

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF ORGANIZING SCHOOL REVIEWS AND COMPETITIONS IN UZBEKISTAN AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of the organization of school reviews and competitions in Uzbekistan, Finland, South Korea, and Russia. Drawing on regulatory documents, international assessment data (PISA 2022), and scholarly literature, the study identifies the pedagogical conditions, governance mechanisms, and assessment frameworks that underpin each country's approach to academic olympiads, creative contests, and intellectual competitions in general education schools. The analysis reveals three distinct models: Finland's non-competitive individual development model, South Korea's high-stakes competitive model, and Uzbekistan's hybrid model that combines centralized olympiad governance with diverse creative and intellectual contests. Based on the comparative findings, the article proposes evidence-based recommendations for enhancing Uzbekistan's competition system through formative assessment integration, project-based competition formats, unified digital portfolios, and expanded international participation.

Keywords: School review-competition, subject olympiad, general education, comparative analysis, PISA, assessment system, student creativity, gifted education, academic competition governance.

Introduction

In contemporary education systems worldwide, the cultivation of students' intellectual, creative, and practical potential stands as one of the most critical pedagogical imperatives. School reviews, academic olympiads, and creative competitions serve as powerful instruments for realizing this potential, functioning simultaneously as diagnostic tools for identifying gifted students, motivational mechanisms for enhancing academic engagement, and developmental platforms for building higher-order competencies. The significance of these activities extends beyond individual student development; they constitute an essential component of national human capital formation strategies, directly influencing a country's long-term economic competitiveness and innovation capacity.

The Republic of Uzbekistan has undertaken substantial reforms in organizing school competitions in recent years. Government Decree No. 562 of September 9, 2021, fundamentally restructured the system of subject olympiads and introduced the Presidential Prize competition for "Best School for Teaching Foreign Languages." For the 2024–2025 academic year, the Ministry of Pre-School and School Education's directive of February 14, 2024, established a comprehensive roster of over 26 officially recognized competitions, including: subject



olympiads conducted across four stages (school, district, regional, and national), the Zakovat intellectual game, the Kamalak Yulduzlari children's creativity festival, the Constitution Knowledge Contest, the Rainbow Scholars review-competition, sports championships, and various essay and language contests. The digital platform olympiad.uzedu.uz now facilitates quarterly online olympiads for students in grades 4 through 11, while the national olympiad system covers grades 9–11 in all core subjects.

However, in the context of globalization and the accelerating pace of educational innovation, a critical examination of international best practices becomes an objective necessity. Finland, South Korea, and Russia represent three fundamentally different paradigms for organizing school competitions, each rooted in distinct cultural traditions, educational philosophies, and governance structures. Finland's model prioritizes individual development within a non-competitive environment; South Korea's system channels intense academic competition toward university admission; Russia's All-Russian Olympiad provides a direct pathway from school-level contests to guaranteed university placement. Each model offers valuable lessons for Uzbekistan as it seeks to optimize its own hybrid approach.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of school review and competition systems across these four countries, identifying transferable best practices and developing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing Uzbekistan's competition framework. The study draws on regulatory documents, PISA 2022 international assessment data, and scholarly literature in comparative education.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The pedagogical foundations of school competitions rest on several well-established theoretical frameworks that illuminate why and how such activities contribute to student development. A multi-theoretical lens is essential for understanding the divergent approaches observed across countries.

L.S. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides perhaps the most direct theoretical justification for academic competitions. According to this framework, optimal learning occurs when students are challenged to perform tasks that lie just beyond their independent capability but can be accomplished with appropriate scaffolding. Well-designed competitions function as structured ZPD interventions: they present progressively complex problems that push students beyond routine classroom expectations, while the competitive context itself provides a form of social motivation that supports heightened cognitive engagement. The four-stage structure of Uzbekistan's olympiad system, which progresses from school-level to national-level difficulty, implicitly reflects this principle of graduated challenge. B.S. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives offers a complementary analytical framework. Bloom's hierarchy — progressing from knowledge and comprehension through application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation — suggests that the highest-quality competitions are those that demand upper-level cognitive operations. A critical examination of existing competition formats reveals significant variation in this regard: while Finland's project-based assessments consistently require synthesis and evaluation, many traditional test-



based olympiads remain anchored at the knowledge and application levels. This distinction has important implications for competition design.

