



FACTORS AND CONDITIONS FOR THE FORMATION OF AN EDUCATIONAL HUB IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

In response to the requirements and challenges of the globalization process, many countries have focused their efforts on transformations in their higher education system, and pursuing a policy of unifying universities as tools to increase their competitiveness and strengthen research and innovation potential. Meantime, in the context of the modernization of higher education factors of the competitiveness of the educational hub formation and the processes of universities unification in Uzbekistan have not yet been a subject of special research.

The **purpose** of this publication is to define key factors and conditions of the competitiveness of universities relating them to the issues of formation of an educational hub and wide implementation of international educational programs into higher education in Uzbekistan.

Using **content analysis of university websites** and expert assessment on the published data on the leading universities in Central Asia as an **empirical basis** for the study, as well as **comparative analysis of case studies** from foreign countries that have experienced unifying processes and successfully transformed their higher education system in the context of the setted target of forming hub for the implementation of international educational programs, we considered foundations of the competitiveness of the university including the factors affecting the competitiveness of the educational activities of the university.





Keywords: educational hub, higher education system, factors of competitiveness, foreign students, development concept

1. Introduction

Overseas higher education programs and institutions play a fundamental role in restructuring the economy by creating an enabling environment and attracting “best universities” with globally recognized talented professionals who will transfer their cutting-edge knowledge and thereby create opportunities to fill professional jobs and create profitable regional connections.

In the global space the emergence of a complex of Western university education programs, campuses and joint ventures, significant reforms of local universities have a number of long-term development goals:

- Creation of opportunities for competition and interaction between foreign providers of educational services and local higher education institutions, universities and enterprises;
- Turning Central Asia and Uzbekistan into a “global knowledge center” for production, innovation, R&D and university-industry linkages;
- Diversification of the labor market;
- Creating a favorable environment for postuniversity education of professionals, attending lectures, seminars, master classes, short-term courses, etc.;
- Improving the position of Uzbekistan's universities in the Quacquarelli Symonds world ranking of universities and entering the ratings in the Financial Times, Times Higher Education Supplement and certain disciplinary areas, primarily STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics).

World experience shows that formation and stimulation of the creation of educational hubs results in an increase in competitiveness and strengthening of regional integration, relying on the development of higher education as a factor of economic and social development. Thus, since the 1990s, the authorities of Singapore, Taiwan and other countries of Southeast Asia have been pursuing a policy of consolidation of existing universities and creation of new public and private educational institutions [1].

Uzbekistan also has the potential and can attract students to its universities, primarily from the Central and Southeast Asia and neighboring countries. However, over the past decade the number of foreign students studying at the universities of Uzbekistan has not exceeded 800 people annually. Attraction of foreign students can bring additional income to the country.





2. Review of Previous Research

Development of educational centers in Asia demonstrates a clear departure from the traditional global exporters of educational services. While the United Kingdom and Australia are mainly developing cross-border higher education for commercial profit, whereas Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong are setting more comprehensive goals for their education hub initiatives, such as fostering innovation and professionals, building educational capacity and soft geopolitical influence [2, 3, 4, 5]. These complementary goals do not exclude the commercialization of the higher education industry, but they signal a broader agenda for using higher education both for achieving the goals of increasing the competitiveness of educational services [6] and for innovative cooperation. At the same time, the authors distinguish both international educational centers and regional educational centers, noting that they can be both an international and a regional center and, despite these differences, use higher education for geopolitical influence in target areas for each educational center through education, training, research and dissemination of educational standards and norms.

To improve the competitiveness and efficiency of its university systems, the Chinese government focused on strategies for restructuring universities in the context of the global market [8, 9]. Also the concept of the third generation university (3GUs) was disclosed in the publications of Wissem [10], which interprets University 3.0 not as a tool for servicing social requests, but as a way to solve the internal tasks of the university itself in the new conditions: the transformation of universities is based not only on external (the requirements of an innovative economy), but also internal factors (competition for sources of funding, qualified teachers, talented students). Despite its huge advantages, the export of higher education in Hong Kong is also subject to a number of obstacles and disadvantages, such as inadequate infrastructure [11].

