



With the support of the
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National Impact Study

Impact of the Erasmus+ CBHE projects on the development and modernisation of higher education in the Republic of Uzbekistan

Executive summary

DISCLAIMER

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Introduction

The last four year (2017-2020) became a period of sweeping reforms and important decisions aimed at improving quality of higher education that resulted in multi-fold increase of the relevance thereof as well as the important role played by intensively developing international cooperation. Erasmus+ Programme is an important direction of such cooperation and currently involves a total of 65 universities from across the country.

It is important to note that since the very first days of the programme back in 2014 Uzbekistan's higher education institutions had been taking an active part in the Erasmus+ Programme, a worthy successor to the extremely successful Tempus programme offering an even wider range of opportunities for cooperation in the field of higher education. As a result, Uzbek universities were able to substantially strengthen their expansive cooperation with European universities and institutions of higher learning from neighbouring countries, develop a number of joint Master programmes, establish joint faculties and unique research laboratories that contributed a lot to their improved international recognition and rankings.

Erasmus+ Programme's relevance, the multitude of its operations and opportunities for long-term cooperation conform to and serve the achievement of objectives defined in the Concept of Higher Education Development in Uzbekistan by 2030 as well as recent new Laws on Education and on Research/Science. Advanced teaching technologies introduced by joint projects, educational platforms created, the access to European Universities' educational resources have all been a substantial support in transitioning the whole education system online due to pandemics of 2020 continuing into the current year. Virtual mobility and blended mobility allowed academic staff to upgrade their qualifications, contribute to joint publications and continue the research activities of the scientists in the country's universities.

Taking account of the strategic development goals of the country's higher education system, the opportunities offered by Erasmus+ Programme could be used to enhance quality of training of creative and systemically thinking professionals, strengthen attractiveness of higher education system for investments, introducing the "University 3.0" concept that calls for close integration of education, research and innovation.

The work aimed at expanding coverage of youth with higher education continued throughout 2020 through rapid growth in the number of new higher education institutions in the country and establishment of campuses by the world's leading universities. The number of HEIs has reached 129 today as opposed to just 60 in 2017. In the last four years, 52 new higher education institutions were established in the country including 25 branches of foreign universities and 9 non-state universities.

Sustainable partnerships and connections developed under European Union supported programs have helped in resolving various matters involved in establishing campuses of prestigious foreign universities, creating joint departments and programs, teaching different courses in English as medium of instruction. It is obvious that three years long cooperation under an Erasmus+ project along with student and teacher exchange facilitates better mutual understanding and provides opportunities to benchmark and develop joint curricula, textbooks and training materials. Erasmus+ projects and

European countries' experience in general especially contribute to the introduction of ECTS and gradual transition to a credit-module system structures in academic processes.

To this end, the Cabinet of Ministers' Resolution Nr 824 dated 31/12/2020 "On measures to improve organisation of education process in higher education institutions" can also be named since it was heavily influenced by the projects.

Pursuant to this resolution, education process in higher education institutions will gradually transition to credit-module system starting 2020/2021 academic year. The document has approved the Regulation on introduction of credit-module system based on the European systems (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System - ECTS) in the education processes of higher education institutions.

Given the continuous increase of the number of higher education institutions in the country, new Erasmus projects must cover those for whom this is going to be the first chance to establish long-term connections and sustainable cooperation not only with European universities but also universities from Central Asia, CIS countries and other regions of the world.

The Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan supports operations of Erasmus+ Programme and highly values its substantial contribution, flexibility and timely, constructive responding to all government decisions aimed at further improving the country's higher education system.

This year, Uzbekistan's higher education system is facing, like all other countries of the world, serious challenges caused by the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. Despite existing difficulties, the universities of Uzbekistan are managing to sustain both the academic process and the research operations as well as international cooperation with active utilization of advanced information technologies.

