

Doctoral Expansion without Quality Gains: Lessons from Uzbekistan

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Many post-Soviet governments attempted to strengthen doctoral education through publication requirements and financial incentives to improve quality and attract talent. Uzbekistan's recent experience reveals both gains and limits. Despite more demanding top-down rules, doctoral awards have expanded rapidly without corresponding quality gains. Weak capacity, informal practices, and low trust in enforcement foster superficial compliance and highlight the need for bottom-up participatory governance that aligns rules, incentives, capacity building, and shared norms of academic integrity.

Doctoral education has become central to the science and technology policies of many countries, where it is often viewed as a driver of innovation, academic workforce development, and national competitiveness. This is especially relevant in emerging economies, where universities are expected to strengthen research-teaching and research-innovation linkages and support economic modernization. By transmitting values and norms that shape the future behavior of citizens and professionals, doctoral education is also assumed to promote fairness, impartiality, and meritocracy as foundations of pro-growth institutions.

Uzbekistan, a late reformer in doctoral education, offers a revealing case. Since 2017, doctoral education has been tied closely to the country's modernization agenda. The government's 2030 goals include nearly doubling the share of academic staff with doctorates to 70 percent, improving research quality, increasing international visibility, raising university rankings, and making higher education a corruption-free sector. Yet Uzbekistan's experience, echoed across several post-Soviet countries, shows that, while the reform logic is compelling, the chosen approach captures only part of the challenge. Where capacity is limited, enforcement is uneven, and informal practices are prevalent, reform risks producing the appearance of compliance rather than genuine quality gains.

The Appearance of Formal Compliance

Uzbekistan has combined more demanding formal requirements with financial incentives intended to attract talent and improve research quality and impact. Doctoral candidates must now publish in peer-reviewed journals and provide evidence of real-world application to defend their dissertations. At the same time, academic salaries have increased up to fourfold, stipends have become more attractive, and holders of PhD and Doctor of Science degrees receive salary premiums of up to 30 percent and 60 percent, respectively. Together, these measures have raised the returns to doctoral study.

Despite the more demanding rules, doctoral awards have expanded rapidly: more than 6,000 doctorates have been awarded since 2017. Yet, because institutional capacity has remained weak, the expected quality gains have not materialized. Candidates often lack access to contemporary literature, databases, methods training, language support, and adequate supervision, while many supervisors have limited exposure to international research practices.

This creates predictable distortions. In weak-capacity environments, rules meant to raise standards can shift attention from genuine knowledge production to symbolic compliance. Publication counts, evidence letters, and completed defenses then become indicators of procedural success without necessarily reflecting independent research capability. In a top-down higher education governance context, universities and supervisors face pressure to demonstrate progress against quantitative targets rather than substantive research competence, while candidates are incentivized to secure the outputs needed for defense.

Uzbekistan's experience therefore illustrates a broader reform dilemma. Publication rules, financial incentives, and capacity investment all matter, but their effects depend on the institutional environment in which they operate. Where enforcement is uneven, informal practices are normalized, and trust in merit-based rules is weak, more demanding requirements produce compliance on paper while leaving underlying academic standards largely unchanged. Similar dynamics observed in Central and Eastern Europe, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine suggest that doctoral reform cannot rely on rules, targets, and incentives alone. Its effectiveness depends on whether formal requirements are embedded in adequate capacity, participatory governance, and shared professional norms that make merit-based achievement the only credible route to academic advancement.

Limits of Incentives and Metrics

Financial incentives can reshape behavior, but not always as intended. In Uzbekistan, higher salaries, stipends, and degree premiums have made academic careers and doctoral study more attractive after years of low pay. Yet when the returns to doctoral degrees rise faster than research capacity, professional norms, and confidence in impartial enforcement, they also raise the value of shortcuts. If a doctorate brings salary gains, promotion prospects, and status while quality assurance remains weak, some candidates may come to see the degree less as a scholarly achievement than as a credential to be secured. A system may produce more doctoral graduates, publications, and formally compliant dissertations without developing independent researchers. The result is a capacity illusion: an apparent expansion of research capability without the institutional foundations needed to sustain high-quality scholarship.

In Uzbekistan, this illusion is reinforced by informal practices throughout the doctoral journey. At admission, candidates often rely on informal connections. In selecting supervisors, influence within academic councils can sometimes outweigh research expertise. During doctoral study, informal support may help candidates navigate formal requirements. Publication requirements may be met through predatory journals or paid publication services, dissertations may be partially or wholly outsourced through ghostwriting, evidence of real-world application may be secured through personal networks, and dissertation defenses may involve rehearsed responses or prearranged questions.

Importantly, these practices are not merely isolated abuses. They reflect a deeper misalignment between incentives, capacity, and academic norms. When formal requirements are difficult to satisfy through legitimate scholarly effort, and when enforcement is perceived as negotiable or selectively applied, candidates face strong incentives to pursue procedural success rather than substantive research development.

Research Environment as a Shared Resource

A doctoral system is more than regulations, funding, and degree requirements. It is also a research environment shaped by material resources and less tangible but more critical factors such as trust, reputation, peer judgment, ethical standards, and confidence that merit-based rules apply equally to all. Research quality depends on shared expectations about acceptable scholarly behavior. Supervisors must mentor rather than merely

approve paperwork, examiners must assess dissertations substantively, universities must treat integrity as a professional obligation, and candidates must believe that genuine effort will be recognized and shortcuts sanctioned.

This environment is a shared resource: it is sustained when actors protect standards and depleted when they tolerate practices that weaken trust. If predatory publications are accepted, ghostwritten dissertations pass, evidence letters circulate without genuine application, informal networks smooth defense, and sanctions are rare or selective, confidence in formal rules erodes. A self-reinforcing cycle follows: limited capacity makes legitimate compliance difficult; high rewards increase shortcuts; shortcuts weaken confidence in rules; and declining confidence makes informal support more attractive, privileging connectedness over merit.

From Control to Coproduction

The policy implication is not that publication requirements should be abandoned, financial incentives dismissed, or capacity building neglected. Candidates and supervisors need better access to infrastructure, literature, methods training, writing support, and structured supervision. These investments are essential.

But they must be embedded in credible academic governance. Doctoral reform should move from compliance control to the coproduction of standards. Academic communities need a meaningful role in defining quality expectations, designing supervisory responsibilities, reviewing progress, identifying predatory publishing risks, and developing fair procedures for sanctioning misconduct. Supervisor development should cover research design, publication ethics, academic writing, mentoring, and responsible authorship.

Uzbekistan's experience, therefore, offers lessons for other post-Soviet countries and beyond. Doctoral reform cannot be achieved through ambitious targets, financial incentives, and capacity investment alone. The greater challenge is to build an academic environment in which shared norms and sustained integrity make formal rules credible in practice. In post-Soviet contexts, this also requires greater institutional autonomy and merit-based accountability. If reform strengthens shared responsibility and credible academic standards, it can become a foundation for research capacity and institutional modernization. Without shared norms, academic integrity, and autonomous institutions capable of competing on merit, doctoral reform may expand credentials while leaving the deeper architecture of research quality unchanged.

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