“Franchise” Branch Campuses in Uzbekistan: The Internationalisation of Higher Education as a Solution?

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Abstract

Internationalization transformed the way Higher Education (HE) is provided. Used correctly, internationalization can bring a useful exchange of services and resources into a country’s HE sector. Although there is a growing body of research on HE internationalization broadly, current scholarship overlooks the correlation of excessive reliance on opening of foreign university branches as a way to internationalize the HE sector and the development of the local HE system. This research thus provides the first insights into how the internationalization of HE may not necessarily solve a developing country’s problems in the local HE sector. Using the case of Uzbekistan, it argues that, in the absence of systematic reforms in the local HE system, HE reform that over- relies on the imported internationalization in the form of foreign university branches is not sustainable. Such “franchise” or “imported” internationalization does not contribute to the development of local HE system.

Keywords

internationalization – higher education system – reforms – foreign university branch campus – international – Uzbekistan

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1 Introduction

The term *internationalization* became popular in higher education studies in the early 1980s.1 It can be defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education."2 Scholars tend to agree that globalization and the proliferation of free trade stimulated internationalization of higher education (HE) around the world,3 and the term became official during the past two decades4 For the purpose of this research, I employ Larsen's explanation of HE internationalization as a "movement of higher education students, academics, programs and providers."5 The components of HE internationalization include the development of joint programs with foreign HE institutions, exchange programs, development of branch campuses of overseas foreign universities, recruitment of international students, staff, and scholars, internationalization of the curriculum, recognition of credits and study periods spent abroad, and other research and educational partnerships among HE institutions worldwide. Many education policy leaders share the belief that foreign university branches are "a single thing that can magically solve educational woes."6 Uzbekistan's HE policy and media discourse on the topic gives the impression that Tashkent is indeed expecting foreign university branches to solve all the existing issues in its local HE system: the government is relying only on foreign university branches as a way of reforming the sector. The internationalization of HE in Uzbekistan commenced in the form of opening foreign university branches after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed leadership in fall 2016. While foreign universities are not new to the Uzbek HE system, the previous government of Islam Karimov was very cautious in letting foreign universities into the country. It took twenty years to open the first seven branch-campuses, while the current government allowed seven new foreign universities entrance

1 Jane Knight, "Updating the definition of internationalization," *International Higher Education* 33, (2003): 2–3.

2 Jane Knight, "Updating the definition of internationalization," *International Higher Education* 33, (2003): 2–3.

3 Philip G. Altbach and Jane Knight, "The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities," *Journal of Studies in international education* 11, no. 3–4 (2007): 290–305.

4 Even though these two articles published eight years apart, they both claim internationalization proliferated during the last two decades. See ibid.; Uwe Brandenburg and Hans de Wit, "The end of internationalization," *International Higher Education*, no. 62 (2015): 15.

5 Marianne Larsen, *Internationalization of Higher Education: An Analysis through Spatial, Network, and Mobilities Theories*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

6 Christopher Hill, "The Future is Bright for Branch Campuses, but not as We Know Them," Times Higher Education, 2018, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/future-bright-branch-campuses-not-we-know-them#survey-answer.

within three months.7 The number of such branches almost tripled in 2019, jumping from only 7 in 2016 to a total of 19 by May 2019.8 While the above-mentioned changes are long overdue, recent developments still show a lack of systemic, thought-out reform strategy, and the proliferation of foreign university branches seems to be the least planned.

This article analyzes how the growing number of foreign university branches—called franchise university campuses—in Uzbekistan may affect broader HE reforms and what challenges this trend may create. It argues that overreliance on internationalization in the form of opening foreign university branches at the expense of reforming the national HE sector is not sustainable. Once such franchise universities leave the country for various reasons (research shows there is a high likelihood of them being closed at some point), Uzbekistan will simply end up with its old, inefficient, and poor local HE system.

2 Methodology

This research does not focus on the overall or individual performance of any foreign university branch in Uzbekistan. Nor does it aim to assess the academic or non-academic achievements of students graduating from foreign university branches. This paper, rather, looks at how the trend of opening foreign university branches at such a pace while being slow in reforming the stagnated national sector affects broader HE sector reforms.

7 Foreign university branches operating in Uzbekistan during Karimov's presidency (compiled by the author): The Plekhanov Russian University of Economics since 1995, Westminster University (UK) since 2002, Lomonosov Moscow State University (Russia) since 2006, Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas since 2007, Management Development Institute of Singapore since 2007, Turin Polytechnic University (Italy) since 2009, Inha University (South Korea) since 2014.

8 Currently operating foreign university branches (compiled by the author as of May 2019): Plekhanov Russian University of Economics since 1995; Westminster University (UK) since 2002; Lomonosov Moscow State University (Russia) since 2006; Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas since 2007; Management Development Institute of Singapore since 2007; Turin Polytechnic University (Italy) since 2009; Inha University (South Korea) since 2014; Yeoju Technical Institute in Tashkent (YTIT) (South Korea) since 7–8 September 2018; Webster University (US) since 5 September 2018; Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloy (Russia) since 24 September 2018; Branch of Information Systems Management Institute (Latvia) since September 28, 2018; Amity University (India) since October 3, 2018; Moscow State Institute of International Relations (Russia) since October 4, 2018; Branch of Bucheon University in Tashkent (South Korea) since July 2018; Branch of National Nuclear Research University under Moscow Institute of Engineering and Physics (Russia) since July 10, 2018; Ajou University in Uzbekistan (South Korea, not a branch) since November 30, 2018; Branch of Moscow University of Physical Training, Swimming, Youth and Tourism (Samarkand region) since February 13, 2019; Sharda University Branch in Andijan region (India) since April 2019.

