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The EU-Central Asia Education Initiative

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Abstract

The European Education Initiative was launched as part of the EU-Central Asia Strategy in 2007. By 2009, the initiative had prioritised higher and vocational education and emphasised links with the Bologna Process. Attempts were made to establish the EU-Central Asia Education Platform – a re-branding of Tempus and Erasmus Mundus programmes within a set of specific activities – and outline the ways in which internal EU education policy development processes could be externalised to the Central Asia region. However, the slow and uncertain pace of development of the Education Initiative, with the exception of the CAREN programme, calls for an analysis of the logic, content and practice of what has been attempted. It is also necessary to examine the political and institutional context that explains the lack of traction gained with education policy actors in the EU and Central Asia, and the prospects for a more compelling vision and a concrete programme of implementation that could meet the real and urgent needs of Central Asian countries. Drawing on the evidence provided by participants in the development of the Education Initiative, this paper concludes by outlining an agenda for addressing its weaknesses.

*Introduction*¹

The 2007 EU-Central Asia Strategy identified the field of education and training as a key area for cooperation, where the European Union (EU) was willing to share its experience and expertise.² The strategy called for the establishment of a European Education Initiative and the development of an E-silk highway. Policy engagement for education and training was, in consonance with the rest of the strategy, to be based on a balanced bilateral and regional approach that could respond to the differing needs of Central Asian countries and contribute to regional cooperation.³

The European Education Initiative was to offer support at all levels: primary, secondary, higher and vocational education and training. More concretely, three areas were identified:

- Higher education: the Erasmus Mundus and Tempus⁴ programmes were to be mobilised for cooperation, and academic and student exchanges. The EU would grant scholarships for students from Central Asian countries to attend European universities.
- Institution-building: the development of regional education centres, European Studies institutes and support for the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.
- Vocational education and training (VET): the EU would support the activities of the European Training Foundation (ETF) in this area.

The E-silk highway was to be an internet-based communications network, which would link Central Asian students, teachers, academics and scientists both regionally and with the EU e-network. Specific educational purposes included enabling participation in modern forms of life-long and distance learning.

This paper intends to examine 1) the selective and limited

¹ The author would like to thank EUCAM colleagues Matteo Fumagalli, Michael Emmerson and Jos Boonstra, whose constructive comments and suggestions have been reflected in this document. This working paper draws on research carried out in June 2009. Interviews were conducted with officials from the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, and with members of the education policy communities in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The detail, which this paper provides on the Education Initiative, would not have been possible without the cooperation of this range of interested participants. The assessments and conclusions drawn are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of these participants.

² The EU Strategy for Central Asia proposed three new regional initiatives: education and training (coordinated by the European Commission); rule of law (coordinated by Germany and France); and environment, including water management (coordinated by Italy).

³ Council of the European Union, 'The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership', Brussels: COEST 179, 2007.

⁴ Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies.

experience and expertise that the EU has offered to its Central Asian partners; 2) the content, processes and significance of the Education Initiative; 3) the balance achieved between regional and bilateral approaches; and 4) the adequacy of the EU's approach given the differing needs of Central Asian countries. Based on interviews with some of the actors most closely involved in the process and access to documents related to the Education Initiative, this paper identifies the main components of the initiative in order to establish what it is and is not. This provides the basis for analysing the processes and outcomes of the initiative up to 2009. Finally, the paper offers a number of recommendations for the EU. At the core is the need for Europe to revisit its 2007 strategy and to develop concrete and operational approaches to education and training cooperation, based on a transparent and realistic assessment of what can be achieved.

1. Education and training in Central Asia: opportunities for engagement

Since 1991, education and training systems in Central Asia have operated in contexts characterised by a decline in educational and literacy standards, as part of the bigger picture of downfalls in public health and life expectancy, as well as rising levels of criminality and massive male emigration.⁵ International studies have identified the following challenges facing Central Asian education if it is to contribute to societal development:⁶

- Demographic trends resulting in a growing demand for education at all levels. Central Asia has a young population with high numbers under the age of 24;⁷
- Inadequate funding leading to a lack of capacity in the education system;
- Contraction of the secondary education system and the closure of vocational schools;
- A lack of quality provision at all levels, as well as low levels of educational achievement;
- Massification of higher education;
- Inadequate funding of education at all levels; and

⁵ MacFarlane, S.N., 'Caucasus and Central Asia: Towards a Non-strategy', Occasional Paper Series 37, Oxford: Centre for International Studies, University of Oxford, 2004.

⁶ Silova et al., 'Education and the Crisis of Social Cohesion in Azerbaijan and Central Asia', Comparative Education Review 51/2, 2007, 159–80.

⁷ In Kazakhstan, 47 per cent of the population is under the age of 24; in Kyrgyzstan, 55 per cent; in Tajikistan, 61 per cent; in Turkmenistan, 58 per cent; and in Uzbekistan, 59 per cent; in *Ibid.*

- Corruption at all levels, but most evidently in higher education entrance and assessment.

Central Asian education systems continue to be characterised by the obsolescence of infrastructure and facilities, unstable mixes of public and private provision and funding, and unbalanced curricula with a system of qualifications that has little relevance to economic and social development. Issues of demand, capacity, funding, content, relevance and equity, amongst others, are exacerbated by the political and governance context within which these education systems function; the centralisation of system regulation makes it difficult for local or institutional level actors or initiatives to contribute to change.⁸

To this bleak picture, two points must be added. First, these challenges are not equally common to all Central Asian countries; and second, the EU is aware of these challenges and has substantial experience in developing common responses to them.

While Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are desperately poor and under-funding of education could lead to the closing down of the school network entirely in the upcoming winter, Kazakhstan has energy resources to provide for dramatic improvements in its education system. In fact, it is investing 500 million dollars in a new technical university in Astana, which will teach in English and employ foreign professors. It also has an increasingly well-regarded private university sector with well-developed links with European universities. Uzbekistan also has been able to sustain significant levels of investment, with for example, new lyceums in Samarkand and Tashkent, and a fairly independent Westminster University in the capital. Turkmenistan is slowly recovering from its experience under President Niyazov, which saw the shortening of school and university years and a sustained policy of ideological curriculum control that replaced Soviet-era Marxist-Leninist content by the *Ruhnama*. Shared experience and challenges therefore combine with a diversity of resources and policy responses. Diversity does not preclude the possibility of cooperation and regional policy development. It does however argue for a balanced regional and bilateral approach, as specified in the Central Asia Strategy.

Since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the EU has engaged in the development of a wide-ranging education and training policy within the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme (Council of the European Union, 2000; and European Commission, 2003). Despite the constraints, national sensitivities with regard to social policy and the diversity of education and

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training systems, member states and the European Commission have worked within the Open Method of Coordination and the 7 billion Euro Lifelong Learning Programme to develop agreed policies across the full range of education and training policies within a lifelong learning perspective. EU member states have signed up to a full policy coordination approach based on common objectives, benchmarks, joint Commission and Council of Ministers reports, and peer learning activities involving state and non-state actors. In addition, member states have participated in the dramatic transformations associated with the Bologna Process. One of the proposed dynamics for the development of the EU's external engagement has been the *externalisation of internal processes*.⁹ The EU has a successful internal model and significant levels of expertise and experience in working within the constraints of national diversity nonetheless to produce important levels of policy cooperation.

