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The National Research Ethics System Of Uzbekistan: Institutional Architecture, Policy And Emerging Mechanisms Of Research Governance

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the formation and current state of the national research ethics system in the Republic of Uzbekistan. It examines the legislative framework governing scientific research, the institutional architecture of research ethics, the activities of the National Ethics Committee, local ethics committees, and the Higher Attestation Commission, as well as emerging mechanisms of public governance aimed at ensuring the quality and integrity of scientific research. Particular attention is given to UNESCO initiatives promoting bioethics and the ethics of artificial intelligence, the implementation of the Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM), international research ethics standards, and the principles of the TRUST Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Research Partnerships. The paper also analyzes contemporary challenges related to academic integrity, the prevention of ethics dumping, digital transformation, and the governance of artificial intelligence. It is argued that the further development of Uzbekistan's national research ethics system requires harmonization of international ethical standards with the country's cultural and religious traditions, strengthening the network of local ethics committees, improving the legal framework, and fostering a modern culture of responsible research and academic integrity.

Keywords: research ethics; bioethics; Uzbekistan; National Ethics Committee; local ethics committees; UNESCO; TRUST Global Code of Conduct; academic integrity; ethics dumping; artificial intelligence; science governance.

Introduction

In the context of globalisation and rapid scientific and technological development, the ethical regulation of research is gaining particular importance [1]. Uzbekistan, like many other post-Soviet states, is at a stage of actively reforming its national science governance system, including the institutions of research ethics. Establishing an effective system of ethical oversight is becoming not only a requirement of international standards but also an internal necessity to ensure the quality of and trust in scientific results [2].

In recent decades, the international community has developed a number of documents aimed at preventing unethical practices in the global research arena. A key instrument among them is the *Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Research Partnerships* [3], which directly addresses the problem of ethical dumping – the transfer of unethical research methods to countries with weaker regulation. For Uzbekistan, which is actively integrating into the global scientific community, the implementation of such standards is an urgent necessity [4].

The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive overview of the formation and development of the national research ethics system in Uzbekistan, to characterise its institutional structure, legal and regulatory framework, international cooperation, and to identify current challenges and prospects [5].

Materials and Methods

The study is based on an analysis of the legal and regulatory documents of the Republic of Uzbekistan that govern scientific and research activities, including the Law “On Science and Scientific Activity”, Presidential Decrees, and departmental regulations of the Ministry of Health. International documents

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have also been examined, including the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, the TRUST Code, as well as materials from UNESCO projects in Uzbekistan.

A comparative legal method was used to compare national norms with international standards. A systemic approach was applied to analyse the institutional structure – from central bodies (the Higher Attestation Commission, the National Ethics Committee) to local ethics committees. Scientific publications on research ethics in Central Asia were analysed, as well as educational and methodological materials reflecting the educational component of bioethics in Uzbekistan.

Results

Formation of the National Research Ethics System in Uzbekistan

The system of science ethics and research governance in Uzbekistan is developing in line with the large-scale modernisation of the national innovation and education sectors. The fundamental foundations of academic and bioethical expertise in the republic have deep historical roots, going back to the period of the formation of an independent national scientific school [6]. An important role in the establishment and development of bioethics in the post-Soviet space, including Uzbekistan, was played by Professor O.I. Kubar – one of the founders of the Forum of Ethics Committees of the CIS Member States – and Professor B.G. Yudin – the founder of bioethics as a scientific discipline and educational subject in Russia, as well as Academician M.S. Abdullakhodjaeva – the founder of bioethics as a scientific direction in Uzbekistan [7].

As in international practice, the national system is oriented towards protecting human rights, complying with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration, the standards of Good Clinical Practice (GCP) and the provisions of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights [8]. The specificity of Uzbekistan lies in the centralised state regulation of academic integrity through the system of higher attestation, as well as in the rapid adaptation of legal mechanisms to the challenges of digitalisation and the introduction of artificial intelligence under the auspices of global initiatives, including partnership with UNESCO [9].

