

Problems and prospects of convergence of Higher Education Systems in countries of the Eurasian Economic Union

Problemas y perspectivas de convergencia de los sistemas de educación superior en los países de la Unión Económica Euroasiática

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ABSTRACT:

This article, identifies the problems and outlines the prospects of creation and development of a single education space on the territory of member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), regarded by the authors as an important part of economic integration on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Taking into account the foreign experience, as well as the existing elements of education integration in the former Soviet states, the authors outline the main directions of integration cooperation in the sphere of higher education in EEU countries, establish a set of primary tasks and conclude that their realization requires the adoption of a single action plan approved by national governments, the creation of a special supranational body to coordinate the activities, and, most importantly, the understanding of the necessary nature of this process by all EEU members.

Keywords: Eurasian Economic Union, integration of higher education, single education space, legislation, harmonization of education, interuniversity cooperation.

RESUMEN:

Este artículo identifica los problemas y describe las perspectivas de creación y desarrollo de un espacio educativo único en el territorio de los Estados miembros de la Unión Económica Euroasiática (EEE), considerado por los autores como una parte importante de la integración económica en el territorio del antigua Unión Soviética. Teniendo en cuenta la experiencia extranjera, así como los elementos existentes de la integración educativa en los antiguos estados soviéticos, los autores describen las principales direcciones de la cooperación de integración en el ámbito de la educación superior en los países EEU, establecen un conjunto de tareas primarias y concluyen que su realización requiere la adopción de un plan de acción único aprobado por los gobiernos nacionales, la creación de un organismo supranacional especial para coordinar las actividades y, lo más importante, la comprensión de la naturaleza necesaria de este proceso por parte de todos los miembros de la EEU.

Palabras clave: Unión Económica Euroasiática,

1. Introduction

Today, international economic integration, defined as a process of convergence of national economies of different countries that leads to their gradual economic interpenetration based on objective processes of strengthening interdependence of national economic systems, is one of the key directions of foreign economic policy of a significant number of states and state unions. Economic integration, manifesting itself in market expansion and joint use of national scientific, industrial and technical potentials, allows not only to ensure economic growth and stronger positions of integration groups and their members in the global economy, to make them more steady against external threats, but also provides for the stable development of the global economy as such, since the convergence of national economies largely mitigates the chances of political conflicts among the states.

As evidenced by the experience of the most successful interstate unions, economic integration gradually leads to the need of certain unification of human resourcing of this process and, accordingly, to the need of convergence of national systems of professional education. If we take European integration (the EU) as an example, an integration project that became known as the Bologna process was launched to solve these tasks, resulting in the creation of a single European higher education space. The processes of interstate education integration take place in other parts of the world as well. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has carried out the following higher education integration initiatives: 1) a broad network of programs has been elaborated in order to promote the idea of harmonization of national education systems and, consequently, the idea of forming a single education space; 2) a number of official declarations have been signed by ASEAN member states; 3) the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Council has been established (Supachai Yavaprabhas, 2008).

2. Methods

The subject matter of this research is the the education aspect of cooperation is an important element of interstate integration policy, no matter the region. The authors aim to reveal the benefits integration of higher education. In order to outline the prospects of interstate education integration within the EEU and its possible development vectors, primarily in the higher education sphere, it is necessary to understand, what this process is really comprised of, how it works and what internal controversies it harbors.

The legislative acts related to education as the most fully reflections of historical processes in this area were used as the main sources for this work.

Methods of research include structural and system approaches, and the following methods have been used as a methodological basis of a research: economical and statistical data analysis, comparative analysis, expert estimates, observation, poll, analytical modeling.

Besides the released statistical information, the conclusions are based on the results of the social and economic research conducted by the authors and under their guidance. This manifold and multi aspect research enabled us to draw new conclusions, and also to review some existing views.

3. Results

Thus, the education aspect of cooperation is an important element of interstate integration policy, no matter the region.

This is also true for the task of education integration in the former Soviet Union, within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – an international organization for regional economic integration, which now comprises the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus,

the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation as its members. The Republic of Moldova has an observer status in the organization. Over 50 countries have shown interest in joining or participating in the Union in some form.