It should be noted that the efficiency of the Higher Education Development Programme approved by the country's President in 2017 is confirmed by the results achieved. Intensive work is implemented at all levels to address the matters identified in the Concept for Development of Higher Education up to year 2030. The percentage of school graduates that have a chance to get enrolled in HEIs has grown, new higher education institutions were opened in the country over the past four years, including branches of foreign universities. Universities from many countries of the world have expressed their interest in establishing their branches not only in Tashkent but notably in regions. The number of dissertations defended and publications by the university teachers and researchers has increased substantially.

Importantly, active development of international relations and long-term cooperation with partners from different regions of the country remains an important factor facilitating objectives set by the country's leadership. Among those, Erasmus+ Programme is one of key elements supporting cooperation not only with European Universities but also universities of CIS countries including Central Asian countries and other regions of the world.

Contribution of all participating project teams and of the Higher Education Reforms Experts' team to the modernization of higher education in their respective universities and nationwide is widely recognised.

The progress is especially notable in the field of introduction in the country's universities of the ECTS, the European system for transfer and accumulation of education which will help to improve the effectiveness of academic process and facilitate international integration. Joint training workshops, teleconferences, consultations and meetings between the MHSSE and the National Erasmus+ Office and the HEREs team that have become a tradition have played an important role and made their strong contribution to the development of higher education strategies.

The research and methodological publication called “Perspectives of Higher Education Development” approved eight years ago in the framework of Tempus programme has obtained a status of official research and methodological journal after successful registration conducted this year under the Erasmus+ programme. The eighth edition of the annual publication was presented at the team's annual workshop held online on 15 December 2020 and later posted at the www.erasmusplus.uz website for wider audience. The commitment of Ministry of HSSE to support this publication in many ways given its goal being to inform staff and students from higher education institutions with progressive achievements and experiences from leading foreign countries and local HEIs was declared in the Ministry's foreword to the publication.

Apart from financing joint projects, the Erasmus+ Programme also envisaged supporting the national Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE) teams.

These National HERE teams that were operational in all partner countries since February 2008 facilitate strengthened cooperation on general matters pertaining to reforming higher education, including quality assurance, innovation and alignment with the needs of the labour market.

European Commission will provide continued support to National Teams (NT) in the coming years with direct involvement of partner countries' education ministries participating in the Erasmus+ Programme.

The main goal of the national Higher Education Reform Experts' team is to disseminate information about the developments in the country's higher education system as well as transformations in the European Higher Education Area spanning over 49 countries participating in the Bologna Process.

The work of NTs in partner countries not participating in the Bologna Process is aimed at facilitating modernization of higher education in line with the national strategies and policies pertaining to reforming this sector.

One of the team's numerous tasks is to implement so called Technical Assistance Missions (TAMs) aimed at organising thematic workshops involving European professors, on topics proposed and agreed in advance with the Ministry of Higher and Specialised Secondary Education. 14 TAM workshops are already conducted that were dedicated to topics like credit-module systems, English language teaching methodologies for non-linguistic courses, PhD studies, education quality, learning outcomes, qualification frameworks, graduate employment, etc.

Members of Uzbekistan National Team participated in discussions and reviews of matters pertaining to quality assurance, development and implementation of ECTS, internationalisation and university autonomy. Moreover, many experts were directly involved in the work of the State Inspectorate for Supervision of Quality in Education, MHSSE, managed universities and were members of different State Committees.

This year, the experts followed the tradition and organised on 16 December 2020 the fourth national scientific-practical conference titled “Erasmus+ Credit Mobility: its Role in Enhancing Education Quality” that was held online. The goal of the conference is to improve efficiency of education process and of scientific research conducted by Uzbek specialists through exchange of knowledge, experience attained during mobility stage and to implement results and research products. The conference is a specific response to the recommendation made by the country’s Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education to disseminate results of cooperation under Erasmus+ projects with a view to promote best practices and attract new teams and participants from across the country. The conference’s compendium reflected the current situation during this challenging year and clearly shows the universal readiness to continue cooperation and mutually beneficial student and teacher exchanges. The range of article authors keeps expanding through contributions of European partners.

