

July 18, 2019

Modernization of Higher Education in Uzbekistan: Opportunities for Russian-Uzbek Cooperation

Sergey Yun

Higher Education in Uzbekistan: Problems of Development

With President Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyev taking office in 2016, deep reforms affecting all areas have been carried out in Uzbekistan. The content of the reforms is determined by a shift in the country's national development model. If we define the model in terms of resources, the transition from a conservative policy of relying on own resources to a policy of actively attracting external development resources as part of a multi-vector policy has been made. The priorities are the following: foreign investments and modern technologies, exports of goods and services, best international practices in the fields of public administration and regulation, development of financial, transport, social spheres, etc.

Higher education in Uzbekistan is also at the stage of deep reforms. The necessity of the reforms is determined by the problems inherited from the previous period which caused a gap between the goals of the country's social and economic development and the capabilities of the outdated university system. Among open source materials, only one comprehensive analytical work was found, the World Bank Report 2014 "Uzbekistan. Modernization of the Higher Education System" (<http://documents.vsemirnyjbank.org/curated/ru/737161501483080910/pdf/88606-28-7-2017-14-44-29-UzbekistanHigherEducationReportru.pdf>). Its conclusions and assessments were supplemented by materials from other sources.

Sergey Yun, Associate Professor, World Politics Department, National Research Tomsk State University.

Among other things, we can highlight the following problems of higher education in Uzbekistan that have accumulated by the mid-2010s:

1. A huge shortage of places in the country's universities. The level of youth enrollment in higher education in Uzbekistan is one of the lowest in the world, 9-10% of the number of graduates of secondary and secondary specialized educational institutions. According to the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education of Uzbekistan (hereinafter - the Ministry of Higher Education of Uzbekistan), 361.4 thousand applicants competed for 82.9 thousand places in full-time undergraduate programs in 2008, the average competition being 4.4 persons per a place. In the future, the number of places was reduced to the level of 57-58 thousand annually, however, with account of the population growth, the demand for training only increased and the average competition in 2015 amounted to 10.5 persons per a place.

Table 1. Competition for undergraduate programs in universities of Uzbekistan

Year	Quota for the bachelor's programs	Applications for admission	Competition (persons per place)	Number of Uzbek population, thousand people
2000	31568	214098	6,8	24487,7
2001	36044	274631	7,6	24813,1
2002	39765	236920	6,0	25115,8
2003	45468	238727	5,3	25427,9
2004	52758	256847	4,9	25707,4
2005	57485	286943	5,0	26021,3
2006	60729	329478	5,4	26312,7
2007	73195	363669	5,0	26663,8
2008	82918	361372	4,4	27072,2
2009	66556	350954	5,3	27533,4
2010	56607	385700	6,8	28001,4
2011	56607	418724	7,4	29123,4
2012	56374	432110	7,7	29555,4
2013	56607	480540	8,5	29993,5
2014	57907	543244	9,4	30492,8
2015	57907	605800	10,5	31022,5
2016	57907	663298	11,5	31575,3
2017	66316	729947	11,0	32120,5

Source: Higher education in Uzbekistan. Once again about testing, applicants and corruption. <https://www.fergananews.com/articles/9537>

Another issue is the uneven distribution of universities across the country relative to the population of the regions of Uzbekistan.

Table 2. The number of universities in Uzbekistan by region

Regions of Uzbekistan	Population as of 01.01.2017, thousand people	Number of universities, including foreign branches
Andijan region	2962,5	4
Ferghana region	3564,8	4
Namangan region	2652,4	3
Tashkent and Tashkent region	5253,4	36
Syrdarya region	803,1	1
Jizzakh region	1301,0	2
Samarkand region	3651,7	7
Qashqadaryo region	3088,8	3
Navoiy region	942,8	2
Surxondaryo Region	2462,3	3
Bukhara region	1843,5	4
Xorazm region	1776,7	3
Republic of Karakalpakstan	1817,5	6
Total	32120,5	78

Source: Higher education in Uzbekistan. Once again about testing, applicants and corruption. <https://www.fergananews.com/articles/9537>

2. The shortage of graduates with higher education for various sectors of the economy and the structure of university training in major areas not adequate to modern scientific and technological development. It is noteworthy that the system of higher education in Uzbekistan was focused primarily on the training of teachers: in 2010, the share of graduates studying pedagogy was 59.8%, respectively. Later, recruitment for pedagogical and a number of other specialties was reduced in favor of engineering, production and construction areas (from 23% to 33.2%). In general, the key role in the training of technical specialists was assigned to secondary specialized professional institutions, however, the prevailing ratio in Uzbekistan 10:1 between professional technical workers and specialists with higher education in technical industries did not meet international competitive standards (from 2:1 up to 7:1).

