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**Regional Integration in Central Asia: Analyzing Perceptions of Central Asian
students studying in Kazakhstan**

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Abstract

Regionalization-the act of strengthening the inter-state with social ties-attracted important attention in global governance studies of the political, economic, and cultural ties of specific geographic areas. The customary focus of Central Asian integration efforts has been elite-level agreements and state-led initiatives. China and Russia are external powers influencing these initiatives. However, limited attention has been paid to how individuals, particularly youth engaged in academic mobility, experience and interpret regional integration from the ground up. This study addresses this gap by examining the perceptions of international students from Central Asian countries currently studying in Kazakhstan. Those students from Central Asian countries are studying within Kazakhstan. Exploring youth perceptions about regional cooperation, identity, and participation across cross-border education, the research is based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 20 students from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Educational exchanges along with shared cultural frameworks seem to encourage a stronger feeling of regional belonging political narratives spread locally strengthened. This study contributes to the political science and international relations literature by introducing a youth-centered approach to regionalism with constructivist lens. It offers practical recommendations for policymakers and educators seeking to strengthen academic partnerships and foster more socially grounded strategies for Central Asian integration.

Key words: Central Asia, regional integration, youth identity, academic mobility, constructivism

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian republics faced different challenges within Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan while engaging in various forms of regional cooperation. National cultures differed alongside major powers like China and Russia exerting external influence with border disputes occurring. These are factors that hinder regional integration (Rustami, 2025; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, et al., 2018).

Despite this, at the 2024 summit, the Central Asian presidents agreed on a roadmap for regional integration. Such as the Central Asia 2040 strategy, which includes an action plan for industrial cooperation (2025-2027) and enhanced reinforcement of trade, energy, and transport partnerships (The Diplomat, 2024).

Leaders of the nations of Central Asia have different views with regard to regional integration. President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stresses that “a successful Central Asia is a successful Kazakhstan”, thereby confirming the need for multilateral cooperation (The Astana Times, 2024). At the same time, the President of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, remains committed to the neutrality of his country, denying all possible integrations within the region (Daryo News, 2025). In addition, Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev supports cooperative projects, in particular the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, while Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon promotes digital transformation as a driver of development. Kyrgyzstan’s President Sadyr Japarov highlights transport infrastructure as a means to stimulate economic growth (Daryo News, 2025). Moreover, Emomali Rahmon advocated for digital transformation for regional development, while Sadyr Japarov highlighted transport infrastructure as one of the means of stimulating economic growth (Daryo News, 2025).

Most discussions on this topic focus on economic and political efforts, forgetting about the prospects and influence of youth on strengthening regional integration. Given that young people are

future politicians and economic figures, understanding their views can provide valuable information about the long-term sustainability of regional cooperation. Therefore, particular attention should be given to Central Asian students who participate in academic exchange programs within the region.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how students perceive regional integration and whether the younger generation is forming a common Central Asian identity. By examining the perception of youth, this study expands the scope of discussions about regional integration. This research contributes to the existing literature on Central Asian regionalism by incorporating the perspectives of Central Asian, expanding broader discussions on ideational factors that underlie regional integration. Following that, this study seeks to answer the following research question: “How do Central Asian students studying in Kazakhstan perceive regional integration, and how does their experience reflect the emergence of a shared regional identity?”.

Literature review

External and Internal Determinants of Regional Integration

Integration in political science, especially in the context of post-Soviet states has been a contentious issue in recent years. Integration of the Central Asian region has been shaped by both external and internal factors, including its historical reliance on the Soviet economic system and the diversity of national interests among its states (Rustami, 2025).

Rustami (2025) says that the model of integration used in places like Europe is hard to apply to Central Asia, as five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have different histories, cultures, and governments that make them different from other attempts to integrate the region. Following the Soviet Union’s collapse, these nations prioritized national sovereignty over regional cooperation, making the reintegration of their economies and political structures into a broader union a persistent challenge (Allison, 2004).

Principal nations, economic linkage, with political division greatly shape regional consolidation within contexts like Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Southern Africa. Even though regional organizations help to manage external pressure, maintaining national independence remains a key concern. Russia and China exert competing influence in Central Asia, with Russia leveraging security alliances and economic dependencies (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace et al., 2018), while China promotes its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an alternative model (Dadabaev, 2013). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) encourages cooperation in the region, but the competition for power between Russia and China has led to more complex policies among Central Asian countries, which has an impact on diplomatic flexibility, stability in the region, cooperation and many other factors (Filippo, 2018).

Institutional Models and Theoretical Frameworks

Academic researchers such as De Haas (2017) and Cooley (2015) share the view that Central Asian integration is driven by economic, security, and political cooperation through organizations like the SCO, CSTO, EAEU, and CAREC. These organizations improve trade, coordinate security, and build up infrastructure. Furthermore, integration within organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is often seen as incompatible with Central Asia's unique cultural and political traditions (Bohr, 2004). Buzan and Waeber (2003) suggested regional security complex theory discusses the idea that historical, political, and geographic factors shape regional security dynamics, reinforcing the continued influence of historical ties on Central Asia. The absence of a NATO-equivalent organization in Asia further suggests that a collective regional identity in Central Asia is far less developed than in Europe (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002). Additionally, the region's diverse cultural, ethnic, and political landscapes further hinder the development of a unified regional identity (Isaacs & Polese, 2015).

Political Leadership and Bilateralism

From a political standpoint, many scholars do not consider Central Asian regional integration to be successful. Saqib and Naazer (2023) and Park (2025) argue that Central Asian regionalism remains limited due to external forces like China, Russia, and the EU. The countries are more interested in bilateral ties with China than in the development of integration institutions. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative has intensified competition for Chinese investments. Using a liberal intergovernmental perspective, Saqib and Naazer (2023) explain that states avoid deep integration because national leaders act in self-interest, and cooperation only occurs when economic benefits align.

Juraboev (2025) and Kazhenova (2024) share the same opinion. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was able to form greater regional integration, but political leaders disagreed on fundamental matters and fought over ways for regional leadership. Kazhenova (2024) examines approaches of the presidents of Kazakhstan as well as Uzbekistan and then concludes conflicting strategies obstructed any integration. As a president, Nazarbayev advocated for deep economic and political integration. Karimov, however, remained skeptical due to his fear of losing sovereignty. Kazhenova (2024) describes within her research that Uzbekistan began moving closer to Kazakhstan after Mirziyoyev's election.

Economic Integration and Infrastructure Disparities

There are notable differences in economic strategies as Kazakhstan focuses on integration into global markets and active participation in the EAEU market, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has historically avoided participation in large economic unions (Juraboev, 2025). Despite these challenges, Rustami (2025) assumes that there is a need for a shift toward a more flexible integration framework in Central Asian region, allowing cooperation without a necessity for a full institutionalization. Therefore, this perspective aligns with findings on multilateralism in Asia, where regional cooperation is driven more by pragmatic interests than ideological unity (Jetschke & Lenz, 2013).

Over the past decades, trade integration between the Central Asian countries has noticeably intensified, but continues to face a number of systemic constraints. Moreover, one of the main obstacles to deepening trade integration is the low level of development of transport infrastructure, which as a result leads to high logistical costs in the region. In addition, the absence of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the EAEU limits opportunities for comprehensive regional integration. These countries prefer to enter into bilateral trade agreements with countries such as China, Iran and Turkey, which limits opportunities for comprehensive regional integration.

On the other hand, the membership of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the EAEU facilitated the simplification of trade procedures between them (Cieřlik & Gurshev, 2024). However, the region's dependence on external trading partners, primarily China and Russia, remains high and continues to experience a decline in integration processes (Vinokurov et al., 2022).

Cultural Regionalism and Identity Formation

Culturally, the formation of a unified regional identity is disturbed by political instability and nation-building processes, despite common historical, linguistic and religious roots (Mayer, 2021). In response, initiatives aimed at strengthening regional cooperation are being undertaken, such as the UNESCO Silk Road Project as well as large-scale events, including the World Nomad Games and the Central Asian Cultural Forum in Khiva (UNESCO, 2024; Mayer, 2021).

