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Improving the Organizational and Governance Mechanism for Developing Educational Tourism in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Uzbekistan is emerging as a regional destination for educational tourism, driven by rapid growth in international student mobility and higher education internationalization. However, fragmented institutional responsibilities, inadequate student services, and the absence of integrated cross-sector governance constrain sustainable development. This study examines organizational barriers and develops a governance framework through structured policy analysis and rapid evidence synthesis of peer-reviewed research, legislation, official statistics, and comparative evidence from Kazakhstan and Malaysia. Published research estimates approximately 39,700 international students enrolled in Uzbekistan in 2025, a 30.5-fold increase from 2017. Separately, official statistics report 37,200 foreign education-purpose arrivals during January–November 2025, with 83.3% originating from five countries. These figures measure different populations and should not be combined. The analysis identifies weak interagency coordination, limited integration of statistical systems, insufficient student support, and tensions between recruitment expansion and educational quality. A multi-level governance mechanism is proposed, combining a national coordination council, an operational Study in Uzbekistan Office, independent quality assurance, university-level service standards, regional destination clusters, and integrated monitoring. The framework offers an implementable basis for improving accountability, market diversification, student experience, and sustainable regional development. Its effects remain to be tested through phased pilot implementation and outcome-based evaluation.

Keywords: Educational tourism; higher education internationalization; governance; international student mobility; Uzbekistan; regional development.

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1. Introduction

Educational tourism is a cross-sector phenomenon situated at the intersection of international education, travel, migration, and local economic development. In this study it denotes mobility in which structured learning is a primary purpose of travel, encompassing degree programmes, academic exchanges, summer schools, language education, professional courses, and heritage or field-based learning. Unlike a narrow international-enrolment perspective, this definition recognizes universities, public authorities, cultural institutions, accommodation providers, and transport services as interdependent components of an education destination [1].

Uzbekistan's higher education internationalization has accelerated since 2016. Earlier scholarship documents the expansion of international activity and foreign branch campuses, [2], while qualitative research identifies limited university-level ownership of a predominantly top-down internationalization agenda [3]. More recent research reports substantial international student growth alongside continuing barriers related to teaching languages, research capacity, student services, and social integration. Taken together,

these developments make governance quality, not merely international recruitment, an urgent policy issue.

Existing national arrangements allocate higher education, tourism development, migration, statistics, and accreditation to distinct public institutions[4]. Although the Law on Education provides powers for coordination, international cooperation, institutional evaluation, investment, and public-private partnerships, the reviewed framework does not establish a dedicated, end-to-end mechanism for educational tourism as a shared policy field [5]. Separate statistics for student enrolment and border arrivals illustrate the organizational problem: they are useful for their respective purposes but do not form a harmonized measure of education-related mobility [6].

The knowledge gap lies in the limited translation of higher education internationalization research into an operational, cross-sector governance architecture suitable for Uzbekistan. Prior studies illuminate institutional reform, academic internationalization, or destination choice[7], but they do not, within the evidence reviewed here, specify an integrated division of responsibilities across education, tourism, accreditation, regional development, and student services. This article therefore asks: (1) what measurable development and governance constraints characterize Uzbekistan's educational tourism; and (2) how can existing institutions be coordinated without compromising regulatory independence or university autonomy? The contribution is a context-specific institutional framework and a set of measurable implementation priorities, rather than a claim of empirically proven policy impacts.

The governance problem is also territorial. International students and short-course visitors use academic facilities alongside urban services, including public transport, rental housing, medical assistance, cultural venues, and visitor information. A university may provide an academically credible programme while the destination delivers an uneven experience because no organization coordinates the services around it. This makes educational tourism different from an exclusively university-led internationalization policy: destination institutions and municipal government become part of the academic mobility value chain. Research on education hubs and student destination choice provides a rationale for connecting these dimensions, rather than assuming demand depends on tuition prices alone [8].

For Uzbekistan, the distinction between degree education and short learning visits is especially important. International degree programmes create relatively long stays and continuing service requirements, whereas summer schools, professional education, field schools and heritage-learning activities can operate at different times and across several regions. A single recruitment indicator cannot capture these distinct forms of demand. The absence of harmonized categories also makes comparisons between national arrival statistics and university enrolment misleading. The present study consequently defines educational tourism as a coordinated education-and-destination ecosystem and uses that definition to examine both governance gaps and the practical allocation of institutional responsibilities.

