

Education in Turkmenistan

Context

Impact of the economic crisis

Turkmenistan's isolation from global markets protected it from much of the economic crisis. The economy was affected insofar as the external demand for hydrocarbon exports reduced, resulting in a fall in the production of natural gas and oil. However, diversification of gas export markets bore fruit, as new pipelines to China and Iran became operational in 2009 and 2010, respectively. As a result, hydrocarbon production is expected to increase significantly in the next five years, translating into growing revenues. This favourable outlook will accelerate current economic reforms, improve public financial management and stimulate private sector growth.

Governmental reforms and the robust macroeconomic situation in the nation have aided a fully functional and convertible exchange rate. The largest impact from the financial crisis was the sharp reduction in the price of exports, such as metals and hydrocarbons. This reduction was compounded by the loss of the Russian gas giant Gazprom as a leading export client. The combination resulted in significant revenue losses for Turkmenistan. However, the development of alternative markets in China and Iran could sustain the current levels of income.

The country's GDP continues to grow, but not at the remarkable growth rate attained over the last few years (Turkmenistan's GDP grew by over 500 per cent between 2000 and 2006). In 2009, Turkmenistan's GDP (PPP) per capita was US\$37,059. A large amount of national income has been channelled into infrastructure development at the expense of increasing spending in the social sector. Turkmenistan's Human Development Index (HDI) for 2010 is 0.669, placing it in the medium human development category; this is below the average HDI of 0.717 for countries in Europe and Central Asia, and above the average of 0.592 for medium human development countries. Turkmenistan has an HDI rank of 87 out of 169 countries. Its



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'HDI neighbours' in Europe and Central Asia (i.e., countries that are close in HDI rank and population size) are Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, which had HDI rankings of 102 and 109, respectively.

Education reform

After nearly two decades of regressive policies, the 2007 national elections yielded hope for reforms to improve the educational system. Despite declining education spending, the new government of Turkmenistan has made progress toward education reforms. The following are some notable reform efforts:

- Education has been recognized as a national priority and the government has undertaken a comprehensive education sector review.
- The government raised compulsory education from 9 to 10 years.
- The president announced that 'model schools' were to be built in all five regions to demonstrate interactive teaching and learning methodologies.
- Twenty-six child-friendly schools (CFS) have been created in Ashgabat and regional centres with UNICEF support to demonstrate best practices for further nationwide replication of CFS.
- The Ministry of Education (MoE), in partnership with UNICEF, completed curriculum guides in mathematics, geography and technical/vocational education that suggest new approaches to content development, teaching and testing.

Quick Facts about education in Turkmenistan

Total population	4.8 million
Percentage of GDP spent on education	24%
Net pre-primary school enrolment	24%
Net attendance ratio (NAR) in primary school, 2007	99%
Net attendance ratio (NAR) in secondary school, 2007	84%
Ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (out of 179 countries)	162

Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010; ChildInfo 2008, UNICEF Turkmenistan

- Reforms of higher education and vocational schooling are also underway. They centre on the introduction of new technologies. The government re-introduced vocational secondary schools and launched post-graduate and doctoral studies at national universities. Over 200 Turkmen were admitted to Russian universities to major in agriculture, veterinary science, management, geology, drilling, mathematics and computer science, law, medicine and other subjects.

Access to education

While primary enrolment rates are above average and secondary attendance is slowly improving, greater access to pre-primary and tertiary education is needed. Turkmenistan, having achieved universal primary education for all students (per the MDGs), has set a new national target for education: improvement of quality and achievement of international standards by 2015.

