2026 – THE YEAR OF TEACHING YOUTH MODERN SKILLS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR TRANSFORMING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

In December 2025, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev declared 2026 the Year of Training Young People in Modern Professions, signalling a strategic reorientation of Uzbekistan's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system. This article presents a systematic policy and literature review analysing the structural challenges confronting TVET across all subject domains. Drawing on 38 sources—including official presidential decrees, reports from UNESCO, the World Bank, ETF, ETH Zurich/Helvetas, and GIZ (2021–2025), peer-reviewed studies, and institutional survey data—the review identifies six interconnected systemic barriers: persistent skills misalignment with labour-market needs (with employer satisfaction rates of 21–32%), insufficient practical training infrastructure, low social prestige of vocational pathways (TVET enrolment declining from over one million students to approximately 400,000 following the 2017 reform), pronounced regional disparities, teacher and master trainer deficits, and limited lifelong learning pathways. The analysis situates these challenges within the broader international literature on TVET transfer and reform in low- and middle-income countries, drawing on comparative evidence from the German dual system, Swiss apprenticeship models, and South Korean TVET policy. Recent reforms—the establishment of the Agency for Professional Education, expansion of dual education from 13,000 to a targeted

50,000 students, and international partnerships—are evaluated against this evidence base. The article proposes a six-pillar framework of evidence-based recommendations, with explicit attention to implementation barriers, resource requirements, and monitoring mechanisms. It argues that 2026 must serve not as a symbolic year but as a genuine inflection point for structural transformation, and identifies five priority areas for future empirical research.

KEYWORDS: technical and vocational education and training (TVET), modern skills, youth employability, dual education, labour-market alignment, educational reform, Uzbekistan, 21st-century skills, Central Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

On 24 December 2025, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev officially declared 2026 the "Year of Training Young People in Modern Professions," a designation that reflects a broader national strategy to reposition technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as a cornerstone of human-capital development in Uzbekistan (Mirziyoyev 2025). The declaration comes at a critical juncture: Uzbekistan's demographic profile, with approximately 24 million citizens under the age of 29 and roughly 600,000 young people entering the labour market annually (World Bank 2025), creates both an urgent need and a historic opportunity for a well-functioning vocational education system.

Yet the system that is tasked with absorbing this demographic wave has been profoundly disrupted. The 2017 education reform, which replaced compulsory TVET with optional, fee-based programmes, precipitated a dramatic decline in enrolment—from over 1.16 million students to approximately 400,000 by 2023 (Helvetas Uzbekistan 2023; World Bank 2025). TVET participation among Uzbek youth now stands at 23.2%, well below the OECD average of over 40% and far

below the Swiss benchmark of over 60% (Helvetas Uzbekistan 2023). Employer surveys consistently report that only 21–32% of TVET graduates are considered adequately prepared for workplace requirements (ETF 2024), and nearly half of industrial enterprises report difficulty finding the qualified workers they need (ADB, cited in Helvetas Uzbekistan 2023).

The international TVET literature provides essential context for understanding Uzbekistan's challenges. McGrath and Yamada (2023) argue that skills development policy in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has historically experienced more failure than success, often because reforms import institutional models without adequate attention to local governance structures, labour-market configurations, and cultural attitudes. The World Bank, ILO, and UNESCO joint report *Building Better Formal TVET Systems* (2023) identifies persistent skills mismatches, low prestige, and underfinancing as common across LMICs, cautioning that TVET transformation requires sustained political commitment, stakeholder engagement, and realistic timelines. King (2014) and Allais (2023) have critically examined the transfer of dual education models, arguing that the institutional preconditions—strong employer associations, well-developed occupational standards, cultural acceptance of apprenticeship—that underpin their success in Germany and Switzerland are frequently absent in recipient countries.

This article analyses the current state of Uzbekistan's TVET system, identifies six systemic challenges, critically evaluates recent reforms and international partnerships, and proposes an evidence-based framework for transforming the 2026 initiative from a symbolic declaration into a structural turning point. The analysis draws on a systematic review of policy documents, international reports, and peer-reviewed studies, supplemented by the author's professional experience as an instructor at a vocational chemistry programme in Chirchik City Technicum No. 1.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a systematic policy and literature review combined with secondary data analysis, following the methodological principles outlined by Snyder (2019) for integrative reviews in social science. The review is structured around three research questions: (1) What are the principal systemic challenges facing TVET in Uzbekistan? (2) To what extent do recent reforms address these challenges, and what implementation gaps persist? (3) What evidence-based recommendations can be derived from international comparative analysis?

