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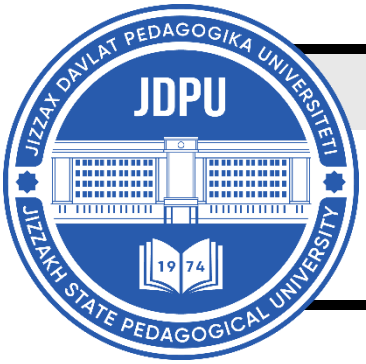

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SCIENTIFIC AND THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF THE FORMATION OF A RESEARCH CULTURE OF MASTER'S DEGREE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article analyzes the issue of forming a research culture in the higher education system, in particular at the master's degree level, from a pedagogical and methodological point of view. The development of a culture of independent scientific thinking, methodological literacy, and epistemological thinking in master's students is considered a necessary factor of modern scientific progress. The article also extensively examines the impact of innovative educational technologies, academic freedom, the mentoring system, and digital media on research culture. In addition, the key components of research culture (such as methodological literacy, critical thinking, and scientific style) are identified, and practical recommendations for cultivating research competencies at the master's level are provided.

Introduction. In the 21st century, the emergence of a global information society, the rapid pace of scientific and technological progress, and the deep integration of artificial intelligence into research activities have assigned fundamentally new responsibilities to modern higher education systems. Universities today are expected not only to impart knowledge but also to serve as incubators for advanced scientific thinking. In this context, developing a research culture has become a central priority in academic curricula. This notion

encompasses more than just mastering research techniques; it represents an integrated system of values, principles, and approaches that guide how knowledge is produced and validated. Indeed, some scholars define research culture as a "reflective model of scientific thinking" rather than a mere accumulation of facts [1]. Cultivating such a culture among graduate students is now seen as essential for sustainable scientific development.

At the master's level, in particular, higher education serves as a critical stage for fostering the highest tiers of scientific competence and inquiry skills. Master's students no longer simply absorb research methodologies in the abstract; they actively engage in research practice designing pilot studies, employing advanced data analysis, and defending their findings in scholarly forums. Throughout this process, the essential components of a mature research culture begin to take shape, including methodological reflection, critical thinking, epistemological (gnoseological) awareness, and an unwavering commitment to research ethics [2]. Leading universities worldwide have increasingly institutionalized these principles. For example, many top institutions now emphasize structured mentoring programs, vibrant graduate research seminars, participation in scholarly societies, and the use of digital research ecosystems as standard elements of master's education. These measures point to a global shift in graduate training towards a more research-centric model of learning.

In Uzbekistan, recent educational reforms underscore the importance of research culture at the master's level. The strategic framework "New Uzbekistan – New Education" [3] positions master's programs as a gateway to developing genuine researchers who can contribute to the nation's innovative development. Concrete steps such as expanding research grants for graduate students, upgrading university laboratories, introducing special methodology courses, and forging international academic partnerships have been initiated to strengthen research capacity. Despite these efforts, practical challenges remain. Local analyses indicate that many master's theses still tend to be overly descriptive compilations of facts, often lacking in-depth critical analysis or robust theoretical grounding [2; 4]. In other words, the culture of independent inquiry and rigorous methodological justification is not yet consistently achieved. This gap highlights the need for continued focus on cultivating research culture and the structures that support it, if the reforms are to reach their full potential.

In light of the above, the present study aims to critically examine the scientific and theoretical aspects of forming a research culture among master's degree students. This includes analyzing the imperative for developing research culture, exploring effective pedagogical and methodological approaches to foster it, and reviewing key factors such as innovative

technologies, academic freedom, and mentoring. The study draws on leading international experiences and contemporary educational paradigms, while also considering the specific opportunities and challenges within the national context of Uzbekistan.

Methods. This research employs a qualitative, theoretical methodology grounded in literature analysis and comparative examination of educational practices.

Literature review. We conducted an in-depth review of pedagogical and methodological literature on higher education and research training, focusing on works that discuss the concept of research culture and the development of research competencies at the master's level. Key sources include scholarly articles on methodological thinking, epistemology in science education, and reflective learning approaches [5; 6]. These sources provided conceptual frameworks for defining research culture and its components, as well as insights into effective strategies for cultivating those components.

