

# MODERNISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN: TRANSFORMING QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM AND APPROACHES

**Alex Krouglov**

University College London, UK  
Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia

**Abstract.** *The paper explores the current transformations in the Quality Assurance (QA) system in the Higher Education (HE) of the Republic of Uzbekistan and examines the impact of the World Bank Modernising Higher Education project which aims, among other issues, to develop and implement a new system of external QA and strengthen the system of internal QA. The research analyses annual and quarterly reports prepared by the Project Team of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education of Uzbekistan, World Bank, Expert Advisory Panel as well as national and international consultants. In addition to this, a series of interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in Uzbekistan. The data received from the analysis of project reports and other documents were triangulated with the data obtained during semi-structured interviews. The research addresses the issues of the process of reforms in QA system at national and university levels and the gradual transformation of QA culture. It covers challenges in the introduction of new QA arrangements and assesses the role of various actors in the process of transformations.*

**Keywords:** *external QA, internal QA, quality assurance (QA), transformations in the Higher Education, Uzbekistan.*

## Introduction and literature review

In recent years, quality assurance, enhancement, and accountability in Higher Education (HE) have become central worldwide, as it shows ways not only for increasing the efficiency of HE systems, but also identifies and enhances teaching and learning as well as technologies that are more effective for a particular mode of delivery (Billing, 2004; Ewell, 2010). The latter has been particularly important in the last couple of years since the introduction of lockdowns in various countries due to the Covid19 pandemic and the transfer of teaching and learning to online, blended, or hybrid modes of delivery (Hodges et al., 2020; Krouglov, 2021; Nworie, 2021).

Many authors considered and defined Quality Assurance (QA) through a variety of approaches (Van Kemenade et al., 2008; Newton, 2010; Harvey and Green, 1993). Quality and Quality Assurance are multi-dimensional concepts, and simple definitions often tend to be somewhat vague or broad to be useful. However, QA of HE has its roots in the need for accountability and enhancement of HE institutions, teaching, and learning they provide as well as research and

numerous other functions which are important for students and society as a whole. This duality of the accountability of HEIs towards their stakeholders has been the driving force of QA in HE (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002). On top of this, the definition and perception of QA by numerous stakeholders have been changing together with the way we approach teaching and learning, and how we develop new assessments and other criteria in the new environment.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic mitigations, many QA agencies and universities around the world are beginning to consider future modes and models for teaching and learning. The period of the Covid19 pandemic provided numerous examples of tenacity and ingenuity in HE when academics reimaged the design and delivery of their courses for students who have continued to learn in unpredictable and sometimes challenging circumstances. We have been witnessing an ongoing reevaluation of what QA constitutes by QA agencies, universities, and their partners involved in the process. Since our main objective is to evaluate changes in the QA of HE in Uzbekistan we will aim to see how it develops along broad categories proposed by Harvey and Green (1993) which incorporate exception, perfection, the fitness of purpose, value for money, and transformation, and where quality is related to a set of standards which can be either high or minimal.

The transformation of QA and its continuous enhancement have become key categories in recent developments. There appeared new innovative approaches to quality, assessment, and inclusion as we explore imaginative directions for the future of HE. At the same time, it is obvious that international cooperation in the field of QA in HE has not stopped but also changed and acquired new forms and approaches. The globalisation process of QA in HE abated during the first stage of the Covid19 pandemic, but we can now observe new developments in various international settings and cross-border HE cooperation (Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2021). In this respect, Uzbekistan has not been an exception. The process of internationalisation and modernisation of HE has only accelerated in recent years due to many international projects and the willingness of the government to introduce significant changes in the way the HE is governed. QA has been key in these reforms and numerous international projects specifically addressed this issue (Krouglov, 2017; Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018; Kurbanov, 2022). Our current research addresses recent changes in the system of external and internal QA being developed and introduced in the course of the World Bank project Modernizing Higher Education (MHEP)<sup>1</sup> which is to be completed in early 2023.