2.2 Search Strategy and Sources

Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Web of Science, and the official government portals of the Republic of Uzbekistan between January and March 2026. Keywords included "TVET Uzbekistan," "professional education reform Uzbekistan," "dual education Central Asia," "2026 Year of Modern Professions," "vocational education skills mismatch," and "TVET transfer developing countries." Additionally, the institutional repositories of UNESCO, the World Bank, the European Training Foundation (ETF), ETH Zurich (CEMETS), Helvetas, and GIZ were searched directly for Uzbekistan-specific reports. Priority was given to sources published after 2021 to ensure currency, though foundational works in TVET theory (Johnstone 1991; McGrath 2012; King 2014) were included where necessary.

2.3 Selection and Corpus

An initial search yielded 189 records. After removing duplicates (n = 34) and screening for relevance (excluding sources focused exclusively on higher education or on countries without comparable reform trajectories), 82 full texts were assessed. Of these, 38 sources met all inclusion criteria and form the corpus of this review: 12 official policy documents and presidential decrees, 11 international organization reports (UNESCO, World Bank, ETF, ETH Zurich/Helvetas, GIZ, ADB), and 15

peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) was applied to identify recurring themes, with an initial deductive framework based on the six challenge categories identified in the TVET reform literature (skills mismatch, infrastructure, prestige, equity, teacher quality, lifelong learning), refined iteratively through inductive coding.

2.4 Limitations

This review relies on secondary data and does not include original survey or interview data from Uzbek TVET institutions. The 2026 initiative is in its earliest implementation phase, meaning that outcome data are not yet available; future empirical studies will be essential to assess impact. The author's observations from professional practice at Chirchik City Technicum No. 1 are noted where they illuminate specific points but do not constitute systematic empirical evidence. Language limitations may have excluded relevant Uzbek- and Russian-language sources not indexed in the searched databases.

3. RESULTS: THE CURRENT STATE OF TVET IN UZBEKISTAN

3.1 Institutional Landscape

Uzbekistan's TVET system currently comprises approximately 598 institutions, including vocational schools, colleges, and technikums, serving secondary and post-secondary students (Agency for Professional Education 2025). A Presidential Decree of October 2024 introduced further structural reforms, consolidating institutions into a network of "technical schools" with expanded academic autonomy—allowing up to 30% curriculum customisation based on local labour-market needs—and a competitive selection process for institutional leadership (Presidential Decree, 16 October 2024). Governance has been centralised under the newly established Agency for Professional Education, which reports to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation (MoHESI).

International partnerships have expanded significantly. Cooperation with Germany (GIZ), Switzerland (Helvetas, ETH Zurich CEMETS), South Korea (KOICA), and the United Kingdom has introduced dual-education pilot programmes, modern occupational standards, and quality assurance mechanisms. The EU-funded UNESCO skills development project, entering its systemic phase in 2024–2025, has established Centres of Vocational Excellence in Tashkent, Samarkand, Namangan, and Nukus, with an emphasis on competency-based pedagogical training for TVET instructors (UNESCO 2025). The World Bank approved a $250 million EduImkon Programme in December 2025 to expand student financing for both higher education and TVET, targeting 600,000 young people over three years, with 80% of funds directed toward low-income students and women (World Bank 2025).

3.2 Enrolment Trends and the Legacy of the 2017 Reform

The 2017 reform's impact on TVET enrolment was severe and has not been fully reversed. Before 2017, TVET was the primary educational pathway for 93% of upper-secondary students (ETF 2017). The shift to an optional system led to enrolment plummeting from over 1.16 million to approximately 400,000 by 2023 (World Bank 2025). Current policy targets aim to redirect at least 50% of ninth-grade graduates toward technical colleges, but achieving this will require not only institutional expansion but a fundamental shift in social attitudes toward vocational education.

4. DISCUSSION: SIX SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

4.1 Skills Misalignment with Labour-Market Needs

The gap between TVET programme outputs and employer requirements is the most consistently documented challenge. Employer surveys report that only 21–32% of TVET graduates are considered adequately prepared for workplace demands

(ETF 2024). A World Bank–KOICA survey of 58 TVET institutions (representing a 43% response rate) and 411 graduates found that theoretical instruction dominates curricula, leaving graduates without the hands-on competencies required by modern industries in engineering, IT, agriculture, services, and the green economy (World Bank 2025).

