



Uzbekistan Ranks Third Globally as Host of International Branch Campuses

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Governments of many countries around the world have decided that transnational education, and specifically international branch campuses, can help them achieve their economic and social development goals. In recent years, Uzbekistan, a country in Central Asia, has actively supported foreign universities that want to establish a campus in the country. Quite unnoticed internationally, Uzbekistan is now host to the third largest number of international branch campuses globally, behind only China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This article considers why and how Uzbekistan implemented its transnational education strategy.

Higher Education in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 saw Uzbekistan and the four other former Soviet republics of Central Asia become independent states. They were all expected to transition from planned to market economies. Initially, the five Central Asian states took different approaches to higher education reform. For example, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan aimed to achieve mass participation in higher education, Uzbekistan chose to retain its elite system with relatively low levels of participation, which was still below 10 percent as recently as 2010. Further, the Uzbek government retained centralized decision-making, whereby it was wholly responsible for determining institution finances, program structure and content, and admissions policies.

A series of acts passed in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in the establishment of new institutions, higher enrollments, introduction of standardized entrance tests, and increased international cooperation. However, the most extensive reforms came after 2016, the year in which Shavkat Mirziyoyev became president. The government began promoting transnational education as a way to help achieve its goals of increasing higher education capacity and improving educational quality.

Internationalization

The internationalization of Uzbekistan's higher education began before 2016. Uzbek institutions established links with foreign universities for cooperation and collaboration, and special funds were allocated by the government so that hundreds of young Uzbeks could study abroad. Under special circumstances, it was possible for a foreign university to establish a branch campus in Uzbekistan. The first international branch campus was established in 1995 by the Russian University of Economics named after G.V. Plekhanov, followed by two more Russian universities in 2006 and 2007. It was perhaps natural that the first foreign-owned campuses came from Russia since Uzbekistan retained strong ties and trade links with Russia, and a high proportion of the population spoke Russian as their second language.

International cooperation also led to the introduction of private Uzbek-owned transnational education institutions. These institutions award degrees from a foreign university, which typically assumes the role of advisor or mentor while also taking responsibility for quality assurance. The first of such institutions was Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT), which commenced operations in 2002 with the support of the University of Westminster, United Kingdom. Several researchers have wrongly classified WIUT as an international branch campus even though press releases of the institution have emphasized that the university is *not* a branch campus, and the University of Westminster's website refers to WIUT as "partner." Both international branch

Abstract

To achieve its economic and social development goals, the Uzbek government has established a vibrant transnational education sector. At the start of 2024, Uzbekistan had 38 transnational higher education institutions, including 30 international branch campuses. This has resulted in the country becoming host to the third largest number of international branch campuses globally, behind only China and the United Arab Emirates. This article considers why and how Uzbekistan implemented its transnational education strategy.

campuses and the local privately-owned transnational education institutions quickly developed reputations for providing high quality education, and student enrollments increased dramatically.

Education Hub

Encouraged by the success of the early transnational education providers, the Uzbek government decided that expanding the transnational education sector would contribute greatly to achieving its objective of a 50 percent higher education participation rate by 2030. Since 2017, a variety of incentives have been offered to foreign universities that establish a branch campus in Uzbekistan, including grants, tax breaks, guarantees against financial loss, and premises, land, and equipment, often free of cost. The high level of unsatisfied student demand combined with the Uzbek government's generous incentives encouraged 23 institutions to open a campus in the country between 2018 and 2022. However, with relatively low tuition fees, foreign universities are not coming for profit; rather, they are satisfying their internationalization, social equity, and global brand-building objectives.

At the start of 2024, Uzbekistan had 38 transnational education institutions, where students can achieve a degree from a foreign university without leaving Uzbekistan; 30 of these institutions are international branch campuses. This has resulted in Uzbekistan becoming host to the third largest number of international branch campuses globally. The country may now be recognized as a higher education hub.

It is amazing not only that so many new campuses were established in such a short period of time, but that most of the campuses occupy large well-equipped and resourced premises, which contrasts starkly to the "single-floor in an office block" institutions that are common in many other transnational education hubs. Further, the new transnational education institutions in Uzbekistan have impressive enrollment rates. In their first two years of operation, many institutions managed to enroll several hundred students, and several providers now have more than 4,000 students.

This success has not come without challenges. There are no clear and separate regulations for transnational education providers, which is further complicated by the fact that government-sponsored campuses are usually supervised by the specific ministry that is related to the institution's main field of teaching. So, different institutions may be subject to different requirements and expectations. Some institutions have experienced licensing difficulties. Problems related to teaching that does not show awareness and respect for local values have occurred, such as when one professor was dismissed for discussing the sexual orientation of a local historical figure. Also, many students have a level of English language competency that is not equal to international standards, resulting in the need for a foundation year and/or extra language support.

Effective Strategy

Of Uzbekistan's 30 international branch campuses, 14 belong to institutions based in Russia. But an interesting and uncommon feature of Uzbekistan's transnational education sector is that institutions also come from a diverse range of other countries that include India, Italy, Latvia, Malaysia, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Turkey, and the United States. Higher education internationalization achieved in this way makes good strategic sense for Uzbekistan, as it promotes international trade and relations without overrelying on Russia.

While many transnational education providers in other education hubs focus on business, computer science, and engineering programs, the institutions in Uzbekistan offer a diverse range of subjects that are relevant to the nation's economic development, such as energy (oil, gas, and nuclear industries), medicine, chemical technology, pharmaceutical science, computer science and digital transformation, teacher education, agriculture, and international relations.

Promising Future

All stakeholders must currently be satisfied with how Uzbekistan's transnational education sector is developing. It is widely believed that higher education quality has already improved, and the new institutions have contributed considerably to the increased

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higher education participation rate, which reached 42 percent in 2023. It may be still early to say, but it is encouraging that no foreign provider has yet failed. Uzbekistan is well-positioned to serve as a regional education hub for Central Asia. With tuition fees that are considerably lower than international levels, it is likely that the number of international students coming to Uzbekistan will increase significantly over the next decade. However, since there is still plenty of unsatisfied demand from domestic students, institutions have not yet turned their attention to recruiting international students. ▲

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