Changes that happened in Uzbekistan's foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev have opened up new opportunities for regional cooperation, while Kazakhstan is actively promoting cultural diplomacy in order to strengthen integration (Mayer, 2021). One of the main limitations is the lack of a regional academic mobility program similar to Erasmus+, which hinders interstate exchange in the educational field (Costa Buranelli, 2021).

Educational Regionalism and the Role of Youth

Högselius's (2022) idea of "hidden integration" looks at other ways of integrating people that are not associated with politics as technical and physical infrastructures. Although government leaders

do not emphasize integrated infrastructure, they still share geopolitical location as well as the use of water resources, railways, and electric grids, which connect Central Asian countries. The EAEU and CAREC drive economic integration primarily through trade liberalization, infrastructure, and investment (Mirzoev, 2006).

Abduvaliev (2024) says that the CAREC 2030 strategy's goal is to connect the area to global markets by encouraging diversification, making it easier for investors to generate money flows and making connections stronger. Kazakhstan handles 80.9% of trade within the region (Ahunbaev et al., 2022, p. 50). However, issues like being landlocked, relying on natural resources and strict rules stop further growth (Ahunbaev et al., 2022; Medukhanova et al., 2022). Even with these problems, regional cooperation is still supported by bilateral deals, infrastructure projects, and changes to the way institutions work. The EAEU and CAREC strengthen business ties, and the SCO and CSTO help keep the area stable (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2014).

In addition to economic and political cooperation, regional integration also contributes to people-to-people interaction strategies. Initiatives such as the European Erasmus Program or Turkiye Burslari have demonstrated how education can serve as a soft power tool to strengthen a common identity.

Opinions of young people differ greatly from those of their parents and grandparents, as they have not yet faced the challenges of the modern world (Starr, 2024). In turn, Amutuhaire (2024) investigated the impact of regionalization of higher education on student mobility in East Africa. In his methodology, he used a mixed method involving 200 international students and found that this affects the development of academic partnerships and the strengthening of educational standards. In addition, the regionalization of education is based on historical authority, which is associated with economic and political inequality between the countries of the region. Thus, regionalization contributes to the development of higher education, however requires the elimination of structural gaps within the region (Amutuhaire, 2024).

The World Bank (2023) indicates that regional partnership in higher education is one of the

essential ways for Central Asian countries to work together more effectively. Sharing school supplies, students can exchange with other countries, so all lessons can be ensured to be similar because these actions might all improve the level of education toward more cooperation in the region. ASEAN's experience shows that higher education can integrate regions in an important way. Because of academic cooperation in ASEAN, Buszynski (2019) argued that regional research networks have in fact been strengthened and it has become a reason for the rise of educational standards. Therefore, Central Asia could adopt similar strategies to enhance collaboration in higher education, particularly through joint research initiatives and student mobility programs (Lorenzo, 2021). Chou and Ravinet (2016) further discuss that education strengthens regional cooperation and criticize the Eurocentric bias in regionalism studies, calling for more context-specific research.

After a thorough review of the relevant literature on Central Asian integration, it is evident that many studies examine the common areas such as historical, economic, and geopolitical aspects of regional cooperation. However, considerably less attention has been given to how young people, especially students participating in academic mobility perceive and experience the processes of regionalization at the level of everyday life. This bottom-up perspective offers valuable insight into the extent to which notions of regional unity resonate within societal consciousness. In this context, it is crucial to examine how higher education institutions and student networks can function as sustainable drivers of regional cooperation.

Methodology

This research is grounded in a constructivist perspective, which assumes that regional integration is not only shaped by formal institutions or material conditions, however also by people's ideas, perceptions, and lived experiences. Current study emphasizes ideational dimensions, such as shared values, regional identity and cultural familiarity. Youth narratives and symbolic associations contribute to understanding regionalism from the bottom-up approach.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative method to understand how they view regional integration plus if youth in Central Asia form a common identity across borders. The main method selected from all methods for data collection was through semi-structured interviews. This format offers flexibility while still allowing thematic consistency. The subject matter can remain rather uniform. It is effective especially toward understanding complex, ideational phenomena. Strict questionnaires or just numerical instruments cannot properly examine topics like local affiliation including selfhood development.

In a semi-structured format, students could express their views using their own words, maintaining focus on political cooperation, identity and academic mobility. This approach aligns with the constructivist assumption that reality is socially constructed through interaction and meaning-making

Participant Selection and Sampling

Research focused on 20 international students from Central Asia currently studying in Kazakhstan. Participants were recruited from Maqsut Narikbayev University (MNU), KIMEP University, KBTU, and the Medical University of Astana (MUA).

Purposive sampling was used to select students who met the key criteria: they were citizens of a Central Asian country (other than Kazakhstan) and enrolled in a Kazakhstani university. To enhance diversity, snowball sampling was applied, as a result, initial participants referred peers within their Central Asian networks. This strategy helped reach underrepresented groups, including Turkmen students.

Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted between late March and mid-April 2025. Initial outreach was made through Outlook, WhatsApp and Telegram applications. Participants received a digital informed consent form, which detailed the study's aims and ensured voluntary participation. All students confirmed participation by ticking a box; no physical signatures were required.

Interviews were conducted both in person and via Zoom, depending on participants' preferences. Most conversations were held in Russian, the common lingua franca. Audio was recorded using Zoom and iPhone voice memo apps. Some interviews were video-recorded, while others were audio-only based on participant comfort. All data was securely stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder.

Transcription was conducted using a Telegram bot for Russian and English-language interviews and manually for Kazakh interviews. All personal identifiers were removed to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method was the method used to analyze interview transcripts. This approach enabled the research team to identify and categorize patterns across the data.

A deductive coding approach was applied, based on pre-formulated research questions and interview themes. Analysis focused on semantic content rather than latent meaning in order to maintain the integrity of participant narratives.

The coding was conducted collaboratively using Google Sheets, allowing for organized review and categorization. The team identified four major thematic clusters:

- Cluster 1: Background and motivation
- Cluster 2: Social and cultural integration
- Cluster 3: Barriers and opportunities
- Cluster 4: Identity shifts and perceptions of Kazakhstan

Cross-checking and collaborative refinement of themes ensured consistency and accuracy throughout the coding process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured through the university's internal review board. Participants were informed about their right for withdrawal at virtually any point, including during or after the interview. Current study ensured complete anonymity, which indicates that no names were recorded or used in the final analysis. All audio and transcript files will be deleted upon submission of the final thesis.

Findings

Background and Motivation

Attraction of Kazakhstan as an Educational Destination

A notable factor that influenced the decision of many participants to study in Kazakhstan is the advantages of Kazakhstani education. Many referred to the quality of education, international accreditation, and the availability of modern infrastructure at universities. The majority of participants also noted that the availability of full or partial scholarships, competitive programs or intergovernmental initiatives was crucial. One student was accepted through a law program jointly run by the Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan, while others mentioned receiving merit-based scholarships after passing standard exams.

After getting acquainted with the activities of universities, students from Tajikistan and Turkmenistan decided to study in Kazakhstan. Participants liked the presentation of educational institutions made by the university administration or the feedback from other students already studying in Kazakhstan. Some also noted that Kazakhstan has become more attractive than Europe as it is geographically close and affordable.

Russian as a Lingua Franca

Their decision was also influenced by the ease of communication due to their knowledge of the Russian language and the fact that many of them have social connections such as friends and relatives, which reduces cultural and logistical barriers.

Social and Cultural Integration

Institutional Support

Many students emphasised that they had seamlessly integrated into academic life abroad. Especially those who were fluent in Russian or Kazakh. In addition, due to living in a dormitory, participating in academic projects and participating in joint cultural events, social integration took place in natural conditions. Institutional efforts, such as introducing classes or support from international offices, were critical for international students, and many were provided with them.

