European Journal of Business Startups and Open Society

Vol. 5 No. 3 (Mar - 2025): EJBSOS

http://innovatus.es/index.php/ejbsos

Higher Education Reforms: Expanding Opportunities

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Abstract: The article describes the reforms being implemented to increase the innovative potential of the higher education system, the fact that today all spheres of life in New Uzbekistan have become areas of deep reforms, and the higher education system of Uzbekistan is undergoing significant institutional changes.

Key words: Education, science, upbringing, social development, reform, social sphere, scientific and innovative activities, research, university, intellectual development, concept, State program, undergraduate education areas, New Uzbekistan.

Introduction

The effectiveness of any goal and reforms is achieved through science. Wherever it develops or emerges, it will not fail to influence global progress. This can be observed in the fact that science plays a key role in the rise of developed countries. The development of society depends on the scope and logic of the reforms being implemented. Only those reforms that identify which sectors need attention and are carried out after deep and thorough consideration can make people's lives easier, lighten their difficulties, improve their standard of living, and provide solutions to their problems. The work being done must not only address today's problems but should also focus on the long-term future. Today, all areas of life in New Uzbekistan have become fields for deep reforms. In this process, it is impossible not to highlight the changes in the education system, which is the cornerstone of the social sector. In recent years, practical efforts to organize all stages of the education system according to modern requirements have entered a decisive phase.

Research Methodology

The main part of the reforms being implemented in the field of education, without a doubt, consists of reforms in the higher education system. As our President emphasized: “It is well known to all of us that the foundation of progress and the force that makes a country powerful and a nation great is science, education, and upbringing. Our future, the bright future of our homeland, is closely linked, first and foremost, to the education system and the education we provide to our children.”

Indeed, in the Republic of Uzbekistan, the process of setting the priorities for the systematic reform of higher education, raising the training of independent, highly qualified personnel to a new level of quality, modernizing higher education, and developing the social sector and economic branches based on advanced educational technologies, is being guided by the "Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030," which was approved by the President’s decree on October 8, 2019. This document serves as a prologue to the new reforms in the field. It sets out tasks such as accelerating intellectual development, training competitive personnel, organizing scientific and innovative activities effectively, and strengthening international cooperation, with a focus on the integration of science, education, and production.

Analysis and Results

At the current stage of development, Uzbekistan's higher education system is undergoing significant institutional changes. Within the framework of administrative reforms and the goal of integrating higher education, scientific, and innovative activities, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education was transformed into the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovations. A research center for the development of higher education operates under the ministry, analyzing qualification requirements and educational programs, and studying advanced foreign experiences in higher education development. According to the analysis of scholars today, it is observed that 15-20% of knowledge undergoes depreciation every year. Such factors push for aligning the education system with the times and introducing the concept of lifelong learning that encompasses a person's entire life, based on the needs of the market economy. The new, modern concept of education being implemented today resonates with the long-promoted idea in our country: "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave." Today, educational reforms, which have been elevated to the level of state policy, are receiving special attention from our President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who, from the very first days of his presidency, has focused on improving the quality indicators at every stage of the lifelong education system. These efforts are strategically aimed at building the foundation for the Third Renaissance.

Reforms and Achievements in the Education System Over the last six to seven years, the reforms implemented in the education system aimed at long-term development have not only led to significant positive changes within our country, but have also elevated the international stature and reputation of Uzbekistan. Several laws, presidential decrees, and decisions related to the sector have been adopted. The adoption of the "Law on Education" in 2020 clearly expressed the country's goals in this regard, and it is not an exaggeration to say that this law set clear guidelines for the country's educational objectives. This document outlined the fundamental principles of the education sector, as well as the structure, types, and forms of the education system. In particular, the adoption of the "Concept for the Development of Higher Education Until 2030" has laid the foundation for advancing public-private partnerships in the higher education sector and has created the groundwork for advancing Uzbekistan's universities in international rankings (QS, THE, Academic Ranking of World Universities). This document has transformed into a strategic program for the development of the university system, establishing key indicators for growth. Thanks to systemic measures, two of the country's universities — the National Research University "Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers" and the Mirzo Ulugbek National University of Uzbekistan — entered the top 1000 best universities in the world for the first time (QS World University Rankings 2025). As a result of the reforms, special attention is being given to the introduction of modern standards. Since 2020, all higher education institutions in the country have been gradually transitioning to a credit-modular system based on the European Higher Education Area (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). This transition has ensured the flexibility of educational programs and created opportunities for students to choose their subjects of study.

