

HiEdTec midterm evaluation

Introduction The aim of the HiEdTec project is to “support the modernization of Higher Education Systems in Central Asia through the development of open educational resources, connectivity, the acquisition of digital skills and learning methods and mobilization of stakeholders including teachers, learners, economic and social parts”.

The project started on November 15 2018 and will end on November 14 2021. In this document a midterm evaluation of the project is presented.

The original plan was to have the midterm evaluation take place mid 2020 and not at the beginning of 2020. The early midterm report therefore does not cover all the activities that would have been covered if the original planning was followed. However, all planned activities for the reported period were achieved. Earlier submission of the progress report is necessary in order to get the second installment earlier and buy the rest of the equipment, which is necessary to complete the planned project activities for this period.

Further, it is important to note that the Corona crisis has an impact on the project progress and will continue to hinder the timely implementation of project activities. It is yet too early to assess the magnitude of this impact.

Approach The HiEdTec project consists of 7 work packages that are reported on in the midterm progress report. The evaluator has chosen to use these work packages as main structure for his report. The Table of Achieved/Planned Results of the progress report of the Technical Implementation Report has been checked against what has been published on the project web site. Documents on the project web site have been viewed, as well as the evaluation reports (last view date was March 30).

Input for this evaluation The following sources have been used to gain the information for this evaluation:

- Project description, in particular Log Frame and Workplan
- Draft of the midterm progress report of February 2020
- The project website, both the public as the project only information
- The project mailing list
- Participation in the third project meeting in Tashkent (December 2019)
- The HiEdTec Facebook page
- Contacts with various members of the HiEdTec project community

WP1 Cooperation for sharing experience and exchange of good practices in the field of innovative educational technologies and didactic models.

All deliverables have been published, including the translations into Russian and vice versa. These deliverables form the basis of further work during the implementation of the HiEdTec project and contain a lot of useful information. It is not clear if this information is really assimilated by the Central Asian project partners. During the face

to face project meetings summaries of the reports should be presented, together with discussions of further actions.

For example, one of the documents (Deliverable 1.5) provides an overview of the existing networks in Central Asia that the project partners can use. It has been written and translated into Russian, but there are no follow-up actions mentioned to actually make use of these networks and involve them in the project. Representatives of the academic network organisations in Central Asia might be invited to (a part of) the project meetings so that they can present the services that they can offer the HiEdTec community. For the next meetings KRENA (Kyrgyzstan), TURENA (Turkmenistan) and TARENA (Tajikistan) should be invited when the meetings are organized in their countries.

WP2 Development of Concepts of Adaptation of the HE system to the digital generation.

The Concepts of Adaptation have been developed and published, on paper as well as electronically, at the end of 2019 in three languages (Russian, English and in the local Central Asian country language). The final versions of the concepts were agreed by the relevant ministries and education and science and approved by the academic councils of the universities in the partner countries.

It is also not clear if the Concepts have evoked additional funding from the governments to implement actions to realise the envisaged adaptations. Each country has written “Recommendations for Adapting the Central Asian HE system to the needs of the digital generation”. These documents are well structured and provide, on the basis survey input from hundreds of teachers and students, per country clear recommendations for Ministries of Higher Education and Sciences for the adaption of Higher Education.

On paper this work package is “done”, but follow-up actions should be monitored and reported on.

WP3 Development of Centres for Innovative Educational Technologies and active learning classrooms, selecting virtual classroom software; Development of Handbook of Innovative Educational Technologies.

According to the Progress report on implementation, in all of the partner countries except Turkmenistan, Centres for Innovative Educational Technologies have been created and three active learning classrooms have been realized. Indicators for these achievements are reports, with pictures, on the HiEdTec web site. These indicators were only fully available for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Two of the three centres are presented for Tajikistan and for Uzbekistan only one is presented. According to the project management all centres, except Turkmenistan, are installed and the results were to be presented during the project meeting in March in Coimbra. Due to the Corona related travel restrictions this meeting was cancelled. During the virtual meeting at the beginning of March, Khorug State University (Tajikistan) did present its centre and classrooms.

By coincidence the evaluator has been able to visit the HiEdTec Center and the classrooms at the Kyrgyz State Technical University in Bishkek and was pleased with the

professional setup of the facilities. The same applies to the facilities at the Tashkent State University of Economics, where the third HiEdTec meeting took place.

A Handbook of Innovative Educational Technologies has been reported as finished deliverable, and is available on the HiEdTec part of the University of Ruse website. The handbooks have been printed and would have been distributed and explained at the cancelled Coimbra meeting. The project is rescheduling activities to support the introduction of the handbooks.

Apart from BigBlueButton being mentioned as selected video-conferencing software, no other specific software is mentioned and it is not clear whether other software will be selected in the future.

WP4 Development of courses for trainers and lecturers for the acquisition of digital skills and innovative teaching and learning methods. Development of open educational resources.

