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Uzbekistan Expanded Higher Education. Did Equality of Opportunity Follow? *Evidence from 2010–2023*

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Key Messages

- **Expansion has changed the scale of access.** Higher-education institutions rose from 119 to 222, and enrollment passed 1.4 million.
- **Opportunity has not equalized automatically.** Family background remains closely linked to who reaches university.
- **The next reform task is completion.** Track whether first-generation, rural, and lower-income students enter, remain enrolled, and complete degrees.

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Introduction: expansion and opportunity

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has made higher-education expansion a central part of its development strategy. New universities, branch campuses, and enrollment growth have created opportunities that were much more limited a decade ago. This matters in Uzbekistan, where a large youth population is entering the labor market and demand for higher-level skills is rising.

Capacity is not the same as equality of opportunity. New places reduce inequality only if students from less advantaged families and lower-access regions can prepare for admission, receive clear information about programs and costs, finance study, relocate when necessary, remain enrolled, and complete degrees. If these barriers remain, expansion may increase the number of students while leaving the social pattern of access largely unchanged.

This brief asks whether Uzbekistan's rapid higher-education expansion has been accompanied by broader opportunity. The answer is cautious. The system has grown substantially, but family background remains closely linked to who reaches higher education, while regional access remains uneven. The next phase of reform should therefore judge success not only by the number of institutions and seats, but by whether first-generation, rural, and lower-income students can use the new capacity.

Expansion is clear. Equalization is less clear. The next step is to make expansion work for students who are less prepared, less informed, or less able to pay.

The expansion is real, but uneven

Since 2017, Uzbekistan's higher-education system has grown rapidly. The number of institutions rose from 119 in 2019/20 to 222 by 2024/25. Total enrollment increased from about 441,000 to over 1.4 million.[1] But this growth was not uniform. The national average more than doubled (from 73 to 180 students per 1,000 youth aged 20–24), but no region outside Tashkent city has caught up with Tashkent city's 2020/21 level (Figure 1).

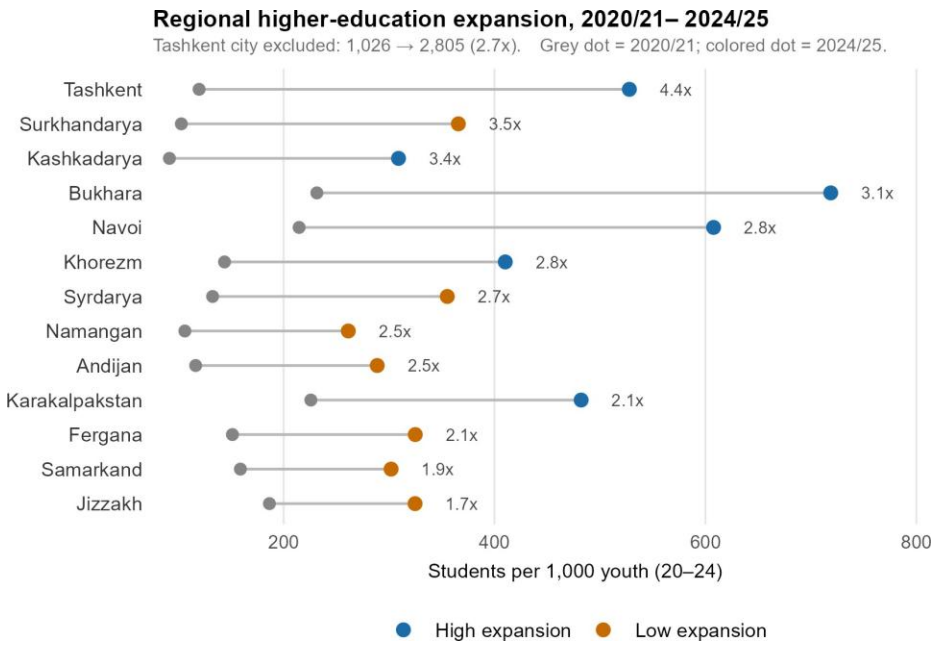

Figure 1: Regional higher-education growth, 2020/21 to 2024/25 (excluding Tashkent city). *Source: Administrative higher-education series. Indicator definition: total students enrolled in higher-education organizations located in each region (headcount persons), divided by the region's population ages 20–24, multiplied by 1,000. Grey dots show 2020/21 levels; colored dots show 2024/25 levels. Tashkent city is excluded from plotted regions (it rises from ~1,026 to ~2,805 per 1,000), consistent with concentration of institutions and enrollment in the capital. Regions are colored by expansion intensity.*

Expansion creates more places. It does not show which students can actually reach them. In a system where preparation, information, exam readiness, transport, tuition, and living costs differ across families and regions, new capacity can widen access in absolute numbers while leaving relative opportunity gaps intact.

