

Shaping Education in Uzbekistan: Addressing Diverse Stakeholder Needs

Dr. Murodullo Kholmukhamedov

Director of Institute for Labor Market Research under the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction of Uzbekistan

Email: [mxolmuxamedov\[at\]mail.ru](mailto:mxolmuxamedov[at]mail.ru)

Abstract: *As Uzbekistan transitions from a command to a market economy, the education sector faces increasing demands from diverse stakeholders, including the labor market, industry, and society. This paper explores these stakeholders' needs, the challenges they pose, and efforts to address them through frameworks like the National Curriculum and Qualification Frameworks. It highlights the importance of aligning education content with these emerging demands while ensuring the system's continuity and relevance.*

Keywords: education content, labor market, secondary and tertiary education, innovation

1. Introduction

The question of who determines the content of education is one that is faced by every country across the world. Uzbekistan is no exception to this, and the issue is becoming more poignant in education policy and discourse in the country. As a country transitioning from a command economy as a Soviet Republic and in the initial two decades of its existence, it has traditionally been the government that was the sole authority on education content. Following the initiation of liberal reforms beginning in 2016, it is becoming more and more apparent that the government cannot be the sole entity responsible for determining the content of education. New stakeholders whose needs must be addressed and reflected in education content are rapidly emerging.

Emerging stakeholders on education content

The first part of the paper discusses the demands placed on education content from emerging stakeholders: labor market, industry, society, prevailing attitudes and values. It also delves into how demands from new stakeholders impact the education sector and current efforts to address them, if any.

Labor Market

There is clear evidence of the need for labor market input on education content in the skills mismatch of Uzbek graduates with the demand of the labor market, indicated in reports such as ILO's "Toward Full and Productive Employment in Uzbekistan: Achievements and Challenges" report (ILO, 2021) which indicates that over half of employers in Uzbekistan suffer from a skills mismatch of graduates with their need.

In a nascent market economy such as Uzbekistan, it is essential to ensure that the graduates that are coming out of professional and tertiary education institutions are able to meet the demands of industry and the mismatch between the skills of graduates and labor market demand creates a two-fold challenge. Firstly, graduates are unable to find gainful employment, leading to a disproportionate strain on social safety systems. The issue also creates a demand for foreign specialists that are capable of meeting the needs of the labor market which not only means that Uzbek specialists are not able to enter the labor market but also that companies are

spending more on salaries than they would spend on an Uzbek workforce that was capable of meeting their needs.

The need to address this is recognized by the Uzbek government and international organizations which are in the process of implementing a number of projects to address the issue. One promising initiative has been the establishment of 29 Sector Skills Councils across various sectors (Paul. C., 2023). While the fact that the councils are under government ministries and agencies is not ideal, it can be seen as a positive step towards incorporating the demands of the labor market in education content.

Industry

Another challenge presented by a lack of relevant stakeholder input on the education content has also prevented the establishment of linkages between science and education with industry. As such, the education and science sectors of the country have traditionally been unable to respond to the innovation needs of the economy, leading to a National Innovation System that is based on government prerogative. (UNESCO, 2015)

In order for Uzbekistan to fulfill its potential and establish itself as a hub of innovation, the needs of industry need to be incorporated into education content. For example, Uzbekistan is rapidly establishing itself as a hub for IT outsourcing and has set a lofty aspiration of attracting 1, 000 foreign IT companies and providing 300, 000 jobs within the sector by 2030 (IT Park, 2023). In order to achieve these aspirations, the education sector should pivot to facilitating the preparation of highly qualified specialists that would not only be competitive in the domestic but also global market. In order for Uzbekistan to reach its potential, the needs of leading sectors of the economy need to be addressed.

Society

The economic liberalization of recent years has also brought another stakeholder in the education system that has traditionally been overlooked to the forefront: society. An increase in freedoms and rights also means that the education system of Uzbekistan now needs to be responsive to the needs of society as well. It is worth noting that some of the reforms made in the country may outpace the change in the attitude of a population that has spent a century within a command

economy structure. This may lead to conflicting conservative demands of society on the content of education than the more progressive demands of industry and labor market.

