



The Evolution of Policy-Oriented and Applied Research in Uzbekistan: From Institutional Isolation to Strategic Integration

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of policy-oriented and applied research in Uzbekistan, with a focus on the historical, institutional, and geopolitical factors that have shaped its trajectory from the Soviet period to the present. Using a historical-institutional and documentary analysis approach, the research investigates reforms, policy frameworks, and institutional developments, with particular emphasis on the post-2016 era under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The findings show that Uzbekistan has transitioned from a centralized, planning-based research system to a modernized and pragmatically driven model that directly supports national development goals. Key reforms include the institutionalization of implementation-based doctoral research, the establishment of advanced think tanks, and the requirement for international publication, all of which have expanded research infrastructure, enhanced human capital, and increased global competitiveness. The University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) is highlighted as a pioneering institution that connects academia, government, and international actors in advancing applied and policy-relevant research. The study concludes that these transformations represent a paradigmatic shift toward integrating research into governance and development, while also proposing initiatives to deepen Uzbekistan–Afghanistan academic cooperation through joint research programs, expert exchanges, and institutional partnerships. Such measures are expected to strengthen regional stability, foster cross-border knowledge production, and support the emergence of a collaborative academic ecosystem in Central and South Asia.

Keywords: Academic Cooperation, Policy Integration, Research System Evolution, Science Governance, Uzbekistan Reforms.

Introduction

The formation and development of policy-oriented and applied research in Uzbekistan has undergone several distinct phases shaped by institutional and structural constraints. These transformations not only reflect the country's specific scientific trajectory but also provide valuable insights for the international community. Uzbekistan inherited the Soviet model of research organization, characterized by centralized planning and rigid five-year cycles, which limited institutional flexibility and created a persistent divide between scientific knowledge and its practical application. As Gustave Le Bon observed in his comparison between East and West, the integration of science with practice is a defining advantage of

Western societies, whereas in contexts like Uzbekistan, theoretical knowledge often remained detached from real-world implementation.

Following independence, the country faced significant challenges in revitalizing its research system. The absence of a coherent methodology for applied and policy-relevant inquiry, coupled with deficient infrastructure and underdeveloped research facilities, hindered the production of solution-oriented knowledge. These structural gaps were further aggravated by chronic underfunding, which rendered academic careers unattractive and unsustainable for younger generations. Moreover, large-scale brain drain depleted intellectual capital, as many highly trained specialists chose not to return after studying abroad. Security concerns, particularly after the terrorist attacks of 1999 and 2005, shifted state priorities toward counter-radicalism, relegating science and education to the margins of national policy. At the same time, strained relations with neighboring countries created conditions of strategic isolation, restricting cross-border collaboration and international engagement.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics impeded the emergence of a robust national research school capable of addressing urgent social and political challenges. Nonetheless, critical reassessment of this period has laid a foundation for new strategies that aim to reconcile domestic needs with global imperatives, thereby opening pathways for a more integrated and policy-relevant research environment.

Material and Method

This study was conducted in Uzbekistan, serving as the main geographical and political context for analyzing the evolution of policy-oriented and applied research. The temporal scope spans from the Soviet period (1924–1991) through the early independence era (1991–2016) to the post-2016 reform period under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, while also considering prospects for Uzbekistan–Afghanistan academic cooperation within the broader Central and South Asian framework.

The research employed qualitative methods, combining historical-institutional and documentary analysis. Data were collected from a wide array of primary and secondary sources, including official policy documents, government decrees, legislative acts, university regulations, reform programs, scholarly publications, and reports from international organizations and think tanks. Triangulation of these sources was applied to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

A historical-institutional approach was used to trace the evolution of Uzbekistan's research system, identifying key institutional transformations, path dependencies, and critical junctures. This was complemented by systematic documentary analysis of policy frameworks, reform agendas, and organizational structures, with particular focus on post-2016 reforms in doctoral education, think tank development, international publication standards, and research–policy integration.

As the study relied exclusively on documentary and secondary data, it did not involve human or animal subjects, and thus no ethical approval was required. All materials were publicly accessible and properly cited to ensure transparency and academic integrity.