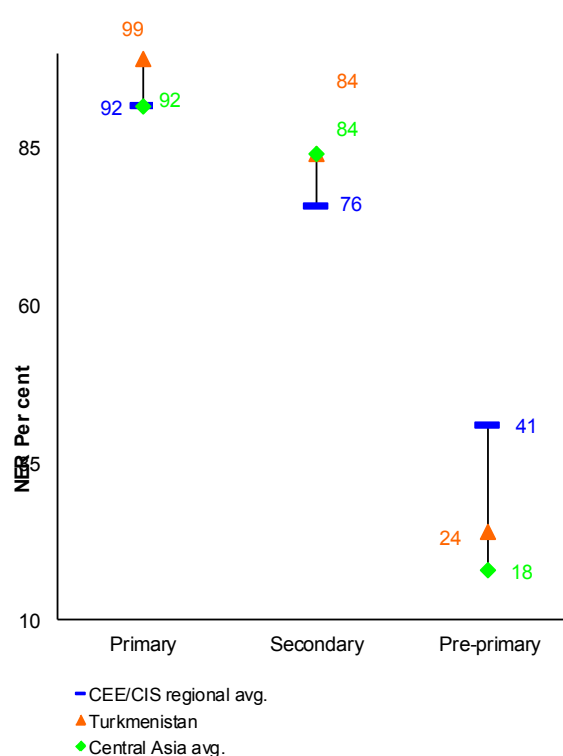
Early childhood education

Access to pre-primary education remains scarce, especially for hard-to-reach populations. The pre-primary enrolment rate is 24 per cent, which is below the regional average. Disaggregating the data by location reveals a large disparity between urban and rural areas. Approximately 57 per cent of urban children attend pre-primary education, while only 5 per cent of their rural peers do. A National Early Childhood Development Plan of Action is under consideration by the government that will direct more resources at early learners. UNICEF is also making strides in raising awareness about school readiness for the youngest students.

Basic education

Turkmenistan's primary school net enrolment rate (NER) is 99 per cent, which is above the regional average (see Figure 1). This widespread coverage reflects remnants of the Soviet education system that provided education to all children. A real challenge in access to education is in secondary school, where the net enrolment rate drops to 84 per cent. This is above the Central Asian average, but still not sufficient. This is especially worrying considering that 40 per cent of Turkmenistan's

Figure 1: Comparing education net enrolment rates (NER) in Turkmenistan to subregional and regional averages, 2007



population is under the age of 15. The government is pursuing a variety of measures to improve the access to and quality of education:

- In 2009 UNICEF provided the Ministry of Education with key technical assistance for raising the quality of education and achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals and improving school curriculum.
- The Government of Turkmenistan carried out a thorough study of parenting practices, infrastructure needs, the state of early learning and an analysis of the education sector.
- Under the state programme on rural development for access to health and education, the government continues to invest heavily in large-scale infrastructure and public sector development projects, including construction of schools.

Tertiary education in Turkmenistan consists of a dozen specialized institutions and a state university. Admission is extremely competitive, and in 2001 the government focused on higher education with the aim of eliminating bribery and improving both the quality and professional standards. New textbooks and other materials were purchased.

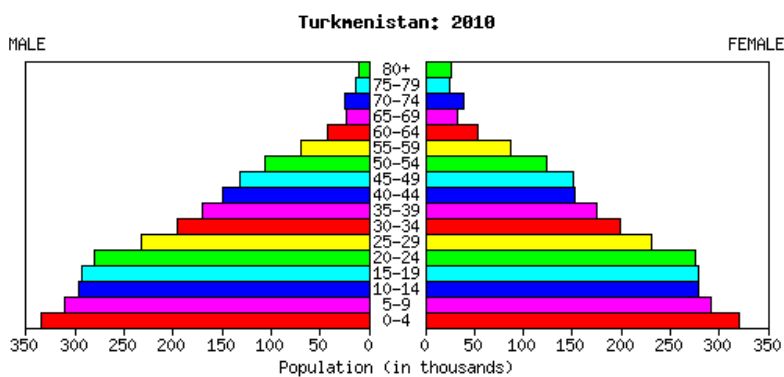
Children with disabilities

There are 14 institutions for children with disabilities in Turkmenistan. Some of the schools focus on specific disabilities, such as students with vision or hearing impairments, while others are more general in scope. Government funding and community donations are the major form of support for the institutions. Sports have historically been



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Figure 2. Estimated population in Turkmenistan, 2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base.

an integral part of the institutional experience, along with life skills and some academic learning. Poor physical conditions, overcrowding, lack of supplies and poor teacher preparation are some of the issues facing these institutions.

A common belief is that regular schools are not prepared to accommodate special education students. The small number of children with disabilities who do attend regular schools do not receive any accommodations or support, unless a parent chooses to attend with them and care for them.

A recent survey administered to parents in Turkmenistan highlighted that families are strongly against the institutionalization of children with disabilities.

Educational challenges facing adolescents and youth

Youth comprise one quarter of Turkmenistan’s population. Most of these young people have high rates of literacy and competency in science, language and the arts, but they lack skills, such as communication and healthy lifestyle education. Societal expectations, such as marrying at 21 years of age, and minimal parent-child discussions regarding reproduction and drugs lead to unhealthy situations for young people.