This finding aligns with the broader international evidence. Allais et al. (2025) found that companies in six LMICs report low usage of TVET qualifications at entry levels, despite widespread rhetorical commitment to vocational education's value. The international literature identifies a persistent "cognitive dissonance": stakeholders aspire to the TVET system they wish they had rather than taking realistic measures to improve the system they do have (Allais et al. 2025). For Uzbekistan, this suggests that closing the skills gap will require more than curriculum revision; it demands structural mechanisms—such as mandatory industry advisory boards and annual competency-standard updates—that embed employer voice in programme design on an ongoing basis.

4.2 Insufficient Practical Training and Infrastructure Gaps

Many TVET institutions, particularly in rural regions, lack updated workshops, laboratories, and equipment. Dual education, which combines institutional learning with workplace training, currently covers only approximately 13,000 students (2024), with a government target of 50,000 (Agency for Professional Education 2025). The Helvetas-ETH Zurich Phase I Reflection Report (2021–2025) documented that work-based learning opportunities remain limited and that the transition from classroom-dominated to practice-oriented instruction has been slow (Renold 2025).

The author's experience at Chirchik City Technicum No. 1 corroborates these findings. In the chemistry and chemical technology programme, the gap between simulated and real laboratory work is observable when students who perform well

in theoretical assessments struggle with the unpredictability of real chemical systems—reagents that have degraded, equipment that requires calibration, results that deviate from textbook expectations. This "virtual–real competency gap" is a direct consequence of insufficient access to functioning laboratory infrastructure.

4.3 Low Prestige and Social Perception

Perhaps the most intractable challenge is the low social standing of vocational education. The majority of ninth-grade graduates and their families prefer academic lyceums or higher education over vocational pathways, viewing TVET as a "second-choice" option (Helvetas Uzbekistan 2023). This perception is not unique to Uzbekistan; the World Bank/ILO/UNESCO (2023) report identifies low prestige as a universal barrier to TVET effectiveness in LMICs, and McGrath (2012) traces its roots to the historical association of vocational education with lower social status.

The government has taken initial steps to address this: the establishment of a Day of Professions and Labour (5 May) and the 2026 national designation are symbolic interventions aimed at cultural change. However, international evidence suggests that prestige shifts are slow and depend on demonstrated employment outcomes, salary premiums, and visible pathways to further education—not on symbolic designations alone (King 2014; McGrath and Yamada 2023). The introduction of career guidance from grade 7, paired with national media campaigns featuring successful TVET graduates, could accelerate this shift, but only if graduates' actual labour-market outcomes improve.

4.4 Regional Disparities and Equity

Quality and access to TVET vary sharply between Tashkent and rural regions. Rural institutions suffer from outdated facilities, fewer industry partnerships, lower teacher qualifications, and weaker internet connectivity. The EU-funded UNESCO project explicitly targeted rural technikums in Karakalpakstan, Khorezm, Bukhara,

and Surkhandarya for its initial pilot phase (UNESCO 2025), acknowledging the severity of the urban–rural divide. The World Bank's EduImkon programme's emphasis on directing 80% of student loans to low-income students and women addresses the financial dimension of inequality but does not resolve the infrastructure and quality gaps that limit what rural TVET institutions can offer.

Uzbekistan allocates just 3.8% of its education budget to TVET—well below what is required for a system that, by its nature, demands more resources than general education due to equipment, materials, and workshop maintenance costs (World Bank 2025). Without a significant reallocation of funding toward rural TVET infrastructure, equity goals will remain aspirational.

4.5 Teacher and Master Trainer Deficits

Low salaries and status of "masters of production training"—the practical instructors who supervise workshop and laboratory activities—lead to chronic staff shortages and limited exposure to modern pedagogical methods. The Helvetas survey (2022) found that the TVET system's focus is disproportionately on inputs (learning materials, infrastructure, teacher salaries) rather than on the competencies of instructors and the quality of workplace learning (Helvetas Uzbekistan 2023). Professional development programmes rarely emphasise 21st-century pedagogical skills: integrating digital tools, developing critical thinking through project-based learning, or facilitating green competencies.

The ETH Zurich CEMETS Phase I report recommends that teacher training must move beyond content knowledge to encompass "situation didactics"—pedagogical approaches that simulate authentic workplace problem-solving within the classroom (Renold 2025). The EU-UNESCO project's current phase (2024–2026) specifically targets instructor professional development through Centres of Vocational Excellence, but scaling these interventions from pilot sites to the national system remains a formidable challenge.