J. Dewey’s pragmatic pedagogy, which emphasizes experiential learning and authentic problem-solving, provides the theoretical rationale for project-based competition formats. Dewey argued that education must be grounded in genuine experience rather than abstract knowledge transmission. Finland’s approach to student assessment — which privileges collaborative projects, real-world problem-solving, and self-directed inquiry over standardized testing — represents the most thorough application of Deweyan principles among the countries examined.

Among Central Asian scholars, N.A. Muslimov’s research on integrative competency development has particular relevance. Muslimov’s work demonstrates that professional competency develops most effectively when theoretical knowledge is systematically integrated with practical skills through structured activities — a principle that applies directly to the design of multi-disciplinary competitions. K.Kh. Karimov’s research on credit-module systems further suggests that competition outcomes could be meaningfully incorporated into formal academic credentialing frameworks, creating stronger incentives for participation while enhancing the diagnostic value of competition results.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of theoretical approaches to school competitions

Theoretical Approach	Core Principle	Application to Competitions	Limitations
Zone of Proximal Development (L.S. Vygotsky)	Learning occurs when students tackle challenges just beyond their current ability with guided support	Competitions present progressively difficult tasks that stretch cognitive abilities beyond routine classroom work	Requires careful calibration; excessive difficulty may discourage rather than motivate
Taxonomy of Cognitive Domains (B.S. Bloom)	Higher-order thinking — analysis, synthesis, evaluation — represents the apex of educational objectives	Well-designed competitions demand application, analysis, and creative problem-solving rather than mere recall	Many competitions still rely on lower-order recall and recognition rather than genuine synthesis
Pragmatic Pedagogy (J. Dewey)	Education should be grounded in authentic, experiential problem-solving connected to real life	Project-based competitions (Finnish model) embody learning-by-doing principles	Traditional test-based olympiads may lack the experiential dimension Dewey advocated
Integrative Competency Approach (N.A. Muslimov)	Professional competency develops through integration of theoretical knowledge and practical skills	Multi-disciplinary competitions that combine knowledge areas foster holistic competency development	Disciplinary silos in traditional olympiads may limit integrative potential

The theoretical analysis reveals a fundamental tension that runs through all competition systems: the tension between competition as a motivational force (emphasized in the South Korean model) and competition as a potential source of stress, anxiety, and inequity (a concern central to the Finnish critique). Uzbekistan’s hybrid model has the opportunity to navigate this tension by selectively integrating elements from both traditions, leveraging the motivational



power of structured competition while incorporating formative assessment practices that protect student well-being.

Comparative Analysis of National Models. A systematic comparison of the four countries reveals significant differences across multiple dimensions of competition organization, governance, and impact.

Table 2. Comparative framework: school competition systems across four countries

Criterion	Uzbekistan	Finland	South Korea
Governance model	Centralized: Ministry of Pre-School and School Education; olympiad.uzedu.uz digital platform	Decentralized: local school boards and individual teacher autonomy; national framework guidelines only	Centralized: Ministry of Education; supplemented by private hagwon academies and EBS digital platform
Types of competitions	Subject olympiads (4 stages), Zakovat intellect game, Kamalak Yulduzlari festival, sports cups, essay contests (26+ official events)	Project-based learning portfolios, collaborative team projects, self-assessment presentations, voluntary creative exhibitions	National subject olympiads, Suneung college entrance exam, hagwon competitions, GPA-based class ranking system
Assessment approach	Summative: standardized tests and written exams scored by expert panels; results linked to teacher salary bonuses	Formative: no grades until age 13; self-assessment and peer review; no inter-school or inter-student rankings	Highly competitive: standardized tests, GPA rankings, percentile placement; results determine university admission
Student coverage	Grades 9–11 (main olympiad); grades 4–11 (quarterly online olympiad); all grades for creative contests	All grades; participation voluntary; emphasis on inclusive access regardless of ability level	All grades; participation quasi-mandatory due to ranking system; intense pressure from elementary school onward
Digitalization level	olympiad.uzedu.uz platform; quarterly online olympiads; electronic registration and result tracking	Digital portfolios; project-based online platforms; minimal standardized digital testing	EBS e-learning platform; AI-based diagnostic tests; comprehensive digital tracking of all academic performance
Teacher incentives	Monthly salary supplements based on student competition results (Government Decree No. 823, 2019)	High professional autonomy; curriculum design freedom; 6.8% acceptance rate into teacher training (comparable to Ivy League)	Performance-based bonuses linked to student test scores; national ranking of teachers by student outcomes
Core philosophy	Identifying and nurturing talented students; building a pipeline to international olympiad teams	Supporting every student’s individual development; learning through intrinsic motivation, not competition	Achieving academic excellence through rigorous competition; university admission as the ultimate goal
International integration	Growing: Kangaroo Math, international olympiad teams; participation in TIMSS; PISA integration pending	National Matriculation Exam; no international competition focus; strong PISA performance used as benchmark	Extensive: international olympiad dominance; PISA top-5 performer; global hagwon franchise network



