



Astana Declaration

of the Second Meeting of Ministers for Education of the Member States of the European Union and of the Central Asian Countries

Astana, 23 June, 2017

1. The Second Meeting of Ministers for Education of the Member States of the European Union and of the Central Asian countries with the participation of the Ministers responsible for Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training was organised by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan as host country, in cooperation with the European Commission and the European External Action Service to take stock of the achievements in mutual cooperation in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training since 2015 as well as to define the prospects of cooperation for the future.
2. The meeting took place in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 23 June 2017, and was chaired by the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan Mr. Erlan Sagadiev. It was attended by Ministers or their high level representatives of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the European Union Member States with participation from Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain and Slovakia.
3. The participating Ministers and delegates reaffirmed their commitment to establish a strong, durable and stable relationship aiming at fostering a prosperous, sustainable and stable, socio-economic development of the Central Asia region in line with the global commitment to Sustainable Development Goals, in particular to “ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning”.

Education is instrumental for sustainable development and contributes to building resilient societies able to adapt to current challenges.

4. Central Asia countries and the European Union both seek to improve living standards by way of strengthening employment of young people, and increasing labour mobility. Education plays a significant role in creating an open, knowledge-based society with high levels of employment opportunities. Education contributes to prevent the exclusion of youth from the labour market and is thus fostering stability and security of a society. Participating Ministers and delegates agreed that high quality education from pre-school onwards is one of the best safety nets against social exclusion. As a consequence, in the 21st century one of the essential tasks, both for the European Union and Central Asia countries, is the adaptation of educational systems to the needs of learners and job seekers helping in meeting the demand of employers of finding

highly qualified personnel. Within this framework, special attention should be paid to the development of Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training systems.

5. Participating Ministers and delegates welcomed the exchanges that took place at experts' level on how to avoid gender inequality in education and discussions on how education may contribute to preventing violent radicalisation and extremism.
6. Participating Ministers and delegates acknowledged that the Bologna process in Higher Education, which created the European Higher Education Area, provides guidance and orientation to the further development of cooperation in this field, linked to the priorities mentioned in the Yerevan Communiqué (May 2015): enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives; making education systems more inclusive; and supporting agreed structural reforms in education.
7. Participating Ministers and delegates underlined, that the Torino process in Vocational Education and Training serves as an excellent instrument and approach to support the progress of Vocational Education and Training in the respective partner countries. The objective of the Torino Process remains twofold: to acquire up to date knowledge about education policies and their results in a country; and to strengthen the ownership, participation and evidence-base of policy making to improve the performance of education policies.
8. Participating Ministers and delegates stressed the high relevance of bilateral cooperation in education between European Union Member States and Central Asia countries, for example specific academic mobility schemes developed between Higher Education institutions from the European Union and Central Asia.
9. Participating Ministers and delegates agreed that cooperation in education at regional level among Central Asia countries provides strong potential for strengthening mutual ties for the benefit of all Central Asia countries. Such a process may be supported by means of existing European Commission programmes (e.g. Erasmus+).

Progress in education reforms and achievements in cooperation since 2015

10. Participating Ministers and delegates recognised that Central Asia countries put education as a corner-stone of their sustainable development strategies. Participating Ministers and delegates also acknowledged the progress made by Central Asia countries in modernising their education systems and carrying out further structural reforms to improve their quality of education and governance at different levels.
11. Participating Ministers and delegates stressed the high value of dialogue and cooperation to support education reforms and the clear interest of both sides in further strengthening the cooperation. Participating Ministers and delegates also acknowledged the contribution made to education reforms in Central Asia by specific European Commission's regional programmes

(such as Erasmus+, the Central Asia Education Platform, the Central Asian Research and Education Network) and in most countries by bilateral European Commission education programmes. Successful examples include joint efforts to establish qualifications frameworks in education or substantial progress made with regard to creating a high-capacity data-communications network for researchers, academics and students in Central Asia countries in the Central Asian Research and Education Network.

12. In line with the European Union-Central Asia Education Initiative, participating Ministers and delegates welcomed the engagement of Latvia and Poland whose involvement is contributing largely to substantive and practice-oriented discussions on Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education. Participating Ministers and delegates expressed their satisfaction with the experience and knowledge exchanged by means of peer learning and experts' participation in the Central Asia Education Platform between countries sharing a similar background in education reform, such as Central Asia countries and Poland and Latvia.
13. Participating Ministers and delegates are committed to strengthening their support to education modernisation in Central Asia countries through the exchange of know-how and experience through bilateral and regional assistance programmes, projects and initiatives in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training sectors.

