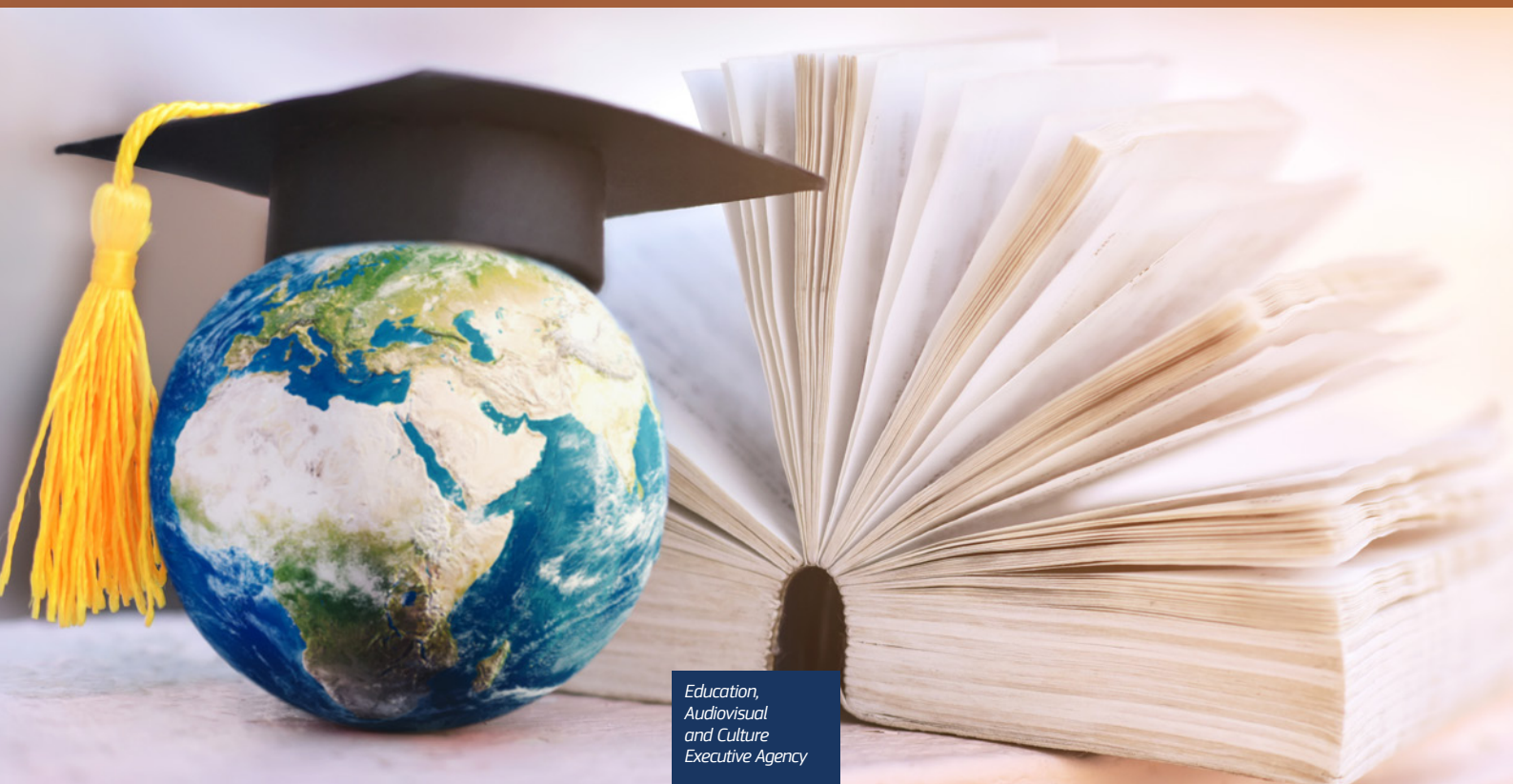




# Erasmus+

## Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action

### Regional Report Iran, Iraq, Yemen



**More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://europa.eu>).**

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**Erasmus+**  
**Capacity Building in  
Higher Education (CBHE) action**