All types of cooperation under Erasmus+ Programme and especially International Credit Mobility projects faced serious challenges this year because of COVID-19 pandemic. Credit should be given to the coordinators and participants from both European and our sides that, despite the emergent challenges, found ways to maintain cooperation and rendered required help to all participants of mobility schemes that were forced to extend their stay abroad due to inability to go back home due to lockdowns. All required changes including visa extensions and provision of options to continue studies and practical training were agreed by partners in a timely manner.

Abstract of the National Impact Study

According to the study conducted which based on the analysis of online surveys, in-depth expert interviews, focus group discussions conducted in November-December 2020 as well as the analysis of field and institutional monitoring exercises by the National Erasmus+ Office, Tempus and Erasmus+ programmes are the single and largest programme that had a systemic impact on the development and modernization of higher education in the Republic of Uzbekistan. This conclusion was also reflected in the report published following regional cluster meeting that studied impact of Erasmus+ CBHE projects held on 19-20 November 2020. The programme's substantial impact on the implementation of higher education reforms and timely reaction to government's decisions on modernising the system is also reflected in the Central Asia Regional Report <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/39eb35f5-40e0-11eb-b27b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> prepared by EACEA following the analysis of final reports of the 1st generation CBHE projects in 2015. The Tempus and Erasmus+ programmes were further praised by the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan as well as other line ministries and agencies such as the ministries of Health, Agriculture, Foreign Affairs, Innovative Development, etc.

At the same time, a series of challenges and difficulties were identified by the research that project teams faced during implementation of Erasmus+ projects. Difficulties and challenges were both of systemic and isolated nature as reflected by the participants in their presentations and questionnaires.

All experts and respondents that participated in the study noted that without contribution of Tempus and Erasmus+ projects it was unlikely to achieve such rapid modernization of higher education in Uzbekistan in 2017-2020 especially as it pertains to new and often innovative forms of education.

Overall, opinion leaders note as a cross-cutting theme that implementation of Tempus and Erasmus+ projects demonstrates that Tempus Programme's impact on the reforms and modernization of higher education system and capacity building led to implementation and dissemination under Erasmus+ Programme thus increasing expectations of increased innovation and competitiveness of the national higher education system with the support of new Erasmus programme.

Moreover, sharp increase of the number of universities operating in Uzbekistan in 2017-2020 (from 60 in 2017 to 129 at the end of 2020) including campuses of foreign universities, as well as emergence of a large number of non-government, private universities, was also made possible thanks to the development of a large pool of professionals through their participation in Tempus and Erasmus+ projects. At the same time, experts also noted some caution exercised by European partners in establishing joint higher education institutions or branches in Uzbekistan unlike what partners from South Korea and Russian Federation did. In general, however, interest on the side of European colleagues to the creation of joint Master programmes and departments remains and even tends to increase.

During the National Impact Study (NIS) of Tempus and Erasmus+ programmes many participants of the research offered numerous comments and recommendations as to preventing challenges and difficulties related to the programmes that were compensated thanks to the results achieved and the

contribution the programmes made to the respondent's individual professional development, capacity built in their departments and HEIs as well as systemic impact at regional and national levels.

HERE team members have also prepared 6 analytical notes that shall be presented in the second publication along with this report. The following pressing topics were discovered that can inform decisions on future national and regional priorities and describe vectors of Uzbekistan's development in the years leading to 2030: The following reforms implemented in Uzbekistan in 2017-2020 were highlighted: structural governance and economic reforms; higher education reforms; reforms in science and innovation; agricultural and health sector reforms.

Each analytical report contained Erasmus+ CBHE project profiles including links to project websites as well as description of main results achieved thanks to implementation of these projects.