Using a content analysis approach, policy documents and reform strategies relevant to graduate education were examined most notably the "New Uzbekistan – New Education" initiative and related higher education policies [3]. This helped situate the research in the current national reform context. We also analyzed examples of international best practices by looking at case studies and reports from leading universities (e.g., descriptions of mentorship models, research-integrated curricula, and the use of digital repositories in graduate programs). Though not a formal comparative case study, this examination allowed for identifying common successful elements across different higher education systems.

The study is informed by a reflective and epistemological framework. We consider the development of research culture through the lens of reflexive pedagogy encouraging students to reflect on their own thinking and research processes as well as epistemology, which examines the nature of knowledge and inquiry. This perspective aligns with V. S. Khoroshilov's [1] view of research culture as fundamentally reflective, and it echoes the emphasis on epistemological awareness highlighted by V. N. Ponikarova [6]. By integrating these perspectives, the analysis attends both to the methods of research (methodological literacy, techniques of inquiry) and to the underlying understanding of knowledge that students must develop.

No experimental study involving human subjects was undertaken, as this work is primarily a theoretical and analytical exploration. Instead, the "results" of the study consist of synthesized findings from the literature and policy analysis: key components of research

culture at the master's level, factors influencing its formation, and recommended practices to enhance it. These results and their interpretation are detailed in the following sections.

Results. A first step in understanding how to foster a research culture is to clarify what this concept entails. Drawing on the literature review, research culture can be defined as a graduate student's readiness and capacity to engage in systematic inquiry, underpinned by sound methodological knowledge, critical and independent thinking, and adherence to ethical and intellectual standards [1; 5; 6]. It is not limited to conducting experiments or collecting data; rather, it is an integrated set of habits of mind and scholarly values. From our analysis, the following five interlocking components of research culture were identified:

1. Methodological literacy. The ability to select, understand, and properly apply appropriate scientific methods and research designs in one's field. This includes familiarity with both quantitative and qualitative approaches and knowing when and how to use them.

2. Critical thinking. The capacity to analyze and evaluate existing data, theories, and arguments in a rigorous manner. Students with strong critical thinking skills question assumptions, identify biases, and assess the strength of evidence before accepting conclusions.

3. Scientific style and communication. Mastery of clear and precise academic writing and presentation, along with strict adherence to scholarly documentation and citation standards. A well-developed scientific style enables students to articulate complex ideas coherently and to engage with the academic community.

4. Source criticism (information literacy). The practice of identifying credible information sources, scrutinizing their relevance and reliability. This involves a thorough appraisal of literature, data sources, and evidence, ensuring that research is built on a solid foundation of verified knowledge.

5. Reflexivity. Continuous self-examination of one's own research process, assumptions, and conclusions. Reflexive researchers regularly reflect on the effectiveness of their methods, the validity of their interpretations, and the ethical dimensions of their work, making adjustments as necessary.

These components are mutually reinforcing. For instance, good source criticism feeds into stronger critical analysis; reflexivity leads to improvement in methodological choices; and clear scientific communication helps sharpen thinking. Together, they form the backbone of a robust research culture at the master's level. A deficiency in any one component can undermine the others a fact that highlights why a holistic approach to cultivating research culture is needed in graduate education.

Our review of international practices reveals a broad consensus on the conditions that best nurture a research-oriented mindset among graduate students. Leading universities worldwide have implemented a range of programs and activities to embed research culture into the fabric of master's education. A few notable practices are:

Top institutions (for example, Oxford, Harvard, the University of Tokyo, and others) emphasize close mentorship, pairing each student with experienced faculty or research supervisors. Regular advisory meetings, progress reviews, and research group participation help socialize students into academic research norms. This mentoring goes beyond oversight of thesis work; it often includes guiding the student's professional development, encouraging publication, and integrating the student into the broader research community of the institution.

Universities commonly run graduate seminars, journal clubs, and conferences where master's students present their work and critique each other's research in a constructive setting. By participating in these scholarly communities, students learn to receive and provide feedback, stay abreast of new developments, and cultivate a collaborative spirit of inquiry. Such activities strengthen critical thinking and scientific communication skills in a practical context.

Modern graduate programs increasingly require students to engage with advanced digital tools and databases from the start. Universities provide access to extensive digital libraries and research databases (e.g., JSTOR, IEEE Xplore), as well as training in using reference management software and data analysis tools. Global research platforms and software like Google Scholar, the Scopus database, and Zotero have become indispensable in graduate research [10; 11; 12]. Many programs also encourage the use of collaborative digital environments (such as shared data repositories and academic social networks) to promote transparency and team science.