Limited employment opportunities and a lack of access to technology are further struggles for youth in Turkmenistan. Students feel their educational training prepares them for very specific jobs, limiting their employment prospects upon graduation. Greater application in the classroom could expand employment opportunities. With high secondary school drop-out rates and low employment prospects, some students end up restless and isolated. The lack of technology within the country further limits interactions. The nation ranked third to lowest on Internet availability and usage. Most adolescents and youth in Turkmenistan have limited computer literacy.

Equity

Based on available data, Turkmenistan has nearly achieved gender parity in primary school. Net enrolment rates show that there is not a significant rural/urban or income quintile gap (see Figure 3). This kind of parity was sustained from the Soviet-style school systems, which achieved equality through strictly regulated school enrolment policies. These positive figures do not mean that there is no inequality in the system or that inequities could not arise. For instance, enrolment rates are as high as 67 per cent in Ashgabat, the capital city, but fall to 11 per cent in Lebap, an outlying rural region.

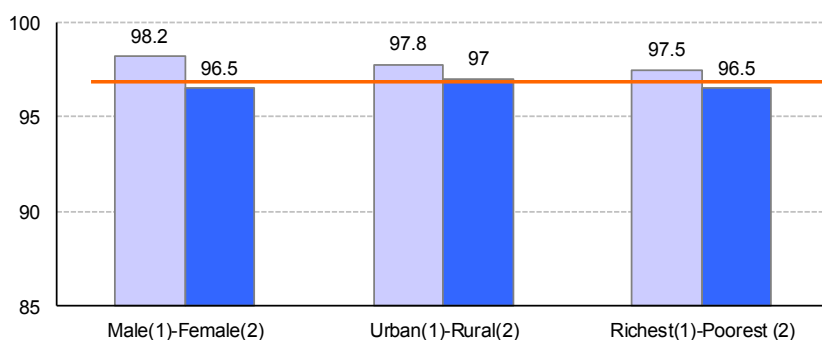
Fifteen per cent of Turkmenistan’s population are minorities such as Kazakhs, Russians and Uzbeks. Few official statistics are available on enrolment patterns among these groups; however, discrimination – ranging from being forced to study in the Turkmen language to wearing traditional Turkmen clothing to school – directly infringe on their own ethnic traditions.

Learning outcomes and quality

The quality of education in Turkmenistan lags behind other nations in the region. While the nation has not participated in any international assessments, traditional teaching methodologies and limited student engagement affects students’ attainment and retention of knowledge. There are efforts to address these limitations, such as through the child-friendly schools movement, but greater attention is still necessary.

Proxy indicators of quality suggest that school-based processes are relatively efficient. Only 0.8 per cent of students repeat a grade, 99.8 per cent of students make it to the final year of primary school, and only 0.1 per cent of students drop out of primary school. This suggests that students do move from one grade to the next, but it is unclear whether they have mastered learning objectives for each level.

Figure 3. Comparing education parity between subnational groups in Turkmenistan, 2008





A lack of investment in schools over the past 15 years has left many school facilities in poor condition. This puts further strain on learning outcomes and quality of education. As school buildings crumble, classrooms become more crowded, intake rates drop and quality declines.

Education financing

Over the past decade, education expenditures continued to be around 3.9 per cent of GDP. This low proportion of funding contributes to the ongoing challenges in access, quality and school conditions. Human resources are another concern. A lack of qualified teachers and teacher retention – especially at institutional schools and in rural areas – limits the educational quality. Social sector financing may have suffered as government invests in physical infrastructure, such as roads and buildings. Meanwhile, employment decreased in both healthcare (which fell from 4.8 per cent to 3.9 per cent) and education (which went from 9.8 per cent to 8.5 per cent).

Priorities in education in Turkmenistan

The following are UNICEF's priorities for improving education in Turkmenistan:

- Focus on early childhood development and the promotion of child-friendly learning environments, which includes advocacy for child-friendly schools
- Provide policy support for education reform based on quality and inclusiveness
- Enhance quality in basic and secondary education
- Improve the flow of data and information systems, e.g. through EMIS
- Improve access to education through innovative education approaches
- Support the Human Resource Development Plan and capacity development