

Uzbekistan: Reforms Leave Students Out in the Cold

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Teachers and students fear that higher education is becoming a privilege, not a right.

Every morning, a small group of teenagers gather at the entrance to a school in the Kashkadarya region of Karshi. They shuffle around, gazing hopefully at the door, hoping that someone will take pity on them and allow them to enter.

But headmistress Saiera Turaeva simply shrugs her shoulders. The Karshi city education department, in common with its counterparts across Uzbekistan, has ordered that senior school classes be cancelled from this month on, and she has no option other than to tell the young students to go home.

If the 15- to 17-year-olds affected want to continue their education, they will have to do so at one of the former Soviet republic's many colleges and lyceums.

The authorities argue that the decision, which came into force at the beginning of this academic year, is in the best interests of the country's youngsters. With older students moved out of secondary schools and into colleges and lyceums where they can learn specialised skills, officials claim that the education system will be strengthened.

However, the affected students and their parents believe that the opposite is true.

Abror Rakmatullaev, a 15-year-old former pupil at Turaeva's school, has had his dreams of being accepted for university crushed as he cannot afford to finish his secondary education at a college. Instead, he has taken a job as a trainee apartment renovations worker.

His mother Zumrad told IWPR, "I couldn't afford to send him [to a college], as we would have to pay for travel and food, and this is far more expensive than it would be at school."

Bokhodyr Azimov, father of Abror's fellow pupil Aziz, sees the closure of senior classes as state interference in the life of his son and their family.

"I am his father, and it should be up to me to decide where my son studies, but instead we are being forced to send him to college if he is to continue his education," he said angrily.

Aziz is one of Turaeva's former pupils who continues to go to his old school in the hope that he will be allowed to continue his education there.

"Many of the people in my year do not really care and have no wish to go to college, but I really want to finish my secondary education in school so that I can enrol at the law faculty of my local university," he told IWPR.

The Uzbek government began increasing the number of colleges in the republic in 1999 following a series of education reforms.

Almost every city in the former Soviet republic now boasts such colleges, which are well-funded and equipped when compared with the secondary schools. In the Kashkadarya region alone, there are 64 of the former catering for more than 51,000 pupils.

For many regional officials, building colleges is seen as a way to curry favour with President Islam Karimov, who spearheaded the 1999 reforms. But the idea of studying at such institutions was not accepted by the Uzbek population, and students have not taken places there if there were another option available to them.

Kholmurad Karomiv, deputy head of the Kashkadarya region college department, told IWPR that many potential students are put off by the fact that it takes three years of study to finish the secondary education phase at the colleges compared to only two years at school.

But observers believe that the generally poor standard of education available in the colleges is a greater factor.

Many parents now believe that students' lack of enthusiasm for the colleges has prompted the authorities to close down access to the senior secondary school classes – thus leaving pupils with no choice if they want to continue their education.

The government's recent decision to abolish correspondence courses in Uzbek universities has also come as a blow to the republic's students.

Amangul Davletova, an 18-year-old student from Nukus in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, had planned to study to be an economist, but did not want to give up her job in a bank.

However, shortly before the entrance exams were due to be held on June 24, Uzbek cabinet ministers issued a decree ending the correspondence course system, due to its "discrepancy with modern requirements of study". Davletova has since abandoned her career plans.

Professor Karimbai Eschanov, a teacher with three decades of experience, told IWPR that abolishing this form of study "is the biggest mistake possible", which would affect young women most of all. Previously, a female student could marry and have children and still keep up with her studies by correspondence.

"In the present situation, many of them have to abandon higher education altogether," he said.

Gulzada Rakhimova, a university teacher and the head of a non-governmental women's organisation in Nukus, agreed that women will be primarily affected – but added that men also stand to lose out.

"Young men who intend to combine work and study will have to make the choice between the two. Many who give up their jobs in favour of education will be forced to rely on their parents, who will have to support them during their studies," she said.

The disabled are also be affected. Malika Askarova, who has been walking on crutches since childhood, had been keen to study by correspondence when she enrolled at a university in Karakalpakstan, but is now forced to attend daily lectures rather than work from home.

“It’s very hard for me already, but the most difficult time will be in winter, when I will have trouble moving around safely,” she said. “Couldn’t they have kept the correspondence option for those who genuinely can’t attend classes easily?”

But one teacher from the Karakalpakstan state university, who wished to remain anonymous, stood by the decision to abolish the correspondence courses.

“Students who study by correspondence pay bribes to help them pass their exams,” she said bluntly.

However, many students and parents allege that bribes are also paid by regular students, and argue that getting rid of the remote-learning courses will not solve the problem but rather deprive many young people of a university education.

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