



## THE ROLE OF INTERNALISATION IN ENHANCING UZBEKISTAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

**Xamidova Muxlisa**

Westminster International University in Tashkent

ORCID: 0009-0007-7722-1855

[atakhodjayevamukhlisa@gmail.com](mailto:atakhodjayevamukhlisa@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** Internationalisation has become a prime factor of competitiveness in the sphere of higher education, shaping global presence, image and abilities to employ graduates. In the case of emerging economies, it presents an opportunity to enter the global academic communities and be rated in world rankings. The aim of this paper is to address the issue of how the internationalisation enhances the competitiveness of universities in Uzbekistan through the interviews held and by referring to the relevant body representatives of different universities. The results indicate that, as much as Uzbek universities have embraced internationalisation, the challenge in their governance, allocation of resources and language capacity still exist. Internationally affiliated institutions like the Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT) and Webster University in Tashkent (WUT) can make use of international networks more efficiently in contrast to nationally based universities, which use strategies based on small steps, including the mobility programmes, and faculty training in foreign countries. The paper supports the view that the current internationalisation in Uzbekistan cannot be considered as a sustainable competitiveness issue unless it is integrated into the processes of teaching, research, and governance in the country.

**Keywords:** internalisation, higher education, institutional competitiveness, university rankings, Uzbekistan.

## O'ZBEKISTON OLIY TA'LIM TIZIMI RAQOBATBARDOSHLIGINI OSHIRISHDA XALQAROLASHTIRISHNING O'RNI

**Xamidova Muxlisa**

Toshkent shahridagi Xalqaro Vestminster universiteti

**Annotatsiya.** Xalqarolashtirish oliy ta'lim sohasida raqobatbardoshlikning asosiy omillaridan biriga aylanib bormoqda, u oliygochlarning global maydondagi mavqeい, imiji va bitiruvchilarning ishga joylashish imkoniyatlarini belgilab beradi. Rivojlanayotgan davlatlar uchun esa bu jarayon xalqaro ilmiy hamjamiyatga kirish va jahon reytinglarida o'z o'rnini topish imkoniyatini beradi. Ushbu maqolaning maqsadi – O'zbekiston universitetlarining raqobatbardoshligini oshirishda xalqarolashtirishning qanday rol o'ynashini turli oliygohlar va mutasaddi tashkilot vakillari bilan o'tkazilgan suhbatlar asosida tahlil qilishdir. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, O'zbekiston universitetlari xalqarolashtirishni faol qo'llayotgan bo'lsalar-da, boshqaruv, resurslarni taqsimlash va til salohiyatida muammolar mavjud. Toshkent shahridagi Xalqaro Vestminster universiteti (TXVU) va Toshkent shahridagi Webster universiteti kabi xalqaro hamkorlikka ega oliygohlar xalqaro tarmoqlardan samaraliroq foydalanmoqda, milliy universitetlar asta-sekinlik bilan talabalar almashinuvi dasturlari va xorijda o'qituvchilar

malakasini oshirish orqali harakat qilmoqda. Maqolada ta'kidlanadiki, agar xalqarolashtirish ta'lif, ilmiy tadqiqot va boshqaruv jarayonlariga to'liq integratsiya qilinmasa, u O'zbekiston oliv ta'lifida barqaror raqobatbardoshlik omili sifatida qaralishi mumkin emas.

**Kalit so'zlar:** xalqarolashtirish, oliv ta'lif, institutsional raqobatbardoshlik, universitet reytinglari, O'zbekiston.

## РОЛЬ ИНТЕРНАЦИОНАЛИЗАЦИИ В ПОВЫШЕНИИ КОНКУРЕНТОСПОСОБНОСТИ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ УЗБЕКИСТАНА

**Хамидова Мухлиса**

Международный Вестминстерский университет в городе Ташкенте

**Аннотация.** Интернационализация становится важнейшим фактором конкурентоспособности в сфере высшего образования, формируя глобальное присутствие, имидж и возможности трудоустройства выпускников. Для стран с развивающейся экономикой она представляет собой возможность войти в мировое академическое сообщество и быть признанными в международных рейтингах. Цель данной статьи – рассмотреть, как интернационализация способствует повышению конкурентоспособности университетов Узбекистана, основываясь на интервью с представителями различных вузов и экспертных организаций. Результаты исследования показывают, что, несмотря на активное внедрение интернационализации, в университетах страны сохраняются проблемы в сфере управления, распределения ресурсов и языковой подготовки. Международно аффилированные университеты, такие как Международный Вестминстерский университет в городе Ташкенте (МВУТ) и Вебстерский университет в Ташкенте (ВУТ), более эффективно используют международные сети по сравнению с национальными вузами, которые применяют пошаговые стратегии: программы мобильности и повышение квалификации преподавателей за рубежом. В статье утверждается, что интернационализация в Узбекистане не может рассматриваться как устойчивый фактор конкурентоспособности, если она не будет интегрирована в процессы преподавания, научных исследований и управления.

