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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, FOREIGN-FUNDED PROJECTS, AND THE OUTCOMES OF REFORMS IN THE SECONDARY SPECIALIZED AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SECTOR OF UZBEKISTAN

Muradova Gulnoza To'lqinovna
Second-Year Master's Student,Information Technology and Management University

Abstract: This article examines international cooperation, foreign-funded projects, and the outcomes of reforms implemented in the secondary specialized and vocational education system of Uzbekistan. It analyzes the role of collaboration with international organizations, foreign governments, and development partners in modernizing the education system, improving educational infrastructure, introducing advanced pedagogical technologies, and enhancing the qualifications of teaching staff. The study also evaluates the implementation of internationally supported projects, their contribution to improving the quality of education, and their impact on the development of a competitive workforce. Based on historical and comparative analysis, the article identifies the achievements, existing challenges, and future prospects for strengthening international cooperation in the field of secondary specialized and vocational education.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, secondary specialized education, vocational education, international cooperation, educational reforms, foreign projects, international organizations, professional education, educational modernization, teacher professional development, educational policy, human capital, international experience, educational quality, workforce development.

During the years of independence, Uzbekistan established broad cooperation with various international organizations and foreign countries in the political, socio-economic, cultural, and humanitarian spheres. Education became one of the central areas of international cooperation, and educational institutions at all levels gradually developed partnerships with their counterparts abroad. Uzbekistan cooperated with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), UNESCO, and UNICEF, as well as with developed countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, France, Spain, Austria, the Netherlands, Japan, the Republic of Korea, China, and Russia. This cooperation covered a wide range of activities, including strengthening the material and technical infrastructure of educational institutions, improving the organization of the teaching and learning process, enhancing teachers' professional qualifications, supporting students' participation in international academic competitions, and organizing scientific conferences and seminars.

International educational issues constituted one of the principal areas of activity of UNESCO, and Uzbekistan consistently implemented a number of initiatives within this framework. Through UNESCO's "Implementation of the National Education Strategy and Personnel Training" project, valued at US$215,000, cooperation was established to improve education and the training of scientific and technical personnel. Furthermore, under UNESCO's "Strengthening the Capacity for Education Financing" project, activities were carried out to improve the financing of educational needs, develop modern financial management competencies among specialists, and strengthen economic management within the education sector.

In cooperation with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNESCO also implemented the project "Monitoring the Implementation of Educational Reforms in Uzbekistan." The project aimed to strengthen the institutional capacity of ministries responsible for developing an integrated educational information system, improve computerization, and provide training for specialists in statistical data collection and analysis. Within the framework of this project, a unified national monitoring system for Uzbekistan's education sector was developed, with a total project value of US$900,000 [1].

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Strengthening the material and technical infrastructure of the secondary specialized and vocational education system became one of the major priorities of Uzbekistan's international educational cooperation. Several large-scale international projects were implemented, including the "Support for the Development of Vocational Education in Information and Communication Technologies" project in cooperation with the German Development Bank (KfW); the "Vocational Skills Development in Uzbekistan" project financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC); the TACIS Project "Social Partnership in Education and Training in Uzbekistan" supported by the European Union; the Japanese Government's grant project "Improving Professional Development of Teachers in the Secondary Specialized and Vocational Education System"; and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) project "Support for Initial Vocational Education in Uzbekistan."

Within these initiatives, Uzbekistan attracted international financial assistance amounting to €8.7 million from the German Development Bank (KfW), €15 million from the Government of Spain, US$7 million from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and 4 million Swiss francs from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Under the European Union's TACIS Project "Support to Vocational Education in Uzbekistan," with a total value of €1 million, three vocational colleges representing six educational specializations were equipped with modern educational and laboratory facilities. In addition, Boards of Trustees, modeled on successful European practices, were piloted in eight vocational colleges [2].

Between 1992 and 2001, equipment valued at approximately US$34 million was imported from the Republic of Korea and installed in 218 secondary specialized educational institutions across Uzbekistan. In the Samarkand Region alone, vocational colleges received educational laboratory equipment financed through Korean credit resources. Furthermore, under a project financed by the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF) of the Republic of Korea, the Samarkand Tourism College was equipped by the Korea Scientific Equipment Manufacturing Corporation with educational laboratory equipment and computer technology valued at approximately US$350,000 [3].

In 2008, the Government of the Republic of Korea provided a US$27 million concessional loan for the implementation of the project "Development of Secondary Specialized and Vocational Education." Within this project, 150 vocational colleges specializing in the service sector were equipped with modern educational laboratories for household appliance maintenance, radio and television equipment repair, photography, electrical engineering, electronics, and welding technologies. Multimedia classrooms for teaching specialized subjects were also established. During project implementation, funds totaling US$46,826.11 were utilized. Following consultations between expert groups and Korean specialists, it was decided to revise the procurement plan by reducing the number of laboratory equipment items included in the tender documentation from 138 to 43, representing approximately 31 percent of the originally planned list [4].