Findings

The legacy of soviet-era education

In the aftermath of independence, Uzbekistan encountered a series of profound challenges in advancing applied research. Scientific output remained largely confined within academic institutions, seldom translating into practical solutions capable of improving societal well-being. Several structural barriers were particularly acute:

Absence of a coherent methodology for the development of applied and policy-relevant research. The lack of a systematic framework hindered the articulation of strategic scientific priorities aligned with the evolving needs of society and the state.

Deficient infrastructure: The underdeveloped material and technical base – including a shortage of modern laboratories, research institutes, and technology parks – constrained the capacity to conduct high-quality, solution-oriented research.

Brain Drain: The large-scale outflow of scientific talent significantly weakened Uzbekistan's research landscape. The emigration of qualified professionals and young specialists diminished the country's intellectual capital. The "UMID" program, which aimed to send students abroad for advanced education, yielded limited results: a substantial proportion of its graduates chose to remain overseas, opting not to return to Uzbekistan.

Chronic underfunding of scientific activity further exacerbated the problem. Minimal state investment in research made it difficult to attract and retain early-career scholars. At certain points, monthly stipends for doctoral students amounted to as little as USD 100, rendering academic careers economically unsustainable and unattractive to younger generations.

Security Priorities. In addition to structural challenges, Uzbekistan's scientific development was significantly shaped by concerns over internal and external security. Following a series of terrorist attacks in 1999 and 2005, the government under President Islam Karimov shifted its focus toward national security and counter-radicalism. As a result, science and education were relegated to the periphery of the state agenda.

Strategic Isolation: Tense and often adversarial relations with several neighboring Central Asian states further constrained the development of cross-border scientific collaboration. This not only limited the inflow of external resources and expertise but also hindered Uzbekistan's integration into regional academic and research networks. These dynamics fostered a condition of strategic isolation in which science was deprived of meaningful support – both from domestic institutions and from the international scholarly community. The combined effect of these factors impeded the emergence of a national research school capable of addressing urgent social and political challenges. Nevertheless, the critical reassessment of this period has laid the groundwork for new strategies in scientific development – strategies that aim to balance domestic priorities with global imperatives.

Uzbekistan 2.0

Since 2016, following the election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the country has embarked on a broad agenda of reforms spanning domestic and foreign policy, as well as the education and research sectors. Particular emphasis has been placed on the development of applied and policy-oriented research as a strategic

resource for national modernization (Education Global Practice, 2016; Akramov & Khamidov, 2024).

These transformations have unfolded against the backdrop of shifting political dynamics in Central Asia. The region has become a top priority in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Diplomatic relations with all neighboring countries have significantly improved; long-standing issues such as the delimitation and demarcation of state borders and the management of transboundary water resources have been successfully addressed. Regular Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State have been institutionalized, facilitating a shift away from a predominantly security-centered regional agenda toward pragmatic cooperation in economic development, social policy, human capital, and education (Mirziyoyev, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

Among the key legal and strategic documents that have shaped the trajectory of higher education and scientific development are the Presidential Decree "On additional measures to further improve the professional education system" (2019), the Law "On Education" (2020), and the "Uzbekistan - 2030" Development Strategy (2023), which collectively aim to enhance access, quality, and applied research capabilities in universities (Lex.uz, 2019, 2020, 2023).

- 1) The Presidential Decree "On additional measures to further improve the professional education system" (Lex.uz, 2019), aimed at modernizing vocational training and aligning it with labor market demands;
- 2) The Law "On Education" (Lex.uz, 2020), which established new legal and institutional frameworks for the education system, including specific provisions for promoting research within universities;
- 3) The "Uzbekistan - 2030" Development Strategy (Lex.uz, 2023), in which Goals 7 and 8 focus on strengthening the system of higher education, while Goals 9 through 12 address the development of science and innovation, including international research cooperation and the digitalization of scientific infrastructure.