This paper employs a qualitative research design to gather and analyze the data. It first examines how HE providers in Uzbekistan reached their current state of stagnation. Secondly, it analyzes current government policy discourses (official documents, statements, legislation, etc.) and semi-standardized interviews with tertiary education management and teaching staff. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in various national higher HE institutions during fieldwork in Tashkent, January–February 2020. Some of the interviews were conducted prior to fieldwork via audio calls, March–April 2019.

The first interviewees were reached using the author's professional networks in Uzbekistan's HE sector. The remaining respondents were selected using the snowball sampling method. The respondents' profiles ranged from established professors to early career academics. The interviews were held with teaching staff members at ten local universities and teaching staff members of three foreign university branches that have operated in the country for many years. It should be noted that almost every week a new branch of a foreign university is being opened in Uzbekistan. However, since these branches are just starting to operate and teach students, they do not have considerable operation experience in the country's HE sector. Hence, our analyses do not include new branches just commencing to operate.

Moreover, to get a clearer picture of internationalization process, supplementary interviews were conducted with anonymous government officials of Uzbekistan and experts from American Councils for International Education (ACIE). In total, 20 respondents were interviewed from local HE institutions and eight from foreign university branches. Interviewees were asked about the governance of the university, international standards, teaching and learning resources, infrastructure and facilities, student experience and retention, staff retention, and professional development as well as processes in their respective universities/institutes. The interview data was analyzed based on emerging themes in respondents' answers, through which five core categories were revealed. Since HE internationalization became active in Uzbekistan just in the last two years and is quite sporadic in nature, it is not possible yet to gather longitudinal data to observe any shifts or changes in trends.

3 "Franchise"[9] Internationalization vs. Reforms at Home

The existing literature on HE internationalization can be categorized intosix categories. First, internationalization is studied for the purpose of

9 In imported HE internationalization, the focus is on importing international providersof HE through branch campuses. See Nizar Mohammad Alsharari, "Internationalization

conceptualizing what internationalization is, its importance and consequences, and how definitions of internationalization evolved during the decades to include various aspects of international partnerships among educational institutions.10 Currently, there is no agreed definition of HE internationalization. While the existing scholarship's arguments can be useful in understanding what internationalization is, it lacks comprehensive analysis of the rationales behind a country's decision to internationalize their HE systems. Although Knight provides analysis on some of the rationales for internationalization at the national level,11 her findings are limited to a few possible rationales (nation-building, socio-economic development, and human power development) and do not specifically analyze the case of a developing country, and, thus, are not applicable to emerging nations such as Uzbekistan.

The second group studies internationalization as process, outcome, and governance,12 and examines the types of internationalization found in Asian HE institutions, such as "import type," "import and export type," and "transitional type."13 While these scholarly works show why and how some Middle Eastern countries as well as China decided to internationalize their HE systems, they fail to provide generalizable arguments as to how the development of local HE institutions and internationalization in the form of foreign university branches interact with one another. Moreover, these studies do not specifically address foreign university branches as a form of internationalization. Rather, their findings include public–private partnerships and joint dual degree programs between local and international HE institutions.

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of the higher education system: An interpretive analysis," *International Journal of Educational Management* 32, no. 3 (2018): 359–381. Note: Some scholars call these franchise university campuses.

10 Jane Knight, "The changing landscape of higher education internationalisation—for better or worse?" *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 17, no. 3 (2013): 84–90; Marianne Larsen, *Internationalization of Higher Education: An Analysis through Spatial, Network, and Mobilities Theories*, (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016); Jane Knight, "Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 8, no. 1 (2004): 5–31.

11 Jane Knight, "Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 8, no. 1 (2004): 5–31.

12 Nizar Mohammad Alsharari, "Internationalization of the higher education system: An interpretive analysis," *International Journal of Educational Management* 32, no. 3 (2018): 359–381; Julie Vardhan, *Internationalization and the Changing Paradigm of Higher Education in the gcc Countries*, (sage Open, April–June 2015), 1–10.

13 Futao Huang, "Internationalization of higher education in the developing and emerging countries: A focus on transnational higher education in Asia," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 11, no. 3/4, (Fall/Winter 2007): 421–432.

The third group of literature studies HE reforms in developing countries, including "imported internationalization." According to Buckner,14 in imported internationalization, the states choose to invite elite Western and Ameri- can universities to open campus branches in their countries. While Buckner's findings are useful to understand HE reform based on internationalization, her work is limited to Middle East and North Africa and does not address Central Asian trends in general. Moreover, Buckner also calls "imported" internationalization "Americanisation," focusing on American and British universities. She fails to see that internationalization can and is being imported from non-English-speaking countries as well (i.e., South Korea, India, China, and Russia). Thus, the literature in this group overlooks the relationship of franchise or imported internationalization in the form of non-Western foreign university branches with local HE institutions.

Lastly, the fourth scholarly group studies internationalization in the form of active international student recruitment with the goal of high revenue genera- tion.15 This scholarship accuses internationalization of using international students, who have little or no support available in the foreign country of their study, as "cash cows." However, these studies focus on internationalization mostly in developed, Western countries, where international student recruitment is the number one model for internationalization. Wadha and Jha, specifically, do offer analysis on student mobility from a developing country perspective, wherein students from developing countries look for HE opportunities abroad.16 However, while their findings on the domination of developed countries in the international HE market are useful, they overlook the relationship between reliance on imported internationalization and the lack of reform in developing countries' national HE market.

