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## Internationalization of higher education in Uzbekistan: goals, tools, role of Russia and scenarios of evolution

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### **Uzbekistan: the course towards reforms and change of development models**

Modern Uzbekistan is in a special place among the post-Soviet countries from the point of view of Russia's interests. It is the third most populous post-Soviet state, the fifth largest economy, a military-political ally of Russia, one of the two regional political leaders and leading trade and economic partners of Moscow in Central Asia. According to expert estimates, the level of active or passive command of the Russian language of the population in Uzbekistan is about 40%. In the field of higher education, Uzbekistan is one of the main export markets for Russia. According to the data for the 2017/2018 academic year, Uzbekistan ranked fourth in the world in terms of the number of citizens studying in Russian universities, after Kazakhstan, China and Turkmenistan.

Interest in Uzbekistan is also determined by the fact that President Sh.M. Mirziyoyev's taking of office in 2016 began a new stage of systemic reforms in the country, which marked the transition from a model of economic development focused on the domestic market and resources to a model focused on export and active involvement of external development resources. The sphere of higher education occupies an important place in the program of ongoing reforms. The tasks of increasing availability of higher education, ensuring its quality and competitiveness at the international level have been set.

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By the mid-2010s higher education in Uzbekistan was state, elite, mainly paid, super-centralized in terms of governance, underfunded by the state, focused on teaching at the expense of science, a system in which demand absolutely dominated supply: applicants competed for places in universities, and not universities - for applicants. Such a system preserved the established practices and did not stimulate employees and universities to develop science, strengthen ties with the real sector of the economy, and improve the quality of education. As a result, the structure of university training in areas / specialties inadequate to modern scientific and technological development, a shortage of graduates with higher education for various sectors of the economy, and a relatively low level of skills of university graduates have developed in the country.

The development of the reform of higher education in Uzbekistan began immediately after Sh. M. Mirziyoyev's arrival for the presidency. Since then, a whole array of documents has been issued on various aspects of the reform, signed mainly at the level of the President of Uzbekistan. Among them, the key framework documents defining goals, objectives, priorities are, first, the medium-term resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On measures for the further development of the higher education system" dated April 20, 2017 and the "Program for the integrated development of the higher education system for the period 2017- 2021", then - the long-term "Concept for the development of the higher education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030" dated October 8, 2019 (hereinafter - Concept 2019) [Presidential Decree 2019].

The Concept 2019 defines the following as the strategic goals for the development of the country's higher education system: (1) improving the quality of personnel training; (2) increasing the level of the population coverage with higher education; (3) creating a competitive environment and ensuring the competitiveness of the system at the international level. The depth of the problems of higher education in the mid-2010s, the large-scale nature of the planned reforms, as well as the general course towards the modernization of the country on the basis of a more open, integrated, export-oriented model predetermined the fact that from the very beginning, the issues of higher education internationalization took a critically important place in the strategy and implementation of relevant reforms.

Internationalization has become a tool for the Uzbek authorities to achieve several goals at once: improving the quality of higher education; its massification, promotion of high-quality higher education in the regional centers of the country; increasing the political weight and prestige of Uzbekistan in Central Asia. The dynamics of Uzbek higher education internationalization has acquired a character unprecedented for the post-Soviet space. This process unfolds in two dimensions: internal and external.

## Higher education: internal internationalization

Internal internationalization of higher education is understood as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural components into the formal and non-formal curriculum for all students studying at university” [Beelen Jones 2015]. In contrast to external internationalization, which affects a relatively small, elite part of students and teachers, internal internationalization can become a means of "massification" of world educational practices. As H. de Wit emphasizes, in the world "there is an increase in demand for internal internationalization", especially characteristic of developing countries facing "a choice: a competitive direction of internationalization or a socially responsible approach in higher education" [De Wit 2019. S. 16.18].

