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# 15 Turkmenistan

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## 15.1 THE NATIONAL AND HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXTS

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### National Context

Turkmenistan, like other post-Soviet republics, has implemented a series of reforms to transform its social and political institutions so that they will be able to accommodate its national agenda. Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan did not abandon the centralized management style but reemphasized the major role of the state in guiding the country's transition from the Soviet model to a new model. Although this centralized approach may have yielded some positive results, such as free water, electricity, subsidized gasoline, and public transportation (Pomfret, 2001; Stronski, 2017) during the first two decades of independence, it also made the economic sectors, including the higher education sector, rigid and unable to react quickly to changes in the market. In addition, the country has focused on reducing foreign influences in the process of social and political transformation, thus increasing the country's degree of isolation from the outside world. In 1995, Turkmenistan gained the status of a permanently neutral state unanimously supported by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The country does not hold a membership with many international organizations, coalitions, and unions, including the World Trade Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Bologna Process.

Turkmenistan is one of the Central Asia countries situated on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. It borders Iran, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. It has an area of 492,200 km<sup>2</sup> (approximately 305,838 mi<sup>2</sup>), 80 percent of which is desert. Despite its large territory, the population of

Turkmenistan is approximately six million people, which is twice that of Moldova but less than a third of Kazakhstan.

Although the process of changing the political system of Turkmenistan from the Soviet-type to democracy started in 1991, it is moving slowly. First, to date, there are three officially registered parties, namely, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (since 1991), the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (since 2012), and the Agrarian Party of Turkmenistan (since 2014). However, only one party (the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan) dominates the political field at all levels of government. Previously, the country had been a single-party state until it adopted a new constitution in 2008 that enabled the formation of multiple political parties. Second, in Turkmenistan, the president still has a high degree of authority and is the main driver of transformations in the country (Clement & Kataeva, 2018). Since independence, that office has been held by two people, Saparmurat Niyazov (1990–2006) and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (2007–present).

Turkmenistan is an upper-middle-income country, with its economic growth mainly driven by hydrocarbon exports (Gyulumyan, 2014). There was a dramatic increase in the country's gross domestic product (GDP) from \$3.2 billion to \$43.5 billion between 1991 and 2014, followed by a fall to about \$35.8 billion in 2015 (World Bank, n.d.-b). In 2015, Turkmenistan experienced an economic crisis caused by the collapse in gas and oil prices. Its export markets include petroleum gas (83 percent of exports), refined petroleum (5.6 percent), pure cotton yarn (2.2 percent), and raw cotton (2.1 percent) (OECD, 2019d). Turkmenistan exports the vast majority of goods to China (83 percent) and Turkey (6 percent). According to OECD (2019d), the country's economy relies mainly on industry (57 percent), while service sector and agriculture account for 28.1 percent and 9.3 percent respectively.

Because of the centralized market philosophy, there has been a slow liberalization process of the economy, making the country's economic system unable to adjust quickly to changing conditions. The government exercises tight administrative control over its key sectors, resulting in the dominance of state-owned monopolies in the economy and hindering the development of private sectors. In turn, that makes the system vulnerable to economic crises. The centrally planned economy and the abundance of hydrocarbon resources (the world's fourth-largest holder of natural gas) helped Turkmenistan more or less address the challenges following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Examples of current economic challenges include a low level of industrialization and transportation and the natural gas dependency on the market of the former Soviet republics (Pomfret, 2001).

