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## Joint Communiqué of the First Meeting of Ministers for Education of the Member States of the European Union and of the Central Asian countries Riga, 25 – 26 June 2015

1. The First 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 (HE) and vocational education and training (VET) was organised by the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) in cooperation with the European Commission and the European External Action Service.
2. The meeting took place in Riga, Latvia on 25 and 26 June 2015, and 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 EU countries represented by Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom. It was chaired by the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia Ms Mārīte Seile.
3. The meeting reaffirmed the commitment to strengthen further mutual beneficial cooperation in the field of education, within the context of the EU-Central Asia Strategy, addressing the following themes (i) Development of Qualification Frameworks and Standards (ii) Quality Assurance and Accreditation (iii) Employment and Labour Market Needs.
4. Ministers acknowledged that adapting educational systems to meet the demands of labour market and needs of individuals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an essential task for the EU and Central Asian countries. They underlined the importance of modernising education as an imperative for sustainable socio-economic development and stability, contributing to mutual understanding, respect and intercultural dialogue and the preparation of future generations.
5. Ministers noted that education was defined as one of the key priority areas in the 2007 EU-Central Asia Strategy and remains fully pertinent. They appreciated that since 2007, education has become one of the most successful areas of Central Asia and EU cooperation.
6. Ministers welcomed the value of the dialogue and work jointly undertaken by Central Asian countries, the EU and the donor community in this area, acknowledging the progress achieved since 2012, notably the reforms undertaken by Central Asian countries to modernise education systems whilst also involving relevant stakeholders to build links between HE and the different levels of VET.



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7. Ministers acknowledged the major contribution that EU academic cooperation programmes Tempus (1994-2013) and Erasmus Mundus (2004-2013) have made to the modernisation of HE in Central Asia, and welcomed the new cooperation opportunities offered through Erasmus+. Ministers acknowledged the work carried out by Erasmus+ National Offices in promoting cooperation with European HE Institutions and by national teams of HE Reform Experts in promoting reform initiatives in the Central Asian countries. Ministers underlined the importance of grants to enable students, researchers and staff to broaden their knowledge by studying and working in universities abroad and agreed that grant programmes should receive full support by all administrative structures.
8. Ministers noted that ensuring links between education, research and labour market will further promote employment of young people and innovation, contributing to the sustainable economic development of Central Asia.
9. Central Asian Ministers noted the importance of the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes, taking into account regional synergies in association with the European HE Area as well as characteristics, needs and reforms of each Central Asian country.
10. Ministers welcomed the results of the meetings of Central Asian and EU experts, notably the Bishkek meeting entitled "Labour Market Needs and Best Practices in Central Asia for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education & Training and Higher Education" on 11 and 12 December 2014 and the meeting in Istanbul "Employability, Quality and Mobility in HE and VET" on 16 and 17 March 2015. Ministers expressed appreciation that the focus of the meeting "Employability, Quality and Mobility in HE and VET" was determined through the exchange of experience, extensive consultations of Central Asian stakeholders and their EU counterparts, on e.g. transparency and independence of quality assurance, participative development of qualification frameworks and business-education long term engagement.
11. Ministers noted the consultations referred in paragraph 10 above, where quality assurance and improving links to labour markets are key issues in Central Asia, together with moving forward on further reforms of VET systems and measures for increasing VET quality. Ministers noted the support the European Training Foundation (ETF) has given to the VET reforms in Central Asia and to the monitoring of progress in VET policies through the Torino Process.
12. Ministers acknowledged that the issues discussed regarding HE and VET systems apply equally well to many EU Member States and stressed the importance of seeking common ground within Central Asia and with the EU, basing cooperation in HE and VET on mutual or peer learning to the extent possible.
13. Ministers noted with appreciation the outcomes and contribution of the Senior Officials' Meetings, held in Brussels and Riga on 27 May and 25 June 2015 respectively, to develop and



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agree the content of this joint communiqué, as well as discussions and exchange of good practice on the issues of common interest in the field of HE and VET.

