

# Cooperation between Uzbekistan and the European Union in the field of education and human development in the spotlight of Luxembourg media



*The leading Luxembourg publication "Eureflect" published an article by Shakhnoza Kodirova, Head of Department at the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, entitled "The EU's Role in Uzbekistan's Transformation: Supporting Human Development and Education."*

The reform agenda of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has laid a solid foundation for deep and effective cooperation with the EU. Today, Brussels increasingly views Uzbekistan as a country with strong potential to become a model of sustainable transformation in Central Asia.

The partnership has evolved significantly – from the signing of the first Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1996 to expanding cooperation across more than 20 areas, including trade, energy, education, environmental protection, and human development. Currently, the two sides are on the cusp of finalising a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which will elevate their relationship to the level of a strategic partnership.

## **Human Capital and Education as Pillars of the EU-Uzbekistan Partnership**

One of the core components of the evolving Uzbekistan-EU dialogue is cooperation in human capital development. For the EU, investment in education is a cornerstone of sustainable economic growth, democratic governance, and global competitiveness. Education and skills development have long been integral to the EU's external engagement with partner countries.

Uzbekistan, in turn, attaches strategic importance to improving its workforce capacity as a key enabler of sustainable development, economic modernisation, and quality of life. Amid rapid institutional reform and the transition toward inclusive growth, Uzbekistan regards educational cooperation with the EU as a vital mechanism for adopting international standards, advancing research, and training a new generation of professionals.

The EU's updated Central Asia strategy places special emphasis on partnerships for human capital development. The Samarkand EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference served as a catalyst for further advancing scientific and educational cooperation. Among other initiatives, plans are underway to establish a new framework for scientific and technological exchange in priority areas such as artificial intelligence, big data, digitalisation, and space research – topics that have featured prominently in recent high-level meetings between EU and Uzbek leadership.

## **From Tempus to Erasmus+: A Continuum of Progress**

EU-Uzbekistan cooperation in education has deep roots. Early programmes such as Tempus (1994-2013) and Erasmus Mundus (2007-2014) laid the groundwork for modernising Uzbekistan's educational and research landscape. These initiatives focused on retraining university staff, upgrading technical infrastructure, and linking academic research to real-world application.

Since 2015, Erasmus+ has played a key role in transforming Uzbekistan's higher education system. Currently, 98 Uzbek universities participate in the programme, enabling significant improvements in academic quality and internationalization. From 2015 to 2024, Erasmus+ funded 63 projects under the Capacity Building in Higher Education strand. Of these, 43 have been completed, while 20 are ongoing. Notably, seven projects are coordinated by Uzbek universities themselves – reflecting increasing institutional maturity and leadership within the country's higher education sector.

Through the programme's International Credit Mobility component, over 3,000 Uzbek students and academic staff have participated in exchange programmes. Between 2021 and 2024, Uzbekistan emerged as the regional leader in academic exchanges, accounting for 39% of all Erasmus+ mobility from Central Asia. To date, 127 Uzbek students have been awarded the prestigious Erasmus Mundus scholarships to pursue Master's degrees at top European universities.

### **Strengthening Academic Ties through Horizon Europe and Jean Monnet**

Seventeen Jean Monnet projects are currently being implemented in Uzbekistan. These initiatives help strengthen academic ties with the EU, particularly through Centres of Excellence hosted by the University of World Economy and Diplomacy and Tashkent State University of Economics. These centres not only promote European educational standards but also foster a new academic culture conducive to open dialogue and research collaboration.

A major milestone in the EU-Uzbekistan knowledge partnership was Uzbekistan's accession to Horizon Europe – the EU's flagship research and innovation programme with a budget of €95.5 billion. Participation provides Uzbek researchers and universities with access to competitive grants, joint research projects, and global knowledge networks.

Of particular interest is Cluster 5 of Horizon Europe – “Climate, Energy and Mobility” – which aligns closely with Uzbekistan's national priorities for green economic development and energy resilience. In this domain, Uzbekistan is also participating in SECCA (Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia), a regional initiative promoting sustainable energy integration.

Recognising the need to raise public awareness about climate adaptation, Uzbekistan has embedded sustainability themes into its national education agenda. The government's Green Economy Transition Programme through 2030 identifies education for sustainable development as a top priority. This aims to prepare a new generation of specialists equipped to support green growth in an era of global environmental challenges.

Uzbek universities have already begun offering programmes in high-demand green economy disciplines, including biotechnology, renewable energy engineering, and sustainable resource management. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, over 35% of students in the 2023/2024 academic year are enrolled in programmes linked to green skills – compared to just 5% in 2019/2020. This dramatic rise reflects Uzbekistan's commitment to building a knowledge-based, innovation-driven, and environmentally responsible economy.

### **Reforming Vocational Education: European Expertise at Work**

EU-Uzbekistan cooperation on human capital is equally evident in the reform of vocational education and training. EU member states have long been global leaders in integrating education with industry needs – an area of direct relevance to Uzbekistan's national reform agenda.

Since 1995, the European Training Foundation (ETF) has supported Uzbekistan in developing modern education and skills systems. The overarching goal has been to enhance employability, expand access to learning, and promote social cohesion.

This long-standing partnership has served as a bridge between Uzbekistan and Europe's best practices in vocational training. Between 2014 and 2020, the ETF and the EU Delegation to Uzbekistan implemented the project “Skills Development for Employability in Rural Areas” in cooperation with UNESCO, focusing on labour market integration in underdeveloped regions.

The ETF has also helped strengthen ties between education providers and the private sector through the “Torino Process” – a key EU-led policy review mechanism for VET. In 2022, Uzbekistan joined DARYA (Dialogue and Action for Resourceful Youth in Central Asia), a regional EU programme co-implemented by

the ETF and UNICEF. With a €10 million budget and a timeline through 2027, DARYA promotes youth employment and vocational training by fostering dialogue between governments and business communities.

Uzbekistan's reforms in vocational training have gained momentum since 2017, with special attention to introducing the dual education model – an approach widely used in Germany that combines theoretical instruction with hands-on experience in enterprises. The legal framework for dual education is now in place, and 50% of vocational colleges in Uzbekistan have adopted the model in at least one programme.

### **A Model for Constructive Partnership**

The EU-Uzbekistan partnership stands today as a compelling example of constructive engagement built on mutual trust and shared values. Beyond internal reform, it contributes to the resilience and stability of the broader Central Asian region.

The EU's role in Uzbekistan's transformation goes far beyond financial or technical assistance. It represents a long-term strategic commitment to supporting comprehensive reforms grounded in education, science, and human development. A key strength of the EU's approach lies in fostering synergy between education systems and labour markets – ensuring that skills development leads directly to opportunity, inclusion, and progress.

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**Source**