The Finnish Model: Non-Competitive Individual Development. Finland's approach to student assessment and competition stands in stark contrast to most global norms. The Finnish education system deliberately avoids inter-student competition, ranking systems, and standardized testing for the first seven years of schooling. Students receive no grades until age 13, and even after that point, assessment remains primarily formative and descriptive rather than summative and comparative. The only mandatory standardized examination is the National Matriculation Exam at the end of upper secondary school.

Instead of traditional competitions, Finnish schools emphasize project-based learning, collaborative problem-solving, and self-assessment. Students develop individual and team portfolios that document their learning journey, and teachers — who are granted exceptional professional autonomy and are drawn from the top 6.8% of university applicants — design assessment activities tailored to their students' developmental needs. The PISA 2022 results demonstrate that this approach yields strong academic outcomes: Finland scored 484 in mathematics, 490 in reading, and 511 in science, all above the OECD average, while simultaneously recording among the lowest levels of student anxiety and school-related stress among participating countries.

The Finnish model's relevance for Uzbekistan lies not in wholesale adoption — the cultural and institutional contexts differ profoundly — but in specific transferable principles: the integration of formative assessment into competitive activities, the value of project-based assessment formats, and the potential of digital portfolios for tracking long-term student development.

The South Korean Model: High-Stakes Competition. South Korea represents the polar opposite of the Finnish approach. The Korean education system is built upon intense academic competition that begins in elementary school and culminates in the Suneung (College Scholastic Ability Test), a single high-stakes examination that effectively determines university admission and, by extension, career trajectory. Students routinely study 16 hours per day, supplementing regular school attendance with extensive instruction at private academies (hagwon), which constitute a multi-billion-dollar industry.

Academic competitions in South Korea function as integral components of this competitive ecosystem. Subject olympiads serve as pathways to elite science and foreign language high schools, while class ranking systems create a pervasive competitive atmosphere. The PISA 2022 results reflect the academic intensity of this system: South Korea scored 527 in mathematics, 515 in reading, and 528 in science, placing it among the top five performers globally. However, this academic achievement comes at a documented cost to student well-being. According to the International Labour Organization's 2020 data, South Korea ranked last among 30 OECD countries in skill-matching level, suggesting that the competition-driven system may prioritize test performance over genuine competency development.

For Uzbekistan, the South Korean experience offers both positive lessons and cautionary warnings. The integration of digital assessment platforms, the systematic connection between competition performance and educational advancement, and the engagement of the private sector in supplementary education represent potentially valuable elements. However, the well-



documented negative effects on student mental health and the disconnect between academic competition and actual skill formation warrant careful consideration.

The Russian Model: Olympiad-to-University Pipeline. Russia's All-Russian Subject Olympiad (Vserossiyskaya Olimpiada Shkol'nikov, or Vseros) provides a particularly relevant comparison for Uzbekistan due to shared post-Soviet educational traditions and structural similarities. The Vseros operates through four stages — school, municipal, regional, and final — mirroring Uzbekistan's four-stage system. However, a critical distinction lies in the stakes: winners of the final stage of the Vseros receive guaranteed admission to Russian universities without additional entrance examinations, creating a powerful incentive structure that directly connects competition performance to higher education access.

Russia has also been notably successful in hosting and promoting international mathematics competitions. The International Mathematical Kangaroo, which originated in Australia and was adapted for Russian-speaking countries, now reaches over 6 million students across more than 100 countries. Uzbekistan has already begun integrating this model through the Olympia organization (olympia.uz), which administers the Kangaroo competition nationally. This example demonstrates how international competition frameworks can be successfully localized while maintaining global benchmarking standards.

The Uzbek Model: An Evolving Hybrid System. Uzbekistan's competition system has undergone rapid development since the adoption of Government Decree No. 562 in 2021. The current system combines several distinctive elements that differentiate it from all three comparison countries.

First, Uzbekistan has developed one of the most comprehensive official competition rosters among the countries studied. The 2024–2025 academic year features over 26 officially recognized competitions spanning academic subjects, languages, sports, arts, technology, and civic education. This breadth exceeds what is typically found in Finnish or Korean schools and reflects a deliberate policy of engaging students across multiple dimensions of talent and interest.