The country's centralized approach also slowed down the liberalization process of the education sector. Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan inherited a successful education system in terms of a high level of literacy and primary and secondary enrollments (Brunner & Tillet, 2007). The higher education system had been absent during the pre-Soviet era (Clement & Kataeva, 2018). The country has shaped the education system as a means to promote nation-building and to produce specialists required for the economy. The government implemented a series of radical and disruptive educational reforms (Hofmann, 2018), some of which might be questioned by international standards. Examples of such reforms include the replacement of the Cyrillic-based alphabet with a Latin-based script (in 1993); a decrease in years of schooling in Turkmen-medium schools and years of University education from ten to nine years (in 1999) and five to four years, respectively; the elimination of all postgraduate programs (Hofmann, 2018); and full or partial replacement of courses on history, geography, philosophy, and social studies with courses on *Rukhnama*, a book written by President Niyazov (Clement & Kataeva, 2018). *Rukhnama* comprises the president's collected thoughts on morality, culture, and history. When Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow took office in 2007, the government reversed many of the reforms, including the restoration of post-graduate programs, increasing years of schooling, and years of University education (see Clement & Kataeva, 2018; Merril, 2009).

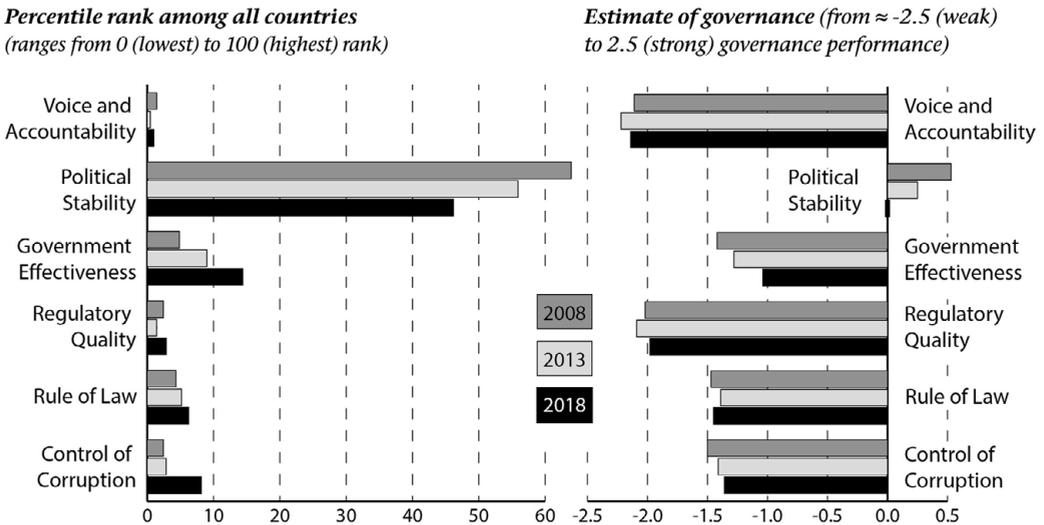
The national governing context according to the World Bank's Governance Indicators project is as follows: The country has high political stability, but its corresponding other areas of governance are low. The voice and accountability indicator is below the second percentile, and none of the other domains are higher than the fifth percentile. The country is tightly controlled centrally and there are few freedoms and incentives for broader participation within government. The missing profile of global competitiveness by the World Economic Forum is telling in and of itself (Figure 15.1).

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### Shape and Structure of Higher Education

In terms of shape and structure, the higher education system of Turkmenistan shares some features with other former Soviet republics, but it also has some peculiar characteristics. The major role of state and political leaders, as well as underinvestment related to country wealth, are the reasons for the slow modernization of the system. In 2012, public expenditures on education accounted for 3 percent of GDP (World Bank, n.d.-b), which is low compared to international indicators.

Figure 15.1 Worldwide governance indicators for Turkmenistan



The country's higher education institutions (HEI) can be divided into the following types: University, academy, institute, and conservatory. Universities offer a wide range of programs, including graduate programs. Academies offer graduate programs in special fields, whereas institutes provide graduate programs in specific professions. Of twenty-four HEIs, there are six universities, one academy, sixteen institutes, and one conservatory (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2017). Clement and Kataeva (2018) propose another classification of institutions in terms of educational activities, majors, and specialties. According to this classification, there is one national flagship University, three large state and specialized universities, two international universities, fifteen small and specialized institutes located in the capital, and three regional specialized institutes. Over the course of the last several years, Turkmenistan has created new institutions such as the International University for Humanities and Development in 2014, Oguzkhan University of Engineering and Technologies in 2016, and the Institute of Public Utilities in 2017 (centralasia.news, 2019).

