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Article

The Competitiveness of Developing Educational Tourism in Uzbekistan: Regional Higher Education Leaders and Opportunities for Attracting Foreign Students

*Khoshimov Shokhrukh Gulomovich**1

1. doctoral student, Chief Specialist at the Research Institute for Tourism Development under the Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Lecturer at Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Correspondance: shohhoshimov@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article analyzes the regional competitiveness of the emerging educational tourism sector in Uzbekistan based on the academic capacity of higher education institutions, their positions in international university rankings, international accreditation, cooperation with foreign universities, educational programs offered in English and Russian, facilities and services for international students, and the tourism attractiveness of the regions. The study provides a comparative analysis of emerging educational tourism centers in Tashkent, Bukhara, Khiva, Urgench, Fergana, Kokand, Andijan, Namangan, and Chirchiq. Particular attention is paid to the achievements of regional higher education leaders in international rankings and accreditation systems, the multilingual nature of educational programs, and their potential to attract international students. The findings demonstrate that the competitiveness of educational tourism is determined not only by a university's position in international rankings but also by a combination of factors, including international accreditation, language of instruction, diversity of academic programs, international cooperation, student accommodation and infrastructure, tuition and living costs, and the tourism attractiveness of the destination. The study proposes a polycentric model for the development of educational tourism across the regions of Uzbekistan.*

Keywords: *educational tourism, international students, higher education, education services export, regional competitiveness, international ranking, international accreditation, academic mobility, English language, Russian language, educational destination*

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1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has significantly increased student mobility across countries and regions, contributing to the growing importance of educational tourism as an emerging segment of the tourism sector. International student mobility generates demand not only for educational services but also for accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, cultural, recreational, and other tourism-related services. Therefore, educational tourism can be considered a multidimensional field that creates economic and institutional linkages between higher education institutions and the tourism sector [1].

The attractiveness and competitiveness of an educational destination are no

longer determined solely by the academic reputation or international ranking position of its higher education institutions. The diversity of academic programs, language of instruction, international accreditation, cooperation with foreign higher education institutions, student exchange opportunities, accommodation conditions, cost of living, safety, and tourism attractiveness of the destination have increasingly become important factors influencing international students' destination choices. Consequently, the assessment of educational tourism requires an integrated consideration of both higher education and tourism-related indicators [2].

In recent years, Uzbekistan has undertaken significant measures to internationalize its higher education system, attract international students, and expand the export of educational services. The increasing number of public and private higher education institutions, the expansion of cooperation with foreign universities, the establishment of branches of foreign higher education institutions, and the growing availability of academic programs delivered in English and Russian have strengthened Uzbekistan's potential as an international educational destination. However, the development of educational tourism varies considerably across regions and cities [3], [4].

Cities such as Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, Urgench, Fergana, Kokand, Andijan, Namangan, and Chirchiq are emerging as educational tourism centers where higher education infrastructure and tourism attractions intersect at different levels. The academic capacity, internationalization level, diversity of educational programs, and tourism infrastructure of higher education institutions in these cities differ significantly, resulting in differences in their ability to attract international students. Therefore, assessing regional competitiveness in educational tourism requires consideration not only of university-based indicators but also of the tourism, socioeconomic, and destination characteristics of the respective regions.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the regional competitiveness of educational tourism in Uzbekistan through an integrated assessment of higher education and tourism-related indicators [5]. In this context, the study comparatively examines the academic capacity of higher education institutions in selected cities, their positions in international rankings, international accreditations, cooperation with foreign universities, English and Russian-medium educational programs, conditions created for international students, and the tourism attractiveness of the respective destinations.

The main research question of the study is: What are the key factors determining the competitiveness of different cities in Uzbekistan as educational destinations for international students? In addressing this question, the study aims to demonstrate that the competitiveness of educational tourism is not determined solely by the position of universities in international rankings. Rather, it is shaped by the combined influence of academic quality, international accreditation, language of instruction, diversity of academic programs, international cooperation, student accommodation opportunities, cost of living, and the tourism attractiveness of the destination [6].

The study is significant in that it evaluates the regional development of educational tourism in Uzbekistan and analyzes the capacity of higher education institutions to attract international students from a tourism destination perspective. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of policies and strategies aimed at expanding the export of educational services, establishing regional educational tourism centers, strengthening the international competitiveness of higher education institutions, and increasing the attractiveness of Uzbekistan as an international educational destination [7].