2. Materials and Methods

The research adopts a qualitative policy-analysis design supported by rapid evidence synthesis and descriptive secondary-data analysis. The source corpus comprises peer-reviewed studies on internationalization in Uzbekistan, international education hubs, and destination choice; official statistical publications; Uzbekistan's education legislation and institutional mandates; and regional comparative literature [9]. Academic research was used for explanations of implementation challenges, while legal and administrative documents were used to characterize existing powers and reported statistics.

Evidence was synthesized in four stages. First, the concept of educational tourism was delimited to include degree and shorter forms of learning mobility. Second, secondary indicators of international enrolment and foreign education-purpose arrivals were

extracted with their separate units, reference periods, and sources retained. The concentration of origin markets was calculated by dividing the sum of reported entries from the five largest source countries by total education-purpose entries [10]. Third, mandates and likely coordination interfaces were mapped across ministries, the tourism authority, quality assurance, universities, and regional actors. Fourth, Kazakhstan and Malaysia were compared by function—national steering, institutional implementation, destination services, and regulatory safeguards—rather than by assumed equivalence [11].

Institutional design alternatives were assessed against five criteria: clarity of accountability; independence of academic quality assurance; horizontal coordination across public bodies; scope for university-level autonomy; and continuity of services across the international learner journey. No original interviews or surveys were conducted for this article: figures from the 32-expert, 27-institution study are external published findings. The work is not an exhaustive systematic review, and no causal effects of the proposed mechanism are estimated. Differences between administrative series and the absence of comparable national indicators for retention, satisfaction, expenditure, and completion limit the analysis.

The evidence base was assessed using a source hierarchy. Journal articles supplied arguments about policy implementation, student experience, and internationalization outcomes; the national statistics publication supplied counts of education-purpose border entries; legislation and official institutional websites supplied the basis for assigning formal competencies. The World Bank's regional higher education analysis and the Uzbekistan–2030 development strategy were treated as policy context rather than as direct measurements of educational-tourism performance. This distinction avoids turning strategic ambitions or institutional descriptions into empirical evidence of programme effectiveness.

Descriptive calculations were limited to ratios supported by published observations. The 83.3% market concentration measure uses the sum of five official origin-country counts divided by 37,200 education-purpose arrivals; this is not a concentration index for all students physically present in the country. Reported enrolment growth was retained as published in the 2026 peer-reviewed study, rather than reconstructed as a new administrative series. No imputation was undertaken for unreported student satisfaction, programme completion, accommodation capacity, visitor spending, or regional distribution. Those variables were identified as monitoring requirements and not presented as measured results.

The resulting institutional model is an analytical output of policy design. The criteria used to compare options were: whether each task has a responsible actor; whether recruitment and academic accreditation remain institutionally separated; whether administrative processes can be shared across agencies; whether universities can adapt services to local conditions; and whether a learner can move from application to graduation without falling between organizational mandates. The proposed architecture is therefore evaluated for logical consistency and compatibility with the reviewed framework, not for experimentally established effectiveness.

3. Results

3.1. Growth and concentration of educational mobility

The peer-reviewed estimate of international enrolment reached about 39,700 students in 2025, corresponding to a reported 30.5-fold increase relative to 2017. Official border statistics independently recorded 37,200 foreign education-purpose arrivals in January–November 2025, an increase of 54.3% from the same period of 2024. Because one series measures enrolment and the other border entries, neither is a denominator for the other, and both must remain distinct.

The same arrival data identify India (16,300 entries), Turkmenistan (8,900), Tajikistan (2,700), Pakistan (1,700), and China (1,400) as the five largest origin markets. Together, these account for approximately 83.3% of arrivals, while India's share alone is about 43.8% (author calculations based on). The concentration indicates exposure to changes in a limited set of recruitment markets, although it cannot be interpreted directly as concentration among all enrolled international students.

Table 1. Published indicators of educational mobility in Uzbekistan

Indicator		Period / population	Value	Interpretation
International enrolment	student	2025; students enrolled	≈39,700	30.5-fold increase since 2017 [1]
Education-purpose arrivals	foreign	Jan.–Nov. 2025; border entries	37,200	54.3% annual increase [5]
India share of arrivals		Jan.–Nov. 2025; entries	43.8%	Author calculation from [5]
Top-five share	source-market	Jan.–Nov. 2025; entries	83.3%	Author calculation from [5]

Note: Enrolment stocks and border-entry counts represent different statistical concepts and are not directly comparable.