There is a manifest need for each of the Central Asian countries to develop their education and training systems. Indeed, since 1991 they have engaged with a broad range of international actors and institutions to address these needs. The Education Initiative clearly has the potential to contribute and establish a set of regional priorities, funding sources and policy cooperation. The EU has significant resources to offer and the experience of working towards long-term transformations. It is also important to highlight that the EU is not the only actor engaged in education assistance and cooperation in Central Asia. Russia, Japan, Turkey and the US are also active; Central Asian students seek opportunities to study abroad in, for example, Russia, the US and Germany. Nonetheless, the EU might have a comparative advantage with regard to education and training that might be less evident in other parts of its Central Asia Strategy. In principle, therefore, the Education Initiative has the potential to support the Central Asian states in meeting their current challenges. The extent to which it has worked towards fulfilling this potential is explored in the succeeding sections.

2. The Education Initiative since 2007

The Education Initiative has four noticeable characteristics. First, the original prospect of engagement in all education and training sectors has been reduced to a focus on higher education and VET. Second, the strategy's blueprint lacks a framework for implementation other than the existing Tempus, Erasmus Mundus and ETF activities. It is only the explicit incorporation of the Bologna Process within the Initiative (and this is anyway implicit in the Tempus programme) which marks an elaboration. There is a temptation to see the Education Initiative as little more than a re-branding of existing programmes. Third, there is very little sense of addressing the broader educational or social context in Central Asia or of making links between education and human rights, and governance and human rights. Finally, the development of the Education Initiative has been less than transparent and, so far, it has gained very limited traction in Central Asia's education and training sectors.

The Education Initiative now consists of three strands, each of which is expected to contribute to the modernisation of the higher and vocational education and training systems in Central Asia:

- The development of an EU-Central Asia Education Platform;
- Specific activities; and
- Information and communication actions.

As the conceptualisation, content and components of the

⁸ Zgaga, P., 'Thematic Review of TEMPUS Structural Measures: A Survey Report', Final report to the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission, Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana and Centre for Educational Policy Studies, 2008.

⁹ Council of the European Union, 'European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, Eastern Regional Programme', Strategy paper 2007-2013, Brussels: European Council, 2006, p.6.

Education Initiative have developed, it is now possible to identify what it actually involves (see Table 1). In essence, it intends to establish and coordinate networks for EU-Central Asia regional and bilateral policy cooperation; to increase the impact of EU programmes and institutions aimed at higher education and VET reform; and for the Education Initiative to gain an identity and a profile in the region.

2.1 The EU-Central Asia Education Platform

Despite the rather amorphous label of 'platform', this strand of the Education Initiative is best understood as an attempt to establish the conditions for ongoing, iterative and productive policy dialogue and agreement. The networks intend to provide the opportunity for both regional and high-level political discussion, as well as debate on more technical and operational matters. It is expected that the Education Initiative will lead to regular regional and bilateral high-level meetings between the Commission and ministerial representatives from Central Asia. Technical Working Groups, chaired by each of the countries of the region, would have the mandate to review education sectors, develop agreed policy responses and stimulate policy discussion at the national level. EU member states would offer experience and expertise, and the Commission would play a role in helping to coordinate member state and EU resources. The third component of the Education Platform would consist of national level dialogue between the Commission, interested EU member states and individual Central Asia countries on a bilateral basis. The focus would be on coordinating existing funding opportunities, developing work programmes and implementation and financing mechanisms, and taking sector wide and holistic approaches.

It is important to recognise the innovative character of the Education Platform. It would for the first time set up a process for Central Asian governments to meet together as a region and collaboratively discuss joint challenges and approaches. It would establish a role for the Commission in coordinating policy discussion and development regionally and bilaterally, and in developing a strategic approach to the activities of individual EU member states in Central Asia and at the regional level. Its novelty should not therefore be underestimated. But neither should its complexity and the resultant time that would be required to move between the different levels of governance of the education systems and to ensure coordination between them. In terms of the Central Asian Strategy, there are the same objectives and constraints found in the areas of rule of law, good governance or water resource management. The aspiration of the Education Platform is therefore both consistent with the strategy and internally coherent in terms of addressing the different dynamics at play in the development of EU, regional and bilateral

The Education Platform: assessment

The difficulties in establishing the Education Platform are apparent. In essence, these challenges are a manifestation of the reality that the establishment of the Education Platform will itself be an outcome of the Education Initiative; education policy development is a topic through which regional cooperation will be fostered.

By June 2009, three notionally high-level meetings had been held to flesh out and develop the components of the Education Initiative and their coordination. The first meeting, held in Cairo in May 2008, was convened as an additional session within a Tempus conference. The meeting confirmed the commitment of the Central Asian states to education policy discussion through the Education Initiative and was therefore the first step to establishing the Education Platform. Proposals were made to set up a regional network for coordinating arrangements for Credit Transfer (an implicit form of the Technical Working Group) and to set up environment and vocational training centres in Central Asia. The agreement to continue to participate in the Education Initiative and indeed to contribute to the development of regional institutions, one of the original aspirations of the 2007 strategy, was matched though by a developing fault line between a regional approach and a bilateral one. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan favoured a regional approach; Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were broadly supportive of a regional initiative but were concerned with maintaining the potential for national and project focused strategic initiatives. In theory, the Education Platform is flexible enough to deal with these differing priorities and commitments, but its practical implementation will of course be a key question. Some sense of the potential difficulties can be found in that there had been little prior consultation or preparation and that the first meeting itself was very short and in effect did little more than secure agreement that the Education Initiative and the role of the Education Platform within it should continue to be developed.

The second meeting was convened in Brussels in September 2008. Again, it confirmed the commitment of the Central Asian states to regional cooperation within the frame of the Education Initiative, but no timeline or methodology for its implementation was established. Both the Education Platform and the broader Education Initiative were still at the level of preparatory work. The questions of participation of which education policy actors and institutions, working within which processes, according to what work plan, with which timeframes and resources and so on – indeed all of the crucial factors in establishing a purposeful network of any sort – were left unanswered.

The third meeting was held in Brussels in June 2009. Participants

Table 1. The EU-Central Asia Education Initiative

EU-Central Asia Education Platform	Specific activities	Information and communication actions
High-level meetings	Tempus	Joint events Publish joint materials
Technical Working Groups	Erasmus Mundus	
National level dialogue	The Bologna Process	
	The European Training Foundation (ETF)	
	CAREN	
	Coordination of member state initiatives	

relationships. However, neither the institutionalisation of these interlocking forms of policy development nor the achievement of concrete results is straightforward.

provided a number of perspectives. Central Asian countries sent quite high-level government representatives.¹⁰ The willingness

¹⁰ For example, the Deputy Minister of Education and Science from Kyrgyzstan was present and made a presentation: "A Central Asia

to consider the broad context of education reform and open up discussion beyond the priorities of higher education and VET were also commented upon. Nonetheless, satisfaction continued to be expressed towards the viability of the overall strategy and the potential for further progress rather than with regard to the hard work of implementation and work programmes where little progress was made. For some observers, the June 2009 meeting continued to be about defining the spaces for educational cooperation rather than about filling up what could appear to be empty boxes. Nonetheless, the meeting did see confirmation of Commission funding for the Education Platform: one million Euros for 2010 to fund the meetings that would constitute the Education Platform and to coordinate activities in the other strands.¹¹

The details of this series of meetings suggest a number of features that have influenced the ways in which the Education Platform has, and is likely to continue to, develop. The existence of the initiative has been restated at each meeting, but hitherto there has been little development towards practical implementation. It is notoriously difficult to maintain momentum in activities that depend on the presence of significant policy actors with real influence in their home countries. So far, not all countries have been represented in the meetings and there has been little continuity with regard to participants. This does raise questions about the extent to which these can be considered *high-level* meetings and therefore of the extent to which discussions and conclusions reached are actually endorsed by national authorities. The lack of continuity and *authority* in these meetings can perhaps explain why the clarity and purpose of the Education Initiative is not always apparent in Brussels and even less so for national policy actors in Central Asia.

