TRANSFORMING UZBEKISTAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK FROM CONTROL TO ENHANCEMENT

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ABSTRACT

As Uzbekistan continues its transition from a centrally controlled higher education system to one aligned with international standards, the transformation of its quality assurance (QA) framework has become a national priority. This article critically examines the evolution of QA in Uzbekistan, comparing its historically control, oriented approach with the emerging enhancement, based model. Drawing on policy analysis, institutional review, and comparative frameworks, the study explores the structural, cultural, and operational challenges facing QA reform. The findings indicate that despite formal changes introduced since 2019, including the adoption of new accreditation criteria, the dissolution of SISQE, and the push for institutional autonomy, the QA system remains largely compliance, driven, output, focused, and centrally governed. Internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms are underutilized, stakeholder engagement is limited, and self, assessment is often seen as a bureaucratic requirement rather than a tool for improvement. However, the article also identifies clear opportunities for innovation, including the alignment of internal and external QA processes, enhanced institutional responsibility, and the integration of students and employers as active partners in QA. The study concludes that sustainable reform depends on shifting institutional cultures, fostering trust, and creating transparent, feedback, driven mechanisms for quality enhancement. It offers practical recommendations for building a more integrated, outcome, oriented QA system that supports both accountability and continuous improvement in higher education.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, institutional autonomy, self, assessment, enhancement, stakeholder engagement, Uzbekistan.

1. Introduction

In the landscape of higher education, the concept of "quality" is inherently dynamic, shaped by evolving societal expectations, labor market demands, technological advancements, and institutional missions. Unlike a static or absolute measure, quality in higher education is increasingly recognized as a context, dependent, stakeholder,

driven construct that must continuously adapt to both local realities and global standards (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015). In this evolving context, QA has emerged as a holistic and strategic framework that encompasses internal processes, external evaluations, and stakeholder engagement aimed at continuous improvement. It contrasts sharply with the older paradigm of quality control, which primarily focuses on compliance and inspection, relying heavily on centralized oversight mechanisms and documentary verification.

In Uzbekistan, higher education quality has traditionally been regulated through a state, controlled system focused on external inspection, attestation, and conformity to centrally defined standards. This quality control model, although instrumental in enforcing minimum academic standards, has limited the autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs) and constrained their ability to innovate and respond flexibly to emerging challenges. The self, evaluation processes in many HEIs have often been reduced to formal reporting exercises designed to satisfy external accreditation requirements rather than stimulate institutional reflection and improvement (Odilov, 2023).

As global trends increasingly favor quality enhancement frameworks, Uzbekistan has begun to shift toward a more integrated and context, sensitive QA system, particularly since the introduction of significant reforms in 2019. These reforms aim to balance accountability with institutional autonomy, positioning HEIs as active agents responsible for defining and upholding the quality of their educational offerings. The revised approach acknowledges that sustainable quality improvement requires not just compliance with standards, but the internal motivation, capacity, and ownership of quality processes by institutions themselves. Consequently, there is growing emphasis on aligning with international standards such as the ESG, while simultaneously embedding these frameworks within Uzbekistan’s unique socio, political and educational context.

An effective QA system for Uzbekistan must therefore serve dual purposes: ensuring accountability through transparent external evaluation, and fostering enhancement by empowering institutions to take proactive roles in developing their internal quality cultures. This dual, purpose model holds the potential to transform higher education into a more adaptive, innovative, and stakeholder, responsive sector capable of meeting both national development goals and global competitiveness demands.

2. Historical Overview

Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has undertaken gradual but transformative reforms to modernize its education system, including the establishment of QA mechanisms in higher education. In the early post, independence years, the QA landscape was heavily influenced by Soviet, era legacies, centered on rigid state control, standardized curriculum mandates, and compliance, focused inspections. The system prioritized attestation and licensing, with little room for institutional autonomy or stakeholder engagement in quality decision, making. As a result, HEIs primarily functioned as implementers of centrally prescribed standards, and IQA mechanisms remained underdeveloped and externally dictated (Odilov, 2023).