The two national indicators also point to a practical research-design problem. An enrolment stock measures participation in higher education during a defined period; a border count measures entry events whose declared purpose is education. A student may cross a border more than once, while a short-programme participant may enter without becoming enrolled in a degree. Adding, comparing, or interpreting these totals as a unified population would misstate both programme demand and visitor numbers. A future reporting system should preserve the separate series while establishing standards for unique learners, mobility categories, and repeat travel. This is a prerequisite for credible economic-impact analysis rather than a merely technical improvement.

Concentration of arrivals adds a second, distinct vulnerability. The reported five-country share does not establish that individual institutions rely on the same markets, because institution-level nationality and programme distributions were not available in the reviewed sources. Nevertheless, it suggests that national planning should examine the resilience of partnerships, recognition pathways, language support and recruitment channels across origin markets. Diversification should be assessed jointly with retention and educational outcomes: attracting applicants from more countries has limited public value if programmes cannot provide appropriate academic and welfare services.

3.2. Institutional and regulatory gaps

The reviewed institutional structure is characterized by strong sectoral mandates but limited horizontal integration. The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation leads sector policy; the Tourism Committee oversees destination development; the National Quality Assurance Agency for Education (NQAAE) is responsible for quality assurance and accreditation; and universities deliver academic programmes and most direct student support. No single actor is assigned responsibility for the complete learner journey from verified programme information and applications to accommodation, progression, and completion.

This separation creates three connected gaps. First, programme promotion and the service capacity needed to fulfil promises to international applicants may evolve at different speeds. Second, statistical systems distinguish educational arrivals from enrolment, but publicly accessible data do not integrate unique learners, mobility type,

regional destination, educational outcomes, and visitor expenditure. Third, published evidence of language, academic, and social-support difficulties suggests a risk that recruitment targets will take priority over sustained educational quality. These findings concern governance arrangements and reported service constraints; they are not evidence that all host institutions perform inadequately.

The legislation reviewed permits education-sector coordination, accreditation, international cooperation, financing, and public-private partnerships. Consequently, the immediate reform need is better assignment of shared functions and operational accountability, not necessarily a new primary law. Appropriate regulation could be initiated through existing Cabinet-level authority, subject to subsequent legal review.

Responsibilities overlap most visibly at transition points in the learner journey. Before arrival, students need reliable information about accreditation, teaching language, fees, admissions and immigration procedures; after arrival, they need housing advice, orientation and academic or health-service referrals. Government tourism authorities can promote destinations, but they cannot validate academic quality. Quality regulators can inspect programmes, but they do not ordinarily coordinate accommodation or airport-arrival services. Universities are closest to individual learners, although their administrative capacity and internationalization strategies vary. The resulting coordination deficit is structural: competent sector-specific organizations exist, but accountability for integrated service outcomes is weak[12].

The regulatory response should therefore distinguish standards from delivery arrangements. A national service framework could specify the minimum information that must be disclosed to prospective students, deadlines for common services, routes for complaints and responsibilities for safeguarding. Individual universities would remain responsible for programme design, admissions decisions and student welfare, subject to quality assurance. A national coordinating entity could provide shared data definitions and digital tools without overriding universities' academic autonomy. This division addresses the concern, present in earlier qualitative research, that top-down internationalization priorities may fail to become functioning institutional strategies[13].

3.3. Comparative lessons and governance design

Kazakhstan illustrates the value of central political direction and the difficulty of securing institutional-level implementation of internationalization. Malaysia provides a contrasting example of a recognizable national interface for international education services and promotion, while scholarship also emphasizes coherent institutional policy and quality safeguards. The transferable principle is differentiated responsibility: strategic steering, destination promotion, independent quality regulation, and university-level implementation should be coordinated but should not be consolidated into a single organization.

On that basis, the analysis develops the multi-level architecture summarized in Table 2. It is a proposal derived from the reviewed evidence and design criteria, not an existing or experimentally validated governance arrangement.

Table 2. Proposed organizational mechanism and division of responsibilities

Governance level	Proposed / existing actor	Core role and safeguard
National steering	National Council for International Education and Tourism	Set cross-sector strategy, definitions, shared KPIs, and interagency escalation
Operational coordination	Study in Uzbekistan Office (proposed)	Coordinate verified information, destination promotion, recruitment-agent register, portal, and monitoring; no accreditation power

Governance level	Proposed / existing actor	Core role and safeguard
Independent regulation	NQAAE (existing)	Accredit and review programmes independently of recruitment promotion
Institutional delivery	University International Student Offices	Implement service standards, advising, accommodation referral, and progression monitoring
Place-based coordination	Regional Education Destination Clusters	Connect universities, local authorities, museums, tourism and service providers
Data infrastructure	Interoperable multi-agency information system	Keep enrolment and arrival definitions distinct while enabling secure linkage and aggregated reporting