These notionally high-level meetings are not the only ones that have been held and the potential for incremental development of policy cooperation networks should not be discounted. European Union delegations have participated in Education Platform meetings in Astana in May 2009, and Bishkek and Dushanbe in June 2009. It would thus be reasonable to state that while the Education Platform's development has been slow, there is now greater activity and growing clarity about what is to be involved. EU member state participation is an additional feature of the Education Platform in theory and now in practice too with the Polish Embassy in Turkmenistan and the Latvian Embassy in Uzbekistan having taken on the role of coordinating the Education Initiative on the ground in those countries.

2.2 Specific activities

This strand of the Education Initiative constitutes the content and the material means that would contribute to the concrete implementation of whatever might emerge from the development of the Education Platform. In essence, the Tempus programme will provide the funding and procedures for education policy development activities; the Bologna Process provides a set of ten policy areas for higher education reform; and the Erasmus Mundus programme provides the means to link Central Asian higher education institutions, staff and students with those from EU member states. The CAREN project will provide a high-speed broad band network to link higher education institutions in Central Asia with the EU and globally. ETF activities will promote reform of the vocational education and training sectors. The activities of member states in Central Asia will be mapped and coordinated in order to achieve complementarity and efficiency, and to focus on supporting education reform around shared priorities.

perspective: education reform in Kyrgyzstan".

11 The recommendations made with regard to the Education Platform at the end of this paper call for this sum of money to be reviewed. There are clear questions about what kinds of international activity can be financed with such a limited amount.

Tempus

The Tempus programme works on the basis of Joint European Projects (JEPs) between EU institutions and partners from third countries established as consortia. JEPs run for two or three years and Tempus funding enables individuals working in the higher education sector to engage with partners on specific activities within the project. Tempus is more than a mobility programme; rather, it allows for policy specific and context-rich education reform activities. It also provides for Structural and Complementary Measures (SCMs), which are short-term interventions to support national higher education reform and strategic policy frameworks.¹²

In theory, Tempus is open to participation from a wide range of bodies (non-governmental organisations, business companies, industries and public authorities) in addition to higher education institutions, but in practice, it has been a source of funding for universities engaged in government-supported reform. It is essentially a bottom-up programme, relying on responses to calls for proposals from higher education institutions and their staff. But it is also directed towards the achievement of concrete political goals that are negotiated and agreed upon between the European Commission and partner countries. These follow the broad remit of higher education reform, aiming at a knowledge-based economy and society, quality assurance, accreditation, and the need to adapt better to labour market needs and the Bologna Process.

Since the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999, Tempus projects have been a means to develop Bologna principles and to work towards their implementation even in countries that are not members of this process. Kyrgyzstan has been particularly active in this regard with its Tempus-funded involvement in the Commission-funded Tuning Project.¹³ The role Tempus projects have played in establishing particular institutions as pilots and flagships for policy innovation has been apparent. Tempus has a solid track record in the region; both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have maintained their involvement in the programme despite otherwise problematic relations with the EU. Tajikistan has only been able to participate in Tempus programmes since 2004 and so there is the potential for even greater engagement there. It is also important to note that Tempus promotes not only Bologna, but also the EU higher education modernisation agenda embedded in the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme. It promotes curricular reform, which usually go much beyond curricula and imply the retraining of teachers, the development of new teaching material, the introduction of new quality assurance procedures, and even new internal governance systems. Thus, Tempus provides the means to externalise some of the internal dynamics of EU higher education policy development.

The bottom-up profile of Tempus also has the potential to address quite embedded levels within the higher education sector. It provides opportunities for curricular development, enables institutions and academics to gain prestige, contributes to internationalisation, and provides benefits for students and staff. However, it depends on the national context to have an impact at the systemic level, but this should not obscure the potential for the EU to engage with quite embedded levels within education systems.

Tempus: assessment

As part of the Education Initiative, the EU has committed to

12 The Tempus approach has developed through four iterations since 1990. Tempus I ran from 1990–4; Tempus II from 1994–8; Tempus III from 2000–6; and Tempus IV for the period 2007–13.

13 For details of the Tuning Project, see www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu

double the funds available to Central Asia under Tempus to an annual 10 million Euros from 2010. The programme's strong track record in the region clearly gives the potential for these funds to be used to develop a focused regional and bilateral approach to higher education reform. Kyrgyzstan provides a clear example of the extent of engagement in Tempus with the ways in which JEPs have established pilot projects for the licensing of higher education institutions and participation of student organisations in quality assurance. Since 1994, there have been 36 major projects in Kyrgyzstan and the priorities of the Bologna Process have been reflected in project funding. There remains the potential for Tempus to be a vehicle for more intense engagement in education reform in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The mobilisation of Tempus within the Education Initiative needs not therefore be a continuity exercise but can be developed further. The doubling of funds is not insignificant, despite the relatively small sums involved, and there is no doubt on the ground that it will be used in higher education reform-related projects and the willingness and capacity is certainly there to apply successfully for funding. Continuity is important and the Tempus programme has the means to build upon the existing infrastructure, good will, positive experiences and evidence of productive outcomes.

In terms of whether Tempus will display continuity or change within the Education Initiative and whether its potential will be built upon, a number of initial assessments can be made. At the level of the EU institutions, Tempus has been subject to a number of modifications whose implications are yet fully to emerge. Traditionally, the priorities, projects and implementation of the Tempus programme in Central Asia have been the responsibility of the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) and the European Training Foundation. Funds were always authorised and provided by the EU Directorate General for External Relations (DG RELEX) and Aid/Development (DG AIDCO). The establishment of the Executive Agency in 2006 shifted the implementation of Tempus from the ETF but left policy decisions with EAC between June 2008 and April 2009. From now on, AIDCO will assume responsibility for Tempus and related policy decisions. In addition, AIDCO has been tasked with the coordination of the Education Initiative and so in one way the priorities, coordination and efficiency of Tempus may well be enhanced. However, these institutional arrangements do create some potential difficulties. One of the main successes of the Tempus programme and the reason why it constitutes a significant example of how to establish the Education Platform, is the long-term engagement and experience in the region which the ETF and DG EAC have gained since 1990. As a bottom-up programme, Tempus is centrally concerned with the long-term and iterative negotiation and implementation of project-led reform by networks of actors with shared experience and a degree of trust that has developed over time. In contrast, AIDCO has limited knowledge and experience in education policy development in the region and its officials are not yet part of country networks.

The significance of these institutional factors lies in the extent to which the logic of the development of cooperation networks and influence established by Tempus can be productively mobilised within the Education Initiative when some of the core actors from DG EAC and the ETF are no longer as centrally involved in the programme. The maintenance of Tempus networks could serve as an important building block for the Education Platform, but the question is whether the shift to AIDCO will create delays in maintaining and mobilising these networks and will lead to changes in policy priorities. The additional implication is that the DG EAC expertise in the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme in managing the complex work of education policy cooperation and coordination will be only partially mobilised within the Education Initiative.