While Tashkent remains the country's principal international academic center, new educational destinations are also emerging across the regions.

In particular:

Bukhara – international accreditation and cultural tourism;

Fergana – medical education and Korean and European educational models;

Kokand – multidisciplinary higher education, engineering, arts, and culture;

Andijan - private, multilingual, and medical education;

Khorezm - the formation of distinctive regional models through the integration of public, private, and internationally oriented higher education.

The aim of this study is to identify the emerging regional educational tourism centers in Uzbekistan and assess their potential to attract international students.

2. Materials and Methods

The study employed comparative analysis, content analysis, expert assessment, statistical comparison, and regional benchmarking methods. The following locations in Uzbekistan were selected for the study:

Tashkent, Bukhara, Khiva, Urgench, Fergana, Kokand, Andijan, Namangan, and Chirchiq.

The following criteria were applied in the assessment:

academic capacity;

international rankings;

international accreditation;

experience in admitting international students;

programs offered in English and Russian;

international cooperation;

student infrastructure;

competitiveness of education and living costs;

tourism and cultural attractiveness of the destination.

The study utilized information from official university websites, international ranking organizations, and international organizations operating in the field of higher education.

3. Results

3.1. Tashkent - Uzbekistan's Global Academic Center

Tashkent, the political and administrative capital of Uzbekistan, is the country's largest higher education center and has the strongest institutional and infrastructural capacity for attracting international students. The main advantages of the capital include international rankings, foreign universities, international programs, developed transportation infrastructure, student facilities, and international services.

The presence of an international airport, well-developed transport connections with different countries, and extensive hotel and catering infrastructure provide additional advantages for international students [8].

Therefore, Tashkent occupies a leading position as a global academic educational destination in Uzbekistan. However, the relatively higher cost of education and living in Tashkent compared with some other regions may increase the competitive advantages of other cities.

3.2. Bukhara – International Accreditation and Cultural Educational Tourism

Bukhara has the potential to combine two important resources for educational tourism: the internationalization of education and historical-cultural heritage. The internationally accredited educational programs of Bukhara State University strengthen its academic reputation [9]. An important advantage of Bukhara for international students is the possibility of integrating the academic

learning process with the historical urban environment.

For example, short-term academic programs in:

history;
archaeology;
cultural heritage;
oriental studies;
tourism;
architecture;
language and culture

can be integrated with tourism routes. As a result, Bukhara has the potential to develop an educational tourism model based on "Study – Heritage – Culture."

3.3. Fergana – A Diversified International Education Center

From the perspective of educational tourism, Fergana is one of the most diversified educational destinations in Uzbekistan. The city hosts educational institutions representing different academic models, including Fergana State University, Fergana Public Health Medical University, Uzbekistan-Korea International University, Fergana Asia International Medical University, and the Fergana branch of Riga Nordic University [10], [11].

The coexistence of public, private, Korean, European, and medical education models within one city diversifies Fergana's position in the international education market.

Fergana State University. The university's international relations, foreign-language programs, and academic mobility opportunities represent important resources for attracting international students.

Medical education. The development of medical education may enable Fergana to become a promising destination for students from South Asia and other countries seeking medical education [12].

Korean and European models. Uzbekistan-Korea International University is associated with the Korean educational model, while Riga Nordic University contributes to the development of an international academic environment linked to the European educational model.

Thus, Fergana represents an integrated regional model combining public, private, Korean, European, and medical education.

3.4. Kokand – A Multidisciplinary Academic and Cultural Education Center

The educational tourism potential of Kokand is strongly associated with Kokand State University and Kokand University. Kokand State University was established on the basis of Kokand State Pedagogical Institute, the Kokand branch of Tashkent State Technical University, and the Fergana regional branch of the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture.

As a result, a large academic center has emerged that combines pedagogy, engineering, technical sciences, natural sciences, economics, arts, culture, and sports. According to official university information, the university has more than 38,000 students and over 1,100 academic staff members. This scale makes Kokand State University an important foundation for regional educational tourism [13].