According to the 2014 UNESCO data (the latest available data; UNESCO, n.d.) there are low college-going rates (7.95 percent of the age group), particularly for women (6.2 percent), with 36 percent lower female enrollment than in 2016 (Babayeva & Bilyalov, 2020). With a sizeable share of

youth in the country, college admission is modest yet growing, with more than 12,000 students admitted in the 2019–2020 academic year (Babayeva & Bilyalov, 2020). The latest trend in the country is the shift from state-funded study to tuition fee education. As such, the number of fee-paying students has increased by 33 percent, while state-funded education has seen a 14 percent decrease (Turkmen HEIs increased enrollment; “Turkmenskije vuzy uvelichili nabor studentov i rasshirili perechen napravlenij podgotovki,” 2020).

Another similarity to other post-Soviet countries is that Turkmenistan is taking steps to transition to a three-cycle degree system. However, the transition started later and slower in Turkmenistan as compared to its former Soviet counterparts, with the change still far from being adopted system wide. Only two universities, the International University for Humanities and Development and the Oguzkhan University of Engineering and Technologies, offer first cycle and second cycle programs that are in accordance with the Bologna structure (European Commission, 2017a). Regarding third cycle programs, they are not fully following the Bologna standards. Since the restoration of the Academy of Science in 2007, many HEIs have launched three-year doctoral programs (*aspirantura*), but the structure of the programs is not aligned with the Bologna requirements. A distinguishing feature of Turkmen postgraduate education is that the Academy of Science continues to play a major role in training doctoral students.

The number of HEIs has increased from nine to twenty-four institutions since independence (Clement & Kataeva, 2018). Although the Law of Turkmenistan on Education adopted in 2009 allows the establishment of private HEIs, all institutions are state-owned. Overall, the modernization process of the higher education system according to international standards has been slow over three decades of independence. One of the possible explanations for this is that the educational reforms of the Niyazov administration hindered the modernization process (Clement & Kataeva, 2018; Merrill, 2009). The educational reforms of the Berdimuhamedov administration such as the Law on Education (in 2009) and a 2007 decree “On improvement of education system in Turkmenistan” resumed the modernization process. For instance, the current legislation allows conducting additional income-generating activities that does not affect their public funding, which depends on the number of students. In addition, the two new universities mentioned above charge tuition fees (EACEA, 2017).

Another peculiarity of the HE system is that all HEIs, except three institutions, are situated in Ashgabat, the country’s capital.

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### Higher Education Governing Context

The governance of the higher education system is centralized, as the state plays the major role in regulating and governing the vast majority of HEIs' activities. Concurrently, HEIs have strictly limited autonomy. First, the institutions have constrained financial autonomy. In the current legislation, they have the right to conduct income-generating activities under the legislation and to use the available extra-budgetary resources for their purposes. For instance, they can use them to provide support for students in need. As for public money, the institutions do not have the control over these funds. Specifically, they do not have the flexibility to reallocate resources to different budget priorities. Also, the institutions do not have authority to set salary schemes. It is the state that approves the schemes for HEIs.

Second, the institutions have limited autonomy to shape academic structure and course content. The state sets state educational standards that HEIs follow and develops guiding documents concerning the organization of education.

Third, the vast majority of HEIs are not entitled to set admission standards and the size of student enrollment. Admission to HE is regulated by a presidential decree, whereas the quotas are set based on the applications from the sectoral ministries and departments.