It is important not to overemphasise the importance of the institutional politics and dynamics of the European Commission

within the Education Initiative. But by June 2009, a number of concerns were being discussed internally that can partially explain the relative delays in defining the added-value of the initiative for a successful programme like Tempus. As discussed above, the development of the Education Initiative has been undertaken by RELEX and now AIDCO. Education specialists within the European Commission, in the Central Asian states and within their education policy communities have not been closely involved in the Education Initiative. As a result, it may be that policy and funding decisions (on funding allocation for projects, on which countries can benefit from additional funds, on whether Tempus can engage with actors and institutions not hitherto involved, and so on) are made without significant contributions from those whose institutional experience and memory and education policy expertise could be most valuable.

The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process is about the development of a European Higher Education Area. Since the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 by the Ministers of Education from 29 European countries, the process has grown to include 46 states consisting of all but two of the signatories of the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe.¹⁴ Since then, meetings have been held every two years between the Ministers of Higher Education to take stock of progress, agree to new priorities and arrange for an ongoing work programme within a clearly defined, iterative process involving all levels of higher education systems.¹⁵

In terms of the content of the reform, the Bologna Process has incrementally developed further action lines in addition to the original six established in 1999.¹⁶ Current action lines include:

- Establishing a three-cycle system of higher education within a qualifications framework;
- Promoting mobility;
- Developing quality assurance;
- Increasing employability;
- Developing the European Higher Education Area in a global context;
- Developing joint degrees;
- Recognising qualifications;
- Including a social dimension; and
- Promoting lifelong learning.

The significance of the Bologna Process is that it constitutes an iterative and clearly focused programme of reform, a model of higher education structure and priorities, and a process that has gained and retained the commitment of participating countries from the state level to institutions, staff and students. In essence, the Bologna Process has a set of priorities and the governance

¹⁴ Only Monaco and San Marino of the Council of Europe members are not signatories to the Bologna Process.

¹⁵ The Ministers met in Prague in 2001, Berlin in 2003, Bergen in 2005, London in 2007 and Leuven in 2009. It was at the Berlin meeting that the decision was made to make participation in the Bologna Process open to the signatories to the European Cultural Convention. In addition to governmental participation, the Bologna Process now has clearly defined roles for the European Commission, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, as well as for a series of non-governmental bodies: the European Studies Union (ESU), the European Universities Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions of Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

¹⁶ The original six were: adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles (Bachelor and Masters); establishment of a system of credits; promotion of mobility; promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance; promotion of the European dimension in higher education.

means to achieve it.

The interaction between Tempus and the Bologna Process in the Central Asian Education Initiative is potentially a powerful one. Bologna establishes ten fairly simple and clear objectives and therefore provides a ready-made agenda for policy development. At the same time, the EU's Education and Training 2010 Work Programme contributes policy principles with regard to, for example, funding models, the means of achieving greater efficiency and equity, autonomy, and governance. The Bologna action lines also come with a set of technical problems, solutions and models for scrutiny or emulation, which gives an agenda for policy development with concrete and specific parameters building on experience with the 46 signatories to the Bologna Process. At a higher level, the Bologna Process has produced clear sets of standards and guidelines for, for example, European Quality Charter for Mobility or the European Quality Assurance Register.

It is important to emphasise this since the Bologna Process is exactly that: a process that is more than a script for higher education reform. While the Bologna action lines can serve as a template for other countries, an attractive model and a challenge for existing systems, as a process it requires the engagement of all participants in higher education. À la carte Bologna is likely to do little more than irritate or destabilise higher education institutions and systems, result in paper reforms with little progress in effecting real transformation or to constitute for some countries either another international club to join or a deceptively easy and cost efficient way of reaching European standards.¹⁷ The Bologna Process embodies a series of norms and processes of reform: inter-governmental relations, interactions between supranational and national agencies and individual higher education institutions with their students and staff; transparent discussion; and repeated monitoring of effects and implementation. These norms and processes constitute a number of challenges for member countries and non-members seeking to work towards the implementation of the Bologna Process action lines.

The Bologna Process: assessment

The successful mobilisation of the Bologna Process within the Education Initiative depends on whether the dynamics that were at play before the launch of the Central Asia Strategy can be given new impetus. In this sense, a number of assessments can be made.

The Bologna Process was already a factor in higher education reform in Central Asia before the launch of the Education Initiative.¹⁸ Indeed, the process has had global ramifications in terms of encouraging national systems to provide for internationally comparable and recognisable degrees.¹⁹ Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have reformed aspects of their higher education systems along Bologna action lines.²⁰ These were the only Central Asian countries invited to the Bologna

17 Tomusk, V., 'Market as Metaphor in Central and East European Higher Education', *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 8/2, 1998, 223–39; and Tomusk, V., 'Three Bolognas and a Pizza Pie: Notes on Institutionalisation of the European Higher Education System', *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 141, 2004, 75–95.

18 Nyborg, P., 'The Influence of the Bologna Process on Reform Processes in the Caucasus and Central Asia', *Twelfth ISCE Economic Forum*, Prague, 31 May – June 2004.

19 Robertson, S. and Keeling, R., 'Stirring the Lions: Strategy and Tactics in Global Higher Education', *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 6/3, 2008, 221–40.

20 Both Kyrgyzstan's and Kazakhstan's repeated attempts to join the Bologna Process. Kyrgyzstan has made repeated attempts to join the club since the Bologna Declaration, but the insuperable problem of not allowing full participation of third countries is the barrier.

Policy Forum, held as part of the Ministerial Meeting in Leuven in April 2009.²¹ In their national strategies, both have set the adoption of the Bologna model as national priorities. Kazakhstan has moved to a three-cycle university degree architecture and has made arrangements for Credit Transfer and the mutual recognition of degrees. It has clearly identified curricular reform priorities in Engineering; Science and Technology; Social Sciences and Business; and Health and Social Protection. In addition, Kazakhstan's engagement in governance reform, transformed university management and student services with a focus on quality assurance are all in line with EU policy development processes within the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme. Kazakhstan can be expected to continue to draw upon EU models for the reform of its higher education sector.

Kyrgyzstan too is already developing Bologna approaches.²² The Kyrgyz country strategy paper adopted in May 2009 reconfirmed the intention to implement the principles of the Bologna Process in the context of harmonising higher education with international standards and adapting qualifications for labour market needs, while at the same time enhancing quality, equity and student mobility. The country is also developing a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which may be increasingly compatible with the EU equivalent, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

Uzbekistan is equally committed to the internationalisation of processes in the field of higher education. It has prioritised the reform of university management, a transformed degree structure, the development of new curricula and the re-working of the connections between universities and enterprises.

On the other hand, Turkmenistan's isolation in all areas has of course had an impact in terms of higher education. But in July 2007, the new President defined the priorities for higher education reform: to achieve international standards in education, science, technology and ICT development; and for universities to retrain teachers and trainers at all levels, from pre-school to higher education. Nonetheless, the implementation of the Bologna action lines would require a major reshuffling of the existing educational system.²³

Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that the Education Initiative has the potential to help Central Asia become a mini-Bologna, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as leaders for emulation, policy learning or even competitive copying. Central Asia could become a club with sufficient homogeneity and heterogeneity to enable productive and cooperative learning, with a measure of organised competition being conducive to national and regional intensification of the implementation of the Bologna action lines.

