

PRESS RELEASE

The conference "EU-Turkmenistan: Cooperation in the Field of Education" was organised by the EU Delegation to Turkmenistan on November 2, 2022 in Ashgabat with active involvement of the National Erasmus+ Office in Turkmenistan, and support of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of International Affairs of Turkmenistan. The conference agenda was focused on providing the Turkmen HEIs and secondary vocational schools with more visibility about existing opportunities of cooperation with EU universities within frameworks of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 and other EU educational programmes.

The conference was attended by the representatives of two Turkmen Ministries (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Protection), 17 heads of higher education institutions and 10 secondary vocational schools. Representatives of diplomatic institutions in Turkmenistan took part in the conference: Ambassador of Romania in Turkmenistan Ion Naval, Ambassador of Germany Michael Bierhoff, and Director of the French Institute under the Embassy of France in Turkmenistan Romen Guverne.

Conference participants joined remotely included: Rector of the University of Ruse in Bulgaria, academician Hristo Beloev, Coordinator of HiEdTec project (University of Ruse) professor Angel Smrikarov, Coordinator of DARYA project (ETF) Franca Crestani, administration and HiEdTec project staff of the Turkmen State Institute of Energy, Oguz Khan Engineering and Technology University of Turkmenistan.

The opening speech was addressed by Ambassador of EU Delegation to Turkmenistan Diego Ruiz Alonso who highlighted the significance of such events for developing bilateral relations between EU and Turkmenistan. He provided a brief overview of the priorities and results of cooperation between EU and Turkmenistan in the education field since 1996, and mentioned the implemented Erasmus+ successful projects of 2015-2020 which results led to introduction of innovative teaching methods, advanced training courses for academic staff, and incorporating master university programmes.

Concluding his speech, Ambassador Diego R. Alonso emphasized the importance of EU educational programs for extending horizons of cooperation between EU and Turkmenistan: "We have something to remember and something to be proud of, and I want to call on everyone today to open dialogue on how to make our cooperation even more fruitful and how to use the opportunities and programs that the European Union offers to the whole world and Turkmenistan."

Following the EU Ambassador's speech, Deputy Minister of Education of Turkmenistan Azat Atayev focused in his address on successful ties between Turkmen universities and EU leading universities and research centers actively developed in joint projects. He noted that European countries "has become a hub of one third of the world's top universities and Turkmenistan is particularly interested in the possibilities of studying the EU universities' experience based on the current trends in the international education services market. In line with the Presidential Program for Social and Economic Development of Turkmenistan and according to the country's priorities, we are tackling huge tasks to ensure sustainable development and economy prosperity, and therefore place strong emphasis on the development and reform in the education and training system and research.

Turkmenistan pays particular attention to stimulating growth and developing further cooperation with European educational institutions since the EU universities have become as a reference point for quality education throughout the world, and the development of education is an integral part of the EU's cooperation with its partner countries."

The Deputy Minister noted that the conference could provide a common platform for further cooperation of EU and Turkmen academics and researchers in such priority directions as: digitalization of education, partnership development in creation of innovative educational environments, training engineering specialties, international accreditation of Turkmen universities, collaborative research and joint publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Other priorities, he mentioned, included training and exchanging experience in the development of innovative universities, in particular, entrepreneurial universities with start-up centers, business accelerators, incubators, and technology transfer.

Coordinator of the National Erasmus+ Office in Turkmenistan Aina Chorekliyeva elaborated on the projects initiated within two EU programmes TEMPUS and Erasmus+ since 1997 encouraged significant structural and systemic changes of the Turkmen higher education system. Specifically, Tempus projects supported the Turkmen academic staff to gain experience in e-learning and developing digital learning aids, provided them with enormous amount of factual material and practice to be used for teaching and academic research. Erasmus+ CBHE projects 2015-2020 facilitated to broaden the range of subjects in the Turkmen university programmes, maintained the curricula reform and the process of incorporating master programmes, and adapted the teaching process to social needs.

The main part of Aina Chorekliyeva's speech revolved around the current generation of EU education programmes which could open up new perspectives for the years from 2021 to 2027 for shaping mobility and international cooperation in education. She made special emphasis on the main four components of the Erasmus+ program, Erasmus Mundus for MA students and Jean Monnet for studying the EU advanced experience. NEO Coordinator familiarised the audience with the requirements and innovations

of the Call applications, the possibilities of the academic exchange, and other relevant opportunities of the Erasmus+ Call 2023.

As an example, indicating the successful cooperation between the EU and Turkmen universities and a best practice for Turkmen project partners, available for dissemination to all Turkmen HE institutions, the NEO Coordinator mentioned the joint experience of project “Modernization of higher education in Central Asia through new technologies” (HiEdTec).

The EU coordinators of HiEdTec Hristo Beloev (Rector, academician, professor of the University of Ruse, Bulgaria) and Angel Smrikarov (professor, project Coordinator) made online presentations on the main project outcomes.

Addressing the conference, prof. H. Beloev said: “HiEdTec started in 2019 and its active partners are four EU universities and fifteen Central Asia universities. Ministries of Education of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are actively involved in the project implementation. The project has facilitated our team to take a big step towards digitalization of our universities, which is a global trend. The project also helped us to save the educational process during the coronavirus pandemic.”