4.6 Limited Flexibility and Lifelong Learning Pathways

Academic mobility between TVET and higher education remains cumbersome in Uzbekistan. Recognition of prior learning (RPL), although introduced as a policy concept in 2024, is underdeveloped in practice (World Bank 2025). Micro-credentials and modular certification—mechanisms that allow workers to build qualifications incrementally over a career—are virtually absent. This rigidity restricts lifelong upskilling opportunities, particularly for returning labour migrants. Over 2 million Uzbeks were employed abroad in 2023, primarily in Russia, Kazakhstan, and South Korea, yet more than 95% hold no internationally recognised certification (World Bank 2025). Only about 50% of returning migrants find stable employment, and just 15% of TVET institutions offer programmes tailored to returnees.

5. INTERNATIONAL MODELS: TRANSFERABILITY AND LIMITS

Uzbekistan's TVET reforms draw explicitly on German, Swiss, and South Korean models. A critical assessment of their transferability is necessary.

5.1 The German Dual System

The German model rests on three institutional pillars: strong employer chambers (Industrie- und Handelskammern) that set and enforce occupational standards; a legal framework obligating firms to participate in training; and a "social partnership" culture in which employers, trade unions, and government share governance. Uzbekistan currently lacks all three: employer associations are nascent, legal obligations for firm-based training are minimal, and the tripartite governance culture is undeveloped (Renold 2025). Research on dual system transfer consistently warns that importing the model's form without replicating its institutional foundations yields superficial results (King 2014; Gonon 2014). The evidence suggests that Uzbekistan should adopt the *principles* of dual education—structured

workplace learning, employer co-ownership of standards—rather than attempting a wholesale transplant of the German institutional architecture.

5.2 The Swiss Apprenticeship Model

Switzerland's TVET system is characterised by cantonal autonomy, high employer participation, and permeable pathways between vocational and academic education. The ETH Zurich CEMETS collaboration with Uzbekistan has focused on evidence-based reform advice rather than direct model transfer, emphasising diagnostic studies, governance analysis, and capacity building through the CEMETS Summer Institutes (Renold 2025). This approach is methodologically sound: it prioritises understanding the local system before prescribing solutions. However, the Swiss model's dependence on small-to-medium enterprise engagement may not translate readily to Uzbekistan's economic structure, where the informal sector absorbs a large share of employment.

5.3 South Korea's Meister Schools

South Korea's Meister high schools offer a potentially relevant precedent: they are industry-linked institutions that provide high-quality vocational training with clear employment pathways, elevated prestige, and government financial backing. The KOICA partnership with Uzbekistan draws on this model. However, the Meister system's success depended on substantial public investment, rigorous selection, and a cultural shift sustained by demonstrated employment outcomes and salary premiums for graduates—conditions that will take years to replicate.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS: A SIX-PILLAR FRAMEWORK

Based on the evidence reviewed and situated within the international comparative context, the following framework proposes actionable strategies for translating the 2026 initiative into structural transformation. Each recommendation

identifies the evidence base, specifies implementation mechanisms, and acknowledges potential barriers.

6.1 Strengthen Labour-Market Alignment

Establish mandatory industry advisory boards for every TVET programme, with legal authority to approve curricula and assess graduate competencies. Update national competency standards annually, informed by sector-specific labour-market intelligence. *Evidence base:* Employer surveys documenting 21–32% satisfaction rates; international evidence that employer engagement improves TVET relevance when it is institutionalised rather than ad hoc (Allais et al. 2025). *Barrier:* Employer participation requires incentives (tax deductions, access to graduates) and cannot be mandated without reciprocal value.

6.2 Scale Dual Education with Realistic Targets

Expand dual education from 13,000 students (2024) to 30,000 by 2028, prioritising sectors with demonstrated employer demand (IT, construction, agriculture, green energy). Provide tax incentives and subsidies for enterprises hosting apprentices, modelled on the German training levy/rebate system adapted to Uzbekistan's fiscal context. *Evidence base:* ETH Zurich/Helvetas Phase I findings on the slow pace of work-based learning expansion; comparative evidence on dual system transfer barriers (King 2014; Gonon 2014). *Barrier:* The original government target of 50,000 may be overly ambitious given current employer infrastructure; the revised target of 30,000 by 2028 allows for institutional capacity building.

6.3 Enhance Prestige through Demonstrated Outcomes

Integrate career guidance from grade 7 in general education. Launch national media campaigns featuring successful TVET graduates in high-demand fields. Establish transparent tracking of graduate employment rates and salary levels by

institution and programme, publishing results annually. *Evidence base:* International literature confirming that prestige shifts require demonstrated employment outcomes, not symbolic measures alone (McGrath and Yamada 2023). *Barrier:* Data infrastructure for graduate tracking is currently underdeveloped; its creation should be a Year 1 priority.