Another global trend is the promotion of interdisciplinary research projects at the master's level. Students are encouraged to tackle complex real-world problems that overlap multiple fields (for example, a project at the intersection of education, technology, and sociology). This approach not only broadens students' perspectives but also fosters creativity and adaptability key aspects of research culture. Some universities facilitate this through interdisciplinary research centers or by allowing flexible curricula where students can take courses across departments.

Cultivating a research culture also involves treating students as junior researchers. Many leading programs encourage or even require master's students to submit papers to conferences or academic journals. By going through the peer-review process, students gain

firsthand experience of scholarly critique and learn the standards of quality expected by the academic community. This practice reinforces meticulous methodology, sound analysis, and clarity in writing.

These international best practices illustrate that establishing a strong research culture is an active, structured process. It requires creating an environment where inquiry is expected and supported at every step from coursework and mentoring to the tools and opportunities provided. The common thread is engagement: students actively engage in doing research (not just learning about it), and the institution actively engages in mentoring and providing resources. Such an environment socializes students into the professional research world, making the transition to independent research smoother and more natural.

Technological innovation in the last two decades has profoundly impacted how research is conducted and, by extension, how research culture develops among students. The rise of digital media and AI-driven tools has introduced both new opportunities and new challenges in graduate education:

On the positive side, innovative educational technologies have dramatically expanded access to information and streamlined many aspects of research work. Master's students today can perform sophisticated data analyses using statistical software, collaborate in real-time with peers around the globe via online platforms, and leverage artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as machine learning algorithms or natural language processing for literature review and data processing. For example, AI-based literature discovery tools can quickly scan millions of articles to identify relevant papers, saving time in the preliminary research stages. Digital media platforms (like academic social networks, webinars, and online repositories) also facilitate knowledge sharing and professional networking, which can enrich a student's research perspective beyond their immediate institutional environment.

However, alongside these advantages, there is a cautionary aspect. Easy access to information and powerful tools does not automatically equate to quality research. If misused or relied upon uncritically, such tools can lead to superficial work or what might be called "imitative scholarship" research that merely pieces together others' ideas without deeper analysis or original insight. Our review emphasizes that without a solid grounding in methodology and critical thinking, students may become over-reliant on technology, using it to shortcut the research process (for instance, indiscriminately collecting data or sources without proper evaluation). To truly benefit from technology, students must learn to approach these tools reflectively and ethically. As A. M. Kadyrov [2] notes, digital research tools should be seen

not just as convenient aids, but as instruments that require skilled and thoughtful application. In other words, technology should augment a researcher's capabilities, not replace fundamental understanding.

This finding underscores the idea that developing research culture now also means developing digital literacy as an integral component of scholarly practice. Universities are increasingly recognizing this by incorporating data science modules, training in research software, and even AI ethics courses into graduate curricula. Ultimately, the impact of innovative technologies on research culture is double-edged: when combined with strong methodological training, these technologies can significantly elevate the quality and scope of student research; but without that foundation, they risk creating a false sense of competence.

The analysis indicates that two human factors, academic freedom and mentoring play an absolutely pivotal role in shaping the research culture among master's students. These factors create the psychosocial environment in which the technical skills and knowledge outlined above are put into practice.

Academic freedom in this context refers to giving graduate students the latitude to choose their research topics (within the scope of their program), to pursue novel or even unconventional ideas, and to express their reasoned viewpoints without fear of undue censorship or retribution. This freedom is not without guidance (students still consult with advisors and follow ethical guidelines), but it provides the student with a sense of ownership of their work. Our findings suggest that when students feel a degree of autonomy in their research, they are more motivated to invest creativity and critical thought into it. They learn to take intellectual risks, a trait which is important for innovation. Furthermore, an open academic atmosphere encourages debate and the exchange of ideas, which can sharpen arguments and improve the quality of research outcomes. This environment of free inquiry resonates strongly with the principles of communicative action in scholarship – the idea that truth emerges from transparent, reasoned dialogue. In fact, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action emphasizes that unconstrained, rational discourse is fundamental to the progress of knowledge [9]. In practical terms, academic freedom at the master's level means students are allowed (and encouraged) to challenge existing theories, propose alternative hypotheses, and cross traditional disciplinary boundaries in their research. Such a culture requires trust and support from faculty and institutions, as well as a commitment to academic integrity from the students.