Common Language

These interactions allowed the students to find a common language with their peers from neighboring countries. Students most often communicated with Kazakhs and other Central Asian immigrants, especially if participants are from culturally close countries such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Cultural Similarities

Moreover, some noted that integration was easy due to the already similar culture and mentality. Traditional views on life, such as respect for elders, hospitality, and more, are very similar among the Central Asian region. Participants also mentioned that child-rearing practices, gender roles, and integrational communication followed similar patterns. Shared emphasis on family and moral behaviour created a familiar environment.

Barriers and Opportunities for Regional Integration

Bureaucratic Challenges and Institutional Barriers

The survey participants identified bureaucracy as the most persistent obstacle to academic mobility and regional cooperation in Central Asia. Such consistent issues as visa regulations, short-term residence permits, and complex paperwork procedures as nostrification were repeatedly mentioned. In addition, the lack of mutual recognition of degrees and educational qualifications further limits student mobility in the region and minimizes the desire for further academic mobility.

Implementation of New Policies

Most participants emphasized the need to introduce new policies or reorganize academic mobility procedures to support student exchange and academic collaboration. For instance, proposals included increasing the number of regional scholarship programs, simplifying legal and administrative procedures and creating a unified Central Asian educational platform to centralize information and opportunities. In addition, Erasmus+ comparative models were often mentioned as examples of proper academic mobility models. According to the participants, this program will help to increase the mobility and cooperation of students, respectively.

Informal Regionalism and Cultural Proximity

Despite all the above-mentioned bureaucratic issues, the majority of students expressed optimism about academic cooperation. Many noted that cultural proximity, belonging to a single region and digital connectivity contribute to the creation of informal cross-border networks. These prospects indicate a growing interest in regionalism among the youth of Central Asia, although restrained by institutional problems in the region.

Perceptions of Kazakhstan and Identity Shifts

Identity Transformation and Integration Experiences

Students often reported changes in their self-perception and regional identity while studying in Kazakhstan. For the majority of participants, this experience has strengthened their sense of belonging to the broader Central Asian community. This emerging identity was often based on shared traditions, Islamic values, linguistic proximity, and cultural understanding. Participants' reflections on cultural closeness, including notions of a "one nation" identity, underscore the enduring relevance of a shared social space. Moreover, living in such an environment had a positive impact on building interethnic networking, which contributes to improving integration in the region.

However, it is important to note that since the experiences were different, some participants described feelings of alienation or linguistic discrimination. These cases have contributed to a more critical view of integration, revealing hidden contradictions between national identity and regional

solidarity. Thus, a significant part of the participants deny the existence of integration, and believe that most countries cooperate in a competitive framework.

Kazakhstan as a Professional and Educational Destination

Nevertheless, most of the participants acknowledged that during their time in Kazakhstan, the participants were significantly influenced by their attitude towards Central Asian cooperation. Several students expressed interest in working or living in other Central Asian countries, especially in general sectors such as finance, law, or international development. Others viewed Kazakhstan as a long-term destination because of the emotional and professional fit for building a career in the country or living there.

Conclusion

The results of the study show a complex form of regionalism in Central Asia, due to the interpersonal experience and cultural proximity of students, but this is not so visible in political terms. These results echo the broader theoretical framework of “social” regionalism, where shared identities sometimes outweigh formal political and economic integration (Costa Buranelli, 2021; Jetschke & Lenz, 2013).

The participants’ reflections on cultural proximity, such as “one nation” self-awareness, validate the continuing presence of a shared social space. Individuals share this experience as well as demonstrate regional proximity including a common identity feeling. This kind of sense indicates a strong cultural ties and influences their perception of regionalism. Cultural and historical heritage continues to connect the regions, per Mayer (2021) and Isaacs and Poles (2015).

However, despite the cultural proximity promotes social cohesion, bureaucratic and administrative obstacles continue to hinder academic regional integration. Some students noticed difficulties such as obtaining a visa, lack of recognition of diplomas and difficulties in obtaining a residence permit. Although the interpersonal level reflects the growing regional identity, unresolved structural problems hinder its development.

From an educational perspective, students' openness to cross-border mobility is consistent with arguments of Starr (2024) and Amutuhaire (2024), which emphasize the role of education in promoting sustainable regional cooperation. However, academic exchanges are obstructed due to the lack of a regional mobility system similar to Erasmus+ (Costa Buranelli, 2021).

Political structures might adapt themselves to regionalism in a long-term perspective. Without such adaptation, the development of a shared regional identity may remain limited, as the existence of a social space does not necessarily translate into sustained political or economic cooperation. According to Högselius (2022), informal modes of integration, including infrastructural and technical cooperation, may still promote regional connectivity even without official institutional frameworks.

Given Kazakhstan's current role as the main host country for students from the CA, it occupies a unique position that contributes to the deepening of regional integration through education. This study demonstrates that, while official political discourse frequently underscores the importance of regional integration, it is the everyday social interactions among youth that substantiate and operationalize this abstract notion.

Furthermore, educational mobility is vitally crucial when it shapes perceptions of regional unity, thus investments in student exchange programs as well as academic partnerships can reinforce regional cohesion.

The formation of regional identity may remain largely symbolic and socially constrained in the absence of corresponding shifts in institutional and political agency. Following that, voices of youth must be integrated within policy design toward sustainable regional integration. Therefore, to gain integration structural barriers must be addressed respectively.

The circle of participants was limited to students from Central Asia who study at universities located in Kazakhstan. Most of the students were recruited from large and internationally oriented universities in Kazakhstan, and these elite universities mainly attract academically motivated and open-minded students whose views may differ from those of other students attending non-elite educational institutions from small towns.

Future research could broaden its scope by including working youth and Central Asian students studying outside Kazakhstan to capture more diverse regional experiences. A mixed-methods or comparative approach may also offer deeper insights into how national contexts and social environments shape perceptions of integration. Furthermore, quantitative studies may be able to offer further generalizability as well as complement qualitative findings. By stressing all of the importance in perception, identity, and cultural proximity for shaping regional futures, this study contributes greatly to the growing field in constructivist and youth-centered research within international relations.

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Appendix 1. Informed Consent Form

Regional Integration in Central Asia: Analyzing Perceptions of Central Asian students studying in Kazakhstan

Researcher/s:

Mussirkep Kazyna - bachelors students in international relations
 Nurlybekova Zulfiya - bachelor's student in international relations
 Temirbulatova Dilnaza - bachelor's student in international relations

Supervisor - Utebayev Artur

Thank you for your participation in our research! This study aims to explore regional integration in Central Asia by analyzing speeches from leader's meetings and studying how international students from Central Asian countries studying in Kazakhstan view regional cooperation and identity. In this study, you will take an individual interview, and answer a set of questions about your experience as a Central Asian student studying in other countries of the region. This process will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time, for any reason, by simply informing the researcher. You are also free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

Data Privacy:

Coded Data with Confidential Storage
 Any personal information that could directly or indirectly identify you will be separated from your data and replaced with a unique participant code. This code and personal information will be securely stored in a separate location accessible only to the researcher(s). You may request deletion of your data before the study concludes on 23rd May, 2025, by contacting the researcher at zulfiyanurlybekova@kazguu.kz and providing your date and time of participation. After this date, all personal information will be permanently deleted, and your responses will no longer be identifiable.

Data Storage and Access:

Research data will be securely stored on password-protected computers and used solely for scientific analysis. Only the researchers will have access to this data.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the ISE Committee for Scientific Research at Maqsut Narikbayev University.

If you have any questions, please contact Zulfiya Nurlybekova at zulfiyanurlybekova@kazguu.kz

If you have any complaints regarding the study, you may contact the Chair of ISE Committee for Scientific Research Ikboljon Qoraboyev at i_qoraboyev@kazguu.kz

Thank you for reviewing this information.

Consent Form

I have read and understood the information provided and:

- I agree to participate in this study
- I don't want to participate in this study

Appendix 3. Interview questions, questionnaires, stimuli materials in the study

Cluster 1: Background and University Enrollment

- Q1. Can you tell me a little about yourself? (e.g., country of origin, university, field of study)
- Q2. Why did you choose to study in Kazakhstan instead of your home country or another region?