3. The problem of education quality, the level of university science and training. In the 2011-2012 academic year, only 32% of the faculty had advanced degrees. The average academic load of professors and associate professors was about 20 hours of classes a week, senior teachers and teachers – about 25 hours a week, which did not leave time for active scientific work. An indirect sign of the problem is the lack of Uzbek universities in international university ratings.

4. Hypercentralized management of higher education to the detriment of the initiative and autonomy of universities. The training was conducted in accordance with the state educational standards (SES) approved by the Ministry of Higher and Secondary-Specialized Education of Uzbekistan. At the same time, universities were practically unable to make changes to the curricula established by the SES: the maximum volume of changes could not exceed 5% of the total academic time. Another example is the quoting by the authorities of admission in each major for each university, including recruitment to tuition-fee departments.

In general, higher education in Uzbekistan has developed as a system in which demand absolutely dominates over supply: applicants compete for places in universities while the universities do not compete for applicants. Such a system preserves the existing practices, encourages corruption and does not stimulate universities to develop. In addition to the problems of the quality of education and the shortage of graduates in popular specialties, a consequence of the system's features was the exacerbation of the brain drain problem. According to UNESCO, in 2012 19.2 thousand citizens of Uzbekistan studied at universities of foreign countries, in 2013 – 20.3 thousand, in 2014 – 26.1 thousand, in 2015 – 28.1 thousand, in 2016 – 33 thousand¹.

Another consequence is the relatively low level of interaction between Uzbek and foreign universities in the framework of joint educational and scientific programs, academic exchange of students and teachers. However, universities in Uzbekistan actively participated in the EU's Tempus and Erasmus programs. Since the 2000s branches of foreign universities in Uzbekistan have begun to open. By 2016, a total of 7 representative offices had been opened, including the branches of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow State University and National University of Oil and Gas "Gubkin University". However, the number of students in branches of foreign universities was only about 1 % of the total number of students in Uzbekistan.

Goals of higher education reform in Uzbekistan: international dimension

The framework documents defining the directions of the modern reform of higher education in Uzbekistan are the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On measures for the further development of the higher education system" of April 20, 2017 (hereinafter referred to as the 2017 Decree) and the "Program for the comprehensive development of the higher education system for the period 2017-2021" (hereinafter referred to as the 2017 Program) approved in the form of two appendices to the presidential resolution. These documents are annually specified by the decisions within the framework of the 2017 Program. The texts of official documents are available on the website of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of Uzbekistan in the section "Government Documents" (<http://www.edu.uz/ru/doc/view/3>) and on

¹ UNESCO Database UIS.Stat. URL: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

the website of the National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan (<http://lex.uz/ru/>). However, not all originals are available in Russian translation.

The annual presidential decrees "On admission to higher educational institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan" for the next academic year are of particular interest. The latest version of the document is called "On the parameters of the state order for admission to study at higher educational institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the 2019/2020 academic year" (<http://www.lex.uz/docs/4380360>). These decisions fix not only the specific admission quotas by levels, forms, majors, sources of financing for all universities in the country but also other decisions of the authorities of a practical nature regarding the higher education reform.

The entire system of higher education in Uzbekistan is currently in a whirlwind of complex, organizationally and financially costly reforms affecting all aspects. Achievement of the general goals stated in the Presidential Decree of 2017, "a cardinal improvement of the higher education system, a radical review of the content of training in accordance with the priority tasks of the country's social and economic development, providing the necessary conditions for the training of specialists with higher education at the international level standards" is provided, including the following areas:

1. The key priority is to increase the accessibility of national higher education. To do this, the enrollment is expanding annually in existing universities, new universities and branches of existing universities in the regions are opened. In particular, the International University of Tourism "Silk Road" (Samarkand), the Samarkand Institute of Veterinary Medicine (Samarkand), the University of Journalism and Mass Communications of Uzbekistan (Tashkent), the Chirchik State Pedagogical University (Chirchik), the Military Institute of Information and Communication Technologies and Communications of the Ministry of Defense (Tashkent), Jizzakh Branch of the National University of Uzbekistan, Termez Branch of Tashkent Medical Academy, Karshi Branch of Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers, Samarkand Branch of Tashkent State University of Economics were opened.