A pivotal shift occurred in 2019, when the Uzbek government introduced a wide, reaching reform initiative to bring its higher education QA system in line with international standards. The reform focused on integrating the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) into national accreditation and evaluation processes, promoting a shift from a purely control, based logic to a dual model that includes quality enhancement alongside accountability. Key changes included the development of new accreditation criteria, the formalization of learning outcomes, and the creation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), designed to link educational outputs with labor market expectations (ENQA, 2015).

In parallel, public administration reforms launched in 2022 aimed at decentralizing authority and optimizing the governance of education. These reforms were expected to enhance institutional autonomy, allowing HEIs to participate more actively in shaping their academic programs and quality strategies. One of the most consequential outcomes of this restructuring was the dissolution of the State Inspectorate for Supervision of Quality in Education (SISQE) in 2023. Formerly the central QA authority, SISQE had held responsibility for external evaluations, including inspections, document reviews, and compliance assessments.

The abolishment of SISQE led to a significant redistribution of QA responsibilities. Oversight functions were transferred to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation (MHESI), which now centralizes control over both VET and HEIs. While this move was intended to consolidate QA governance under a single umbrella and eliminate fragmentation, it also raised concerns about the blurring of roles between internal and external QA functions. For instance, many HEIs now rely on internal quality units that simultaneously report to MHESI and function as institutional quality drivers, creating a conflict between institutional autonomy and state, driven oversight.

Despite the progress made, the reforms have highlighted enduring structural challenges. These include limited capacity for independent self, assessment within HEIs, weak stakeholder involvement, and continued emphasis on output, oriented metrics (e.g., document compliance, employment rates) rather than process, based quality culture. Moreover, the lack of trust in internally generated data has led to excessive verification by external bodies, perpetuating a climate of control rather than empowerment.

In summary, Uzbekistan's QA evolution reflects a gradual but complex shift from state, centric inspection to a more balanced approach incorporating enhancement, autonomy, and stakeholder engagement. The 2019 reforms laid essential groundwork, but effective implementation requires continued efforts to build capacity, realign governance structures, and foster a culture of trust and shared responsibility for quality in higher education.

3. Existing QA Framework: Critical Analysis

Uzbekistan's current QA framework for HEIs represents a hybrid model that attempts to bridge traditional quality control with emerging international QA standards. The regulatory structure, shaped largely by the 2019 accreditation reform and guided by state, issued criteria, defines quality primarily in terms of compliance with State Educational Standards (SES) and pre, determined documentation requirements. The core criteria for accreditation and external evaluation focus on formal indicators, such as the number of qualified staff, infrastructure, research outputs, and graduate employability rates, rather than deeper assessments of institutional learning culture or educational effectiveness (Resolution No. 470, 2019).

At the heart of the framework lies a compliance, driven logic. Institutions are required to submit self, evaluation reports using templates provided by the MHESI, which are then verified by external commissions. However, these reports tend to mirror external QA expectations rather than serve as tools for internal reflection and improvement. The practice often results in symbolic self, assessment exercises, with HEIs focused on preparing for external audits rather than identifying institutional challenges or planning strategic improvements.

Despite some formal acknowledgment of IQA, there is a significant gap in institutional autonomy and ownership. Many HEIs lack the capacity and authority to develop context, specific QA policies or modify curriculum based on local needs. Curricular decisions remain centrally regulated, limiting responsiveness to local labor market shifts or institutional innovation. IQA units within HEIs, although formally established, are often perceived as administrative extensions of MHESI rather than autonomous

bodies. This undermines their credibility and effectiveness, leading to a reproduction of external requirements rather than authentic quality management systems.

Furthermore, the role of stakeholders, especially students and employers, remains minimal and mostly formalistic. While the accreditation criteria require HEIs to demonstrate employer satisfaction and graduate employability (often using a 70% threshold), there is little guidance on how this data should be meaningfully collected, interpreted, or acted upon. Employers are rarely involved in curriculum development or quality enhancement processes at the institutional level. Similarly, student involvement is typically limited to feedback surveys, with no formal mechanisms for participation in governance or strategic planning (Krouglov, 2017).