## **Development of Qualification Frameworks (QF) and Standards**

14. Ministers noted that there is a wide range of qualification frameworks globally, appreciating that Central Asian countries are also developing National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs). They recognised that cooperation and exchange of experience on development of NQFs between Central Asian and EU countries promotes HE and VET students' and graduates' mobility, as well as employability within Central Asian and within the EU countries.
15. Ministers underlined the importance of the exchange of information on the recognition of qualifications and diplomas, implementation of learning outcomes, diploma supplement and credit systems. Transparency of educational standards and curricula in HE and VET is an important aspect in facilitating recognition of learning outcomes and mobility.
16. Ministers stressed that the Erasmus+ programme, like Tempus in the past, should continue promoting the development of common principles and prerequisites for recognition of qualifications and diplomas and the development of qualification frameworks.

## **Quality Assurance (QA) and Accreditation**

17. Ministers noted the importance of independent and transparent national quality assurance and accreditation systems in order to increase trust of employers/professional organisations and education institutions in the quality of VET and HE.
18. Ministers called on the European Commission to provide funding opportunities between EU and Central Asian partner countries to further develop quality assurance and accreditation systems in Central Asian countries.
19. Central Asian Ministers, underlining the need of development of quality assurance systems, supported further initiatives for training experts and trainers in quality related issues in the framework of EU education projects in the field of VET and HE.

## **Employment and Labour Market Needs**

20. Ministers recognised that the analysis of labour markets and the needs of employers are of crucial importance for improving HE and VET systems and the employability of graduates. They called for measures to promote effective collaboration between all levels of VET, HE, professional organisations and employers (particularly small and medium-sized enterprises)



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including the update of curricula and NQFs, calling for support to set up national sector skills councils to provide a bridge between the labour market and the education and training systems. Ministers agreed that enhanced cooperation with stakeholders, including social partners and enterprises, provide a significant contribution in the development of VET. Ministers also pointed out that in a rapidly changing labour market, lifelong learning is crucial to anticipate new needs, increase capacity-building and ensure self-fulfilment of citizens. In that process digital learning should also be developed.

21. Ministers underlined the importance of responding to the dynamics of labour markets and changes in migrant worker patterns in order to minimise unemployment and promote employability of young people, as well as equal opportunities for men and women and minorities. They also emphasized the need for validation of non-formal and informal learning.
22. Central Asian ministers also highlighted the importance of VET as a means to acquire qualifications in a lifelong learning perspective, urging to ensure the opportunity to return into VET at different ages in order to improve qualifications and to re-train. They called on the European Commission and EU countries to provide support for developing educational professional programs, professional re-training courses and a system validating professional qualifications acquired from non-formal and informal learning.
23. Ministers were of the opinion that VET is undervalued as a means to address high youth unemployment in most of Central Asia and the EU. They further highlighted the need for elements of work-based learning in VET (e.g. apprenticeships) and noted that this is a growing trend in the EU. They expressed the opinion however, that internship opportunities in Central Asia would remain limited without further modernisation of the VET system (infrastructure, equipment, curricula). Against this background, Ministers called for the European Commission to fund study visits and/or short-cycle internships of Central Asia VET teachers and students to the EU.
24. Central Asian ministers further underscored the need for the European Commission and EU countries to assist Central Asian countries in developing data collection methodologies on *inter alia* quality assurance indicators, graduates' employment, employers' feedback on graduate skills and mobility statistics.



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## Moving Forward

25. Ministers thanked the Chair of the Meeting for the effective handling of the proceedings and for hosting the excellent arrangements.
26. Ministers invited the EU-funded "*Central Asia Education Platform*" to continue to seek consensus on some of the key needs for further modernisation of HE and VET systems in Central Asian countries.
27. Ministers endorsed the Annex to this Joint Communiqué "Indicative Roadmap of Activities under the "*Central Asia Education Platform (2015-2018)*" and looked forward to the implementation of the proposed activities mentioned in the Annex by the European Commission, its Agencies, and the European External Action Service in cooperation with EU Members States and Central Asian partner countries.
28. Ministers also acknowledged the readiness of Poland to assume a leading role for HE and the readiness of Latvia to assume a leading role for VET under the "*Central Asia Education Platform (2015-2018)*".
29. Central Asian ministers underlined the importance of EU assistance designed to advance modernisation of the Central Asia education systems and invited the European Commission, European External Action Service, EU countries and the donor community to dedicate financial means to address the needs identified in this Joint Communiqué.
30. Central Asian ministers welcomed the funding and cooperation opportunities offered by the "*Central Asia Education Platform (2015-2018)*" and the Erasmus+ programme for strengthening mobility of students and staff and for capacity building. They agreed to take into account the priorities identified in the Joint Communiqué in the preparation of the national priorities for the next call of proposals of Erasmus+.
31. Ministers expressed their interest to meet in two years to take stock of EU-Central Asia cooperation on education, to forge a closer partnership and enhance dialogue and exchanges on agreed priority themes.