As follows from the EEU's official documents, this international organization was created in order "to create proper conditions for sustainable economic development of the member states in order to improve the living standards of their population; to seek the creation of a common market for goods, services, capital and labor within the Union; to ensure comprehensive modernization, cooperation and competitiveness of national economies within the global economy" (Art. 4 of the EEU Treaty, 29 May 2014). EEU's creation means the transfer to a different level of cooperation among certain countries that used to be parts of the Soviet Union.

It is evident that HR issues within the EEU may be resolved consistently through interstate education integration, with a prospect of creating a single education space on its territory. It should be clarified that the EEU Treaty does not contain any concrete provisions regarding such a supranational system. The main document of the union only touches upon the issues of education in one article, regulating the mutual recognition of education certificates, and even at that certain professions are excluded from mutual recognition (medical, pharmaceutical, educational and legal spheres) (Part 3 of Art. 97). There is currently no detailed legal framework for the creation and functioning of a single EEU education space.

In order to outline the prospects of interstate education integration within the EEU and its possible development vectors, primarily in the higher education sphere, it is necessary to understand, what this process is really comprised of, how it works and what internal controversies it harbors.

In light of the above, international higher education integration is an objective, dynamically developing process of convergence of national education systems, the increase of their complementarity, whereby higher education gains a world-wide and systemic nature, boosted by its feature of globality. In the state, legal sense, the term "higher education integration" may be defined as the aggregate of political, legal, economic, social and cultural processes that lead to strengthening of coordination of activities and cooperation and on to the possible unification of certain education institutions, of their complexes, of national systems.

The development of this process is associated with the need to overcome a number of objective complications and controversies, the most significant of which are listed below.

- Both in the global and regional aspects, higher education is a set of elements that are interconnected, yet different by nature: there are education institutions that establish direct ties with foreign partners and organizations; certain national and regional higher education systems elaborating a common development strategy; finally, different international education organisations and associations, contributing, under the auspices of UNESCO, to the unification of the world's higher education into a single system. Herewith, the higher education institutions and organisations are sufficiently, although differently, independent in the material and academic sense. Within a market framework they interact on different organizational levels of higher education in the forms of cooperation or competition, working out their own strategies and tactics. At this time, the international aspect is not the main or dominating one, but it is still present, used as a reference point for solving regional and national tasks by higher education systems.
- Higher education is becoming more autonomous from economic, social and, moreover, from national and global political systems. This process is based on the aforementioned universal norms of material and academic freedom of activities of universities, as well as the growing importance of international conventions and recommendations defining the development prospects for national higher education systems. The formation of the specific nature of a self-reproducing, self-developing associative global system (as well as of regional interstate systems) of higher education is a process that is not regulated in administrative ways; yet it formulates the ideology of development for all education systems – national, regional, international ones, and in certain cases this may spark controversies with the national interests and the functions of administrative bodies.
- Many regional components of the global higher education system currently possess stability,

which is a feature of systematic nature. This stability is acquired through constant reproduction of the system's own structural elements, human resources and norms regulating its functions, in the abovementioned manner. This, in turn, gets amplified through comprehensive "ingrowth" into the social and economic structures of countries and the global economy in general. Precisely this factor leads to the constant adaptation of higher education systems to the changing conditions of the modern world and largely defines their stability.

- A complex problem is the elaboration of a general, if not universal, approach to the content of education from the viewpoint of its adequacy to the specific quantitative and qualitative requirements of the national labor markets, which in turn mirror the specific structure of the technical and technological levels of national economies, which are also subject to gradual convergence. Two processes are running simultaneously – the integration of economies (labor market) and of higher education. The task is to elaborate a single dynamic for these processes as elements of one system, without which their own integration will not be possible.
- Another complex task is to unify the methodology of assessment of the quality of higher education, of education of professionals in national (and integrated) higher education systems. The existing assessment systems will not be described here in detail, but the authors would like to simply point out that the notion of quality of higher education does not up to this point have a single definition either on the international level or within the national systems. The practical result is discrepancies in the assessment of this quality.
- Complications related to the language and cultural aspects of higher education integration should be especially pointed out. All the jointly elaborated and used information flows in the educational, scientific, methodical, organizational and other spheres need a single representation language, but for this all the people working in the integrated higher education system need to speak that language.