For that reason, the key issue is not only whether Uzbekistan has more higher-education places. It is whether expansion is weakening the link between family background, geography, and educational attainment.

Family background remains strongly linked to attainment

Three waves of the Life in Transition Survey show that family background remains closely linked to educational attainment.[2] In 2022–23, 87 percent of respondents whose parents had university degrees also attained a degree. Respondents from upper-secondary backgrounds were split between remaining at the same level and moving up. The sample is too small to report a reliable estimate for lower-origin respondents.

A persistence score, which measures how closely children's educational position tracks their parents', confirms this pattern across waves.[3] Persistence rose between 2010 and 2016 and remained high in 2022–23 (Figure 2). The later decline should be interpreted cautiously. In broad international comparison, these levels fall in a moderate-to-high range for developing and middle-income countries.[4]

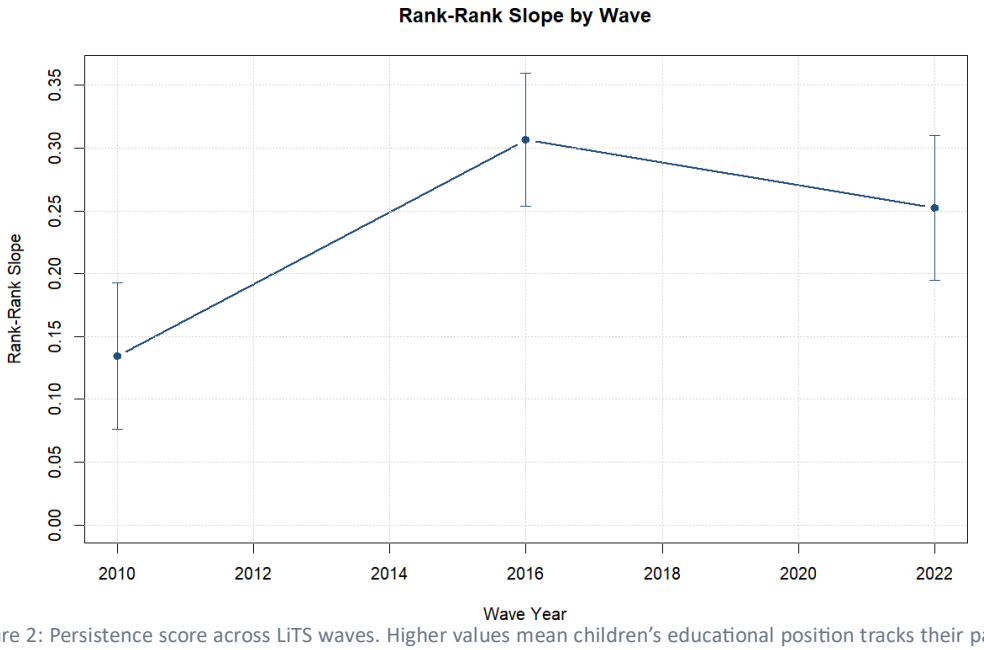

Figure 2: Persistence score across LiTS waves. Higher values mean children's educational position tracks their parents' more closely. *Source: LiTS waves II (2010), III (2016), IV (2022–23). Adults aged 25–64 in Uzbekistan. Shaded band: 95% confidence interval.*

Controlling for region, birth cohort, urban residence, and gender does not change the main result. Parental education remains the strongest predictor of attainment in models combining all three survey waves. Adding migration exposure and household structure barely changes the parental-education coefficient. Urban residents show higher upward mobility than rural residents in every wave. Regional variation is also wide: in 2022–23, the persistence score ranged from near zero in some regions to above 0.4 in Tashkent city.

The evidence does not yet show that expansion is weakening the link between parental background and educational attainment. This should be read carefully. Most adults in the survey completed education before the post-2017 reforms, so the survey cannot yet show the full effect of expansion. It does show, however, that inherited advantage remains strong.

More places, by themselves, are unlikely to close the gap because access to higher education is shaped long before admission. Students from better-resourced families often have stronger secondary preparation, better access to tutoring, more information about application procedures and fields of study, and greater ability to cover exam preparation, transport, relocation, contract tuition, and living costs. These mechanisms help explain why new capacity may still be used mainly by students who were already better positioned to compete for it.

Household resources shape who can use new opportunities

Family resources help determine who can use new capacity. In high-expansion regions, 26 percent of remittance-receiving households direct remittances toward education, compared with 16 percent

in low-expansion regions.[5] About 63 percent of households report positive education spending, and 14 percent pay for tutoring.