However, the potential for the development of a regional area contrasts with the national and international politics of the region. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the front-runners in terms of Bologna; their geographical proximity and language and cultural similarities might make it more likely that they will push ahead.

21 The participating countries were Australia, Brazil, Canada, the People's Republic of China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Tunisia and the United States, in addition to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The Bologna Policy Forum is to be reconvened in 2010.

22 The Kyrgyz position is clear however: high-level support, and this was signalled by the attendance of the Vice Prime Minister at the first meeting of the Bologna Policy Forum in April 2009.

23 For Silova writing in 2005, 'postgraduate education in Turkmenistan does not exist. Postgraduate students continue their education at higher institutions of neighbouring countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and at higher institutions in the European Union, Turkey, the United States, China, Japan, etc.'. See Silova, I., 'Travelling Policies: hijacked in Central Asia', *European Educational Research Journal* 4/1, 2005, 50–9, p. 57.

Higher education cooperation and mobility, for example, will be facilitated by a conducive visa regime. With the Bologna Process as a script and Tempus funds, countries could be able to use the Education Initiative as a means to pursue modernisation. What is less likely at this stage is the mobilisation of the Bologna Process as a *process*. Internal national sensitivities and external rivalries, particularly between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are likely to condition the development of Central Asia as a sub-region of Bologna over and above the importance of the technical question of whether any of the countries are invited to join the Bologna Process as signatories. In the context of Central Asia, the degree to which the steering of higher education policy is open to non-governmental actors and institutions nationally, regionally and in relation to the EU, remains an open question.

Erasmus Mundus

The European Union's Erasmus Mundus programme was established in 2004. It set up the means to establish consortia of EU higher education institutions that would enable mobility of staff and students and could lead to the provision of joint European Masters qualifications. Third country institutions including those from Central Asia were able to join from the outset, but the development of the Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window for the budget period 2007–13 provides funds explicitly for neighbouring countries in the Southern Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. The basis for participation is consortia of EU higher education institutions and third party institutions. For the period 2007–8, 4.4 million Euros were made available for the Central Asian region, with 1.3 million Euros for Kazakhstan and 3.1 million Euros for the other Central Asian countries. The aim of Erasmus Mundus is to facilitate the exchange of persons, knowledge and skills in the higher education sector. The right of initiative lies with European institutions, which must have an Erasmus Mundus Charter to ensure that the adequate procedures are in place to operate the mobility scheme adequately and fairly. However, the programme is very limited in scale. For example, in 2006 Kazakhstan had only 44 beneficiaries, increasing to 59 in 2007.

Erasmus Mundus: assessment

The Education Initiative means that, as with Tempus, available funds have doubled to 10 million Euros per year. Increased funding will allow for a doubling of the number of students and staff under the mobility scheme. At the same time, it should be recognised that the direction of mobility has largely been from Central Asia to Europe. In 2007, for example, 39 individuals from the EU went to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while 101 went to the EU. For the period 2010–13, under the terms of the Development Cooperation Instrument through which the Erasmus Mundus programme will operate in Central Asia, it will no longer be possible for EU citizens to receive funding to go to Central Asia; only Central Asian students and scholars will receive scholarships to attend EU institutions.²⁴

However, Erasmus Mundus, like the Erasmus programme itself, is not just a mobility programme. It contains the logic of pressure towards educational change and reform, which is enabled by trans-European mobility.²⁵ When students are mobile, they expect to have periods of study abroad recognised

and this has implications for the management and certification of higher education qualifications. When they return to their home countries, their experience and expectations can be inserted into their national context and be conducive to change. In tandem with the Bologna Process and Tempus, an increase in student and staff mobility could reinforce higher education change. There is an education reform logic in the extension of Erasmus Mundus, which has potential.

Mobility programmes for students can appear to be little more than opportunities for the sons and daughters of the wealthy and powerful to benefit from time abroad. Scholarship programmes are popular, but in order for them to contribute to positive development in Central Asia, they must not be allowed to become additional resources for elites to gain advantage. The experience of the EU in the management of Erasmus and related exchange programmes – procedures for selection, aptitude, language skills, fit between the host institution and the student and so on – must be properly applied. The danger of the establishment of such programmes is that the same institutions are repeatedly involved in consortia and the same winners in competitive applications for funding continue to benefit. In addition to questions about who benefits and according to which processes of access and selection, the EU has made commitments under its Erasmus Charter to promote brain circulation rather than brain drain. Mobility programmes have the potential to pressure for enhanced higher education reform. There is also the potential for mobility to conserve existing patterns of elite formation and indeed lead to new opportunities to entrench existing advantages.

CAREN

The Central Asia Research and Education Network (CAREN), in essence, will build on the Virtual Silk Highway, launched by the NATO Science Programme.²⁶ The NATO project was satellite-based, whereas CAREN will be a high-speed terrestrial broadband network of up to 34 Mbps. With the establishment of the infrastructure for high capacity internet links, one million students and researchers in over 200 universities and research institutes in Central Asia will be able to interact with each other and to have access to the EU and the global research community as a result of connection to the pan-European GÉANT network. The CAREN project is expected to provide support in priority areas such as environmental monitoring, radio astronomy, telemedicine, the digitalisation of cultural heritage, e-learning, palaeontology, and mineral extraction. The provision of infrastructure will be led by the Cambridge-based company DANTE (Delivery of Advanced Network Technology to Europe) in the UK, established in 1993, which built and operates GÉANT with co-funding from the European Commission Research and Development Framework Programme.

CAREN: assessment

The CAREN project is the strand of the Education Initiative that has made most progress. It is not new, as it was able to build upon a pre-existing programme. However, it is clear in conception, implementation and expected outcomes. The Education Initiative has brought added-value and has established institutions for organised participation. Given that this is a question of mobilising resources for an infrastructure project, signing contracts and working to strict deadlines rather than setting up the conditions for policy cooperation in complex and sensitive education systems, the level of progress is perhaps unsurprising.

24 Commission of the European Communities, 'Erasmus Mundus Action 2 Partnerships: Guidelines to the Call for Proposals 29/09', Brussels: European Commission, 2009, p. 4.

25 Corbett, A., 'Ideas, institutions and policy entrepreneurs: towards a new history of higher education in the European Community', *European Journal of Education* 38/3, 2003, 315–30; and Corbett, A., *Universities and the Europe of knowledge: Ideas, Institutions and Policy Entrepreneurship in European Community Higher Education Policy, 1955-2005*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

26 The CAREN project is another component of a developing set of EU initiatives in network provision. CAREN will link Central Asia with the BSI (Black Sea Initiative), TEIN2 (Eastern Asia), ORIENT (China), EUROMEDCONNECT2 (the Mediterranean), ALICE2 (Latin America) and TEIN3 (Asia-Pacific).

The June 2008 high-level meeting held as part of the Central Asia Strategy committed to this project. The EU is allocating 5 million Euros, out of the total cost of 6 million for 2009–11. Central Asian countries have provided 20 percent each of the remaining 1 million Euros (200,000 Euros each). The project began on 1 January 2009 and will initially run until 2011, with the CAREN network in operation in 2010. Executive and Steering Group Committees for CAREN have been established, chaired by the European Commission and involving national coordinating bodies (National Research and Education Networks – NRENs), which have been quickly established in the Central Asian countries.

