

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR REFORMING THE HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

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**Abstract.** This article examines the key challenges related to the management and development of the higher education system in Uzbekistan. It highlights the importance of strategic approaches in the context of global transformations and digitalization, and proposes effective governance models based on academic independence, quality assurance, and digital transformation. Based on the results of the scientific analysis, the article provides practical recommendations for reforming the sector.

**Keywords:** higher education system, governance challenges, global changes, digital transformation, strategic approaches, academic independence, quality assurance, effective management models.

**Introduction.** Today, in the era of globalization and innovative development, the role of education, particularly the higher education system is essential in ensuring the competitiveness of nations. Although large-scale reforms have been undertaken in Uzbekistan's education sector in recent years, challenges in managing the higher education system and identifying its strategic development directions remain highly relevant. Addressing these issues requires a systematic approach, a scientifically grounded strategy, and comprehensive digital transformation.

Research aimed at forecasting the outcomes of decisions adopted in the field of higher education modernization both for the higher education system itself and for society at large - remains insufficient today. Despite the ongoing reforms, a range of pressing issues persist, including the increasing academic workload of students and faculty, the reduction and disappearance of schools, the predominance of teaching over research competence, insufficient preparation for teaching and learning processes, inconsistencies in curricula, and the low level of engagement among students and academic staff. These challenges remain highly relevant today.

**Main body.** Research focused on developing a higher education plan has primarily concentrated on discrete elements, with discussions frequently remaining at a superficial level. The unique attributes of the higher education sector, which ought to align with contemporary societal progress and foster meaningful scientific discourse, are neglected. Thus, these publications offer restricted assistance for clarifying the direction of economic policy. Specifically, within the context of "Economic competence", the legal, organizational, and methodological aspects of formulating a strategy for developing knowledge, innovation, and information-based higher education have not been comprehensively elaborated, including at the regional level. Furthermore, strengthening the regional dimension of social development has

become a defining characteristic for the majority of countries today, regardless of their level of development, state structure, or cultural traditions. Governments implement regional policy precisely through the regions themselves. In turn, developing regional strategies for the advancement of education is essential for addressing a range of interrelated socio-economic issues in a comprehensive manner. In this regard, the formulation and implementation of the most effective strategies in the field of higher education hold particular significance not only at the national level but also at the regional level.

Formulating a governance and development strategy for the higher education system represents a complex scientific challenge. It encompasses factors that accelerate economic growth and development, the economic functions of the state, the rationale for state intervention in economic processes, the forms of governmental involvement in market mechanisms, global economic issues, and the methodological foundations of strategic planning.

In Uzbekistan, effective governance mechanisms for the higher education system have not yet been sufficiently developed, and the absence of clear models for institutional approaches and digital transformation in strategic development constitutes one of the key scientific challenges today.

The higher education system is a strategic sector that shapes a country's intellectual potential and directly influences its economic and social development. In today's context, global competition, digital transformation, rapid changes in the labor market, and demographic factors necessitate a reassessment of the higher education system, the adoption of effective governance mechanisms, and the assurance of its sustainable development.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of governance is diminished by the constraints of existing management paradigms: innovative strategies are inadequately integrated, the academic independence of higher education institutions is restricted, the curriculum does not entirely align with labor market requirements, and contemporary methods for evaluating educational quality are utilized only to a limited degree.

To address these issues, it is essential to first classify the existing problems within the higher education system. Currently, Uzbekistan's higher education sector encounters some significant challenges:

- Centralized governance and a lack of institutional initiative;
- Limited academic independence;
- The absence of modern criteria for assessing education quality;
- A discrepancy between educational curricula and labor market demands;
- Low levels of scientific activity and insufficient engagement in innovative research;
- Weaknesses in the implementation of digital technologies.

We propose the subsequent solutions and priority areas for the governance of the higher education system and the development of its strategic framework:

1. Introducing modern management models in higher education governance.
2. Strengthening the functioning of corporate governance structures in universities (including Councils and External Supervisory Boards).
3. Preparing leaders based on principles of leadership and transformational management.

Regarding the priority directions for the development of the higher education management system:

1. Expanding academic independence. It is essential to grant higher education institutions greater authority in independently making decisions regarding educational and academic programs, financial management, and personnel policy, including the independent selection of staff. Strengthening the legal foundations of internal institutional independence will enable universities to formulate and implement their own internal development strategies more effectively.

2. Introducing corporate governance. It is important to strengthen mechanisms of public oversight and transparent management in universities through the effective functioning of Supervisory Boards and Academic Councils.

3. Digital transformation and data-driven governance. It is crucial to implement electronic governance systems and digitalize educational processes through platforms such as LMS, CRM, and ERP systems. Equally important is the use of Big Data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in decision-making, as well as the development of remote learning and hybrid education models. These measures play a key role in enhancing efficiency and modernizing higher education management.

4. Ensuring and assessing the quality of higher education, and aligning it with international standards. It is essential to improve the national accreditation system in accordance with international requirements and standards, prepare universities for participation in global rankings, expand joint programs and scientific cooperation with foreign universities, and strengthen integration with international ranking systems such as QS and THE.