The difficulties listed above are to a great degree based on the fact that the higher education systems of different countries have different functioning scales; different levels of education flexibility and variability; different levels of integration with the labor market, with industrial and financial actors; different levels of market mechanisms, centralization and autonomy of education institutions; their diversity in terms of size, functions, curricula, education technologies, financing sources and management schemes, education standards; differences in concentration and allocation of education institutions across the countries. Integration does not have a great development potential, if there are wide gaps in the social and cultural, economic and scientific development of certain countries and regions.

4. Discussion

All the above statements regarding international higher education integration, including the listed problems, equally apply to the formation of a single education space of the Eurasian Economic Union.

However it should be pointed out that even taking into account all the controversies and differences in the contents and structure of higher education in EEU countries, the following general features may aid the integration process:

- preserved elements of a single higher education system that used to exist for a long time;
- preserved use of the Russian language in different spheres, including education, which makes it possible to use Russian as cooperation tool;
- common problems of transfer to new forms of organization of the higher education process (in particular within the framework of Bologna process);
- implementation (although on different scales) of market mechanisms in higher education systems;
- existence of the private sector of higher education;
- development of different forms of international and interuniversity cooperation on different levels of activity of higher education systems.

When defining the basics of higher education integration in EEU countries, one should proceed from the underlying principle of fundamental importance of the higher education institutions themselves (as the main integration subjects) for the integration process. It is through the higher education facilities of different levels and their active cooperation that the necessary integration of separate national education structures may be reached, leading to general integration. Naturally, a joint organizational, financial and otherwise supporting

infrastructure is required here.

The process of integration activities of higher education institutions (naturally supported by the necessary legal, financial and other infrastructure) takes place on several levels of construction of education systems. The first level is the integration of state and private education institutions (of their complexes), comprising the national higher education systems of EEU countries, in different activities; the second level is the integration of cluster-type education complexes: of higher education institutions and other organizations, united into education, scientific and industrial complexes; the third level is the transfer to integration of national higher education systems in general. On all levels, the integration processes are in many ways interrelated and interdependent, but may be examined separately.

Integration should follow a single policy on all these levels, using interrelated procedures and schedule. The processes should not necessarily run simultaneously, but should follow a common pattern and truly be parts of one plan.

Let us consider the first level of integration and the existing basis of this process in more detail. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, during the 2015/2016 academic year there were 1187 higher education institutions on the territory of the Union, with a total number of 5 845 thousand students and 361.8 thousand faculty members. The largest part of these institutions, students and faculty members is located in the Russian Federation – 75 %, 82 % and 77 % accordingly.

Table 1

Number of higher education institutions in EEU countries and the number of students studying in them (at the beginning of the academic year)
(Official website of the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n. d.;
Official website of the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, n. d.)

	Academic year 2005/2006		Ac. year 2011/2012		Ac. year 2012/2013		Ac. year 2013/2014		Ac. year 2014/2015		Ac. year 2015/2016	
	I	S	I	S	I	S	I	S	I	S	I	S
Armenia	89	98	68	95	65	90	63	85	62	79	60	84
Belarus	55	383	55/54	446	54	429	54	395	54	363	52	336
Kazakhstan	181	776	146	629	139	572	128	527	126	477	127	459
Kyrgyzstan	51	231	53	239	54	232	55	223	53	214	52	199
Russia	1068	7065	1080	6490	1046	6074	969	5646	950	5209	896	4767

Note: *I – number of institutions (units); S – number of students (thousands of persons).

Table 2

Number of faculty members of higher education institutions in EEU countries (thousands of persons) (Official website of the Federal State Statistics Service, n. d.;
Official website of the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.)

	2005	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Armenia	8,6	8,3	8,4	8,8	9,1	8,3	8,4	7,9	7,9
Belarus	22,9	23,6	24,1	24,5	24,7	24,6	23,9	23,3	21,9

Kazakhstan	43,4	37,8	39,2	39,6	40,5	41,2	41,6	40,3	38,1
Kyrgyzstan	13,5	13,0	12,7	12,1	12,8	12,6	14,1	13,1	14,2
Russia	358,9	378,7	377,8	356,8	348,2	341,6	319,3	299,7	279,7

Number of higher education institutions in EEU countries presents in Table 3. In recent years, the overall number of students and graduates of higher education institutions in all EEU countries has been around 1.5 – 1.7 mln people per year. Herewith, almost in all countries, except for the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan, the number of graduates is decreasing, which is primarily explained by the demographics of the countries concerned (Gretchenko, Gretchenko, Demenko and Gorokhova, 2017).