In a comparative study of Malaysia, Singapore, China and South Korea [12], based on learning the national policies and regulatory frameworks regarding the international education affiliates in these countries, it was concluded that in South Korea and Singapore they were more closely associated with liberal regulation based on the use of an inclusive model of internal quality and ensuring a minimum quality assurance (mechanism development for internal quality assurance and external verification in international branches, accreditation both in the country of origin and international accreditation), while in Malaysia and China they were more to the subject of restrictive regulation, but with an integrated quality assurance process.





Comparison of higher education reform in South Korea and Germany [13] based on the results of two recent university reform projects: the Korean Brain Korea 21 project and the German Universities Excellence Initiative showed significant differences in terms of tuition fees, shares of private universities and national ranking. While the Korean project is characterized by a relatively high level of control (Korean projects are assessed annually) and can be viewed mainly as a human resource development program with clearly defined strategic goals, for the German project the project goal is defined more undefined and for a longer time horizon, within tradition of university autonomy and lies mainly in the area of building research capacity.

In the late 1990s - early 2000s opening of Singapore territory for programs and new forms of educational practices of foreign universities [3] made it possible to achieve the policy goals of deeper official institutional ties with many foreign (mainly Western) universities. The vast majority of links between Singapore and foreign universities have focused on distinct disciplinary undergraduate and graduate courses, especially many joint and double degree programs that united local and foreign universities.

The tools and conditions to increase competitiveness for creation of educational hub have been studied by many authors. Results of one study [14] have shown that the relationship between the unification of universities and educational competitiveness is determined by such factors as the accurate formation of a portfolio of training courses and the introduction of a monitoring system for educational activities, merge of universities, improvement of strategic financial management, marketing of educational services, etc.

The development of education is influenced by economic, social and political factors, access, equity, financing, governance, privatization, quality assurance, relevance and funding burden shifting for individual students [15]. Previous studies [16] have also shown that recommendations and feedback arising from personal relationships are influencing prospective student choice of universities, shaping the view and image of international affiliates around the world by students enrolled in nine international schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The results of many studies based on a case-study approach in terms of strategic communication in three Southern Dutch (Flemish) universities [17] mainly indicate the similarity of marketing communication channels for a wide audience, and a high level of differentiation for marketing communication channels focused on specific parties concerned.

Model of student choice of educational institutions, based primarily on demand factors ("push") that are applicable to international branches in Malaysia [18] shows that the success of a university mainly depends on the cost of living in country, general





country and environment attractiveness, comfortable campuses and convenience location for students, and other combined factors of supply and demand, including: academic reputation, diploma prestige, low tuition fees compared to a domestic educational institution, low cost of living, safety of the country for study, the similarity of education systems, as well as cultural affinity. Based on the “push-pull” model of factors influencing the choice of destination by foreign students in the emerging Asian educational centers of Malaysia, the following study [19] identifies as important criteria that determine the decision of students to choose a destination. In addition to the quality and value of individual educational institutions, other main motivating factors in their choice were the "PULL" factors of the country's image - the attractive features of Malaysia, that is, the relatively low cost of education, living, and tuition fees, the country's security for life, a stable government, the availability of modern amenities, closeness to culture and religion, and freedom from discrimination. These results allow the development of effective advertising and marketing strategies for promotion in order to attract more international students.

The results of a study of public administrations of higher education in the United States [20] contributed to the conceptual framework of the process of information flow around the development of public policy for the development of higher education in the United States and revealed the influence of these organizations on the supply and demand for information based on principal-agent theoretical approaches of interaction. Using a stakeholder analysis approach in Lithuania, one of the studies [21] found that the benefits of internationalization far outweigh the threats and disadvantages. Assumptions about the benefits of internationalization: for example, that it promotes cultural integration and harmony, improves the quality of education and research, and improves the reputation of the country and institutions at the international level.

Under the concept of an entrepreneurial university, the effectiveness of comprehensive measures to transform a traditional university into an entrepreneurial university largely depends on many factors: the level of socio-economic development, the nature of financing the higher education system, the mentality of the scientific and pedagogical community, the degree of market transformations and their social orientation, development of social partnership between higher education and the labor market, international cooperation, etc. [22].

Based on the results and approaches used in the studies of the above authors, we carried out a comparative analysis of the competitiveness and challenges of creating a hub for higher education in Central Asia in Uzbekistan.





3. Trends in the Development of Higher Education in Uzbekistan

Economic role of the higher education sector in the Republic of Uzbekistan is determined by the high share of higher education (54%) in the total volume of educational services.

