghur, Tajik and Uzbek schools can independently decide whether to sit the National Unified Exams (NUE) or not. The low percentage of those who choose to sit the exam (and thus gain access to higher education institutions in Kazakhstan) indicates the difficulties faced by the students of Uzbek and Uyghur schools. Thus, in 2009, out of 984 graduates of the Uyghur schools in the Almaty oblast only 103 declared themselves willing to sit for the NUE, out of which 60 chose to take the exam in the Kazakh language and 43 in the Russian language.<sup>6</sup>

The need to sit National Unified Tests in either Kazakh or Russian (after secondary education predominantly in the Uzbek or Uyghur language) presents a practical barrier for students of Uzbek and Uyghur schools to enter higher education and to gain access to state funding for university studies. This situation constitutes a clear breach of Point 2 of Article 14 of the Constitution of Kazakhstan, which forbids discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and language (it also names other forbidden grounds of discrimination, including social origin). The disproportionate difficulties faced by Uzbek and Uyghur (and Tajik) students sitting the NUT has to be recognized as a case of indirect, but effective discrimination on the basis of language and ethnicity.

## Recommendations

### **I. The Need for Bilingual Education**

Currently, there is no comprehensive national policy in Kazakhstan regarding the acquisition of Kazakh language skills by students of ethnic minority schools. While NUT are only available in Kazakh and Russian, the entire process of primary and secondary education in ethnic minority schools is in the minority language. Thus, the preservation of ethnic identity is given advantage over equity and no effective mechanism to guarantee the access of ethnic minority students to higher education is put in place.

Some efforts to implement bilingual education have taken place in recent years. Thus, according to the Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Kazakhstan oblast commenced some multilingual and bilingual education projects in the Uzbek schools, holding seminars with OSCE representatives.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, such efforts are far from systematic and to date no comprehensive system of bilingual education for students of Uzbek and Uyghur schools is visible in advanced stages of planning in education policy documents.

It is essential for Kazakhstan policy makers to recognize that while the acquisition of ethnic minority languages is important and provisions for it are stipulated in a number of international agreements, lack of adequate provision for achieving full proficiency in Kazakh language is a practical barrier to equal access to higher education and to the labour market, as well as a factor diminishing the chances of minority population to engage in politics and civil society on equal terms with ethnic Kazakhs. Therefore measures must be taken to implement bilingual education programmes in Uzbek and Uyghur schools, to facilitate the full proficiency in Kazakh language for the students of these schools.

### **II. The Need for National Unified Tests in Uzbek and Uyghur Languages**

The current situation with access to the NUT only in Kazakh or Russian is discriminatory due to the fact that Uzbek and Uyghur students are first educated in their own language, and then required to sit the single high-stake examination in another language. Their

performance in this exam is further made difficult by the lack of knowledge of appropriate academic terminology in Kazakh and Russian language.

It is essential to introduce NUT in Uyghur, Uzbek (and Tajik) languages already in spring 2010, and to allow the graduates of previous years to sit the NUT in the language of instruction of their secondary school, even if they previously failed the exam in Kazakh or Russian. Only thus can they be placed on equal footing with students of Kazakh and Russian schools.

The NUTs in Uzbek and Uyghur must be introduced and remain available until some years after the introduction of bilingual education programmes in Uzbek/ Kazakh or Uyghur/ Kazakh in all Uzbek and Uyghur state schools in Kazakhstan. For as long as no such programmes are in place in most schools for ethnic minorities, access to National Unified Tests in their language of secondary education is the only way to ensure educational equity towards these groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Отчет Министерства образования и науки РК за 2007 г.

<sup>3</sup> Minority Rights Group international, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, Kazakhstan: Uzbeks, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749cf9c.html> (accessed on 12 October 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Отчет Министерства образования и науки РК за 2007 г.

<sup>4</sup> Информационное Агентство Fergana.ru, 27.10.2006. (on Uzbek schools); National Centre of Uyghur Culture (on Uyghur schools).

<sup>5</sup> OECD report on Higher Education in Kazakhstan, OECD and World Bank, 2007, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/35/38890135.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Information of the Kazakh Embassy to the UK, [http://www.kazembassy.org.uk/uyghur\\_and\\_russian\\_diasporas\\_in\\_kazakhstan.html](http://www.kazembassy.org.uk/uyghur_and_russian_diasporas_in_kazakhstan.html)

<sup>7</sup> Information of the Kazakh Embassy to the UK, [http://www.kazembassy.org.uk/uyghur\\_and\\_russian\\_diasporas\\_in\\_kazakhstan.html](http://www.kazembassy.org.uk/uyghur_and_russian_diasporas_in_kazakhstan.html)