The strategic objectives of higher education legislation can be outlined as follows: expanding access to higher education and enhancing the quality of training for highly qualified specialists; improving the organizational and managerial capacities of higher education institutions, along with strengthening their material and technical infrastructure; enriching fundamental research by incorporating new directions in line with contemporary scientific and technological demands; strengthening applied research in rapidly developing sectors of the economy and introducing a cluster-based system of cooperation among enterprises, universities, and research institutions; increasing the proportion of young researchers and supporting their scientific endeavors; promoting innovation activities across all domains and encouraging scientific research and innovative initiatives; and enhancing the international competitiveness of the higher education system (The Law "On Education," 2020; On additional measures, 2019; On the Strategy "Uzbekistan-2030," 2023).

With the onset of a new wave of political and economic reforms in Uzbekistan after 2016, the country's national science policy underwent fundamental transformations. One of the key strategic shifts involved a rethinking of the governance methodology in the scientific sphere, aimed at bridging the gap between theoretical research and the practical needs of society. The new model of scientific development in Uzbekistan is grounded in the integration of research into real processes of socio-political and economic transformation—reflecting a broader conceptual turn toward “science for life” (On the Strategy “Uzbekistan-2030,” 2023).

In practical terms, this shift has manifested in the active establishment of a modern research infrastructure. Laboratories, think tanks, IT parks, and innovation incubators have been created and are being rapidly developed, all geared toward the production of applied knowledge and problem-solving tools. Today, Uzbekistan hosts more than 30 policy research institutes conducting studies in areas such as public administration, economics, law, sociology, civil society, and other strategically significant domains (Muratov, 2024; Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Uzbekistan, 2025). These institutions are emerging as crucial intermediaries linking academic scholarship, government agencies, and the private sector (“About university,” n.d.; “The Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS),” n.d.).

Special emphasis has been placed on the development of human capital. In May 2025, in line with the renewed priorities of Uzbekistan's science and education policy, the “El-Yurt Umidi” Foundation under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan was restructured and relaunched in an updated institutional format. The Foundation is intended to serve as a key platform for training a new generation of scientific and administrative professionals through advanced education and professional development in leading foreign and domestic academic institutions (“The El-Yurt Umidi Foundation,” 2025).

One of the most notable achievements in recent years has been a substantial increase in doctoral stipends, which now exceed USD 550 per month—a sharp contrast to the previous level of financial support provided to early-career researchers. This measure is aimed at incentivizing academic careers and curbing the outflow of intellectual talent abroad (“The El-Yurt Umidi Foundation,” 2025).

Promising directions in the higher education sector include expanding access to higher education, integrating digital technologies, enhancing the effectiveness of research activities, promoting spiritual and moral development, combating corruption, and increasing investment attractiveness. These goals are essential for ensuring equal opportunities, fostering innovation, and improving the international standing of Uzbekistan's higher education system (On the Strategy “Uzbekistan-2030,” 2023; The Law “On Education,” 2020).

Taken together, these reforms mark Uzbekistan's entry into a new paradigm of scientific development—one in which institutional modernization, investment in human capital, and a focus on the applied relevance of research play a defining role. This emerging model holds promise for the sustainable production of knowledge that is strategically aligned with national development goals and integrated into the global scientific community (On the Strategy “Uzbekistan-2030,” 2023; Mirziyoyev, 2024).

The role of uwed in advancing applied research in uzbekistan.

The University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) stands as one of Uzbekistan's premier institutions of higher learning, enjoying a high level of academic prestige both

nationally and across the broader regional and international landscape (The University of World Economy and Diplomacy, 2024). The university specializes in the training of professionals in strategic fields such as international relations, international law, and global economics, thereby contributing to the intellectual and managerial capacity of the country's foreign policy and economic governance apparatus ("About university," n.d.). UWED's institutional history reflects the broader political and developmental transformations that Uzbekistan has undergone since the Soviet period. During the Soviet era, the university (then functioning as part of the elite cadre training system for the Communist Party leadership) served as a channel for preparing senior officials within the government hierarchy. Following Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, the university was reoriented to become a key center for training the national diplomatic and state elite ("About university," n.d.).

