EDUCATION REFORM IN UZBEKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract. Since 2017, Uzbekistan has pursued a comprehensive education reform agenda covering preschool, general secondary, vocational, and higher education. This article examines the main challenges and opportunities of this reform process. The study aims to identify the structural, institutional, and pedagogical factors that shape the implementation of reform, and to assess the prospects for sustainable improvement in educational quality and equity. The research uses a qualitative approach that combines analysis of national legislation and policy documents, a review of international scholarly literature, and comparative analysis of reform experiences in other transition economies. The findings suggest that wider access, institutional diversification, international partnerships, and digitalization create significant opportunities. At the same time, persistent challenges remain, including teacher quality and professional development, uneven provision between regions and between urban and rural areas, the efficiency of educational funding, and the alignment of curricula with labour-market needs. The article argues that the success of reform depends less on adopting new policies than on consistent implementation, strong teacher capacity, and systematic monitoring and evaluation. The study contributes to the literature on education policy in Central Asia and offers practical recommendations for policymakers.

Key words: education reform; Uzbekistan; policy implementation; higher education; teacher training; educational quality; digitalization; Central Asia

Аннотация. С 2017 года Узбекистан реализует комплексную программу реформирования образования, охватывающую дошкольное, общее среднее, профессиональное и высшее образование. В статье рассматриваются основные проблемы и возможности этого процесса. Цель исследования состоит в выявлении структурных, институциональных и педагогических факторов, влияющих на ход реформы, а также в оценке перспектив устойчивого повышения качества и равенства образования. Исследование основано на качественном подходе, включающем анализ национального законодательства и программных документов, обзор международной научной литературы и сравнительный анализ опыта реформ в других странах с переходной экономикой. Результаты показывают, что расширение доступа к образованию, диверсификация образовательных учреждений, международное сотрудничество и цифровизация открывают значительные возможности. Вместе с тем сохраняются серьёзные проблемы: качество подготовки и профессиональное развитие педагогов, неравномерность образовательных услуг между регионами и между городом и селом, эффективность использования финансирования, а также соответствие учебных программ потребностям рынка труда. В статье утверждается, что успех реформы зависит не столько от принятия новых политических решений, сколько от последовательной их реализации, кадрового потенциала педагогов и систематического мониторинга и оценки. Исследование вносит вклад в изучение образовательной политики в Центральной Азии и содержит практические рекомендации для политиков.

Ключевые слова: реформа образования; Узбекистан; реализация политики; высшее образование; подготовка педагогов; качество образования; цифровизация; Центральная Азия

Annotatsiya. 2017-yildan buyon O‘zbekistonda maktabgacha, umumiy o‘rta, kasb-hunar va oliy ta’limni qamrab oluvchi keng ko‘lamli ta’lim islohotlari amalga oshirilmoqda. Mazkur maqolada ushbu islohot jarayonining asosiy muammolari va imkoniyatlari tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotning maqsadi

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islohotlarning borishiga ta’sir etuvchi tizimli, institutsional va pedagogik omillarni aniqlash hamda ta’lim sifati va tengligini barqaror oshirish istiqbollarini baholashdan iborat. Tadqiqotda sifat yondashuvidan foydalanilgan bo‘lib, u milliy qonunchilik va dasturiy hujjatlarni tahlil qilish, xalqaro ilmiy adabiyotlarni o‘rganish hamda o‘tish iqtisodiyotiga ega boshqa davlatlardagi islohot tajribalarini qiyosiy tahlil qilishni o‘z ichiga oladi. Natijalar ta’limdan foydalanish imkoniyatlarining kengayishi, ta’lim muassasalarining diversifikatsiyasi, xalqaro hamkorlik va raqamlashtirish muhim imkoniyatlar yaratayotganini ko‘rsatadi. Shu bilan birga, o‘qituvchilarning malakasi va kasbiy rivojlanishi, hududlar hamda shahar va qishloq o‘rtasidagi notekislik, ta’lim moliyalashtirishining samaradorligi va o‘quv dasturlarining mehnat bozori ehtiyojlariga mosligi kabi muammolar saqlanib qolmoqda. Maqolada islohotlar muvaffaqiyati yangi siyosatlarni qabul qilishdan ko‘ra ularni izchil amalga oshirish, o‘qituvchilar salohiyati hamda muntazam monitoring va baholashga ko‘proq bog‘liqligi asoslanadi. Tadqiqot Markaziy Osiyodagi ta’lim siyosatiga oid ilmiy adabiyotlarga hissa qo‘shadi va siyosat ishlab chiquvchilar uchun amaliy tavsiyalar beradi.