A key weakness of the current system is its emphasis on output indicators, such as graduation rates, publication counts, and infrastructure metrics, without adequate evaluation of learning outcomes or institutional processes. The accreditation process heavily relies on document inspections and quantitative data that may not reflect the actual educational quality. Moreover, the lack of robust feedback loops prevents HEIs from identifying actionable areas for improvement or integrating lessons learned into their strategic planning.

In sum, while the current QA framework has introduced necessary structure and national standards, it remains heavily centralized, compliance, oriented, and disconnected from institutional realities. To realize the full potential of QA reform, Uzbekistan must pivot toward a more decentralized model that empowers HEIs, elevates stakeholder engagement, and prioritizes quality enhancement over inspection.

4. Challenges Identified

Despite the structural reforms undertaken in Uzbekistan’s higher education sector, the implementation of a meaningful QA system continues to face several persistent challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the overreliance on output, focused metrics and document compliance. The current QA framework emphasizes quantitative indicators such as the number of academic publications, graduation rates, student, to, teacher ratios, and infrastructure statistics. While these metrics are useful for benchmarking, they offer a limited perspective on the actual quality of education. Institutions are incentivized to meet these measurable targets, often at the expense of developing robust academic and pedagogical practices. This emphasis on compliance can lead to superficial achievements where documentation is prioritized over substantive educational outcomes.

Closely related to this is the prevalence of ineffective self, evaluation practices within HEIs. Although self, assessment is

formally required, the process is largely viewed as a bureaucratic obligation rather than a tool for reflection and improvement. Self, evaluation reports are typically designed to align with external expectations, focusing on demonstrating compliance with standards rather than critically analyzing internal strengths, weaknesses, or opportunities for development. As a result, the process often fails to generate useful insights or actionable strategies. In many institutions, self, assessment becomes a one, time task completed before external audits, rather than an ongoing institutional learning activity embedded into the academic cycle.

Another critical challenge is the lack of trust in internal assessments. External evaluators and policymakers frequently question the reliability and validity of data generated by institutions themselves. This mistrust leads to repeated verification processes during site visits, where external commissions often re, check already submitted documents, curricula, and performance reports. Such redundancy creates administrative burdens and discourages HEIs from engaging in genuine self, examination. Instead of empowering institutions to take responsibility for their quality, the system reinforces dependency on external validation and perpetuates a compliance, oriented culture.

The poor integration of stakeholder feedback further weakens the quality loop. While policies may require some form of engagement with students, employers, and academic staff, these practices are often tokenistic. For example, student feedback is typically collected through standard surveys with limited scope, and the results are rarely used to inform curriculum revisions or teaching strategies. Employer involvement is similarly limited, often reduced to signing memorandums or participating in graduate satisfaction surveys that have little bearing on course design or delivery. The absence of structured, meaningful channels for stakeholder involvement undermines the responsiveness and relevance of higher education offerings, particularly in a labor market that is rapidly evolving.

Together, these challenges illustrate that while Uzbekistan’s QA system has made formal strides, its practical implementation remains constrained by a culture of control, weak institutional capacity, and limited engagement with the core values of quality enhancement. Addressing these systemic issues will require a shift in priorities, from documentation to outcomes, from inspection to support, and from hierarchy to partnership among HEIs, regulators, and stakeholders.

