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Article

Assessing the Development of the Network of Foreign and Private Higher Education Institutions in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive assessment of the formation and development of the network of foreign and private (non-state) higher education institutions (HEIs) in Uzbekistan. The study draws on official statistical data covering 2005-2026 and applies time-series analysis, the assessment of structural shifts, the compound annual growth rate (CAGR), the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) and concentration ratios (CR-3, CR-6). The findings show that over the past six years the total number of HEIs rose from 102 to 211, private HEIs from 17 to 69, and foreign HEIs from 7 in 2015/2016 to 30 in 2025/2026; the ownership-based HHI declined from 7,222 to 4,089, confirming a substantial institutional diversification of the system. At the same time, the study identifies two serious imbalances. First, private and foreign HEIs account for 46.9 % of the network but enrol only about 16.6 % of the student body, and average enrolment per institution in this segment is 4.4 times lower than in the state sector. Second, 92.0 % of international students are enrolled at state HEIs, which means that foreign institutions have not become the principal driver of education export. Export revenue per international student is estimated at roughly USD 1,055, indicating low monetisation of an otherwise expanding market. On this basis the author formulates proposals aimed at shifting the network from extensive growth towards intensive, quality-driven development.

Keywords: *higher education, foreign HEI, private higher education institution, institutional network, education export, internationalization, enrolment rate, concentration index, licensing, education quality.*

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade the higher education system of Uzbekistan has become one of the most rapidly changing areas of the country's social and economic life. In 2016 the republic had only 77 higher education institutions and the gross enrolment rate among young people stood at around 9 %; by the 2024/2025 academic year the enrolment rate had reached 47.7 %. This leap was achieved not only through the expansion of state universities, but also through the entry of new institutional actors into the system - private higher education organisations and branches of foreign universities.[1]

This transformation was not accidental. The Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030, approved by Presidential Decree No. PD-5847 of 8 October 2019, established the creation of a competitive environment in higher education, the expansion of the private sector and closer cooperation with foreign universities as policy priorities. The Law on Education (No. LRU-637 of 23 September 2020) subsequently consolidated the legal status of private education organisations, while Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 80 of 21 February 2022

set out the licensing requirements and conditions for the provision of private higher education services.[2]

At the same time, the quantitative expansion of the network raises a number of new questions. To what extent do newly established institutions actually absorb the student body? Are branches of foreign universities integrated into the national education system, or do they operate as separate "islands of internationalization"? Is the rapid growth of the private sector proportionate to the quality of provision? The revocation of the licences of six private institutions in 2023 and one in 2024 indicates that these questions are practical rather than merely theoretical.

The purpose of this article is to assess, in quantitative and structural terms, the state of development of the network of foreign and private HEIs in Uzbekistan, to identify both its strengths and its systemic imbalances, and to formulate evidence-based proposals for quality-driven development of the network.[3]

The internationalization of higher education and the emergence of private provision have long been examined in the international literature. J. Knight defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into all functions of an education system, and distinguishes two principal forms: internationalization at home and cross-border internationalization. P. Altbach and J. Knight show that cross-border education is driven not only by academic motives but also by commercial interests, and caution that branches opened in developing countries may be oriented towards market share rather than educational quality.[4]

The phenomenon of the international branch campus has been studied in depth by S. Wilkins and J. Huisman, J. Lane and N. Healey. These authors conclude that the success of a branch depends less on the brand of the parent university than on local academic capacity, managerial autonomy and the stability of the teaching staff. Healey provides empirical evidence that a significant share of branch campuses encounter financial and academic difficulties within their first five years. This conclusion is directly relevant to Uzbekistan, where most foreign institutions are comparatively young structures.

The most extensive research on the economics of private higher education has been carried out by D. Levy. Within the PROPHE project, private higher education is classified into three types - elite, religious or cultural, and demand-absorbing. Levy demonstrates that in developing countries the bulk of the private sector belongs to the third type and serves to absorb excess demand that the public sector cannot accommodate. M. Trow and S. Marginson interpret rising enrolment through the elite–mass–universal sequence and argue that systems approaching 50 % enrolment inevitably undergo institutional differentiation and stratification by quality.[5]

In the literature devoted specifically to Uzbekistan, the topic has been addressed mainly within a legal and organisational framework, whereas studies assessing the network through quantitative indicators - concentration indices, the proportionality between the number of institutions and enrolment, and the degree of monetisation of education export - remain scarce. Official documents and analytical reports issued by the National Statistics Committee, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation and the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education record the quantitative growth of the network but do not offer a consistent methodology for evaluating its quality and efficiency. This gap defines the scientific novelty of the present study.