Taking a course towards the massification of higher education, Uzbekistan made a choice in favor of accelerated internal internationalization, striving to combine an increase in the volume of specialists training with an increase in the quality of graduated personnel. One of the means of internal internationalization was the opening of foreign universities branches in the country. According to the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education (MHSSE) of Uzbekistan, in mid-2020 there were 22 branches of foreign universities in the country, while in 2016 - only 7. The data on branches are presented in the table:

*Table 1 - Branches of foreign universities operating in Uzbekistan*

Name	Year of foundation	Approximate number of students	Educational programs
Belarusian-Uzbek Intersectoral Institute of Applied Technical Qualifications (Tashkent) (a subdivision of the Belarusian National Technical University)	2019	380	mechanical engineering, technology and automation of mechanical engineering production, tractor construction, equipment and technology of welding production, metrology, standardization and product quality management, intelligent devices, machinery and production, computer mechatronics, management of innovative projects of industrial enterprises , service sector (cars), transport logistics, heat and gas supply and ventilation of buildings and structures, biotechnical and medical devices and systems (bachelor's degree)
Westminster International University in Tash-	2002	3500	business information systems, finance, economics and finance,

kent			business administration, commercial law (bachelor's degree), international business management, international commercial law, international applied economics, human resources management and talent development, business research and analytics (master's degree)
Management Development Institute of Singapore in Tashkent	2007	2200	bachelor's degree in business, marketing, management, finance, tourism, information systems for business, MBA program
Tashkent branch of NRNU MEPhI	2018	450	nuclear power and thermal physics, nuclear physics and technology, heat power and heat engineering, electric power engineering and electrical engineering (bachelor's degree)
Turin Polytechnic University in Tashkent	2009	1200	mechanical engineering technology, information technology and automated control systems in industry, industrial civil engineering and architecture, aerospace engineering (bachelor's degree), mechatronics (master's degree)
Ajou University (South Korea) in Tashkent	2019	no data	architecture, electrical engineering, construction engineering (bachelor's degree)
Университет Амита (Индия) в Ташкенте Amity University (India) in Tashkent	2019	500	information technology (bachelor's and master's degrees), business administration (bachelor's and master's degrees), computer science and engineering, economics, tourism management
Bucheon University (South Korea) in Tashkent	2018	570	preschool education, architecture, the Korean language and management (bachelor's degree)
Sharda University (India), Andijan	2019	250	information technology, computer science and engineering, business administration (bachelor's degree)
The Branch of Astrakhan State Technical University (ASTU)	2019	admission started in 2020	aquatic biological resources and aqua culture (bachelor's degree)
The Branch of ISMA Uni-	2018	250	business administration (bache-

versity of Applied Sciences (ISMA) in Fergana			lor's and master's), tourism, information systems (bachelor's degree), computer systems (master's)
The Branch of MGIMO (U) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Uzbekistan (Tashkent)	2019	90	jurisprudence, business informatics (bachelor's and master's degrees), management, linguistics (master's)
The Branch of Moscow State University Named for M.V. Lomonosov in Tashkent	2006	430	applied mathematics and computer science (bachelor's and master's degrees), psychology (bachelor's and master's degrees)
The Branch of National Research Technological University "MISIS" in Almalyk (Tashkent oblast)	2018	400	metallurgy (technology of metals), automation and control of technological processes and production (bachelor's degree), mining (specialist's degree)
The Branch of National Research University "Moscow Power Engineering Institute" in Tashkent	2019	150	heat power engineering and heat engineering, electric power engineering and electrical engineering (bachelor's degree)
Филиал Российского госуниверситета нефти и газа им. И.М. Губкина в Ташкенте The Branch of Russian State University of Oil and Gas (National Research University) named after I. M. Gubkin	2007	1035	oil and gas engineering (bachelor's degree), economics (bachelor's degree), geological exploration technology (specialty)
The Branch of Russian State University of Physical Education, Sport, Youth and Tourism (Scolipe) in Samarkand	2019	150	physical education (bachelor's degree)
The Branch of D. Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia in Tashkent	2019	180	chemical engineering (bachelor's degree)
The Branch of Plekhanov Russian University of Economics in Tashkent	1995	700	economics (bachelor's and master's degrees)