Mentoring and supervisory support complement freedom by providing structure and expertise. Effective mentors serve not only as subject matter experts who can guide technical

aspects of the research, but also as role models of scholarly behavior. They inculcate the norms of scientific ethics, demonstrate how to handle setbacks or dead-ends in research, and often provide the initial "networking bridge" for students to enter the broader academic community. The analysis highlights mentoring as a catalyst for developing methodological sophistication: under a mentor's guidance, a student is more likely to learn how to frame a solid research question, how to design a study methodically, and how to interpret results insightfully. Moreover, mentors can help students reflect on their learning process a form of meta-cognitive coaching that reinforces reflexivity. It was observed that institutions with a strong mentoring culture tend to produce graduates with higher research confidence and better publication records. In short, mentoring personalizes the research culture for the student; it turns abstract principles into lived practice through one-on-one interaction.

One notable insight from combining these observations is that academic freedom and mentoring work best in tandem. Freedom without guidance can lead a novice researcher to feel lost or to venture into impractical directions, while mentoring without allowing freedom can stifle creativity and motivation. The optimal scenario is a supportive mentorship within an open, rich intellectual environment. Such an environment also encourages interdisciplinary integration—mentors often help students make connections between their work and broader scholarly conversations in related fields, which broadens the student's analytic perspective. We found that some of the most innovative master's research emerges when students are empowered to take intellectual initiative but also backed by the wisdom of experienced researchers.

Turning to the specific context of Uzbekistan, the study's findings reflect a mix of progressive reforms and ongoing challenges in the development of research culture at the master's level. On one hand, there is clear evidence of a strong institutional will to transform graduate education. In recent years, universities in Uzbekistan have introduced courses on research methodology and academic writing for master's students, created grant opportunities for young researchers, and encouraged participation in international conferences. Joint programs with foreign universities and the establishment of new research laboratories in certain fields are also part of this reformist wave. These steps align well with the components and best practices discussed above – focusing on improving methodological skills, providing resources (labs and grants), and opening up the academic environment through international exposure.

On the other hand, the analysis confirms that challenges persist in practice. Surveys and reports from local academic circles suggest that a significant number of master's dissertations in Uzbekistan still do not meet the desired level of analytical depth and originality. Common issues include: a tendency to rely on rote literature reviews without critical evaluation; insufficient application of appropriate research methods (for example, choosing a method without fully understanding its limitations or not appropriately analyzing the data collected); and weak linkage between the research results and theoretical frameworks. Underlying causes of these issues may include the remnants of a lecture-centric undergraduate education that did not emphasize independent research, limited proficiency in accessing global literature (language barriers or lack of familiarity with databases), and, in some cases, a cautious academic culture that only slowly adapts to giving students more autonomy. According to Kadyrov [2] and Usmonova [4], one specific area needing improvement is the cultivation of methodological thinking students often begin their master's program with little experience in how to design a research project or how to formulate a problem in a way that is researchable and significant. This skill cannot be developed overnight; it requires iterative practice and mentorship, ideally starting from the undergraduate level.

Another challenge is related to resources: not all universities in Uzbekistan have equal access to digital libraries or the latest software tools, which can hinder students from fully engaging in cutting-edge research practices. However, the trend is positive, as the Ministry of Higher Education has been working on expanding digital infrastructure and university libraries are increasing their collections and online offerings.

In summary, the national context analysis reveals a dynamic situation. The foundations for a strong research culture are being laid through reforms and policy support, and there are early signs of improvement (such as a growing number of publications by young Uzbek scholars, and master's thesis topics branching into newer, interdisciplinary areas). Yet, the day-to-day academic culture at many institutions still needs to evolve. This includes nurturing a mindset of curiosity and skepticism in students, training faculty to be effective research mentors, and continuing to open the academic space for more international collaboration and academic freedom. The challenges identified underscore that policy changes must be accompanied by cultural changes within universities a process that naturally takes time and concerted effort.