Cluster 2: Social and Cultural Integration

- Q3. Have you had any challenges studying in Kazakhstan as a foreign student? (e.g., visa, adaptation, language, finances)
- Q4. Do you interact with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?

Cluster 3: Barriers to and Opportunities for Regional Integration

- Q5. What are the biggest obstacles to student exchange and regional cooperation in Central Asia?
- Q6. If you could suggest one change to improve student mobility and academic cooperation in Central Asia, what would it be?
- Q7. Do you think Central Asian countries are becoming more connected, or do they remain separate? Why?

Cluster 4: Perceptions of Kazakhstan and Identity Shifts

- Q8. Do you feel a sense of common identity with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?
- Q9. Have your perceptions of Central Asian integration changed after your experience of living and studying in Kazakhstan?
- Q10. What do you think about regional cooperation in Central Asia?
- Q11. Do you see yourself working or living in another Central Asian country in the future? Why or why not?

Appendix 4. Additional materials

Interview answers

Question 1: Can you tell me a little about yourself? (e.g., country of origin, university, field of study)

Participant 1: participant is from Turkmenistan studies at M. Narikbayev University, majoring in International Relations.

Participant 2: Originally from Turkmenistan. participant currently studying in second year of pharmacy at MUA.

Participant 3: 1st year, MUA, 23 years old, studying pediatrics.

Participant 4: participant study at MUA in the second year.

Participant 5: Originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 6: participant is a first-year student studying accounting. participant is very interested in studying English. Participant has been living in Kazakhstan for almost a year.

Participant 7: Student studying linguistics, originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 8: Originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 9: participant is ethnically Kazakh and originally from Kyrgyzstan. Participant currently studying Law in Kazakhstan at KIMEP and finishing my Master's Degree.

Participant 10: participant studies at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Higher School of Economics, majoring in Business, Finance, and Insurance.

Participant 11: Originally from Kyrgyzstan

Participant 12: participant 22 years old. I was born and raised in Cherchik, a city in the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan. At 18, the participant moved to Kazakhstan to study. They are currently in their fourth year of financial studies at Maksut Narikbayev University (formerly known as KazGUU) in Astana.

Participant 13: Originally from Kashkadarya, Uzbekistan, and later moved to Tashkent. participant completed her Bachelor's degree in Civil Law at the Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL). After graduation, the participant worked as a lawyer for three years.

Participant 14: participant currently studying law at the Faculty of Law, Maksut Narikbayev University, formerly in Kazakhstan.

Participant 15: participant 21 years old, and I'm originally from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Right now, participant studying International Relations at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty. participant is a third year student. They chose this field because they have always been interested in diplomacy and how countries interact.

Participant 16: 4th year student, majoring in management (concentration in marketing). At MNU

Participant 17: 3rd year student. Exchange student. Economics major. At MNU

Participant 18: 2nd year, marketing. At MNU

Participant 19: Kimep University 4th year Business School. Management

Participant 20: From Tajikistan – 21 years old – Majoring in Finance

Question 2: Why did you choose to study in Kazakhstan instead of your home country or another region?

Participant 1: participant chose this university due to participant 's father's job, which made the admission process easier. The decision was personal—participant was drawn to the university both emotionally and academically, particularly because of its focus on international relations and law. participant also appreciated the university's modern building and attractive program offerings.

Participant 2: participant knew that education in Kazakhstan is good—many people praised it—so they decided to apply here.

Participant 3: It's a nearby country, friends recommended it, and it's affordable financially.

Participant 4: participant 's decision was influenced by friends and acquaintances, since many of them study in Kazakhstan and praise the education here.

Participant 5: Because participants have lived here since childhood.

Participant 6: Kazakhstan is one of the most developed countries in Central Asia. Secondly, participant is ethnically Kazakh, so they wanted to return to their historical homeland.

Participant 7: participants originally planned to move to Kazakhstan right after graduating from university, but they are still considering it. participant was thinking of spending a few months in Kyrgyzstan after graduation to see if they can find a job there. If not, then they plan to move back to Kazakhstan and live there again.

Participant 8: Because participants lived here for some time.

Participant 9: participant 's main motivation was to move and settle in Kazakhstan.

Participant 10: participant is ethnically Kazakh. participant 's parents have close ties with Kazakhstan and instilled love for the country since childhood. The university is one of the best, and participant personally wanted to study there. It was mostly the participant 's own decision.

Participant 11: A lot of people come here to study.

Participant 12: participants considered studying in Russia or even Europe, having passed IELTS. But they chose Kazakhstan because it's a participant 's historical homeland. participants applied to several universities including KIMEP, KBTU, and KazNU, and was accepted to Maksut Narikbayev University. participant didn't want to study in Almaty due to traffic and familiarity — they wanted their own path, so chose Astana. participant was awarded scholarships through competitions among students from post-Soviet countries — they won for KIMEP and KBTU. For Narikbayev University, participants passed the national exam (ENT) with high scores and earned a scholarship.

Participant 13: participants came to Kazakhstan to pursue a master's degree through a special program initiated by the Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan in cooperation with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). This was not a purely personal decision—it was influenced by the opportunity provided through this government-supported program.

Participant 14: After finishing school, the participant 's family moved to Kazakhstan while they continued studying law for two years at Tashkent State University of Law. Eventually, participant decided

to reunite with their family in Kazakhstan. Also, they chose this path because they are ethnically Kazakh. For a Kazakh, being in their own homeland is a matter of great pride. That played a big role in the participant's decision.

Participant 15: participants had options to stay in Uzbekistan, but wanted to challenge themselves and experience something new. Kazakhstan felt familiar yet different—it's close culturally, but the education system here is more internationally oriented. Also, some of the participant's relatives live in Kazakhstan, so it made the move easier. It was mostly a personal decision, but the participant's older cousin, who also studied here, recommended it.

Participant 16: It was important for participants to get a high-quality education. Studying abroad has always been their dream. After passing all the exams, participants eventually chose to study in Kazakhstan. It was because of the grant. And the university itself made an impression. It was more of a personal decision and the grant's. The grant for all students is internal. Peers had no influence.

Participant 17: Thanks to the academic education system, participants like education in Kazakhstan. They think that this way they will better understand the economy of Central Asia. To ensure a sustainable economy. It was the participant's personal decision. They also listened to other people's reviews and liked them.

Participant 18: A friend influenced the participant. The friend showed how cool it is to study at MNU and participants wanted to study at this university.

Participant 19: participants liked the university. The best university in the country. There are many mobility programs and there is diploma accreditation. Initially, participants wanted to go abroad, and KIMEP provided a full grant for international students. The full grant was a good motivation.

Participant 20: participants had other options, but the university gave a presentation and participant thought, "Why not?" After they arrived and a year passed, participants liked the education system and the professors, so they decided to continue studies here. Before that, participant was only considering Europe and had no plans to study in Kazakhstan. Admission happened mostly because of the university presentation.

Question 3: Have you had any challenges studying in Kazakhstan as a foreign student? (e.g., visa, adaptation, language, finances)

Participant 1: participant didn't face any major challenges with adaptation, finances, or documents. participant 's parents supported the participant , making everything smooth.

Participant 2: participant doesn't remember any major difficulties, only some language challenges at first, but since they know Uzbek, they get used to it quickly.

Participant 3: Some minor difficulties with language adaptation.

Participant 4: participants had difficulties with language adaptation and some financial issues. The biggest challenge, in the participant 's opinion, was obtaining a visa while still in Turkmenistan.

Participant 5: Not directly mentioned, but there are indirect references to difficulties related to registration and documentation.

Participant 6: participants had some initial difficulties with paperwork—they didn't understand the process or where to go. They had to travel between countries to get documents. But in everything else—language, study, communication—it was comfortable.

Participant 7: No, participant has not.

Participant 8: No, participant has not.

Participant 9: Yes, there were bureaucratic challenges. participants had to constantly notify government agencies, and it was difficult to obtain an individual identification number (IIN), which is essential for legalization. participant also faced discrimination due to their level of Kazakh language proficiency. Despite that, they had no problems with adaptation overall.

