

Foreign Cooperation Relations in The Reform of Public Education

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Abstract: This study historically analyzes the role and significance of foreign cooperation relations in the process of reforming the public education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan during 2017–2021. The research examines large-scale reforms implemented in the country's education system, particularly improving the quality of general secondary education, strengthening the material and technical base of educational institutions, introducing advanced pedagogical technologies, as well as cooperation with foreign countries and international organizations in implementing international standards.

Keywords: Public education, educational reforms, international cooperation, international organizations, general secondary education, pedagogical technologies, international standards, education policy, modernization.

Introduction: During the period of the development of "New Uzbekistan," advancing the public education sector and organizing it on the basis of international educational standards has become one of the priority directions of state policy. The reason for this is that education is the most important factor driving all socio-economic sectors of the state.

From the early years of independence up to the present period, long-term cooperation has been established with developed countries of the world and international organizations in this sphere. In Uzbekistan, cooperation aimed at improving the education sector—particularly the public education system—enhancing the capacity of teaching staff, establishing modern educational institutions, equipping schools with educational resources and modern technologies, and developing the teaching of foreign languages in general secondary schools has contributed to the globalization of educational processes in the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

To date, numerous scientific studies have been conducted on the development of the public education system in Uzbekistan. Among them is the учебное

пособие by Sh.A. Abdullaeva and M.T. Ergasheva entitled "Natural and Scientific Literacy in International Assessment Programs", which examines the role of international cooperation in the educational policy of "New Uzbekistan." It discusses participation in international assessment programs such as Programme for International Student Assessment, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, and STEAM education, as well as the changes being implemented in general secondary schools as a result of such participation.

Another study devoted to issues in the field of public education is the dissertation of Q. Hoshimov titled "Changes in the Education Sector in the Regions of the Fergana Valley During the Years of Independence." This research mainly focuses on the regions of the Fergana Valley as its primary object of study, while reforms in the field of school education implemented in other regions were not fully covered.

Another study closely related to the present research topic is the dissertation of N. Isamatova entitled "Stages and Problems of Reforms in the Public Education System of Uzbekistan (1991–2021)." This dissertation highlights the legal foundations of reforms

implemented in the school education sector during the early years of independence, the introduction of educational regulatory documents into practice, and changes in the material and technical infrastructure of schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to further develop reforms in the public education sector, the Ministry organized meetings and negotiations throughout 2018 with developed countries and their public and private organizations to study advanced foreign experience. Representatives from countries such as Finland, China, United Kingdom, Germany, and United States participated in these discussions. In addition, representatives of the Ministry visited South Korea and the United States and established cooperative relations with local organizations[1.2].

Furthermore, in order to improve the quality of the educational process, it was planned to widely introduce advanced foreign experiences, innovative teaching methods, and information and communication technologies into the education system. As part of these efforts, 9.7 million copies of 20 different textbooks were planned to be published for 11th-grade students.

In addition, significant measures were taken to improve vocational training conditions for students in grades 10–11 of general secondary schools. Through equipping 489 classrooms within training and production complexes with the necessary equipment, substantial progress was made in preparing young people with professional skills for the labor market[2.17].

From this perspective, in order to improve students' knowledge levels and organize teaching based on international education standards, on 8 December 2018, by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 997 "On measures to organize international research in the field of assessing the quality of education in the public education system," a number of large-scale international assessment programs were introduced.

These include the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study to assess the reading and comprehension skills of 4th-grade students; the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study to evaluate the achievement levels of 4th and 8th-grade students in mathematics and natural sciences; the Programme for International Student Assessment to measure the literacy of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science; and the Teaching and Learning International Survey aimed at studying the teaching and learning environment in general

secondary education institutions as well as the working conditions of teachers and school leaders[3.1].

In this context, it was planned that in 2021 Uzbekistan would participate for the first time in the international assessment program Programme for International Student Assessment, which evaluates the knowledge and skills of 15–16-year-old students. This program was expected to involve approximately 90 countries around the world[4.1]. Students' knowledge assessment system in Uzbekistan has also been linked with long-term strategic goals within international education rankings. According to planned indicators, it was envisaged that Uzbekistan would enter the top 70 countries in the international student assessment ranking in 2021, improve its position to the top 60 by 2025, and ultimately join the group of 30 leading countries by 2030[5.2].

Uzbekistan began participating in the international monitoring study Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in 2021 for the first time. The PIRLS 2021 results were officially published on 16 May 2023 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and Boston College. The PIRLS international field test, originally planned for 2020, was conducted in April–May. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the testing process was postponed and implemented in November 2020 across 28 general secondary schools in 11 regions, involving 1,400 students. The assessment was administered in Uzbek, Russian, and Karakalpak languages by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

The main PIRLS study was conducted from 1 to 30 April 2021, in which 5,982 fourth-grade students participated (representing 0.01% of the total 626,646 students), covering 221 classes. Overall, 180 schools out of 10,008 general secondary schools nationwide (0.018%) were included in the study[6.246].

At the international level, this international program was conducted for the fifth time, and Uzbekistan participated for the first time. In the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study assessment, Uzbekistan scored significantly below the international average of 500 points, achieving 437 points and ranking 49th among 57 participating countries.