Until recently, Uzbekistan remained a closed society to most academic re- search. For this reason, research into HE in Central Asia could not access Uz- bekistan to gather and analyze data.17 For example, one of the prominent scholars in Central Asian education studies, Iveta Silova, studied HE private

14 Elizabeth Buckner, "The Role of Higher Education in the Arab State and Society: Historical Legacies and Recent Reform Patterns," *Comparative & International Higher Education* 3 (2011).

15 Patel Fay, "Exploitative higher education internationalisation is dead," University of World News, 2019, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190703113 119458.

16 Rashim Wadhwa and Shashiranjan Jha, "Internationalization of higher education: Implications for policy making," *Higher Education for the Future* I (2014): 99–119.

17 Kathryn H. Anderson and Stephen P. Heyneman, "Education and social policy in Central Asia: The next stage of the transition," *Social Policy & Administration* 39, no. 4 (2015): 361–380; Bolormaa Shagdar, "Human capital in Central Asia: trends and challenges in education," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 4 (2006): 515–532.

tutoring and education more broadly across the region but could not work in Uzbekistan.18 Hence, these studies fail to give an overview of HE reform and internationalization in Uzbekistan.

There are scholarly works that focus on HE in Uzbekistan whom we group into the fifth category of literature.19 However, these do not focus on internationalization but, rather, on rudimentary reforms in the HE sector and are limited to describe empirically Uzbekistan's higher education system.20 While Ruziev and Burkhanov claim the introduction of centrally administered testing to Uzbekistan's HE admission process (1994) replaced the corrupt Soviet- style oral and written examinations conducted in individual universities, they fail to note that the centralized testing system has been found no less corrupt than the old system.21 To this group also belongs literature that studied the re- development of HE in post-Soviet Central Asia from a comparative perspective but fail to provide a comprehensive study of the Uzbek HE internationalization policy in the post-independence period.22

Nevertheless, there is good body of social research by international organizations on HE in Uzbekistan that, based on various factual evidence, list concrete

18 See Iveta Silova, "Private supplementary tutoring in Central Asia: New opportunities and burdens," UNESCO-IIEP, (2009), 47, http://etico.iiep.unesco.org/en/resource/private-supplementary-tutoring-central-asia-new-opportunities-and-burdens; *How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2008).

19 José Joaquín Brunner and Anthony Tillett, *Higher Education in Central Asia; The Challenges of Modernization—an Overview*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007).

20 Kobil Ruziev and Umar Burkhanov, "Uzbekistan: Higher education reforms and the changing landscape since independence," *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity* (2018); Kobil Ruziev and Umar Burkhanov, "Higher education reforms in Uzbekistan: Expanding vocational education at the expense of higher education?" *Higher Education in Russia and Beyond* 8, no. 2 (2016).

21 See recent media articles on corruption in testing system administered by the State Test Centre – case with Tashkent Oriental Studies Institute and case with State Pedagogical University: Gazeta.uz, "People who promised to help in the university entrance exams were arrested", *gazeta.uz*, July 28, 2018, https://www.gazeta.uz/oz/2018/07/28/pora/ and Gazeta.uz, "Deputy Dean of State University detained on suspicion of receiving bribe", *gazeta.uz*, July 13, 2017, https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/07/13/guvd/.

22 John C. Weidman and Brian Yoder, "Policy and Practice in Education Reform in Mongolia and Uzbekistan During the First Two Decades of the Post-Soviet Era," *Excellence in Higher Education* 1, no. 1&2 (2010); Jose Joaquin Brunner and Anthony Tillett, "Higher Education in Central Asia; the Challenges of Modernization–an Overview," *Washington, DC: World Bank* (2007); J. Huisman et al. (eds.), "25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries," *Palgrave Studies in Global Higher Education*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52980-6_14.

steps to modernize and liberalize the HE sector.23 However, their findings are limited to recommendations on how to improve tertiary education, lacking study of how the Uzbek government's reliance on opening of foreign university branches affects the country's broader HE sector. Globally, the current scholar- ship on HE in Central Asia fail to cover "imported internationalization" of HE in the form of foreign university branches and how these imports affect the national tertiary sector. This article hopes to fill this knowledge gap.

4 The State of Higher Education in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan emerged as an independent state with its own model of transitioning from a Soviet-style planned economy to a market economy. Along with all other sectors, the country's HE was heavily affected by the disintegration of the Soviet Union as HE "was more fully integrated across the Union."24 As Uzbekistan no longer received funding from the federal Soviet center for social programs, education, and research,25 it had to consider restructuring its education system in alignment with its political and economic agenda. Among many other socio-economic reforms, the transition period reforms included the reorganization of structures and curriculums in HE institutions. While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan opted for a "mass higher education enrollment" development option, Uzbekistan kept their HE as an "elite" system with lower enrollment rates.26 The Uzbek government kept complete control over the HE sector and the reforms that took placewere of top-down nature.27

On the path to redevelop its education system, the government of Uzbekistan adopted the Law on Education in 1992. In 1997, the National Program for Personnel Training—another legal basis for the operation of an education system that represents a long-term strategy to reinforce the education system— was adopted. Uzbekistan introduced a national quality-assurance system

23 The World Bank, *Uzbekistan: Modernizing Tertiary Education*, (The World Bank, 2014); UNDP, *Higher Education in Uzbekistan: Structure Development and Reform Trends*, (UNDP, 2009); Asian Development Bank, *Education Reforms in Countries in Transition: Policies and Processes Six Country Case Studies* (Asian Development Bank, 2004).