Recognizing this potential pitfall, the government of Uzbekistan has pursued social reforms such as eradicating child forced labor in cotton harvesting and taking efforts to increase the inclusivity of disadvantaged and vulnerable populations (USAID, 2023). These initiatives, combined with the proper management of economic liberalization has ensured that there is no significant pushback from society to the efforts. However, it is still essential for education content to be responsive to the demands of society at large in order to prepare individuals that are well adjusted and able to effectively operate within their society.

Prevailing attitudes and values

Lastly, the personality and attitudes of students is another stakeholder in the determination of education content that is emerging. While it is impossible to respond to the individual circumstances and needs of individual students, there is now a need to take into account the prevailing attitudes and values within the student population. This is increasingly important in an early demographic transition country with a growing population as prevailing attitudes and values within the country will undoubtedly shift over time. (Makhanov, n. d.). In the short - term there may be a demand for the inclusion of more progressive content such as civic engagement, social responsibility, and media literacy in curricula, but these demands may shift in the coming years and decades. If the education sector cannot predict these shifts in advance, they will at least have to be responsive to those shifts once they have manifested themselves.

Need to manage the diverse needs of education stakeholders

Having established that there are at least five different stakeholders who have demands and interests regarding education content, it is essential to develop a comprehensive mechanism for approaching these needs and ensuring that education content does not become discontinuous, duplicated or otherwise inefficient. This part of the paper introduces the current state of the education sector in Uzbekistan before moving on to discuss the establishment of a National Curriculum Framework, the optimization of a National Qualification Framework, and mechanism to ensure the consistency of training programs and industry as potential avenues to address the needs of these stakeholders.

Current state of education sector in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan still uses an outdated, Soviet system of instruction with a heavy focus on memorizing content delivered by an instructor, leaving essential 21st century competencies such as critical thinking, problem - solving, and intercultural dialogue unaddressed. This has put significant strains on the quality of education as evidenced by Uzbek students ranking 71st among 80 participating countries in mathematics and 73rd in reading in the 2022 Program for International School Assessment (OECD n. d.).

Furthermore, a lack of student interest and buy - in into their education journey is clearly evident as half of students seeking admission to university in 2024 were unable to pass

the entrance exams. The state of higher education in the country follows a similar approach with little emphasis placed on the acquisition of practical skills required to effectively operate within the labor market and society.

It is clear that significant changes need to be made to the general and tertiary education sectors of the country in order to allow them to produce specialists that would be competitive within the local labor market, if not the global one.

National Curriculum Framework

The need for a revision of existing general education content and the development of a National Curriculum Framework is evidenced by the PISA 2022 rankings as well as research conducted by international organizations such as UNICEF.

One of the key issues within the general education system is that classes are offered as stand - alone subjects which leads to the duplication of educational content and subjects like National Ideas and Appreciation for the Motherland having an oversized role within the education system.

It is suggested that creating clusters of subjects surrounding Mathematics, Literacy and Languages, Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, as well a final cluster encompassing Personal, Social and Health Education or Physical Education would allow the education system to become more effective at instilling in students key competencies required of individuals in the 21st century (UNICEF, n. d.).

It is also proposed that a core of 8 - 10 years of education will be provided with instruction in required classes with students being able to choose subjects according to their interests in that last 2 - 4 years of education. A system consistent with international standards such as IB and IGSE will ensure that students are equipped with the competencies required to operate in a globalized world and that they receive instruction in areas of interest, significantly increasing the buy - in to their educational journey.

National Qualification Framework

A well - developed National Qualification Framework is one of the primary mechanisms through which education providers and training institutions can meet the demands of the industry. In order for this to be the case, there needs to be significant private sector involvement in the development of the National Qualification Frameworks.

Uzbekistan began its development of National Qualification Frameworks in 2016 with them being approved in 2020. The new National Qualification Framework replaced the Sectoral Education Standards and received significant input and support from international aid agencies such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank in its development and implementation (ADB, 2022).

