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Higher education in Uzbekistan under Shavkat Mirziyoyev

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Abstract

Since coming to power in 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has initiated a period of sweeping transformation across all sectors in Uzbekistan, with higher education being a central pillar of his reform agenda. This paper examines the key strategic changes implemented in the Uzbek higher education system between 2017 and 2025, focusing on the drive for massification, internationalization, and quality improvement. The analysis highlights the dramatic increase in the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and student enrollment, the introduction of academic and financial autonomy for state universities, the shift towards international educational standards (such as the credit-modular system), and the active promotion of Transnational Education (TNE) through foreign university branch campuses. While these reforms have successfully increased access and global engagement, challenges remain concerning infrastructure capacity, faculty development, and ensuring the quality and international recognition of all newly established institutions. The paper concludes that Mirziyoyev's commitment has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of higher education, positioning it as a core driver for the nation's socio-economic development and global integration, aligning with the "Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030."

Keywords: Higher education, Uzbekistan, president

1. Introduction

The post-2017 higher education reforms in Uzbekistan represent a profound and rapidly implemented strategy to overhaul the system. The focus on Quantitative expansion, quality enhancement, and international integration is critically underpinned by a strategic commitment to STEM education, positioning it as the key lever for the nation's socio-economic modernization and the realization of the "Third Renaissance. Uzbekistan's education system, inherited from the Soviet era, remained largely centralized and restrictive in the decades following independence in 1991 (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018) ^[8]. Pre-2016, the higher education sector was characterized by limited institutional autonomy, stringent government control over admissions and curricula, and low enrollment rates, with only about 9% of high school graduates gaining access to tertiary education (Imamkulov, 2023) ^[3].

The advent of the Mirziyoyev administration marked a radical departure from this approach, prioritizing human capital development and modernization. Higher education reforms became a key component of the nation's long-term "Action Strategy," later formalized in the Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030 (Presidential Decree No. PF-5847, October 8, 2019). This paper explores the multidimensional reforms introduced under President Mirziyoyev, assessing their scope, achievements, and persistent challenges.

The transformation of the higher education sector has been guided by three primary strategic objectives: expanding access, enhancing quality through international standards, and promoting institutional autonomy. In his address to the Parliament on 24 January 2020, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev declared 2020 as the 'Year of Development of Science, Education and the Digital Economy.

He stated: 'Science and education are of paramount importance for enhancing the intellectual and spiritual potential of young people as much as our entire society. Societies failing to promote science suffer regression and backwardness'. The President also noted '...we had set

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ourselves a goal of joining the ranks of advanced nations and we can only achieve it by accelerating reforms, by relying on science, education and innovation.'

The President underlined the importance of revising the higher education system, improving materials, disciplines and standards, providing academic and financial independence, increasing the enrolment rates in higher education and encouraging the young population to pursue higher education by providing state grants (with separate grants to be provided for female students).

Massification and Expansion of Access

A primary goal has been to address the historically low enrollment rates and high demand for higher education. The reform measures have resulted in a significant expansion of the sector; Increase in HEIs: The total number of universities has more than doubled, growing from 77 in 2016 to over 210 by 2023 (Imamkulov, 2023) [3]. This includes the establishment of numerous new state universities, regional branches, and private institutions. Surge in Enrollment: The higher education enrollment rate for the 18-23 age group has dramatically increased from 9% in 2016 to approximately 42-47.7% by 2023-2024 (Imamkulov, 2023; UzDaily.uz, 2025) [3]. Diversification of Study Formats: New educational formats, including evening, correspondence, and distance learning, have been introduced to accommodate working professionals and older citizens, expanding opportunities regardless of age (Inovatus Journals, 2024). This massification was supported by a corresponding increase in acceptance quotas, with undergraduate and master's quotas multiplying significantly since 2016 (JournalNX, 2023).

Internationalization and Quality Enhancement I.

To align the Uzbek system with global best practices, significant steps have been taken to internationalize and standardize academic quality:

Adoption of the Credit-Modular System: Since 2020, state HEIs have been gradually transitioning to the credit-modular system based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), aiming to facilitate student and faculty mobility and international recognition (Inovatus Journals, 2024). Transnational Education (TNE): Uzbekistan has actively positioned itself as a Transnational Higher Education Hub (TNE Hub). Between 2018 and 2022, 23 foreign HEIs established campuses, making Uzbekistan one of the largest hosts of international branch campuses globally (University of Bath, 2023). This strategy is intended to introduce foreign curricula, management practices, and quality standards directly into the country. Global Recognition: A handful of Uzbek universities, such as the National University of Uzbekistan, have begun to enter the prestigious QS World University Rankings, reflecting a growing, albeit nascent, international presence (Imamkulov, 2023) [3]. Additionally, many universities have entered the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings (UzDaily.uz, 2025).

Institutional Autonomy and Decentralization

A crucial reform has been the move toward greater financial and academic autonomy for HEIs. Prior to 2017, the system was highly centralized. The reforms have:

Granted Autonomy: Dozens of state HEIs have been granted financial and academic autonomy, allowing them greater control over curriculum design, determining teacher workload, financial management, and establishing new programs (CEENQA, 2023; Gov.uz, 2021). This decentralization is intended to foster competition and innovation. Digitalization and Anti-Corruption: Efforts have been made to digitize administrative processes, including university admissions and library services, aiming to enhance transparency and reduce bureaucratic and corrupt practices (President.uz, 2020).

Achievements and Challenges

The reforms under Mirziyoyev have yielded tangible results: Increased Access: The most notable success is the dramatic increase in the higher education enrollment rate, fulfilling a long-standing public demand.

International Engagement: The influx of foreign universities and the push for international standards have raised the general profile and quality of education in key institutions.

Faculty Incentives: Salaries for university professors and teachers have been increased significantly, alongside efforts to double quotas for doctoral studies, signaling an investment in faculty and research capacity (Gov.uz, 2021).

Support for Women: The government has introduced interest-free educational loans for women and fully funds tuition for women enrolled in master's programs at public universities (UzDaily.uz, 2025).

Persistent Challenges

Despite the rapid progress, several challenges threaten the sustainability and depth of the reforms:

Capacity Building: The exponential growth in the number of HEIs and students has strained the capacity of existing infrastructure. There is an ongoing shortage of highly qualified professors who meet international qualifications, and modern research facilities remain limited, particularly in rural areas (CEENQA, 2023).

Quality Assurance: Ensuring that the quality of education across all newly established HEIs—including the numerous non-state and TNE providers—meets international standards remains a significant task. The pace of reform may outstrip the ability to guarantee uniform quality.

Research Output: Enhancing research output and innovation remains difficult due to insufficient funding for research and the need for further faculty development in research methodologies (CEENQA, 2023).

Conclusion

The period of Shavkat Mirziyoyev's presidency has been an "epoch of modernizing Uzbekistan," with the higher education sector at the forefront of the change (Research Gate, 2020). The reforms, underpinned by the Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System until 2030, have successfully transitioned the system from a restrictive, centralized model to one focused on mass access and international integration. The expansion of universities, the adoption of the credit-modular system, and the development of the TNE Hub demonstrate a strong political commitment to building human capital for the "New Uzbekistan." However, to fully realize the strategic goal of entering the top 50 countries in the Global Innovation Index by 2030, sustained effort and investment in faculty,

infrastructure, and rigorous quality assurance will be essential to ensure that the expansion in quantity is matched by an improvement in the quality and global recognition of Uzbek higher education.

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