Kalit so‘zlar: ta’lim islohoti; O‘zbekiston; siyosatni amalga oshirish; oliy ta’lim; o‘qituvchilarni tayyorlash; ta’lim sifati; raqamlashtirish; Markaziy Osiyo

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely regarded as a foundation of economic competitiveness and social cohesion, and since 2016 Uzbekistan has placed it at the centre of its national development agenda. A turning point came with Presidential Decree No. PP-2909 of 20 April 2017, which launched a comprehensive programme for the development of the higher education system for 2017–2021 and was followed by measures covering preschool, general secondary, and vocational education. Together, these measures signal an effort to move from a closed, centrally managed model towards one oriented to quality, openness, and international cooperation.

This effort builds on an uneven post-Soviet legacy. After 1991, the successor states followed divergent paths in reforming their inherited education systems, and the scholarly literature has documented these changes extensively [Heyneman, 2010, pp. 76–87]. Uzbekistan‘s course was particularly cautious: **gross enrolment in higher education fell from 15% in 1991 to 9% in 2017, and the strictly top-down approach to reform did not improve access or institutional capacity** [Ruziev, 2018, pp. 435–459] [Burkhanov, 2018, pp. 435–459].

The period after 2016 is therefore widely seen as a break with this legacy. **Recent work notes that the higher education sector has been undergoing significant changes since 2016 in a country where more than half of the population is young** [Ibrokhimova, 2023, pp. 177–185], which raises the stakes of getting reform right.

Despite growing scholarly attention, much of the existing literature concentrates on higher education and internationalization. The reform process as a whole, and especially the gap between policy adoption and implementation, remains less examined. This article addresses that gap by asking three questions: (1) which structural, institutional, and pedagogical challenges constrain reform; (2) which opportunities it creates; and (3) which conditions are needed for sustainable improvement in educational quality and equity.

The study uses a qualitative approach that combines analysis of national legislation and policy documents, a review of international scholarly literature, and comparative analysis of reform experiences in other transition economies.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design, which suits a reform process that is still unfolding and cannot be reduced to a few quantifiable variables. The analysis covers the period from

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2017 to the present. The design combines three complementary strands: document analysis, a structured literature review, and comparative analysis.

The first strand examines national legislation and policy documents issued since 2017, including presidential decrees, laws, and sectoral strategies. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic documents [Bowen, 2009, p. 27]. Each document was examined for its stated objectives, targets, responsible institutions, and implementation mechanisms, following the sequence of skimming, thorough reading, and interpretation [Bowen, 2009, p. 31].

The second strand reviews scholarly publications on education reform in Uzbekistan and in comparable contexts. Traditional literature reviews are often criticised for lacking thoroughness and rigour and for being conducted ad hoc [Snyder, 2019, p. 333]. To limit this weakness, the review applied explicit inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed studies and official reports addressing the design, implementation, or outcomes of education reform. Sources were screened by title and abstract and then read in full.

The third strand compares Uzbekistan with other transition economies. The comparative method must generalise from relatively few cases, and one remedy is to focus on comparable cases, for example through area comparisons [Lijphart, 1971, pp. 682–693]. Accordingly, the comparison is restricted to post-socialist and Central Asian systems that share a Soviet institutional legacy.

Evidence from the three strands was coded into three dimensions, namely structural, institutional, and pedagogical, and each finding was classified as a challenge or an opportunity. Document analysis is often combined with other methods as a means of triangulation [Bowen, 2009, p. 29], and agreement across the strands was therefore used to assess the credibility of each finding.

The study relies on documentary and secondary evidence, so it captures formal policy more fully than classroom practice. Its findings should therefore be read as an analytical synthesis rather than as causal evidence.

RESULTS

The analysis shows that the most visible result of the post-2017 reforms is rapid quantitative expansion. Higher education enrolment rose from 264,300 students in 2015/2016 to 1.43 million in 2024/2025, more than five times higher [Sultanova, 2025, p. 1]. The scale of this change is best understood against the pre-reform baseline, when gross tertiary enrolment had fallen from 17 percent in 1991 to 9 percent in 2011, far below the 40 and 49 percent recorded in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic [World Bank, 2014, p. 45]. This suggests that expansion primarily relieved a long-standing supply constraint, given that about 400,000 applicants competed for 64,000 places in 2010 [World Bank, 2014, p. 50]. Diversification of providers reinforced the shift: by 2024 the country had 211 higher education institutions, including 112 public universities, 69 private universities, and 30 foreign institutions [Kun.uz, 2025, p. 1]. In our assessment, this mix of public, private, and foreign providers is the clearest institutional opportunity, because it widens student choice and introduces external quality benchmarks.