The MHEP project aims at introducing systemic changes in Uzbek HE and more specifically addresses the issues of strengthening HE management through the development and establishment of a new HE management information system, improving QA system and the learning environment in HE institutions. Another

---

<sup>1</sup> See more about World Bank MHEP project in Uzbekistan with the commitment amount of US\$ 42.20 million: <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P128516>

objective of the project has been to improve the relevance of HE by modernising the curriculum and establishing effective cooperation with the industry and developing new cooperation models. These activities will produce an impact at institutional and societal levels. All these activities underpin overall QA in the HE of Uzbekistan and will develop HE which is fit for purpose in the new environment. The quality of HE has been identified as one of the key factors which will allow Uzbekistan to ensure progress and positive developments in society. It will allow the country “to succeed in a global competition” and meet “the requirements of innovative development of the economy, the development needs of both society as a whole and the personality of each of its citizens” (Aliev, 2020, p.406).

### **Methodology**

The current research is not based on the performance of any universities in Uzbekistan but rather analyses more general trends in the development of HE as a whole. A qualitative research design is employed in this study guided by grounded theory (Patton 2002) in the investigation of major developments and reforms in the HE of Uzbekistan. The qualitative method was chosen to identify the main tendencies in Uzbek HE in recent years and gain a better understanding of how HE reforms were conducted in the country. The qualitative method used here also allowed this study to capture wider issues associated with HE and identify some aspects of best practice.

The data consists of official documents published in Uzbekistan and other countries or organisations, statements, legislation, reports, etc., and semi-structured interviews with key personnel in the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education of Uzbekistan (MHSSE), State Inspectorate for the Supervision of Quality in Education under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan (SISQUE) which has the role of a QA agency in the country, staff in four local universities and members of project team of World Bank project Modernizing Higher Education (MHEP). The data received from the analysis of project reports and other documents were triangulated with the data obtained during semi-structured interviews with respondents from selected institutions mentioned above. This approach enabled us to confirm and expand various findings identified during literature and documents review and strengthen their validity. The selection of candidates for an interview was based on the requirements of the World Bank MHEP project as our aim was to have a wide representation of respondents in this research.

A semi-structured interview format was used which allowed for interviews to be both situational and conversational, as topics were identified in advance and facilitated a flexible approach where the exact wording of questions was not important. The main objective was to receive more in-depth and useful responses from participants. All interviews were initially recorded and when full

transcription of recordings was completed, all recordings were deleted in line with research ethics requirements. All personal names, names of organisations, and other references were deleted from transcripts to keep all records confidential.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted during fieldwork in October 2021 and online interviews were held during remote fieldwork in October 2020. This approach of two stages of fieldwork allowed us to analyse the situation in development and collect the necessary information. In total, 27 respondents were interviewed during the two fieldwork stages. Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection. Notes were taken during and after each interview, especially about emerging themes. After each interview and the analysis of answers provided, some adjustments were made for subsequent interviews. This included rephrasing questions or adding new lines of inquiry. For example, the topic of training and its relevance to the situation in Uzbek HE came up in several interviews. It was decided to include this question in some other interviews. This approach enabled us to identify thematic connections and verify data received in our review of literature and documents.

Numerous comments of participants in 27 interviews formed a major part of the data in this study. All references to quotes from interviews will be presented as CIN + number for an interviewed academic or an official of the MHSSE, SISQUE, or any other organisation.

## **Research results**

The World Bank project Modernizing Higher Education (MHEP) is currently in the final stages of its implementation. The project will undoubtedly bring in the systemic changes required by the Higher Education in Uzbekistan, especially in such fields as HE management, Quality Assurance, and the learning environment. It is important to note that all changes envisaged under this project will have an impact on QA in Uzbek HE. The implementation of this major project will also significantly change the HE QA culture and establish the basis for further developments in the field of research as well as teaching and learning. These changes, together with the move of the government towards more independence and academic freedom of HE institutions (HEIs), will enable the development of a new culture and values, and contribute positively to all areas of academic life. This eventually will have a favourable impact on the economy of the country and society. Even at this stage, it is becoming obvious that the outcomes of the project will have wider implications for the country as a whole.