24 Jose Joaquin Brunner and Anthony Tillett, *Higher Education in Central Asia; The Challenges of Modernization—an Overview*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007), 8.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Kobil Ruziev and Umar Burkhanov, "Uzbekistan: Higher education reforms and the changing landscape since independence," *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity* (2018).

known as the State Standards for Higher Education in 2001,28 even though it was still based on strict government control.29

Uzbekistan did not give up improving the accessibility of the HE but did it in its own peculiar way: it increased the number of national tertiary education providers but not necessarily by the means of internationalization and privatization of HE as Kyrgyz, Kazakh, or many Eastern European countries did. For instance, the number of HE institutions in Uzbekistan increased from 43 in 1989 to 78 by 2015.30 However, the success of this doubling of universities is undermined by the increase in the population from 20 million in 1990 to 31 million in 2015. So, proportional to the population, HE accessibility has in fact decreased. Demand for HE is almost tenfold the supply, leading to very high corruption at the administrative level.31

Perhaps the biggest impediment in the de-Sovietization of HE, however, was the government's approach to reforms. Uzbekistan's "gradualist approach to transition was unique in terms of the pace, sequencing, and prioritization of reforms, resulting in the so-called 'Uzbek model'32 of economic development."33 The impact of this Uzbek model on higher education can be summarized as state dirigism. The strictly authoritarian approach to reforms did not lead to improvement in any areas of the HE sector, from enrolment rates to the quality of centrally dictated curriculum.

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28 See Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Decree No. 343 on Approving State Standards of Higher Education", *Norma Online*, Legislature of the Republic of Uzbekistan, August 16, 2001, https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=15087_o%E2%80%98zbekiston_respublikasi_vazirlar_mahkamasining_16_08_2001_y_343-son_oliy_talimning_davlat_talim_standartlarini_tasdiqlash_to%E2%80%98g%E2%80%98risidagi_qarori&products=1_zakonodatelstvo_respubliki_uzbekistan.

29 See Alex Krouglov, "Transforming Higher Education in Uzbekistan: From Quality Control to Quality Assurance Culture," in *The Rise of Quality Assurance in Asian Higher Education* (Elsevier, 2017).

30 Kobil Ruziev and Umar Burkhanov, "Higher education reforms in Uzbekistan: Expanding vocational education at the expense of higher education?" *Higher Education in Russia and Beyond* 8, no. 2 (2016): 1.

31 For more analysis on the then-widespread corruption in higher education in Uzbeki- stan, see Ararat L. Osipian, "'Feed from the Service': Corruption and Coercion in State– University Relations in Central Eurasia," *Research in Comparative and International Edu- cation* 4, no. 2 (2009): 182–203.

32 The five pillars of the Uzbek model of development were: a priority of economy over poli- tics, the state as the only reformer, the supremacy of law, gradualism of reforms (rather than shock-therapy), and strong social policy.

33 Kobil Ruziev and Davron Rustamov. "Higher education in Uzbekistan: Reforms and the changing landscape since independence." *Economics Working Paper Series* 1604 (2016): 5.

There is another key factor that has specifically affected on the government's policy to restrict access to HE: until 2016, Uzbekistan was widely known as an oppressive dictatorship under President Karimov. The government officials were reported to use all measures to combat actual or perceived security threats to the regime.34 Karimov's discourses framed repressive policies as a threat to the hard-earned peace, independence, and prosperity. Among these threats, Karimov placed a special focus on the student body and the HE sector of the country more broadly. In January 1992, the first and only student protests in the history of post-Soviet Uzbekistan took place in Tashkent city's Student Town (*Vuzgorodok*)35 to question and complain against the sudden rise in prices for sugar, bread, and other such basic items in local markets.36 Karimov labelled this incident as the work of "dark forces" aimed at destroying the new state.37 His remarks constructed an external threat to the country that aimed to act through a naïve student body. Since this incident, an unofficial rule to cap student numbers in the country for each year was put in place, keeping them from exceeding a certain percentage.38 Recently, for the first time in the history of Uzbekistan, a government official—Sherzod Shermatov, Minister of Public Education—confessed that the current issues facing the HE sector are due to wrongful securitization of the university sector and student body as a result of student protests of 1992.39

A World Bank report from 2014 concluded that Uzbekistan's general approach to HE reform is top-down and strictly centralized, offering little or no autonomy to HE institutions in matters concerning course design, student intake, and management of their own finances—a plethora of issues that might take years to address.40 According to the study, the tertiary education system in

34 According to Amnesty International's report, throughout Karimov's rule (1991–2016), the authorities consistently used torture and other ill-treatment to suppress dissent and repress political opponents. See Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report—Uzbekistan*, (Amnesty International, 2016).

35 Vuzgorodok is Tashkent's university town where several number of universities and student accommodations are located.

36 BBC Uzbek, "BBC archive: Student protests in Tashkent 1992," BBC, January 15 2016, https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/lotin/2016/01/160115_latin_bbc_archieve1_video.

37 Ibid.

38 During the official interview, current Minister of Public Education of Uzbekistan Sherzod Shermatov referred to President Mirziyoyev saying that "for many years we [the state] consciously made the nation uneducated". To access full interview see: Sherzod Shermatov Minister of Public Education, interview by Alter Ego, July 16 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5EXBwmW1cw&t=274s.

39 Ibid.

40 The World Bank, *Uzbekistan: Modernizing Tertiary Education* (The World Bank, 2014).

Table 1 Admission rate in the academic year 2017–2018

Number of applicants	Number of admitted students	Admission rate
729,707	**65,875**	**9.03%**

Source: State Testing Centre website www.dtm.uz, 2019

Uzbekistan is one of the most inefficient in the world. It can absorb less than 10% of applicants (see Table 1), while the interest among fresh school graduates in pursuing higher education is one of the highest in the world.