Expansion, however, has not automatically translated into quality. The baseline diagnostic found that only **32 percent of instructional staff** in Uzbek universities held the equivalent of a PhD in 2011/12 [World Bank, 2014, p. 15]. If staff numbers have not grown as fast as enrolment, pressure on teaching quality has probably intensified, although recent staffing data are needed to confirm this. The problem also has a territorial dimension: a mixed-methods study of 200 educators and policymakers reports lower teacher qualifications and more limited digital resources in rural areas, while urban areas advanced faster [Khajieva, 2024, pp. 708–711]. Digitalization is therefore a double-edged opportunity: without rural infrastructure and teacher training, it may widen the very gaps it is meant to close.

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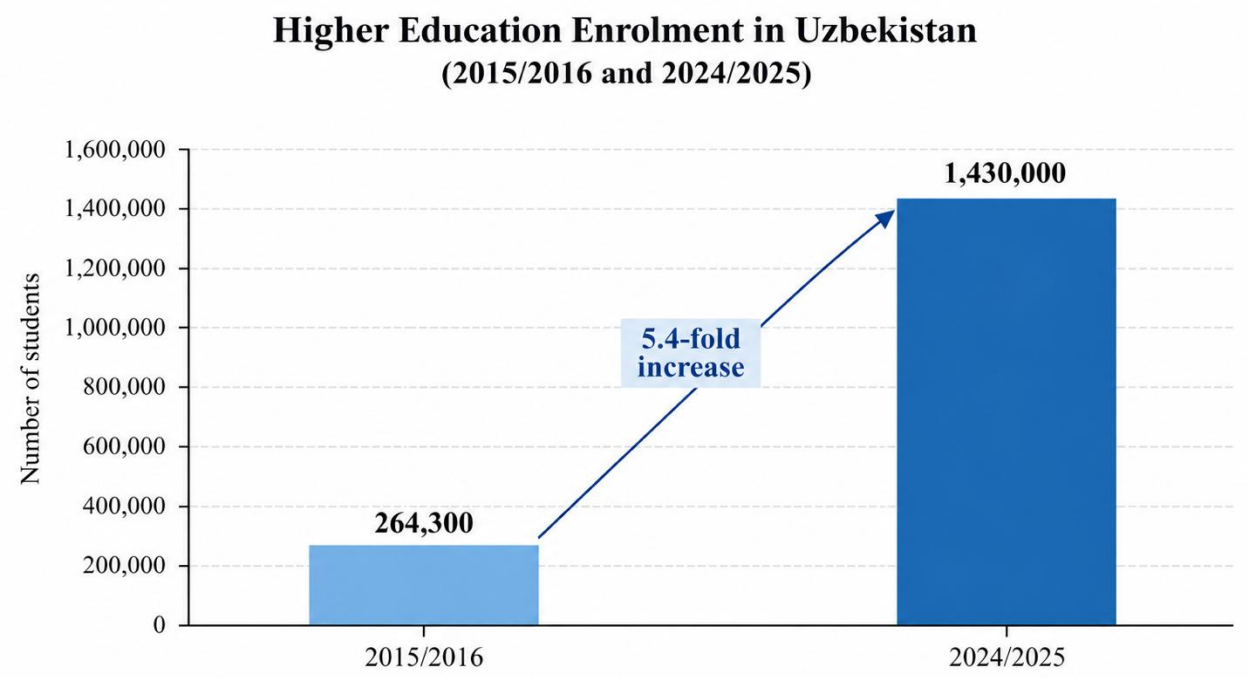


Figure 1. Higher education enrolment in Uzbekistan, 2015/2016 and 2024/2025.

Source: Sultanova (2025, p. 1).

Financing patterns point to a similar imbalance. State spending on education was about **8 percent of GDP,** but only about **0.4 percent of GDP** reached tertiary education [World Bank, 2014, p. 12]. Our reading is that expansion on such a narrow public base has probably relied on tuition fees and private investment, which raises equity concerns for lower-income and rural families. This makes the financing model a test of sustainability.

Alignment with the labour market is a further area of difficulty. In 2008, **73 percent of** surveyed firms cited inadequate worker skills and education as an obstacle to doing business [World Bank, 2014, p. 25], and in industry and construction the ratio of higher-education to specialised secondary graduates was nearly one to ten [World Bank, 2014, p. 30]. These figures show that the problem concerns not only the number of graduates but also their field of study and skill profile. Consequently, increasing enrolment without matching programmes to employer demand risks producing more graduates but not the specialisations the economy needs.