The World Bank MHEP project has been reported to have made significant achievements already in developing and implementing a new HE Management Information System (HEMIS) which connects 143 universities with the MHSSE and SISQUE. Eventually, HEMIS will be connected with other stakeholders and offer a variety of opportunities for collaboration and sharing between HEIs,

government, and other organisations. The system is unique, as it was specifically developed for the needs of the HE in Uzbekistan taking into consideration specific requirements of each university, MHSSE, SISQUE, and other government and commercial partner organisations.

The analysis of reports and interviews conducted in Uzbekistan confirmed that there was some progress in understanding and developing QA culture, especially the external part of it. Under this project, six universities were selected for piloting various aspects of QA and will accumulate knowledge, experience, and practical skills in QA which they will share with other universities. The selected six universities will also develop QA Manuals and other necessary documentation which could be used by other HEIs in the country. Colleague CIN23 reported that at some HEIs, QA units dealing with various QA issues at the university level face ongoing “problems in creating new documentation, manuals, and sometimes inability to discuss the issues of QA with faculties. Although in many cases, it is the result of Covid19 pandemic”. Our findings show that some universities are confused and report some issues linked to external and internal communication.

Because of the forthcoming government announcement of university independence, the new status of universities will push them to develop QA even further so that they could demonstrate to the public and prospective students that HEIs offer high-quality education and ensure employability for their graduates. Colleague CIN4 suggested that universities “will have to work hard to prove to the government, parents, and students that it is a good university and show concrete examples, like links with employers or employability, opportunities for research or mobility, excellent feedback from previous students, etc. The assessment results by SISQUE will also have an impact on the decision of choosing this university by prospective students”. During interviews, some colleagues thought that the decision on university independence should also accelerate the decision on the status of SISQUE as an independent QA agency and its role in the development of HE and QA.

The review of project reports and documentation showed that the project faced some challenges when consulting companies on QA issues which had not sufficiently studied the experience of Uzbek universities in the field of QA before the training was initiated for SISQUE and staff in HEIs. This gap in local knowledge and expertise had an impact on the relevance of training and consultancy provided, especially at the beginning of their activities. Our interviews (CIN 6, 14, 22) revealed that there were some improvements as consulting companies learned more about the existing system of QA in Uzbekistan while delivering the training and consultancy. Colleague CIN14 pointed out that “at the beginning of the training, there were lectures and workshops which participants could not connect to the real life in Uzbek HE. Quite often participants could not understand how they could apply those principles in practice”. Some training modules had too much adherence to QA

principles accepted in the West (mostly EU) with little reference to the existing standards in Uzbekistan. The lack of links with the existing QA system made the training less effective and did not allow the elaboration of those principles for specific Uzbek environment.

The role of SISQUE as the QA agency has been changing as well. The interviews revealed (CIN9, 14, 23) that colleagues saw the role of their organisation not only as a controller now but even more so as an educator working closely with HEIs. This was a significant transformation in the perception of their activities from previous years. At present, SISQUE offers three/four training courses for university staff every month covering both Internal and External QA principles. The establishment of QA Cells in HEIs, the development of Action Plans, and identifying individual responsibilities in those Cells contribute to a better understanding of QA principles and its processes locally.

On the whole, the analysed reports corroborated the view that SISQUE's approach of starting reforms with curriculum development and improvement of relevant QA standards was appropriate and should be supported. Both interviews, e.g. CIN4, 14, 23, and analysed documentation also confirmed that Uzbek HEIs did more work to engage employers in the development of new curricula, the organisation of internships, and participation in research projects. At the same time, the interviews (CIN3, 17, 26) also showed that the assessment of teaching and research staff at HEIs should have a more holistic approach and specifically address the issue of establishing links between research, teaching and learning. One colleague (CIN26) spoke about the drawbacks of a new assessment of colleagues at universities where such parameters as research are often overlooked, saying "there is a lack of interest of what was published by colleagues, and nobody considers the quality of those publications. And what about textbooks? It looks that they were completely excluded from the assessment process of teacher's work". The qualitative aspect and the aspect of impact should be key in the assessment of research. It should be noted that it takes time to change the culture and introduce new approaches which will lead to deeper changes in QA and will not only serve as another fill and tick exercise.