The reasons for this result include the socio-economic difficulties experienced in the early years of independence, problems inherited from the previous period in the school education system, the introduction of State Educational Standards in the 1998–1999 academic year, limited national experience in education system development, and significant shortcomings in the material and technical base of

schools. In addition, the process of globalization in school education did not fully meet international standards.

In the context of “New Uzbekistan,” however, all levels of education have been organized in accordance with international standards, which has led to the achievement of an average result in the PIRLS 2021 assessment. Although this result may not appear highly satisfactory at first glance, it is considered a positive achievement within a relatively short period of time.

If Uzbekistan had joined such international assessment programs at least in the first decade of the 2000s, it could today have become a strong competitor to countries such as Singapore, Ireland, Hong Kong, Russia, and Finland[7.454].

In the global education system, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study program, which assesses the achievement levels of 4th and 8th grade students in mathematics and science, is considered beneficial not only for the world but also for Uzbekistan. This program is of great importance in improving the effectiveness of general education curricula, students’ mastery of subjects, the quality and methodology of teaching, and issues of equity in education.

According to the 2015 TIMSS assessment results, countries such as the United States, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United Kingdom achieved the highest levels in their education systems.

Uzbekistan participated in the 2019 study in the status of an observer, which provided an opportunity to monitor the educational programs and achievements of developed countries, apply their experience in practice, and compare its own results with those of other countries.

In this context, the study examines several key issues, including the interest of 4th and 8th grade students in mathematics and science, the level of scientific literacy of Uzbek students compared to their peers in other countries, the contribution of families to students’ learning of mathematics and science, whether there are specific features of mathematics and science teaching in Uzbekistan compared to other countries and, if so, how they are manifested, how the teaching process of mathematics and science is currently organized in the country, and how teaching methods used by Uzbek teachers differ from those used in other countries[8.1].

As an observer country in 2019, Uzbekistan participated in the test materials of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study using

question booklets prepared by specialists from the National Examination Centre of Lithuania. Based on these materials, students achieved the following results: 52.2% in mathematics, 47% in science (natural studies), and 28.7% in reading comprehension. The relatively low performance in reading comprehension was not due to students’ insufficient command of their native language, but rather because the format of the questions was unfamiliar to them, which created certain difficulties for students in understanding and responding to the tasks[9.2].

In general, the education system of Uzbekistan is an independent system in nature. The relatively low results in the above-mentioned international assessment programs are explained by the fact that education in Uzbekistan is not directly based on the frameworks of these assessment systems, and that they are relatively unfamiliar to students. In addition, the unfamiliar format of test items has created certain difficulties for participants in these assessment studies. For this reason, the “New Uzbekistan” policy places great emphasis on the globalization of education.

In order to further improve the education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the development of new State Educational Standards and curricula has been outlined, along with the gradual implementation of STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education into practice. In this regard, the Order of the Minister of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated 27 August 2021 No. 274 “On the introduction of the STEM education system in general secondary schools” defines the implementation of the following measures: the development of a STEM subject curriculum for general secondary schools; the formation of a list of necessary laboratory equipment and tools for teaching STEM subjects; and the involvement of international and local experts and educators in improving teachers’ qualifications in STEM education, as well as providing teachers with additional educational resources[10.276]. In order to achieve these goals, it was planned to provide STEAM and foreign language teachers with 200,000 units of modern computer equipment (laptops)[11.1].

Within the framework of the STEM education program, modern schools are increasingly focusing on robot design, modeling, and project-based engineering activities. The growing demand for technical education aimed at improving the country’s competitiveness has become one of the most urgent issues today. At present, STEM education makes a significant contribution to the development of society and the state.

STEM programs help to continuously increase the interest of students aged 7–14 in regular learning activities. For example, in physics lessons, the concept of gravitational force may be explained by writing formulas on the board; however, in STEM clubs, students further develop their knowledge through practical activities such as building rockets and airplanes, working on electrical engineering projects, engaging in robotics, and applying elements of traditional crafts and other hands-on tasks[12.277].

In order to further develop the STEM education program, the Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated 28 October 2022 No. PQ–447 “On measures for the widespread introduction of STEAM education in the general secondary education system” defines a set of tasks aimed at modernizing educational content, establishing STEAM centers, and equipping schools with the necessary equipment and software for interdisciplinary teaching. This approach not only develops cognitive knowledge but also contributes to the formation of personal competencies such as creativity, initiative, critical thinking, teamwork, adaptability, and digital literacy, which are considered essential 21st-century skills[13.286].

This program has a significant impact on the comprehensive development of the country, the improvement of market mechanisms, the creation of a healthy competitive environment, and the acceleration of the integration of Uzbekistan’s economic reforms into the global economy. Consequently, it contributes to the strengthening and enhancement of the state’s economic potential.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that the years 2017–2021 were a period rich in major transformations and reforms in the history of the Republic of Uzbekistan. During these years, alongside other sectors, the public education system was elevated to the international level with the aim of improving the worldview and intellectual capacity of young people. In cooperation with international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund, efforts were made to develop the infrastructure of educational institutions, improve the system of teacher professional development, introduce international assessment programs into school education, and design curricula aligned with global education standards.

Furthermore, the application of best practices from developed countries, the expansion of international grants, projects, and educational programs, as well as the increasing role of digital technologies in education, became one of the priority directions of state policy in

developing the school education system.

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