**Regional Report  
Iran, Iraq, Yemen<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Defined as Region 9 in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide



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# 1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE REPORT

This report is based on the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency's evaluation of reports (interim, monitoring, final and impact) of the first generation of CBHE projects selected in 2015. In 2015, two projects were selected for an EU funding, namely:

1. Internationalisation of Higher Education in Iran (561753-EPP-1-2015-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)  
Region 9 Country: Iran
2. International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967-EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)  
Region 9 Countries: Iran and Iraq

(these projects are referenced throughout the text as Project 1 and Project 2)

The results are therefore based on a very small sample of finalised CBHE projects and are to be considered as preliminary and to be read in this context. By the same token, the **sample is characteristic** for CBHE in general and for the tendencies in Region 9 in particular, given that Project 1 (although a Joint Project) addresses **the system level** and Project 2 the **institutional level**. There is also the fact that one project (Project 1) is run by a recurrent beneficiary **repeating** schemes financed by CBHE in another parts of the world, while the other (Project 2) is run by a newcomer having **specific knowledge of and connections with the Region** and addresses specific needs in the involved countries together with the partners.

**No other elements**, such as institutional monitoring visits and thematic cluster meetings, were organised by the Agency in Region 9 due to the fact that the **security situation** for all countries covered by Region 9 is considered **critical by the European External Action Service (EEAS)**<sup>2</sup>. It is to be outlined, that due to the civil war in Yemen, the participation of **Yemenite projects is marginal** and limited to one project selected in 2018, wherein Yemenite Higher Education Institutions are partners in a regional project with Iran on environmental management. This report is thus covering **Iran and Iraq only**.

The report is analysing the role of the CBHE action regarding **the impact and sustainability of the funded projects**. More specifically, the report will look into the **institutional development** of higher education institutions (HEIs), their modernisation of study programmes their teaching and learning methodologies, structural reforms and the strengthening of their technical capacities. It will then focus on **opportunities created for individuals** (students, academic and administrative staff).

The report will also examine how the EU projects have influenced **national policy developments in the education sector**, despite the fact that for the years in question no Structural Projects are active in the country.

Finally, the analysis will be used to identify **challenges and lessons learned** and provide a **set of recommendations** for future reference for CBHE in general and Region 9 in particular.

<sup>2</sup> [https://myintracomm.ec.europa.eu/corp/security/EN/newDS1/TravelAdvice/Documents/CTA%20map\\_2nd%20release%202019.pdf](https://myintracomm.ec.europa.eu/corp/security/EN/newDS1/TravelAdvice/Documents/CTA%20map_2nd%20release%202019.pdf)

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The Capacity Building Higher Education (CBHE) action of the Erasmus+ Programme supports the modernisation and development of higher education institutions and the educational systems in the Partner Countries. Capacity Building projects are expected to have a long-term structural impact and their direct influence is on institutions and educational systems rather than on individuals.

European HEIs have a key role to play in supporting the modernisation efforts of emerging and developing parts of the world. Via the development of the educational systems of Partner Countries, they contribute to a sustainable development of the economies and societies as a whole and they allow addressing challenges at national, regional or even global level (e.g. climate change). In this context, the involvement of national authorities (Ministries of Education) plays a critical role.

International consortia of higher education institutions (including private businesses) strengthen the quality of higher education in the Partner Countries by providing to students new and upgraded skills needed in the labour market, introduce innovative approaches in teaching and learning and provide entrepreneurial skills.

The CBHE action is implemented through two types of projects, which aim to have an impact on HEIs or on the educational system as a whole. '**Joint projects**' are aimed at the development of HEIs (e.g. curriculum development, governance of institutions, etc.), while '**Structural projects**' address important challenges for the educational systems of the Partner Countries (accreditation, quality assurance in education, PhD education, etc.).