2. Materials And Methods

The information base of the study consists of official data published by the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and the HEMIS information system, together with the relevant regulatory and legal acts. The

period of analysis covers the academic years from 2005/2006 to 2025/2026, while structural comparisons focus on 2019–2025.

The following methods were applied. First, time-series analysis was used to calculate absolute growth as well as base and chain growth rates. Second, in order to summarise the long-term trend in a single indicator, the compound annual growth rate was computed using the formula:

$$CAGR = (Y_1 / Y_0)^{(1/n)} - 1,$$

where Y_0 is the base-year value, Y_1 the reporting-year value and n the number of years.[6]

Third, the degree of concentration of the network by ownership form and by region was assessed using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index:

$$HHI = \Sigma (s_i)^2 , \quad i = 1 \ldots n,$$

where s_i is the share of group i in the total (in per cent). An HHI below 1,500 indicates low concentration, values between 1,500 and 2,500 moderate concentration, and values above 2,500 high concentration. In addition, the CR-3 and CR-6 ratios, expressing the combined share of the three and six largest units respectively, were calculated.

Fourth, to establish the proportionality between institutional expansion and actual enrolment, the study computed average enrolment per institution and export revenue per international student.[7]

The limitations of the study should be stated explicitly. Different official sources report divergent totals for the number of HEIs (for example, 211 and 203), which is explained by licence revocations, the transformation and merger of state institutions, and differing reporting dates. Furthermore, a complete and continuous statistical series on enrolment in private HEIs has only begun to take shape since 2025, when Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 403 made registration in the HEMIS system mandatory. For this reason, several enrolment-related indicators are presented as the author's own estimates and are marked accordingly.

3. Results

Dynamics of the foreign HEI network. The network of foreign higher education institutions in Uzbekistan began in the early 2000s with two institutions and reached 30 by the start of the 2025/2026 academic year. The results of the time-series analysis are presented in Table 1.[8]

Table 1.

Dynamics of the number of foreign higher education institutions in Uzbekistan

Academic year	Foreign HEIs, units	Absolute growth, units	Base growth rate (2005/06 = 100), %	Chain growth rate, times
2005/2006	2	–	100.0	–
2010/2011	6	+4	300.0	3.00
2015/2016	7	+1	350.0	1.17
2020/2021	18	+11	900.0	2.57
2025/2026	30	+12	1500.0	1.67

The Figure 1. data reveal that the network developed unevenly rather than smoothly. Between 2010 and 2015 growth was almost stagnant, with only one institution added over five years, while the principal surge falls within the reform period after 2016: from 2015/2016 to 2020/2021 the number of foreign HEIs increased 2.57 times. In the

following five years, however, the pace slowed considerably. Whereas the compound annual growth rate for 2015/2016-2025/2026 was 15.7 %, for 2020/2021-2025/2026 it fell to 10.8 %. This indicates that the network is moving from a phase of extensive expansion towards saturation.[9]

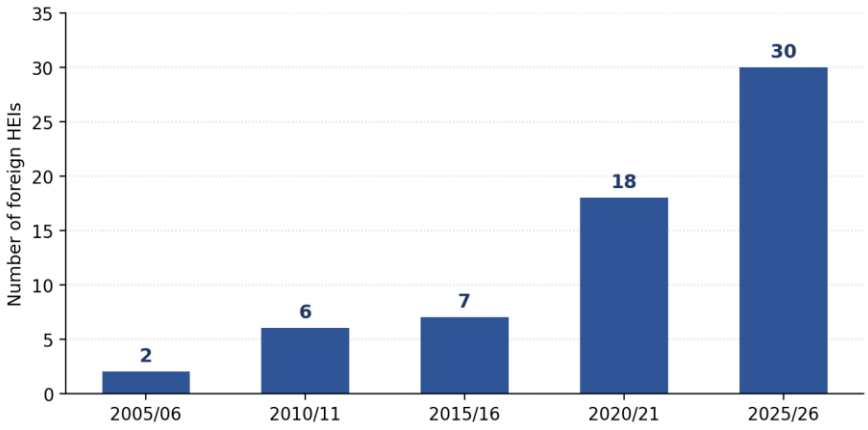


Figure 1. Change in the number of foreign higher education institutions, units

Structural shifts by ownership form. The deepest change in the network occurred in its ownership structure. Table 2 compares the situation in 2019 and 2024.[10]

Table 2.