Furthermore, between 26 and 28 March 2008, a series of meetings was held between Korean consultants and representatives of the relevant ministries and government agencies of Uzbekistan. During these meetings, recommendations regarding the tender documentation submitted by the Ministry for Foreign Economic Relations, Investments and Trade, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy, and the Uzbek Agency for Information and Communications were discussed. On 31 March 2008, the next meeting of the Tender Commission took place with the participation of Yong Su Lee, Director of the EDCF II/Africa and CIS Department of the Export-Import Bank of Korea; Lee Tae Gyun, Head of the Representative Office of the Export-Import Bank of Korea; Shin Myong Hoon, Head of the Korean Consulting Group; and Im Bok Bin, the Korean technical expert responsible for educational equipment [5].

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The Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) allocated a loan of 6.347 billion Japanese yen for the implementation of the UZBPG "Development of Secondary Specialized and Vocational Education" project. These funds were primarily directed toward equipping agricultural vocational colleges with modern educational equipment and supporting the professional development of teachers and engineering-pedagogical staff. Completed in 2005, the project utilized a concessional loan totaling US$58.8 million, enabling 50 agricultural vocational colleges to be fully equipped with modern facilities. Equipment meeting international standards was installed for seven major areas of specialization, including agronomy, crop production, livestock farming, farm management, agricultural product processing and storage, veterinary science, and agricultural machinery and equipment [6].

In addition, the Center for Secondary Specialized and Vocational Education signed a contract worth 5.498 million Japanese yen with the Sumitomo Corporation. The Government of Japan also provided a grant of approximately UZS 1 billion to the Zomin Household Services and Agricultural Vocational College, of which UZS 283 million was allocated for construction activities. The project also financed facilities for motor vehicle maintenance and the establishment of a mini-livestock farm. Furthermore, during 2002–2003, 106 teachers employed within the secondary specialized and vocational education system completed professional development programs in educational institutions in Japan [7].

During the implementation of the National Program for Personnel Training, Uzbekistan significantly expanded cooperation with European countries, including Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and Poland, while actively attracting foreign investment to modernize vocational education. Particularly intensive cooperation was established with Germany. One of the largest initiatives was the "Support for the Development of Initial Vocational Education in Uzbekistan" project implemented by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) with grant funding totaling €4.4 million [8]. Approximately 850,000 German marks were allocated for equipping vocational colleges with modern technical equipment. Between 1999 and 2001, an additional 1.5 million German marks was invested in equipping laboratories at five vocational colleges located in Tashkent City, Tashkent Region, and Samarkand Region. These institutions also introduced curricula and educational programs developed on the basis of international best practices. Furthermore, between 1999 and 2003, the German company Pfaff-Zinger assisted in installing modern equipment in 65 vocational colleges throughout Uzbekistan [9].

Between 1999 and 2004, more than 100 professional development activities were organized both domestically and abroad for teachers, vocational instructors, and educational administrators. During this period, 547 students graduated from pilot vocational colleges, of whom 76 graduates (13.5%) were admitted to higher education institutions [10].

Considerable investment was also made in improving the material and technical infrastructure of pilot colleges. Projects totaling approximately UZS 1.2 billion were implemented, resulting in the establishment of nine training firms, two foreign language laboratories, three training restaurants, nine specialized laboratories for hotel management, restaurant services, and tourism, three training kitchens, two workshops each for metalworking, welding, and agricultural machinery maintenance, as well as one modern computer laboratory. These institutions also received educational literature, methodological manuals, and specialized computer software valued at approximately UZS 53 million. Within the framework of the "Support for the Development of Vocational Education in Information and Communication Technologies" project, financed through an €8.69 million investment by the German Development Bank (KfW), 14 vocational colleges specializing in information and communication technologies were modernized [11].

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Using a concessional loan of €7.669 million provided by the German Development Bank (KfW), vocational colleges were equipped with information technology equipment and furniture supplied by the German companies Fujitsu Siemens Computers and Lucas Nülle. In addition, under the "Development of Vocational Education" project financed through a US$15 million concessional loan from the Government of Poland, 84 vocational colleges specializing in agro-industrial production and light industry were modernized [12].

The Government of the Kingdom of Belgium financed, on an interest-free basis, the project "Support for the Development of Secondary Specialized and Vocational Education for Small Business Personnel Training," valued at US$9.6 million. Within this project, 14 academic lyceums and 40 vocational colleges were equipped with multimedia classrooms. The Swiss Confederation also contributed to the modernization of Uzbekistan's secondary specialized education system. Through projects implemented by the Swiss Cooperation Office, approximately 1 million Swiss francs was allocated to support employment opportunities for graduates of vocational colleges. For example, in 2001, the vocational sewing college in Quvasoy District, Fergana Region, received a complete set of sewing machines manufactured by the Swiss company Bernina [13].

