

PRIORITY CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION SECTOR REFORMS IN MODERNIZING UZBEKISTAN

Ruzumboy Eshchanov
Chirchik State Pedagogical
Institute in Tashkent
region **UZBEKISTAN**
ruzumboy@gmail.com

John Lamers
Center for Development
Research, Bonn University
GERMANY
j.lamers@uni-bonn.de

Gulbakhor Bobojonova
Chirchik State Pedagogical
Institute in Tashkent region
UZBEKISTAN
b.gulbaxor1987@gmail.com

Davron Bekchanov
Chirchik State Pedagogical
Institute in Tashkent region
UZBEKISTAN
bekchanovdj@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Education sector overall is undergoing tremendous reforms after Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected as a president of Uzbekistan in 2016. Since then modern education standards are being implemented in various stages of education. Current paper critically reviews the education sector challenges and enumerates the priority challenges. Summary section discusses possible solutions to these problems.

Keywords: Education, capacity-building, challenges, clusters, Uzbekistan.

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan has adopted a number of regulatory acts, resolutions and guidelines for improving the national higher education system. Following independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country did not change its education system significantly till 1996. However, the “National Program on Capacity building” adopted from 1996 started the colossal reforms in the education sector, which touched-upon all the stages the education was divided into following stages:

- nine-year compulsory secondary education covering 7-16 years old pupil.
- it was followed by three-year compulsory professional colleges or academic lyceums covering 16-19 years;
- four-year optional tertiary education (bachelor) (30-50% public-funded);
- two-year optional master program (10% public-funded);
- three-year optional candidate of science program (100% public funded);
- five-year optional doctor of science program (100% public funded).

Education sector is undergoing tremendous reforms after the change of the political landscape in 2016. Since then modern education standards are being implemented in various stages of post-school education. More transparent entrance exam systems were adopted. To this end it is particularly worth mentioning the Presidential decrees on restructuring and reforming of the education sector institutions and education quality enhancement measures, e.g. establishment of the Ministry for Pre-school education, five-folds increase of the wages of the secondary school teachers, gradual increase of the intake quota for tertiary education etc.

The program entitled “Program on complex development of the higher education system during 2017-2021” elaborated on the key target parameter of the capacity building process, which consist of increasing the university intake quota from 9% to 15% in two years¹. switching back to 11 years secondary education through massive-closure of professional colleges. In line

¹ Cabinet of Ministers define a yearly university intake quota based on the labor market inquiry, which is allocated among the state universities and institutes. Only eight universities established in cooperation with foreign counterparts can define their annual intake size independently.

with the degree and in accordance with the set parameter, university intake quotas for covering the school graduates in higher education should be increased in the following areas:

- In humanities – 18.4%;
- In social sciences, economics and law – 3.5%;
- Manufacturing and technical area – 32.8%;
- Agricultural and water management – 38.5%;
- Healthcare and social provisions area – 25.7%; and
- Service sector – 39.7%.

Within this framework, the country experienced a 30% increase of intake of students to the higher education institutions in the country in time span of three years.

Moreover, the current President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev gave high priority to the issue of education from his first day of presidency and have been initiating and supporting crucial programs in the sphere. He has also touched upon the education sector reforms in the in his address to the national Parliament on 28 of December 2018 and underlined that “We have to strengthen our efforts directed at establishing more opportunities for getting higher education. Higher education coverage of the school graduates remained at the level of not more than 9-10% during the previous years. The actions and measures taken since 2016 have allowed us to increase this number to 15%. But this is still insufficient according to national demand, because plentiful experience of more developed countries demonstrates that this indicator should be 60-70% in average. Therefore, the country has set as long-term objective achieving a 20% coverage of the school graduates attending higher education, which was realized already in the 2019 entrance season with a strong commitment of gradual increase in the coming years.”²

REFORM GOALS

Due to planned university intake quota system, low coverage of the graduates in higher education (only 9% of graduates were seated in tertiary education) has eradicated the interest of the youth in higher education during the years of independence.

In fact, enhancement of the education processes and organization of delivering modern education to the youth is one of the most topical issues nowadays. During the meeting dedicated to the further development of the education system, improving the sector of human capacity building and expanding the integration of science and technology with the manufacturing sector, which took on 24 October 2018, the President of Uzbekistan highlighted the issues related to integrating innovative methods to the process of education, providing consistency of the existing education curricula with manufacturing and production, and existing challenges associated with making the education system in line with the structural changes labor market demands is experiencing and mentioned “It is bothersome that instead of serving as an engine of national economic growth and development, our higher education system is lagging behind the global, contemporary level”.