Structure of higher education institutions by ownership form

Indicator	2019, units	2019, %	2024, units	2024, %	Change, units	Growth, times
State HEIs	85	83.3	112	53.1	+27	1.32
Private HEIs	17	16.7	69	32.7	+52	4.06
Foreign HEIs	–	–	30	14.2	+30	–
Total	**102**	**100.0**	**211**	**100.0**	**+109**	**2.07**

Over six years the share of state HEIs in the network fell from 83.3 % to 53.1 %, while the share of the private sector rose from 16.7 % to 32.7 %, that is, almost doubled. The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index by ownership declined from 7,222 to 4,089. This quantitatively confirms the transition of the system from a monopolistic structure to an institutionally diversified model and shows that the demand-absorbing private sector model described by D. Levy also operates in Uzbekistan.

At the same time, the growth rate of the private sector has slowed sharply: the compound annual growth rate for 2019-2024 was 32.3 %, but between 2024 and 2025 it fell to only 2.9 %. Two factors account for this - the saturation of market capacity and the tightening of licensing requirements. The revocation of the licences of six private institutions in 2023 and one in 2024 demonstrates that quantitative expansion has not always been matched by quality.[11]

The Figure 2. imbalance between institutional expansion and actual enrolment. One of the most important findings of the study is the sharp discrepancy between the share of institutions in the network and the share of students they enrol. In the 2024/2025 academic year more than 1,167,000 students were enrolled at state HEIs; assuming a total student

body of approximately 1.4 million, private and foreign institutions account for roughly 16.6 % of enrolment.

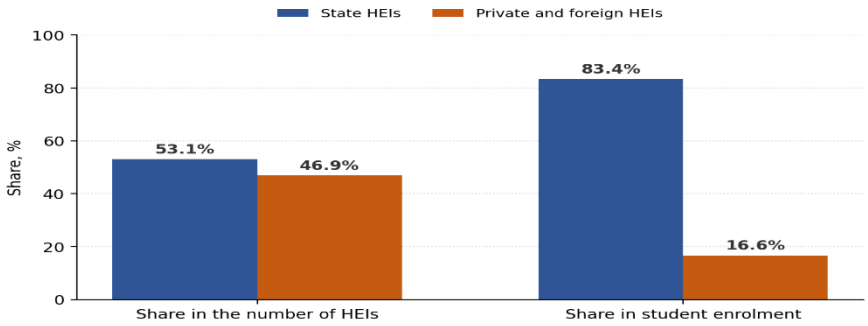


Figure 2. Comparison of shares in the number of HEIs and in student enrolment, %

In other words, private and foreign institutions constitute almost half of the network (46.9 %) yet enrol less than one sixth of all students. Average enrolment per institution is 10,420 students in the state sector but only 2,354 in the private and foreign segment - a difference of 4.4 times. This indicates that most of the new institutions are small in scale, narrowly specialised and financially fragile. The vulnerability of branch campuses in their early years noted by Healey (2015) is therefore observable in the local context as well.[12]

Education export and the composition of the international student body. As of 2025, 24,647 international students were enrolled at higher education institutions in the country. The structural analysis of this cohort is presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Composition of the international student body, 2025

Breakdown	Students	Share, %	Comment
Total international students	**24,647**	**100.0**	**as of 2025**
Citizens of India	13,060	53.0	mainly medicine
Citizens of Turkmenistan	4,884	19.8	group T_2
High-income countries (T_1)	1,149	4.7	smallest segment
Central Asia (T_2)	7,323	29.7	regional inflow
Other countries (T_3)	16,175	65.6	dominant segment
Tashkent city	11,559	46.9	territorial hub
Six largest regions	23,528	95.5	CR-6 ratio
Medical programmes	15,656	63.5	field concentration
Enrolled at state HEIs	22,685	92.0	ownership breakdown
Enrolled at private/foreign HEIs	1,962	8.0	ownership breakdown

The analysis reveals several significant imbalances. First, the cohort is geographically very narrow: 53.0 % of students are citizens of a single country, India, and a further 19.8 % are citizens of Turkmenistan. Two countries thus account for 72.8 % of total enrolment, which implies high sensitivity to external shocks. Second, concentration by field of study is pronounced: 63.5 % of international students are enrolled in medical programmes. Third, high-income countries (group T_1) account for only 4.7 %, meaning that Uzbekistan currently competes largely in the price-sensitive segment of the international market.[13]

The territorial distribution is equally uneven: 46.9 % of international students are concentrated in Tashkent city, and six regions together account for 95.5 % of the cohort. The calculated Herfindahl-Hirschman Index amounts to 2,796 and the CR-3 ratio to 76.4 %, both indicating high territorial concentration.