Participant 10: No, participant lives with participant 's grandmother, so there are no issues with the Kazakh language. They had no problems with adaptation or academic subjects. Has lived in Kazakhstan for less than a year.

Participant 11: When the stay period ends, they give only one month. participant thinks it would be better to give students 90 days. Otherwise, they have to go elsewhere and renew it. If documents could be submitted in advance from abroad, it would be better. As it is now, participant can end up being deported for 2–3 months. At first, they realized that one month wasn't enough.

→ Problems with documentation and registration.

→ When the participant arrived in Kazakhstan, dealing with documents and registration was difficult. Corruption was also a problem.

→ Who helped with adaptation and paperwork?

→ The university helped. The student affairs department explained everything, even before the trip. They explained everything thoroughly so that participant wouldn't make mistakes.

Participant 12: Yes. Initially, participants struggled with mathematics because the participant 's school taught in Russian, but university courses were in English. That was hard in the beginning, but the participant worked through it. Socially, participant was nervous at first about making friends, but knowing both Kazakh and Russian helped. They made friends in the dorm quickly.

Participant 13: participant noted that the transition was relatively smooth since Uzbek and Kazakh cultures are similar. The language was not a major barrier, as many people speak Russian, and participants were already fluent in it. Financially, participant 's scholarship covered everything, so they didn't face significant hardship.

Participant 14: Yes, definitely. Participant knows the Kazakh language because they learned it from the participant 's mother and family, but never studied Kazakh grammar formally. So, communicating can be difficult sometimes—especially when the participant struggles with spelling or phrasing. Although ethnically Kazakh, participants faced a year of discomfort trying to assimilate. People would ask awkward questions like “Do you know Uzbek?” or “Can you cook pilaf?” It felt discriminatory at times. Now, however, participant feel more comfortable and proud of their identity.

Participant 15: There were some challenges, especially at the beginning. Navigating the visa process was confusing—participants had to reapply and go to different offices just to get simple documents signed. Also, even though the participant speaks Russian, understanding academic terms and some local slang took time. Financially, participant is on a partial scholarship, so they have to budget carefully, but it's manageable.

Participant 16: There were no serious difficulties. participant was ready in advance to study abroad. And 4 more people from the participant 's country came with them, which made the adaptation easier. The language barrier didn't bother the participant either. But it was difficult with the training load. The university administration contacted participants and told them where to go and what to do. It wasn't that hard, for 2 weeks.

Participant 17: Yes. It was difficult for participants at the beginning because of the educational material and the teaching methodology. Also, the city of Astana is very large and difficult to navigate. But people helped.

Participant 18: No one explained to the participants how to register as a foreign student, how to get a Kaspi and an IIN, or what it is. But then they helped.

Participant 19: As such, there were no problems. The university itself provided all the conditions for good integration. It helped with the paperwork. There are no problems with the language. But the older generation is not always sympathetic; they can speak Kazakh, but the participants does not understand it. From a financial point of view, everything is normal, even if it is more expensive than in Tajikistan.

Participant 20: No. The university helped a lot. They supported the participants with legal matters. Nothing was required from the participant . There were no financial problems. Adaptation was a bit hard due to the climate. participant is from a warm country, but despite that, they decided to stay. In other aspects, adaptation was easy because friends and acquaintances helped with everything. Over time, participant got used to it.

Question 4: Do you interact with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?

Participant 1: participants primarily interacts with Kazakh students. participant hasn't had much interaction with students from other Central Asian countries but expressed a desire to meet and make friends with them.

Participant 2: Yes, participant does interact with students from other Central Asian countries.

Participant 3: Yes, participant communicates with Kazakhs and Uzbeks because they share a common culture and similar languages.

Participant 4: Yes, participant does. Most of the students in the participant 's course are Kazakhs, and there are a few Turkmen students as well.

Participant 5: Not directly stated, but other students from Central Asia are mentioned in conversation, along with a recommendation to reach out to the international office.

Participant 6: There are many students here from China and India, but fewer from Kyrgyzstan. Visually, they all look alike, even the participant 's culture and holidays are similar. Sometimes people don't even realize the participant is not from Kazakhstan until they say so.

Participant 7: Yes, participant does.

Participant 8: participants had acquaintances from Uzbekistan. The participants have Uzbek relatives, so they communicate with them, and they have sometimes lived in Uzbekistan.

Participant 9: Yes, especially through sports, participant felt a sense of unity with other Central Asian students. However, outside of sports and apart from shared history, there isn't much connecting them. Students from countries like Tajikistan feel more distant. Generally, there is little effort made towards integration.

Participant 10: participant interacts with people from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. They all like it here.

Participant 11: Yes, participant does.

Participant 12: Not much. There's a double-degree program with Tashkent University of Law, but participants didn't connect with students from there. participant prefers spending time with Kazakh students. They don't usually mention that they are from Uzbekistan — it's not something they focus on.

Participant 13: Yes, participant communicates with peers from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. participant 's program is international, so students naturally form connections across countries. participant emphasized that these interactions have been very positive and enriching.

Participant 14: Yes, participant does. participants studied in Tashkent for two years, lived in a dorm, and met many students—Uzbeks, Karakalpaks, Kazakhs. They still keep in touch regularly. They discuss various topics and enjoy each other's company. participant also communicates well with students from all three groups at participant 's current university, even though they weren't placed in the English-language track.

Participant 15: Yes, definitely. participants have met people from Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and of course, Kazakhstan. Most of them live in the same dorm or attend the same lectures. They usually get

along well—they share a lot culturally. They celebrate Nowruz together, for example. Those similarities help build connections naturally.

Participant 16 : participant communicates actively. participant got acquainted with Uzbekistan. It's interesting to learn about their cultures. They were friends, they covered objects together.

Participant 17: Yes. participant communicates with Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Clashes between families began to occur, which led to cultural differences. Seminars and general events helped to make friends.

Participant 18: Yes, they live in a dorm. Friendship is due to the similarity of cultures. Especially between Uzbeks and Tajiks.

Participant 19: Sure. KIMEP has a very large community of international students from Central Asia. They invite each other to different programs, to visit, to help with employment. Great networking.

Participant 20: Yes. participant interacts with students from Uzbekistan, has acquaintances from Tajikistan, and with Kazakhs. participant has been friends with Kazakhs since their first year. Because they share very similar views on many things — even though they're from different countries, they have similar mentalities.

Question 5: What are the biggest obstacles to student exchange and regional cooperation in Central Asia?

Participant 1: One key challenge is the visa requirement. Turkmenistan mandates a visa, which complicates things. Another issue is that the MNU diploma is not recognized in Turkmenistan, which limits employment opportunities back home.

Participant 2: In participant 's opinion, there are no real obstacles. If a person wants something, they will make it happen. But participants would say there are some difficulties with visas since they need to renew them on time and go through the process to obtain one.

Participant 3: participant didn't face any obstacles.

Participant 4: In participant 's view, if we talk about students from Turkmenistan, the main obstacles are internal visa issues and a slight language barrier.

Participant 5: Previously, migration was more difficult because the permitted stay was limited to 30 days. Now, it's 90 days, and it has become easier to integrate and move between Central Asian countries.

Participant 6: In participant 's opinion, bureaucracy is the biggest issue—especially with documents if you're a foreigner. Also, the difficulty of obtaining citizenship directly affects employment.

Participant 7: participant doesn't know.

Participant 8: participant doesn't know, hasn't experienced any.

Participant 9: There are too many requirements and documents needed. Residence permits (RVP) are only issued for one year, which is inconvenient for students. The process of staying legally in Kazakhstan is complicated. On a broader level, regional tensions—like disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—and political blackmail hinder cooperation. Forums and initiatives often lack real effectiveness.

Participant 10: Adaptation comes through living in the dormitory. It may be hard emotionally because there's no family nearby, which can be distressing. When participants applied, around 15 people went through the process, but the quota was given to only 5. The rest didn't make it because they hadn't carefully checked the website, even though everything was written there in detail.

Participant 11: At first, participants realized that one month wasn't enough. It would be better if documents could be submitted in advance from abroad. Otherwise, participant might face deportation for 2–3 months.