A milestone in UWED's institutional evolution was the issuance of Presidential Decree No. 330 in 2022, which laid the groundwork for the university's comprehensive modernization (On measures for the systemic reform of the activities of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, 2022). As part of this reform, UWED was designated a "smart university", actively integrating digital technologies into both educational and administrative processes. This transition has enabled the modernization of curricula and teaching methodologies in alignment with international academic standards (On measures for the systemic reform, 2022).

The university's current development model is based on a fundamentally new approach to scientific research—one in which academic knowledge is not isolated from social and political reality, but rather embedded directly in processes of public administration and decision-making. Within this paradigm, science is not viewed as an autonomous or detached domain, but rather as a functional instrument for enhancing policy effectiveness and modernizing state institutions ("About university," n.d.).

One of the key innovations reflecting UWED's practice-oriented approach to research is the mandatory requirement to demonstrate the applied value of doctoral research outcomes. Doctoral candidates at UWED must obtain an official implementation certificate from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, confirming that the novel contributions of their dissertation have been integrated into the Ministry's operational practices ("About university," n.d.). This requirement represents a critical step toward cultivating a culture of accountability and reinforcing the link between academic research and real-world public policy implementation.

Another important benchmark of scientific productivity is the mandatory publication of research articles in peer-reviewed journals indexed in international databases such as Scopus. This requirement not only enhances the international competitiveness of Uzbek scholarship but also fosters deeper integration of national academic discourse into the global scientific arena ("About university," n.d.).

UWED also serves as an active platform for the exchange of knowledge and expert dialogue. The university regularly hosts academic conferences and policy roundtables that function not only as forums for intellectual debate but also as sources of analytical input for government bodies. Policy recommendations developed during these events are submitted to the Parliament of the Republic of Uzbekistan, as well as to relevant ministries and agencies. A notable example includes the policy recommendations generated under a grant project funded by Japan's Nippon Foundation on the modernization of the higher

education system (“UWED hosted an international seminar...,” 2024). These proposals were adopted by the Senate of Uzbekistan and contributed directly to shaping reforms in national education policy (“UWED hosted an international seminar...,” 2024).

UWED is not only committed to enhancing its academic and institutional performance but also actively explores broader scientific trends and challenges in Uzbekistan. A recent university-led study focusing on the motivations for engaging in scientific research has yielded the following insights (“About university,” n.d.):

Personal motivation to pursue scientific activity is shaped by a variety of factors, with the most significant being creativity, intellectual engagement, and societal contribution. These trends underline the importance of institutional strategies that support creativity, applied research, and international integration (Akhadali Ugli, 2025; Krouglov, 2022).

- A need for creative activity and a desire for discovery and innovation, cited by 44.9% of respondents.
- An interest in a specific scientific field and the motivation to solve complex research problems, noted by 20.7%.
- A drive for intellectual engagement, including the aspiration to develop individual “know-how” and innovative solutions, mentioned by 10.0%.
- A desire to contribute to society through discoveries and scientific achievements, acknowledged by 7.4%.
- A wish for professional recognition, as reported by 4.3%.
- An ambition for international self-fulfillment, including the opportunity to work in developed countries, expressed by 2.0%.
- Additionally, 8.7% of respondents stated that they had not yet clearly defined their personal reasons for pursuing scientific work.

These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of scientific motivation among emerging researchers in Uzbekistan and emphasize the importance of institutional strategies that support creativity, applied research, and international integration (“About university,” n.d.).