The authors of the study did not overlook some aspects pertaining to implementation of Erasmus+ projects in Uzbekistan during COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic; online surveys were conducted, and a number of topics linked to this problem were discussed during expert interviews and focus group discussions. As a general conclusion, this study confirmed serious impact of lockdown measures implemented by the states on Erasmus+ projects especially objectives and activities involving mobility; cooperation and project implementation continued despite these challenges and complete cessation of project activities was only reported in a number of isolated cases. It was especially important to learn that full support from all stakeholders of Erasmus+ programme, including European partners, the MHSSE and the National Erasmus+ Office was rendered and highly valued by respondents.

The format of this study does not allow to reflect the whole range of the analysis conducted, however, the most relevant mandatory parts, i.e., challenges and recommendations, were duly reflected.

General conclusions

Projects' impact at the national level:

Majority of respondents surveyed as part of the NIS noted huge impact Tempus and Erasmus+ projects made to the development and modernization of higher education, especially with regard to internationalisation and development of new directions of education. It was noted that new Master programmes (specialisations) and improved quality of academic processes were the key contributions the project made at the country level. Moreover, the project have contributed to a certain extent to the establishment of the national quality assurance agency (the State Inspectorate for Supervision of Quality in Education under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan) whose representatives participated in one of the Erasmus+ CBHE projects. In addition, the system of continuous professional development of managerial staff in the MHSSE's system was also instituted and reformed thanks to implementation of a project under Erasmus+ programme. The MHSSE's initiative on creating joint international departments and Master programmes in Uzbekistan was supported by Tempus and Erasmus+ projects that created foundation for the emergence of new bilateral joint education programmes initiated with different European partners. Internationalisation of education resulted in emergence of new universities and campuses of international universities in some of the regions where managerial teams are comprised of people with successful experience in engaging with European partners acquired in Tempus and Erasmus+ projects. Thus, experts from HEIs located in Samarkand noted rapid career growth, creation of HEIs and efficient governance in these HEIs as a positive impact of Tempus and Erasmus+ projects, thanks to, first of all, capacity development and experience accumulated during implementation. Procurement of a whole range of unique laboratory equipment and creation of training laboratories played an important role in modernising higher education, strengthening scientific and innovative potential of Uzbekistan's HEIs, resulting in strengthened research activities.

Experts interviewed and some respondents of focus group discussions noted contributions to the development of new Law on Education, Law on Innovations from experts that participated in implementation of Tempus and Erasmus+ projects in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's National Development Strategy for 2017-2021 calls for harmonization of Uzbekistan's higher education system with the principles laid down in the 1999 Bologna Declaration. And the introduction of credit-module system is the key element of the Higher Education Development Concept up to year 2030. Experts also noted that the development and introduction of a credit transfer system in Uzbekistan used the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) as an example.

All experts and respondents that participated in the study noted that without contribution of Tempus and Erasmus+ projects it was unlikely to achieve such rapid modernization of higher education in Uzbekistan in 2017-2020 especially as it pertains to new and often innovative forms of education. Overall, opinion leaders note as a cross-cutting theme that implementation of Tempus and Erasmus+ projects demonstrates that Tempus Programme's impact to the reforms and modernization of higher education system and capacity building led to implementation and dissemination under Erasmus+ Programme thus increasing expectations of increased innovation and competitiveness of the national higher education system with the help of future Erasmus programmes. Moreover, sharp increase of the