Participant 12: Bureaucracy is the biggest obstacle. The process of applying, the number of required documents — it's overwhelming and discouraging for many students.

Participant 13: participant pointed out bureaucratic and institutional limitations, especially related to the recognition of academic degrees and a lack of region-wide educational frameworks.

Participant 14: The first issue is bureaucracy. Another is the difference in educational systems. In Tashkent, they had midterms and finals every semester—simple and predictable. But in Kazakhstan, the system includes deadlines, projects, and multiple layers of assessments. It's more stressful. Still, with time, students can adapt. participant wouldn't say it's a major barrier, just something to consider.

Participant 15: participant would say bureaucracy is still the biggest problem. Every country has its own rules, and nothing is really standardized. Simple things like recognizing academic credits or processing residency documents take a long time. Also, there's not enough information available about regional exchange programs—students don't always know what opportunities exist.

Participant 16: Lack of information. And transparency of student exchange between countries. And the language barrier can be a problem. Diploma recognition. And the financial side is no less important, because accommodation and transportation are also factors that remain barriers to academic mobility. How honest is everything when it comes to the exchange and distribution of who exactly will be going through the exchange program.

Participant 17: Lack of information about academic exchange in Central Asia. It is difficult to register and apply due to limited information. It was also difficult to register a Caspi credit card, because without Caspi it is difficult to buy something.

Participant 18: There are no problems as such. Especially in terms of student exchange. participants did not give an exact answer.

Participant 19: participant doesn't know. Because they mostly go to Europe or Asia rather than Central Asia. The international office helps quite well.

Participant 20: Adaptation, probably — but it depends more on the person, how well they can adapt to life abroad. Also, language barriers. For participants personally, the climate is a key factor. That's the most important thing for the participant . Or, for example, if someone can't find friends or acquaintances. Academic challenges too — there might be a different curriculum or way of delivering information.

Question 6: If you could suggest one change to improve student mobility and academic cooperation in Central Asia, what would it be?

Participant 1: participant would remove the diploma recognition restriction and would work to develop more academic exchange programs, especially between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. participant believes this could help show that Turkmenistan is more open and allow others to better understand its culture.

Participant 2: It would be good if universities offered more distance learning courses.

Participant 3: Support with studies, the academic program, and language teachers. As for government-level support, participant is not sure.

Participant 4: participant thinks that creating academic banks to provide scholarships for students in the region would be the most effective solution.

Participant 5: If participants were in a leadership position, the first thing they would address is providing housing or, at the very least, offering assistance with residency registration. International staff and students face serious documentation problems. Registration is essential—without it, it's hard to legalize one's stay.

Participant 6: Simplify the process of obtaining citizenship. Even with a residence permit, participant is not always allowed to work fully. It's especially harder for non-Kazakhs to get citizenship than it is for ethnic Kazakhs. participant would change the law to make integration easier for students and young professionals from Central Asia. For example, they would create a separate citizenship track for students and open student banks and exchange programs.

Participant 7: Maybe increase the number of exchange students.

Participant 8: participant doesn't know what to suggest.

Participant 9: participant would simplify the requirements and documentation process for foreign students as well as simplify entry and residence procedures in Kazakhstan and create a database to track incoming foreign students for better management.

Participant 10: More quotas should be allocated. Only 10 people from Central Asia received the quota. Everyone needs a grant, so it would be good if more were available. participant would introduce additional courses for those who don't know the Kazakh language — at least 2–3 hours per week.

Participant 11: Extend the period of stay and reduce bureaucratic hurdles related to registration.

Participant 12: Simplify the documentation process. Make fewer documents required and reduce bureaucratic hurdles. participant would remove the restrictions that discourage foreign students. They know people who left Kazakhstan because of these issues. If someone is really motivated to study here, they should be supported.

Participant 13: participant suggested establishing a unified Central Asian education system or at least a mutual recognition framework for degrees and academic credits. If in a leadership position, participant would start by facilitating bilateral agreements between ministries of education and creating regional scholarship programs similar to Erasmus+.

Participant 14: Governments should launch more exchange programs and scholarships. Education ministries play a key role in this, and more intergovernmental agreements are needed to make mobility easier. If participants worked in the Ministry of Education, they would start with bilateral agreements, one country at a time. Once there's success with one, others can follow.

Participant 15: participant would suggest creating a centralized digital platform where students from Central Asia can apply for exchanges, scholarships, or short programs across the region—like a regional version of Erasmus+. It would also be good to offer more short-term programs or joint degrees.

Participant 16: Create some kind of common regional platform where all the universities of Central Asia are united. Where all the available grants, additional information, etc., would be. Such a platform will simplify the application process. The first step in a senior position would be to initiate interstate agreements on the recognition of academic credits and diplomas within Central Asia, because there are cases that diplomas are not recognized. So that there are no legal obstacles.

Participant 17: Create an academic network. participants helped newly arrived students financially. A special phone number and educational institution for exchange students, where they can share their learning experiences. Share experience. Also organize regional student fairs for student coordinators.

Participant 18: participant would suggest opening up more places for students in educational institutions—by type of grant, etc.

Participant 19: participant would add countries from Turkmenistan, for example, so that they could come to Kazakhstan and learn about the culture. Provide grants between universities. Help more Turkmen citizens so that they can cooperate more (if desired). So that they can see a different education system.

Participant 20: participant would suggest organizing events dedicated to uniting Central Asian students. There are already such events every year, but participants think more publicity should be given to them. Because students usually leave their countries, there should be more focus on studying within Central Asia — because education here isn't worse. Students should be sent on exchange — for example, every semester to a different Central Asian country. So they can study each other's cultures. Even if they know some facts about the countries, that's not enough.

Question 7: Do you think Central Asian countries are becoming more connected, or do they remain separate? Why?

Participant 1: participant believes each country still tries to remain independent. In participant 's home countries, people strongly preserve their culture and traditions, including traditional clothing. participant feel people believe separation is good. However, participant admits they can't say for sure, as they have lived in Kazakhstan for the past five years. They note that people trust their government for providing peace and shelter.

Participant 2: participant believes the region is connected by culture and history—these factors help unite the peoples of the region.

Participant 3: Yes, the countries are becoming closer because they are brotherly nations. People in the participant 's country think the same.

Participant 4: The region is still connected by culture and history. participant believes these factors help to unite the peoples within the region.

Participant 5: participant thinks development is happening, but slowly. Everything occurs at the official level—yes, they sign things, launch initiatives—but there's no major breakthrough yet. Maybe in the future. One example is humanitarian aid from Kyrgyzstan to its neighbors. It shows that cooperation exists and is strong, even if it progresses slowly.

Participant 6: At first glance, it seems like the region is divided, but in reality, the countries are very similar in appearance, culture, and language. You only realize someone is from a different country when they tell you. Otherwise, mentally and visually, they're like one whole. People are often surprised when they find out the participantis from Kyrgyzstan—especially because of how similar they are. But overall, the attitude is neutral.

Participant 7: participant is now in their third year, and the number of exchange students has increased significantly. Students from different countries are coming. participant think things are getting better every year. This is progressing, and it has become easier for students to go abroad on exchange programs, especially to Central Asian countries.

Participant 8: participant doesn't know if any integration or projects are happening. They have no thoughts on the topic. They are not very interested in it.

Participant 9: The countries remain separate. For example, disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan demonstrate how divided the region is. Integration efforts often result in nothing, and forums are mostly ineffective.

Participant 10: Of course, people want to unite. participants themselves want to study and stay here. That's why people support Central Asian integration. People in the participant 's country also support it. Very few people are against it.

Participant 11: participant doesn't know.

Participant 12: Yes, the countries are becoming more connected. For example, during Nowruz, participant saw students from different Central Asian countries celebrating together and sharing their traditional dishes. participant believes that the region's Turkic roots and cultural overlaps help build connection.

Participant 13: participant believes there is growing connection, especially among the youth, due to education, technology, and cultural similarities. However, participant also noted that government-level cooperation still lags behind grassroots enthusiasm.