3.4. Measurement architecture and implementation priorities

The proposed mechanism requires a measurement framework that distinguishes growth, quality, service capacity, resilience and regional benefit. The initial reporting layer would identify international students by programme, institution, nationality and location; separate exchange learners and short-course visitors; and report education-purpose border entries independently. A second layer would monitor first-to-second-year retention, completion, verified accreditation, student satisfaction, complaint resolution and accommodation referrals. A third layer would evaluate programme partnerships, regional distribution and learner expenditure where survey data become available. None of these missing national measures is treated as an observed baseline in this study[14-15].

The source report outlines a staged 2027–2031 policy horizon. In the first phase, government would specify participating institutions, interoperable data definitions, the authority of the proposed coordination office, and common student-information standards. Initial pilots would then test university service offices, recruitment-agent transparency, regional destination clusters, and an integrated information portal. Expansion would be conditional on evidence that service outcomes and academic quality are not deteriorating. Such sequencing reduces the risk that a promotional programme recruits more learners than universities and host destinations can responsibly accommodate.

4. Discussion

The main interpretation is that Uzbekistan's educational-tourism challenge is shifting from market formation to system integration. Rapid international mobility growth creates opportunities for institutions and destinations, but expansion alone does not demonstrate improved educational outcomes or regional economic benefits. Education-hub scholarship similarly treats academic reputation, national positioning, student experience, and mobility infrastructure as mutually reinforcing conditions [12], [13]. A policy centred only on international student headcount may therefore overlook the factors that sustain an education destination.

The first governance implication is to establish a National Council with authority to resolve coordination failures among education, tourism, foreign affairs, migration, statistics, and other bodies. Its function would be strategic rather than operational: define categories of educational tourism, approve shared standards, review market risks, and report results. An associated Study in Uzbekistan Office could serve as a single operational interface by coordinating a verified national programme portal, common student information, international promotion, and recruitment-agent transparency. A specialized office should not, however, determine its own programmes' accreditation status; NQAAE should retain independent evaluation and publication of quality outcomes.

The second implication concerns the interface between quality assurance and student services. Institutions recruiting internationally need verified disclosure of instruction languages, proficiency requirements, compulsory fees, accommodation conditions, and available academic support. National minimum service standards could apply to International Student Offices while allowing universities to decide how services are organized. Public co-financing could reward retention, completion, student satisfaction, accreditation compliance, and active partnerships, rather than recruitment volume alone. These are proposed incentives, not weights or effects validated by observed outcomes.

Third, regional educational tourism should be developed as a portfolio of learning experiences rather than an extension of standard sightseeing. In Samarkand–Bukhara and other suitable destinations, universities could coordinate heritage conservation field schools, architecture and archaeology programmes, language immersion, summer courses, and cultural education with museums, local government, and licensed travel providers. Regional Education Destination Clusters could make accommodation, local transport, venues, and academic supervision jointly manageable. The reviewed material supports this as a plausible development pathway but does not establish demand volumes or economic returns for particular clusters[16].

Fourth, data integration is necessary before educational tourism can be evaluated as a distinct sector. A national information architecture should distinguish at minimum enrolled degree students, exchange learners, short-course participants, education-related border entries, and repeat trips. Secure linkages between institutions and government agencies could support indicators for enrolment, origin-market diversification, regional distribution, retention, completion, complaint resolution, and satisfaction. Measures of educational-tourism expenditure would require dedicated surveys or a tourism-satellite-account-compatible approach; tuition revenue alone is not a measure of full visitor expenditure.

A phased 2027–2031 implementation pathway follows from these priorities. Initial work should focus on institutional roles, common definitions, a verified programme information standard, and basic data governance. Subsequent pilots could test university service standards, regional clusters, and digital information systems before national expansion. Evaluation should use pre-specified indicators and comparison groups where possible; recruiting more students should not be treated as success if retention, quality, welfare, or completion deteriorates.

The study has limitations. It synthesizes a selective research and policy corpus, without exhaustive Scopus/Web of Science coverage, primary stakeholder interviews, or implementation trials. The organizational model is normative and remains to be validated in practice. In particular, national data were insufficient to quantify visitor expenditure, satisfaction, housing supply, or graduation outcomes, and estimates from different datasets could not be pooled. Future research should assess implementation costs and legal feasibility in detail, pilot selected clusters, and evaluate outcome changes longitudinally.