European Union Central Asia Education Initiative and related cooperation programmes successfully strengthened constructive education policy dialogue

With regard to previously identified priorities:

14. Participating Ministers and delegates welcomed the on-going implementation by the Central Asia countries, the European Commission and the European Union Member States of the roadmap of activities for education agreed upon at the First Ministerial Meeting in June 2015 in Riga. With funding from the European Commission, specific activities were organised on: (i) Development of Qualification Frameworks and Standards (ii) Quality Assurance and Accreditation (iii) Employment and Labour Market Needs. Participating Ministers and delegates confirmed that these themes should remain priority areas for the future mutual cooperation in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training, notably for the Central Asia Education Platform programme.
15. Participating Ministers and delegates acknowledged that *Central Asia countries are working on National Qualifications Framework as an important component of their National Qualifications Systems* based on the principles of lifelong learning and the recognition of learning outcomes. Participating countries are encouraged to consider the recent Council Recommendations of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning as inspiration for the development of national and regional Qualifications Framework.

16. Participating Ministers and delegates noted that Central Asia countries are at different stages of National Qualifications Framework design and implementation. Kazakhstan has developed a National Qualifications Framework in 2012 and adopted the renewed version in 2016. Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and professional standards are being developed on the basis of the Kazakhstan National Qualifications Framework. Kyrgyzstan has developed the Concept of the National Qualifications System on the National Qualifications Framework and discussed various aspects of the National Qualifications Framework. Tajikistan is conceptualising its National Qualifications Framework and has legislated some aspects, and Uzbekistan has developed state educational standards and qualification requirements, and has begun a new stage of targeted reforms in the system of higher and secondary special, vocational education. In Turkmenistan discussions on the introduction of a qualifications framework system have started.
17. Participating Ministers and delegates acknowledged that *activities to improve quality in both Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training* have been undertaken in all Central Asia countries. In 2012 Kazakhstan introduced independent accreditation of educational institutions and programs in the field of Higher Education, and since 2015 in the field of Vocational Education and Training. Kyrgyzstan introduced changes in the legislation thereby creating the normative framework for accreditation. In Tajikistan a Centre for methodological support and quality monitoring of Vocational Education and Training was set up. In Uzbekistan the quality assurance is achieved by the implementation of a continuous training system, re-training, improving qualifications and certification of teachers. Turkmenistan has just begun to develop a certification methodology as part of skills evaluation and the introduction of a quality assurance system.
18. Participating Ministers and delegates acknowledged that the countries of Central Asia have established *cooperation between state institutions and employers to increase the quality of education and promote employability* of graduates. This cooperation is implemented through discussions of policy issues in Education Councils, the development of occupational standards or via involvement of employers in the organisation of the educational process, evaluation and certification of skills of learners in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have introduced dual or work-based learning. Where Kyrgyzstan has piloted an apprenticeship scheme, Kazakhstan has already created relevant legislation for a systematic introduction of the dual system approach.
19. Uzbekistan has a successful system of work contracts between enterprises, local communities, schools and students, providing also for a job guarantee. Tajikistan is addressing the quality of education provision through improved teaching, learning assessment and education system management. Turkmenistan is about to start a closer dialogue with the labour environment with the creation of sector councils.
20. Participating Ministers and delegates noted that three regional conferences have been held on National Qualifications Frameworks (National Qualifications Framework) in Riga;

Cooperation in Higher Education in Cracow; Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Dushanbe. Workshops on data collection methodologies promoted the evidence-based policy approach in Vocational Education and Training. Stock-taking reports and discussions papers on National Qualifications Framework, capacity building and mobility in Higher Education and on synergies with other European Union and donor funded projects led to recommendations for reform initiatives. These activities supported policy dialogue and peer learning among all stakeholders.

The European Higher Education Area and engagement with Central Asia countries

21. Whilst only Kazakhstan is a formal Member of the European Higher Education Area, participating Ministers and delegates of all Central Asia countries confirmed their interest to be associated with the Bologna Process which has proposed guidance for many national reforms.
22. Participating Ministers and delegates welcomed steps undertaken by Central Asia countries at systemic level in introducing two (three) cycle education, as well as efforts to strengthen quality assurance and governance mechanisms in Higher Education and to foster the strategic approach to internationalisation of universities and other Higher Education institutions, increased international mobility of students and academic staff, following Bologna principles.
23. Participating Ministers and delegates welcomed the establishment of direct contacts and strengthening of bilateral cooperation between Higher Education institutions of Central Asia countries and the European Union, including the development of joint projects and mobility of students and staff.