It should be of interest to national and international stakeholders alike to review one of the most important factors for increasing the efficiency of the current education system. The further focus therefore is on cluster technologies defined here as :

“unification” (collection, association) when applied to education and includes number of pedagogical processes. In general, the term cluster and the approach is used for explaining large

² Address of the President of Uzbekistan to the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) from 24 December 2018, www.uza.uz

producers and economic complexes, in which modern systems of their management are established and interlinked.

In contemporary life, pedagogical processes are applying also to cluster methods in practice. In line with acting independently, pedagogical processes review challenges, search for alternative solutions, run common projects, unity various stages of education under one cluster with the overarching aim of increasing the efficiency in the education sector, i.e. covering more students in tertiary education at lower costs.

In practice, developing countries use to operate stand-alone policies for higher, secondary-specialized, secondary and pre-secondary education and consequently a low consistency is observed within the entire system. Uzbekistan is hosting 11 universities accredited by foreign education authorities and this number is growing. These universities operate under modern curricula, outlined in syllabuses and monitored through proper evaluation systems. These universities are overseen by the Uzbekistan Higher Education Ministry; however, the latter is not engaged with local universities. Hence, there is no joint course, neither a common module delivered in cooperation with the local universities accredited by foreigners in the country. Therefore, knowledge and skills of the local university graduates do not always meet the national requirements of present-day employers.

Moreover, the current pedagogic systems have clear individual shortcomings, among which:

1. Lack of life-long learning;
2. Secondary education is 11 years in Uzbekistan compared to an average of 12 years in most of the developed countries.
3. Unnecessarily extensive curricula and hence pedagogic load for the teachers and learners (due to Soviet-style curricula development, where ideological bringing-up of the students was the principal leaning objective);
4. One-sidedness of pedagogic processes which offers strong theoretical knowledge loosely linking it with practice;
5. Inconsistence of human capacity building program with the practical market economy requirements (larger part of the university staff do not possess practical experience in their own fields);
6. Barriers in foreign language learning which would facilitate independent learning; which limits the access to much intelligence and information as well as lessons learned from elsewhere.
7. More emphasis is given to theoretical rather than practical knowledge, loosely linking the former knowledge with actual demand from practice;
8. Physical and technical limitations of the learners' independent learning abilities (low student-to-textbook ratio, limited access to online article databases and almost no subscription to prestigious international journals);
9. Limitations linked with usage of information technologies due to lack of equipment and applications;
10. Ever decreasing reputation and real-wage of the teachers, which is hindering the engagement of highly skilled pedagogical personnel with applied attainments;
11. Student performance evaluation systems have been amended frequently during the last 20 years but still is intraspresent and obscure, which is negatively affecting the quality of the higher education.
12. Creating of wrong impression among the youth, parents and society that becoming a student guarantees possession of a degree diploma, due to relaxed requirements to some students at some higher education facilities and courses, which in turn is arguably impacting the prestige and reputation of some higher education facilities.

Therefore, one solution to the above-mentioned challenge is reviewing the avenues of implementing an education cluster system following the example of other countries leading in innovative education systems such as the US and Germany. It includes developing national methodologies for the creation of education cluster systems and implementation of these systems. To this end one way could be the establishment of an inter-ministerial pilot “higher education facilities-secondary specialized in education facilities-schools” education cluster for addressing and solving current challenges based on e.g. best-practices obtained during the testing in practice of this pilot cluster. Following a review of the experiences on the potential available solutions to the challenge of optimal resource allocation (i.e. education spending at all levels) based on the best-practices of developed countries, it can be noted that curricula and syllabuses (subject plans) of pedagogic programs are consistent with each other at any given stage, be it in higher, secondary specialized, secondary or pre-school levels. In the USA e.g., curricula of professional colleges (offering e.g. secondary specialized degree) are envisaged for three years and have compatible identical curricula and programs with the curricula of the university colleges (higher education facilities). Therefore, as a consequence a graduate of a professional college may choose to continue her/his education as a final year student at the university (college) and possesses thus an opportunity of obtaining a bachelor’s degree which is an additional incentive to the students and parents to gain a better competitive position at the labor market.