Prof. H. Beloev told about the project aim to adapt the educational system in the partner countries to the digital generation through the introduction and effective application of ICT–based innovative educational technologies and didactic models in the educational process. Partner universities successfully created the sustainable academic network throughout Central Asia to exchange their knowledge and experience in the field of innovative educational technologies which currently continue to be expanding. The project team could have designed the Concept of adapting the educational system to the digital generation which was approved by the academic council at each Partner university, and the Guide on innovative educational technologies and published in two languages – English and Russian.

Giving a brief overview of the project outcomes, professor H. Beloev said: “The project team has generated 15 centers of innovative educational technologies - one at each university, and 45 halls of active learning - three at each university. Each university has mastered one system for synchronous distance learning. 75 trainers in the field of innovative educational technologies have been trained - 5 at each university. Over a thousand teachers have been trained in the field of innovative educational technologies.

In order to assist in the training of trainers and teachers, Ruse University has created a rich virtual library with presentations and video lectures in the field of innovative educational technologies. The number of visits to this library is approaching 700,000 (seven hundred thousand).

Each partner university has created five web-based courses. Turkmen is one of them. All web-based courses created by the project in each country have been collected in one virtual library: Turkmen is one of them. The website of our project contains links to all virtual libraries and to all courses. Together, we are spreading the results of our work throughout the Central Asia. All of the above is a very good start to the digital transformation of education“.

Concluding his statement, prof. H. Beloev highlighted the importance of created effective cooperation.

Professor Angel Smrikarov, Head of Center for Innovative Educational Technologies (Ruse, Bulgaria), addressed online to the conference with the presentation on a special system designed to assess the degree of digitalization of universities, which, in turn, should be based on such indicators as the current state and development trends of a higher education system, the transition of universities to a digital educational environment and methods for assessing the degree of their readiness for digitalization.

The achieved results of HiEdTec Turkmen partners were broadcasted by Habib Halmamedov, project Local Coordinator. Turkmen partners are represented by three HE institutions: the International University for the Humanities and Development, Oguz Khan Engineering and Technology University of Turkmenistan, and the Turkmen State Institute of Energy. The project completely meets strategies of Turkmenistan development and the national priorities considering that the country is currently implementing a digital educational system.

Habib Halmamedov spoke on the best practices gained as a result of Turkmen partners' participation in HiEdTec which supported the development of their universities into innovative and assisted to improve the quality of trained specialists. He noted that the project outcomes contributed to the digital transformation of partner-universities with e-learning methods, digital textbooks, manuals, video and audio materials, interactive and multimedia programs to improve the universities' virtual learning environment and also provided considerable support to the lifelong and continuing education developments in Turkmenistan.

The conference hosted presentations of Romania, France, Germany and Italy with the purpose to provide the complete information about educational programmes and grants for Turkmen candidates:

Ambassador of Romania in Turkmenistan Ion Naval told about the system of higher education in Romania, its specific features and opportunities for the Turkmen youth to enter Romanian universities.

Ambassador of Germany Michael Bierhoff spoke about the German Cultural Institute PASCH initiative (Schools: Partners for the Future) promoting the knowledge of German language globally and in Turkmenistan and supporting France-Turkmenistan cultural cooperation. In particular, the associated direct contact in the frame of the PASCH project provided establishing in Turkmenistan a system of

support for teachers and students through provision of methodological and advisory assistance, and dissemination of teaching-learning materials which increased interest and became strong motivation for Turkmen students to study the German language.

Director of the French Institute under the Embassy of France in Turkmenistan Romen Guverne expressed hope that the conference would make a contribution in the development of French-Turkmen bilateral relations and signing an agreement in the field of education. He informed about opportunities offered by the Institute in the field of language training courses with different levels of proficiency, competitions organized for French language enthusiasts with opportunities for winners to visit France. He also proposed the Institute initiative to organize a delivery of university-level distance learning for two Turkmen higher education institutions – Magtymguly Turkmen State University and Azadi Turkmen National Institute of World Languages.

Franca Crestani, the Coordinator of European Education Foundation (ETF), elaborated new youth-focused project DARYA for Central Asia recently launched to support the development opportunities for inclusive and labour market relevant skills. DARYA is intended to be implemented during the next five years in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. For Turkmenistan the DARYA project is particular important given the country's priorities and focus on socio-economic reforms and digitalization process.

Mrs Franca Crestani gave the information on the project key parameters and objectives which included:

- Developing future-oriented skills through better data and analysis of education and training outcomes and skill needs;
- Flexible and transparent approaches to qualifications at the national and regional levels, ensuring equal opportunities for all;
- Greater use of inclusive approaches to teaching and learning.

In conclusion, she announced the dates for the consultation process in Turkmenistan and the upcoming events in November – December 2022.

In the final part of the conference the participants exchanged their views in a question-answer format to share experience in the field of inter-institutional cooperation. The contributions from the floor were made by representatives of Kakayev International university of Oil and Gas of Turkmenistan and the State Academy of Arts of Turkmenistan who spoke on their institutions' international cooperation with EU universities and highlighted the importance of activities taking place at the local level, such as online EU experts' lectures on mathematics, economy, logistics, and master classes on art.