Participant 14: participant thinks the countries should be more cooperative—especially considering the geopolitical situation in the region. Countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan need to work together. For example, water disputes involving the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers are growing concerns. These issues will only worsen in the future as demand increases. The region must address them now to avoid future conflict.

Participant 15: The countries are slowly becoming more connected—especially through education and trade. participant thinks young people are leading the way in terms of connection, especially with social media and regional events. But on the political level, countries still prefer to act independently. There's not much trust yet between governments.

Participant 16: participant believes that Central Asia is gradually becoming more coherent. Young people play a key role here. Because thanks to education, digital technologies, and exchange programs, new connections are being formed among society. But there are still some historical and political differences that persist.

Participant 17: The region is slowly moving towards unification. Because it is quite limited in resources. participant think it would be very good for the government to have regional integration, because they can work together.

Participant 18: It depends on the cities of each country. For example, in the capital of Tajikistan, people believe that Central Asia is becoming more connected, but in remote cities they do not think so and think that it is not so necessary. Also, in the capital, people want to continue to unite in Central Asia.

Participant 19: There used to be collectivity, but now people and countries are focused on individualism. Everyone wants to preserve their culture and stand out. For example, there was an academic mobility program between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but now it's gone. They want to promote their own universities. In the participant 's country, they don't say anything—everything is normal.

Participant 20: participant thinks the region is becoming more united. Because many tourists from Central Asia visit other Central Asian countries. And since there is a similar mentality, the countries should focus on that more so that they unite further and work on big joint projects. Including education — that way, there will be more progress and things will get better. More top universities will appear. Plus, the distance isn't that far — you can be at home and at school. Exchange programs are one of the aspects of Central Asian integration. For example, when you talk about your culture — that's how people grow closer. People in the participant 's country are very positive about this and are also in favor of uniting the countries. There are many programs and forums that come to the countries and focus on Central Asian cooperation — to make it better.

Question 8: Do you feel a sense of common identity with students from other Central Asian countries? Why or why not?

Participant 1: Yes, participant feels there is a shared mentality. People understand each other easily, and even the languages are similar. When people speak Kazakh with the participant, they understand. participant's sense of cultural similarity hasn't changed much during their stay in Kazakhstan since they had already lived in Azerbaijan before, which helped them adapt quickly.

Participant 2: Yes, participant do feel a sense of common identity, as mentioned earlier—thanks to shared history, similar cultures, and languages.

Participant 3: Yes, participant feels a sense of shared identity because they have similar traditions, and all in the region are Muslims.

Participant 4: Yes, participant does feel a shared identity. As mentioned earlier, thanks to shared history and the similarity of cultures and languages, participant feel a sense of common identity.

Participant 5: Partially mentioned, through comparisons of mentalities and personal experience.

Participant 6: Yes, because people look alike, share the same traditions, a common history, and Islamic culture. Unless someone tells you, you won't even know where they are from. – Yes, before arriving, participant thought Kyrgyz people were very different. Now they see they are almost the same.

Participant 7: participant has never thought about it before, and even after the question, they can't say they feel a sense of identity with the Tajik people.

Participant 8: Probably after moving to Kazakhstan. Before that, participant didn't really think about it.

Participant 9: In some ways, yes — especially through sports and among Turkic peoples ("We are Turks"). However, in daily life, that sense of unity is not really present. Tajikistan, for instance, feels more distant. Apart from a shared history, there's little that connects the region.

Participant 10: Yes, people are all similar. They have common goals and desires. participant says that people everywhere are the same — maybe the slang is different, but the meaning is the same. People are all the same and have a lot in common.

Participant 11: Yes, participant feels a sense of common identity.

Participant 12: Yes, participant does. They don't divide people by region or nationality. People are all Kazakhs or Turkic people, sharing similar traditions and holidays — like Nowruz, even though each country celebrates it in their own way (e.g., sumalak in Uzbekistan vs. nauryz kozhe in Kazakhstan). Yes, the participant's identity has strengthened here. Though born in Uzbekistan, they feel strongly connected to Kazakhstan and the broader Turkic community.

Participant 13: Yes, very much so. participant feel they share similar traditions, values, and languages. This feeling has grown stronger during participant's time in Kazakhstan. They now see themselves as part of a broader Central Asian community.

Participant 14: participant does feel a sense of common identity due to similarity in cultures.

Participant 15: Yes, participant does. People share a lot—language similarities, cultural values, even food. For example, talking to someone from Kyrgyzstan or Turkmenistan often feels like talking to someone

from home. There might be small differences, but overall they understand each other well. That creates a feeling of unity.

Participant 16: Rather, yes. Because they share cultural values and traditions. participant knows many people from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In many ways, their values are similar. This feeling appears during joint studies and in everyday communication. Because the participants realized more that there are many similarities between people. It has only changed for the better since moving here.

Participant 17: Yes, they share a similar language, think the same about the world. Even jokes are similar. Before coming here, participant didn't think that the region is connected, but after moving here it is clear for them that they share a similar identity. Also, history is similar.

Participant 18: After moving here, participants realized how similar people are. Not only culture and language, but also mentality.

Participant 19: Yes. Cultural values are the same. So the participant thinks everyone is similar. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are similar, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are similar. When participants moved to Kazakhstan, they did not feel that it was a completely different country from Tajikistan. Even the upbringing is the same. Before moving in, participant hadn't thought about it at all. And now they feel it more.

Participant 20: No. Because even though there are similar views on life, each country has its own identity. And its own uniqueness, and the participant believes it is important to keep the balance. Every country has its own identity.

Question 9: Have your perceptions of Central Asian integration changed after your experience of living and studying in Kazakhstan?

Participant 1: participant didn't notice significant changes but recalled cultural events hosted by the Turkmen Embassy where they felt a strong sense of cooperation and friendship between cultures.

Participant 2: participant 's view of regional integration has remained positive. They just hadn't really thought about it before coming here.

Participant 3: participant has always thought this way.

Participant 4: participant 's perception has remained positive—they still believe in regional integration. They just hadn't really thought about it before coming here.

Participant 5: Yes, participant sees growth and expansion of opportunities. Simplified migration rules make integration more realistic than before.

Participant 6: Yes. participant used to feel more of a difference, but now they feel almost complete cultural unity. Kazakhstan has become a comfortable home for them.

Participant 7: Yes, participant sees a positive trend. More exchange students, more opportunities, and overall, there's a sense of progress.

Participant 8: participant doesn't think so.

Participant 9: The ongoing bureaucratic difficulties and feelings of exclusion shifted the participant 's view.

Participant 10: This feeling strengthened once the participant started living in Kazakhstan. They had some sense of it before, but couldn't fully experience it. Now they fully understand it. People are similar and interact with one another.

Participant 11: participant doesn't think so.

Participant 12: Definitely. participant thought it would be difficult, but the experience exceeded expectations. They participated in programs like Work and Travel — opportunities they wouldn't have had if they stayed in Uzbekistan. A turning point was realizing they were not the only Kazakh from Uzbekistan studying here. That sense of community helped shift the participant 's perception.

Participant 13: Yes. Before coming to Kazakhstan, participant didn't think much about regional integration. But through interactions with peers and professors, they realized the importance of cooperation. A key moment was when students from different countries collaborated on a moot court competition. This made participants reflect on how well they can work together despite national differences.

Participant 14: participant doesn't think that their perception changed.

Participant 15: Absolutely. Before coming here, participant didn't think much about regional cooperation. They saw each country as very separate. But living and studying here, meeting people from across the region—it's made participants realize how connected they actually are. Now they see the potential for real integration if the focus is on the youth.

Participant 16: This feeling was reinforced by a moment during university events where students from Central Asian countries presented their cultures with national clothes, dishes, and dances. participants were surprised that while there are differences in some traditions, there is a similar respect for family and elders. A warm interaction helped them realize that there are more points of contact.

Participant 17: Yes, a lot. It happened in terms of national interactions. participants have gone to museums, amusement parks, and monuments where they found that there is a similar history, political background, and identity.