Lastly, the institutions do not have autonomy to cooperate internationally with other organizations. The Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan (CMT) is responsible for maintaining international relations. Thus, HEIs follow a comprehensive state-control model, with little to no market orientation because the core decision-making unit regarding main activities remains with the State.

In terms of accountability, the governing structure of the HE system can be characterized as a hierarchical governmental-led model. The CMT is the highest governing body that designs and implements state educational policies, strategies and state educational standards, coordinates the activities of HEIs, and sets models of funding, quality assurance, licensing, and accreditation. The Ministry of Education is the highest governing body after the CMT that controls information as well as sets policy. Interestingly, the ministry did not have a website until recently (Berdyeva, 2020; National Information Center, n.d.). It organizes the activities of the institutions, designs normative acts on the organization of professional development programs, elaborates the procedures for student enrollment and the standard statutes for HEIs, and approves a salary-related scheme.

The rector is the highest ranking official who is responsible for the direct management of an institution. The rector's powers and responsibilities are specified by the institution's policies. Rectors are appointed by the government.

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## 15.2 GOVERNING BODY PROFILE

A challenge exists in finding relevant information to describe the university-level structure to governing. The lack of public information and documentation is illustrative of the types of control and oversight provided by the government. The presented governing structure is not exhaustive because of the scarcity of information. The profile focuses on one of the new universities, which might be organized differently from the older universities or different types of HEIs. Other details beyond this instance are not readily available.

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### The Case of the International University for Humanities and Development

The International University for Humanities and Development is perhaps the most modernized and certainly the most internationalized University in the country. Established in 2014 in the country's capital, the University uses the English language as the medium of instruction. The University has six schools and a foundation-year program to help students acquire academic study skills and improve their English language proficiency. Although it is not clear what scholarships exist to study at the University, the yearly announcements on student admission to the University only mention the fee-paying option.<sup>1</sup>

The University has five faculties, enrolling more than 1,600 students. The focus of the University is on humanities and social sciences with a computer science department according to its website (<https://iuhd.edu.tm>). Two recently opened master's programs were designed according to the Bologna requirements.

In terms of its governing body, the University's major decision-making lies with the Academic Council chaired by the University rector. Similar to the standard Soviet structure of Academic Councils (*Uchenyi Sovet*), the IUHD Council includes the rector, vice-rectors, heads of structural units and research centers, and deans.

According to the University's website (<https://iuhd.edu.tm/academic-council>), the Academic Council has the following functions:

<sup>1</sup> <https://turkmenportal.com/catalog/16821>.

- make amendments to the institution’s charter;
- approve the composition and decisions of the Academic Council and changes in the structure of the University;
- consider the development of research work, accept reports on the work accomplished, and also contemplate implementation of research work objectives into production;
- accept reports from the senior and middle leadership teams and make relevant proposals.
- considers issues related to the institution’s main activities and international cooperation.

The Academic Council meetings are held once a month on a certain day of the week and are open to the public.

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### Commentary

Turkmenistan has strongly pursued a centralized approach after independence, from revamping the country’s economy sectors to structuring its higher education sector. To date, this state-driven approach expanded enrollment, and there are considerable internationalization efforts taken by some institutions. Market forces exert minor but growing influence over the system with the declining state-funded admissions and the increase in fee-paying students. However, the country’s centralized approach slowed down the pace of the modernization process in accordance with the international standards. Nevertheless, Bologna preparations are underway, though they may still take substantial time and effort to elevate Turkmenistan higher education following the requirements of this integrative process.

The country’s tight administrative control has also affected the governing structure of HEIs. The governance structure is still very centralized with strong government control over institutional decision-making. The lack of transparency is evidence of this point. The universities tend to follow the traditional Soviet-style governance approach with the central role of the University rector and the Academic Council. The country context seems to be unfavorable to University governance, per the World Bank governance indicators. Low percentile ranks in the governance indicators (rule of law, control of corruption, voice and accountability) appear to directly or indirectly affect universities and their governance and management.