

## Development Processes of The Higher Education System During the Independence Years (1991-2026)

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### Abstract

*This article provides a scholarly analysis of the systematic reforms carried out in the higher education system of Uzbekistan during the years of independence (1991-2026), their stages, and outcomes. The study examines statistical data, regulatory documents, and contemporary literature sources through comparative-historical and systematic analysis methods. As a result, it is demonstrated that the higher education system has undergone fundamental qualitative and quantitative changes over the 35 years of independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan.*

**Keywords:** Higher education, reform, independence, universities, credit-module system, digitalization, state policy, accreditation.

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### 1. Introduction

The higher education system is the most important sector that shapes the intellectual potential of any state, ensuring economic development, social justice, and national self-awareness. After Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991, the task of reforming the Soviet-era centralized, ideologically rigid education system emerged as an unavoidable priority issue on the agenda. From the early years of independence, the strategy of rebuilding higher education on the basis of national interests and international standards was established as state policy [1].

Over the past 35 years, the higher education system has

fundamentally renewed its institutional structure, financing mechanisms, academic-methodological base, and international cooperation framework. Whereas only 42 higher educational institutions existed in 1991, by 2026 their number exceeded 200 [2]. At the same time, the number of students exceeds approximately one million per year, a figure that represents a 4.5-fold increase compared to the situation in 1991 [3].

The relevance of this study lies in the need to scientifically systematize the long-term dynamics of higher education reforms and evaluate the effectiveness of their outcomes. The purpose of the article is to conduct a step-by-step analysis of the changes implemented in the

higher education system during the years of independence, identify their results, and determine prospects for future development.

## 2. Literature Review

The primary sources used in the study include: laws and Presidential decrees of the Republic of Uzbekistan on higher education; official statistical data published by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation; reports by UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank; local and foreign scientific studies; data from international rankings and accreditation bodies, and other sources [4, 5].

## 3. Methods

The following methodological approaches were employed in the study: comparative-historical method – for comparing the higher education system across different historical periods; systematic analysis – for identifying the interconnections between various elements of educational policy; statistical analysis – for evaluating the dynamics of quantitative indicators; documentary analysis – for examining the regulatory and legal framework.

## 4. Discussion and Results

In the first decade of independence, the fundamental institutional foundation was established in the field of higher education. In 1992, the Law “On Education” was adopted, which defined the legal basis of the national education system [8]. In 1997, a new edition of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Education” and the “National Program for Personnel Training” were adopted. These documents envisaged the transition of higher education to a multi-tier system (bachelor’s, master’s degrees) and the renewal of the material and technical base [9]. During this period, the network of 42 higher educational institutions was significantly expanded and a number of new universities were established. New national educational standards replaced Soviet-era centralized curricula. A system of state grant and contract places was introduced, which laid the groundwork for the beginning of financial diversification in education [10].

In the second stage, the higher education system was further improved. A credit-module system consistent with the principles of the Bologna Process was introduced, and academic programs began to be aligned with international standards [11]. Memoranda of

cooperation with foreign universities were signed and the first branch campuses appeared – a network of branches of Russian, Korean, and British universities. The activities of the State Testing Center (STC) were expanded, and the system of admission to educational institutions was transferred to a transparent and competitive basis [12]. During this period, non-state higher education institutions also began to develop. By 2010, 65 higher educational institutions were operating in Uzbekistan, 16 of which were non-state institutions [2]. However, during this period, admission quotas remained restricted, and the coverage rate of higher education was still low – approximately 9-10 percent [13].

In 2017, President Sh. Mirziyoyev launched a systematic policy aimed at fundamentally renewing higher education. The “Action Strategy for Further Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan” (2017-2021) became the main roadmap for modernizing higher education [14]. In 2017, admission quotas were doubled. Steps were taken to grant academic and financial autonomy to universities. During this period, the network of international branch campuses expanded unprecedentedly: a Harvard Medical School cooperation program, the Turin Polytechnic University Tashkent branch, Webster University, Inha University, and others began their operations [15]. The coverage rate of higher education reached 28 percent by 2021, representing a threefold increase compared to the 9 percent figure in 2017 [3].

In 2023, a new Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan was adopted, which enshrined the right to education in an expanded form [16]. The “Concept for the Development of Higher Education until 2030” was developed and approved. A system for accrediting higher education institutions was introduced. Starting from 2024, it became mandatory for institutions to obtain a quality certificate from independent accreditation bodies [17]. Significant achievements were made in the field of digitalization. The “Edu.uz” and “HEMIS” platforms were fully implemented. By 2025, hybrid and distance learning formats were standardized in all higher educational institutions [18]. Uzbekistan also achieved notable results in the field of international recognition, with several universities aspiring to enter the QS World University Rankings. Tashkent State Technical University and the National University of Uzbekistan were included in the 2025 list [19].

The results obtained demonstrate that higher education

reforms in Uzbekistan proceeded in a step-by-step but consistent and cumulative manner. Each stage was built upon the achievements of the previous one and gave rise to new directions. However, our study also identified a number of structural problems. First, the coverage rate of higher education remains around 28-30 percent, which is still low compared to developed countries (50-70 percent) [13]. Second, the quality gap between higher educational institutions is significant – the difference in resources and personnel between capital-city universities and regional institutions is considerable [6]. Third, research and innovation activity is still insufficiently funded: the share of GDP directed to education was 5.7 percent in 2025, but the contribution allocated to science constituted only 0.2 percent of it [20].

International education researchers such as P. Altbach and L. Reisberg emphasize the need in post-Soviet states to transition from increasing admission quotas to ensuring educational quality [7]. Uzbekistan's recent policy shows that important steps have been taken in this direction: the introduction of the accreditation system, the expansion of international cooperation, and the digitalization of administration through the HEMIS platform are clear evidence of this.

At the same time, the research results partially confirm the conclusion put forward by Kholmatov N. and others that “the legal foundations of the reforms are solid, but the implementation mechanisms are weak” [6]. The academic autonomy of universities has not yet been fully ensured, and the alignment of academic programs with the demands of industry and the labor market is also insufficient. The experience of international branch campuses is showing its positive aspects – local students are gaining access to quality education without having to go abroad. However, the integration of these branches into the local academic ecosystem and the effectiveness of knowledge transfer require separate studies.

## 5. Conclusion

Uzbekistan has accomplished enormous work on the path of fundamentally renewing its higher education system during the years of independence. The growth from 42 higher educational institutions in 1991 to more than 200 institutions by 2026, a 4.5-fold increase in the number of students, the liberalization of admission quotas, the rapid development of international cooperation and digitalization – all of these should be noted as positive outcomes of the reforms. The main conclusions of the study are as follows: first, higher education reforms were

carried out sequentially in three main directions – institutional expansion, quality assurance, and internationalization; second, the post-2017 period proved to be the most dynamic and strategically well-directed stage of the reforms; third, the digitalization and accreditation systems created a new infrastructure for monitoring the quality of education.

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