According to the Progress report on implementation a syllabus for the "acquisition of digital skills and innovative teaching and learning methods" has been developed. On the HiEdTec website an overview of a two part syllabus is available in Russian and in English, with a pointer to where the course can be reached on the web site of the University of Ruse.

WP5 WP5. Quality Assurance

The Internal Quality Assurance Plan as well as evaluations of the first three meetings, the syllabus mentioned in WP4 and a questionnaire have been published. The Quality Assurance Plan is a lengthily and well written document that provides clear instruments to monitor and enhance the quality of project outcomes. An evaluation of the progress report has been listed as achieved result, but is not available on the project web site.

WP6 WP6 Dissemination and Exploitation of Project Results

A Dissemination and Exploitation Plan has been written and published on the project web site. The project web site also provides various templates and worked out examples for dissemination materials, such as posters, equipment labels and other items. Not all links that are provided work.

As the first actual results of the project still have to come it is understandable that there are no reports published of actual dissemination activities.

WP7 Project Management & Coordination

Project rules and project management structure have been published at an early stage of the project and discussed during the first project meeting at the University of Ruse. The management structure is thorough with adequate handles to enable input from all consortium members.

Since the kick-off meeting two project meetings have been organized, the first in Almaty (June 2019) and the second in Tashkent (December 2019), which was also attended by the external project evaluator. The evaluations of these meetings are quite positive, with one remark that is mentioned several times: the use of Russian as main language in the meeting interactions. Several participants notice that this shuts out non-Russian speaking attendees. It is also the observation of the evaluator that the

highly appreciated input from the EU participants is lost because of this language issue. The project manager should consider to have simultaneous translation facilities available to make more optimal use of the knowledge and experience of the EU attendees.

Further, face to face project meetings should normally result in a list of actions arising from what has been discussed and presented. These action lists were not found in the minutes of the project meetings. It is recommended to create a list of outstanding action points from the meetings and monitor the progress of these action items.

The evaluator was on the email list for all HiEdTec participants. Statistics of the number of emails that were sent through this list are not available, but the evaluator was impressed by the amount of emails coming from the project coordinators to the project participants. On the one hand this is a good sign of active project management, but on the other hand it is questionable if all of the emails were meant for all participants of the email lists, or only for a few who are late in reacting to previous requests. The project management should evaluate if the number of outgoing emails actually improves the effectiveness of the project management. It is common practice that an overload of, for the recipient, irrelevant emails leads to loss of interest and willingness to read these emails.

Conclusions Overall the HiEdTec project is well underway and most of the deliverables that were expected to be produced by the end of March are available on the project web site.

The project management is quite professionally organized and effective in terms of meeting deadlines in time and involving the partner countries in contributing to the project.

The project management should take notice of the fact that producing documents as deliverables in the project are not goals in itself, they should serve a mean. It is not always clear what will be or has been done with the deliverables. Follow-up actions should be discussed during the project meetings.

Until now most effort have been put into establishing the innovation centers and the class rooms and creating awareness of the need for digitalization of education in the partner countries. The remaining project period the actual objectives of the project have to be dealt with, such as the creation of a sustainable academic network to carry on the work after the end of the project, creating the Cloud based virtual libraries and activating the established innovation centres. Had this evaluation taken place at a later moment, as scheduled, the first results of this work would have been visible. If desired the evaluator will produce a small report with his findings of these issues before the end of 2020.

As said, it is still too early to assess the impact of the current global Corona crisis. It is however, safe to assume that the impact will be severe and long lasting. Until now the project management has not presented any damage control plans. The four day Coimbra meeting was squeezed into a half day virtual meeting and the project management has already warned the consortium partners that the July meeting in Kyrgyzstan might be postponed to the fall of 2020. What are the consequences of these changes and which measures has the project management taken to minimize the damage? For example, one might consider to introduce monthly virtual meetings to replace cancelled and postponed activities. The project management should also

review the logframe, workplan, timetables and planned expenditures for 2020-2021 to anticipate on the effects of the Corona crisis.

Finally, the negative effects of the Corona crisis to society should be put to use. The 15 Central Asian universities have created Centers for Innovative Educational Technologies with modern technology to support educational processes. These universities are supported by European universities of high standing in the area of the use of technology in (higher) education. Now is the moment to put this all to use in providing solutions for the challenges that students and teachers are facing. Now is also the moment to initiate discussions with governments and HEI managements to enforce the recommendations that have been formulated in the earlier mentioned Deliverables with recommendations.

Competences of the evaluator The evaluator has, for more than 40 years, been heavily involved in the introduction of ICT in education and research at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands. Since 1999 he has also been involved in supporting the introduction of ICT in Higher Education and Research in Central Asia, first in the NATO funded Silk project (1999 – 2009) and subsequently in three phases of the EU funded CAREN project (2009 – 2019).

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