Both project types address one of the following **three pillars**

1. Curricula Reform
2. Modernising university governance and management
3. Strengthening of relations between HEIs and the wider economic and social environment)

based on pre-established regional priorities.

The countries in **Region 9** have been involved in the CBHE action from the very beginning of the E+ programme in 2014.



<sup>4</sup> For the ex-Tempus countries defined by the Ministries of Educations of the Partner Countries.

## 3. CBHE IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Higher education systems in Iran and Iraq are facing a number of challenges.

Iraq's higher education system comprises universities and technical institutes, under the general management of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). However, in the autonomous Kurdish Region of North Iraq, HEIs are managed by the local government who runs its own Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

Higher Education in Iraq faces many challenges such as lack of infrastructure, security threats, education system quality, academic staff and faculty qualification, teaching and learning material, scientific research and publications and graduate quality in relation to labour market.

Higher education in Iran comprises universities, teacher training colleges, technical institutes and HEIs. All institutions of higher education, except medical institutions, are under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Medical universities are supervised by the Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education.

The situation in Iran as regards higher education is not comparable to Iraq. Iran has a functional higher education system and public universities have a relatively good reputation, particularly in engineering. The University of Tehran is ranked by the Academic Ranking of World Universities as one of the top 400 universities in the world (301-400). Sharif University of Technology has appeared on the list in previous years and is presently ranked by Times Higher Education among the top 600 universities in the world (501-600) and is often referred to as the MIT of Iran<sup>3</sup>. It is hence no coincidence that Maryam Mirzakhani – the winner of the Fields Medal (the Nobel Prize for Mathematics) and listed by Nature magazine's ten "people who mattered" of 2014 – is a graduate of Sharif University.

However, Iran also faces challenges due to the sanction regime, which has in many respects isolated the vibrant Iranian academic landscape from internationalisation trends in general, as well as from technical equipment and internationally available knowledge and expertise. This in turn affects the overall competitiveness of Iranian graduates.

For both countries, structural reforms are a key element of public policies for improving the socio-economic situation and societal development including competitiveness, upgrading skills of the work force and underpinning the economic growth needed to catch up with the global word economy. Among the reforms required, upgrading labour force skills, modernizing university governance and internationalisation are essential elements the structural reform processes.



<sup>3</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/27/middleeast/irans-mit-sharif-university-technology/index.html>  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/elizabethmacbride/2015/10/29/how-the-mit-of-iran-helps-create-silicon-valley-startups/#5c949961627c>



The CBHE action targets the aforementioned challenges through the implementation of international cooperation projects. The results accomplished by both projects have affected the modernization of higher education in both countries to different degrees. Higher education institutions and individuals, both staff and students, have benefited from institutional and study programme reforms by using and mainstreaming results of CBHE projects, primarily related to creating a new curricula, and modernisation of university structures, namely setting up offices dealing with internationalisation.

The CBHE action applies both a bottom-up and a top-down strategy to align national decision making with priorities of university development and internationalisation (fostering the Bologna Process and tools) and vice versa. However, an effective impact on the normative and hence structural level remains often disconnected from legislative and administrative reforms. Punctual attainments directly traceable to CBHE projects are visible mainly in the segment involving the creation of new student-centred study programmes at bachelor and master level and as well as their national accreditation systems. For the time being, this certainly holds true also for Iran and Iraq. The two projects in question reflect the general assessment. Project 1, dealing with the internationalisation of Iranian Higher Education, is considered a “weak” project with few tangible results or sustainable impact while Project 2 has achieved valuable and concrete result in the development and implementation of courses in environmental management. Tangible results have become highly visible through the establishing of eLearning platforms almost unknown in Iraq, and very rarely used in Iran. No courses related to geomatics and environment had existed in any of the countries.

The achievements obtained through this CBHE projects, in particular the new and updated degree programmes, have provided students in the Region with possibilities that could not have been realised without the input of the European partner institutions. Apart from the fact that the mode of teaching and learning (eLearning) of Project 2 is innovative, **the pedagogic approach is also to a large extent new**. The project applied a **student learning perspective**, where the student can access the material in a number of ways. Depending on availability and preferences, the student can learn by reading, listening, or viewing videos. This is especially important for vulnerable groups, sometimes having limited capabilities when it comes to specific forms of learning.