Legal and Regulatory Framework

The regulatory framework for research governance and ethics rests on several key documents. The basic act is the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Science and Scientific Activity”. The Law defines the legal, organisational and economic foundations of scientific and scientific-technical activities and establishes guarantees for the freedom of scientific creativity [10]. A key document setting the direction for reforming the system of postgraduate education and scientific attestation is Presidential Decree No. UP-5847 of 8 October 2019 “On Measures for Further Improving the System of Postgraduate Education”, which introduced a multi-stage examination of dissertations through the sectoral expert councils of the Higher Attestation Commission (HAC) [11].

In the field of healthcare and pharmaceutical activity, the laws “On Medicines and Pharmaceutical Activity” and departmental orders of the Ministry of Health regulate the mandatory conduct of ethical review and GCP standards [12]. In 2000, the National Ethics Committee of Uzbekistan (NEC) was established under the Academic Medical Council of the Ministry of Health, and its Regulations were developed. In the same year, the NEC joined the Forum of Ethics Committees of the CIS Member States and the European Bioethics Forum [13].

An important step was the Presidential Decree of 25 August 2023 on the establishment of the Abu Rayhan Beruni International Prize for promoting ethics in the field of artificial intelligence, which reflects the country’s aspiration to integrate advanced ethical standards in new technologies [14].

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Institutional Structure

The organisational architecture of governance and oversight is distributed between state regulators and expert institutions. The Higher Attestation Commission (HAC) under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan is the key body for the attestation of highly qualified scientific and pedagogical personnel [15]. In accordance with the Presidential Decree of 26 May 2026 "On Improving the System of Training and Attestation of a New Generation of Scientific Personnel", the HAC was transferred to the structure of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan while retaining its independence in fulfilling its tasks [16]. The procedure for appointing the head was changed: the candidacy of the Chairman of the HAC is proposed by the leadership of the Academy of Sciences, after which it is coordinated with the Presidential Administration and approved by the Cabinet of Ministers [17]. The Chairperson's term is limited to five years (no more than two consecutive terms). This decision was accompanied by the dismissal of the previous Chairman, who had headed the Commission since 2015 [18].

The central bioethics body is the National Ethics Committee of Uzbekistan (NEC) under the Ministry of Health – the first in Central Asia, established in 2000. According to contemporary research, the NEC remains the only body responsible for ethical review at the national level [19]. At the same time, "there is little evidence that regional ethics committees are functioning properly, and there is no ethics review in medical institutes and research centres, even though they conduct clinical trials of drugs" [20].

A local network of committees operates on the basis of leading medical universities. and scientific-practical centres: the Association of Physicians of Uzbekistan, the Scientific-Practical Medical Centre for Paediatric Oncology, Haematology and Immunology, the Bioethics Committee of the Centre for the Development of Professional Qualifications of Medical Workers at TashIUV, and others. They approve study protocols, monitor compliance with the rights of vulnerable populations and the procedure for voluntary informed consent [21].

International Cooperation and UNESCO Initiatives

An important step in strengthening the institutional base of bioethics in Uzbekistan was UNESCO Project No. 3210454091 "Promoting Ethics and Bioethics in Science and Technology in Uzbekistan" [22]. Implemented from 2024 to 2025 with a budget of USD 20,000, the project is aimed at addressing three key tasks: assessing and analysing the current state of bioethics in Uzbekistan, disseminating and promoting the latest UNESCO publications in the field of bioethics, and stimulating discussions among scientists, policymakers and the public on topical bioethical dilemmas [23]. In cooperation with the Ministry of Digital Technologies of Uzbekistan, the Readiness Assessment Methodology is being introduced to align the national AI development strategy with UNESCO's recommendations on AI ethics [24].

Of great importance is the *Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Research Partnerships*. The Code is built on four values – fairness, respect, care and honesty – and offers concrete mechanisms to counter ethical dumping [25]. In August 2018, the European Commission adopted the TRUST Code as a mandatory reference document for the Horizon 2020 programme. Later, the Code was endorsed by Nature Portfolio, SAGE Publishing, the Association of Commonwealth Universities and many other leading organisations.