Official data on the exact number of higher education institutions in the country is confusing: on its main webpage, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education (MHSSE) claims to have 91 local higher education institutions and 8 foreign university branches (as at May 11, 2019).41 However, on its official news channel on Telegram,42 the Ministry issued a statement, dated May 11, 2019, to confirm 85 local higher education providers and 17 foreign university branches. Uzbekistan's 85 national tertiary education providers (including universities, regional branches, academies and institutes),43 all of which are public,44 have no capacity to take in the yearly influx of more than half a million applicants. The country does not currently have any universities in the overall Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings (even in the top 801–1,000 rankings).45

Recent media discourse46 shows that the MHSSE is in conversation with THE about adding the Uzbek higher education institutions into the rankings. However, before being ranked, the Uzbek higher education institutions should first meet the requirements of international ranking systems. Currently, they

41 Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education (MHSSE), "Higher Education Institutions", the website of MHSS, MHSS, accessed May 11, 2019 https://edu.uz/uz/otm/ index.

42 MHSSE, "HE Institutions numbers reach 102", Official Telegram Channel of MHSSE, MHSSE, accessed May 11 2019, https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@eduuz.

43 MHSSE, "HE Institutions numbers reach 102", Official Telegram Channel of MHSSE, MHSSE, accessed May 11 2019, https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@eduuz.

44 As per official MHSSE data as at May, 2019.

45 Times Higher Education, "Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings," Times Higher Education [July 5, 2019], https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/ where-to-study/study-in-uzbekistan#survey-answer.

46 Press Service of MHSSE, "Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education signs Partnership Agreement with Leading International Rating Agency", MHSSE, publication date February 27, 2019, https://edu.uz/uz/news/view/1155.

lack liberal admission policies, market-based fees, and reputable international faculty members. Most importantly, higher education in Uzbekistan is completely detached from the needs of the economy in terms of skilled labor.

5 Foreign University Branches: A Sign of Reform or an Ad HocCreation?

After Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President in September 2016, the authorities began showing interest in HE reform. Deputy Prime Minister Aziz Abduhakimov gave an interview to a local news agency clarifying the government's HE policy. Among other things, he stated that the "government [of Uzbekistan] is working on a concept of turning Uzbekistan to an education hub of Central Asia within the next 10 years."47 According to Uzbekistan's *Development Strategy for 2017–2021*, "improving the quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions through the introduction of international standards of training and assessment of the quality of teaching, gradual increase in admission quo-ta" is one of their top priorities.48

Recent reforms include a presidential decree, issued on September 6, 2018, allowing online education at tertiary institutions. Additionally, in September 2018, for the first time in history, the government allowed local universities to admit additional students after the university entrance exams were com- plete.49 Applicants who failed the entrance exams but could score one-third of the maximum possible marks can gain admission by paying extraordinarily high fees (USD 10,000–35,000) for the first year of enrolment. From the second year of enrolment on, they pay the usual fees (approx. USD 1,000–2,000).

Compared to the slow and non-market-based reforms of the HE sector during the last two decades, the rapid growth in the number of foreign universities since 2016 is a sign of willingness for reform. However, how sustainable is this type of reform? How do foreign universities fit into the HE system and which of the existing issues are they expected to address? So far, the government does not appear to have clear answers to these questions.

47 Gazeta.uz, "In 10 years Uzbekistan must become Education Hub of Central Asia", *gazeta.uz*, September 18, 2018, https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/09/18/education/ for gazeta.uz.

48 "The Tashkent Times, "Uzbekistan's Development Strategy for 2017–2021 has been adopted following public consultation", *The Tashkent Times*, 8 February, 2017, http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/541-uzbekistan-s-development-strategy-for-2017-2021-has-been-adopted-following public consultation.

49 "Uzdaily, "Uzbekistan sets super tuition fees for universities", *Uzdaily.uz*, August 16, 2018, https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/45314.

The Law on Education50 and the National Program for Personnel Training form the legal basis for the national policy in the field of education. A review of the Law on Education shows that there is no reference to establishing foreign university branches and their operation in the country. The Law, however, states that:

> The education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan consists of state and non-state educational institutions that implement educational programs in accordance with state educational standards.51

It is not clear whether foreign university branches fall under the umbrella of non-state (non-governmental) educational. The only reference to any international cooperation between HE institutions is stated in Article 33:

> Educational institutions participate in international cooperation on educational issues, have the right to establish direct links with relevant educational institutions of foreign countries, to create joint educational institutions with them in the order prescribed by law.52

Although the article states that educational institutions can establish direct links with relevant educational institutions of foreign countries, it does not cover the completely separate case of foreign university branches operating in the country as autonomous HE institutions.

Article 9 of the Law further states that "the education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan is unified and continuous,"53 which, again, creates ambiguity regarding whether the current lack of synergy between the national HE providers and internationalized branches of various foreign universities is envisaged by this law. Put simply, the Law on Education does not address internationalization of Uzbekistan's HE sector in general nor establishing branches of foreign universities in particular.

50 "The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Education", lex.uz, LexUz online, August 29, 1997, https://lex.uz/docs/15622.

51 "The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Education" Article 9, lex.uz, LexUz online, August 29, 1997, https://lex.uz/docs/15622.

52 "The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Education" Article 33, lex.uz, LexUz online, August 29, 1997, https://lex.uz/docs/15622.

53 "The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Education" Article 9, lex.uz, LexUz online, August 29, 1997, https://lex.uz/docs/15622.

The National Program,54 adopted by the Parliament, represents a long-term strategy to reinforce the education system. It lists the goals, tasks, and stages of development of its national model of education, ranging from primary education to post-graduate education. The Program does not refer to the internationalization of the country's HE by way of opening foreign university branches nor does it provide grounds on how such foreign university branches should fit into the current HE system. This ambiguity clearly shows that establishing foreign university branches at such pace was not envisaged in the strategic documents on higher education.

