

## A COMMENTARY ON 'EDUCATION AND HEALTH TOURISM' OPPORTUNITIES IN UZBEKISTAN IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This commentary aims to discuss the main issue that contributed to Uzbekistan's vision of education and health tourism in the digital age. In order to understand the potential of the country, it is necessary to focus on the alternative tourism opportunities that spread tourism throughout the year. The following types of tourism promise potential for development in Uzbekistan:

1. Visit, Faith and Cultural Tourism,
2. Sports, Eco and Agro Tourism,
3. Festival, Entertainment, Gastronomy and Shopping Tourism,
4. Congress, Business and Fair Tourism,
5. Education, Culture and Art Tourism,
6. Health, Thermal and 3. Age (Anti-Aging) Tourism.

These tourism types include numerous sub-themes in Uzbekistan, for example, sports tourism can be developed in about 15 different branches, football, athletics, horse racing, cycling, and so on. On the other hand, gastronomy tourism, is a noteworthy subject that needs to be developed by considering all types of tourism with separately.

### 2. EDUCATION AND HEALTH TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN AT A GLANCE

Rapid and widespread developments about communication and transportation technologies in the last three decades; helped individuals to meet their education and health necessities in the country of their preference. Thus, with the increased cooperation between the states and the easier visa regimes after the cold war, some countries had the opportunity to export in education and health services.

Educational tourism is a kind of tourism that occurs when people travel to another country to improve themselves in a certain field, learn new concepts and make a career. When we examine the tourism literature, we see that education tourism is defined as a program that includes the travel of a person or group for a learning experience in a particular region.

Participants in education and health tourism need to stay in the country of destination longer than other tourism types. In general, education in a foreign country can last from a few weeks to 300 weeks. In a foreign country, applying to health institutions and receiving treatment may continue for several weeks and require travel to that country multiple times. Relatives are also involved in traveling, especially to help those traveling to another country for Health. On the other hand, those who go to long-term education in a foreign country visit their relatives and sometimes invest in the country through the purchase of housing.

In every kind of tourism, there is a need for buildings and facilities suitable for the theme, infrastructure and superstructures, as well as school and university facilities with sufficient comfort for educational tourism, and teachers and scientists who train qualified students in science branches. For health tourism, there is also need for a good health facility, successful doctor and a well-functioning management system with treatment. In addition, the student and the patient; the desired education and treatment, and transportation, accommodation and food and drink survival, the country in which it intends to go should have easy access to information.

Educational tourism with its size in recent years includes; applied education, theoretical education, exchange of students and teaching staff (such as *Erasmus* or *Farabi* programmes) profession or self-development education and training activities. People go to other countries to attend college,

university, to obtain bachelor's, master's, doctorate degrees and other postgraduate education schedules, some of them are travelling to study at language schools, and some to attend *internship* schedules. Employers, professionals or employees participate in training programs prepared to learn new developments in their field. In addition, people who are living under the intense traffic pressure in big cities, working under the intense stress in the plazas in the company centers, improve such tourism by participating in courses organized in various subjects in order to relax in nature during the holidays. Lifelong learning is a major motivating factor for many tourists over the middle age. Nowadays, participants in educational tourism want to be more educated, have more academic ideas, and obtain more local information about the environment and culture. In order for learning to take place on the educational journey, the tourist must encounter information and experiences that are different from the experiences of their daily life. Educational tourism has a wide range from individual self-discovery courses to formal, academic credit courses. International learning, provides the students; an openness, tolerance and respect, a sense of responsibility towards oneself, others and the environment. Based on these definitions, education tourism can be divided into two sub-titles; 1. Formal / organized (at school) Education, 2. Common Education tourism.

**Formal (School) Education Tourism consists of;** College, University bachelor, master, doctorate and scientific research programmes,

**Non-Formal Education Tourism consists of;** Professional and individual development trainings (courses), local food making, carpet-rug weaving, ceramics and local souvenirs production, local music and painting education, such as growing vegetables, handcrafted culture and art courses.