5. Integration of education, industry, and the labor market. Establishing dual education in collaboration with industry sectors is crucial, which involves implementing dual training models, aligning educational programs with labor market demands through systematic revisions, and enhancing the connection between scientific research and practical application.

The changes that have taken place in Uzbekistan's post-industrial society have given rise to several fundamentally new trends in the development and functioning of higher education. These encompass: the massification of higher education; the incremental decrease of the state's financial contribution; the enhancement of state mandates regarding the efficiency and performance of higher education institutions; the evolution of the conventional model of academic knowledge; and the proliferation of quality assurance systems. All of these factors impose new responsibilities on both global and Uzbek universities to enhance the competitiveness of higher education in an increasingly dynamic and rapidly changing world.

Studying global and local theories and practices of strategic planning enables us to define strategic planning as a systematic method of managing change throughout the key processes conducted at all levels of the hierarchy. In terms of form, a strategy constitutes a type of managerial document presented through tables, charts, descriptions, and similar formats; in terms of content, it represents a model of goal-oriented actions and a set of instruments designed to achieve the intended objectives. In a static sense, strategy is a plan or direction for the development of a system (or organization), whereas in a dynamic sense, it is a set of actions aimed at achieving predetermined objectives.

Although the development strategy of higher education may contain certain elements of commercialization, its essence is fundamentally non-commercial. In our view, this non-commercial nature is determined by the core functions and purposes inherent to higher education itself:

1. Transmitting the moral, ethical–aesthetic norms and traditions accepted by society to future generations (the transfer of society’s “genetic code”);
2. Preparing an elite capable of making strategic decisions across various sectors;
3. Providing mass training of qualified specialists based on scientific research and advancements in relevant fields of activity.

Accordingly, the non-commercial nature of educational activity is characterized by the following features:

- a high level of regulation of the educational environment;
- the uncertainty of the final outcomes of higher education activities;
- differences in the value systems of education and business;
- a highly ambiguous notion of the “consumer” in strategic decision-making and the limited independence of management.

The necessity to formulate a higher education development strategy is propelled by the swift transformations in the external environment and, consequently, by the changing demands of society, students, and employers—demands that frequently exceed the present condition of the higher education system. This technique is crucial for aligning higher education with the requirements and standards of a certain historical context, establishing a successful developmental trajectory across all market levels, and acquiring key human resources and innovative technology. This requirement is influenced by Uzbekistan's economic development trajectory and the regional advancement of social development. Thus, the higher education development strategy ought to be regarded as a logical extension of the national development strategy and must be incorporated into the regional development strategies.

Studying the regional dimension of shaping a higher education development strategy is based on a systemic and interdisciplinary approach. In particular, drawing on the principles of the theory of the state’s economic policy (strategy), economic theory, the sociology of education, regional economics, strategic planning theory, and the theory of state regulation of the economy, it becomes evident that incorporating the regional aspect into the formulation of a higher education development strategy is both logical and necessary. This is because the goals and tasks of national strategic plans are ultimately implemented at the level of specific regions.

In regional development strategies, the science–education complex is regarded as one of the most important sources of competitive advantage and as a foundation for future prosperity. Building on this potential, regions have the opportunity to implement a number of strategic directions both within programmatic initiatives for developing the education sector and as independent regional initiatives. Identifying alternative models for the development of higher education, therefore, requires an approach grounded in the specific scientific and educational characteristics of each region.

The objective of structural transformations in the higher education system is to create an optimal structure of higher education institutions that takes into account the needs of economic sectors and key consumers of human resources for specialists possessing the required level of qualifications and skills, as well as the capacities of these institutions. At the same time, restructuring is aimed not only at diversifying universities into various types, but also at consolidating institutions in ways that promote the concentration of resources.

**Conclusion.** The institutional and structural modernization of Uzbekistan’s higher education system has emerged as a strategic necessity in the context of globalization, digital

transformation, and rapid changes in the labor market. The findings of the research indicate that several systemic challenges persist within the current governance mechanism, including a high degree of centralization, limited academic independence, misalignment between educational content and labor market requirements, and inconsistencies with national and international quality assurance standards.

Analyses conducted at both regional and national levels indicate that development processes within Uzbekistan's higher education system are predominantly implemented through a normative-administrative approach, while strategic modelling, regional education policy, and comprehensive system-level needs assessments remain insufficiently developed. Therefore, the higher education development strategy should be viewed not merely as a component of state policy, but as an integrated national mechanism that shapes the country's intellectual, economic, and technological potential.

The research demonstrates that if the governance of a modern higher education institution is not intrinsically linked with strategic planning, innovation management, elements of corporate governance, digitalized processes, and quality assurance systems, improvements in educational effectiveness cannot be achieved. Expanding universities' financial, organizational, personnel, and academic independence leads to the strengthening of innovative activity in educational programs, scientific fields, and human resource policies.

Institutional and structural modernization of Uzbekistan's higher education system - drawing on international experience, the environment of digital transformation, and the country's innovative potential serves as a key mechanism for shaping the nation's long-term intellectual capital. International experience indicates that true stability and effective integration into global competition in higher education can only be attained when institutional independence, digital governance, quality assurance, labor-market integration, and regional strategy operate together as an interconnected system.

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