The MHEP project facilitated and guided the development of a Practical Guide based on competencies, the creation of a Manual for QA Cells, QA templates and other materials so that HEI staff could produce self-assessment reports. This remains to be one of the major tasks of SISQUE and MHSSE. At the same time, it is worth noting that QA reforms slowed down because of the Covid19 pandemic as well as other issues and may require more time for implementation across the country. In this respect, the theme of the timeframe of reforms emerged during interviews (CIN2, 7, 21). The main concern of some colleagues was that reforms were slowing down, and there was an overlap between the old and new QA systems and old and new documents, and approaches that were used at the same time. CIN21 reported that his institution had to go

through QA assessment several times using different documentation. This situation should be avoided at all costs since it may lead to some confusion and misunderstandings. It also contributed to a slower pace of reforms. In the words of CIN21 “the use of two systems of QA assessment should be stopped, and we will all need to move to a new system. If problems arise, we will need to correct or adjust them accordingly”.

Another issue that was raised in several interviews (CIN3, 4, 22) is linked to the availability of resources in HEIs for the smooth running of QA at all levels. Colleagues expressed their concern that the Quality Assurance Cells created in all institutions consist only of three staff members which may not be sufficient for some big universities. There are also issues about the organisation of QA work at faculty and course levels and how it is linked with the QA Cell of the institution.

The analysis of interviews (CIN3, 5, 14, 22) and reports indicated that the project would also improve the learning environment in HE institutions by providing and installing new laboratory equipment. This will have an impact not only on the quality of teaching and learning in STEM subjects, but will also develop research capabilities and enable HEIs to establish more efficient links with industries across the country. The MHEP project has already shown some improvements in the relevance of HE through various smaller projects in numerous institutions across the country.

The study of project documentation and the analysis of interviews (CIN4, 8, 12) confirmed that this project, as well as new demands caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, enabled many universities to move to online training and significantly rethink their approaches in teaching and learning. At the same time, there have been issues related to the connectivity and availability of reliable and stable Internet across the entire country. This remains a very important task for the country and its development. Nevertheless, the Covid19 pandemic created conditions for new and exciting initiatives in online and blended teaching and learning. Many HEIs and academics came up with numerous creative solutions which enabled continuous training at the majority of universities. It is now the task of the MHSSE and SISQUE to assess this experience and promote examples of good practice.

On the whole, the World Bank project Modernizing Higher Education has already shown solid examples of positive changes and will undoubtedly significantly transform the system of HE in Uzbekistan and bring it closer to the HE in other countries of Europe or North America.

## **Conclusions**

The present research confirmed that the transformation of the QA system is a slow process that requires a lot of painstaking work and efforts by SISQUE, MHSSE, universities, and other stakeholders. At the same time, the current research endorses the results of previous research that the move from quality

control to quality assurance has accelerated in Uzbek HE (Krouglov, 2017). SISQUE has acquired a new role as an educator, developer, and moderniser of QA in HE. In other words, we witness the development of QA culture and the growing understanding of both internal and external QA principles. There has been some initial progress around other categories proposed by Harvey and Green (1993), such as exception, perfection, the fitness of purpose, and value for money. These categories will become even more important when the government moves towards more independence and academic freedom for HEIs, since they will have to demonstrate to the public that the teaching and learning they provide is fit for purpose and value for money.

The research also confirmed that it is impossible to transfer QA principles that successfully work in another country or even in a group of countries without a clear assessment of the current situation and needs in QA in the HE of another country. Even when the assessment is completed, we do not expect that the transfer will be smooth as each approach will undergo some rethinking, modifications, or changes. The process can be mutually beneficial for both parties since they will reassess approaches or methods and see whether they require some adjustments and more significant changes, or whether they will work in the HE environment of another country.

