

ERASMUS+ INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: “PERSPECTIVES OF HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN” (December 20, 2024)

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Abstract. The article presents the outcomes and outputs of the international conference dedicated to the 30th anniversary of cooperation between the European Union and Uzbekistan in higher education under the Tempus (1994-2014) and Erasmus+ (2014-2024) programmes. The Conference Statement and brief description of two annual events which took place within the conference are included as well.

Keywords: Erasmus+, higher education, reform, anniversary, impact, Central Asian regional cooperation, best practice, projects` results, priorities, ideas, proposals.

The highest level of the Erasmus+ programme impact in Uzbekistan was achieved during 2024 by celebrating of the 30th anniversary of HE cooperation between the European Union and Uzbekistan within 20 years of Tempus and 10 years of Erasmus+.

The consolidated efforts of the National Erasmus+ Office and the National Team of Erasmus+ Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) supported by effective cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (MHESI) and the local Erasmus+ project teams, strengthened the impact of Erasmus+ in Uzbekistan.

The traditional Annual Conference of the National Team of Erasmus+ HEREs in Uzbekistan is an important opportunity for HEREs for community building and networking, best practice sharing and promotion of the innovations in higher education and Erasmus+ projects`best practice.

In 2024 the Annual HEREs Conference "Perspectives of Higher Education Development in Uzbekistan" was organized as the International Erasmus+ conference “Perspectives of Higher Education Development” dedicated to the 30th anniversary of cooperation between EU and Uzbekistan in higher education, which was started in autumn 1994 with the 2 first Tempus projects in Samarkand and Bukhara.

The delegations of the HEREs and the National Erasmus+ Offices from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan were welcomed to the conference as honourable guests and speakers.

The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of Uzbekistan Kongratbay Sharipov and EU Ambassador to Uzbekistan Toivo Klaar delivered the welcoming and congratulatory speeches emphasizing the role of Erasmus+ programme as a key driver of higher education reform, institutional capacity building, international partnerships, and strengthening regional cooperation in Central Asia.

Thanks to representation of all 5 CA countries the conference reinforced regional collaboration and strengthened joint efforts between Central Asian NEOs and HEREs to enhance Erasmus+ regional cooperation.

Two significant outputs of the conference should be underlined:

- The Conference Statement and Recommendations of all Central Asian HEREs for 2025 were published on NEO website (<https://erasmus.uz/en/page/89-88-heres>) and communicated by UZ NEO to the Ministry and CA NEOs.

- Special edition (No 16 of 2024) of peer-reviewed scientific and methodological journal of UZ HEREs "Perspectives of Higher Education Development" was dedicated for 30th anniversary of EU-UZ cooperation in the field of HE, featuring contributions from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The Conference was aimed on enhancing the efficiency of higher education development by fostering the exchange of experiences, sharing insights on innovative methodologies, achievements, trends, and challenge, summarizing the activities of Erasmus+Higher Education Reform Experts for 2024 and promote regional cooperation.

The conference included the organization of a plenary session with presentations of National Teams of HEREs of the Central Asian countries and 3 parallel sections in the afternoon.

The panel discussion “Priorities for strengthening of regional cooperation within Erasmus+” ensured contribution by experts presenting the best practice of Erasmus+ projects and sharing proposals for future regional projects within the Call -2025 and further ones.

Within the conference, the Annual Scientific and Educational Forum "ACCESS TO SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION AND PUBLICATION ACTIVITY" took place with support of HEREs and the representatives of the well-known publication companies.

The Forum is an annual event, which has been held since 2016 with the support of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Agency for Information and Mass Communications under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the National Library of Uzbekistan and “E-LINE PRESS” Ltd. The main forum objectives are to increase innovation, the quality of scientific research and publication activity by familiarizing forum participants with world sources of scientific and educational information, advanced methods of preparing scientific articles and dissertations.

Heads of respective ministries and departments, universities, scientific centers of the Academy of Sciences, teachers, doctoral students and applicants for academic degrees, directors and chief editors of scientific publishing houses of Uzbekistan and the CA countries benefited of the forum networking with leading

publishers of electronic scientific and educational resources and analytical systems, such as ESO Information Services Inc. (USA), Wiley (USA), Mikro Information (Turkey), IEEE (USA), Pulse of Science (Russia), OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (UK), MOODY'S (USA) and others.