number of universities operating in Uzbekistan including campuses of foreign universities, as well as emergence of a large number of non-government, private universities, was also made possible thanks to the development of a large pool of professionals and academics through their participation in Tempus and Erasmus+ projects. At the same time, experts also noted caution exercised by European partners in establishing joint HEIs or branches in Uzbekistan unlike what partners from South Korea and Russian Federation did. But, in general, the European partners maintain interest in establishing joint Master degrees and departments. Also, according to the latest report published by QS international ranking agency, 4 Uzbek universities made it to the regional university ranking table, and 2 of these HEIs are also so called “internationalisation spots” which contributed to the emergence of universities from Uzbekistan in this ranking. National initiative for creation of Incubation and Start-up Acceleration Centres as well as innovative enterprises in Uzbek HEIs started in December 2020. Thus, information-methodological materials developed by UNIWORK and MIND projects have created foundation for establishment of such centres in the Bukhara State University and the Tashkent State University of Economics. Also, some participants noted that these projects have substantially strengthened the participating universities’ innovative and scientific potential thanks to improved links with employers and development of student-led start-up culture which in turn had a multiplier effect, i.e., all HEIs in Uzbekistan are now creating virtual departments, start-ups and incubation and acceleration centres.

Interesting conclusions were reached as a result of study of Tempus and/or Erasmus+ projects’ interaction with local and national authorities and government bodies. Participants of the study have responded differently to this question, but their responses reflected an obvious trend: while in HEIs located in the capital city interaction with capital city’s authorities was not reported or was minimal, the situation was very different in regional HEIs, and cooperation between authorities and HEIs was very strong, going as far as creation of joint initiatives on establishment of innovation clusters, technoparks and agropolises. Examples included establishment of Agropolis and an Incubation Centre in Bukhara region, innovative agricultural cluster in Samarkand. Moreover, one HEI in Samarkand region which had obvious “points of internationalisation and innovation” was reorganised to create 3 new HEIs where management teams include specialists with vast experience of participating in Tempus and Erasmus+ projects, who confirmed importance of such experience and contributions made by the project during their interviews.

Some experts and participants of focus group discussions noted that impact of national projects was higher compared to regional projects. Moreover, sustainability of national projects lasts longer and has more profound impact including, inter alia, impact at an institutional and an individual level.

Projects’ impact at the institutional level:

The conclusions with regard to the projects’ impact at the institutional level were quite interesting. Some HEIs are leaders in the number of previous and ongoing Tempus and Erasmus+ projects. The researchers decided to study this phenomenon in greater depth. To better understand the results of the study so called “internationalisation spots” were identified and marked. As a rule, “internationalisation spots” are presented by a duo of the international department plus department (faculty) that actively engage in drafting and, later, implementation of project proposals. We noted that it is this collaboration between international relations departments and faculties of the universities as well as

departments' proactive commitment in international cooperation provided great results in terms of internationalisation. Unfortunately, such collaboration was not universal across the universities, and clear leaders can be seen among HEIs despite the almost 100% geographical and statistical coverage of Uzbek universities by the projects. The same was noted by the "super coordinators" and opinion leaders, i.e., that some universities are represented by the same people. Representatives of MHSSE interviewed also noted that this is a rather positive phenomenon that impacts capacity development, starting from individual impact that further translates to institutional and national impact of the project on the development of certain fields of education.

Some projects were mentioned during the interviews which we would like to highlight here while other projects shall be mentioned in relevant sections of the study. Thus, one of the projects, Erasmus+ IMEP, had an enormous impact on the system for continuous professional development of managerial staff in Uzbekistan. Moreover, cooperation under this project dates back to the days of Tempus project called QAPD where project team members first developed a course called Education Process Management and then introduced a new degree programme called Management in Education. Almost all Erasmus+ CBHE projects implemented in 2015-2017 contributed to the development of a credit transfer system both at their respective universities and at the national level. Experts noted establishment of advanced and innovative laboratories thanks to Erasmus+ RENES, ECCUM and TechReh projects. Moreover, many experts reflected during their interviews on the importance of experience in distance working, videoconferencing and conducting webinars gained during Erasmus+ projects during COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed Uzbek universities to implement transition to online studies in a relatively painless manner, and the project experts and team members that were forced to transition to remote operations of their projects have acted as champions sharing the methodology of such remote operation.