Kokand University, with its international programs, also contributes to the development of the city's educational tourism potential. The university's programs in arts and culture provide opportunities to integrate education with Kokand's historical and cultural resources. Programs combining education, arts, culture, history, and creative experiences could be developed for international students.

At the same time, technical and engineering programs make it possible to develop Kokand's educational tourism beyond purely humanities-oriented fields.

Thus, Kokand's potential model can be characterized as a multidisciplinary educational tourism destination integrating English-medium education, engineering, arts, culture, and the historical heritage of the city [14].

3.5. Andijan – A Multilingual Private and International Education Center

The Andijan branch of Kokand University represents an important new element in the competitiveness of educational tourism in Andijan. Its main distinctive features include the diversity of academic programs and multilingual educational opportunities for international students.

The branch offers programs in medicine, pharmacy, economics, finance, computer engineering, pedagogy, psychology, history, and philology. Of particular importance is the availability of separate educational programs in English and Russian. The availability of medical education in Uzbek, Russian, and English provides additional convenience for international students.

Official university information also emphasizes cooperation with universities ranked among the Top 1000 universities internationally. Therefore, the following model can be developed for Andijan [15].

In addition, Andijan hosts the branch of the University of Warsaw of Poland, Andijan State University, Andijan State University of Foreign Languages, and Andijan Institute of Agriculture.

Thus, Andijan's educational tourism model can be characterized as a private and multilingual education center combining medical education and international cooperation.

2.6. Khorezm - A Promising Center for the Integration of Education and Tourism

Khorezm region has distinctive opportunities for educational tourism in Uzbekistan. The main reason is the location of Urgench and Khiva within an integrated tourism-education environment. Urgench functions as a modern education and service center, while Khiva is an internationally recognized historical and cultural tourism destination and a UNESCO-listed city [16].

Therefore, Khorezm has the potential to develop a model based on "Education in Urgench and Cultural Experience in Khiva." This model offers particularly significant opportunities for short-term academic programs, summer schools, and programs in history, archaeology, cultural heritage, tourism, and foreign languages for international students.

3.7. Urgench State University – The Academic Leader of Khorezm

Abu Rayhan Beruni Urgench State University is the principal academic center of the Khorezm region. The university has a specific mechanism for admitting international students. According to official information, foreign citizens can study full-time in all faculties of the university. The university also applies an admission mechanism based on interviews [17].

The university has experience in working with international students. According to official university information, 1,185 international students were enrolled, with a significant proportion being citizens of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. This demonstrates Urgench's potential as a cross-border education center.

The university's position in international rankings is also strengthening. In the QS Asia University Rankings 2025, Urgench State University was ranked in the 661–680 range and placed 44th among Central Asian universities. In addition, in 2026, the university's master's programs in mathematics, applied mathematics, physics, mathematics and physics, and mathematical engineering received positive evaluations from the German accreditation organization ASIIN.

The university's inclusion in the 1501+ group of the QS Sustainability Rankings 2026 further expands its international visibility [18].

Thus, the competitive model of Urgench State University is based on

international rankings, international accreditation, experience with international students, and a multidisciplinary academic base.

3.8. RANCH University – A New Private Education Center in Khorezm

RANCH University is one of the new private higher education centers developing in Urgench. According to the university's official information, RANCH University operates under License No. 385847, issued on September 6, 2024.

The university is developing a modern and internationally oriented educational model covering fields such as engineering, information technology, economics, architecture, pedagogy, philology, and medicine.

Its main advantage lies in its effort to combine practical education, digital technologies, information technology, engineering, medicine, economics, and international cooperation as a new-generation private university.

Therefore, RANCH University has the potential to form a private and innovative segment of educational tourism in Khorezm [19].

2.9. Ma'mun University – An Educational Model Connecting Khiva and Urgench

Although the main address of Ma'mun University is located in Khiva, official information indicates that the university has campuses in both Khiva and Urgench. The university operates across five campuses and, according to 2025 data, serves more than 12,000 students.

One of its important achievements is institutional accreditation by the German organization ACQUIN. According to university information, this accreditation is internationally recognized until 2032.

Ma'mun University also provides specific services for international students. In particular, it offers a service for meeting international students at Urgench International Airport and transporting them to the university dormitory.