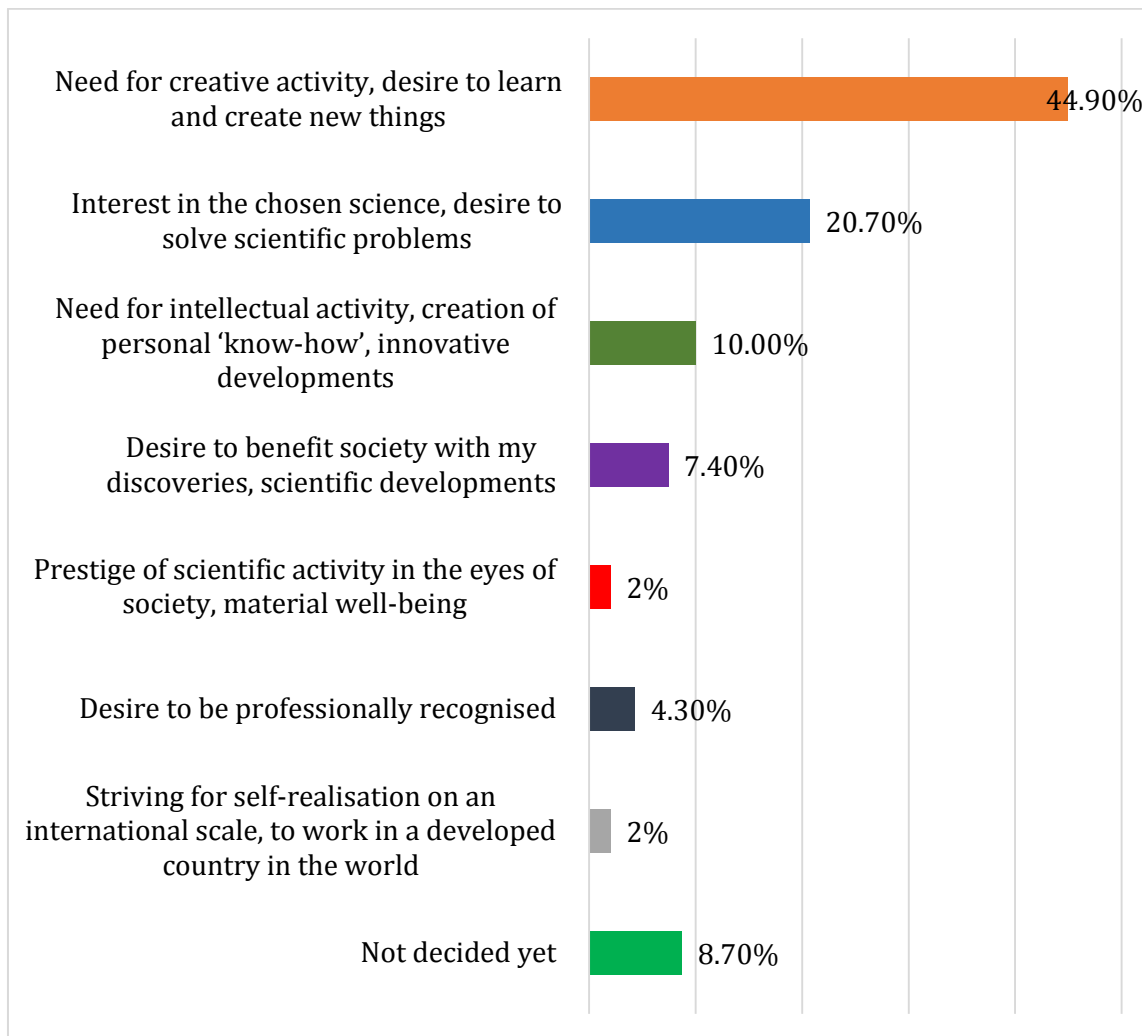


Figure 1. Multifaceted Dimensions of Scientific Motivation among Emerging Researchers in Uzbekistan

Moreover, the findings revealed that a majority of respondents (51.5%) expressed a positive attitude toward scientific research, with a preference for combining both theoretical and empirical approaches. This reflects a comprehensive understanding of the research process and a desire for integrative, knowledge-driven inquiry.

In addition, 29.5% of participants indicated a stronger interest in theoretical research, while 13% preferred empirical studies that focus on real-world application and evidence-based analysis.