The Branch of Inha University (the Republic of Korea) in Tashkent	2014	1500	computer and software engineering, economics (bachelor's degree), logistics (bachelor's degree)
The Branch of Turkey University of Economics and Technology	2020	admission started in 2020	e-commerce and technology management, international business and entrepreneurship (bachelor's degree)
The Center for the implementation of educational programs of Webster University (USA) in Tashkent	2019	550	business management (bachelor's degree and master's degree), economics, media communications (bachelor's degree), teaching English as a foreign language (master's degree)

The activity for opening new branches of foreign universities in Uzbekistan is rapidly developing. University of Debrecen (Hungary) intends to create a branch in Tashkent. In June 2020, a draft resolution of the President of Uzbekistan on the opening of a branch of St. Petersburg University in Tashkent which is supposed to train students in biomedicine and oriental studies was published. It is planned to open the "Digital University of Japan", the founder of which is the Japanese joint-stock company "Digital Knowledge"; graduates will receive diplomas of Uzbek State University of World Languages in computational linguistics and one of the Japanese universities. Plans are being discussed to establish in Tashkent branches of the Chinese Sichuan University, designed to train personnel in the field of tourism, and the Nanjing Polytechnic Institute, which will specialize in teaching marketing, international business and e-commerce. It was reported that the Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan reached an agreement to open a branch of British University of Law in Tashkent.

Higher educational institutions with the status of international ones began to be created in Uzbekistan. So, in 2018, in Samarkand "Silk Road" International University of Tourism was opened, which implements 13 full-time and 5 correspondence bachelor's programs in tourism, as well as three master's programs. According to the Charter of the university, the Vice-Rector for Development and International Relations is appointed from the citizens of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries on the recommendation of the Secretary General of the Organization. In May 2020, the government adopted a decree on the opening of British Management University in Tashkent, where students getting a bachelor's degree are going to study banking and finance, international logistics and trade, tourism and hotel management in English, master's degree students - finance and data analysis, project management, and healthcare management. Soon a decision to create Tashkent International University of Education was taken, which received the right to "determine as foreign partners ... higher educational institutions included in the rating of the 1000 best universities in the world ... and open their branches on the basis of the university"; the university will train managers and teachers giving their classes in English. Yojeu

Technical University in Tashkent, Tashkent AKFA University and Korean International University in Fergana have the status of private universities opened by Korean investors.

However, the branches of foreign universities, despite their rapid growth, cover only about 3.5% of the number of students studying in Uzbekistan. 19 out of 22 branches are located in Tashkent and Tashkent region. The widespread introduction in Uzbekistan of joint educational programs with foreign universities is intended to give a greater effect. In 2017, each higher educational institution of Uzbekistan received the order to establish “close promising partnerships with leading specialized foreign scientific and educational institutions” [Resolution 2017]. Over the past three years, Uzbek universities, both Tashkent and regional, have launched dozens of joint educational programs with foreign universities. Universities of Russia and Belarus are the absolute leaders among partners in joint programs; programs with universities in Poland, China, the Republic of Korea, USA, Israel, Ukraine and other countries are also open.

Data on joint programs (partner universities, enrollment quotas, areas of training) implemented in 2020 are presented for many universities in Uzbekistan on the MHSSE channel in the Telegram social network (<https://t.me/eduuz>). Analysis of these data and information on open branches allows us to conclude that the internal internationalization of higher education in Uzbekistan has stratified into two processes: “elite” and “mass” internationalization. The first process is aimed at attracting strong, highly reputable universities to Uzbekistan, such as MGIMO, MEPhI, MEU, MISIS, Inha University, Aju University. The second is to attract universities to Uzbekistan that are capable of solving pragmatic tasks at an acceptable level: improving the quality of training of teachers, doctors, engineers, agricultural specialists, and tourism managers.

### **External internationalization**

The excess of demand for higher education over a supply in Uzbekistan led, in particular, to the growing from year to year the departure of citizens abroad to study at universities. According to UNESCO, the number of Uzbek citizens receiving higher education abroad increased from 19.2 thousand in 2012 to 35 thousand in 2017. According to our estimates, in the 2019-2020 academic year, about 45 thousand students from Uzbekistan studied abroad. About 27 thousand students studied in Russia, 4 thousand - in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, about 2 thousand - in Ukraine, 1.8 thousand - in Kyrgyzstan, among the countries of the "far abroad" the most attractive are the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, USA, Latvia.