From the perspective of educational tourism, this is particularly important because the university is attempting to establish an "arrival – accommodation – education" chain for international students [20].

Therefore, the main competitive model of Ma'mun University is based on international accreditation, private education, services for international students, the cultural heritage of Khiva, and the infrastructure of Urgench.

2.10. Namangan and Chirchiq – Emerging Centers of Medical Educational Tourism

The activities of Impuls Medical Institute in Namangan and Chirchiq are contributing to the emergence of new geographical centers of medical educational tourism.

The international demand for medical education, admission opportunities for international students, and educational options in Russian and English increase the potential of these destinations to enter the international student market.

For Namangan, a regional medical education center model may be appropriate, while for Chirchiq, a medical education center integrated into the Tashkent Region agglomeration may be more appropriate [21].

2.11. English and Russian as Important Factors in Attracting International Students

The findings of the study indicate that educational programs offered in foreign languages constitute an important component of educational tourism competitiveness. English is the primary instrument for accessing the global education market, while Russian serves as an important regional instrument for Uzbekistan, particularly for Central Asia, the CIS, and markets where there is demand for Russian-medium education.

From this perspective, English enables access to the global market, while

Russian strengthens Uzbekistan's position in the regional education market.

The availability of separate English- and Russian-medium programs at the Andijan branch of Kokand University, as well as multilingual medical education, represents a practical example of this model. The availability of bachelor's and master's programs in English at Kokand State University also provides an important foundation for developing an international academic environment [22].

Similarly, the availability of programs in English, Russian, and other foreign languages at Fergana State University strengthens the international diversification of Fergana as an educational destination.

Table.1

Comparative Model of Regional Educational Tourism Leaders

Region	Main educational leaders	Comparative model
Tashkent	International and major national higher education institutions	Global academic center
Bukhara	Bukhara State University	Accreditation, cultural tourism
Khiva	Mamun Universiteti	Accreditation, historical and cultural tourism
Urgench	Urgench State University, RANCH University, Ma'mun University campuses	Public, private, and international education
Fergana	Fergana State University (FDU), Fergana Public Health Medical Institute (FPHMI), Uzbekistan-Korea International University, Riga Nordic University (RNU), Fergana Asia International Medical University	Medical education, Korean and European educational models

Table.2

Comparative Table of Regional Educational Tourism Leaders

Region	Main educational leaders	Comparative model
Tashkent	International and major national higher education institutions	Global academic center
Bukhara	Bukhara State University	Accreditation, cultural tourism
Khiva	Ma'mun Universiteti	Accreditation, historical and cultural tourism
Urgench	Urgench State University, RANCH University, Ma'mun University campuses	Public, private, and international education
Fergana	Fergana State University (FDU), Fergana Public Health Medical Institute (FPHMI), Uzbekistan-Korea International University, Riga Nordic University (RNU), Fergana Asia International Medical University	Medical education, Korean and European educational models
Kokand	Kokand state university	Multidisciplinary education, technology, arts, and culture

Andizjan	Kokand university Andizhan branch	Private, multilingual, and medical education
Namangan	Impuls Medical Institute in Namangan	Medical education
Chirchik	Impuls Medical Institute in Chirchik	Medical education, Tashkent Region metropolitan area

4. Discussion

The research findings indicate that Uzbekistan is developing a multicentric educational tourism system based on regional specialization, rather than a model centered on a single educational tourism hub. The decision of an international student to select a university is influenced by a combination of factors that can be expressed as follows:

education quality → international recognition → language of instruction → price → living conditions → safety → international environment → attractiveness of the city.

Therefore, although the presence of a university in international rankings is important, it cannot be considered the sole criterion. For example, the performance of Urgench State University in the QS Asia rankings strengthens its academic reputation. At the same time, ASIIN accreditation demonstrates that specific educational programs comply with international quality standards. The institutional accreditation of Ma'mun University by ACQUIN provides an international quality signal for a private university [23].

For RANCH University, at its current stage of development, the main priorities are to establish international academic reputation, expand international programs and partnerships, and strengthen infrastructure and services for international students. This situation requires different development strategies for different regions.