The Annual Erasmus International Credit Mobility event was also organised by HEREs and ICM beneficiaries as one of the conference sections. The proceedings of the session «ERASMUS+ INTERNATIONAL CREDIT MOBILITY: ROLE IN IMPROVING QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH» was published and made downloadable from UZ NEO website.

The support of conference organisers (Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan (MHESI), Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan, National Erasmus+ Office (NEO), National Research University "Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers" (TIAME), National Team of Erasmus+ Higher Education Reform Experts) was highly evaluated by the conference participants.

CONFERENCE STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“PERSPECTIVES OF HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN UZBEKISTAN”

Annual International Erasmus+ conference dedicated to the 30th anniversary of EU-Uzbekistan cooperation in higher education¹

We, the participants of the Annual International Erasmus+ conference on "Perspectives of Higher Education Development in Uzbekistan", convened on 20 December 2024 in Tashkent² have gathered to discuss:

- fostering of the regional (Central Asian) cooperation
- enhancing the efficiency of higher education development through the exchange of experiences, sharing insights on innovative methodologies, achievements, trends, and challenges
- summarizing the activities of Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) for 2024.

The conference includes the organization of a plenary session with presentations of National Teams of HEREs from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as three specific parallel events:

¹ In 2024 the Annual HEREs Conference "Perspectives of Higher Education Development in Uzbekistan" was organized as the International Erasmus+ conference dedicated to the 30th anniversary of cooperation between the European Union and Uzbekistan in higher education under the Tempus (1994-2014) and Erasmus+ (2014-2024) programmes. The delegations of the HEREs and the National Erasmus+ Offices from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan participated as honourable guests and speakers.

² <https://erasmus.uz/en/publications/442-international-erasmus-conference-perspectives-of-higher-education-development-in-uzbekistan-overview>

1) Panel discussion “PRIORITIES FOR STRENGTHENING OF REGIONAL COOPERATION WITHIN ERASMUS+”

2) Annual Scientific and Educational Forum “ACCESS TO SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION AND PUBLICATION ACTIVITY”

3) Annual Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility event «ERASMUS+ INTERNATIONAL CREDIT MOBILITY: ROLE IN IMPROVING QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH»

The next No 16-2024(2) of the peer-reviewed scientific and methodological journal of Uzbekistan Higher Education Reform Experts “PERSPECTIVES OF HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT” were presented. Five papers on Erasmus+ programme impact on higher education reform in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan Uzbekistan were published.³

CONCLUSION

We express our gratitude to all participants and organizers of the conference⁴. We are committed to continuing this dialogue annually and taking the necessary steps toward further development of higher education systems of 5 Central Asian countries and strengthening of regional cooperation within Erasmus+ and beyond.

³ <https://erasmus.uz/en/publications/440-heres-jurnalining-navbatdagi-16-soni-chop-etildi>

⁴ Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “TIIAME” National Research University, National Team of Erasmus+ Higher Education Reform Experts and National Erasmus+ Office in Uzbekistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

BASED ON 2024 ACTIVITIES OF THE ERASMUS+ HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS EXPERTS OF CENTRAL ASIA⁵

Following the results of 2024 activities of the National Teams of HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS EXPERTS (HEREs), training seminars organized for HEREs in 2024, as well as based on the resolution of Annual International Erasmus+ conference which took place at the “TIAME” National Research University on 20 December and Round Table discussion at the Tashkent University of Information Technologies on 19 December 2024⁶, the National teams of Higher Education Reform Experts of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan present the following comprehensive recommendations for fostering of the regional cooperation within and beyond of Erasmus+ programme.

KAZAKHSTAN

1. Universities from Central Asian countries should develop International Credit Mobility in the region. To contact the Ministries of Education of CA countries for financial support through the allocation of funds from the state budget.
2. To establish a consortium agreement for Erasmus+ project on Artificial Intelligence and Other Information Technology Tools in the Development of Inclusive Higher Education.
3. To take measures to further strengthen and revitalize the Central Asian Higher Education Platform.