**Ключевые слова:** интернационализация, высшее образование, институциональная конкурентоспособность, университетские рейтинги, Узбекистан.

### **Introduction.**

In higher education, internationalisation has gained importance, since it directly affects the competitiveness of an institution and the employability of its graduates (Suguku, 2023). It consists of diverse elements, such as the mobility of students and faculty, international cooperation, international research collaborations (Zaiachuk, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic hastened the pace at which institutions recognised the importance of virtual internationalisation to reach more global students and foster collaboration between international students (Sertyesilisik 2022).

Although internationalisation offers a considerable number of benefits, including better teaching quality, increased global cooperation, and the enhanced global reputation of the institution, it has to be noted that it also exhibits several difficulties, including accessibility and competitive pressures between institutions (Zaiachuk, 2020). Recent literature has become rather critical, acknowledging unequal power relationships and inequalities inherent to the process of internationalisation (Mittelmeier and Yang, 2022). It is recommended that higher education institutions strategically integrate virtual internationalisation reflected on its political economy keeping the aspects of competitiveness in mind (Sertyesilisik, 2022).

There are various reasons why universities go through internationalisation strategies, and they include educational quality, enhancement, institution reputation, and global competitiveness (Vasylenko and Prysyzhnyuk, 2024). Internationalisation also has economic advantages because it exports educational services and sustains labour markets, as well as political advantages, because it synchronizes national higher education systems with the global trends (Rementsova, 2020). The most frequent methods are the establishment of cross-border collaboration, interpersonal exchange, and the creation of curricula connections (Vasylenko and Prysyzhnyuk, 2024). Other goals of universities are the attraction of international students and the increase in student mobility (Gesso, 2021).

Another dimension that is important as far as equipping students as global citizens is concerned is curriculum internationalisation. The strategies vary between add-ons to courses through infusion, transformational learning and social responsibility embedded. Approaches to implementation are faculty support in curriculum building, long-term collaborations, incorporation of international student experiences, and boosting language learning opportunities (Clarke and Kirby, 2022).

In Uzbekistan the perspective of internationalisation has been endorsed as a national policy priority. The country has strengthened academic mobility schemes, increased international faculty recruitment and expansions to global collaboration. Despite this, issues around systemic governance, linguistic deficit and lack of funding still inhibit universities to utilise internationalisation fully as a competitiveness tool.

### **Literature review.**

**Theoretical Foundations of Internationalisation.** To promote greater integration of the theoretical frameworks to conceptualise internationalisation within the higher education sector, recent research studies recommend stronger cohesion of the theoretical frameworks used to conceptualise internationalisation in higher education. Qiu et al. (2025) suggests a blended evidence-based model which entails a combination of the existing models in a way that allows accommodating the structure and the flexibility to institutions. In a similar sense, Munusamy and Hashim (2020) make use of the Uppsala and network theories to explain how universities establish global interaction through networking.

According to the argument of Uzhegova and Baik (2020), Chartered bodies should take into consideration the issue of unequal terrain of higher education that concerns specifically the institutions that are on the academic periphery. They emphasise the context-specific background but also see that the systemic approach used by Klemenčič can help to capture this. According to Lee and Stensaker (2021), the gap that exists in the number of scholarly outputs concerning internationalisation does not warrant further theoretical development as concepts linking internationalisation, globalisation, and competitiveness should be strengthened.

**Ranking and Internationalisation.** The internationalisation force attributed to spring rankings at universities is quite high. Rankings determine institutional strategies because they affect international student recruitment, the hiring of faculty, and research partnerships. But well-established university reputations tend to have more influence on the decision-making process of international students than annual changes in world university rankings (Soysal et al., 2020; Soysal et al., 2022). The world ranked universities have a better record of putting a greater emphasis on internationalisation and research partnership (Buckner, 2020). The essays performance is closely linked with factors that include the width of disciplinary coverage, research impact, interdisciplinarity, international collaborations (Li and Yin, 2022). The leadership universities usually do high impact research that is multi-faceted and worldwide networks. However, ranking models tend to prefer larger and broad-based universities to smaller and specialised universities (Li and Yin, 2022).

There are drawbacks related to their methodological approach, but nevertheless, rankings are significant to both universities and students as strategic actors in the global



system of higher education (Soysal et al., 2022). As a concept, internationalisation is a clear step to better reputation and competitiveness in case of institutions that are in the emerging economies.

### **Research methodology.**

The present paper reports on the qualitative study of ranking in higher education in Uzbekistan. The information was obtained based on the semi-structured interviews of the representatives of the universities, including Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT), Webster University in Tashkent (WUT), British Management University (BMU), Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE), Tashkent State Technical University (TSTU), and Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers National Research University (TIIAME NRU). Thematic analysis was used to come up with recurring patterns on internationalisation and competitiveness.