SUMMARY

Following independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union. The new country Uzbekistan faced key challenges in the transfer from a command driven and state-central centered economy and education system to market guided systems which demanded min depth adaptations and reforms also in the education set up and systems. The educational reform after independence was thus carried by political will as evidenced by several presidential decrees. Yet in practice the right mix has not been found yet and consequently results on the ground are still modest demanding even more reforms and changes. E.g. Uzbekistan’s five-year-long higher education system was divided after the reforms in 1996 into a 2-stage system: “bachelor” and “master” degree programs within the framework of a policy, which aimed during 1996-1998 to make these degree programs in line with the EU-Bologna system. However, this process was implemented by initially only shortening the curricula inherited from the Soviet Union times to ca.20%. It is known that Soviet Union curricula emphasized the teaching and transfer of theoretical knowledge as a priority. As a result, the hours dedicated for theoretical knowledge were shortened in favor of the applied skills, which required creation of modern labs, heavier integration of ITC etc. But this was not well-implemented due to underfunding and irrational allocation of resources (larger part of investments in the education sector were directed to building, reconstruction and renovation of education facilities).

At the same time, dividing the five-year Soviet education into two stages required the creation of master courses. Delivery of applied knowledge and skills were again stifled at this level due to lack of appropriate material basis. This led to repeating once again larger part of the program delivered in the bachelor level. Such implementation of the Bologna system turned out to be inefficient as the resulting graduates were not able to meet the requirements of the labor market. The lack of necessary basis for practical classes (labs, hardware and software etc.) for developing applied skills led to a condition in which lecturers had to deliver these applied skills through additional lectures.

These issues, along with the intake quota system, low coverage of the graduates in higher education (only 9% of graduates were seated at universities until 2017) and insignificant pay gap between the employee with and without diploma has eradicated the interest of the youth in higher education following the years of independence. In addition, students lack the ability of learning independently and still heavily rely on guidance from lecturers. This system also hinders the delivery of course and classes in an interactive manner.

A further challenge is that the curricula of the teaching subjects still lack modules on e.g. independent assignments and hence teaching the ability to work in groups of two or more students electively. The application of a cluster education system with a special emphasis on independent learning would thus likely lead to much better results.

An independent cluster education system with a special emphasis on human capacity building e.g. in foreign languages through supporting the delivery of general profession subjects in foreign languages is to be recommended as a one alternative to one of the above-mentioned challenges such overloaded curricula with heavy theoretical content and no applied trainings. This would increase the attractiveness of independent learning and reinvent the language learning for local student.

The social, economic and spiritual challenges associated with human capacity building in Uzbekistan are actually quite known. Solutions thus should include improving the prestige of the teachers, and the delivery of the subjects not in line with the requirements of the modern labor market and moreover, should make room to make it attractive also for girls and young women to apply to pedagogical programs/courses and lower level entry requirements for these programs, which demonstrates the declining competition to these programs/courses.

Nowadays, the rapid increase of the intake quota during 2017-2018 to 50-60% compared with the previous years has created an acute demand for better and modern experiment field equipment and laboratories, as well as highly skilled university lecturers familiar with pedagogical approaches and teaching styles.

The creation of education clusters with e.g. 150-200 students in general profession and social subject areas and consequently lowering the workload of the lecturers may increase the quality of delivery and hence would be a potential solution to present-day challenge of overloaded teachers, inappropriate allocation of classroom hours, extensive curricula enriched with unnecessary learning outcomes such as getting familiar with general history, spiritual enlightenment and so on.

Measures can in addition be taken to ensure the creation of inter-university distance learning based on the syllabuses of the subjects. It may also be worthwhile consider a better monitoring system for guiding the use of university (i.e. Learning Resource Centers, Computer labs and internet traffic) and private (i.e. their own time) resources by individual students (e.g. virtual learning environments such as Moodle and MOOC can be used to achieve this objective).

Nowadays, the current student performance evaluation system is undergoing another reform by piloting the Bologna credit system in the delivery of some courses. But this is unlikely to have significant impact on quality improvement as long as the academic curricula do not undergo fundamental restructuring. Curricula has to be upgraded from theory-emphasized curricula inherited from the Soviet Union to a modern, well-framed “modules-based” system. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a cooperation between foreign and local universities

currently accredited and operating in Uzbekistan with an overarching aim of restructuring the curricula of the entire Uzbek higher education system.

Ensuring the independence of the higher education facilities in defining the intake quotas based on e.g. labor market demand for specific professions is vital for solving one of the above-mentioned problems. But most importantly, one has to eliminate the correct impression that once becoming a student guarantees the award of a degree diploma, irrespective of the performance of students. This requires the elimination of forecast of intake and degree delivery quotas, which will definitely lead to increased quality of the higher education. This in turn should improve the healthy competition among the higher education facilities.