KYRGYZSTAN

1. Enhance Institutional Autonomy and Governance

Work with policymakers to revise higher education legislation, granting more autonomy to universities in decision-making, curriculum development, and financial management. Promote governance reforms to improve transparency, accountability, and stakeholder involvement within universities.

2. Strengthen Digitalization Efforts

Accelerate the adoption of digital tools and platforms in teaching, learning, and administrative processes within Kyrgyz universities. Provide training programs for faculty and staff to enhance digital competencies and integrate blended learning models. Develop a national framework for quality assurance in online and blended education.

⁵ News about the International Erasmus+ conference "Perspectives of Higher Education Development in Uzbekistan" <https://erasmus.uz/en/publications/442-international-erasmus-conference-perspectives-of-higher-education-development-in-uzbekistan-overview>

⁶ <https://erasmus.uz/en/publications/445-highlights-from-the-pre-conference-roundtable>

3. Foster Internationalization and Academic Mobility

Support the development of joint programs with European universities and facilitate student and staff exchanges through Erasmus+ mobility initiatives. Create mechanisms to ensure credit recognition and promote international collaboration in research and curriculum design. Encourage the participation of Kyrgyz universities in international rankings to enhance global visibility.

4. Align Curricula with Labor Market Needs

Strengthen partnerships between universities and the private sector to ensure curricula address current labor market demands. Promote the integration of entrepreneurial and soft skills training into academic programs to improve graduate employability.

5. Promote Research and Innovation

Support research capacity building by providing funding opportunities for young researchers and fostering collaborations with international research institutions. Establish research centers in key areas such as climate change, renewable energy, and digital transformation, leveraging Erasmus+ resources.

6. Focus on Equity and Inclusion

Implement targeted initiatives to improve access to higher education for marginalized groups, including students from rural areas, women, and persons with disabilities. Develop support systems, such as scholarships and mentoring programs, to reduce barriers to participation in Erasmus+ activities.

7. Expand Regional and Cross-Border Collaboration

Encourage collaboration between Kyrgyz universities and institutions in neighboring Central Asian countries to share best practices and promote regional integration. Organize regional workshops and seminars to address common challenges, such as governance, quality assurance, and internationalization.

TAJIKISTAN

1. Developing Regional Accreditation Standards

- Establish a framework for regional accreditation that aligns with international best practices.
- Involve stakeholders from various sectors, including government, academia, and industry, to ensure standards meet local and global needs.
- Create a collaborative platform for sharing best practices and experiences among Central Asian countries to harmonize accreditation processes.

2. Establishing the Independent Central Asian Accreditation Agency

- Form an independent agency responsible for overseeing the accreditation of higher education institutions in the region.

- Ensure the agency operates transparently and is accountable to stakeholders, including educational institutions and the public.
- Promote the agency's role in enhancing the quality of education and fostering trust in regional qualifications.

3. Modernization of Educational Programs (Curriculum)

- Collaborate with industry leaders to identify the skills needed for the modern economy, focusing on green skills, digital skills, and other emerging competencies.
- Encourage universities to adopt flexible and innovative curricula that can be updated regularly to reflect changing market demands.
- Facilitate faculty training and development programs to equip educators with the necessary skills to deliver modernized curricula effectively.

Access to Higher Education

1. Developing Distance Education (Regional Educational Platform)

- Create a centralized online platform that offers access to distance education resources, courses, and programs across Central Asia.
- Ensure the platform is user-friendly and accessible to diverse populations, including marginalized groups and remote communities.
- Promote partnerships between universities to share resources, expertise, and best practices in distance education delivery.

Research and Innovation Capacity

1. Regional Infrastructure for Joint Scientific Events

- Organize regular conferences, seminars, and round tables to foster collaboration between universities and research institutes in Central Asia.
- Encourage joint publications and research projects that address regional challenges and promote knowledge sharing.
- Establish a network of researchers and institutions to facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration in research and innovation.

2. Supporting Cooperation Between Universities and Research Institutes

- Develop joint research initiatives that leverage the strengths of different institutions and address common regional issues.
- Create funding opportunities for collaborative research projects that involve multiple stakeholders, including government and industry partners.
- Promote the establishment of research centers of excellence that focus on key areas relevant to the region's development, such as sustainable development, technology, and health.