Discussion. The findings of this study paint a comprehensive picture of what constitutes a research culture at the master's level and how it can be fostered. It becomes evident that

research culture is a multifaceted construct, one that can be visualized as a structural model composed of tightly interwoven dimensions. The five key components identified (methodological literacy, critical thinking, scientific communication style, source criticism, and reflexivity) do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact systemically to shape a student's scholarly identity. When these elements are collectively nurtured, the result is a self-propelling research culture where students continuously seek to improve their understanding and investigation of problems. The importance of epistemological (gnoseological) awareness in this mix deserves special mention. Developing a deeper consciousness about the nature and limits of knowledge empowers students to move beyond simply describing phenomena to analyzing and theorizing about them. This higher-order conceptualization is precisely what Ponikarova [6] underscores as crucial for modern scientific progress. In essence, when master's students grasp why we consider certain evidence valid or how a theory framework underpins an argument, their research moves to a more thoughtful and original plane.

Another significant aspect emerging from the results is the role of reflective practice in graduate research training. Encouraging reflexivity means that students learn to view their research process itself as an object of analysis. This leads to continual refinement of their approach – a pattern akin to a feedback loop improving performance. The emphasis on reflexivity in our results aligns with the views of Belova and Garnik [5], who stress that a culture of inquiry flourishes when individuals habitually reflect on their cognitive processes and decisions. Similarly, Garnik and Belova [5] highlight that methodology in scientific research has a reflective dimension – suggesting that when students are taught to question how they are conducting research at each step, they become more adept at identifying errors, biases, or new directions for investigation. In a practical sense, implementing this could involve reflective journals, research diaries, or regular debrief sessions where students articulate what went right or wrong in their approach.

The discussion also needs to integrate the influence of contemporary information technologies and AI tools on research culture. The results indicate that these technologies can be double-edged. Here, it is useful to frame their role in terms of enhancing or impeding the components of research culture. For instance, access to a tool like ChatGPT or an AI-based data analysis platform can certainly accelerate the research process, but without critical thinking and source evaluation, a student might accept AI outputs uncritically or use them inappropriately. Therefore, the infusion of technology into research training must be accompanied by an equally strong emphasis on the traditional scholarly virtues. In practical

terms, this could mean that curricula include not just technical training on using tools, but also discussions on the limitations of these tools, ethical considerations, and the importance of human oversight. Kadyrov's [2] insight that digital tools themselves should be subjects of methodological reflection is particularly apt: for example, a class might ask students to reflect on how relying on Google Scholar shapes their literature review, or to analyze differences between results obtained via different software. This meta-approach transforms technological literacy into a component of research culture rather than an external aid.

The synergy of academic freedom and mentoring emerges in the results as a cornerstone of an enabling research environment. In discussing these, it's useful to compare the ideal scenario to the current realities (both globally and in Uzbekistan). The ideal, as drawn from international best practices, is one where students feel both free and supported. In practice, achieving this balance is challenging. The discussion can acknowledge that academic freedom for students exists on a continuum; some programs may allow students wide latitude in defining their projects, while others might assign specific topics due to funding or faculty expertise constraints. Similarly, the quality of mentoring can vary widely depending on faculty commitment and training. What is non-negotiable, however, is the need for a cultural mindset among faculty that treats master's students as emerging colleagues in research rather than just learners completing an assignment. This culture shift involves faculty embracing a role that Habermas might describe as facilitators of discourse guiding students through argumentation and evidence in a way that respects the student's intellectual agency [9]. In contexts like Uzbekistan where a more hierarchical tradition has been the norm, fostering this kind of open mentor-mentee dialogue is crucial and may require targeted faculty development programs.

Another discussion point pertains to the interdisciplinary and theoretical breadth that enriches research culture. As found in the results, broad theoretical frameworks (from historical analysis to discourse analysis) are increasingly part of cutting-edge research. This reflects a global trend in academia where complex problems demand multi-dimensional thinking. For master's students, being exposed to a variety of theoretical perspectives can stimulate reflexive and critical thinking by showing that any phenomenon can be understood in multiple ways. Michel Foucault's work, for example, exemplifies a post-structuralist approach to questioning knowledge structures and could inspire students to think about the "archaeology" of their field's knowledge [8]. Incorporating such diverse theoretical insights in graduate training (through course readings or seminars) can broaden students' analytic toolkit. The discussion here should note that Uzbekistan's curricula might benefit from further

inclusion of contemporary theories and cross-disciplinary content, to move beyond a sometimes narrow focus on technical skills. There are positive signs, as some universities have begun including courses on philosophy of science, research ethics, and area studies as electives for graduate students.

