



TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

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***Abstract:** The article is devoted to the consideration of the reforms and achieved results in the higher education system in Uzbekistan. In addition, having analyzed the regulatory framework within the issue under consideration, the authors highlight the importance of education in achieving the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals.*

***Keywords:** education, higher education, university, United Nations (UN), sustainable development goals, gender equality.*

Uzbekistan is currently undertaking a profound transformation of its national education system. The core objective of this reform is to enhance the quality of training for highly qualified personnel. Contemporary demands impose new requirements on university graduates, compelling them to master modern knowledge grounded in advanced information and educational technologies. This shift is essential for improving the quality of life for individuals and society collectively.

The development of the higher education system has consistently been a priority for the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The

significance of this focus is evidenced by a series of presidential decrees and resolutions. Key among these are: Presidential Decree № PD-5847, «On Approval of the Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030» (October 8, 2019); Presidential Decree № PD-27, «On the State Program for the Implementation of the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026 in the «Year of Care for People and Quality Education»» (February 28, 2023); and the Presidential Resolution «On Approval of the National Program of Education in the Field of Human Rights in the Republic of Uzbekistan» (February 7, 2023).

The 2019 Concept outlines several priority objectives. These include developing public-private partnerships in higher education, raising the enrollment rate to over 50 percent by expanding public and private institutions across regions, and fostering a healthy competitive environment. It also aims to place at least ten national universities within the top 1000 of international rankings (e.g., QS, THE, ARWU). Furthermore, the Concept advocates for a transition from theory-heavy curricula to a system cultivating practical skills based on international experience. This elevates higher education to a new level, aiming to produce graduates who can successfully navigate the labor market and contribute to socio-economic development. A central pillar of this transformation is the gradual implementation of the «University 3.0» model, which emphasizes the integration of education, scientific research, and innovation, including the commercialization of research outcomes.

The subject of higher education reform has also attracted considerable scholarly attention. Numerous researchers emphasize the

necessity of systemic changes to elevate the sector. For instance, Senko (2015) argues that in the context of rapid social and demographic shifts, integrating teaching with research activities is essential for resolving key challenges in higher education development. Similarly, Borisenko (2023) underscores the fundamental role of education in personal and professional development, stating that it enables individuals to define their role in society, think critically, and acquire new competencies.

Within the international discourse, Burton R. Clark's work, *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective*, provides a valuable framework for analyzing contemporary issues. Clark (2011) examines the organizational structures of higher education systems across nations, investigating how they maintain stability, distribute authority, ensure integration, and manage change.

The national commitment to this transformative agenda was reiterated by President Sh. Mirziyoyev at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023. He stated that developing human capital and nurturing a creative younger generation are strategic priorities for Uzbekistan, viewing accessible, quality education as the most effective tool for eradicating poverty and ensuring sustainable growth. He cited tangible progress, with preschool enrollment rising from 21% to 70% and higher education enrollment from 9% to 38% in six years, with targets set for universal kindergarten access and 50% university enrollment for school graduates by 2030. Systematic efforts to promote gender equality are also underway, with girls constituting 49% of university entrants in the previous year.

Among the global trends reshaping the world order, the transition to sustainable development is particularly consequential. Climate change

and anthropogenic environmental impact have reached a critical juncture, with consequences such as fires, floods, and ecological degradation threatening biodiversity and human health. Many experts posit that humanity has entered a new geological epoch - the Anthropocene - defined by the significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems.

Education is widely recognized as a key instrument for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 interconnected global objectives designed as “a plan for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all” (UNDP, 2015). Uzbekistan integrated these goals into its national policy following their adoption in 2015, formally approving 17 national SDGs in 2018 via a Cabinet of Ministers resolution.

The concept of sustainable development, formally named in 1987, advocates for meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. Research in this field has expanded dramatically since the late 20th century, evolving into the dynamic domain of sustainability science. While the 169 global targets under the SDGs provide a universal framework, each nation adapts and implements them according to its specific national conditions and strategic priorities.

In this context, universities are increasingly called upon to address pressing societal challenges. They contribute both indirectly, through research and specialized training, and directly, through volunteer, charitable, and socio-cultural initiatives. Consequently, many universities are evolving into anchor institutions, playing a central role in the infrastructure for sustainable regional development.

Modern universities are therefore concentrating on developing educational programs that train personnel for long-term labor market relevance, thereby helping to reduce unemployment. This necessitates active collaboration with local authorities and industry partners to forecast labor market trends and shape targeted training programs.

The higher education sector worldwide is undergoing fundamental changes in its societal role, methodologies, and management. Leading global universities are actively redefining their missions. A widely recognized trajectory is the evolution from the teaching-focused “University 1.0” model to the “University 3.0” model, which integrates education, research, and innovation. Currently, a new paradigm - “University 4.0” - is emerging. This model expands the mission beyond the traditional trio to include the active integration of societal structures to directly address sustainable development challenges.

Table 1

Specific peculiarities of the strategic guidelines of universities aimed at global or regional influence¹

Model/Features	University 1.0	University 2.0	University 3.0	University 4.0
Mission	Education	Education and science	Education, science and innovations	Education, science, innovation, integration, impact on sustainable development of society
Strategic objective	Personnel training	Production of new scientific knowledge,	Influence on economic development through the	Global impact on sustainable development of society,

¹ Developed by the authors in reliance upon the literary sources.

		personnel training	introduction of innovations and personnel training	ecosystem integration
The role and place of education	Education is the process of transferring gained knowledge	Education in the process of producing new scientific knowledge	Education in real innovation-based projects	Foresight education in research educational ecosystems
Academic curricula	Standardized academic curricula	Standardized academic curricula with a variable part	Individual educational trajectories within the framework of standardized academic curricula	Personalized learning, flexible, open, networked academic curricula
Academic technologies	Traditional active	Traditional interactive	Innovation-based offline	Innovation-based digital and online
Science	Science beyond universities	Generation of new knowledge through proactive research, "pure science"	Research for the technological development of national economies	Transnational research aimed at solving global problems
Key personnel	Faculty	Faculty and researchers	Faculty, researchers and managers	Faculty, tutors, researchers, IT-specialists
Impact on the society	Impact on the human resource development	Impact on the development of human resources	Impact on technological development of the economy	Impact on the global sustainable development processes

		and research potential		
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The growing emphasis on this expanded mission is reflected in global evaluations. For example, top-ranking universities in the QS World University Rankings 2023 are highly rated for their contributions to the SDGs. The integration of sustainable development principles into higher education encompasses several critical tasks: ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4); improving literacy and skills for lifelong learning; promoting gender equality through equal educational opportunities (SDG 5); and fostering environmental stewardship and sustainable practices.

In conclusion, the modern university is assuming a more central and significant role as an institution *for* society. This new mission - the socially oriented university - is becoming a critical determinant of institutional success and competitiveness. The capacity of universities to implement this model effectively directly influences the developmental success of their regions and the nation as a whole

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