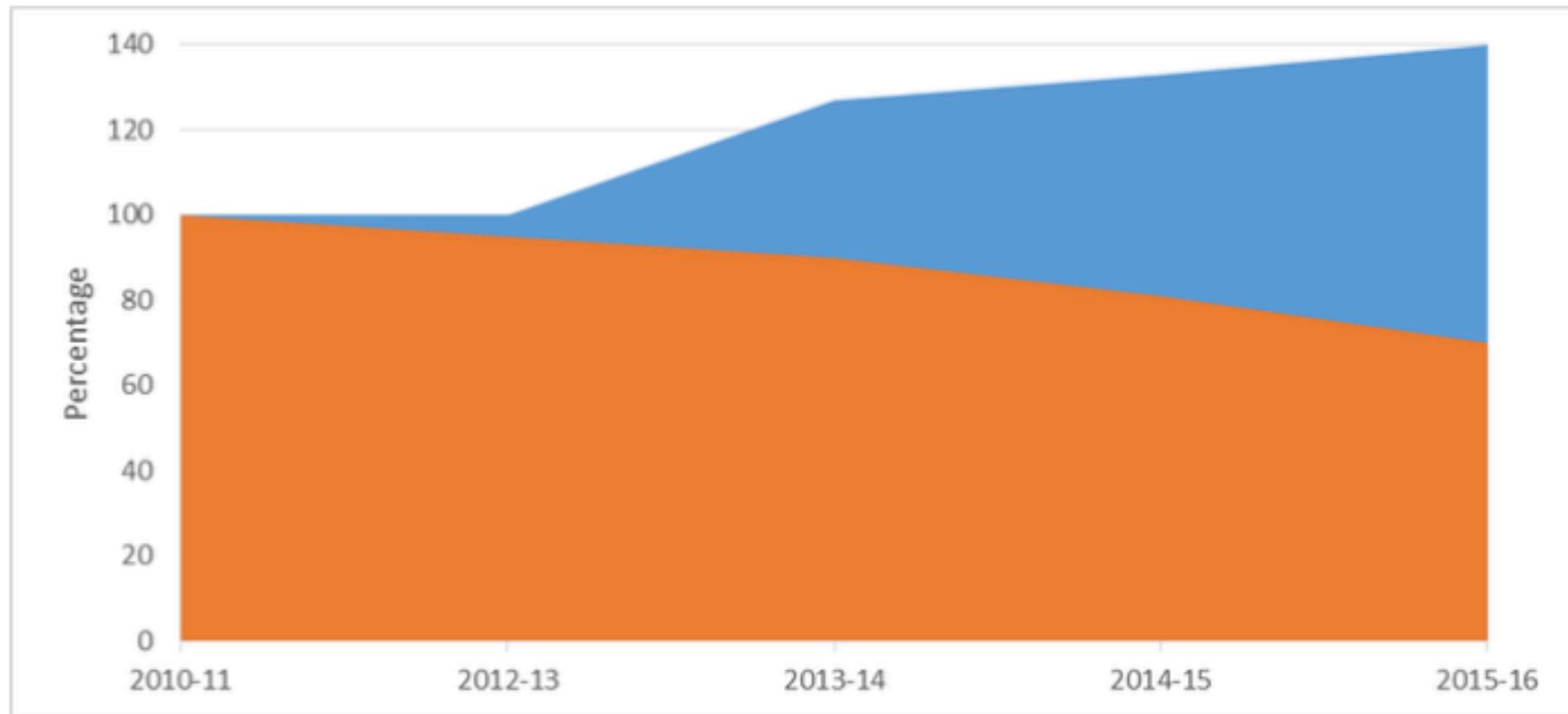
Table 3
Number of higher education institutions graduates in EEU countries
(thousands of persons) (Official website of the Federal State Statistics Service, n. d.)