Finally, reflecting on the national context, the discussion must reconcile the ambitious goals of reform with the on-the-ground realities observed. It appears that while policy provides a strong framework (and optimism), day-to-day academic life changes more gradually. This is not unique to Uzbekistan many education reforms worldwide face the challenge of actual implementation. It underscores that developing a research culture is as much a cultural and behavioral change as it is an institutional or curricular one. Students must be encouraged to internalize the attitudes of curiosity, skepticism, and rigor; faculty must model and reward those attitudes. While infrastructure and policy support are necessary conditions, they are not sufficient alone. The discussion suggests that ongoing efforts like workshops on research methods, student research competitions, and international exchange programs for both students and faculty can slowly but surely shift the academic culture. Over time, success stories (master's students who produce exceptional research, or faculty-led mentoring programs that result in publications) can serve as motivating examples that reinforce the desired culture.

In summary, the interplay of the study's results with existing theories and practices highlights a multidimensional strategy for cultivating research culture. It involves building individual competencies, providing enabling environments, leveraging technology wisely, and aligning with broader intellectual currents. The implications of these findings are far-reaching: institutions that effectively implement these strategies are likely to see not only an improvement in the quality of master's theses and publications, but also the emergence of a new generation of scholars who carry forward a dynamic research ethos. This bodes well for the scientific progress and innovation capacity of the country. Conversely, the discussions also caution that neglecting any one key area (be it mentoring, freedom, or methodological rigor) could hinder the entire endeavor. Future research could delve deeper into each component examining, for example, the quantitative impact of mentorship programs on student research outcomes, or how exactly digital literacy correlates with research creativity. Such studies would further inform policy and practice, ensuring that efforts to bolster research culture are evidence-based and effective.

Conclusion. In an age of globalization and rapid technological advancement, cultivating a robust research culture at the master's level is more than an educational aspiration it is a

strategic imperative for higher education institutions. This study has explored the multifaceted nature of research culture and the conditions necessary for its development, with a special focus on the context of contemporary Uzbekistan. The analysis leads to several key conclusions and recommendations:

1. It is essential to advance methodological skills through reflexive and epistemological training. Master's programs should integrate coursework and practical assignments that enhance not just technical research abilities but also students' understanding of the nature of knowledge and inquiry. This holistic competency development will produce graduates who can think independently and critically at every stage of research.

2. Universities must create a transformational research environment grounded in strong mentorship and genuine academic freedom. This involves training faculty to be effective mentors, promoting policies that give students a voice in their research direction, and establishing a supportive community where questioning and innovation are encouraged. Such an environment is the breeding ground for creativity and intellectual risk-taking.

3. The education system should teach the use of digital and AI tools from a critical, methodologically informed perspective. Rather than treating technology as a shortcut, programs should frame it as an integral part of modern research practice that requires skillful handling. Workshops on digital tools, combined with discussions on their limitations and ethical use, will help integrate technology in a way that truly enhances research culture.

4. Diversifying research through an expansive interdisciplinary outlook is recommended. Encouraging master's students to engage with theories and methods outside their immediate field can spark innovative approaches and solutions. Universities should support interdisciplinary thesis topics and possibly co-supervision arrangements (where appropriate) to broaden the academic horizon of graduate researchers.

5. A strong emphasis on scientific ethics, including strict avoidance of plagiarism and data falsification, must underpin the research culture. By instilling ethical standards and a sense of responsibility, educators ensure that the pursuit of knowledge remains honest and credible. Institutions might implement mandatory ethics seminars and use plagiarism detection tools as both educational and preventive measures.

Ultimately, a well-established research culture at the master's level serves as a crucial indicator of an education system's quality and a nation's scientific progress. Master's graduates who possess not only specialized knowledge but also a cultivated research mindset become valuable assets in academia, industry, and society at large. They are better equipped to tackle

complex problems, contribute original ideas, and adapt to the evolving demands of the knowledge economy. For Uzbekistan, as for any country aspiring to strengthen its innovation capacity, investing in the research culture of its emerging scholars is an investment in its future. The transformation may not happen overnight, but as this article has shown, the path is clearly charted: by combining international best practices with local initiatives and continuously reflecting on and refining the approach, higher education can fulfill its role in training globally competitive, research-minded specialists.

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