An important feature of the proposed national office is its limited mandate. The office could consolidate programme information, facilitate recruitment-market intelligence and coordinate common service interfaces, but it should not accredit the courses it promotes. Assigning independent academic review to NQAAE is consistent with the distinction between regulatory credibility and destination marketing in the reviewed comparative literature. Clear boundaries also reduce the probability that an enrolment target becomes an implicit instruction to weaken entry requirements, language standards or institutional evaluation.

Financial incentives warrant similar caution. The source report recommends linking public support to educational outcomes—especially progression, satisfaction, quality compliance, international diversification and active academic partnerships—rather than distributing resources on headcount alone. Such a mechanism could encourage institutions

to invest in academic support and student services before further recruitment, but the appropriate weighting of indicators is not established by the available evidence. Development funding for shared information systems, quality-assurance capacity and regional pilots should therefore be evaluated against transparently defined output and outcome measures rather than presumed economic returns.

Regional clusters offer a complementary but distinct policy route. In heritage-oriented destinations such as Samarkand and Bukhara, the proposed cluster could connect universities with museums, historic sites, local authorities and professional tour operators around academically supervised field learning, conservation, language or cultural programmes. Other regions might focus on technical, medical or professional education according to institutional specialization and infrastructure. These examples specify possible organizational forms; the source corpus does not quantify city-specific willingness to pay, course demand, visitor expenditure or the net economic impact of such arrangements. Regional proposals require feasibility studies before investment commitments.

The model can be tested with a practical evaluation protocol. Piloting institutions should publish baseline measures before adopting student-service standards, report the cost of implementation, and monitor changes in satisfaction, retention, complaints and completion. Where data access and comparability permit, performance could be compared with non-pilot institutions over the same period. A parallel regional evaluation could monitor the number and duration of verified short educational programmes, participating local partners and visitor spending based on dedicated surveys. These tests would help determine whether cross-sector coordination generates measurable benefits rather than simply creating additional administrative structures.

The service implications should be translated into auditable commitments. A programme marketed internationally could be required to publish an accurate language-of-instruction statement, academic entry criteria, the complete schedule of fees, accreditation status, and information about accommodation and student rights. On arrival, learners should have access to documented immigration guidance, institutional orientation, academic advising and clearly assigned complaint routes. Risk-based quality monitoring could prioritize rapidly expanding programmes or those with persistent service complaints, while preserving procedural independence for the accrediting authority. These proposals respond to the reported shortcomings in academic language preparation and student support, but they should not be confused with currently implemented nationwide standards.

Institutional coordination also has a financial dimension. The original policy assessment proposes targeted capacity grants and the use of legally available public-private partnership mechanisms for eligible facilities, especially accommodation and campus-related services [6]. Shared digital infrastructure and market information are plausible national public goods, whereas university-specific buildings require evidence of realistic demand, financial sustainability and operational responsibility. Published estimates of the cost of the complete educational-tourism sector, of student expenditure, and of the economic contribution of short educational visits were not available in the reviewed material. As a result, financial projections should remain conditional and should not be reported as measured outcomes of educational tourism in Uzbekistan.

Finally, governance reform depends on feedback from affected stakeholders. International learners and recent graduates can identify service bottlenecks that administrative databases do not capture; academic staff can assess whether programmes have the necessary teaching and language-support capacity; regional providers can identify seasonal or transport constraints. Annual surveys and independently reviewed complaint data would provide a complementary source of evidence to enrolment and border-entry counts. A functioning coordination system should publish not only

recruitment performance but also weaknesses, corrective actions and subsequent changes in learner outcomes. This emphasis on transparent performance is consistent with the policy shift from enrolment volume to quality-adjusted development proposed in the source study.

5. Conclusion

Uzbekistan's growing international education activity has outpaced the integration of some of the organizations and services required for educational tourism. The reviewed evidence points to fragmented accountability, source-market concentration, incomplete learner-mobility statistics, and student-support constraints. Its central contribution is a proposed hybrid governance mechanism linking Cabinet-level coordination, a national operational interface, independent accreditation, university service delivery, regional destination clusters, and interoperable data. The model aims to align expansion with academic quality, student experience, and regional development while preserving existing institutional competencies. It should be treated as an evidence-informed policy proposition: its effectiveness depends on regulatory feasibility, piloting, transparent outcome indicators, and independent evaluation rather than on enrolment growth alone.

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