	2000	2005	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Armenia	9,8	13,3	26,1	23,4	23,9	24,9	24,6	21,9	19,7	12,7
Belarus	38,7	53,6	68,8	74,0	73,3	75,8	84,6	82,7	81,1	78,0
Kazakhstan	64,6	154,2	196,7	176,0	162,0	160,9	171,6	172,7	177,7	147,2
Kyrgyzstan	17,9	32,9	33,5	38,1	38,0	41,8	41,7	41,3	40,8	41,7
Russia	635,1	1151,6	1358,5	1442,3	1467,9	1442,9	1399	1291	1226,1	1300,5

In the academic year 2015/2016, the Republic of Kazakhstan had the largest number of students (trainees, attendees) in higher education facilities per 10 000 persons – 379, followed by the Republic of Armenia (358), the Russian Federation (307), the Kyrgyz Republic (296) and the Republic of Belarus (282).

Higher education institutions within the EEU are already cooperating on a large scale, and this trend continues to grow, which is evidenced by student exchange statistics (carried out on various conditions). For example, in the academic year 2015/2016, there were 102.1 thousand students studying in EEU higher education institutions, who came from other EEU member countries. This is 41 % more than five years ago (Results of Task Fulfillment on Sustainable Development in the EEU Region. Report of the Eurasian Economic Commission). As pointed out in the report of the Eurasian Economic Commission, the aforementioned positive dynamics were observed against the background of “general decrease of the number of students in higher education institutions” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Number of students in higher education institutions



Blue: Number of students coming from other EEU member states;
Orange: Total number of students

Herewith, during the academic year 2015/2016, there were 60.8 thousand students-citizens of other EEU countries studying in Russian higher education institutions (Table 4) (1.2 % of the total number of students in Russia), which is almost 12.6 % more than in the academic year 2014/2015 and 18 % more than in 2013/2014.

Table 4

Number of students-citizens of EEU countries studying in Russia at the beginning of the academic year (thousands of persons) (Russian Statistics Yearbook, 2016)

	2013/14			2014/15			2015/16		
	T*	I**	IT***	B	O	MC	B	O	MC
Armenia	2,3	1,1	0,6	2,4	1,3	0,5	2,3	1,2	0,6
Belarus	15,6	3,1	1,2	10,0	3,6	0,7	8,3	3,4	0,6
Kazakhstan	31,4	21,2	1,9	38,8	25,7	2,1	46,4	30,0	1,7
Kyrgyzstan	2,2	1,8	1,0	2,8	2,4	1,0	3,8	3,2	1,0

Note: *T – Total; **I – Including those undergoing intramural studies;
***IT – Aside from that, number of students studying on the basis of international treaties.

In strategic perspective, Russia and its former Soviet Union partners have a significant additional basis for development of integration processes – these processes will develop in a social and economic environment that has been interwoven by a multitude of economic, political, social and cultural relations among its separate participants for hundreds of years.

An important direction of interuniversity cooperation is the participation of higher education institutions in different unions and associations, which is an example of the second level of integration. This gives the institutions significantly broader options in adapting to the economic situations of EEU countries. One of the best examples of such associations is the *Euroasian Universities Association*, which has been functioning for more than 20 years now with the aim of “exchanging experience, coordination and organization of joint work of universities in the sphere of educational and methodical, scientific and research, cultural and

enlightening, social activities of universities of the Eurasian region” (Charter of the Euroasian Universities Association, 2009; Education in Belarus in the Context of International Statistics, 2013)

The most effective forms of interuniversity cooperation are academic and scientific exchange programs, programs of internship and of further education of staff members. Moreover, interuniversity cooperation may develop through joint use of material assets in the form of collective use centers, labs, technopolises, technoparks, aimed at joint realization of scientific projects, industrial implementation of innovative solutions.

Another important way to both strengthen interuniversity cooperation and develop an integrated education space is *information cooperation* – the creation of a single, constantly updated database storing information regarding research in high-priority spheres, aggregating the patents, licenses and other results of intellectual activity. Cooperation in this sphere is also possible through creation and development of joint digital libraries, other databases.

Having clarified the terminology of higher education integration and having defined the main patterns, premises and problems of development of these processes in the former Soviet Union within the EEU, in conclusion of our study we will examine in more detail the main tasks for the further progress of integration in EEU member states, including the integration of their higher education systems.