Moreover, the concept emphasizes the development of public-private partnerships in higher education, the establishment of both public and private higher education institutions in various regions, and the goal of increasing the higher education enrollment rate to over 50%. It also aims to create a healthy competitive environment in the sector. In the short time since the adoption of this concept, it has facilitated major reforms to improve the quality of education in the sector.

In the field of higher education, the responsible authority has developed and approved 183 qualification requirements for undergraduate programs, taking into account the programs of universities ranked in the TOP-300 as of the first half of 2024. Additionally, 38 educational programs from six universities have passed international accreditation. Furthermore, in order to deepen the ongoing reforms in education and organize the activities of educational institutions based on advanced international practices, the "Project Office for Education Sector Projects" has been established. This project office is tasked with enhancing the professional capacity of

personnel in the education sector and raising the quality of education services to international standards. As part of efforts to improve education quality, the project office has implemented systematic measures. For instance, in the current year, undergraduate programs have been optimized by 40% (from 306 to 183), and the number of master's degree specialties has been reduced by 15% (from 625 to 528). The issue of optimizing the deanships and other administrative structures through the digitization of the educational process in universities is also under development. Additionally, the interaction between higher education institutions and vocational education institutions is being strengthened, ensuring the continuity of education. The first and second-year courses at universities will be integrated with vocational colleges. As part of the education reforms, it is planned to align the diplomas issued by vocational colleges with international standards. Specifically, those who graduate from vocational colleges with high marks will be awarded diplomas that conform to international classifiers. Moreover, students in vocational colleges will be equipped with sufficient professional qualifications to continue their education at universities. This means that graduates of vocational colleges will have the opportunity to continue their studies at the second or third year of university.

Thirdly, the process of training highly qualified specialists actively involves the demand side, i.e., the employers. In this regard, qualification standards for over 5,000 professions are being developed. To facilitate this, it is planned to establish the National Qualification Development Institute under the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan, which will collaborate with employers to develop the necessary qualification requirements. For some practical disciplines in higher education, employers are actively contributing to the educational process. The reforms in the higher education sector aim to create a healthy competitive environment in the education services market, implement advanced higher education standards, elevate the content of higher education to a qualitatively new level, and establish a system for training highly qualified personnel. As part of the "Year of Attention to the Human and Quality Education" State Program, it is planned to introduce distance learning for undergraduate programs in state higher education institutions, depending on their capabilities. Moreover, the parameters for admitting students to state higher education institutions will only be approved for state grants, and 1,000 places will be allocated for training personnel on state grants in foreign higher education institutions operating in the country, as well as in their branches and non-state higher education institutions. The implementation of these tasks will undoubtedly contribute to expanding coverage and realizing the dreams and aspirations of the future generations. Of course, the significant focus on the education sector is not without reason. It is clear that by taking our country to the next stage of development, uniting all efforts, and working selflessly, we can build the foundation for the Third Renaissance and, ultimately, the New Uzbekistan.

As a result of higher education reforms, the doors of opportunity have been opened for every citizen in our country who wishes to obtain higher education. More specifically, regardless of age, citizens now have the opportunity to pursue higher education through day, evening, or correspondence learning formats. That is, every citizen of our country, regardless of age, nationality, or ethnicity, now has the full opportunity to exercise their constitutional rights. Furthermore, citizens with work experience can enter higher education institutions without an entrance exam, based on an interview recommendation from the senior management of the organization where they work. In particular, employees with at least five years of work experience were given the right to recommend employees to enter evening and correspondence programs at state higher educational institutions during the 2021/2022 academic year. According to the recommendations provided by the organizations, employees can be enrolled based on the results of an interview, without exams, and pay tuition fees according to a tiered contract system. This rule was a new and unexpected development for the people of our country. It was also noted that each organization could issue such recommendations to up to 100 employees. This aspect of higher education reform aligns with the essence of market relations.

Conclusion

To implement the state policy aimed at solving all the issues raised by modern science and production, all conditions and opportunities are being created in higher educational institutions. In order to carry out the above reforms, attention must be paid to the quality of education and the continuous enhancement of the attractiveness of working in this field. After all, the development of the nation and the people, as well as the increase in its intellectual potential, depends on the activities of educators. Educators are a crucial link in passing on the secrets of science, as well as the moral and cultural heritage to the youth. Therefore, it is essential to create the necessary conditions for teachers to fully demonstrate their potential, and to provide them with social, legal, and material support.

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