These costs matter because access to higher education is partly built outside the university itself. Families may need to pay for tutoring, internet, devices, transport to testing centers, application-related costs, relocation to another city, dormitory alternatives, and contract-based tuition. When these costs rise, students from lower-income and less-educated families face barriers even when more places formally exist.

The 2022–23 LiTS child module covers roughly 180 households with school-age children. The sample is small, but reported disruption was large.[6]

Figure 3 summarizes the scale.

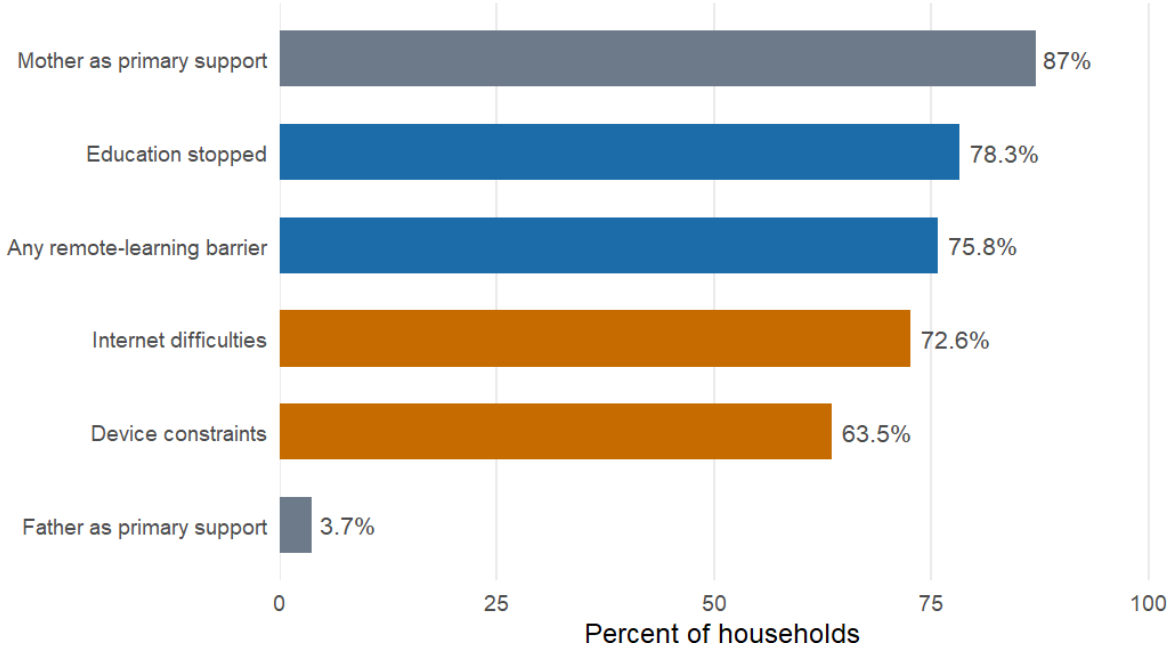

Figure 3: COVID-19 disruption and household learning support. *Source: LiTS IV (2022–23) child module, Uzbekistan subsample (~180 households).*

78 percent of households reported that a child's education stopped entirely. Nearly three in four faced at least one barrier to remote learning: 73 percent cited internet problems, 64 percent lacked adequate devices. When formal schooling was interrupted, mothers provided most reported learning support: 87 percent of cases, compared with 4 percent for fathers. Families with less-educated parents reported more internet and device difficulties.

This matters beyond the COVID period. When instruction moves outside the classroom, household

internet, devices, and adult time become part of the education system. Families with fewer resources have less capacity to absorb that shift. The same logic applies to tertiary expansion: new institutional capacity helps most when students also have the information, preparation, and support needed to use it.

These barriers are not only household-level problems. They reflect structural differences across the education pathway: unequal access to high-quality secondary schools, uneven availability of exam preparation, regional differences in institutional quality, the growing role of private tutoring, and the financial burden of contract tuition and relocation. Expansion can therefore reproduce inequality if the new places are easiest to use for students who are already better prepared, better informed, and better financed.

What the evidence can and cannot say

This brief shows that family background remains closely linked to educational attainment in the available adult survey profiles. It does not estimate the causal effect of the post-2017 expansion.

Four limits matter. The LiTS waves are repeated cross-sections, not a family panel. Most adults observed in 2022–23 completed education before the post-2017 expansion. The 2016-to-2022 change in persistence is not statistically clear. The COVID child module is small, at roughly 180 households.

These limits narrow the claim. They do not remove it. Uzbekistan has expanded higher education quickly, but the available evidence does not yet show that inherited educational advantage has weakened in adult attainment profiles.