TURKMENISTAN

1) Adopting state educational standards to the best international practices: adaptation of the national educational standards to the common regional concepts.

2) Harmonization of Educational Systems

- Aligning educational programs with international standards, such as the Bologna Process and ISCED.

- Introducing a three-tier higher education system: bachelor's, master's, and PhD programs, taking into account existing curricula.

3) International Recognition and Accreditation

- Enhancing the participation of Turkmen universities in international rankings and accreditation of educational programs.

- Applying ENQA standards to ensure the quality of higher education.

4) Development of Academic Mobility

- Increasing the number of bilateral agreements with universities in Central Asia and Europe for student, faculty, and researcher exchanges.

- Establishing internship and joint research programs for students and postgraduate researchers.

5) Strengthening the Research Base of Universities

- Establishing research centers at universities to work on regional projects, including sustainable development, digitalization, and energy.

- Encouraging Turkmen researchers to participate in international conferences and publications.

6) Inclusive Education

- Developing educational programs accessible to all population groups, including people with disabilities.

- Expanding access to higher education through online platforms.

7) Digitalization of Education and the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- Implement e-learning platforms, digital textbooks, and interactive tools to increase accessibility and flexibility in education.

- Automate management processes, including admissions, student performance tracking, and reporting, using centralized digital systems.

- Equip educational institutions with modern IT infrastructure, including computers, high-speed internet, and virtual labs.

- Develop adaptive learning platforms using artificial intelligence to create personalized learning paths for students.

- Organize training programs for students and educators to improve digital literacy, programming, and data analysis skills.
- Use AI and data analytics to monitor educational outcomes, predict performance trends, and identify areas for improvement.
- Foster international partnerships through participation in digital education initiatives such as Erasmus+ and regional collaborations.
- Support startups and projects focused on AI, digital learning environments, and educational technologies to drive innovation in the sector.

8) **Fostering competencies of the younger generation.** In the framework of regional cooperation, it is important to provide comprehensive support to young people in the educational sphere. The search for talented young people, their support and encouragement. Improving educational-research-labor communication.

9) **Promoting digitization process in education.** Implementation of educational programs using e-learning and distance learning technologies. Development of computer technologies and digitalization of the education system. Provision of high-quality electronic information at all levels of education, enriching the content and improving the quality of educational services and teaching methods.

10) **Inclusivity and green policies in education.** Obtaining an opportunity to explore the development of a more inclusive curriculum. Promoting green policies in the educational system. Improving educational programs in Turkmenistan, focusing on integrating the principles of gender equality, supporting climate change initiatives and promoting healthy lifestyles through educational institutions.

11) **Regional inter-institutional collaboration.** Inter-institutional collaborations and partnerships as fundamental roles in developing and diversifying traditional institutional approaches. Summarizing current practices and exploring future strategies to strengthen and sustain inter-institutional collaborations and partnerships with research-intensive majority-serving institutions.

12) **Implementation of publication cooperation of higher education institutions of Central Asian countries in indexed publications (Scopus, Web of Science);** holding joint international conferences and other events that contribute to increasing the ranking of higher education institutions of the region in the most popular world rankings (THE WUR, QS Ranking, etc.)

13) **Development of regional cooperation in the field of research and cybersecurity;** joint development of international grants and projects that provide for the development of tools for the prevention and prophylaxis, early detection, combating and preventing cyber threats, as well as the training of highly qualified specialists in this field.

14) **Sustainability and long-term strategies.** Developing strategies to ensure the long-term impact of Erasmus projects on regional development, including plans for continued cooperation after the end of funded initiatives.

15) **Supporting student and faculty mobility.** Development programs that facilitate student and teacher exchanges between regions. This may include scholarships, travel funding, and cultural events.

16) **Feedback and engagement of participants.** Regularly receiving feedback from project participants to assess their needs and expectations, which will help to tailor programs and improve their quality.

UZBEKISTAN

In the ongoing year, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovations (MHESI) of Uzbekistan has successfully implemented four advanced information systems to streamline documentation processes for educational institutions and ministry functions. Additionally, six government services have been integrated into the unified interactive portal, enhancing accessibility and efficiency. To optimize enrollment and re-evaluation procedures across higher, secondary specialized, and vocational education sectors, the ministry has refined six information systems, enabling seamless online submissions of documents. Rigorous evaluations have ensured strict compliance with admission criteria, operational standards, and the smooth functioning of all associated processes. These efforts have earned MHESI a top-tier "green" rating in the 2023 mid-year digital transformation assessment, reflecting its leadership among other ministries.