Educational tourism, not like some other types of tourism, is not affected by seasonal risks. Since college and university visitors will stay in the city where they attend for a long time, it makes a great contribution to the local community, positively affects the sales of the tradesmen, students contribute to the home economies and general economic welfare by renting a house and board. Educational tourism also creates cultural awareness among people, allowing people to recognize different cultures and characters from different regions. With the cultural interaction, it leads to the reduction of various hostilities which

are artificially placed among societies. Educational tourism also makes important contributions to the economy of countries. There is a small example; Approximately 40% of the Turkish North Cyprus economy is fed from by educational tourism with six universities.

According to UNESCO (2019) reports, there are over 4 million people outside of their home country for college and university education. We can say that more than five million people participate in “education tourism” yearly together with unregistered graduate and doctoral researchers and those in countries whose statistics cannot be reached.

Over the past three decades, we have witnessed the increase in the number of tour operators and travel agencies offering educational tourism packages to school groups, college or university students. Simultaneously, the rise in lifelong learning and the increasing healthy retirees with disposable income from age group three are also expanding **educational tourism** in many countries. Accordingly, it is observed that international tourism exhibitions are increasing in the fields of Education Tourism and Health Tourism. Some figures on educational tourism by leading countries are shown in the below.

The top ten most preferred countries for education are; US, Britain, France, Australia, Germany, Russia, Japan, Canada, China, Italy, and Turkey.

The top ten countries sending the most students abroad are; China, India, South Korea, Germany, Saudi Arabia, France, US, Malaysia, Vietnam, Iran, and Turkey.

**As for Uzbekistan:** The number of foreign students who came to Uzbekistan in the 2017/2018 academic year increased from 1,320 to 2,685 in the 2018/2019 academic year. The countries that send the most students to Uzbekistan are; Turkmenistan, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Whereas, there are 3,820 Uzbekistan citizens who go to other countries for undergraduate and graduate education.

Uzbekistan Tourism Development State Committee Report (2019) asserts that although there are five travel agencies that provide student transfer services from Uzbekistan, there are no agencies working to bring students from abroad to Uzbekistan. There is a missing intermediary in the service.

**When it comes to health tourism;** this is the event that people who traveling to different countries in order to receive health services. According to the World Tourism Organization (2013) health tourism is the visits to hot springs or other health centers to improve the physical well-being of the person. In another definition, health tourism is expressed as the whole of the events and relationships that occur in accommodation, travels and organizations that include holiday, for strengthening or maintaining health (Gencay, 2007).

The health tourism market has the highest growth rate among the world tourism industry (Kilavuz, 2018). The people with the need of aesthetic surgery operations, organ transplantation, dental treatment, physical therapy, rehabilitation are the people who use the services of international health institutions. More than 30 countries in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe are active in health tourism. When we look at health tourism India, Thailand, Singapore, US, Malaysia, Germany, Mexico, South Africa, Brazil, Costa Rica and Turkey are emerging as the leading countries (Taleghani et al., 2011). Usually health tourist that flow towards to Turkey, Asian and Latin American countries are from the United States, Canada and the Western European countries (Yalçın & Çalık, 2014).

Demand in the medical tourism market is concentrated in three regions: North America, Western Europe and the Middle East, while the favorite countries of European health tourism visitors are India, Malaysia and Thailand. Malaysia dominates the Middle East market because of its Islamic reference. Singapore is the country of choice for the Japanese market. Cuba is directed to the Central American market. Since the 1970s, Jordan is the popular country in the health industry within Middle Eastern and Asian region. In medical tourism in Turkey; eye and dental surgery, IVF applications, aesthetic and plastic operations, cardiovascular diseases are the most preferred treatments in health tourism (Ünal & Demirel, 2011).

In terms of thermal tourism, Germany, Austria and Hungary are among the most important European countries. There are developed therapeutic spa centers in Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In addition, there are thermal facilities in France, Spain, and Italy and numerous cure centers in Russia.

In 2018/2019, the number of patients coming to Uzbekistan from abroad for health tourism is around 54,000. Patients coming to Uzbekistan mostly requires dental treatment, as well as asthma, Rheumatism, Lung-Heart and general treatments. Although there is no travel agency working to bring patients to Uzbekistan, ten agencies provide services to bring patients abroad (Hopkins et al., 2010).

Health tourism is an economic activity that connects two different sectors such as health and tourism and takes place with the providing services. Due to the vital feature of health services, those who participate in health tourism spend high amounts.