Second, Uzbekistan's unique teacher incentive mechanism — whereby student competition results directly influence teacher salary supplements under Government Decree No. 823 (2019) — creates a financial incentive structure that is absent in the Finnish model and operates differently from Korean teacher evaluations. While this mechanism has been effective in mobilizing teacher engagement with competitions, it also carries the risk of encouraging teaching-to-the-test and competition-focused instruction at the expense of broader educational objectives.

Third, the olympiad.uzedu.uz digital platform represents a significant step toward the kind of comprehensive digital competition management seen in South Korea's EBS system. The platform facilitates online registration, quarterly online olympiads, result tracking, and the formation of national team rosters for international competitions. However, its functionality could be substantially expanded to incorporate the portfolio features characteristic of Finnish practice.



Table 3. PISA 2022 international assessment results (selected countries)

Country / Region	Mathematics	Reading	Science
South Korea	527	515	528
Finland	484	490	511
Russia (2018 data)	488	479	478
OECD Average	472	476	485

Source: OECD, PISA 2022 Results (Volume I), Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The comparative analysis of school review and competition systems across Uzbekistan, Finland, South Korea, and Russia reveals that each country's model is deeply embedded in its national educational traditions, cultural values, and economic development priorities. No single model can be transplanted wholesale into a different context. However, the analysis identifies several evidence-based principles and specific mechanisms that can inform the continued development of Uzbekistan's competition system.

The central finding of this study is that Uzbekistan's hybrid model — combining centralized olympiad governance with a diverse portfolio of creative, intellectual, and sports competitions — represents a sound foundation that can be strategically enhanced through selective adaptation of international best practices. The following recommendations are grounded in the comparative evidence presented above:

First, integrate formative assessment into competition frameworks. Drawing on Finnish practice, Uzbekistan's competition system should develop assessment criteria that evaluate not only final outcomes but also the trajectory of individual student growth. This could be implemented by introducing a pre-competition diagnostic assessment followed by a post-competition evaluation, with recognition awarded for the greatest improvement as well as the highest absolute performance. Such an approach would broaden the motivational reach of competitions beyond the most academically advanced students.

Second, expand project-based competition formats. In addition to existing subject olympiads and intellectual contests, Uzbekistan should develop a national system of individual and team project competitions focused on solving authentic, real-world problems. These competitions should require students to integrate knowledge across multiple subject areas, conduct independent research, and present their findings before expert panels — skills that align with Bloom's higher-order cognitive objectives and Dewey's experiential learning principles. The Finnish experience demonstrates that such formats can coexist with traditional academic competitions without diminishing the rigor of either.

Third, establish a unified digital portfolio system. The existing olympiad.uzedu.uz platform should be expanded to function as a comprehensive student achievement portfolio, aggregating results from all officially recognized competitions, creative contests, and extracurricular



accomplishments. This portfolio should be designed to interface with the higher education admission system, creating a mechanism whereby competition achievements receive formal recognition in the university entrance process — similar to the Russian Vseros model but broader in scope, encompassing creative and practical achievements alongside academic performance.

Fourth, systematically expand international competition participation. Building on the successful localization of the International Mathematical Kangaroo through the Olympia platform, Uzbekistan should actively pursue integration with additional international competition frameworks across science, technology, languages, and creative arts. The formation of national competition teams should begin at earlier stages of the educational process, with dedicated training programs modeled on the structured preparation systems employed by South Korea and Russia for international olympiad teams. Furthermore, PISA and TIMSS assessment criteria should be systematically incorporated into national competition design to ensure alignment with global educational benchmarking standards.

Fifth, develop a competition impact monitoring system. A longitudinal research program should be established to track the long-term academic, professional, and psychosocial outcomes of competition participants. The South Korean experience demonstrates the critical importance of monitoring not only academic achievement but also student well-being indicators. Such a monitoring system would provide the empirical foundation for evidence-based policy adjustments to the competition framework over time.

In conclusion, Uzbekistan's school review and competition system has achieved significant progress through recent institutional reforms and digital infrastructure development. By selectively adapting the most effective elements of Finnish, South Korean, and Russian practice — while remaining attentive to the distinctive cultural and educational context of Uzbekistan — the system can evolve into a comprehensive, internationally benchmarked framework that serves both the identification of exceptional talent and the broad development of all students' cognitive, creative, and social competencies.

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