Table 1 contrasts the key dimensions of Uzbekistan’s existing (control, based) and proposed (enhancement, oriented) QA systems in higher education:

Table 1. Comparative Overview: Control, Based vs. Enhancement, Oriented QA Systems in Uzbekistan

Dimension	Control, Based QA System (Pre, 2019 / Existing)	Enhancement, Oriented QA System (Proposed / Reformed)
Core Purpose	Ensure compliance with state standards through inspection and reporting	Balance accountability with continuous quality improvement
Governance Structure	Highly centralized under MHESI; QA shaped by state policy mandates	Distributed governance with clearer division between EQA and IQA responsibilities
Institutional Autonomy	Limited autonomy; HEIs implement centrally designed curricula and QA tools	Greater academic and organizational autonomy; HEIs develop and own QA strategies
Internal QA (IQA)	Mirrors external expectations; driven by documentation requirements	Institution, led self, evaluation focusing on performance, outcomes, and improvement
External QA (EQA)	Dominated by compliance checks, standard, based inspections	Informed by ESG; external audits validate and support internal QA processes
Stakeholder Role	Formalistic; minimal engagement from students, staff, employers	Functional and participatory; stakeholders actively contribute to QA decisions
Assessment Methods	Focus on quantitative indicators (e.g., staff numbers, graduate ratios)	Combines quantitative and qualitative indicators, including learning outcomes
Use of Data	Data collected for reporting purposes; minimal feedback use	Data used for institutional learning and informed strategic planning
Trust in HEIs	Low; frequent external verification of self, reported data	Growing institutional trust; reliance on validated internal assessments
Quality Culture	Efficiency, driven, compliance, focused; weak ownership	Culture of ownership, learning, transparency, and continuous enhancement
Curriculum Design	Centrally managed; limited alignment with local labor market needs	Institutionally managed with stakeholder input; responsive to market demands
Student Role	Passive respondents in feedback surveys	Active participants in QA processes and institutional governance
Employer Role	Occasional involvement in surveys; minimal influence on curriculum	Regular engagement in curriculum, internships, and graduate outcome evaluations
International Alignment	Limited adaptation of ESG; fragmented implementation	ESG, aligned and contextualized to Uzbek higher education traditions and needs

Table 1 illustrates the fundamental paradigm shift needed to transition from a rigid, state, centric QA model to a dynamic, stakeholder, engaged system focused on educational relevance, institutional ownership, and ongoing enhancement.

5. The Way Forward: Towards an Integrated QA System

To modernize the QA system in Uzbekistan's higher education sector, a fundamental reorientation is required, one that positions QA not as a compliance mechanism, but as a strategic driver of continuous improvement. The future lies in establishing an integrated QA system that balances accountability with enhancement, strengthens institutional autonomy, and fosters meaningful engagement with stakeholders.

One of the core innovations proposed is the granting of greater autonomy to HEIs. Academic and organizational independence must be extended beyond formal declarations to real decision, making power over curricula, internal QA mechanisms, and institutional strategies. With enhanced autonomy comes greater institutional ownership, a necessary condition for embedding quality culture into the day, to, day operations of universities. HEIs should be trusted and empowered to identify areas for improvement, act on evidence, and develop strategies that align with their missions and regional or national development goals.

A critical area where autonomy must be reflected is in curriculum design. HEIs need the authority to develop, review, and adapt study programs in collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. This allows for more labor market, relevant education, as institutions can adjust learning outcomes, course content, and teaching methods in response to local and global trends. Stakeholders, particularly employers, should play a co, creative role in ensuring that educational programs meet real, world demands.

Self, assessment must also evolve from a reporting task into an authentic tool for institutional learning and transformation. Instead of producing documents that mirror external QA templates, HEIs should use self, evaluation as a continuous, reflective process that informs strategic decisions. This requires building institutional capacity to analyze performance indicators, identify root causes of challenges, and design realistic, evidence, based improvement plans. The results of self, assessment should feed directly into planning cycles, budget allocation, and staff development activities.

A sustainable QA system must also reposition students and employers as strategic partners rather than peripheral participants. Students should be given platforms to engage in governance, curriculum reviews, and quality discussions, not just as survey respondents but as co, creators of the learning environment. Employer involvement should extend beyond satisfaction metrics to include active participation in program design, internship development, and graduate skills assessment. Their insights are essential for aligning higher

education outputs with industry requirements and future, proofing the workforce.

The table 2 below outlines the shift required in stakeholder roles.

Table 2.