It also worth mentioning that as a result of CBHE projects with European partners, **bridges** have been built for **intra-national, regional or cross-regional** cooperation that otherwise would often not have happened because of the national, regional, cultural and sometimes academic disconnection in the Region ensuing from violent conflicts and the ongoing political tensions. Also, in this respect, project 2 serves as an example as it brings together HEIs from Iraq and Iran under the umbrella of a EU-funded project to combat major environmental challenges together. Environmental issues in one country do after all affect the other.

### 3.1. Institutional Development

#### 3.1.1. Curricula Reform

One of the main objectives of the CBHE action is the reform of curricula. Partner Country HEIs work together in high quality international consortia in order to revise study programmes or to develop new ones, to engage in new learning and teaching methods and to prepare students with new and better skills for a changing job market and a developing economy.

Within the small sample, 50% of CBHE projects in the Region focus on Curriculum reform. In 2015, 13 new degree courses were created in Iran and Iraq. Out of this, 25% were taught in a foreign language (English).

The modernization and launching of new study programs, and the introduction of innovative learning and teaching methods that were not available in Iran and Iraq before, has changed the landscape of the university sector regarding environmental management. This holds especially true for geographic information systems (GIS) and remote sensing as well as spatial data infrastructure (SDI) techniques.

Curricula reform projects have shown a high degree of sustainability, since all newly created study programs at graduate and postgraduate level have become an integral part of regular degree programs taught at universities:

#### International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967-EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Courses are recognized and accredited in Iran as well as in Iraq. From the start of the project, the courses to be developed and the dedicated (student) time for them, as well as the number of lectures and exercises, were planned to be in line with existing higher education system standards in both Iran and Iraq. This has resulted in straightforward adoption and usage, which is a prerequisite for both impact and sustainability.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

For many Partner Country HEIs, collaboration with European universities on curricula development implied an exposure to the **Bologna Process methodology**. Hence, when developing new curricula and considering student mobility opportunities, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), student-centered learning approaches and outcomes, and a 3+2 years degree system were introduced:

#### International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967-EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

All 13 modules developed as part of this project are following EU higher education standards regarding for example ECTS and learning outcomes. The results of the project, in terms of courses and modules are freely used among partners, with the possibilities of offering individual courses or a whole MSc programme, whether individually or together.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

### 3.1.2. Technological Upgrade

The provision of funds to improve the technical infrastructure of Partner Country universities is an important element of the CBHE action and the provision of **equipment** plays an important role (often almost one third of the total grant is used for it). It is an attractive offer for universities, which often lack modern and labour market oriented training facilities.

**In the reporting period, approximately 500,000 Euros were invested in equipment in Iran and Iraq.**

Properly equipping laboratories and centers is highly important for supporting practical coursework, especially in the hard sciences:

#### **International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967-EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

Within the scope of this project, eLearning laboratories have been established at the partner institutions, making it possible to expand the number of courses in the future.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

The strengthening of universities' technical capacities by opening new laboratories is a clear aspiration for CBHE projects and these laboratories are mainly used for teaching purposes. However, they are often also used to conduct research and thus to create a vital bridge between teaching and research. This is of utmost importance especially for Iraqi HEIs where there is no clear governmental strategy or funding system in place and most of the research programs are financially supported by governmental or private sector companies.

CBHE projects have also enabled fostering of the digitalization of education by using various IT tools in the teaching process and by creating online learning platforms.

#### **International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

Here, the use of the freeware/open source software Moodle (learning platform) and AC (administration and communication tool) has impacted all partners, with a focus on Iran and Iraq. Staff have been trained on how to handle these tools, in order to communicate with students, present learning material, organize and monitor student achievements, avoid plagiarism, etc.