Erasmus + as main European Union programme to support capacity building and academic mobility in education in Central Asia countries

24. Participating Ministers and delegates welcomed the achievements of the *Erasmus+ programme* working since 2014 to improve Central Asian systems and agencies according to European Higher Education Area standards to awarding degrees and credit based learning mobility, to broaden academic and student mobility actions, and to strengthen capacity at Higher Education Institution level. Participating Ministers and delegates acknowledged that the Erasmus+ programme during the last two years funded a substantial number of educational exchanges of students and Higher Education staff between Central Asia and European Union universities (more than 2.500 persons) and capacity building projects in Central Asia.
25. Participating Ministers and delegates noted the relevance of the work carried out by National Erasmus+ Offices and by national teams of Higher Education Reform Experts in promoting cooperation projects between the European Union and Central Asia countries and reform initiatives in the region.
26. Participating Ministers and delegates noted the efforts undertaken to further seek partnership options between the Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training at system level.

Participating Ministers and delegates agree that involving stakeholders from the business community to support Higher Education, Vocational Education and Training and socio-economic development will allow better use of synergies between the two sectors. This includes intensified cooperation between the two sectors in Vocational Education and Training teacher training, the joint development of short-cycle intermediate learning programmes and more active involvement of national Higher Education Reform Experts in initiatives strengthening quality in both education sectors.

Reforms in Vocational Education and Training to strengthen links between business, labour market needs and education actors

27. Participating Ministers and delegates noted the active role the European Training Foundation has played in promoting Vocational Education and Training reforms in Central Asia and in the monitoring of progress through the implementation of the Torino Process in the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have shown great ownership of the Torino Process analysis and have involved many stakeholders in the process.
28. Whilst Turkmenistan has not participated in the Torino Process cycle, it has followed the process internationally and regionally demonstrating its commitment to international cooperation in the field of Vocational Education and Training. The European Union proposes that Turkmenistan considers the possibility of making best possible use of European Union support activities in Vocational Education and Training.
29. Participating Ministers and delegates agreed that improving quality assurance in Vocational Education and Training provision and fostering links to labour markets are key success factors to education reform in Central Asia, together with moving forward on further reforms of Vocational Education and Training systems and measures for increasing Vocational Education and Training quality. Participating Ministers and delegates also underlined the need for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.
30. Participating Ministers and delegates stressed the need for assistance from the European Union and the European Union Member States to Central Asia countries in better developing data collection methodologies. These may include data and indicators on the quality of education provision, employment of graduates, employers' opinions on the quality of graduate skills and statistics on mobility both in Vocational Education and Training and in Higher Education. The European Training Foundation evidence based approach to analysis and development of Vocational Education and Training, skills and policies may represent an appropriate model. Promising initiatives to be followed, notably through Erasmus + projects, could for instance include tracer studies of graduate routes into employment.

Moving Forward

31. Participating Ministers and delegates underlined the importance of European Union cooperation to advance modernisation of the Central Asia education and training systems and invited the European Commission, the European External Action Service, European Union Member States and the donor community to dedicate appropriate resources and expertise to address existing and new priorities identified in this Declaration: (i) Qualification Frameworks and Standards; (ii) Quality Assurance and Accreditation; (iii) Employment and Labour Market Needs; (iv) Innovative teaching methods; (v) Contribution of education to prevent violent radicalisation of youth; (vi) Contribution of education in addressing gender inequalities; (vii) Effective financing of education systems and education institutions. These priorities should be kept in mind when defining bilateral or regional education programmes, notably when defining regional and national priorities for the Erasmus+.
32. Central Asia participating Ministers and delegates renewed their commitment to move forward with the reforms of education systems in their countries. They also stressed their readiness to mobilise domestic resources for financing education and reforms in their respective country with the objective to “ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning”.
33. The European Union encouraged the Central Asia countries to strengthen their reform initiatives in vocational education and training such as assuring the provision of a learning outcomes-based and quality-focused education, labour market-oriented curricula and education programmes, coherent qualifications systems and innovative teaching and learning methods. In Higher Education, fields for further reform include, among others, efficient financing of education institutions; autonomy and internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions; and fostering scientific research.
34. Central Asia participating Ministers and delegates welcomed the initiative of the European Commission to extend the duration and funding of the Central Asia Education Platform until March 2019 and its continuing support to the Erasmus+ programme; and to the Central Asian Research and Education Network.
35. Participating Ministers and delegates agreed to the necessity to strengthen mutual cooperation on internationalisation issues in education within regional and international organisations and cooperation mechanisms.
36. Participating ministers and delegates encouraged the development of twinning-initiatives between educational institutions and relevant bodies following the positive experiences with the peer learning approach tested in Central Asia Education Platform.



37. Participating Ministers and delegates expressed their interest to meet in three years to evaluate the success in the European Union-Central Asia cooperation on education and to enhance dialogue and exchanges on agreed priority themes, both at bilateral and regional level.
38. Participating Ministers and delegates thanked the Chair of the Meeting, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Mr. Erlan Sagadiev, for the effective handling of the proceedings and for the excellent arrangements provided.