It should be noted that educational services, like other non-traditional services, have a high potential for creating added value (for example, the added value of educational services in the service sector reaches 15%, while the share of types of services in the total volume of services and their share in the formation of the gross value added of the service sector is only 5%.

In addition, a large number of foreign students is very beneficial for the country, since after studying with us, these students will return to their homeland and will be the guides of Uzbekistan in their country. These are future economic and political ties, which are very beneficial for the country's image and development potential.

The social significance of the higher education sector is determined by its role in the formation of human capital, training of highly qualified staff for the labor market, and increase in the living standards.

The creation of an educational hub in the Republic of Uzbekistan for the implementation of international educational programs in higher education will contribute to development of an innovative and high-tech economy and rise the welfare of the population.

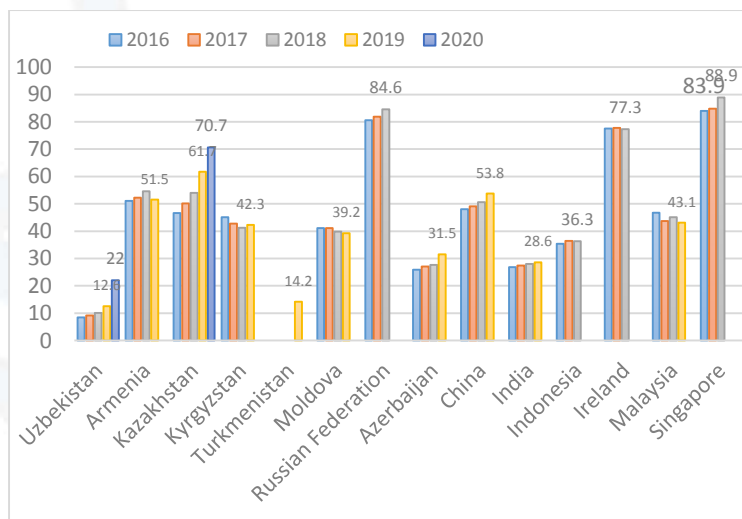


Figure 1. Rate of youth enrollment in higher education 2017-2020,% Source: Data of the State Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Uzbekistan and <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>



Analysis of trends in the development of higher education in the Republic of Uzbekistan showed that the coverage of youth with higher education was much lower (9%) than in countries with a similar level of development (Fig. 1). If in 2016 the number of universities was 70, the number of students was 268,282 thousand, by 2020 the coverage increased up to 22% (i.e. the increase in the share of higher education in the total volume of educational services is 7 pp or an additional 303,231 thousand students).

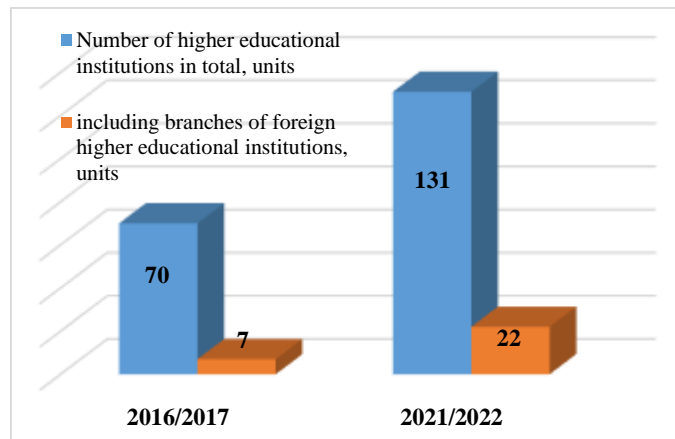


Figure 2. Growth in the number of universities, including foreign ones in the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2016- 2021
Source: Data of the State Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Uzbekistan

In an effort to make quality education available to Uzbek students, recent government initiatives have been aimed at attracting foreign universities to Uzbekistan. Today, among the 131 universities in the Uzbekistan, there are 22 branches of foreign universities (Fig. 2), in which 571,512 thousand students study.

At the same time, 33,159 students from Uzbekistan studied abroad in 2017 with a mobility ratio of 11.8% (the ratio of the number of outgoing students to the total number of domestic students). Low coverage in the country forced the younger generation of the country to look for study opportunities abroad, i.e. the economy of scarcity worked. In addition, the decline in the quality of education has made getting a diploma the top priority of education.

To provide a legal basis for attracting the private sector to the education sector, a Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On improving the procedure for licensing activities in the field of providing non-state educational services” approved the procedure for the provision of non-state educational services,



requiring organization of the educational process in accordance with state educational standards.