Taken together, the three analytical strands show a consistent pattern. Structural change, namely expansion and diversification, is well documented. Institutional and pedagogical change, namely financing, teacher capacity, and curriculum relevance, is harder to verify and appears to lag behind. Because the baseline diagnostics date from 2011–2013, they describe the conditions that the reforms were designed to address rather than current outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the reform has been more successful in expanding access than in strengthening the institutional and pedagogical capacity needed to sustain it. This pattern can be interpreted through Trow's model of higher education development. Trow distinguishes elite systems, which shape a ruling class, from mass systems, which transmit skills for a broader range of technical and economic roles, and from universal systems, which adapt the whole population to rapid social and

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technological change [Trow, 2006, pp. 243–280]. With gross enrolment of only 9 percent in 2011, Uzbekistan‘s system was elite in structure, and an enrolment increase of more than fivefold suggests a decisive move towards the mass stage. That shift changes what universities are expected to do. In our assessment, governance, financing, and staffing arrangements designed for a small elite system cannot simply be stretched to serve a mass system, which helps explain why quality indicators lag behind access indicators.

These findings extend earlier scholarship on the country. The strictly top-down approach to reform followed since independence did not improve access or the human and physical capacities of higher education institutions [Ruziev, 2018, pp. 435–459] [Burkhanov, 2018, pp. 435–459]. Our results suggest that the access dimension of this critique has since been addressed, whereas the capacity dimension remains open. Whether the current reform path can close it will depend less on further decrees than on how consistently they are implemented and monitored.

The capacity gap is most consequential for teachers. A teacher one standard deviation above average effectiveness is estimated to generate over **USD 400,000** in the present value of students‘ future earnings in a class of 20 [Hanushek, 2011, p. 466]. This estimate comes from the United States and cannot be transferred directly, but it illustrates why limited doctoral-level staff and weaker rural qualifications deserve priority. Teacher quality is also tied to the digital agenda, because digital resources add value only when teachers are trained to use them.

The opportunities identified are real but conditional. Diversified providers widen student choice, but their benefits depend on regulation and affordability. Digitalization can extend teaching resources to rural schools, but only where infrastructure and teacher training exist. Financing remains the most uncertain element: a system that grows mainly on tuition income risks reproducing inequality unless disadvantaged students receive targeted support. Finally, labour-market alignment requires programme planning informed by employer demand rather than by enrolment targets alone.

Three implications follow for policymakers. First, teacher recruitment, pay, and professional development, with particular attention to rural regions, should be treated as a core component of reform rather than a supporting measure. Second, expansion targets should be accompanied by quality indicators, systematic graduate tracking, and published monitoring data, so that reform is judged by outcomes rather than by capacity alone. Third, financing models should combine diversified income with transparent equity safeguards.

This study has limitations. It relies on documentary and secondary evidence, several baseline indicators date from 2011–2013, and some recent statistics come from media reports of official data. The interpretations offered here are therefore analytical judgements rather than causal findings. Future research should use post-2017 administrative data, regional comparisons, and surveys of teachers and employers.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the challenges and opportunities of education reform in Uzbekistan since 2017, drawing on document analysis, a structured literature review, and comparative evidence from other post-socialist and Central Asian systems. Its central conclusion is that the reform has been considerably more effective in expanding access than in building the institutional and pedagogical capacity that quality requires.

Three findings support this conclusion. First, rapid enrolment growth and the diversification of providers, including private and foreign institutions, have moved the system beyond its earlier elite structure and opened real opportunities for wider participation and international cooperation. Second, quality has not advanced at the same pace: the limited number of highly qualified teaching staff, weaker

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teacher qualifications and digital resources in rural areas, and a narrow public financing base constrain the benefits of expansion. Third, the alignment between graduate skills and labour-market needs remains uneven, so more graduates do not automatically mean the right skills.

These findings suggest that the success of reform depends less on adopting new policies than on implementing them consistently. Three priorities emerge. Teacher recruitment, remuneration, and professional development, particularly in rural regions, should be treated as the core of reform. Expansion targets should be paired with quality indicators, graduate tracking, and transparent monitoring, so that progress is judged by outcomes. Financing models should combine diverse income sources with clear equity safeguards, so that growth does not widen social and regional gaps.

The study contributes to the literature on education policy in Central Asia by linking expansion, quality, and equity within one analytical framework and by showing that the main risk of the current reform phase is an implementation gap rather than a policy gap. For policymakers, it offers a practical agenda that may also be relevant to similar transition contexts.

These conclusions should be read in light of the study's limitations. It relies on documentary and secondary evidence, and several baseline indicators predate the reforms, so the findings describe tendencies rather than causal effects. Future research should draw on post-2017 administrative data, compare regions within Uzbekistan, and collect primary evidence from teachers, students, and employers.

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