Majority of respondents participating in the study noted the impact the Tempus projects and, to the greater extend, Erasmus+ projects, had in promoting innovative ideas, including the role of HEIs in development of regional innovative clusters and participation of entrepreneurs and industries as equal partners in the so-called Innovation Triangle where HEIs, businesses, industries and local communities actively contribute to the innovations and their integration. Also, experts noted that visits to European universities and learning from their Technoparks, Clusters, Business Incubators and Start-up Acceleration Centres, that included placements in these institutions have undoubtedly strengthened the experts' innovative potential and ability to be leading professionals and specialists in their respective fields.

Half of experts interviewed and focus group participants noted substantial contribution of Tempus and Erasmus+ projects into development of a better understanding of employers, industries' and civil society's roles in high quality and effective training of university graduates. One of the experts even noted that it was thanks to Tempus and Erasmus+ projects that he learned that universities actually have "second and third mission". Understanding of the HEIs' second and third missions remains fragmented in Uzbekistan, and the projects enabled development of practical and theoretical knowledge and experience in this area. As a result, some projects had a goal of strengthening interactions between HEIs and employers, industries and, to some extent, the civil society. The latter included, as noted by the experts, the National Tourism Development Agency, the Association of

Farmers of Uzbekistan and the Youth Union that participated in the implementation of a number of joint projects.

Some participants of the study had experience in implementing both Tempus projects and Erasmus+ CBHE projects and could compare these two programmes. As one of the respondents noted, “Tempus projects were more generous and more flexible”. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that Erasmus+ projects have more pronounced roles and responsibilities of local partners. And one third of participants noted that they had first initiated their projects themselves and then searched for suitable partners. In general, all respondents who had experience in project operations under Tempus and Erasmus+ programmes agreed that Tempus helped put together the teams and to get universities ready for implementation of international education projects with a more active role played by international partners while Erasmus+ allowed to improve achievement of project goals and objectives with a more active participation of national HEIs. Interestingly, practically all participants noted that their projects forestalled some of the reforms announced by the government and have contributed in real terms to the modernization of higher education.

Projects’ impact at the individual level:

During our in-depth expert interviews, we asked several questions about the impact Tempus and Erasmus+ projects and internationalisation in general had in terms of experts’ professional development, and especially their role in career development. Responses varied with regard to the specifics of international experience acquired and some aspects of career development. But in general, majority of experts confirmed during interviews that 80% of their professional success can be attributed to the opportunities provided and experience acquired during Tempus and Erasmus+ projects, namely to flexible skills developed such as English language proficiency, inter-cultural communication skills, project work, teamwork, etc. as well as to the development of personal contacts and networking in academic and research fields.

Especially strong changes occurred in 2017-2020 when international experience of specialists in all areas was a deciding factor of career development. As a result, many experts saw substantial career improvements and managed to have greater impact in their respective fields of education. All experts and opinion leaders interviewed had experience in Tempus or Erasmus+ projects, and some were involved in ongoing Erasmus+ projects at the time of the interview. A very interesting fact was noted by an expert from the Tashkent Torino Polytechnical where 25 former staff members have formed a core team for the Ministry of Innovative Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and all these people had experience in Tempus and Erasmus+ project which certainly helped them develop careers. Moreover, some of these specialists also work in the MHSSE and the State Inspectorate for Supervision of Quality in Education where they helped promote ECTS in Uzbekistan using their experience acquired in international projects and in the campus of this prestigious European university. Some experts also mentioned the risk of “brain drain” that manifests not only in specialists with international experience gained in Tempus and Erasmus+ projects relocating abroad but also their transition to other areas of activity. This issue deserves special attention and further investigation.

Most of the impact the participation in mobility programmes under International Credit Mobility (ICM) schemes sticks at an individual level and promotes the participants' further interest in obtaining Master's or PhD degrees. All participants of focus group discussions noted this impact and there was only one participant that noted that his participation in ICM helped him better understand and implement ECTS in his university. In principle, this correlates with the fact that the interviewed heads of international departments and vice-rectors responsible for international cooperation noted better impact of ICM programmes at the HEI level.