

**Higher Education Reforms in Uzbekistan:  
Expanding Vocational Education at the Expense of Higher Education?**

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## **Higher Education Before Independence**

Upon independence in 1991, Uzbekistan inherited a higher education system that was organisationally and structurally similar to those found in other members of the former Soviet Union. In 1989, there were 43 higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, including 40 specialised institutes and 3 comprehensive universities. Around 310,000 students were enrolled in five-year degree programs, of which around 45% in programs offered in the evenings or by correspondence (Brunner and Tillett 2007, p. 158). With approximately 15% of the relevant age cohort studying at higher education institutions in 1991, access to higher education in the country was one of the lowest in the former Soviet Union (UNDP 2009).

## **Ad Hoc Reforms of the Early 1990s**

Uzbekistan's higher education sector has experienced important changes since 1991. Several new higher education institutions were created in quick succession in the early 1990s, taking the total number to 58 by 1996. The rationale for setting these institutes up was dictated by both the demands of the new economic system and the new statehood which necessitated strengthening and expanding of state institutions. A few private higher education institutions also emerged in the early 1990s. Generally, these had low entry requirements, and most were not adequately resourced in terms of personnel and physical infrastructure. Fearing sub-standardization, the government soon decided not to allow any private sector involvement in higher education, resulting in the demise of this newly emerging market segment.

Higher education institutions can be classified into six types under the new system. These include comprehensive universities, specialised universities, institutes, academies, regional branches of specialised higher education institutes, and branches of foreign universities. There were 78 higher education institutions in 2015, comprising 11 comprehensive universities, 10 specialised universities, 35 institutes, 2 academies, 13 regional branches of higher education institutions, and 7 branches of foreign universities. With the exception of the latter, all higher education institutions are state-owned. Foreign university branches, which come from Italy (1), Korea (1), Russia (3), Singapore (1) and the United Kingdom (1), are a relatively new phenomenon and their share in higher education provision is only marginal (around 2%). The reorganization of higher education admissions rules, which attempted to remove abusive discretionality from the entrance examination process, was arguably one of the most significant reforms of the early 1990s. The new system of testing candidates, which was based on multiple-choice questions and administered externally by the State Test Centre, was formally adopted in 1994. In 1994, the authorities also introduced a mixed funding formula under which higher education places became increasingly privately funded.

## **Fundamental Reforms: National Program for Personnel Training**

The authorities' overall vision for the education system reforms was formulated in the National Program for Personnel Training, which reorganized the existing five-year degree courses, and aspirantura (first post-graduate education level, equivalent to PhD programs) and doktorantura (highest-level post-graduate program, equivalent to habilitation that exists in a number of countries) programs into the Bologna process style bachelor's degrees (four years), master's degrees (two years), and PhD (Majidov et. al. 2010). The Program, which became law in 1997, clearly reflected the authorities' conscious choice to expand vocational education rather than higher education, which

also explains why access to higher education stagnated at the 'elite' stage of expansion (Trow 1974) in the post-independence period. The implicit argument behind this decision was that, given the relatively unsophisticated state of the national economy, which relied largely on commodity production, services, and small-scale manufacturing, the economy would be best served by the expansion and modernization of the vocational education sector.

### **Higher Education Access: Stagnation at the 'Elite' Stage of Expansion**

Although the number of full-time higher education students increased from around 180,000 in 1989 to around 250,000 in 2015, the mismatch between the demand and supply widened during the post-independence period. This can be explained by several key factors, including the gradual phasing out of the courses offered in the evenings or by correspondence by the late 1990s, the dynamics of demand, e.g., population growth from around 21 million in 1991 to around 31 million in 2015, and the rigidity of higher education supply. For example, gross enrolment rates, calculated as the number of students in higher education divided by the number of 19-24 year-olds, fell from 15 in 1991 to 9 in 2012 (World Bank 2014 p.23), and the number of higher education applicants increased from 106,000 in 1996 to more than 540,000 in 2014 – a more than fivefold increase in demand. In contrast, available full-time higher education enrolment places, which measure the higher education supply, increased only modestly, going up from around 49,000 in 1996 to 58,000 in 2014. The expansion of the vocational education sector also played a role: by lowering return on vocational education, it subsequently made a greater number of vocational education graduates seek entry into higher education, creating bottleneck effect as ambitious applicants attempt entry into higher education more than once. As a result, in 2014, the overall number of applicants for higher education places (around 540,000) was around 40,000 more than the number of secondary education graduates.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The demands of the new market-based economic system and the requirements of building and strengthening state institutions to support the transition process were the key drivers for higher education reforms in Uzbekistan. But the state was and remains the main initiator and implementer of reforms in the higher education sector. This strictly top-down approach to reforms, however, has not been successful in improving access to higher education. It stagnated at the 'elite' stage of expansion mainly as a result of the state's conscious strategic choice to expand the vocational education sector instead.

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