The success of the CAREN initiative is suggestive in a number of ways. With EU money on the table, an infrastructure project requiring the setting up of national bodies cooperating regionally and working to link up higher education institutions across the region, managed to cut through institutional delays and national sensitivities (and indeed national security issues).

The European Training Foundation (ETF)

Vocational education and training (VET) is, together with higher education, one of the two priority areas of the Education Initiative. To be led by the ETF, cooperation on vocational sector reform within the Education Initiative will build on the long history of ETF engagement in Central Asia, both regionally and bilaterally. Since 2005, the ETF has had two priority themes: development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and skills development for poverty reduction. The ETF has a history of developing regional policy debate, development of regional exchange for policy learning and peer reviews involving Central Asian countries. It is well respected by the governments in the region. With its past involvement in the implementation of Tempus, it too, like DG EAC, has the personnel and experience productively to engage in networks developed through the Education Platform.

ETF: assessment

As the Education Initiative has been formulated, the ETF has been able to continue with its established activities in the region and there has been some progress towards a regional approach to policy development. In June 2008, the ETF organised a meeting on NQFs in Kyrgyzstan. In October 2008, Dushanbe hosted the ETF Regional Conference on VET in Central Asia. In May 2009, the ETF launched a new initiative involving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, namely the School Development Towards Lifelong Learning. The ETF expectation is that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will be willing to participate as of 2010. Projects like this have the potential to feed into the Education Platform by providing concrete examples of policy and implementation involving a broad range of policy actors.²⁷ As with higher education modernisation priorities, the ETF is in a position to work with a limited set of policy themes and to establish some of the conditions for policy learning and emulation. These are not eye-catching initiatives, however, and the extent to which the limitations of policy themes turn what should be political questions with regard to societal and economic development into questions purely related to education systems and processes, or rather whether this tendency can be transcended by interaction with a developing Education Platform, will remain important particularly given the implications of labour market and training outcomes for the more vulnerable populations in Central Asia.

EU member states

²⁷ For an elaboration of the kinds of engagement that have been pursued with Tajikistan, see ETF, 'ETF Labour Market Report – Helping Tajikistan Develop a National Economic Strategy', Live&Learn 14, 2009.

One of the core precepts of the Education Initiative is that the Commission has set out to concentrate on policy areas where it can provide added-value by drawing on expertise and experience, not duplicating the work of other actors in the region and generating complementarities with EU member state activities. The mapping and coordination of other activities therefore becomes an important basis to back up the claims to be adding value.

EU member states: assessment

It is now possible to grasp the range of activities undertaken due to the efforts of the European Commission and the Council of Ministers to sustain member state interest and commitment to the Education Initiative.²⁸

Germany is providing 10 million Euros for the period 2007–12 with a focus on engineering, technical and environmental studies, and water and energy resource management. Germany has also committed to fund a university professor to contribute to a European Studies Masters course, based at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Academy in Bishkek for the 2009–10 academic year. The OSCE Academy itself, with its focus on political science, professional training, conflict prevention and resolution and protection of human rights, provides opportunities for citizens from all five Central Asian countries. Germany is quite active in the region and already has cooperation programmes with Kyrgyzstan on lifelong learning and Tajikistan on primary education, offering support for capacity building, the development of municipal infrastructure and professional development. In Uzbekistan, Germany supports projects in the vocational area (IT and the construction professions). A project with Kazakhstan focuses on promoting vocational opportunities for girls and women. Germany also prioritises activities in rural areas and has the stated intention to reduce poverty. Currently, Germany-led programmes amount to over 40 million Euros.

The United Kingdom has the Chevening Fellowship Programme and the Chevening Higher Education Programme. The Fellowship Programme for Central Asian mid-career professionals has awarded four scholarships to Kazakhstan since 2006 on human rights and energy security issues. The Higher Education Programme has provided scholarships for post-graduate students with, for example, nine scholarships for Kazakhstan and four for Kyrgyz students in 2007. The Uzbekistan-administered UMID scheme sends undergraduate and post-graduate Uzbek students for short courses at UK universities. The UK's British Council supports a range of professional development centres in the region, which enable young professionals to obtain English language skills. The London School of Fashion contributes to the teaching of design at Uzbek vocational institutions. The British Council also has a 'skills for employability' project with Kazakhstan and delegates have visited Astana and Almaty as part of this Technical and Vocational Education and Training United Kingdom (TVET UK) project. In Kazakhstan, the UK has also developed the 'English for Teaching, Teaching for English' project to enhance English language methods and materials and Inspire, which provides higher education grants for young academics and scientists. In addition, the Kazakh-British Technical University has been co-funded by the Kazakh government and Western oil and gas companies and involves four UK universities. The UK also has an agreement with the Uzbek Ministry of Higher Education to support English teaching in remote areas. In 2007, the British government developed a project with the Turkmen Supreme Council for Science and Technology to re-introduce the English Language post-graduate

²⁸ The mapping that follows here is unlikely to be exhaustive or definitive, but it does give some sense of the potential which is now recognised for the EU to play a role in maximising its engagement in education and training policy in Central Asia.

degree in Turkmenistan. In 2008, a study tour was jointly organised by the British government, UNICEF and UNESCO for Turkmenistan education officials to explore approaches to educational planning and management in the UK and France.

Romania has established scholarships for Kazakh and Uzbek citizens to study in the country and is looking to establish similar opportunities for Kyrgyz and Turkmen students.

As part of the meetings that have resulted in the Education Initiative, both Germany and France have put new proposals on the table. France is ready to launch and fund a European Research Programme in Central Asia. Germany is keen to combine its support for the OSCE Academy in Bishkek and the German Academic Exchange Service to fund the participation of the German-Kazakh University in Almaty in a network of European Studies Centres.

A number of things become apparent as a result of this indicative mapping of EU member state participation in the education sectors of Central Asia. First, national initiatives have the potential to be coordinated so as to pursue EU and member state interests. Second, economies of scale could be achieved by reframing existing small-scale scholarship and mobility programmes within a regional perspective. Whether there would be additional value in seeking to brand these activities as European rather than national remains an open question. There would appear to be scope for greater coordination and this could be developed further. Third, the higher and vocational education priorities of the Education Initiative are currently not the only perspectives through which EU member states view their engagement with the countries of the region. Thus, what might be needed is agreement to the kind of initiatives that could address poverty, gender and regional inequalities, and human rights as part of attempts to modernise the funding, purposes and outcomes of education in all sectors and at all levels. Member states are involved in these broader educational interventions bilaterally and there is potential for the Education Initiative to return to the 2007 strategy and develop engagement in sectors and contexts beyond those of higher education and VET.

2.3 Information and communication actions

The Education Initiative includes a commitment by the EU to raise the profile of European and member state education policy and institutions so as to increase understanding in the Central Asian countries of the opportunities available. In addition to the opportunities for institutions, staff and students, the aim is to further the participation of existing and potential policy actors in education reform dialogues and subsequent policies. This could potentially contribute to the development of networks that go beyond and beneath the high participation of government officials and thereby contribute to bottom-up reform processes. The EU has committed to holding joint events with broad participation, publishing joint materials and fostering information and communication on both the Education Initiative and the opportunities available for mobility, exchange and cooperation.