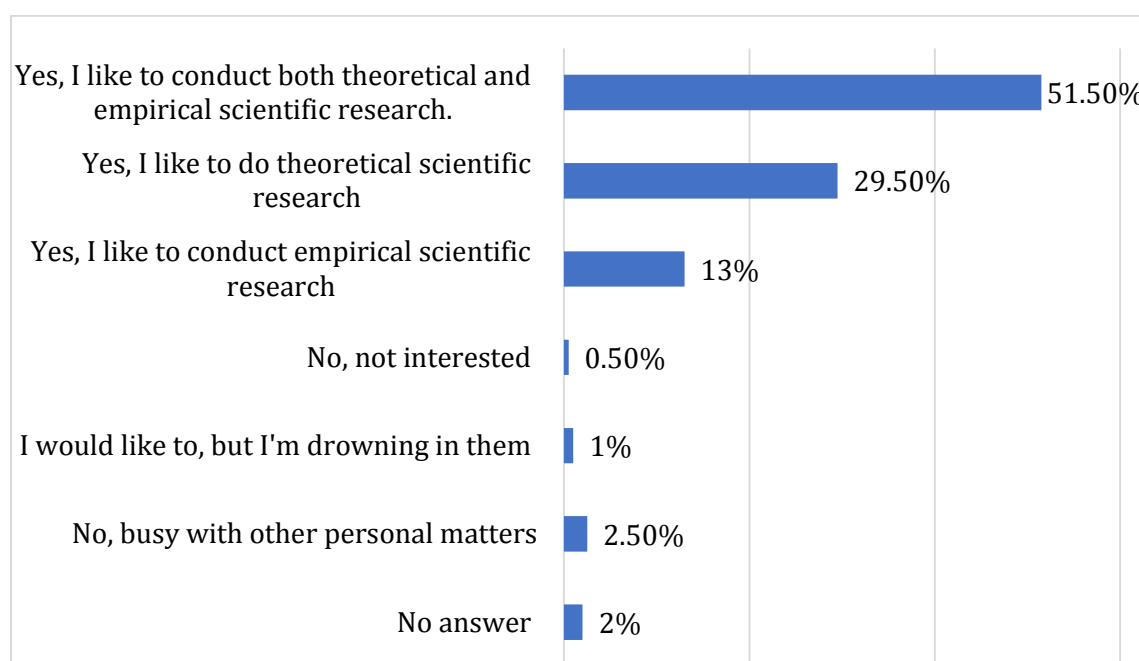


Figure 2. Research Orientation Preferences among Participants

The university places particular emphasis on hands-on professional training. UWED offers a wide range of internship programs in diplomatic missions, government institutions, and international organizations, providing students with not only theoretical grounding but also practical experience necessary for careers in public administration and foreign service. In this way, UWED fosters a unique academic and research ecosystem where education, inquiry, and professional practice are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

One of the most significant directions of recent reforms has been the establishment of the Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS) under the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED). IAIS functions as a high-level policy think tank, providing expert support to the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and other key government institutions. Its faculty and researchers are actively involved in the university's educational process, ensuring a direct and dynamic link between academic training and the practical demands of national policy. A particularly noteworthy initiative is the IAIS Volunteer Club, which enables students to gain hands-on analytical skills by contributing to the preparation of policy briefs and research reports for government agencies. This initiative has become an essential component of practice-oriented education at UWED, helping students develop both professional competencies and a strong sense of civic responsibility.

Beyond its role as a center for applied policy research, IAIS also positions itself as a research-driven educational institution that upholds a mentorship-based training model grounded in the traditional "ustoz-shogird (mentor-disciple)" system. This approach fosters the transmission of knowledge, expertise, and professional ethics from seasoned experts to the next generation of scholars, analysts, and public servants.

Challenges

Despite notable progress in the reform of Uzbekistan's scientific and educational systems – including the efforts undertaken by the University of World Economy and Diplomacy – a number of structural and institutional challenges continue to hinder the full development of applied and policy-oriented research.

First, none of Uzbekistan's higher education institutions currently rank among the world's top 300 universities according to recognized international rankings. This reflects persistent issues in educational quality, research productivity, and international academic integration.

Second, although some progress has been made – many universities, including UWED, now operate under a “University 3.0” model that combines education, research, and elements of entrepreneurship (e.g., organizing summer schools, internships, and providing advisory services to political parties and local governments) – the transition to a “University 4.0” model has yet to occur. The latter requires deep institutional integration with the national economy and an active role in the country's technological and innovation-driven development.

