

2<sup>nd</sup> World Conference on Design, Arts and Education DAE-2013

## Higher Education and Sustainable Development in Kazakhstan

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### Abstract

In recent years, the understanding of the global economy has shifted. As economies across the world continue to rapidly develop, it has become clear that reliance on natural resource exploitation for growth and development is unsustainable. An essential part of developing a new model for development for any country will be reforming the education system of that country to meet the needs of a changing economy. This article analyzes the case of Kazakhstan and the steps it has taken to reform its education system in the context of sustainable development. Kazakhstan's experience reflects challenges and attempted reforms throughout the post-Soviet space. The reforms enacted by the Kazakhstani government have taken initial steps towards shaping its education system to support a new economy, though many challenges remain to be addressed

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

*Keywords:* Education, Sustainable Development, Kazakhstan, Higher Education reformation

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, the world has radically shifted its conception of development. Half a decade ago, in the early 1960s, development focused heavily on methods for supporting economic growth. This model of development is often referred to as a “frontier” model or “exploitative” model, due to its emphasis on discovering and exploiting new natural resource deposits. In the past two decades, this model has begun to lose its dominance. Conceptualizations of development have begun to trend in favor of approaches to poverty reduction and social development [1]. Most notably, a new concept has arisen to address these concerns—the concept of “sustainable development”.

In 2006, Kazakhstan adopted a state document on the country's transition to a model of sustainable development. The document notes that this transition is an essential step in the republic's development. Under

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current conditions, growth and development in Kazakhstan cannot simply continue down the path of natural resource exploitation. The transition away from this “exploitation” model requires new and innovative solutions, including new technological approaches to increasing energy and natural resource efficiency. Without education reforms aimed at training a new generation of workers to meet these demands, this transition will be impossible.

The case of Kazakhstan is informative as a model for conducting this sustainable development transition in the post-Soviet space. The former Soviet republics pose a unique challenge to pursuing models of sustainable development; in the past two decades, these states have not only undergone massive economic reforms, but also have faced the challenge of adopting new social and environmental policies. These challenges have been met with varying levels of success in various social and economic sectors. The depth of reform pursued in Kazakhstan’s education sector provides a thorough example of how this transition can be addressed and what pitfalls face post-Soviet states in the adapting their education systems to support a sustainable development model.

## 2. The Concept of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is often conceptualized of consisting of three distinct branches: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and sociopolitical sustainability. This sustainable development scheme can be more simply conceptualized as a triangle with a clear list of “ingredients” in each of the three sections: economic, social, and environmental.



*<http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/images/what-pic.gif>  
 figure 1*

One of the most important factors in development, which touches upon each section of the sustainable development triangle, is education. Education is evaluated as a development indicator on local, national, regional, and even global levels. One of the regions where education has become a primary development focus is the former Soviet Union, specifically Central Asia. The case of Kazakhstan provides an instructive window on processes of education reform in Central Asia in the context of sustainable development.

## 3. Education in Kazakhstan

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