For Central Asian countries, the relevance of the TRUST Code stems from the region's integration into the global research space, which creates conditions for collaborations with significant imbalances in power, resources and knowledge. A study of the ethics review system in Uzbekistan found that the NEC is the only body responsible for ethical review at the national level, which creates a vulnerability to potential ethical dumping. Article 14 of the TRUST Code explicitly states: "Research that would be

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severely restricted or prohibited in a high-income setting should not be conducted in a low-income setting". Exceptions are possible only with transparent justification according to the "comply or explain" principle.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Uzbekistan has established important legal and institutional foundations for a national research ethics system, while several structural and regulatory limitations remain. The existence of the National Ethics Committee, the Higher Attestation Commission, national legislation, and cooperation with UNESCO indicates significant progress toward institutionalizing research ethics. However, the concentration of ethical review functions at the national level, the limited development of local ethics committees, and emerging challenges associated with digitalization and artificial intelligence demonstrate that further institutional strengthening is required.

Current Challenges and Prospects

The development of the research sector in Uzbekistan faces a number of challenges. In the area of academic integrity, there is a need to combat plagiarism, pseudoscientific publications and violations of publication ethics. As noted during discussions of the HAC reform, Uzbekistan has become a leader in the number of publications in low-prestige scientific journals, which required systemic changes.

In the field of biomedicine and genetics, ethical regulation of advanced technologies, including genomic research, genetic engineering and work with biobanks, is needed. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence require legal and ethical regulation of big data in healthcare and AI algorithms. The risk of ethical dumping in international collaborations persists.

A particular dimension of bioethics development is related to the harmonisation of international standards with local cultural and religious contexts. An empirical study by Gafu, Sharplin and Israel revealed the demand of Central Asian researchers for adaptation rather than simple borrowing of Western models. A theoretical analysis by Collins and Sharplin shows that this demand is rooted in deep cultural and religious contexts.

In Uzbekistan, a unique situation of academic parity has developed: the scientific community, following the principles of enlightened Islam, monitors the ethical space, striving to harmonise secular law and traditional morality. However, the path to this unity is hindered by institutional incompleteness: while there are more than 70 legislative acts regulating certain aspects of medicine, there is no comprehensive medical law or law on patients' rights. The process of forming local ethics committees is slow, leaving the doctor and patient alone with ethical dilemmas in a legal vacuum.

The prospects for the system's development are linked to the introduction of new mechanisms for scientific evaluation: digital anti-plagiarism, integration into the global scientometric space, project-based grant funding, and strengthening the role of ethics committees. A key condition for success remains a deep dialogue between evidence-based medicine and traditional value regulators, as well as the transformation of ethics committees from "bureaucratic bodies" into "ethical mediators". It is precisely this approach – assessing compatibility, contradictions and the potential for compromise between international and local sources of authority – that can become the foundation for a sustainable national policy.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that Uzbekistan has made significant progress in establishing the legal, institutional, and organizational foundations of a national research ethics system. The National Ethics Committee, the Higher Attestation Commission, relevant national legislation, and cooperation with

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international organizations such as UNESCO provide an important framework for promoting ethical standards, academic integrity, and responsible research. At the same time, the analysis identifies several challenges that require further attention, including the limited development of local ethics committees, gaps in comprehensive legal regulation, academic misconduct, risks of ethics dumping in international research partnerships, and emerging ethical issues associated with biomedical technologies, digitalization, and artificial intelligence. The findings also highlight the importance of adapting international ethical principles to Uzbekistan's cultural, social, and religious context rather than adopting external models without appropriate consideration of national conditions. Further development of the system should therefore focus on strengthening local ethics committees, improving and systematizing the regulatory framework, expanding research-integrity education and professional training, implementing effective digital mechanisms for preventing academic misconduct, and strengthening ethical governance of emerging technologies. Particular attention should be given to transforming ethics committees from primarily administrative structures into effective institutions capable of providing ethical guidance, resolving conflicts of interest, and protecting research participants. Overall, the sustainable development of research ethics in Uzbekistan will depend on the effective integration of international standards with national values, stronger institutional capacity, clear legal mechanisms, and the formation of a research culture based on integrity, responsibility, transparency, and respect for human rights.

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