Third, a critical obstacle remains the level of funding for research activities and academic staff. The average monthly salary of analysts and lecturers is approximately \$1,000, significantly lower than the remuneration offered by international organizations (\$2,000–\$3,000). This disparity contributes to the brain drain of qualified professionals. Moreover, the low material and social prestige associated with academic careers further exacerbates the problem, complicating efforts to build a sustainable and vibrant scientific community within the country.

Discussion

The evolution of policy-oriented and applied research in Uzbekistan demonstrates both the persistence of structural legacies and the transformative potential of recent reforms. The study reveals that the Soviet model of centralized planning produced a research system that was largely detached from practical application, reinforcing a divide between theoretical inquiry and societal needs. This historical trajectory explains why, in the immediate post-independence period, Uzbekistan faced significant difficulties in generating knowledge capable of addressing pressing socio-economic challenges. Problems such as chronic underfunding, brain drain, and strategic isolation undermined the formation of a strong national research school, leaving the country dependent on external expertise and fragmented institutional capacity.

Since 2016, however, reforms under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev have laid the foundation for a paradigmatic shift in research governance. By institutionalizing implementation-based doctoral research, strengthening think tanks, and mandating international publication, Uzbekistan has moved toward a model in which knowledge production is directly linked to policy processes and national development goals. These changes resonate with broader global trends emphasizing the integration of science, education, and governance. Importantly, the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) has emerged as a critical intermediary between academia and government, serving as both a training ground for the diplomatic elite and a hub for applied policy research. The introduction of mechanisms such as implementation

certificates for doctoral research outcomes underscores the growing accountability and relevance of academic scholarship in shaping state policy.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. The absence of Uzbek universities in the top tier of global rankings highlights structural deficiencies in educational quality, research productivity, and international visibility. While UWED and other institutions are transitioning to a “University 3.0” model that integrates education, research, and elements of entrepreneurship, the shift to a “University 4.0” model—where universities act as engines of technological innovation and economic transformation—has not yet been realized. Furthermore, disparities in remuneration between domestic academic positions and international organizations continue to fuel brain drain, jeopardizing long-term sustainability of reform efforts.

The findings also have significant regional implications. Uzbekistan’s growing emphasis on academic cooperation with Afghanistan offers a pathway for fostering regional stability and cross-border knowledge production in Central and South Asia. Joint research programs, expert exchanges, and institutional partnerships could establish an academic ecosystem that not only addresses national development needs but also contributes to regional peace and integration. At the same time, such cooperation requires overcoming barriers related to funding, security, and institutional trust.

In summary, Uzbekistan’s research landscape is at a critical juncture. While notable progress has been made in reorienting science toward practical policy application, deeper institutional reforms are necessary to ensure sustainability and international competitiveness. Strengthening research funding, incentivizing academic careers, and advancing toward the “University 4.0” model are key priorities for the next phase of development. Ultimately, the Uzbek experience underscores the importance of aligning scientific governance with broader national and regional strategies, demonstrating how applied research can serve as both a domestic resource and a tool for fostering regional stability.

Conclusion

The evolution of applied and policy-oriented research in Uzbekistan has undergone distinct phases, spanning from the Soviet era through President Islam Karimov’s tenure to the current leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Institutional reforms under the new administration, coupled with improved regional dynamics, have significantly accelerated the development of research capacity and analytical support for foreign policy initiatives. The University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) has emerged as a central hub for policy-oriented research, providing expert analysis to the Presidential Administration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Defense on economic development, diplomacy, and regional security. Notably, UWED plays a critical role in fostering Uzbek–Afghan cooperation through its Centre for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies, delivering strategic assessments and policy recommendations. To further strengthen institutional capacity and bilateral cooperation, several initiatives are proposed: organizing internships for Afghan and Uzbek researchers, launching student exchange programs, convening international conferences on regional development, and establishing joint quarterly analytical reports. Implementing these measures would reinforce academic and expert-level collaboration, create a durable platform for coordinated approaches to

regional challenges, and support the development of integrated knowledge systems based on the “research center–university–enterprise” triad, ultimately contributing to sustainable regional development.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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