Other important legal documents that govern activities for HE system development at this stage include the decrees of the President of the Republic and the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers on the Adoption of State Educational Standards for Higher Education, which mentions that one of the purposes of adopting these standards is integrating into the world education system.55 However, there is no reference therein of the roles/responsibilities of foreign university branches in meeting these standards.

The review of these documents shows that in the current HE policy of Uzbekistan, there is no legal basis or clear strategy or policy on establishing foreign university branches. As such, all the foreign university branches, operating in the country with their own admission policies, curriculum, strategy, governance, and budget models, emerge as an ad hoc parallel system to the national HE system.

The current trend of opening foreign university branches without a solid legislative basis for their operation or clear strategy gives the impression that the government wants to fix HE issues in the country at the cost of opening of foreign university branches. The official information on the number of foreign university branches and the process of their establishment is not reliable. For example, on April 6, 2018, it was reported that the Uzbek Ministry of Preschool Education signed an agreement to set up a Seojeon University branch in Tashkent.56 Several news outlets covered this agreement.57 However, after more

54 "The National Programme for Personnel Training", lex.uz, 1997, accessed on April 25, 2020, https://lex.uz/docs/48401.

55 Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Resolution on the Adoption of State Educational Standards for Higher Education" lex.uz, August 16, 2001, https://lex.uz/docs/359620.

56 See: The Tashkent Times, "University of Sejong to open branch in Tashkent", *The Tashkent Times*, April 6, 2018, http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/2230-university-of-sejong-to-open-branch-in-tashkent-2.

57 See coverage by two prominent online news portals: Gazeta.uz, "University of Sejong to open Branch in Tashkent", *Gazeta.uz*, April 6, 2018, https://www.gazeta.uz/uz/2018/04/06/

than a year after signing the agreement, the Seojeon University branch is still not in the MHSS's list of currently operating foreign university branches in the country.

This oversight shows how disorganized the Ministry itself is with regards to its foreign university branch policy. It also shows that new branches are being established sporadically. Often, this disorganization also reflects that the initiation of agreements with foreign universities to set up branches in Uzbekistan are being handled by Uzbek embassies around the world,[58] not necessarily by the MHSSE itself. Thus, currently, there is no basis to state that the Seojeon University branch was or was not opened. Moreover, the Ministry's most recent list of foreign university branches did not include Yeoju University[59]—a branch that was already operating in the country.[60] This is another example of the uncoordinated nature of the so-called internationalization policy of HE in Uzbekistan.

6 Parallel HE Systems: Long-term Goals vs. Short-term Gains

The current policy seems to prioritize an immediate solution to stagnated, low-quality, Soviet-style HE without committing to long-term strategic reforms. The opening of foreign university branches might be the perceived by the government as an immediate step to improve the image of the sector. However, this trend is creating two parallel, very distinct HE systems. Based on interviews with staff of local universities as well as foreign university branches, this paper identified several consequent differences in university teaching and operations between national and foreign university branches—the cause of the emergence of two parallel systems.

6.1 *Autonomy—Academic and Financial*

Foreign university branches in Uzbekistan have complete autonomy over their academic curriculum and financial management. As confirmed by a leading government official, foreign university branches decide what courses to teach and what textbooks to use throughout the degree programs they offer. The same government official confirmed that foreign university branches are not

sejong/ and Xabar.uz, "University of Sejong to open Branch in Tashkent", *xabar.uz*, April 7, 2018, http://www.xabar.uz/jamiyat/toshkentda-sojong-universiteti-filiali-ochiladi.

58 Interview with anonymous government official, 2019.

59 This information reflects the situation as at May 30, 2019.

60 See Yeoju Technical Institute in Tashkent, "About YTIT", YTIT, accessed on July 10, 2019,https://www.ytit.uz/index.php/en/about/.

asked by the government to add any courses to their academic program.61 They enjoy autonomy not only at the university and faculty levels but for every academic staff member in teaching their courses. Some of them do not teach any pro-government courses around nation-building or identity formation such as "spirituality" (*Ma'naviyat*), etc.

By contrast, local universities still follow the MHSSE's rules and regulations for both curriculum and finances. Moreover, the MHSSE is not the only actor in deciding the finances of a local university—the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economy are also players. Data from staff interviews indicate that staff in local HE institutions spend a lot of time preparing unnecessary reports to submit to the MHSSE. They, in fact, report spending less time preparing for lessons than they do preparing constant paperwork for the higher offices. As one of the respondents shares:

> There is no efficiency in local universities. There are so many government audits and commissions that come to check local universities, but they themselves do not know what they are checking, actually. Recently, I heard that some of my colleagues were a part of the team that was requested not to audit but visit some local universities across the country with the purpose of giving some recommendations. I was not involved in this. What they observed was that most staff in those universities are quite opinionated and are not open for any change. You call them and try to engage in discussion, [but] people are simply scared of losing their jobs above all. There [are] very few competent staff in local universities…62

Local universities with whose staff the interviews were held still do not have the academic and financial autonomy that foreign university branches currently enjoy. This is where the separate yet parallel systems of HE begin to emerge.

6.2 *International Standards of Teaching and Learning*

In foreign university branches, students are taught an international curriculum that is designed to fit the degree they will be getting. Students in such institutions also have the right to choose their electives in addition to compulsory courses. Testing and assessment are completed in line with international standards. Students are strictly taught the basics of academic writing from the

61 Interview with anonymous government officials, May, 2019.

62 Interview data was collected in January–February, 2020, Tashkent.

onset of their studies and are warned that plagiarism is a breach of academic conduct. If anyone is caught committing academic misconduct, they would fail that exam (or assignment) as most international standards dictate.