To further improve and ensure the quality of higher education, increase competitiveness, also the regulation on the procedure for organizing educational activities on the basis of joint educational programs of higher educational institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan and foreign partners and the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Licensing, Permitting and Notification Procedures", where the State Inspectorate for Supervision of the Quality of Education is determined by the authorized body issuing licenses in the provision of non-state services of higher education were adopted.

As a result the number of students increased from 85 students per 10 thousand population in 2016 up to 169 students in 2020. These results were achieved within the framework of large-scale reforms in the higher education system over the past 5 years. The purpose of these reforms is to create a coherent and continuous system in which from the moment of birth until the age of 30, a young person will be provided with comprehensive support and assistance so that he can take a worthy place in life.

In the future, the higher education system faces sets goal to achieve the coverage of secondary education graduates with higher education up to 50% by 2030, ensuring the quality of higher education in accordance with the requirements of the modern labor market (World skills), increasing the competitiveness of universities (teaching staff, their scientific potential and others) of the republic, creating conditions for attracting foreign students.

Additional measures to attract foreign students to the country are provided by the Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System until 2030 to achieve the coverage of graduates of secondary education with higher education up to 50% (or an increase in the number of students by 2030 by more than 2 times from the current 571 thousand students):

- increase in the proportion of areas and specialties of education and faculties, where training is fully conducted in foreign languages;
- creation of favorable conditions for the residence and study of foreign citizens in higher educational institutions based on the involvement of the private sector into the management of student hostels and campuses;
- inclusion in the world ratings through the national rating system, adaptation to international rating indicators, improving the quality indicators of higher educational institutions





4. Factors of the formation of the educational hub of Central Asia in the Republic of Uzbekistan

To create an educational hub in the country a number of factors of competitiveness can be strengthened and the constraining factors of the formation of an educational hub in Central Asia in the Republic of Uzbekistan that need to be eliminated (Table 1).

Table 1 Competitiveness factors and challenges of creating a hub for higher education in Central Asia in Uzbekistan

Competitiveness factors	
Price competitiveness	Comparison of the cost of training at similar universities shows that in Uzbekistan the greatest competitiveness is noted in the medical field, and the National University.
No need for a visa	Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 408 dated November 21, 1996 Appendix №5
High level of human capital	In the group of countries with lower middle income, the human development index is 0.72 (GNI per capita PPP \$ 7142)
Safety , favorable climate	In the Rule of Law Index according to the "Order and Security" indicator, Uzbekistan is ranked 11th with an indicator of 0.91 (the best indicator in Central Asia according to rating indicators)
Relatively cheap accommodation (food, housing, mobile internet)	According to Nambeo.com the cost of living plus rent index in Uzbekistan is 19.02 (10th place among 139 countries of the world). At the National University of Uzbekistan, foreign students are provided with a free comfortable hostel. In terms of the price of mobile Internet , Uzbekistan ranks 21st among 230 countries of the world (according to Worldwide mobile data pricing)
Challenges	
Underdeveloped infrastructure of distance education	In the Speedtest index , Uzbekistan's position in the rating for the speed of fixed broadband Internet is 90th among 180 countries and 118th in the speed of mobile Internet among 137 countries. On the sub-index "Development of ICT Infrastructure" of the Innovation Development Index (GII), Uzbekistan ranks 83rd
The quality of education and the competitiveness of the teaching staff of universities	In the sub-index "Rating of universities QS" of the Index of Innovative Development (GII), Uzbekistan ranks 77th (degree of teaching staff and publication activity). Only 4 universities of the Republic of Uzbekistan are included in the TOP-1000 rating of the best universities in developing countries of Europe and Central Asia in 2021 - Quacquarelli Symonds Emerging Europe and Central Asia University Rankings
Relatively low proportion of the teaching staff with a scientific degree	The potential of the teaching staff of the universities of the Republic of Uzbekistan shows that out of the total number of the teaching staff 24.7% have a PhD, 6.3% - DSc, showing the need to attract scientists from Uzbekistan to higher education
Lack of clear integration of universities and business	There is no data for Uzbekistan on the sub-index "Cooperation between universities and industry in research" of the Innovation Development Index (GII)
A small proportion of majors with training in English	In republican universities, these are single faculties in such areas as "International Economic Relations", "International Business", etc.
The infrastructure of the organization of recreation and leisure does not correspond to the needs of foreign students	The Concept for the Development of Higher Education notes: "the existing places of residence of students and objects of social infrastructure are not adapted to the needs of foreign students"

Source: compiled by the authors based on data from international indices, lex.uz regulatory framework and media data

In Uzbekistan, the factors of the competitiveness of creating an educational hub for the implementation of international educational programs in Central Asia are



security, favorable climate, price competitiveness in a number of areas, including medicine, and the absence of the need for a visa.