Stakeholder	Current Role	Proposed Role
Students	Feedback providers via surveys	Active partners in governance and QA development
Employers	Occasional feedback contributors	Co, creators in curriculum and quality design
Faculty	Implementers of centrally designed QA	Leaders of internal quality processes and innovation
QA Units	Compliance managers	Institutional change agents and facilitators
MHESI	Central controller of standards and compliance	Enabler of autonomy and external support body

By embracing these changes, Uzbekistan's QA system can transition into a more integrated, responsive, and value, driven framework. Such a system does not abandon state oversight but redefines it, shifting the state's role from inspector to enabler, and repositioning HEIs as capable stewards of quality. This transformation is essential for aligning higher education with the needs of a dynamic economy and an increasingly globalized academic landscape.

6. Policy Recommendations

To fully realize the potential of a modern and effective QA system in Uzbekistan's higher education sector, several key policy directions must be pursued. First and foremost, there is an urgent need to align external quality assurance (EQA) with IQA processes. Currently, EQA functions as an isolated mechanism primarily focused on compliance and documentation, while IQA remains underdeveloped and largely reflective of external mandates. An integrated QA framework should ensure that institutional self, assessment directly informs and complements external evaluations. This alignment would create a more coherent system where both components support continuous quality enhancement, rather than functioning as parallel, disconnected processes.

Secondly, it is essential to foster institutional capacity for quality assurance leadership, with a specific focus on developing soft skills. Quality improvement is not solely a technical endeavor; it also requires strong leadership, critical thinking, collaboration, and change management competencies. Professional development programs should be institutionalized to equip quality managers, faculty members, and administrative staff

with the necessary tools to lead QA processes effectively. This includes training in data analysis, self, assessment methodologies, stakeholder engagement, and internal communication strategies that promote a culture of shared responsibility for quality.

Finally, Uzbekistan's QA system must prioritize the development of transparent, feedback, driven mechanisms that close the loop between assessment and action. Feedback from students, employers, academic staff, and external reviewers should be systematically collected, analyzed, and acted upon. Institutions should be required to demonstrate how this feedback informs changes in curriculum, teaching practices, and institutional policies. At the national level, regulatory bodies must move beyond punitive oversight and adopt a supportive role that encourages innovation, continuous learning, and responsiveness to context. These policy shifts are essential for transforming QA from a bureaucratic exercise into a meaningful process that genuinely enhances the quality of higher education.

7. Conclusion

Uzbekistan's ongoing transformation of its higher education QA system reflects a significant departure from traditional, control, based frameworks toward a more integrated, enhancement, oriented model. The core goal of these reforms is to foster a QA system that balances accountability with institutional autonomy and continuous improvement. While substantial progress has been made at the regulatory and structural levels, particularly since the 2019 reforms, the real test lies in translating policy into practice. The shift from document, based inspections to stakeholder, driven, outcome, oriented quality management requires not only procedural change but a deep cultural and institutional transformation. Quality must no longer be viewed as the sole responsibility of the state, but rather as a shared, dynamic process involving HEIs, students, employers, and society at large.

The experience of Uzbekistan underscores that quality assurance is not simply about new standards or systems, it is about changing mindsets, building trust, and empowering institutions to take ownership of their development. To succeed, reforms must go beyond compliance and cultivate a culture of reflection, evidence, based decision, making, and collaboration. The integration of internal and external QA, the elevation of stakeholder roles, and the expansion of institutional autonomy are all critical to achieving a resilient and future, ready higher education system.

As Uzbekistan continues this journey, sustained capacity building, participatory policy, making, and transparent monitoring will be essential. The challenge is not only to establish a robust QA framework, but to embed it as a living system that continuously adapts to the needs of learners, the labor market, and global academic standards.

Based on the above-given analysis, the followings are concluded:

— Uzbekistan's QA transformation must focus on building institutional ownership and stakeholder engagement, not merely regulatory compliance.

— Cultural change within HEIs is essential to operationalize quality assurance as a continuous, values-driven process.

— Ongoing monitoring, capacity development, and alignment between IQA and EQA will determine the long-term success of QA reforms.

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