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ENHANCING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN UZBEKISTAN: EVIDENCE FROM INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL RANKINGS

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Abstract: In recent years, the higher education system of Uzbekistan has demonstrated significant progress in both international and national university rankings. The increasing presence of Uzbek higher education institutions (HEIs) in globally recognized ranking systems reflects the ongoing reforms aimed at improving educational quality, research productivity, internationalization, and institutional governance. This study examines the competitiveness of Uzbek HEIs through an analysis of international and national ranking indicators. The research highlights the achievements of universities in global rankings such as the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings and evaluates the factors influencing institutional competitiveness, including educational quality, academic staff qualifications, research performance, service diversity, pricing policies, geographical location, and marketing activities. The findings indicate that Uzbekistan has emerged as a regional leader in Central Asia and the Caucasus in terms of participation and representation in international rankings. The study concludes that continuous improvement in educational quality, research capacity, and international cooperation remains essential for sustaining competitive advantages in the global higher education market.

Keywords: higher education, university competitiveness, international rankings, THE Impact Rankings, educational quality, Uzbekistan, higher education management, university performance.

The rapid globalization of higher education has intensified competition among universities worldwide. Higher education institutions are increasingly evaluated not only by their educational performance but also by their scientific output, international visibility, innovation capacity, and contribution to sustainable development. Consequently, international university rankings have become one of the most influential tools for assessing institutional competitiveness and quality.

Uzbekistan has undertaken comprehensive reforms in higher education during the last decade. These reforms have focused on improving academic quality, expanding access to education, increasing international cooperation, and strengthening research activities. As a result, the country's universities have significantly improved their positions in both international and national rankings.

The objective of this study is to assess the competitiveness of Uzbek higher education institutions based on ranking performance and to identify the key factors contributing to their competitive advantages.

International rankings serve as important indicators of institutional quality and global recognition. The participation of Uzbek universities in leading ranking systems has increased substantially in recent years.

According to the **Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings 2025**, twelve universities from Uzbekistan entered the world's Top-1000 universities. Moreover, a total of 59 Uzbek higher education institutions participated in the ranking process, representing the highest participation rate among Central Asian and Caucasus countries.

Table 1 presents the major international ranking achievements of Uzbekistan.

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Table 1. International Ranking Achievements of Uzbek Universities

Indicator	Achievement
Universities in THE Impact Rankings 2025 Top-1000	12
Total universities participating in THE Impact Rankings	59
Universities included in international Top-1000 rankings (2025)	38
Total universities represented internationally	79
Universities ranked by subject areas	7
Subject areas represented in Top-1000 rankings	12
Highest-ranked institution	National University of Uzbekistan (201–300 band)

The results indicate substantial progress in the international recognition of Uzbek universities. The inclusion of multiple institutions in global rankings reflects improvements in educational quality, scientific productivity, and institutional management.

Furthermore, the **National University of Uzbekistan** achieved the highest ranking position among Uzbek universities, entering the 201–300 category in THE Impact Rankings. This achievement demonstrates the growing international competitiveness of the country's flagship institutions.

National rankings provide additional insights into the comparative performance of universities within the domestic higher education system.

The 2026 national ranking identified the following institutions among the leading universities in Uzbekistan:

Table 2. Top Universities in the National Ranking (2026)

Rank	University
1	Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers National Research University
2	International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan
3	Namangan Institute of Engineering and Technology

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4	Bukhara State Medical Institute
5	Fergana Polytechnic Institute
6	Namangan Institute of Engineering and Construction
7	Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service
8	Tashkent Medical Academy
9	Tashkent State University of Economics

The national ranking demonstrates the growing diversity of strong universities across different regions and academic specializations. Unlike earlier periods when rankings were dominated primarily by institutions located in the capital city, recent results reveal increasing regional competitiveness.

Competitiveness in higher education is a multidimensional concept encompassing academic, organizational, and market-related factors.

Research on educational competitiveness identifies several key determinants that influence the position of universities in both national and international rankings.

Table 3. Main Factors Influencing University Competitiveness

Factor	Description
Educational Quality	Quality of teaching and learning processes
Research Capacity	Scientific productivity and innovation performance
Staff Qualifications	Academic credentials and professional expertise
Tuition and Costs	Affordability of educational services
Program Diversity	Variety of educational programs offered
Geographic Location	Accessibility and regional attractiveness
Marketing and Promotion	Institutional visibility and branding

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Among these factors, educational quality and research productivity remain the most influential determinants of ranking performance. Universities with strong publication records, international collaborations, and highly qualified academic staff tend to achieve better positions in global rankings.

A practical approach to evaluating university competitiveness involves the use of a five-level scale of competitive advantages.

Table 4. Classification of competitive advantages

Score	Interpretation
5	Clear market leader
4	Above-average and stable performance
3	Average performance meeting standards
2	Declining competitiveness
1	Crisis condition

This framework enables policymakers and university administrators to assess institutional strengths and weaknesses systematically. It also supports strategic planning aimed at improving ranking positions and overall performance.

The empirical evidence suggests that Uzbekistan has become one of the leading higher education systems in Central Asia regarding international ranking participation and representation. The growing number of universities appearing in global rankings indicates the effectiveness of ongoing reforms in governance, quality assurance, research development, and internationalization.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Many institutions continue to face difficulties related to research funding, publication output in high-impact journals, international faculty recruitment, and university-industry collaboration. Addressing these issues will be essential for maintaining long-term competitiveness.

The experience of leading universities worldwide demonstrates that sustainable ranking improvement requires a strategic focus on research excellence, digital transformation, international partnerships, and graduate employability.

The study reveals significant progress in the competitiveness of Uzbekistan's higher education institutions. The increasing representation of Uzbek universities in international rankings confirms the positive outcomes of recent educational reforms and highlights the country's growing academic reputation.

The findings indicate that educational quality, research performance, staff qualifications, service diversification, and institutional visibility are the primary drivers of competitiveness. Uzbekistan's

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emergence as a regional leader in international university rankings demonstrates the effectiveness of modernization efforts within the higher education sector.

To further strengthen global competitiveness, universities should prioritize research excellence, international cooperation, innovation activities, and quality assurance mechanisms. These measures will contribute to sustainable development and enhance the international standing of Uzbek higher education institutions.

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