The factors that reduce the attractiveness of creating a hub for the implementation of international educational programs already today need to be addressed not only to attract foreign students, but also to achieve the training of highly qualified domestic personnel. They include: a low proportion of specialties with training in English, underdeveloped infrastructure of distance education and organization of leisure time, low quality of education and the competitiveness of the teaching staff of universities (relatively high proportion of the teaching staff with a scientific degree in Central Asia), a weak level of integration between universities and business.

Recommended mechanisms to transform the higher education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan into a hub for the implementation of international educational programs in Central Asia, develop and stimulate the existing potential of higher education in the Republic of Uzbekistan and export of educational services include:

1. Organization of marketing activities in the higher education system

- Improve the regulatory framework for the provision of **consulting services** by domestic and foreign agencies to attract foreign citizens to study in the Republic of Uzbekistan;
- Conduct a **marketing campaign** to attract foreign students;
- Increase the number of **representative offices of universities** of Uzbekistan abroad;
- Stimulate orientation of higher education towards making **commercial profits**.

2. Organizational mechanisms to liberalize educational services market and improve the quality of educational services:

- Transition to a system of **accreditation** of educational programs of universities **in accordance with international standards and international certification**;
- Increase the number of universities implementing **double-diploma** programs;
- More actively implement the principles of **dual education**;
- Increase share of **educational content** in universities in English with the orientation of educational programs on the **competencies required by various industry associations**;
- Actively develop pre-university training and **postgraduate education programs** and short-term professional development programs (at universities and organizations of technical and vocational education).

3. Economic mechanisms to increase the **coverage of higher education and creating infrastructure**:

- Increase investment in the development of infrastructure for **distance education**;





- Introduce **scholarship program** for foreign citizens;
- Stimulate the attraction of **foreign specialists** to universities (provision of housing, reduction of income tax, etc.);
- Create **special conditions** for the development of the accompanying **infrastructure of campuses** (dormitories) for foreign students;
- Introduce system of **additional government funding** to motivate educational institutions, whose graduates are employed **in high-tech jobs** in the country or abroad for 2 years.

4. Institutional arrangements and lowering barriers for private organizations:

- Create business joint corporate **centers of competence with universities** (universities and enterprises of Central Asia);
- Expand **rights of universities** to implement programs of **additional professional education**, in the context of the transition to the international requirements of WorldSkills, robotics, IT and multilingual standards, as well as the development of educational services for technical and vocational education.

Creation of a Central Asian educational hub on the territory of Uzbekistan on the basis of attracting the most highly qualified staff from each region based on the personnel potential of the region:

- From Kazakhstan - specialists in IT, gas transportation, logistics and construction;
- From Kyrgyzstan - agrarian and mining industry, textile industry;
- From Turkmenistan - breeding crops, animals, creating new varieties, hybrids using modern methods of biotechnology, as well as horse breeding and studying the potential of the steppes;
- Specialists from Uzbekistan in the exact sciences.

Conclusion

Creation of an educational hub will contribute to an increase in the concentration of highly qualified specialists in a single regional education center, a significant increase in the volume of educational services provided by educational institutions. In turn, an increase in the competitiveness of trained staff demanded on the world labor market, increase in higher education coverage, and increase in the integration of science and industry among the countries of Central Asia will expand contribution for higher education to economic development.

Based on the world experience in educational hubs we analysed the results of studies from foreign countries that have experienced unifying processes and successfully





transformed their higher education system in the context of the setted target of forming hub for the implementation of international educational programs.

Within the framework of the analysis of results of the unification of universities in different countries and trends in the development of higher education in the Republic of Uzbekistan, we define specifics of the unification processes as a tool for the development of higher education, identify key aspects of the competitiveness of universities taking into account positive and negative effects, propose practical recommendations for managing the process of merging universities in order to increase the level of competitiveness of their educational activities.

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