

# APPLICABILITY OF INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES IN UZBEK HIGHER EDUCATION TO IMPROVE QUALITY AND COMPETITIVENESS

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**Abstract.** *Further reforming the higher education system is one of the hot topics in current political life in Uzbekistan. It is in the threshold of a rapid and long term change and improvement process in order to raise quality. In this regard, the international best practices of quality improvement are seen as a key task and objective before the practitioners and managerial staff. How the best practices can be adopted and applied in practice are still under discussion. Therefore, in this article is discussed the problematic issues of quality improvement in the background of the recent developments and policy reforms in higher education system in Uzbekistan. The major components of quality assurance such as adopting the best practices in teaching, research, managing higher educational institutions, and applicability of strategic management tools are argued. Moreover, the possibility of adopting the best practices in the field of internationalization such as student and teacher exchange and working in international projects are reviewed. Each discussion is mixed with recommendations of and implications from the author.*

**Keywords:** *quality in higher education, competitiveness, best practices, quality assurance, benchmarking, tuning methodology, academic autonomy in higher education.*

## Introduction

The latest developments and political reforms in Uzbekistan demonstrate that higher educational institutions (hereinafter HEI) in our country can no longer keep up with the global trends and integrative process around the world. Quality of education remains the top agenda of the reforming policies. In this regard, the latest updates and best practices of Quality Assurance, Quality Improvement Methodologies in Europe and other parts of the world need to be introduced and analytically explained. The questions such as, “How can best practices enrich or impact on the Uzbek higher education system?”, “What can be learned or what are the components of best practices that can we adapt in the Uzbek higher education system?” should be the central concern of every practitioner and management staff in the higher education system. Of course, the Erasmus+ capacity building project (formerly Tempus) has significant impact and remains as one of the important instruments to improve quality improvement and

internationalization in Uzbek HEIs. Moreover, the projects funded by UNESCO, Istedod Foundation, DAAD and World Bank have analysed and researched the applicability of achieved and learned best practices. Therefore, within this article, we conducted a small qualitative research study based on in-depth interviews using the purposeful sampling method. In this method, we selected who can best help us to understand our phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). In-depth interview helped us to understand the analytical thoughts, opinions and recommendations of administrative and managerial staffs in some HEIs and in some recently established quality inspection departments.

Administrative and managerial staffs consisted of some Rectors, Vice-Rectors, Deans, heads of chair and heads of department. Interview respondents were chosen by using purposeful sampling, i.e. those who have had adequate experience working in academic and scientific international projects. Altogether, 29 respondents interviewed.

Four major questions were central in the analysis of the authors:

1. In what extent are the best practices and advanced skills in the field of quality and competitiveness of higher education process effective and productive in Uzbek HEIs?
2. What are the possibilities of using the quality improvement methods such as strategic management, benchmarking, tuning, and continuous improvement to improve the quality assurance mechanism in Uzbek HEIs?
3. What are solutions for the problems and obstacles in the internationalization process in Uzbek HEIs?
4. What are the possibilities to accelerate giving autonomy to Uzbek HEIs?

The purpose of conducting the small interview research is to get into the situation more specifically and investigate the inferences of actual practitioner in HEIs.

### **Applicability of best practices and quality improvement tools**

The author analysed and garnered the major ideas and views of the respondents, resulting in the following arguments.

International best practices have been the central focus of reformation policies and processes since the independence of the country. For example, best practices from the European HEIs within the Erasmus+ capacity building projects are successfully adopted and some of them, like Turkish practices of higher education failed to use in early stage of the independence of the country. However, not every practice can be adopted directly. In the process of formation, the national model of the education system, the local traditions, customs, and

ideological views have been taken into account. Each practice should be carefully learned and analysed. Nowadays, all HEIs are struggling to get a competing position at the international level, by trying to improve the academic and scientific capacities. This struggle increased more sharply after the presidential decrees № 2909 on “Further developing the higher education”, № 3151 on “Further widening the participation of economic sectors and branches in improving quality of training the higher educated specialists”, Cabinet of Ministers’ decree № 515 on “Establishing the State Inspection for supervision of quality in education under the Cabinet of Ministers the Republic of Uzbekistan”, and these legislation decrees load serious tasks and responsibilities in each administrative and teaching staff in every HEI. Responsibilities and tasks are clear, but when it comes to implementation the lacking factors, such as “unsatisfactory knowledge of foreign languages”, “poor working experience in specialised areas”, “poor level of pedagogical experiences” and “unsatisfactory IT skills” and sometimes “academic antagonism” can slow the process down.

However, the fast growing globalization and internationalization process never gives a chance to stay aside if any HEIs intend to position themselves in national and international levels. Since independence, the organizations such as Istedod Foundation, TACIS, TEMPUS, KOICA, DAAD and British Council projects have played a significant role to develop the internationalization activities in Uzbek higher education. However, most of the respondents have poor information about the Erasmus+ program.