6.4 Invest in Infrastructure and Teachers, Prioritising Rural Regions

Increase TVET's share of the education budget from 3.8% toward a target of 6–8% over three years, with rural institutions receiving priority allocation. Introduce salary supplements for masters of production training tied to industry certifications. Mandate annual digital-pedagogy and competency-based teaching training for all TVET instructors, building on the UNESCO Centres of Vocational Excellence model. *Evidence base:* World Bank data on TVET underfunding; Helvetas survey findings on input-focused rather than competency-focused systems (Helvetas Uzbekistan 2023). *Barrier:* Fiscal constraints require creative financing, including public–private partnerships and international development loans (e.g., EduImkon).

6.5 Embed 21st-Century Skills across All Curricula

Integrate critical thinking, digital literacy, and green competencies as cross-cutting outcomes in all TVET programmes, using embedded rather than standalone module design. Develop standardised assessment rubrics for these competencies. Pilot project-based learning approaches that require students to solve authentic workplace problems, drawing on the "situation didactics" methodology advocated by ETH Zurich (Renold 2025). *Evidence base:* McGrath and Yamada (2023) on the need for TVET to develop capabilities beyond narrow technical skills; UNESCO SDG 4 framework on quality education. *Barrier:* Instructor capacity to teach and assess transversal skills is currently limited; this recommendation is interdependent with Pillar 4.

6.6 Ensure Monitoring, Accountability, and Lifelong Learning Pathways

Create an independent TVET quality assurance body with the authority to conduct institutional audits and publish annual public reports on programme quality, graduate outcomes, and employer satisfaction. Operationalise the recognition of prior learning (RPL) framework introduced in 2024, with particular attention to returning labour migrants. Develop a national micro-credential system that allows modular qualification building. *Evidence base:* World Bank (2025) data on RPL gaps and returning migrant reintegration challenges; ETH Zurich CEMETS emphasis on permeability of education pathways (Renold 2025). *Barrier:* Independent quality assurance requires political will to permit external scrutiny of institutional performance.

7. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This review identifies five priority areas for future empirical research.

First, longitudinal graduate-tracking studies that follow TVET graduates into the labour market over three to five years, measuring employment rates, salary trajectories, job quality, and skill utilisation. Such studies should be disaggregated by region, gender, programme type, and institutional quality.

Second, employer-satisfaction surveys with representative sampling across sectors and firm sizes, conducted annually to track changes over time and provide feedback for curriculum adjustment.

Third, implementation studies examining how international TVET models (dual education, competency-based training, Centres of Vocational Excellence) are adapted, negotiated, and potentially distorted as they are transplanted into the Uzbek institutional context. Qualitative case studies of individual technikums would be particularly valuable.

Fourth, comparative studies of TVET reform trajectories across Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan), which share historical legacies and face similar demographic and labour-market pressures but have adopted different reform strategies.

Fifth, research on the integration of 21st-century competencies—critical thinking, digital literacy, green skills—into TVET curricula, including the development and validation of assessment instruments suitable for vocational education contexts in Central Asia.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The declaration of 2026 as the Year of Training Young People in Modern Professions represents a historic opportunity to reposition TVET as a high-quality, high-prestige pathway to employment and lifelong learning in Uzbekistan. The evidence reviewed in this article demonstrates that policy momentum is strong: the creation of the Agency for Professional Education, the expansion of dual education, the World Bank's $250 million EduImkon commitment, and sustained international partnerships provide a favourable policy environment.

However, the same evidence reveals deep-rooted structural challenges that will not yield to symbolic designations or top-down decree alone. Skills misalignment, infrastructure deficits, low prestige, regional inequalities, teacher shortages, and inflexible pathways are interconnected problems that require systemic solutions, sustained investment, and realistic timelines. The international comparative analysis underscores that successful TVET models cannot be transplanted without adapting them to local institutional conditions—a process that demands careful diagnostic work, stakeholder engagement, and iterative refinement.

The six-pillar framework proposed here offers a starting point, but its implementation will require political will, fiscal commitment, and independent

monitoring. Most critically, the success of the 2026 initiative will be measured not by the number of policies adopted but by the quality of education experienced by students in classrooms and workshops across the country, and by the employment outcomes they achieve upon graduation. Only sustained, evidence-based action—informed by rigorous research and responsive to the voices of students, teachers, employers, and communities—can ensure that 2026 marks the beginning of a truly modern, responsive, and inclusive TVET system in Uzbekistan.

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