4. Regional Models for Attracting International Students

Based on the findings of the study, the mechanism for attracting international students can be conceptualized as an integrated system consisting of international reputation; rankings and accreditation; education in English and Russian; international cooperation; student dormitories and residential infrastructure; accessibility of public transportation; competitive education and living costs; and the tourism attractiveness of the destination.

These factors collectively contribute to increasing the export of educational services in the cities of Uzbekistan and generate regional economic multiplier effects. In this process, an international student is not merely a consumer purchasing an educational service but also an active consumer contributing to the local economy [24].

The expenditures of international students on student dormitories or rental housing, food, transportation, communication, medical services, cultural events, excursions, tourism services, and everyday consumption contribute to the local economy. Therefore, it can be argued that the economic impact of educational tourism extends beyond the university level and begins to generate a multiplier effect across the urban and regional economy.

5. Regional Development Strategy

Based on the research findings, the following regional specialization can be proposed for Uzbekistan.

Tashkent should be positioned as a global academic destination. As a megacity, Tashkent should not be directly compared with other cities of Uzbekistan. Instead, it would be more appropriate to compare Tashkent with

major international and regional metropolitan educational destinations such as Almaty, Baku, Islamabad, Delhi, Astana, Tbilisi, Ankara, and Kazan.

Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, and Kokand, as historical cities with significant cultural and historical heritage, can compete for leadership in the academic and heritage destination model within Central Asia [25].

Fergana, Andijan, Namangan, and Urgench, as regional centers with foreign university branches, international and private higher education institutions, and developed service infrastructure, can specialize in educational tourism based on modern higher education and service provision.

Such specialization would ensure that regions do not compete with each other solely in a direct and uniform manner but instead contribute to the formation of a unified national educational tourism system.

At the new stage of educational tourism development in Uzbekistan, competition among regions is determined not merely by the number of higher education institutions but by the comprehensive value offered to international students. The findings of the study allow the following key conclusions to be formulated [26].

First, Tashkent remains the country's largest global academic center. Its main competitive advantages include foreign higher education institutions, developed infrastructure, international transportation connections, and an international academic environment.

Second, Bukhara can develop a distinctive educational tourism product by integrating international accreditation with historical and cultural tourism.

Third, Fergana is emerging as one of the most diversified regional centers, combining public, private, Korean, and European educational models, particularly in the field of medical education.

Fourth, through Kokand University and the multidisciplinary Kokand State University, Kokand is developing a model that integrates pedagogy, technical sciences, engineering, natural sciences, economics, arts, culture, and sports within a unified academic environment.

Fifth, Andijan is developing a private, multilingual, and medical education model through Andijan State University, Andijan State University of Foreign Languages, Andijan Institute of Agriculture, and the Andijan branch of Kokand University [27].

Sixth, the Urgench–Khiva educational tourism corridor has significant development potential. The international ranking and accreditation achievements of Urgench State University, the new private and innovative educational model of RANCH University, and the international accreditation and international student services of Ma'mun University are contributing to the formation of a multicentric educational ecosystem in the region. Urgench State University's position in the 661–680 range in the QS Asia University Rankings 2025 and its six programs receiving ASIIN accreditation in 2026 are important factors strengthening its academic competitiveness.

Seventh, education in English and Russian is one of the strategic factors in attracting international students. While English provides access to the global student market, Russian creates an additional competitive advantage for accessing Central Asian and CIS markets [28], [29], [30].

5. Conclusion

Eighth, the competitiveness of educational tourism should not be assessed solely through university rankings. Rankings, accreditation, language of instruction, price, student dormitories and urban infrastructure, international services, and tourism attractiveness collectively determine the actual competitiveness of a destination. Based on these findings, it is appropriate to

develop a model of “a unified national educational tourism brand – multicentric regional educational destinations” for Uzbekistan. Within this model, Tashkent can be positioned as a global academic center; Bukhara, Samarkand, Kokand, and Khiva as academic and cultural heritage centers; Fergana, Andijan, Urgench, and Namangan as regional centers combining education and modern services; and Chirchiq as an educational tourism center integrated into the metropolitan area of Tashkent. As a result, educational tourism can become an important economic mechanism for Uzbekistan not only by internationalizing higher education but also by expanding the export of educational services, increasing foreign currency revenues, developing the service sector in the regions, attracting investment in student accommodation, and creating new employment opportunities.

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