For a long time, the Uzbek state did not encourage citizens to receive higher education abroad, in fact, perceiving the external internationalization of higher education as a threat to the national identity and security of the country. However, the attitude changed as the reforms in the field of education were deployed: external internationalization began to be perceived as a valuable addi-



tional resource for the modernization of education. In 2018, the rules for admitting foreign citizens to Uzbek universities were simplified. At the beginning of 2019, the procedure for nostrification of foreign diplomas of higher education was significantly facilitated: diplomas awarded by the foreign universities whose branches and joint educational institutions operate in Uzbekistan, and diplomas awarded by the universities holding first 1000 positions in internationally recognized rankings received automatic acknowledgement [Resolution 2019].

An indicator of the change in the state's attitude to cross-border educational mobility was the establishment of "El-Yurt Umidi" Foundation under the government of the country for training specialists abroad and dialogue with compatriots in 2018. The task of the Foundation (which became the legal successor of the previously existing foundation "Istedod") is the state financing of the education of citizens of Uzbekistan abroad under the programs of master's degree and doctoral studies, advanced training and internships. Fellows are required to work at least three (when undergoing advanced training or internships) or five years (when completing a master's or doctoral studies) in their specialization in universities, scientific institutes, ministries and other state institutions of Uzbekistan. Universities or research institutions in which scholars are trained (advanced training) must be included in the top 500 in the world.

For 2018 - 2019 the Foundation awarded 985 scholarships, including 54 for master's studies, 42 for doctoral studies, 191 for internships and 698 for advanced training. Among the countries to which the scholarship holders are directed, the leaders are Russia (461 scholarships), Great Britain (130), the Republic of Korea (83), Germany (48), Belarus (47). At the same time, the Foundation did not reach the key target, according to which 20% of scholarships should be allocated for master's and doctoral studies, and the Foundation's management complains about the low level of candidates' command of foreign languages and weak, in comparison with the demand for a bachelor's degree, interest in master's degree. In the 2019 competition, about 700 out of 1000 scholarships were awarded.

In the Concept of 2019, the external internationalization of higher education, with an emphasis on improving the quality and international competitiveness of Uzbek higher education, is declared a priority of the state policy in this area. The tasks set, taking into account the low starting positions, are impressive with their ambitiousness: "carrying out systematic work to include at least 10 higher educational institutions of the country in the first 1000 positions" in internationally recognized ratings, "including National University of Uzbekistan and Samarkand State University - in the first 500 positions "; increasing the share of foreign teachers attracted to the country's universities, from 1% to 12%; almost tenfold increase in the number of articles published by Uzbek scientists in journals indexed in international databases; the creation of foreign branches of Uzbek universities and the transformation of the country's higher education system into a "hub for the implementation of international educational programs in Central Asia"; an increase in the



share of foreign students in Uzbekistan to 15% [Presidential Decree 2019] (in 2018, their number in Uzbekistan was only 709 people).

Already in 2020, the government of Uzbekistan made an unexpected move, emphasizing that Uzbekistan claims to create the best higher education system in the region. In February 2020, at the height of the academic year, the MHSSE organized a massive outflow of Uzbek students from universities of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, giving them the opportunity to transfer to universities in Uzbekistan without exams and with the provision of a minimum of documents. In June 2020, the Uzbek authorities compiled a list of foreign universities, the quality of education in which does not meet the requirements of the Uzbek labor market. The list includes eight Tajik and eight Kyrgyz universities; in addition, it was pointed out that "some Kazakhstani universities ... do not provide the quality of education", especially in correspondence courses [Eight universities ... 2020].