### **Analysis and discussion of results.**

**Internationalisation as Strategy Priority.** Wit and Jones (2022) summarised in their description of internationalisation how universities always placed the concept as a centre of their competitiveness. Increased visibility training of the faculty outside the country, international Olympiads, and student exchanges were among the strategies emphasised by TSUE and TSTU. One of the priorities of TIIAME NRU was to expand cooperation, to attract international students and lecturers, and to guarantee funding through foreign grants. WUT institutionalised this agenda by establishing a "Sustainable Development and International Rankings Officer" whereas WUT benefited by having an American affiliation in attracting global attention.

**International faculty staffing and recruitment of the students.** Hiring foreign faculty and students was listed as an academic enrichment strategy as well as a requirement in ranking. English-medium teaching coupled with international branding was cited as a success factor by WUT and WIUT, as national universities cited ongoing barriers, especially low levels of English academic competence and low levels of internationalised curricula.

**Cohort Studies, Collaboration and Partnerships.** There was the new source of international research partnerships as the general matter of competitiveness. Universities reported that they tried to increase faculty exchange and joint initiatives, though the QS representatives considered them to be too sporadic and weak to make a strong contribution to international recognition.

**Governance and resource allocation.** Although the government funded internationalisation, resource allocation was problematic in universities as they had poor mechanisms of resource allocation. The local expert indicated that most of the initiatives are done on the basis of rankings without being anchored in long-term strategies of the institutions. Likewise, the representatives of the QS noted such weaknesses as poor alumni tracking, lack of transparency in data, and policy coordination. WIUT has institutionalised its response by appointing a dedicated Sustainable Development and International Rankings Officer, tasked with aligning university operations with ranking frameworks. WUT and BMU, as international and private institutions, emphasized curriculum quality, global branding, and international faculty recruitment as competitive advantages. BSMI, a traditional public institution, focused primarily on academic reputation and improving research capacity but lacked a structured ranking-oriented strategy.

The results indicate that Uzbek universities are approaching internationalisation as a key aspect of full-scale competitiveness, as it is the case with other countries (Zaiachuk, 2020; Suguku, 2023). Internationalisation aids in institutional reputation, employability, and ranking performance, however, a combination of governance, resources, and sustainability are essential to make any differences.



The internationalisation of the curriculum is insufficient in Uzbekistan, even though it is established that internationalisation of the curriculum is important in grooming globalised graduates (Clarke and Kirby, 2022). Internationalisation without incorporating the global dimensions in teaching and research may end up as mere plane flights. The challenges to governance such as poor hindrances, resource allocation, shortcoming in the language barrier, and poor collaboration among universities inhibit improvement. These overlap with the findings in the literature on such an uneven terrain of internationalisation in academic periphery (Uzhegova and Baik, 2020). Faculty capacity that is, English proficiency and research skill is another system bottleneck.

Universities in Uzbekistan adjust their strategies to the ranking methods—the number of international students, international faculty exchange or collaborative research, which also poses the threat of instrumentalism. These rankings are not sufficient to sustain the long-term competitiveness as reputation, quality, and scope of research play a more important role (Soysal et al., 2020; Li and Yin, 2022). Additionally, a narrow focus on ranking can increase inequalities and intensity (as it has been seen all over the world; Mittelmeier and Yang, 2022).

To sustainably internationalise, global engagement must be built-in to the teaching, governance, and research. Internationalisation in the era of COVID-19 presents Uzbekistan with the possibility to extend its access and address limited resources (Sertyesilisik and Sertyeşilişik, 2022). The concept of inclusivity and sustainability ought to become part of internationalisation processes, which follow the global trends in higher education competitiveness.

### **Conclusion and suggestions.**

Internationalisation is a very essential element of competitiveness among institutions within Uzbekistan. Although universities have advanced in terms of widening collaborations, exchange programmes and exchanges of faculties, governance and allocation of resources have limited their effects. Differences also exist between universities that have internationally affiliated links which can effectively use the international networks and the rest of the national universities which adopt slow pace in terms of reforms. To go beyond an internationalisation that is merely symbolic and based on rankings, Uzbekistan necessary needs a shift where global engagement is incorporated into the teaching, research, and governance faculties.

Following the discussion universities are suggested to do the following:

- Include global opinions in the curriculum and teaching methods relating to the development of international citizens.
- Invest in faculty development, especially about English proficiency, writing, and research collaboration.
- Enlarge virtual internationalisation by utilising online associations and shared courses.
- Increase alumni tracking and employer outreach to improve reputation and graduate performance.

For Policymakers:

- Develop an internationalisation national framework to institutionalise strategy.
- Commit to strategic investment to long-term capacity building instead of short-term projects.
- Advocate the principle of inclusivity and sustainability as part and parcel of internationalisation.
- Promote the linkages between Uzbek universities to make the national higher education system stronger.

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