

## Call for proposals:

### A Partnership Opportunity for Universities in Uzbekistan ATLAS — AI Talent and Learning Acceleration Strategy in Central Asia

**Timeline:** 2026–2027

Dear University Leaders,

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, together with the Ministry of Digital Technologies and the World Bank, invites universities in Uzbekistan to express their interest in enhancing artificial intelligence capacity. This opportunity involves partnering with Zhejiang University (ZJU) in China, a leading institution in Asia, through a competitive selection process under the ATLAS initiative.

#### What is this initiative?

ATLAS is a two-year World Bank program designed to help universities in Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Mongolia build world-class capacity in AI. It connects selected universities with **Zhejiang University (ZJU) in China** — ranked among the world's top 50 universities and China's leading institution for AI research and teaching — through a structured South-South knowledge partnership.

The goal is to support Uzbekistan universities in developing the curricula, faculty expertise, industry connections, and institutional partnerships needed to transition into a **national Center of Excellence (COE) for AI**, preparing graduates for an economy where AI is reshaping different key sectors.

#### Who is behind it?

The **World Bank Group** leads the design and coordination, with technical contributions from its Digital Development team and its private sector arm (the International Finance Corporation), and financing from the China–World Bank Group Partnership Facility. The **Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (MHESI)** is the lead government counterpart in Uzbekistan. **Zhejiang University (ZJU)** serves as the anchor academic partner, bringing its AI STEP framework (Start, Train, Explore, Progress), the Zhihai platform with 300+ courses and 2,000+ datasets, and a dense network of Chinese technology firms in Hangzhou's digital economy ecosystem.

#### How will universities be selected?

Following submission, responses will be reviewed using the agreed scoring criteria to ensure a transparent and consistent assessment process. Based on the review, ten priority universities will be identified. One university will be invited to participate in a study visit to China with up to 10 people participation, while the other selected universities will be invited to participate in capacity building and networking activities in Uzbekistan.

**Participation is free of charge for selected universities** — all program costs, including travel to China, training, and conference participation, are covered by the initiative.

#### Why is this relevant for your university?

Universities in Uzbekistan face a moment of structural change. AI is reshaping the skills employers demand, and curricula, faculty training, and university-industry linkages are working to keep pace. Without sustained action, graduates risk entering a labor market for which they are insufficiently prepared, and Uzbekistan institutions risk falling behind regional peers.

This initiative offers a structured pathway to address that gap — through a partnership with an institution that has trained AI specialists since 1978, established China's first AI undergraduate program in 2018, and now teaches AI to over 10,000 students annually. Russian-language interpretation will be provided throughout all activities, ensuring full accessibility for your faculty and staff.

### **How can your university benefit?**

Selected universities will gain access to four concrete benefits:

- 1. Immersive learning programs in China.** Two structured programs (5–7 days each) at Zhejiang University will train ministry officials, university leaders, and faculty on AI curriculum design, COE management, university-industry linkages, and AI governance. Approximately 70 participants from across the three countries will attend, with at least 30% women. Sessions include direct exposure to Chinese technology firms, EdTech providers, and innovation parks in Zhejiang and Hangzhou.
- 2. Institutional twinning with Zhejiang University.** Selected universities will formalize a Memorandum of Understanding with ZJU, opening the door to co-designed AI curriculum modules, faculty mentoring, joint applied research, and integration into ZJU's interdisciplinary programs spanning engineering, medicine, and law.
- 3. Jointly developed AI curricula.** At least one curriculum per each selected university in Uzbekistan will be co-created with ZJU — aligned with international standards and Uzbekistan labor market needs — and embedded into participating universities' academic and research portfolios, directly supporting the transition toward becoming a national AI Center of Excellence.
- 4. Regional conferences and industry connections.** A regional conference in Central Asia and a follow-on conference in Mongolia in 2027 will convene 100+ participants from ministries, universities, employers, EdTech firms, and development partners. The World Bank and IFC will leverage these events to connect your university directly to private sector partners and investment opportunities.

### **What kind of work will be expected from universities in Uzbekistan?**

Universities will be expected to engage in a sustained but flexible set of activities that combine initial exposure, continued collaboration, and deeper engagement over time. This may include participation in structured learning programs in China and the establishment of collaboration frameworks (e.g., MoUs), followed by periodic virtual exchanges to maintain momentum and adapt lessons locally. A second phase of engagement could include activities such as advanced thematic training, joint curriculum development, collaborative research, or targeted exchanges to support institutional application and longer-term partnership building.

### **Expected results by end of 2027**

By the end of 2027, the initiative is expected to deliver both tangible outputs and broader institutional gains. These include 70 trained practitioners and policymakers, at least three signed MoUs with Zhejiang University, jointly developed AI curricula, two regional conferences, and a self-sustaining South-South knowledge network linking Uzbekistan to one of Asia's most advanced AI ecosystems. From the government's perspective, these results can help strengthen national capacity to guide AI development in higher education, support more informed policy design, and create a stronger foundation for aligning skills development with the country's digital transformation priorities. From the universities' perspective, the initiative can help modernize academic programs, strengthen faculty capabilities, expand international collaboration, and improve their ability to prepare graduates with relevant skills for a rapidly evolving labor market.

## **How to get involved**

Universities interested in participating in the ATLAS initiative are invited to apply by completing the online application form before the deadline of July 15, 2026. The application form is the only channel for submissions and can be accessed via the following link: <https://forms.office.com/r/BkgD6ynnkh>.

## **Apply Here: AI Capacity Application Form**

Institutions demonstrating readiness to transition toward Center of Excellence status — with strong leadership commitment, baseline AI capacity, and a credible plan to embed new curricula and partnerships — will be best positioned for selection.

We encourage university leadership to begin internal discussions now and submit their application before the deadline. For any questions or clarifications, please do not hesitate to reach out to the ATLAS team through Natalya Shermetova ([nshermetova@worldbank.org](mailto:nshermetova@worldbank.org)).

With best regards,

**The ATLAS Team — World Bank** *In partnership with MHESI and Zhejiang University*