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## Annex to the Joint Communiqué

### Indicative Roadmap of Activities under the “Central Asian Education Platform” (2015-2018)

| Field of Cooperation                                       | Rationale   | Proposed Activity  | Start            |
|--|---|--|------------------|
| Development of Qualification Frameworks (QF) and Standards | Elements of QF do exist in some of the CA countries. Mapping and exchange of experience on development of qualification frameworks. Cooperation on recognition of qualifications and diplomas promote HE and VET student and graduate mobility and employability within Central Asia. | <b>Stock-taking report/study</b> on existing QF in CA and current status of the development of NQF, building on past experience to avoid duplication. Employer involvement to be highlighted.  | 2015:<br>Q3 – Q4 |
|  |   | <b>National Meetings in Central Asia and Regional Conference</b> on “Qualification Frameworks and Standards in Central Asia”.  | 2015: Q4         |
|  |   | <b>Explore/design new projects for accessing EU and EU MS funding programmes</b> → Project design on QF in Central Asia and development of NQF, building on the experience and work carried out under TEMPUS and by the ETF.   | 2015:Q4          |
| Quality Assurance and Accreditation                        | Independent and transparent QA and accreditation systems together with sufficient and skilled capacity for quality assurance are decisive factors in creating public and private sector employer confidence in the quality of Central Asian HE & VET graduates.                       | <b>Peer-learning</b> on current initiatives, existing instruments and best practices, aiming at the implementation of reform of QA.  | 2016: Q1         |
|  |   | <b>National Meetings and Regional Conference</b> on “Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Central Asia”.   | 2016: Q2         |
|  |   | <b>Explore/design new projects for accessing EU and EU countries funding programmes</b> → Project design to support the setting-up and development of QA and accreditation systems and strengthening capacity development of internal and external QA staff in HE and VET. | 2015:Q4          |
| Enhancing Employability of HE and VET graduates            | Enhancing employability and addressing in particular high youth unemployment are  | <b>Working Group</b> of CA and EU countries on "Data collection methodologies".  | 2015: Q3         |
|  |   | <b>Review of best practices in CA and the EU</b> on collaboration between VET/HE/employers to enhance HE and   | 2016:<br>Q1 – Q2 |



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| Field of Cooperation   | Rationale   | Proposed Activity   | Start    |
|--|---|---|----------|
|  | common challenges to both the EU and CA. Analysing labour markets by collecting data and understanding the needs of employers (particularly small and medium sized enterprises) is of crucial importance to improving the employability of graduates. Effective collaboration between VET/HE/employers is needed for e.g. updating of curricula and NQFs. | VET graduate employability.<br><br><b>Regional Conference</b> on “ <i>Best Practices on cooperation between the VET, HE and employers to promote employability</i> ”.   | 2016: Q4 |
|  |   | <b>Explore/design new projects for accessing EU and EU countries funding programmes</b> → Project design for funding study visits and/or short-cycle internships of Central Asia VET teachers and students to the EU. | 2015:Q4  |
| <b>Supporting Capacity Development and Mobility of Teaching Staff and Students in HE and VET</b> | The internationalisation of education institutions strengthens capacity development and mobility of students, faculty, administrators and researchers.  | <b>Stock-taking</b> of existing capacity development and mobility programmes between EU and CA and within the region. Wide dissemination within Central Asia of the results of the stock-taking exercise.             | 2016: Q1 |
|  |   | <b>Explore/design new projects for accessing EU and EU countries funding programmes</b> → Explore opportunities for bilateral/regional VET mobility programmes for teaching staff and students.                       | 2015:Q4  |
| <b>Principles of Bologna Process</b>   | Promote a Central Asia Education Area using the EU experience in establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA).  | <b>Seminars</b> for HE faculty and managing staff regarding the principles and implementation of Bologna reform agenda upon request of CA countries.  | 2015: Q3 |
|  |   | <b>Regional Conference</b> on “ <i>Prospects for Creating a Central Asia Higher Education Area – Needs, Expectations, Steps for Implementation</i> ”.   | 2016: Q3 |