Such tasks may include:

- to ensure real, effective interrelation among higher education, science and industry within the EEU;
- to start monitoring the expected numbers and professional structure of HR demand on the labor market of certain countries of the integrated union and of the union in general;
- to elaborate a system of methods and forms of stimulating mutual interstate process of drawing students into higher education institutions of certain countries;
- to find ways of assessment and establish the criteria of adequacy of contents of higher education to the demands of economics, politics, social and cultural sphere of certain countries participating in the integration;
- to establish common principles and approaches to the forming of contents and technologies of education, assessment of its quality; to bring the quality of education of different professionals to a universal level in the countries participating in the integration;
- to find ways of effective use of the joint scientific and educational potential;
- to form measures to make the higher education institutions more interested and involved in the processes of integration;
- to find methods of stimulating growth of the overall scope and quality of higher education, which will help prevent the “brain drain” from countries participating in the integration;
- to elaborate an incentive mechanism making the national education systems and scientific schools more competitive, while preserving academic solidarity and mutual assistance (Zornikov and Volkova 2001);
- to strengthen international partnership between the higher education systems of the countries participating in the integration and the higher education systems of other countries and their associations;
- to elaborate a mechanism that will stimulate development of joint higher education institutions of countries participating in the integration, including financial assistance;
- to form a permanent effective system of coordination of activities of higher education institutions and of their associations in certain countries;
- to jointly use innovative informational technologies with an aim of creating modern campuses and research platforms;
- to elaborate a legal framework for the formation and functioning of an integral higher education system, its separate sectors and branches.

Each of these primary tasks suggests creation of a complex of sub-tasks.

For example, the first task presupposes a systematic definition of optimal ways of gradual integration of higher education of certain countries into an integrated higher education system with preservation of all the useful results previously acquired by each of the systems.

At the same time, in accordance with this task, the process of integration must not contradict the existing relations of multi-vector cooperation of higher education systems of certain countries with other education systems, including the American and Asian ones. The development of fruitful cooperation and preservation of a common education space with the countries of partnering regional, political and economic unions are of particular significance here (e.g. for the EEU these will be the countries of Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

Another of the sub-tasks premised on tasks 1, 4 and 8 (and to some degree on others as well) is the need to determine a common language for actual cooperation, because integration convergence and the development of different contacts among countries and nations is seriously hindered by the language barrier. State borders become more transparent and limitations of economic systems become vaguer between countries within integration associations, but the language barriers remain rigid. This is why the task of overcoming them has gone beyond pedagogics and gained political significance; its solution is an important precondition for forming local integration entities.

5. Conclusion

All the above statements regarding the educational integration of EEU countries demonstrate the need to create certain centralized structures for the forming higher education integration entity, which will coordinate this very process.

First of all, a Coordination Centre needs to be created, that will take further steps toward forming an education space that is network-based, not hierarchically constructed. This will require the Centre to function as a representative body for all countries of the Eurasian region, on an equal basis.

Secondly, there is a need to create an international group that will study the problems of higher education integration and find ways to solve them, assess possible risks and forecast future development of integrating education processes in the Eurasian region, taking into account the universal processes of globalization.

Thirdly, it is reasonable to stimulate the convergence of content and technologies of education of higher education systems in Eurasia not only toward unification, but also toward diversification of the educational sphere. This should correlate with the main needs of the labor market in a given region, mirror the social and cultural specifics of the regional education system and be of economic interest both for that region and, in prospect, for the union as a whole.

Fourthly, during the integration of EEU's higher education systems it is necessary to constantly monitor these processes and ensure their compliance with the tasks set forth, with the capacities of certain member states, as well as of the economic union as a whole.

The realization of primary tasks laid out above requires joint coordination of efforts by all member countries, first of all within the framework of the outlined directions. It also requires a single action plan approved by national governments, the creation of a special supranational body that will coordinate the corresponding work. Needless to say, this process requires a lot of effort, harbors many controversies and requires huge organizational input. However, it is possible to carry out this process, if all the actors understand its utmost importance for all the EEU countries. It is the authors' opinion that the materials presented in this study may contribute to the realization of the aforementioned task, since they once again demonstrate not only the paramount role of education and the existence of a single education space for the realization of integration within the EEU, but also the different positive opportunities for development of education systems of all the member states of this union.

Gratitude

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