Thus, in the policy of Uzbekistan on the internationalization of higher education in the country, a competitive dimension has clearly emerged: Tashkent perceives other countries of Central Asia as competitors for the contingent of students and, in the future, markets for the export of its own education. In this regard, it is significantly that Uzbekistan, while developing international educational cooperation, distances itself from Kazakhstan, despite the generally recognized higher quality of Kazakhstan higher education: Uzbek universities practically do not have joint educational programs with Kazakhstan, and "El-Yurt Umidi" Foundation has allocated only three scholarships for internships in Kazakhstan in for the last two years.

### **The role of Russia and development scenarios**

The internationalization of higher education in Uzbekistan is not its Westernization: it is, to a greater extent, the formation of a model open to "Greater Eurasia", "eurasiatization" of higher education. At the same time, Westernization proceeds indirectly, through the adoption and adaptation, first of all, of Russian and Belarusian practices.

The political course towards rapprochement with Russia, started in 2016, created extremely favorable opportunities for Russian universities to work in the Uzbek direction and attract applicants from Uzbekistan. In April 2017, a framework intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the field of health care, medical education and science was signed, in October 2018 - an agreement on the establishment and operation of branches of Russian universities in Uzbekistan. In May 2019, Moscow and Tashkent took an important step in the development of educational cooperation by signing an Agreement on the mutual recognition of education, qualifications and academic degrees.

Mechanisms of interstate and interuniversity dialogue on education issues have been formed. Within the framework of the intergovernmental commission on economic cooperation, a sub-committee on science and education was formed, the first meeting of which was held in September 2019. In 2018, the first Russian-Uzbek educational forum (forum of rectors) was organized, in May 2020 - online conference of rectors of universities of Russia and Uzbekistan.

At present, Russia has an unconditional dominance as a foreign partner of Uzbek universities in joint educational programs. 10 out of 22 branches of foreign universities operating in Uzbekistan were created by Russian universities. At least 60% of Uzbek students studying abroad chose Russian universities (mainly in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan). However, the question arises, how long the period favorable for Russian universities to gain a foothold in the Uzbek market for higher education, which was opened with the beginning of the reforms of Sh. Mirziyeva is going to continue. Uzbekistan is pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy, maintaining its political distance from Russia. Past experience testifies to the ability and readiness of the Uzbek state for sharp foreign policy turns that are reflected in the entire spectrum of bilateral relations. Uzbekistan has set itself a high level of national objectives in the field of higher education: the leadership of Uzbekistan does not consider the country as an “eternal” consumer of Russian educational services, but is interested in Russian experience and practices to unlock and build up its own educational and scientific potential.

Competition for niches in the Uzbek higher education market is also growing. Uzbek-Korean educational cooperation demonstrates rapid growth, Japanese and Indian universities are becoming more active, securing China's position as a leading investor in the country's economy entails an increase in demand for educational services of Chinese universities, while still constrained by the language barrier and weak interest of elite Chinese universities.

In the medium term, there are four scenarios for the internationalization of higher education in Uzbekistan. The first – the most probable due to the scale of the tasks set and the already formed groundwork – is the continuation of the policy of **total internationalization**, which has an only built-in barrier that limits the work of universities in Central Asian countries in the Uzbek market. If Tashkent's foreign policy is adjusted, a transition to the second scenario is possible – **selective internationalization**, directed at creating a most favored nation regime for universities of certain groups of countries (for example, European and American universities or universities of states for which Central Asia is relatively peripheral foreign policy, direction and cooperation with which, accordingly, bears a weak political “load”, such as the Republic of Korea, Japan, India). The third scenario – **elite internationalization**, in which only high-ranking foreign universities are allowed to work in Uzbekistan – can emerge if the Uzbek government considers that total internationalization does not solve the problems of improving the quality of higher education, and resources of national universities are sufficient to “massification” of higher education. The **curtailment of in-**

**ternationalization** provoked by the social and political destabilization in Uzbekistan and the tightening of the political regime is unlikely.

Focusing on the first scenario, Russian universities should also take into account the possibility of Tashkent's transition to implementing models of selective or elite internationalization and intensify efforts to take advantage of the "window of opportunity" opened by Uzbekistan, assigning Russia the role of a "guide" of the country on the path of modernization and ensuring international competitiveness of the higher education system.

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