Information and communication activities: assessment

Unsurprisingly, given the slow progress of the Education Initiative, very little work has been done in communicating or disseminating the concrete strategic or implementation outputs of the work undertaken to date. The Initiative does have a limited presence on the European Commission's External Cooperation Programmes web pages, but this provides little beyond the definition of the strands of the Education Initiative.²⁹ The Commission is in the process of publishing a Compendium in English and Russian of funding opportunities for Central Asian

staff, students and higher education institutions. This will include details of mobility, cooperation, exchange and scholarship opportunities available through the EU programmes and provided by EU member states. It will provide a tangible version of the kind of information provided by the Study in Europe initiative.³⁰ Students and teachers in Central Asia are now able to benefit from these information and communication activities, which are regularly updated by the member states and available through the websites of the EU delegations in the region.

3. Evaluation of the Education Initiative

As outlined above, the different components of the Education Initiative have developed with their own tempos and dynamics. Some assessment of what has been achieved is now possible but some aspirations (regional cooperation, generation and maintenance of networks engaged in policy change and implementation, mobilisation of existing programmes, actions and funding to achieve greater impact) will take time before their potential is fulfilled (or not). Nonetheless, a number of features of the Education Initiative is now relatively clear and the extent to which these remain important may well condition future development within the Initiative.

The rather uncertain nature of the way the Education Initiative has developed does give fuel to those who criticise it as being an empty box, an add-on component of the overall Central Asia strategy with little beyond a generalised interest in education reform to suggest that a strategic and compelling vision has motivated its development. However, the evidence discussed in this paper would suggest that the Education Initiative does contain a model for developing education reforms and an attempt to externalise some of the EU's internal policy content and process. Whether the detail of this model has been recognised and/or concertedly and effectively mobilised is a separate question. At this stage, the argument which the evidence presented here would support is that they have not. The reasons for this are:

Rather than being an empty box, the Education Initiative is concrete and prioritised but to date has done little more than tinker, not always productively, with existing activities. Tempus, Erasmus Mundus and even the CAREN programme are not new, but they are concrete and successful and appear to be readily moulded to the Education Initiative. In terms of higher education and VET, the availability of existing EU policy development scripts and instruments constitutes a coherent agenda for policy development, but the Education Initiative does little to add to what was already there other than some, not insignificant, additional funding.

Within the Education Initiative, the development of an Education Platform is the most problematic and EU institutional factors help to explain why. The Central Asia Strategy was driven by the German Presidency and RELEX. RELEX produced the concept paper for the Education Initiative, without the participation of other EU bodies such as DG EAC and ETF, or of national Central Asian education policy actors. To date, RELEX and AIDCO have run the Education Initiative, and AIDCO is now responsible for its concrete implementation. RELEX approaches the Education Initiative from the perspective of diplomacy and high-level political contacts. Education policy specifically would be in many respects beyond its competence. The expertise of AIDCO lies in the management of big projects and the establishment of flagship programmes rather than the more detailed engagement with the technicalities of reform in, for example, higher education.

The AIDCO unit responsible for the Education Initiative had experienced considerable staff turnover and it was only in the autumn of 2008 that a dedicated team was able to start gaining

²⁹ See www.ec.europa.eu/external_relations/central_asia/index_en.htm

³⁰ See www.study-in-europe.org for details.

some traction on the initiative. By June 2009, AIDCO was still in the process of defining its priorities. In contrast, DG EAC has considerable experience within the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, precisely in the kind of activities and processes that would give some substance to an education platform. DG EAC officials have been consulted on the Education Initiative but their expertise has been only partially mobilised. The clearest manifestation of the consequences of this is the faulty understanding of the Bologna Process. Within the Bologna Process, both expertise and mandate lie with DG EAC and not with RELEX or AIDCO. DG EAC is the Commission's representative in the Bologna Process, whose action lines are funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme for which DG EAC is responsible. Internal Commission coordination of the mobilisation of capacity, competence and experience is likely to be crucial to the development of the Education Initiative for higher education reform within the Bologna framework. In VET, it is the ETF that has the experience, expertise and history of close working relationships with DG EAC. European Commission institutional factors do help to explain the rather uncertain development of the Education Platform.

The contents of the Education Initiative, higher education and VET are complex and technical matters require experience, expertise and political sensitivity on the part of EU policy actors operating in Central Asia. What seems to have happened as the Education Initiative has developed is that political sensitivity has been the overriding concern of both RELEX and AIDCO. In essence, this has been a question of foreign policy meeting education policy, resulting in an undermining of the logic of education policy development and learning which the Education Initiative implies. To date, the Education Initiative has been overwhelmingly the preserve of Presidencies, and Ministries of Foreign Relations and Finance in Central Asia. From the perspective of Central Asian education policy actors, Education Ministries have had a very limited role in formulating, specifying or operationalising the Education Initiative and the degree of commitment to organised regional cooperation is far from clear. Networks have not been established and the willingness of Central Asian governments to facilitate the participation of their policy actors in such networks has not been tested. The EU aspiration and expectation is that long-term, bottom-up improvement in regional cooperation is made possible by the establishment of networks between state institutions, experts, civil society organisations and individuals within the education sector.³¹ Of course, this requires a long-term view but it is also predicated on the establishment of these levels of interaction. To date there has been no attempt to establish them.

The Education Initiative has sustained a measure of support from high-level government officials in Central Asia. In a sense, this is to be expected. Education provision supposes a significant cost, and is associated with development concerns, in particular the levels of social aspiration and potential unrest. Education is thus related to concerns over the levels of development and future economic and societal models. Participation in the Education Initiative is a sign of good faith by both EU and Central Asian participants in the education strands, as well as the overall Central Asia Strategy. As the CAREN project demonstrates, this generalised support can be very constructively mobilised and built upon. However, whether this commitment has been tested and challenged in other areas is an important question. The RELEX perspective would suggest that it is not due to the focus on developing high-level political relations.³² Only after the context for cooperation has been

firmly established, giving time for the content and implications of cooperation to be agreed, assimilated and digested, would it be appropriate to include greater challenges in the policy cooperation agenda. Rather than a generic regional approach, a targeted bilateral approach would conform to the RELEX view of the place of education in the Central Asia Strategy. Key to this is the need for a discreet approach. The lack of transparency and concrete work plans for implementation are explicable from this perspective.

Modernisation of Central Asian education systems would require large-scale and long-term financial commitment from the EU. Given the role of RELEX in facilitating EU strategic interests in the region and the financial capacity of AIDCO as the conduit for EU aid and development funds, the possibility of the EU offering large-scale and targeted funding for the education sector should not be ruled out. Tajikistan's donor-dependency and need for support in poverty reduction and the development of primary education could reasonably justify EU aid and development assistance. Turkmenistan's importance for European energy-security ambitions, combined with its poor education system and curriculum which are only now being hesitantly opened up for international policy learning, might provide the rationale for more and more targeted funding from the EU on a bilateral rather than regional basis. This would of course be outside of the remit of the Education Initiative as outlined in this paper, but as new Indicative Programmes are developed, an increase in the scale and scope of funding should not be ruled out.