In 2011, the Governments of Uzbekistan and Switzerland signed an agreement valued at US$3.4 million for the implementation of the project "Development of Vocational Skills in the Water Management Sector of Uzbekistan" [14].

International cooperation also made a significant contribution to the modernization of vocational colleges in the Kashkadarya Region. Seven agricultural vocational colleges were equipped through Japanese assistance, two institutions received support from the Asian Development Bank, and one college benefited directly from assistance provided by the Government of Japan. In addition, ten educational institutions in the region participated in projects financed by the Government of the Republic of Korea, including the Koson Industrial Vocational College, the Mubarak Industrial Vocational College, and the Qamashi Pedagogical College. Implemented during 2004–2005, the total value of this project amounted to US$27 million [15].

During 2011, educational laboratory equipment valued at approximately US$22.1 million was imported into Uzbekistan. Under the "Development of Secondary Specialized and Vocational Education" project financed through a concessional loan from the Government of the Republic of Korea, 157 vocational colleges specializing in service industries received modern laboratory equipment. Likewise, under the "Support for the Development of Vocational Education in the Construction and Housing Utilities Sector" project financed by the German Development Bank (KfW), 32 vocational colleges were modernized [16].

During the 2010–2011 academic year, the workshops for water supply, gas supply, and sewerage system installation and maintenance at the Tashkent Construction and Public Utilities Vocational College were equipped with state-of-the-art training facilities financed through a concessional loan from the German Development Bank (KfW). These included educational modules covering modern construction technologies newly introduced into the housing and public utilities sector, advanced equipment and machinery, electric and gas-powered heating systems, air purification systems for small enterprises, gas distribution units, renewable energy conversion equipment, climate control systems for buildings, welding and installation equipment, and comprehensive sets of mechanical engineering tools [17].

Uzbekistan also cooperated extensively with international organizations in addressing social issues related to education. For example, the second phase of the European Union TACIS project entitled "Social Partnership in Education and Training in Uzbekistan" commenced in September 2007, continuing the activities implemented during 2004–2006. The Social Partnership Center,

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headquartered in Copenhagen, coordinated project implementation in Uzbekistan through representatives including Søren Kai Andersen and Mikkel Maylund. The project's activities focused primarily on strengthening secondary specialized education in selected regions.

Social partnership is understood as mutually beneficial cooperation among government institutions, public organizations, employers, entrepreneurs, and citizens aimed at achieving common social objectives through the integration of available resources and capacities. Its scope encompasses non-governmental organizations, local associations, and private enterprises involved in employment promotion and educational development. Closely associated with democratic governance, socio-economic development, and universal human values, the evolution of social partnership demonstrates that Western European countries have increasingly adopted a "win-win" model of corporate relations within the labor market over the past two decades. Effective social dialogue creates mutual benefits for employers, employees, and public authorities alike [18].

The second phase of the European Union Commission's TACIS Programme entitled "Social Partnership in Education and Training in Uzbekistan" had a total budget of €1.064 million. The project involved 10 vocational colleges located in four regions of Uzbekistan [18].

Within the framework of the project, ten priority fields of vocational education were identified for the modernization of sectoral educational standards, curricula, and training programs in accordance with labor market requirements. On 28 March 2008, a training seminar entitled "Improvement of Educational Regulatory Documents" was organized for the working groups responsible for revising educational standards and curricula in the selected fields. The seminar provided professional development training for 24 deputy directors for academic affairs and teachers of specialized subjects representing the vocational colleges participating in the project [20].

As part of the project, sectoral educational standards, curricula, and training programs were revised and updated in the following vocational specializations: Jewelry Design, Artistic Wood Carving, Finance, Architecture of Buildings and Structures, Design and Modeling of Garments, Garment Manufacturing, Primary Education, Production of Oil and Fat Products, Operation and Maintenance of Agricultural Machinery and Equipment, and Organization and Management of Livestock Farms. These revisions were undertaken to ensure closer alignment between vocational education and the evolving demands of the labor market.

On 13 May 2008, a practical seminar entitled "Social Partnership in the Employment of Vocational College Graduates during the 2007–2008 Academic Year and in the Vocational Training, Retraining, and Professional Development of the Unemployed at Base Vocational Colleges" was organized. Subsequently, between 17 and 24 May 2008, regional seminars on the same topic were conducted in the Samarkand, Surkhandarya, and Tashkent regions, as well as in Tashkent City.

Uzbekistan's cooperation with leading international organizations and developed countries played an important role in improving the professional qualifications of teachers, organizing overseas internships for educational personnel, providing international study opportunities for students, and incorporating global best practices into the educational process. These initiatives strengthened teachers' confidence in educational reforms, facilitated the development of innovative educational programs, and significantly contributed to improving the quality of instruction through the adoption of modern educational standards and teaching methodologies [21].

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