Eighty percent of the practitioners are well aware of the Quality assurance tools such as “Quality control”, “Strategic planning”, “Strategic management”, “Total Quality Management”, “Tuning”, which they learnt during their participation in the projects where those topics were relevant. For instance, tuning methodology was introduced within the TuCAHEA (see <http://www.tucahea.org>) project and this tool is discovered as one of the effective and productive tools to benchmark the best practices in the field for educational standards and academic competences. Despite the fact that the tools are considered important for higher education, the scope of practical usage has not widened.

Seventy five percent of the total respondents believe that a centralized system of higher education is the best option, at this time of being, to keep the quality under control and to monitor the process. However, autonomy is also important and it has to be transformed gradually. The majority of management staff believe that autonomy can occur if the available authorities are used by the management staff because the management staff have a wide range of authorities to take initiative actions which leads to better performance in certain areas of the process. However, the issue of poor management skills is one of the major factors for dissatisfactory results. To resolve these issues, the Uzbek government introduced a new regulation on “Establishing and organization retraining and

qualification improvement courses for the management and administrative staff in higher education”, in June 12, 2015 (see [http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact\\_id=2724938&twolang=true](http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=2724938&twolang=true)). According to this order, the administrative staff (excluding Rector) have to pass 144 hours of retraining courses whereas teaching staff must pass 288 hours every three years. The retraining course’s curriculum contains subjects such as “Modern approaches to provide the quality”, “Quality assurance indicators in Education”, “Involving the student quality assurance process”, “Innovative management in quality assurance of education”, “International best practices of quality assurance in education”, “Monitoring and inspection the educational quality” which can equip them with necessary competences and managerial skills. The retraining courses are mostly organized under the Head Scientific Methodical Centre (HSMC). On the other hand, the teaching staff course’s curriculum is most focused on specialised specific subjects and the retraining is held under fulcrum HEIs’ centres which are also considered branches for HSMC. For example, pedagogical sphere based in Tashkent State Pedagogical University, natural subjects in National University of Uzbekistan, Economics in Tashkent State Economical University etc.

Overall, by the inference of current policy reforms, we believe the higher education system gradually steps from centralised to decentralised.

We recommend widening the usage of a strategic management tool in HEIs in order to improve the effective management and administration performance. A strategic management tool forces gradual changes and it is considered as one of the effective mechanisms. Strategic management has several components which is considered effective and productive (Chadwick, 1996). However, using the strategic management tool, in most cases, depends on organizational interests and benefits. In private HEIs, strategic management is used widely and it is considered as one of the important management tools. In public HEIs, use of strategic management can come along with the accountabilities and responsibilities before government or ministry. In the case of Uzbekistan, each HEI has sufficient authorities to establish organizational strategies and to proceed the activities towards the vision and mission. Taking into account the international best practices, we recommend two types of strategic management in Uzbek HEIs: internal and external strategies. Internal strategies foresee to carry out the activities based on creativity, effective usage of the available resources, and increasing the functional accountability of each staff member and others. Internal strategy can support to overcome “resistance to change” and neutralize “academic antagonism”. Because, in using internal the strategical management tool, there is no possibility not to take positive and negative factors in into account. On the other hand, the external strategic management tool mostly can be used to respond to external forces such as internationalization, accreditation and ranking which leads the HEIs to be more competitive in the country and in the world.

### **Internationalization as one of the important components of quality**

Internationalization issues were also broadly discussed with respondents. The internationalization process is considered one of the most vital issues in current Uzbek HEIs. The major educational collaboration has been conducted mostly with EU countries. Major destination countries were Germany, Poland, France, Latvia, Spain and Italy. Respondents also think that in terms of internationalization, the regional integration between the five Central Asian countries were in top agenda of current political processes in Uzbekistan which was not preferable before. However, the educational relationship between the five Central Asian countries is still yet to be developed. The majority of the Tempus and Erasmus+ capacity building projects, especially regional projects, included the HEIs from at least two to three Central Asian countries. For instance, the Tempus regional project TuCAHEA was the most successful and the biggest project to date. Tempus TuCAHEA project (Towards a Central Asian Higher Education Area: Tuning Structures and Building Quality Culture) mostly focused on creating the “Central Asian Higher Education Area (CAHEA)”, aligned with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), able to take into account and valorise the specific needs and potentials of the Region and of the partner countries, thus responding to the needs of the higher education community and society at large (see <http://www.tucahea.org>). The project had 47 partners, including eight European Union Universities, 34 Central Asian Universities, and the Ministries of Education of the five partner countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Despite the project’s end in 2015, the significance of the project raised a stream of recent educational policy changes.

Overall, the major percentage of educational collaboration in Central Asian countries was undertaken within the Tempus and Erasmus+ regional capacity building projects and now, each HEI seeks to diversify the collaboration. Not only in the five countries but also the internationalization process is including Afghanistan as well (Yeniseyev, 2017, December 1). On January 16, 2018, 200 Afghan youth arrived to Termez to study their bachelor degree programs which are instructed in Uzbek language (Афғонистонлик ёшлар, 2018). They study at the newly established “Center for educating Afghan citizens” in Termez. Now the government seeks opportunities to interact ethnic Uzbek Afghan citizens in the southern part of Afghanistan, to study their bachelor and master degree programs instructed in Uzbek language. These educational relations lead to bring peace and prosperity to the neighborhoods.