As a result, the quota for admission of full-time bachelors was increased to 66.3 thousand in 2017, 69.2 thousand in 2018 and 80.4 thousand in 2019. From the academic year 2018-2019 extramural and evening departments of universities were restored, for 2019-2020 the quota of admission to extramural bachelor's degree is about 20 thousand people, for the evening bachelor's degree – about 2 thousand people. Universities were also allowed additional admission in coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education and Secondary-Specialized Education on the basis of the available material and human resources.

The annual message of President of Uzbekistan to the Oliy Majlis of December 28, 2018 stated that the enrollment level of graduates of secondary and secondary specialized educational insti-

tutions with higher education exceeded 15 %, the goal for 2019 was to reach 20 %. Apparently, the long-term benchmark for the Uzbek authorities is 60-70 %, which is indicated in the presidential address as the level in developed countries.

2. Optimization of areas and majors of education in universities, taking into account the prospective development of industries and regions. For example, from the 2018-2019 academic year, training of specialists in 66 new majors of bachelor studies and 48 new majors of master studies began in universities of Uzbekistan.

3. Attracting employers to the educational process and scientific research in universities. Mechanisms for involving professional communities in the updating of qualification requirements, curricula and programs, the forming of orders for graduates in particular areas/majors, the organization of internships for teachers and students in industries were set forth in a separate presidential decree "On measures for further expansion of the participation of industries and sectors of the economy in improving the quality of training of specialists with higher education" of July 27, 2017.

4. Change in various norms and rules that provide greater flexibility of the university system. As for the standard terms of study, the general requirements in Uzbekistan are in line with Russian practice: at least 4 years of study in baccalaureate programs and at least 2 years in the master's program. However, in June 2018, a presidential decree authorizing the introduction of the three-year undergraduate programs and one-year master's programs starting from the academic year 2018/2019 was signed. It is known that from the 2018-2019 academic year, a three-year undergraduate program was introduced in the area of "Preschool Education".

Other important regulatory changes to date:

- in 2018 the right of basic (leading) universities to independently develop and approve curricula and programs in agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education was approved, contingent on the needs of employers;
- in 2018, universities received the right to accept foreign citizens for undergraduate studies beyond admission quotas by interviewing, without passing tests;
- in 2019, applicants with diplomas in the areas beyond the so-called "related" areas of undergraduate studies were allowed to participate in the competition for enrolment in master programs;
- a credit system (ECTS) is being introduced in pilot mode.

5. Development of the material and technical base of universities. For this, in particular, the Government of Uzbekistan in April 2017 signed a loan agreement for 42.2 million dollars with the International Development Association which is part of the World Bank Group. The bulk of the funds will be used to purchase equipment for educational and research laboratories.

The plan for the modernization of higher education in Uzbekistan involves the widespread involvement of other external resources. The 2017 Decree obliged “every higher educational institution” of Uzbekistan to establish “close and promising partnerships with leading specialized foreign scientific and educational institutions”.

In general, the following priority areas of interaction between universities of Uzbekistan and foreign universities and research centers can be identified:

- branches of foreign universities;
- joint faculties;
- joint educational programs of double diplomas;
- attraction of foreign specialists;
- advanced training and internships abroad.

The opening of foreign universities branches is the main priority of current policy, as this is the fastest way to expand the training of specialists involving modern professionals and technologies. In December 2017 to support the opening of branches the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan exempted foreign higher educational institutions accredited in the Republic of Uzbekistan from paying all types of taxes and mandatory contributions to state trust funds until January 1, 2023 within the framework of the educational activities carried out in the Republic of Uzbekistan, as well as from a single social payment and personal income tax in the foreign workers wage fund. The activities of specific branches are regulated by individual presidential decrees.

In addition, according to the statement of Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Aziz Abdukhakimov, “to host the branches of foreign universities and joint faculties with Uzbek universities, the Government of the Republic is going to provide buildings and facilities with the necessary infrastructure free of charge within the framework of the state-private partnership”¹. According to his own data, announced on October 18, 2018, the work to organize the activities of branches of 8 foreign educational institutions, 22 joint faculties, 46 joint educational programs was ongoing in Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, the procedure for the nostrification of foreign diplomas about education was greatly facilitated. The latest version of the presidential decree on this issue of January 16, 2019 provides direct recognition and nostrification of education documents (without special tests) for the following citizens:

- citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan, foreign citizens and stateless persons (hereinafter – citizens) who got education in foreign educational institutions, separate units (branch-

¹ Aziz Abdukhakimov: "Uzbekistan will become an educational hub of the Central Asian region." 08/18/2018. URL: https://www.norma.uz/nashi_obzori/uzbekistan_planiruyut_prevratit_v_obrazovatelnyy_hab_centralno-aziatskogo_regiona

es) and joint educational institutions of which work in the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan;

- citizens educated in foreign educational institutions from the first 1,000 positions in the rankings of internationally recognized educational organizations (Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings, Times Higher Education, Academic Ranking of World Universities), the list of which is annually approved by a joint resolution of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary-Specialized Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the State Inspectorate;
- citizens who received education at the expense of funds allocated by the ministries and departments of the Republic of Uzbekistan for targeted training of specialists in foreign higher educational institutions.