In national HE institutions, on the other hand, students still attend classes from Monday to Saturday and the schedule is set up by the faculty/school management. All classes are compulsory and there is no choice of electives.63 The below extracts from some of the interviews illustrate two distinct teaching standards in local universities and foreign university branches:

> I have some friends who studied finance and economics in overseas universities. They say what our local universities are teaching now is actually no longer being taught abroad for 10–15 years. They—local universities— are teaching the same lecture for many years. And academic staff are quite old people. It is not possible to engage a new young staff because of the low salaries.64

Another respondent shares his/her views on the issues that restrict local universities to catch up to or cooperate with foreign university branches in the country:

> I also know some overseas, educated, self-sufficient young people who already have their own businesses who lived and worked abroad for 10–15 years. But they want to work in local universities to contribute to education [in Uzbekistan]. But there is no structure in those universities. Even if you come as a ready staff to teach, there are no mechanisms to deliver your course—you cannot develop your own course. There [are] no prop- er library settings for students and other infrastructure to deliver your course. Even if you have necessary staff—human resources—you really cannot change anything in higher education overnight. It is hard, even during 2016–2020, in five years to make a big systematic change.65

The assignments and the quality of exam settings also differ from that in foreign university branches. Most teaching staff, let alone students, are not aware of academic writing standards. There are no software programs to check plagiarism in students' assignments nor is there support for students to acquire

63 Interviews indicate that University of World Economy and Diplomacy and Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL) have introduced the choice of elective courses to their students.

64 Interview data taken during January–February 2020, Tashkent.

65 Interview data taken during March–April 2019, Tashkent.

academic writing skills. In such an educational setting, students' papers can easily be copied and pasted from any source without proper acknowledgement. While students in foreign university branches receive international-standard teaching with a choice of elective courses in addition to their majors, students in national higher education institutions do not have any exposure to international standards of teaching, learning, or academic support.

6.3 *Student-Centered, Interactive Teaching Methods and Culture*

In most (if not all) national HE institutions, teaching methods and classroom settings are of Soviet style. Students are obliged to attend all lectures and to respect the instructions of the lecturer. These strictures show the dominance of collectivist culture in national HE—adherence to social norms and respect for teacher's authority and instructions. Below is an extract from the interviews with national HE institution staff on the issues in local universities' teaching methods and culture:

> You would need to wait for ten years to bring about proper reform in education—a change of generations should happen for this to occur. When [a] change of generation happens, when younger people will be in the positions currently occupied … by old-school people, and when more international staff are attracted to universities—this is when … major reforms can really be seen. But I also know that there are some very young staff, around 30-year-old Deans and Deputy Deans in some universities. But these young people are the products of local education—they were not exposed to international education and did not study abroad. Thus, they merge easily with the old system.66

Another interviewee from a local university shared his/her views on the issues of teaching materials and resources in local universities:

> Capacity of university staff in local universities should be developed. Attention should be paid to building a good infrastructure and learning resources for students. For example, there are no textbooks in many courses [in local universities]. There is a lot of teaching material and resources available in English. Either such textbooks and materials should be translated into Russian or English or our students should improve their English language skills to use those textbooks in original English language.

66 Interview data, 2020 Tashkent.

Moreover, in local universities, the management seems to pay more attention to the matter of students wearing uniforms than the teaching quality of faculties. As staff from a local university mentioned, "…students are strictly checked for their uniforms. They are encouraged to wear a top and a skirt. No fancy clothing or skinny pants are allowed. Only in winter (when it is cold) students are allowed to wear classic black pants to the University."67 These remarks indicate that the level of priority is much higher on the above points rather than the actual teaching and learning experience in some local universities.

When it comes to branches of foreign universities, their teaching methods as well as classroom attendance is quite different. The course outcomes are designed around student-centered teaching methods. In some universities, students are not obliged to attend the lectures of their elective subjects—they can access all course information, including the recorded lecture, in an online learning platform (similar Moodle or Wattle). A staff member of a foreign university branch compared their teaching standards and methods with the ones practiced in local universities:

> We need to increase English language knowledge of our students. Even if the medium of instruction in local universities is either Uzbek or Russian, students should be prepared to study in English. For example, in many countries, PhD degrees are taught in English even if the country is non-English speaking… In China, academic staff are required to have [an] international degree to be able to teach in universities. All Masters' and PhD students are required to be fluent in English. We could enforce that our students know English well enough to understand course contents.

Moreover, foreign university branches have international teaching staff who encourage students to develop critical thinking. Even local teachers working in foreign university branches are trained to teach students to question ideas. If teaching styles in national institutions teach students what to think, students in foreign university branches are taught how to think. This difference is reflected in the learners' academic and professional activities.

6.4 *International Faculty and Staff Retention*

While not all faculty members in foreign university branches are internationally recruited staff, there are international teaching staff in every foreign university branch. They usually teach the core subjects/courses that the branch

67 Interview with teaching staff in a local university based in Tashkent.

specializes in. Even local staff working in foreign university branches are well trained, with qualification from European or American universities. Foreign university branches try to attract leading international faculty to improve their ranking in the market. As a result, they offer much higher salaries and more attractive work conditions to staff than public universities in the country do. A staff member from a foreign university branch mentions the importance of the flexibility and freedom offered in their institution:

> In our branch campus, the workload includes teaching and research. We are only required to be physically present at the university when we have lectures, seminars, or meetings on campus. On the days when I do not have classes or meetings, it is up to me where I do my research or prepare for my classes. Some of [the] staff in foreign university branches, therefore, can have two jobs, such as teaching in training centers as an additional income. But they will still have to do the load of the university. What matters is that they have freedom to manage their time andworkload.68

Foreign university branches thus try to develop staff retention strategies to keep the best, most talented professors in their institutions. They also offer professional development opportunities to locally hired staff. Thus, students in foreign university branches are exposed to international and intercultural perspectives throughout the duration of their program. During the interviews, a staff member from a local HE institution mentioned the importance of cooperation of foreign university branches with local HE institutions, something the respondent did not see happening at that time:

> How should be the best practice? Foreign university branches in Uzbekistan want to engage more international staff, although it comes costly. However, how many international faculty members are there in local universities? Even in leading ones? None.