**There are three types of tourism in the health sector in general:**

**Medical Tourism:** The type of health tourism in which international patients receive services from health institutions for treatment and rehabilitation.

**Thermal Tourism and Medical SPA:** Health tourism in which spa waters, hotel management and senatorial services are performed along with some complementary medicine applications such as medical massage and peloid.

**Retired and Elderly Tourism:** It is a type of health tourism in which the maintaining healthy life of retirees, care, rehabilitation and medical treatments of the elderly and disabled are together.

### **JCI Hospital Accreditation**

It is very important that the facilities which will participate in medical tourism obtain the certificate from JCI accreditation institution in order to give confidence to the patient. JCI is a non-profit unit of the International Commission for Accreditation (JCAHO).

JCI accreditation is expressed as the gold standard for global health care and based on the principles of total quality management of the quality systems of health institutions. JCI examines the health facility and aims to develop its organization's ISO 9001 quality assurance network under this model.

### **3. CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT TO IMPROVE EDUCATION AND HEALTH TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN**

It is a great advantage to have cultural backgrounds of these services in countries and societies that will work in Educational Tourism and Health Tourism.

Uzbekistan and Uzbek people are the heirs of a geography in which ancient science and health services had been very developed in ancient times. The following names in Table 1 were the best in the world in the sciences they studied at that time.

**Table 1.** Well Known Scientists of The Region

EL-HAREZMĪ	(780- 850)	Algebra, Mathematics, Astronomy, Geography
EL-FERGANĪ	(797- 860)	Stars and Astronomy
EL-BUHARĪ	(810 -870)	Hadith and Religious Sciences
EL-TERMĪZĪ	(824-892)	Hadith and Religious Sciences
EL-FARABĪ	(870- 950)	Politics, Public and Community Management, Philosophy
EL-MATURIDI	(870-944)	Theology, Sociology and Philosophy
EL-BĪRUNĪ	(973-1040)	Astronomy, Mineralogy, Physics, Chemistry
IBN-Ī SĪNA	(980-1037)	Logic, Mathematics, Physics, Metaphysics, Politics, Philosophy, Ethnography, Geography, History, Medical Laws, Surgery
EMĪR TĪMUR	(1336-1405)	Politics, Public Administration, History, Philosophy
ULUĜBEY	(1394-1449)	Astronomy, Mathematics, History, State and War Administration
EL-BĪRUNĪ	(973-1040)	Medical Science, Pharmacology

Such valuable people who have influenced their own age in science have grown up among numerous of scientists in the century in which they lived and served humanity with new methods and new theories. Harezmi's algorithm, Ibn-i Sina's medical laws and Bukhari's hadith transfers still add value to human and social life in medical applications and IT technologies in the world of science and management. In order to learn science from these people, it can be said that a large number of followers came to the Khorezm, Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent regions from the neighbouring countries, forming a type of educational tourism.

### 3.1. Facilities, Infrastructure and Other Components in Education and Health Tourism

Colleges, universities and other educational facilities to which foreign students will be accepted to constitute the important infrastructure of

Educational Tourism. The most important component of educational tourism are faculty and teachers. The most important reason why a foreign student chooses that country is to take courses from highly qualified faculty members. A modern learning program and effective management of the system are other reasons for preference.

In health tourism, modern hospitals, surgical units and surgeons and doctors who are renowned in their branches are among the most important causes of patient attraction. Assistant doctors and nurses who know the language are also important components of health tourism. Cost effective treatment with effective hospital management is another reason for choice. In recent years, the most important reasons for the widespread trend towards Turkey from European, Middle Eastern countries and Russia for heart and kidney surgery, upper respiratory tract and in the plantation issues with cosmetic surgery, are the successful medical practices and reasonable prices.

### 3.2. Transportation to Uzbekistan from Abroad

Easy access to the country is seen as another important reason for education and health tourism. Uzbekistan has the potential of students and patients coming from the border neighbors by road. In addition, geography that does not exceed four hours by plane should be seen as the main market for education and health tourism for a country. When the long education and post-treatment processes are taken into consideration, students and patients prefer cities that do not exceed 3-4 hours by plane. Special advertisement and introduction as well as transportation activities will be needed in order to receive students and patients from the geography exceeding four hours by plane. For Example; Airlines flying from South East Asian countries such as Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore to Europe, currently use Dubai as a transit airport. While flying between South East Asia and Europe, as a transit airport Tashkent is shorter 2,340 Km and 850 Km than Dubai. This means less than one to three hours of flying. For airlines and passengers an average of two hours short flight is more advantageous in terms of operational costs, alternative gains and health.