To attract foreign scientists, teachers and specialists, a preferential regime was established: they were exempted from personal income tax and a single social payment. In order to organize the training of national personnel abroad and attract foreign scientists and specialists to Uzbekistan, various organizational and managerial decisions have been taken since 1997. The last decision was the creation in 2018 of a single El-Yurt Umidi Foundation under the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan for training specialists abroad and a dialogue with compatriots (hereinafter referred to as the Fund; the website of the Fund - <https://eyuf.uz/>). The activities of the Foundation include, inter alia, state financing of training for citizens of Uzbekistan under the master's and doctoral programs, advanced trainings and internships in foreign countries with the obligation to work for at least three (advanced training, internships) or five years (master's, postgraduate) in universities, scientific institutions, ministries, departments and other state organizations of Uzbekistan.

According to President Mirziyoyev, the goal of the El-Yurt Umidi Foundation at the initial stage is to send more than 3,500 specialists abroad to study under the master's and doctoral programs, advanced trainings and internships. It is also planned to attract more than 600 compatriots and about a thousand foreign scientists and experts. The commission created by the Foundation to organize the return of compatriots living in foreign countries to research and higher educational institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan sets the goal of attracting at least 5 compatriot scientists living abroad for each research and higher educational institution of the country.

In accordance with the terms of the competition for studying abroad, a chosen higher educational or scientific institution should be included, as a rule, in the 500 world's best or in the 200 world's best organizations in the chosen area/major in the internationally recognized rankings. In May 2019, the results of the first scholarship competition for studies abroad for specialists from the higher education system were summed up. The final results are: doctoral studies – 65 scholarships, master's programs – 17 scholarships, advanced training and internships – 435 scholarships. According to the Foundation, in the redistribution of target quotas the priority was given

to such specialties as production technologies, engineering, computer technology, communications and information, telecommunications technologies, architecture and construction, agriculture, irrigation and land reclamation, healthcare, mathematics and exact sciences, as well as art and culture. The geography of the distribution of all types of scholarships by countries of study shows the absolute dominance of Russia – 50 % (the leading Russian universities by the number of approved applications are Moscow State University and St. Petersburg State University). Russia is followed by the United Kingdom (12 %), Germany (6 %), South Korea and Belarus (5 % each), the United States (4 %) and other countries follow.

Interaction between Russia and Uzbekistan: a new start

As in other areas, Uzbekistan is attracting external resources for the development of higher education within the framework of a multi-vector policy and support for international competition. Nevertheless, Russia retained a stronger position compared to other countries due to historical ties, albeit noticeably weakened, of the academic communities of the two countries, still a relatively high level of proficiency in the Russian language in Uzbekistan, extensive labor and educational migration from Uzbekistan to Russia and other factors. Active development of political and economic ties between Uzbekistan and Russia under President Mirziyoyev has created a much more favorable environment for expanding Uzbek-Russian cooperation in higher education.

In recent years, Tashkent and Moscow have been actively updating the legal base of relations, streamlining and facilitating interaction in the field of higher education. On April 5, 2017, the parties signed an Agreement on cooperation in the field of healthcare, medical education and science, on October 19, 2018 – an Agreement on the creation and functioning of branches of Russian universities in Uzbekistan (the agreement extends to existing representations of Russian universities), on May 30, 2019 – an Agreement on the mutual recognition of education and qualifications, academic degrees.

The Agreement on the mutual recognition of education and qualifications, academic degrees provides the recognition of correspondence of school and secondary vocational education for continuing education, of higher education – for continuing education and professional activities, of the academic degree of a Candidate of Science (Ph.D. in Uzbekistan) – to obtain the degree of Doctor of Science, of academic degrees of the Candidate of Science and Doctor of Science – for the implementation of professional activities. It is noteworthy that prior to the signing of this Agreement, Uzbekistan remained the only CIS country with which Russia did not have a norm on the mutual recognition of higher education diplomas.

Dialogue mechanisms have been created at the level of authorities and universities. Since October 2018, the Russian-Uzbek educational forum (Forum of university rectors) has been launched

as part of the Forum of Interregional Cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan initiated in Tashkent. In April 2019, a Russian-Uzbek meeting on the implementation of bilateral agreements in the field of higher education and an interregional conference of rectors of universities in Russia and Uzbekistan were held in Astrakhan.