The Education Initiative implies the development of a degree of regional governance of higher education and VET systems in Central Asia with the EU exercising an influence that serves to promote its interests. The European Commission has a clearly defined position on the importance of higher education development within the EU and maximising its attractiveness for incoming and fee-paying students and researchers who can contribute to the EU's transition to a competitive knowledge based economy.³³ The Bologna Process and its promotion of mobility is not neutral in this respect and the influence of the EU in promoting particular kinds of higher education reform in Central Asia is not necessarily disinterested either. However, the aspiration to create a Central Asian education space as a sub-region of Bologna would need to be achieved in order for it to be a factor in the promotion of EU interests. In truth though, Central Asia has scant experience of policy coordination; its economic and social development, dynamics of national cooperation and competition and relations with the EU are likely to militate against the effects of setting up institutional fora, policy instruments and effective and influential networks of policy actors. This does not rule out the possibility that Tempus and Bologna will continue to have incremental effects on higher education in the Central

perspective: the nature of the regimes in the region means that little can be attempted in terms of engaging with education officials until the cover of governmental approval has been provided.

33 For the elaboration of the European Commission's perspective on higher education reform and its contribution to the knowledge-economy ambitions of the EU, see Commission of the European Communities, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Strengthening Cooperation with third Countries in the Field of Higher Education', COM (2001) 385 final, Brussels: European Commission, 2001; Commission of the European Communities, 'Mobilising the Brainpower of Europe: Enabling Universities To Make Their Full Contribution To The Lisbon Strategy', COM (2005) 152, Brussels: European Commission, 2005; Commission of the European Communities, 'Delivering on the Modernization Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation', COM (2006) 208, Brussels: European Commission, 2006; Smith, A., *Going International – In Quest of a New Foreign Policy for European Higher Education*, New York: Institute of International Education, 2005, available at <http://www.iienetwork.org/?p=102405>; and Zgaga, P., *Looking Out: The Bologna Process in a Global Setting*, Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2006.

31 Council of the European Union, 'European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, Eastern Regional Programme', Strategy paper 2007-2013, Brussels: European Council, 2006.

32 There is an underlying approach to the region from the RELEX

Asian states but rather it suggests that there will be a limited role for regional cooperation.

4. Recommendations for the EU

The scope and implementation of the Education Initiative needs to be the subject of ongoing and transparent reviews and development. The following suggestions could provide an agenda for such a process:

- **Given the difficulties associated with the Education Platform in particular, the EU should reconsider its 2007 agenda.**
- **Development of the Education Initiative needs to include the broader development needs of these countries, and help them develop infrastructure for modern education systems.** The intention in 2007 was to address all levels of education and training. The subsequent focus on higher education and VET does not address the underlying needs of the Central Asian systems. The activities associated with the ETF, Tempus and the Bologna Process provide a set of concrete priorities but the danger is that they march to the EU definition of priorities rather than those of the region. The European Parliament's emphasis on the Millennium Development Goals provides an equally clearly focused agenda for the modernisation of the region's education systems and EU engagement in Turkmenistan, for example, should possibly focus on primary and secondary education. The Commission is surely right to emphasise that it needs to work in higher education and VET, where it is recognised and can bring added-value; this is to be both efficient and potentially effective. This focus will need to be reviewed over time but it can start now by focusing the attention on how to work with the higher education and vocational sectors to address the underlying weaknesses in teacher training, curriculum, funding and organisation of the education system as a whole. A concrete first step would be to prioritise teacher training.
- **The role of AIDCO in the Education Initiative should be revisited.** Rather than merely tasking it with the management of programmes where it lacks expertise, its priorities for aid in the period until 2013 could intensify a Central Asia focus with support for the development of basic, secondary and vocational education.
- In 2007, the aspiration was to establish EU institutions in Central Asia. **Regional clusters of EU Centres of Excellence, both for higher education and policy research, could be financially supported. A European Studies Institute, Central Asian Policy Research Institutes and Schools of Public Administration could establish a flagship presence in the region and at the national level, serve to thicken the linkages between EU-Central Asian higher education sectors and institutions and contribute to the development of capacity for policy development.** EU member states have already expressed a willingness to co-fund such institutions. EU centres and research institutes in Central Asia could be pursued within the existing *Jean Monnet* programme and the Commission should now bring proposals before the Council of Ministers so as to build on the support which is already evident by bringing additional resource to established programmes. The Commission would then be in a position to issue terms of reference for these initiatives and invite bids. The success of the CAREN initiative points to the likely success of proposals for regional networks and institution building where national

sensitivities are sidelined because clear systemic benefits are promoted and funded.

- **The Education Initiative needs to be made more transparent and opened up for debate and participatory transformation.** The European Parliament has called for greater transparency and partnership so that EU values and norms can be embodied in the processes surrounding the Central Asia Strategy as a whole.³⁴ In-depth debates and exchanges involving parliaments, civil society, local authorities, education institutions, staff and students should be an aspiration for the EU. It may well be the case that the Central Asian countries have not so far shown the willingness to participate in such processes but neither has the EU been transparent about options, priorities, funding and the relations between education policy and broader societal development. The Education Initiative has been the preserve of a foreign relations perspective. It needs to be opened up for scrutiny at the EU level.
- The European Commission has insisted that the EU provides an attractive point of reference for Central Asian leaders in the political, economic and social transitions of their countries. There is a time when that attraction is pushed to emphasise that the model is based on particular traditions and processes of governance, which are not an extra but a prerequisite for the success of the model. **In addition to processes of governance, the policy bottom line should be re-emphasised as the contribution of education reform to the eradication of poverty and the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals.** Mobility programmes in this sense are not innocent or neutral and the attractiveness of the EU for mobile students and faculty should not undermine the development of capacity and talent in the Central Asian states.
- **The European-Central Asia Education Platform needs to have a much stronger focus on implementation.** The Education and Training 2010 Work Programme provides a model for implementation (an iterative ten-year work programme, defined activities and time-frames, a common policy agenda, benchmarks and targets, data gathering and so on) which could be successfully externalised with Central Asian partners. Clearly, however, properly to animate such a work programme would require both significant investment in human and financial resources and the willingness to commit to iterative and concrete policy development practices. Assuming that both these requirements were to be satisfied, the implication of the material discussed in this paper is that the management of the Education Initiative through RELEX and AIDCO needs a revision. The European Union has established competence, capacity and experience in managing coordinated cooperative activity between education systems. However, it is DG EAC that should now be tasked with the externalisation of the EU's experience and capacity in this area, particularly with regard to higher education. RELEX and AIDCO involvement is essential but the capacity and expertise does not currently rest there. In terms of efficiency, EU engagement in education policy development in Central Asia should be the responsibility of education specialists rather than foreign relations or development project management. The ETF is a substantial organisation. Its involvement in Central Asia signals the EU's concern in addressing the needs of some of the more vulnerable populations. Thus, it is important that its specialists are engaged in the intensification of the Education Initiatives.

³⁴ European Parliament, 'An EU Strategy for Central Asia', European Parliament Resolution of 20 February 2008 on an EU Strategy for Central Asia, 2007/2102, INI, 2008.

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The EUCAM initiative is an 18-month research and awareness-raising exercise which aims: to raise the profile of the EU-Central Asia Strategy; to strengthen debate about the EU-Central Asia relationship and the role of the Strategy in that relationship; to enhance accountability through the provision of high quality information and analysis; to promote mutual understanding by deepening the knowledge within European and Central Asian societies about EU policy in the region; and to develop ‘critical’ capacity within the EU and Central Asia through the establishment of a network that links communities concerned with the role of the EU in Central Asia.

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