Three priorities for the next reform phase

The evidence points to three tasks for the next phase: intervene earlier, judge expansion by completion, and monitor equity as routine. The next three years are a practical window to pair expansion targets with equity targets before another cohort moves through admission and first-year study.

1. Start equity support before university admission. By the time students apply to tertiary education, family background has already shaped preparation, information, and confidence. The Ministry of Preschool and School Education and regional education departments should focus support at grades

9 and 11, when students make consequential choices about upper-secondary pathways, exams, and further study.

Rural districts and schools with historically low university-entry rates could receive targeted preparatory programs, subsidized entrance-exam tutoring, and diagnostic assessments linked to remedial instruction. Universities could build mentorship pipelines with nearby secondary schools, pairing current students and faculty with pupils who would be first-generation applicants. Information sessions should explain application procedures, fields of study, contract costs, scholarship options, and dormitory availability in plain language.

The basic indicators should be entrance-exam participation, application rates, admission rates, and first-year enrollment, reported by region, gender, rural-urban status, and first-generation status where data allow.

2. Judge tertiary expansion by who enters, stays, and finishes. New institutions and branch campuses should not be judged only by seats created. They should also show whether students from lower-access districts enter, remain enrolled, and complete the first year.

This means shifting from a capacity target to a progression target. Higher-education institutions in high-expansion regions should work directly with secondary schools to identify students who are academically prepared but financially or informationally constrained. Bridge programs before the first semester could help first-generation students adjust to academic requirements, administrative procedures, and urban living costs. Where costs are a barrier, need-based grants, dormitory places, transport support, and preparatory courses should be targeted to students whose parents did not attend university.

First-year retention should become a routine performance measure, not only an internal university statistic. Institutions receiving public support for expansion should report whether students from rural areas, lower-access districts, and first-generation backgrounds remain enrolled after the first year and progress toward completion.

3. Publish annual equity indicators. Uzbekistan does not yet have a regular public measure of whether higher education is becoming more equal. The first step is to publish annual enrollment and completion rates by region and gender using existing administrative data. The next step is to add exam participation, retention, rural-urban status, and household-background indicators from surveys.

A practical approach would be an annual higher-education equity dashboard. At minimum, it should report enrollment, first-year retention, completion, and scholarship coverage by region, gender, and rural-urban origin. As data systems improve, it should add parental education, first-generation status, district of secondary schooling, dormitory access, and type of tuition financing where data collection allows.

The purpose of this dashboard would not be to rank universities mechanically. It would be to show whether expansion is narrowing inherited gaps or simply increasing capacity within the same unequal pattern. Public reporting would also help policymakers identify which regions, institutions, and groups require targeted support.

Full methods, diagnostics, and robustness tests are reported in the companion research paper and technical appendix.

What Would Success Look Like?

Expansion should not be treated as automatic evidence of fairer access. Uzbekistan has created substantially more higher-education capacity, but opportunity will expand only if students from less advantaged families and lower-access regions can use that capacity.

In five years, success would mean more first-generation students entering tertiary education, smaller rural-urban gaps in completion, weaker family-background persistence, and public equity indicators updated every year. Without those measures, Uzbekistan can count expansion, but it cannot tell whether opportunity is expanding with it.

Notes

1. Administrative higher-education series compiled from official sources. Covers all recognized higher education institutions nationwide. The regional enrollment rate is an institution-location measure, not a residence-based student rate; the extracted administrative series does not split enrollment by citizenship or prior place of residence, and it is reported as headcount persons, not FTE.
2. The Life in Transition Survey (LiTS) is conducted by the EBRD. LiTS II and III cover 10 oblasts; LiTS IV covers all 14.
3. The analysis uses repeated cross-sections, not a family panel. The age-eligible sample is 3,155 adults aged 25–64; rank–rank estimates use 2,874 adults with valid own and parental education ranks. Parental education is measured as the highest observed parental education when both parents are observed; when one parent is observed, that parent's education is used.
4. The persistence score is a within-wave rank–rank slope. Higher values mean children's educational rank follows parental rank more closely. The 2010 wave recorded parental education differently and had higher missingness; sensitivity checks preserve the wave ordering but the 2010 level carries more uncertainty.

5. Hertz et al. (2008) place intergenerational education correlations between about 0.20 and 0.60 across countries. See also Narayan et al. (2018) and Aydemir and Yazici (2019).
6. Descriptive comparison from the Household Budget Survey (2021–2025), split by regional expansion intensity.
7. Respondents with a child enrolled before COVID and non-missing parental schooling. Results describe patterns; they are not causal estimates.