Leading Russian universities are opening branches in Uzbekistan, especially for staffing priority sectors of the economy and large industrial projects in Uzbekistan. Agreements are already being implemented on opening the branches of MISiS (Alma-lyk), MEPhI (Tashkent), MGIMO(U) (Tashkent), Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia (Tashkent), National Research University "Moscow Power Engineering Institute" (Tashkent). Negotiations are underway to open branches of other Russian universities.

What should be taken into account by the Russian side, primarily by the academic community, to ensure a more successful process of rapprochement:

1. It is necessary to understand that modern Uzbekistan is a dynamically developing economy with the largest and fastest growing population in Central Asia and with the projected highest economic growth rates in the CIS. According to the Asian Development Bank, in 2017 the economic growth was 4.5 %, in 2018 – 5.1 %. In 2019 the growth is projected at 5.2 %, in 2020 – at 5.5 %. Accordingly, the demand for trained personnel in various sectors of the economy and the effective demand for quality higher education will constantly grow in the country.

2. Before the current stage of the reforms, the development of higher education in Uzbekistan was not in the center of attention, but there was a lot of funding for secondary education. According to the 2014 World Bank Report, the share of financing for education from the state budget of Uzbekistan amounted to 8 % of GDP (of which the share of higher education was only 0.4 %), which was one of the highest rates in the world. As a result, one hundred percent of children is provided with primary and secondary education, and the literacy rate of the population of Uzbekistan older than 15 years old was 100 % according to 2015 data (the highest level in the world)¹. That is, it should be borne in mind that the country has and will retain the widest possible base of potential applicants for university training.

3. Despite the decrease in the level of knowledge of the Russian language, especially among young people, in Uzbekistan, the Russian language retains a significant second place after the state language in state bodies and in the society, including the education system. According to the Ministry of Public Education of Uzbekistan, as of December 3, 2018, 581.9 thousand students, or 10% of the whole number, studied in the country's schools in Russian. According to the Sputnik agency, as of August 2018, in 1195 lyceums and colleges (secondary specialized and vo-

¹ Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above). URL: <https://www.populationpyramid.net/hnp/literacy-rate-adult-total-of-people-ages-15-and-above/2015/>

cational education) Russian-speaking groups comprised 90% and 50%, respectively; in all universities of the republic, the Russian language was a compulsory subject, Russian-speaking groups existed in all large universities in Tashkent, Samarkand, Navoi, Andijan, Ferghana and other regions¹.

4. Taking into consideration the depth and scope of problems, Uzbekistan is only on the initial path of modernizing its university system. Reforms will require decades to reach a new quality of education. Raising salaries, revising standards of workloads, creating new buildings and laboratories are contributing but not decisive factors in changing the management culture and organizing the educational process and academic research. It is no coincidence that the corps of University rectors is rejuvenated. Moreover, it takes time to change and adjust the legislation governing the activities of universities. For example, the situation that determines the organization of international cooperation between Uzbekistan's universities and foreign partners in various forms, including joint educational programs, is still under development, although the 2017 Program envisaged its adoption in the third quarter of 2017.

5. It is necessary to seek to work not only with the universities in Tashkent, but also in other regions of Uzbekistan. If we take into account the level of Russian language proficiency, population, economic activity, the priority regions for inter-university interaction are universities in Samarkand, Bukhara, Navoi, the capital cities of the Ferghana Valley (Andijan, Namangan, Ferghana).

6. The situation in Uzbekistan should be monitored on an ongoing basis, especially taking into account the greater openness of systems and availability of information on the Internet. First of all, it concerns the reforms of key sectors of the economy for forecasting the request for priority areas/majors of training. Further, the annual regulations on admission quotas provide accurate information on the current areas of training at universities in Uzbekistan. You can also study the dynamics of demand from applicants for specific areas/majors, for example, in the context of universities, on the Open Data Portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan (<https://data.gov.uz/ru/datasets/1687>). If the information is available only in the Uzbek language, then well-known electronic translators can be used. University admission scores, areas and forms of training for 2014-2016 are accessible in Russian on the educational portal Ziyonet (<http://abiturient.ziyonet.uz/ru/passpoints/index>).

¹ Back to the future: what makes Uzbeks learn Russian more actively. 08/29/2018. URL: <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/analytics/20180829/9256462/Nazad-v-budushee-cto-zastavlyaet-uzbekistantsev-aktivnee-uchit-russkiy-yazyk.html>