Participant 18: Yes. When participants lived in their own country, they did not notice a common identity with students from Central Asia, but after moving here they realized how similar they are. Not only culture and language, but also mentality.

Participant 19: participant doesn't know for sure. It exists between the countries. participant thinks it's a good thing. There are no examples.

Participant 20: participant has always thought that way. But they don't think it's a bad thing. Identity from their country is a feature — and everyone has their own. Everyone will have their own associations with each country. And that's one of the aspects of identity — and how people distinguish others. Each country has its own charm, and at the same time, they come together. They might have disagreements, but despite that, they are more united, and the countries themselves aren't that big — the traditions are similar, and that brings them closer.

Question 10: What do you think about regional cooperation in Central Asia?

Participant 1: participant views it positively, saying it's a good way for countries to learn from one another. participant couldn't recall specific cooperation events but emphasized the value of mutual experience.

Participant 2: participant can't recall a specific moment, but they see integration happening when they watch the news.

Participant 3: Relations are improving. participants are not treated differently—even though they are Turkmen, they are accepted as locals and people help them.

Participant 4: participant can't recall a specific moment, but they see that integration is happening because the countries' leaders are engaging with each other.

Participant 5: It is developing, but slowly and with limited impact so far. Nonetheless, real examples of support—like humanitarian aid—prove that cooperation is present.

Participant 6: It's necessary. The region has common interests, and if paperwork is simplified and exchange opportunities are provided, countries can become more united. – When participants started talking to students from Uzbekistan—they turned out to be very smart and open. participant began thinking about studying in Tashkent and realized how close the countries actually are.

Participant 7: participant thinks every year it gets better, and students are finding it easier to participate in exchange programs, especially if it's a Central Asian country.

Participant 8: participant doesn't follow any news, because they are not interested in it. They don't know if anything is happening. They haven't looked into the topic.

Participant 9: Yes, participant's views have changed. Before, they didn't think much about it, but now they see that the region has more in common than they expected. Studying here made participants more open to the idea of regional cooperation.

Participant 10: participant's worldview has shifted more towards the Kazakh side. Regarding regional cooperation — it is all happening within the diaspora. It has a very positive impact. Regional cooperation does exist. participant's family interactions influenced this change — they started using more Kazakh words in the family and among classmates.

Participant 11: To be honest, participant doesn't know.

Participant 12: In participant's opinion, cooperation is going okay.

Participant 13: Unfortunately, participant can't properly answer this question.

Participant 14: Yes, participant does. They're similar in culture and face the same problems—national identity, bureaucracy, corruption. Integration would help solve many of these issues. But the participant is also realistic: true integration requires political will and strong leadership. Corruption is a major barrier that needs to be addressed first.

Participant 15: participant thinks it's necessary, especially in terms of water, trade, and education. If countries in Central Asia worked together more, they could have a stronger voice globally. Right now,

cooperation is still surface-level and mostly led by political events, but the people-to-people level is more promising.

Participant 16: participant still wants new initiatives and exchange programs. This can facilitate integration. Thanks to academic mobility, participants have this opinion. Living abroad helps them delve deeper into this topic—about how Central Asia is united.

Participant 17: participant thinks that it is very good.

Participant 18: Yes. When participants lived in their own country, they did not notice a common identity with students from Central Asia, but after moving here they realized how similar they are. Not only culture and language, but also mentality.

Participant 19: participant does not know how to answer. They just think it is real in Central Asia.

Participant 20: Regional cooperation exists. The same student exchange programs. Not just studying, but also various other programs. participant 's opinion changed specifically because of studying in Kazakhstan. They used to think education in Central Asia wasn't great, but it turns out there are many good universities. Things are only getting better here.

Question 11: Do you see yourself working or living in another Central Asian country in the future? Why or why not?

Participant 1: participant would like to work in both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, ideally in an embassy setting.

Participant 2: Since the region has more or less similar languages and cultures, participant would actually prefer to gain new experiences in Europe—to work and live there.

Participant 3: participant will return to their home country and start working there. They want to live there with their parents. Also, because of the difficulties with documents. If there were no issues with paperwork, participant would have stayed in Kazakhstan to work and live. They would recommend Kazakhstan for studying—they always help. Yes, if the government and employers supported participants with documents, they would stay in Kazakhstan.

Participant 4: participant is the only child of their parents, so after graduation they plan to return home to live and work. If someone asked for a participant 's recommendation, they would confidently recommend Kazakhstan, because it offers very good education in the region.

Participant 5: Yes, participant does see themselves living and working in Kazakhstan. In a way, they grew up here, and the mentality is closer to theirs. When they go to Kyrgyzstan, it's pleasant, but living and working there would be a different matter. participant is more drawn to Kazakhstan, especially Astana.

Participant 6: participant would like to finish their bachelor's in Kazakhstan, but maybe do a master's in Uzbekistan. In the future—they plan to work in Kazakhstan. They feel comfortable here and see many opportunities. – Simplifying the process of obtaining citizenship would give more rights and access to the labor market.

Participant 7: Yes. Even though the participant has been living in Kazakhstan since first grade, they still feel a strong connection to Kyrgyzstan. They'd like to contribute to the development of their country, see if they can be useful, and gain experience working among Kyrgyz people.

Participant 8: No. participant think if they consider other countries—say, Europe or the U.S.—maybe they'd feel more comfortable living there, in a freer environment with less judgment. Because they feel uncomfortable when people might judge or think things about them. They want to be in a more open environment.

Participant 9: participant might consider living in Uzbekistan for a while — they like their approach to sports. But overall, participant plans to bring their entire family to Kazakhstan and settle here. They think simplified legal processes and better integration policies would make it easier.

Participant 10: participant plans to stay in Kazakhstan, in Almaty. Their plans are only here. Life is not hard for them.

Participant 11: Will see, however right now participant is not sure.

Participant 12: No, participant doesn't see themselves living elsewhere in Central Asia. They had a chance to go to the American University in Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan but chose not to. Kazakhstan felt more familiar and attractive — places like Astana drew them in. Familiarity and strong emotional

connection like the participant has with Kazakhstan. That's why they didn't choose Kyrgyzstan — it felt too unfamiliar.

Participant 13: Yes, especially in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. participant opportunities in legal consultancy and international cooperation. What would make this easier is visa liberalization, better recognition of legal qualifications, and more regional job platforms.

Participant 14: participant is not sure yet.

Participant 15: Yes, participant can see themselves working in Kazakhstan long-term, or even in Kyrgyzstan. They feel comfortable in the region, and there are good opportunities—especially in international organizations. It would be easier if visa policies were relaxed and work permits were easier to get. If those changes happen, participant think more young people would move around the region freely.

Participant 16: participant sees themselves living or working in Central Asia, and they are interested in working in Kazakhstan because there is a lot of business and marketing work here. They would have simplified professional barriers. participant don't mind returning to Tajikistan, but they are considering other options.

Participant 17: Yes, after this exchange experience participants would like to work in Central Asian countries and also in their own country. They would like to work in international economy centers or banks, or in research centers. participant thinks that maybe there will be some difficulties in language, language barriers. But they still can overcome this.

Participant 18: Yes. participant want to work in Central Asia because they understand that there are more opportunities here than in Europe, for example. It's easier to open a business and grow it here. So participants will definitely stay here.

Participant 19: participant wants to move to another country in a foreign country. But they want to improve education in their country. Education is like studying abroad, there are many talented people, but they don't have the resources and information to figure it out. To develop business in the field of education. It would be nice to work in Kazakhstan, but it is difficult because you need to get a residence permit. participant would like to work with people from Central Asia, because they made themselves. They are very hardworking and smart.

Participant 20: Yes. After finishing their studies, participant want to return to Tajikistan. But if there's an opportunity to work in Central Asia — they would accept. In the field of finance, investment. But such fields aren't very developed in their country. And in Kazakhstan there are such companies, and they'd like to try. participant would gladly work with people from Central Asia, and they enjoy all of it. Their dream is to work together with Central Asian people. Especially since the participant 's experience shows that no one holds negative views about their nationality. They're confident this will help them in the future.