The framework holds for private sector involvement through Sector Skills Councils and work is currently under way to enhance the framework as seen through the establishment of the National Qualification Framework Institute for example.

Mismatch of graduate fields and industry demand

There is a clear lack of consistency between programs offered at tertiary and Technical and Vocational Education and Training institutions and labor market demand. The majority of public higher education institutions continue to offer programs in fields that are long outdated and not offered at foreign institutions.

This places significant pressures on the labor market as employers are forced to offer at least introductory on the job training to ensure that graduates are able to effectively operate within their positions. One example of this is the fact that 60% of engineering graduates are engaged in employment outside their specialization in 2024. The disparity in the need for textile engineers and graduates is especially eye-opening. Despite a need for 4000 engineers within the sector, less than 1,000 students graduated within a relevant field.

Recognizing this disparity, there needs to be a comprehensive strategy for aligning educational programs and learning outcomes with the needs of industry. For example, independent, regional Skills Councils will allow for industry to express their needs to education administrators and develop joint mechanisms for bridging the gap between industry demand and educational programs. It is important for those councils to operate regionally as the demand for labor force and skills vary significantly from region to region.

Furthermore, once the alignment between educational programs and labor market demand is enhanced, there is a demand for comprehensive career orientation training for students beginning in the final years of secondary education (Arslonov, 2024).

This training will instill in students significant soft skills required for operating in the workplace such as teamwork, leadership, and initiative. Combined with accurate and relevant information on priority sectors of the economy as well as the prospects of the fields they intend to pursue would allow students to make informed decisions regarding their career. Furthermore, mechanisms for students changing their field within the first couple of years of tertiary education is essential as students will have more insights into their career prospects and interests. These mechanisms operate seamlessly in international institutions such as Webster University in Tashkent but also need to be incorporated into local institutions.

2. Conclusion

Uzbekistan's education system faces the complex challenge of responding to diverse stakeholder demands while ensuring consistency and alignment. Progress has been made, but further efforts are required to refine frameworks and foster collaboration between industry and educational institutions. A responsive, inclusive education system is essential for preparing individuals to thrive in both domestic and global contexts.

References

[1] ADB. (2022). Skills Development in Uzbekistan: A sector assessment. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/859636/skills-development-uzbekistan-sector-assessment.pdf>

- [2] Arslonov, Z. (2024). CAREER GUIDANCE FOR THE YOUTH OF THE NEW UZBEKISTAN: SYSTEMATIC SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE INTERESTED IN MODERN PROFESSIONS. *Oriental Journal of History, Politics and Law*, 4 (08), 64–73. <https://doi.org/10.37547/supsci-ojhpl-04-08-09>
- [3] Comyn, P. (2023, October). Report on Sector Skills Councils in Uzbekistan. <https://tvet.edu.uz/upload/iblock/010/m8rdc15f3h5kx4yqcrnqwklq7v3dq2tx.pdf>
- [4] International Labor Organization (22 Apr.2021), Towards Full and Productive Employment in Uzbekistan. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/towards-full-and-productive-employment-uzbekistan-achievements-and>
- [5] IT Park. (12 Dec.2023). Overview of Uzbekistan's IT market. <https://it-park.uz/en/itpark/news/overview-of-uzbekistan-s-it-market>
- [6] Makhanov, K. (n. d.). A brief review of Uzbekistan's demographic profile. <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/a-brief-review-of-uzbekistans-demographic-profile/>
- [7] OECD. (n. d.). Pisa 2022 results (volume I and II) - country notes: Uzbekistan | OECD. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/uzbekistan_2bb94bfl-en.html
- [8] UNESCO. (2015). UNESCO Science Report: towards 2030. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000235406>
- [9] UNICEF. (n. d.). What is the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) ?
- [10] USAID. (2023). Uzbekistan 2023 Human Rights Report. https://uz.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/78/528267_UZBEKISTAN-2023-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf