

POLICY BRIEF

The missing layer: Mentorship in Uzbekistan's youth support system

Shokhrukhkhuja Fakhriiddinkhujaev

Brief number:

PB-2026-10

Publication date:

July 2026

Department:

Economic Research Unit

Keywords: mentorship, youth employment, social protection, mahalla, diaspora, Uzbekistan

Recommended citation: Fakhriiddinkhujaev, Sh. (2026). The missing layer: Mentorship in Uzbekistan's youth support system (Policy Brief PB-2026-10). Center for Progressive Reforms. <https://proreforms.uz>.

KEY MESSAGES:

- **Uzbekistan has built substantial financial and institutional channels for young people**, including three mahalla-based social registries (the Youth, Women's and Iron Notebooks) that together reach an estimated 1.5 million people. The next practical improvement is a structured guidance layer that helps young people turn these opportunities into realistic decisions.
- **International evidence indicates that mentoring can improve youth, educational and career outcomes**, but the average effect is modest and depends heavily on match quality, mentor preparation, supervision and safeguarding (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019; Eby et al., 2008). Mentoring should complement, not replace, finance, education and social protection.
- **Mentoring already exists in Uzbekistan through several targeted initiatives, including university admissions support, women's entrepreneurship programs and start-up mentoring**. The opportunity is to connect and standardize these efforts into a broader guidance layer linked to existing youth-support and social-protection channels.
- **The most feasible step is a limited, independently evaluated regional pilot**, attached to existing youth-support and mahalla delivery channels, with mentor training and safeguarding built in from the start and a formal decision point before any national scale-up.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed within the content are solely that of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Center for Progressive Reforms.

1. Introduction: Why mentorship matters now

Uzbekistan's youth policy has developed a substantial base of formal support. Financial assistance, entrepreneurship finance, education measures, social registries and mahalla-based outreach provide an important institutional foundation for further strengthening youth support. The practical question is increasingly how to improve the effectiveness of this support in shaping young people's choices about employment, skills, entrepreneurship and social mobility.

One area that remains less institutionalized is structured mentorship. For the purposes of this brief, mentorship refers to regular guidance provided by a trained and accountable person with relevant experience. It differs from ad hoc motivational events, one-off masterclasses or informal advice by focusing on sustained, practical support. Its value lies in helping young people weigh options, sequence decisions, avoid common mistakes and make fuller use of the public support already available. Mentorship is therefore best understood as a complementary guidance mechanism that can strengthen the effectiveness of existing programs, rather than as a substitute for jobs, finance, education quality or social protection.

2. The policy problem: A guidance gap

The current system has important strengths in registration, targeting and financial instruments, while structured guidance remains less institutionalized. This suggests a guidance gap. Some young people receive practical direction through family, school, workplace or professional networks; others face similar decisions with more limited support. Each year, an estimated 700,000 young people enter the Uzbek labor market, and many may have limited access to experienced guidance at the moment when they make important choices.

This gap matters because early decisions are often sequential: a poorly informed choice of training path, business idea, migration route or first job can narrow later options. For disadvantaged young people in particular, an important constraint is often access to people who can explain how systems actually work, rather than a lack of ambition. The policy question is therefore not simply whether the next step should be a new large-scale youth program, but whether existing youth and social-protection channels can be complemented by a well-structured mentoring function that is manageable in scale, suitable for evaluation and safe to expand if results are positive.

3. What the evidence says

The international evidence provides cautious support for youth mentoring, while also pointing to important design conditions. It comes from three main types of studies: large reviews that combine evidence from multiple programs, controlled experiments that assess whether observed outcomes can be attributed to mentoring, and longitudinal studies that examine young people's longer-term educational, labor-market and social outcomes.

Across multiple programs, the average effects are positive but modest. Two large reviews reach similar conclusions: one combined 73 program evaluations, while the other reviewed 70 studies covering more than 25,000 young people. Both found that mentored young people tend to show better outcomes than comparable peers in schooling, behavior and wellbeing, although the typical gains are modest rather than large (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019).

The strongest causal evidence comes from a randomized trial. In the random-assignment study of Big Brothers Big Sisters in the United States, more than a thousand young people aged 10 to 16 were allocated by lottery either to a mentor or to a waiting list. After eighteen months, those with a mentor were about 46 percent less likely to start using drugs and 27 percent less likely to start drinking than the control group, skipped about half as many days of school, and reported better relationships with parents and peers (Tierney, Grossman & Resch, 1995; Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Because places were allocated at random, these differences can more plausibly be attributed to the program rather than to selection effects.

Longer-term evidence also points to economic, not only behavioral, outcomes. Administrative-data research linking the same program to tax records finds that mentored youth earned roughly 15 percent more between the ages of 20 and 25, were more likely to enroll in college, and experienced a narrowing of the income gap relative to their mentors over time. The additional tax revenue was estimated to exceed program costs, suggesting a return on the order of two to three times the outlay (Bell & Petkova, 2024; Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2025). These estimates are specific to the United States and should not be assumed to transfer directly to Uzbekistan, but they provide a useful reference point for the possible scale of returns.

Whether such effects materialize depends heavily on program design. Stronger programs tend to involve sustained relationships, appropriate matching, mentor training, supervision and clear expectations. By contrast, programs with limited supervision may have weaker effects and can create reputational or safeguarding risks.

Evidence from workplace and academic settings points in a similar direction, with mentored individuals reporting better career outcomes than comparable peers, though effects vary by setting (Allen et al., 2004; Eby et al., 2008).

The practical lesson is consistent: mentoring is most likely to be effective when it is structured, supervised and evaluated. This supports a cautious, well-designed pilot rather than an immediate national rollout.

4. Uzbekistan's starting point: Existing channels and early efforts

Uzbekistan already has an important institutional basis for such an approach. The three social registries - the Youth, Women's and Iron Notebooks - are being consolidated under the National Agency for Social Protection's single registry¹. Together with mahalla-based outreach, these instruments already help identify and reach young people and vulnerable households. This is a valuable starting point, as mentoring programs often face difficulties at the first step: reaching the right participants and building local trust.

Elements of mentoring also exist in several separate formats. Under the state Top 100 Uni project, the Youth Affairs Agency is developing the TopCoach platform to connect young people with mentors who have studied at leading universities abroad, with an initial focus on university admissions². A March 2025 presidential resolution finances around 1,000 experienced "mentor-entrepreneurs", each required to help at least five women establish a business³. Private start-up programs, such as StartupFactory's mentoring platform, match founders with experienced mentors, including some based abroad⁴. The state El-Yurt Umidi Foundation also maintains a register of several thousand compatriots working abroad whom institutions can approach for professional advice⁵. These initiatives are important, but remain relatively targeted in scope, focusing mainly on university admissions, women's entrepreneurship and start-ups. They have not yet been brought together into a broader, field-neutral guidance layer linked to youth-support and social-protection channels.

The main gap, therefore, is not the ability to reach young people, but the absence of a consistent method for connecting them with relevant, trained and accountable mentors. This is especially important for young people without access to strong professional networks, early-stage young entrepreneurs with limited market exposure, and youth entering the labor market without family-based professional guidance. Public policy can add value by setting basic standards, improving matching, protecting participants and ensuring that disadvantaged youth are included.

5. Policy options

A careful, phased approach would be more appropriate than an immediate large-scale rollout. One option would be to continue existing support without a dedicated mentoring component; this would avoid new administrative costs, but would not directly address the guidance gap. A second option would be to launch a national digital mentoring platform. Such a platform could offer broad reach and public visibility, but it may also risk prioritizing scale over match quality and participant protection - a concern frequently noted in the mentoring literature. A third option would be to test a structured regional pilot linked to existing youth-support channels.

The preferred option is the regional pilot. It would allow the government and partners to assess whether mentoring adds value under Uzbek conditions, what level of management capacity is required, which groups of participants benefit most, and what safeguards are needed. It would also reduce the risk of expanding a program before its design, quality standards and implementation requirements are sufficiently tested.

6. Recommended approach

This brief recommends a two-year regional mentoring pilot linked to existing youth-support and mahalla channels, potentially as a component of the Youth Notebook. The pilot should focus on young people who need guidance on employment, education, entrepreneurship or the transition to work. The target group should be clearly defined, while avoiding unnecessary complexity in eligibility rules. A cohort of around 1,000 young people, aged roughly 18 to 25, over two years would provide a workable basis for evaluation (Table 1).

¹ National Agency for Social Protection (established 2023); integration of the Iron, Women's and Youth Notebooks into the Single Registry of Social Protection is ongoing (gov.uz; lex.uz; UNICEF Uzbekistan)

² Top 100 Uni project, Youth Affairs Agency of Uzbekistan; the TopCoach platform is described as under development (gov.uz, Top 100 Uni page)

³ Presidential Resolution No. PP-103, 14 March 2025; mentor component of the women's entrepreneurship support program: around 1,000 mentor-entrepreneurs, each to assist at least five women, with grants of up to 50 million soums (lex.uz)

⁴ StartupFactory, Central Asian Mentoring Platform (startupfactory.uz)

⁵ El-Yurt Umidi Foundation, electronic register of compatriots abroad (created 2019; over 5,500 registered), (el-yurt.uz; EU Global Diaspora Facility)

Table 1. Indicative pilot parameters

Parameter	Indicative value
Scope	One region, single cohort
Cohort size	~1,000 young people
Age group	18-25
Duration	Two years
Lead institutions	Youth Affairs Agency, with the National Agency for Social Protection; delivery through mahalla youth structures
Mentor pool	Business, education, vocational sector, public service, civil society, diaspora
Matching	By field, goal, language and availability; rematching allowed
Mentor preparation	Short mandatory training and supervision; code of conduct
Safeguarding	Participant screening, communication rules, complaint channels, data protection
Evaluation	Independent partner agreed before launch; methodology and results published
Indicative budget	Low tens of billions of soums (order of 30-40 billion), to be costed locally
Scale-up	Formal decision after evaluation, against a pre-set effect threshold

Delivery should rely on institutions that already work with young people, in particular mahalla youth structures that hold relevant register information, without creating a parallel administrative structure. The mentor pool could include professionals from business, education, the vocational sector, public service, civil society and diaspora networks. Mentors would have a practical and limited role: providing regular guidance on pathway choices, applications, workplace readiness, entrepreneurship decisions and professional networks.

A diaspora component could be included as a complementary element rather than as the core of the model. Many Uzbeks abroad have valuable experience, and their contribution is likely to be strongest when matched by field and purpose. A practical approach would be to build on existing platforms and registers, instead of developing a separate standalone system at the initial stage, and to invest mainly in human moderation, matching quality, privacy rules and follow-up. For women entrepreneurs, where the government already funds a mentor-entrepreneur scheme⁶, the priority should be to strengthen and independently evaluate the existing scheme rather than introduce an additional overlapping mechanism.

Quality standards should be built in from the start: mentor screening, short training, a code of conduct, field-based matching, supervision, rematching rules, complaint channels and data protection. These elements are central to whether mentoring becomes an effective public-policy instrument rather than a primarily symbolic initiative. The pilot should carry an indicative budget in the low tens of billions of soums in total - on the order of 30 to 40 billion, to be costed against local delivery conditions. This would remain limited relative to the financial assistance already channeled through the Youth Notebook. An independent evaluation should precede any scale-up decision.

7. Risks and safeguards

The main implementation risk is that mentoring is introduced primarily as a visible initiative without sufficient attention to match quality, supervision and participant protection. This could weaken trust and make later scaling more difficult. The principal risks and safeguards are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Key risks and safeguards

Risk	Safeguard / mitigation
Weak or mismatched pairing	Match by field, goal, language and availability; allow rematching
Untrained mentors	Short mandatory preparation; simple code of conduct; supervision
Child / youth safeguarding	Participant screening; clear communication rules; complaint channels
Data privacy	Consent, data minimization, alignment with the single registry's rules
Elite capture	Reserve places for disadvantaged youth; monitor access by region, gender, background and field
Digital exclusion	Combine online tools with mahalla, school, university and youth-center support
Weak monitoring	Independent evaluator from the start; track outcomes, not activity counts
Premature scale-up	Scale only by formal decision based on evaluation, cost, protection and capacity

⁶ Presidential Resolution No. PP-103, 14 March 2025; mentor component of the women's entrepreneurship support program: around 1,000 mentor-entrepreneurs, each to assist at least five women, with grants of up to 50 million soums (lex.uz)

8. Implementation roadmap

The implementation roadmap can be organized in three stages. The first stage is design: responsible institutions approve the pilot concept, define the target group, agree institutional roles, prepare mentor standards, set safeguarding rules and select an independent evaluation partner. This stage should produce a short operational manual covering how mentors are recruited, trained, matched, supervised and, where necessary, reassigned or withdrawn from the program.

The second stage is delivery: recruiting mentors, preparing them through short training, matching them with participants and monitoring the quality of the mentoring relationship. Monitoring should focus not only on activity counts, but also on whether meetings take place regularly, whether the relationship is perceived as useful by participants, and whether participants take practical next steps.

The third stage is assessment. At the end of the pilot, the government and partners would review outcomes, costs, risks, participant feedback and implementation lessons, and take a formal decision on whether to scale the model, adjust and retest it, or discontinue the pilot approach.

Institutional coordination could be led by the bodies already responsible for youth and social protection, including the Youth Affairs Agency, the National Agency for Social Protection and the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction. The Ministry of Finance could be engaged in defining the budget framework, while international partners could contribute as potential co-financiers and sources of evaluation capacity.

9. Conclusion

Uzbekistan has already built important financial and institutional channels for supporting young people and vulnerable groups. The next step is to improve how people move through these channels and convert available opportunities into realistic decisions. Mentorship can help with this if it is treated as a structured public-policy instrument rather than as a one-off motivational activity. The proposed approach is deliberately cautious: begin with one evaluated regional pilot, connect it to existing institutions, include a complementary diaspora component, finance mentor preparation, and build safeguards in from the start. If the evidence is positive, the model can be expanded; if it is mixed, it can be adjusted before larger resources are committed. This is an appropriate logic for a promising, human-centered reform area that is still at an early stage of development.

References

- Allen, T. D., Eby, L. T., Poteet, M. L., Lentz, E., & Lima, L. (2004). Career benefits associated with mentoring for protégés: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(1), 127-136. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.1.127>
- Bell, A., & Petkova, N. (2024). The long-term impacts of mentors: Evidence from experimental and administrative data (Working paper, SSRN No. 4868302).
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. (2025). Big Brothers Big Sisters of America launches groundbreaking research on the long-term impacts of mentorship.
- DuBois, D. L., Portillo, N., Rhodes, J. E., Silverthorn, N., & Valentine, J. C. (2011). How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 12(2), 57-91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100611414806>
- Eby, L. T., Allen, T. D., Evans, S. C., Ng, T. W. H., & DuBois, D. L. (2008). Does mentoring matter? A multidisciplinary meta-analysis comparing mentored and non-mentored individuals. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 72(2), 254-267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2007.04.005>
- Grossman, J. B., & Tierney, J. P. (1998). Does mentoring work? An impact study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. *Evaluation Review*, 22(3), 403-426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X9802200304>
- Raposa, E. B., Rhodes, J., Stams, G. J. J. M., Card, N. A., Burton, S., Schwartz, S. E. O., Sykes, L. A. Y., Kanchewa, S., Kupersmidt, J., & Hussain, S. (2019). The effects of youth mentoring programs: A meta-analysis of outcome studies. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48, 423-443. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-00982-8>
- Tierney, J. P., Grossman, J. B., & Resch, N. L. (1995). *Making a difference: An impact study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.