The most unexpected result concerns the ownership breakdown: 92.0 % of international students are enrolled at state HEIs, while private and foreign institutions account for only 1,962 students, or 8.0 %. This shows that branches of foreign universities are not fulfilling the role expected of them in expanding education export; they serve primarily local fee-paying demand and, as international experts have observed, risk becoming a separate segment insufficiently connected to the national system.

The financial return on export also remains low. In 2024 the volume of higher education export amounted to USD 26 million, which corresponds to average revenue of roughly USD 1,055 per international student. By comparison, this indicator is an order of magnitude higher in the developed segments of the global education market. At the same time, the arrival of 21,042 foreign nationals for study purposes in January–June 2026, a 2.2-fold increase on the same period of the previous year, indicates that growth potential is being sustained.[14]

Summary assessment indicators. The principal indicators calculated in the course of the study are consolidated in Table 4.

Table 4.

Consolidated indicators for assessing the development of the network

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
CAGR of foreign HEIs, 2015/16-2025/26	15.7 %	rapid institutional expansion
CAGR of foreign HEIs, 2020/21-2025/26	10.8 %	decelerating growth
CAGR of private HEIs, 2019-2024	32.3 %	explosive growth
Growth of private HEIs, 2024-2025	2.9 %	saturation phase
HHI by ownership, 2019	7,222	monopolistic structure
HHI by ownership, 2024	4,089	diversification
HHI, regional (international students)	2,796	high concentration
CR-3, regional	76.4 %	centralised distribution
Average enrolment per state HEI	10,420 students	large scale
Average enrolment per private/foreign HEI	2,354 students	4.4 times lower
Export revenue per international student	≈ USD 1,055	low monetisation

The table clearly illustrates the dual character of the network's development. On the one hand, considerable progress has been achieved in institutional diversification: the more than twofold reduction in the HHI, the rise in the enrolment rate from 9 % to 47.7 % and the 4.3-fold increase in the number of foreign institutions over a decade are all clear evidence of this. On the other hand, the deceleration of growth, the low share of enrolment, the high territorial and disciplinary concentration and the weak monetisation of export all indicate that the resources for extensive development are being exhausted.[15].

5. Conclusion

Modern First, between 2019 and 2025 the network of foreign and private HEIs in Uzbekistan expanded at an unprecedented pace: the number of private institutions grew

4.06 times, and the number of foreign institutions increased 4.3 times over the past decade. The fall in the ownership-based HHI from 7,222 to 4,089 confirms the transition of the system from a monopolistic position to a competitive institutional model. Second, quantitative growth has not been matched by structural quality. Private and foreign institutions make up 46.9 % of the network but enrol only about 16.6 % of students, and average enrolment per institution is 4.4 times lower than in the state sector. This suggests that most new institutions have failed to achieve economies of scale. Third, foreign institutions have not become the principal driver of education export: 92.0 % of international students are enrolled at state HEIs. The export cohort is highly concentrated geographically (India and Turkmenistan account for 72.8 %), by field of study (medicine, 63.5 %) and territorially (CR-3 of 76.4 %), which reduces the resilience of the market. Fourth, the deceleration of growth - from 15.7 % to 10.8 % for foreign institutions and from 32.3 % to 2.9 % for private institutions - indicates that the network has entered a phase of saturation. At this stage the focus of state policy should shift from opening new institutions to securing the quality and sustainability of those that already exist.

On this basis, the following proposals are put forward: complete the transition to a two-stage licensing system for private and foreign institutions and introduce comprehensive state accreditation every five years, thereby strengthening requirements applied to continuing operation rather than merely to market entry; introduce local integration indicators for foreign institutions - the share of local academic staff, the number of joint programmes with national universities, and research output - and incorporate them into accreditation criteria; develop a targeted marketing programme oriented towards the markets of South and South-East Asia, the Middle East and Africa in order to diversify education export, and increase the number of English-medium programmes in engineering, ICT and agricultural technology alongside medicine; reduce the territorial concentration of international student flows by developing international dormitories, visa support services and English-language administrative infrastructure at institutions located outside Tashkent; maintain, on the basis of the HEMIS system, an open statistical database on enrolment, graduate employment and tuition fees at private and foreign institutions, which would both inform consumer choice and provide researchers with a reliable source of information; encourage the merger of small-scale institutions or their cooperation in the form of consortia in order to achieve economies of scale and strengthen their financial sustainability. Implementing these measures would ensure a consistent transition of the network from extensive growth to intensive, quality-oriented development and would contribute to achieving the objectives set out in the Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System until 2030.

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