In most local universities, staff often work under pressure to prepare all the necessary reports for the Ministry. Local universities and institutes do not try to compete with foreign university branches in terms of attracting the best researchers/professors in the field or engaging international faculty. Nor they care about retention strategies for existing faculty members. As it was revealed during the interview with one foreign university branch staff member:

68 Interviews taken during January–February 2020, Tashkent.

> Lecturers here … are paid considerably high[er] than they are paid in local universities. Payment is not … really [a] motivator. Most locally hired lecturers stay in foreign university branches as they like [a] working environment where they have an autonomy, learning opportunities and free time! They simply don't want to waste time on preparing useless and endless reports to the "Centre."

Another interviewee from a national HE institution in Tashkent explained the ordinary work setting in local universities:

> In local universities, teaching and research load exists for the sake of reporting. Staff are over-occupied with teaching and other administrative-reporting works. Staff in local universities are required to publish but, mostly, they do it simply for the sake of publishing in some local conferences. The[re] are no development opportunities for teaching staff in local universities.

Thus, the difference in practices of managing and internationalizing teaching staff in local and in foreign university branches is another key issue that con- tributes to the development of two completely different, parallel HE systems.

6.5 *Student Experience and Employability*

In most foreign university branches, students are encouraged to use academic support programs for academic advice during their studies. Moreover, they have access to quality Wi-Fi connections while on campus and can use up-to-date library collections. Students in foreign university branches are also often exposed to international speakers on various topics relevant to their degrees. They also are encouraged to find and apply for internship opportunities. Students even get career consultation as a part of student experience programs, and on completion of their degrees, students in foreign university branches usually get a diploma (or two diplomas) that is valid both in Uzbekistan and abroad (especially in the country from which the foreign university branch originates). This allows them to be more competitive than their peers from local HE institutions.

The exact situation in national HE institutions is unclear, especially for those located in remote provinces. However, interviews with teaching staff in several national HE institutions show that students in the national sector do not seem to have such privileges, let alone decent free internet connections on campus. A brief extract from an interview with a former lecturer illustrates the differences in student experience in these two distinct yet parallel worlds:

> Foreign university branches do not ask students to wear "proper clothes," they let students [be] free for such things. Local universities still intervene more on such things more than they care about educational development of students. I think local universities will always be like that, they seem to represent the government rules and try to impose them on students. In local universities, students should always be willing to say "yes" to their teachers even if they don't agree with the teacher's viewpoint. In [foreign] branches, students can freely exchange views with their lecturers—provide healthy criticism. Students in local universities are constantly looking for opportunities [for] overseas exchange or degree- awarding programs.

Interviews with staff from national universities give the impression that the concept of "student experience" is not even considered in local HE. As long as students are attending lessons and sitting exams/submitting papers, this is the normal expected cycle of education. Unfortunately, the fact that universities should not only offer classes but provide a positive student learning experience is least-known or least-paid-attention-to in local universities. Interviewed staff from local universities confirmed that there is Wi-Fi on their cam- pus but "it would only open the webpages approved by the web team of the University."[69]

Career consulting or advice on internship placements is not normally provided in local universities. Students usually reach out themselves to potential employers to develop networks while enrolled in their studies. On completion of their studies, students get a diploma which is valid only in Uzbekistan. Due to lack of independence and the capacity to internationalize their programs, local Uzbek universities are not actively establishing partnerships for dual degree programs or articulation programs. Thus, the students in local universities continue to be disadvantaged in terms of their career guidance and potential employment opportunities.

7 Conclusion

Current research on the internationalization of HE overlooks how excessive reliance on the opening of foreign university branches without reforming the local HE system remains unsustainable. With its national HE enrolment rate as

69 Interview with a staff member of a local HE institution, 2019.

low as 9%,70 the government of Uzbekistan is now willing to provide wider access to higher education. Despite its efforts to adopt various strategies to reform and modernize national HE institutions, the actual Soviet-style day-to-day operation of local universities remains unchanged. The country is thus relying on the proliferation of foreign universities as a form of reform through the internationalization of the sector.

But the emergence of two parallel HE systems creates several issues that the Uzbek government and society will need to face. Foreign university branches are not solving the issues of national higher education sector. If the current trend continues, with the national sector operating in a Soviet-style system parallel to a huge liberalization policy towards foreign universities/ branches, then the national sector will further stagnate and its students will continue to be disadvantaged in comparison to those studying in foreign university branches. Such a division would make the national system even poorer, detached from internationalization and the job market, attracting a poorly trained student cohort. To solve the emergence of such parallel and yet unequal HE systems, local HE institutions should go through the same liberalization policy. The reform should foresee that each local HE provider independently decides on its own finances, curriculum, internationalization strategy, staff retention technique, and student experience approach.71

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70 See World Bank, "Uzbekistan Education Sector Analysis," World Bank, 2018, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/379211551844192053/pdf/Uzbekistan-Education-Sec-tor-Analysis.pdf.

71 This article was submitted and accepted in July 2019.