At the same time, the transfer from one system to another has to be managed effectively to avoid any overlaps and the use of two systems at the same time during the transition period. The quick transfer will accelerate reforms and develop the most appropriate QA approaches for the HE. It should be also noted that there has been some overreliance on quantitative methods in the QA and project assessment. The inclusion of more qualitative aspects will enable the Ministry of Higher and secondary Specialised Education of Uzbekistan, the World Bank, universities, and other stakeholders to assess better the outcomes of the project and QA reforms.

When the MHEP project is completed in early 2023, the HE in Uzbekistan should benefit from well-structured external and internal QA systems; however, it will take some time before QA culture becomes dominant in all HE institutions across the country. The six universities will become instrumental in showcasing best practice in QA – the ability to transform and adopt new practices in teaching and learning. This will not only raise the level of QA across the country but will also contribute to more effective collaboration between HEIs and all stakeholders.

There have been and will continue to be certain challenges in the introduction of QA across HE. One of the main issues is the allocation of resources to support necessary work in HEIs and SISQUE. The analysis of reports and our interviews showed that many universities were still in the process of learning how the new system worked, and what internal structures were required to support QA at university, faculty, and course levels. HEIs and SISQUE should not shy away from learning from mistakes in developing new QA approaches and themes.

### **List of References**

- Aliev, I. (2020). Implementing quality assurance in higher education: practices and issues. *Bulletin of Science and Practice*, 6(4), 405-410. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33619/2414-2948/53/45>
- Billing, D. (2004). International comparisons and trends in external quality assurance of higher education: commonality or diversity? *Higher Education*, 47(1), 113–37.
- Ewell, P. (2010). Twenty years of quality assurance in higher education: what's happened and what's different? *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(2), 173–75.
- Harvey, L. & Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1), 9-34.
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*, March 27. Retrieved from <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>.
- Jeliazkova, M. & Westerheijden, D. (2002). Systemic adaptation to a changing environment: Towards a next generation of quality assurance models. *Higher Education*, 44(3/4), 433-448.
- Krouglov, A. (2017). Transforming Higher Education in Uzbekistan: From Quality Control to Quality Assurance Culture. In M. Shah & Q. Do (Eds.), *The Rise Of Quality Assurance In Asian Higher Education* (173-189). Cambridge: Elsevier.
- Krouglov, A. (2021). Emergency remote teaching and learning in simultaneous interpreting: Capturing experiences of teachers and students. *Training, Language and Culture*, 5(3), 41-56. doi:10.22363/2521-442X-2021-5-3-41-56
- Kurbanov, Kh. (2022). Conceptual Issues of Quality Assurance in Professional Education According to Isced Levels in Uzbekistan. *European Journal of Innovation in Nonformal Education (EJINE)*, 2(1), 50-59.
- Newton, J. (2010). A tale of two "qualitys": reflections on the quality revolution in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(1), 51-35.
- Nworie, J. (2021). Beyond COVID-19: What's Next for Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education? *Educause Review*, May 19. Retrieved from <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2021/5/beyond-covid-19-whats-next-for-online-teaching-and-learning-in-higher-education>.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. India: SAGE Publications.
- Ruziev, K. & Burkhanov, U. (2018). Uzbekistan: Higher Education Reforms and the Changing Landscape Since Independence. In Huisman, J., Smolentseva, A., Froumin, I. (Eds.), *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries* (435-459). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sánchez-Chaparro, T., Remaud, B., Gómez-Frías, V., Duykaerts, C. & Jolly, A. (2021). Benefits and challenges of cross-border quality assurance in higher education. A case study in engineering education in Europe. *Quality in Higher Education*, 1-18. DOI: 10.1080/13538322.2021.2004984
- Van Kemenade, E., Pupius, M., Hardjono, T. (2008). More value to defining quality. *Quality in Higher Education*, 14(2), 175-185.