In alignment with the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy, initiated through Presidential Decree PF-158-158 on September 11, 2023, significant strides have been made during the designated "Year of Attention to the People and Quality Education." The strategy emphasizes empowering individuals, fostering economic growth, advancing environmental sustainability, upholding the rule of law, and ensuring national security. Key initiatives include:

- Enhancing access to quality education through fortified school nutrition programs and specialized training courses.*
- Addressing socio-economic disparities by implementing targeted healthcare measures and social support services for families in need.*
- Empowering women in socially vulnerable conditions through tailored empowerment programs.*
- Strengthening governance by ensuring operational efficiency and enforcing timely penalties for tax offenses to bolster economic measures.*

These initiatives also resonate with the broader goals of sustainable development, promoting equity, societal impact, and effective governance while addressing digital transformation challenges and advancing the strategic objectives of the "Uzbekistan – 2030" vision.

Key Challenges in Regional Higher Education and Professional Mechanisms for Addressing Them

Enhancing Access to Quality Education

Expand scholarship programs aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), develop inclusive infrastructure and adaptive teaching methodologies for students with disabilities, and implement targeted outreach campaigns to raise awareness in underserved regions.

Bridging the Gap Between Academia and Industry

Establish Higher Engineering Schools through public-private partnerships, design academic programs that align with industry demands to ensure graduate employability, and actively involve industry experts in curriculum development and mentorship initiatives.

Digital transformation of higher education

Development of a Strategy for the digitalization of higher education in order to increase the effectiveness of the educational process, the objectivity of competence assessment, and the acquisition of knowledge anywhere and lifelong learning, based on advanced information technologies and taking into account the development of artificial intelligence.

Advancing Research and International Rankings

Develop cutting-edge research facilities, incentivize publication in high-impact journals indexed by Scopus and Web of Science, and provide specialized training on scientometrics, research ethics, and publishing best practices for faculty and researchers.

Promoting Lifelong Learning and Societal Impact

Establish dedicated lifelong learning centers to offer skill-based certification programs, foster entrepreneurship through innovation hubs and university-based incubators, and implement community engagement projects to address regional challenges, such as sustainability and public health.

Strengthening Governance and Leadership

Adopt transparent and merit-based election processes for academic leadership positions, provide specialized leadership training programs focused on governance and strategic planning, and institutionalize mechanisms for meaningful student participation in decision-making processes.

Fostering Sustainability and Green Practices

Incorporate sustainability principles and environmental education into academic curricula, modernize water and waste management systems with smart technologies, and organize training programs and conferences to advocate for eco-friendly practices and carbon footprint reduction.

Expanding International Mobility and Collaboration

Strengthen partnerships with international universities to establish joint degree programs, integrate student and staff mobility opportunities into academic and professional development plans, and increase funding for participation in Erasmus+ and other mobility schemes.

Empowering Students Through Self-Management

Establish robust student councils with decision-making authority on institutional matters, include student representatives in key governance committees, and implement leadership development programs to nurture student autonomy and accountability.

Addressing Regional Socio-Economic Challenges

Design and implement Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects tailored to address regional disparities, organize stakeholder-inclusive workshops to create localized solutions, and use data-driven strategies to align educational initiatives with regional socio-economic goals.

Integrating Microcredentials

Develop regulatory frameworks to formally recognize microcredentials as part of academic programs, collaborate with industry with the aim to enhance collaborative learning and interactive content delivery.

Regulation of the integration of AI into higher education

Development of a national concept and rules for regulating the integration of artificial intelligence into higher education. Creation of national norms (regulations) and policies for the ethical and effective use of generative AI(GenAI) in education.

CALL FOR ACTIONS

We urge all stakeholders of higher education development and Ministries of Higher Education of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to take immediate and coordinated action to implement these recommendations. Collaboration is essential to achieve sustainable solutions for strengthening of regional cooperation in Higher Education within Erasmus+ and beyond.

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