Hong Kong-Tsknt-Paris	10.884Km Shorter-1.938Km
Hong Kong-Dub-Paris	12.822Km
Shng-Tsknt-Paris	10.960Km Shorter-2.340Km
Shng-Dub-Paris	13.300Km

KUL-Tsknt-Paris 11.556Km Shorter -851Km

KUL-Dub-Paris 12.407Km

In terms of shortness and transit airport of flights between South East Asia and Europe, Tashkent's alternatives are Istanbul and Almaty cities (Uysal Şahin & Şahin, 2019).

### 3.3. Accommodation and Other Living Needs

The most important infrastructure in education and health tourism is the convenience of access to accommodation, library, shopping, entertainment and general living areas and other needs such as pharmaceuticals and medical treatment products. The student and the patient prefer to stay in a home environment rather than a hotel or similar place. Furnished small houses and homestays have been widely adopted in western countries, particularly in education tourism.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The current situation in the world tourism industry and tourism types, rising international needs and demand in these areas, domestic and foreign opportunities and potential of Uzbekistan in Central Asia seem to be suitable for development in education and health tourism. In the light of these evaluations, I would like to draw attention to the importance of the following issues in the development of Education and Health tourism in Uzbekistan:

- Establishing, **Uzbekistan Educational Tourism Council** with the participation of Ministry of Secondary Education, Ministry of Higher Education, State Committee for Tourism Development, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs Board, Provincial Municipality, Association of Travel Agencies, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Interior, Youth-Student Union and related organizations.
- Establishing, **Health Tourism Council of Uzbekistan** with the participation of Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Committee for Tourism Development, Chamber of Physicians, Association of Pharmacists, Ministry of Transport, Workers' Conciliation and Senatorial Enterprises, Association of Travel Agencies and related organizations,
- Establishing, **Tourism Department** in Ministries and related organizations those within the Tourism Industry System of Uzbekistan,

- Working on the education system of the future and health systems of the future by the Uzbekistan Educational Tourism Council and the Health Tourism Council, while preparing 2035 Development and Action Plan for both types of tourism,

- Supporting promotional programs such as films, TV series and theater about medical history and health tourism, history of science and social science and education tourism in Uzbekistan,

- Determining areas that have geothermal resources, which can be declared as “Tourism Center” and/or “Culture and Tourism Conservation and Development Zone”, complete their physical plans and allocate them to tourism investors,

- In cooperation with the State Committee for Tourism Development, the Ministry of Health and Workers' Settlement Sanatorium Enterprises, the thermal tourism centers will be given the characteristics of international health tourism,

- Development of the necessary infrastructures (faculties, facilities, libraries) and superstructures (faculty members, preferred course programs, social environments) for the students to come to Uzbekistan for undergraduate, graduate and doctoral education,

- Conducting comfort-enhancing activities in road transportation with neighboring countries,

- Starting flights to Tashkent from the capitals of the countries which are four hours away by air in the first place, studying the possible direct or indirect flights from and to the further countries,

- Supporting the projects to be carried out by themed organizations taking Our Libraries and Museums from “passive position” waiting for the visitor, to the “active position” that attracts visitors from home and abroad,

- Establishment of a homestay system with student accommodation under the coordination of the provincial municipality,

- Supporting Existing tourism enterprises; for the integration of health, fitness and personal development training units such as gastronomy, wellness, thalasso therapy, thematic courses that belong to Uzbekistan-specific subjects,

- Tourism Emergency health units and general health centers in our provinces; strengthening with Qualified physicians and auxiliary health personnel, also a fast-effective functioning health

management system, space and technical equipment for diagnosis, treatment and post-treatment,

- Encourage the production of medical devices used in treatment and post-treatment in Uzbekistan,
- Schools, Universities, Hospitals, Sanatorium and other education and health tourism components should participate in international education and health exhibitions,
- Establishment of Education Tourism and Health Tourism segment in Tashkent Tourism Exhibition.

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