Taking into account the above mentioned issues in terms of internationalization, we think that the following recommendations are applicable to further develop the internationalization process.

***1. In terms of increasing number of international students.***

If we look at the international practices, each HEI has its own strategy to increase the number of foreign students. The greater percentage of foreign students has a significant impact on higher ranking position in the world, and it gives better options of diversification in financial income, provides more opportunities for local students to be exposed to international culture and traditions, allows more changes to widen the intercultural relations, etc. Therefore, increasing the number of foreign students should be one of the vital objectives and included at the top of the strategic plan of each HEI in Uzbekistan. However, in most cases, despite the political reforms, strategies remain on paper. Organizing the courses instructed in English language is being applied at a slow rate (except some HEIs and international branch universities), especially in regional HEIs. Student exchange programs should be strengthened not only within the Erasmus+ but also HEIs have to find other ways to support their own students to finance the exchange activities. There are some problematic issues in organizing student exchange. The most important one is mutual recognition of the student's grade at the home university while he or she is accepted to another university. The traditional grading system and credit assessment system has several discrepancies, which is yet to be discussed and to come to any conclusion.

***2. In terms of teacher exchange activities.***

Compared to students, teacher exchange programs are well carried out within the programs such as Erasmus+, Istedod Foundation, DAAD. However, hiring international experienced professors still remains problematic. Despite the new legislation introduced on inviting foreign professors, we may meet them in HEIs very rarely. In this regard, more financial independence should be given to HEIs which can make the process more flexible and intensive. According to international practices, teacher or professorship positions for foreigners could be available in each faculty and department level. Based on contract and negotiations, the certain requirements should be set and announced which allows choosing the appropriate person by competition. On the other hand, the flow of local teachers and professors dramatically increased because of the low income and salary. The current reforming policy is foreseen to minimize the "Brain drain" and encourage teachers to remain in their home country and strengthen the academic potential.

***3. In terms of conforming teaching curriculum with international standards.***

The university curriculum structure in Uzbek higher education has a distinctive features and peculiarities stemmed from rich cultural and traditional inherited dignity of the nation. The core and optional subjects divided into blocks, what we call block of social-humanitarian subject, block of disciplinary subjects, and optional and other subjects. Taking account the unique cultural heritage and

moral behaviors the social-humanitarian block of subjects are taught in every higher education institutions as a part of the core curriculum. In overall, the national ideology which can give positive effect not only Uzbek youth but to other nations, is a part of the whole globalization process.

However, the university curriculum in Uzbekistan is to consider making more flexible, mobile, and operative which can be fit to market demands. The curriculum consideration and review tasks responsibilities are delegated to every fundamental institution of different disciplines. These institutions are in need of to exchange and benchmark the experiences with leading universities in the world.

We believe conforming the teaching and academic curriculum to the modern requirements and needs of employers, society and market is considered as one of the strategically important tasks. We recommend, Each subject's syllabus has to be created and lesson plans have to be reviewed. The credit system has also gradually adapted by piloting in certain institutions. For example, Tashkent State Law University started to pilot the credit system in 2017. We also recommend to widen usage of the textbooks written in English language in post-graduate level studies. It is important to start teaching research methodology subjects for PhD level students.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, Uzbekistan has every potential to integrate the higher education system with global processes. The international best practices and advanced skills in improving the quality and competitiveness of higher education are crucially important in currently urgent reformation process in the country. The quality improvement methods and tools such as strategic management, benchmarking, tuning are considered applicable in practice. For instance, the tuning methodology is already in use and it showed own efficiency in TuCAHEA project. By the result of research we believe that autonomy of every HEIs also important and government policy has gradually solving the issue by extending authorities. However, there are several issues as mentioned above which require much investment and reformations which can be undertaken by cooperation with foreign universities and scientific institutions.

Building a legal democratic state requires to implement the application the effective mechanisms and raise the level of quality in every public sector as well as in private. Volume of issues is widening while reformation process accelerates. For instance, in 2018 year and the next upcoming years, the number of student admissions to HEIs will be raised dramatically. Nevertheless, how the current scientific potential and curriculum can respond to these demands is remaining problematic. How the quality and competitiveness can be achieved? Of course, application the international best practices can play major role at this moment. The learned opinions and views of the current higher educational practitioners and

teaching staff disclose that the academic environment in Uzbek higher education are quite open for constructive changes and applying best practices. Young and talented graduated students should be more attracted and encouraged to stay in higher education to engage in academic and scientific occupation. Because scarcity for young cadres is one of obvious issues. Strengthening the international cooperation with foreign universities remains vital for the next decades. Therefore, universities in the world can count on productive and valuable collaboration with Uzbek HEIs.

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