Source: Final Report Assessment

### Specific remarks

Though the possibility of buying project specific equipment is important, experiences in other Regions of the world has shown that there are a number of projects in which equipment was used for general purposes like the provision of laptops to students and teachers. These purchases were not necessary for the implementation of the CBHE project and it is also not clear whether this kind of equipment remains in university possession following the projects' end.

In some cases, the required equipment maintenance and follow-up financing and is not ensured. Sometimes the reason for this is the lack of financial autonomy on the part of the universities.

Moreover, many higher education institutions have reported challenges in the handling of the tendering procedures when equipment was not available in their country but had to be imported. Since different tendering rules had to be followed, the universities faced a multilayer bureaucracy.

### 3.1.3. Governance and Management Reform

As already mentioned, the **university governance/management bodies** still require institutional reinforcement in order to be able to compete with European and worldwide universities. HEIs in the Partner Countries need to improve the efficiency of their governance processes and their structures to make them grow internationally and offer study programmes of high quality, which attract the interest of academics, students and the society at large. This implies, among other things, sustainable strategies and regulations, efficient international relation offices, quality assurance units endorsing international and European standards, financial autonomy, structures for collaborating with the labour market and strong alumni associations.

Much remains to be done in the area of governance and management reform for the Region and it is disputable whether a project-based approach is adequate for this topic when looking at the actual outcomes in other Regions where TEMPUS and other predecessor programmes have been active for decades.

There has been little possibility of international collaboration for a generation of academics that **has never had the opportunity to engage internationally**. Nor have there been many opportunities for international publication given the **country's isolation** and the higher education system's **declining academic rigor**.

(Zahra Rasian, 2009, Higher Education Governance in Developing Countries, Challenges and Recommendations: Iran as a case study, NONPARTISAN EDUCATION REVIEW / ESSAYS, Vol.5, No.3. page 5

### 3.1.4. HEI International strategies

The **internationalisation of higher education** in Iraq seems not to be a high priority on the political agenda of governments (which are also subject to frequent changes) and higher education institutions with the notable exception of the autonomous Kurdish region in North Iraq. On the other hand, in Iran internationalisation of higher education and the promotion of student mobility exercises, receives support by the government which has had limited success, last but not least due to the sanction regime. While in Iran internationalisation is considered as a vehicle for enhancing the competitiveness of higher education institutions and the economy broadly, and a soft power tool against the sanctions in place, in Iraq it is seen primarily as a means of receiving funds to support capacity building on an institutional level. The Region's higher education systems cannot compete with the more established and highly internationalised systems in Europe and elsewhere. However, internationalisation offers a chance to improve and develop through cooperation with strong European partner institutions.

**Individual academics remain the most important driver of international cooperation** in the Region. It is through bottom-up initiatives by academics that short-term mobility, research cooperation, development of joint-study programmes, and other activities are being developed.

These academics often do not receive sufficient support to enact their cooperative ventures. University practices and support services are not sufficiently adapted to serve this goal. Internationalisation efforts are hampered by certain shortcomings throughout the region, such as weak or non-existent international relations offices (IROs), an insufficient number of courses offered in foreign languages, relatively poor foreign language skills among students and academics in some countries, and weak support for finding and managing research funding.

**Strategic and procedural documents were created and adopted by Project 1** aiming to support the internationalization and modernization at the institutional level, such as strategies for university internationalization and systems for monitoring the quality of the education process, which in theory should help improve the service provided by the international relations offices.

However, as already outlined, this project was run by a (recurrent) beneficiary who used already existing materials to provide very limited outputs.

#### **International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

The basis of this project's implementation ('Analysis of barriers for credit recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff' and 'Internationalization Strategic Plans') have major flaws. The 'analysis' is an assembly of the answers to questionnaires sent out to the participating partner HEI and includes no analytic report. Its value is hence limited and it is rather disputable whether it should be considered 'an 'in-depth analysis to delineate the "state-of-the-art" of Iranian HEIs on internationalization processes' as referred to in a White Paper produced by the same project.

Concerning the International Strategic Plans, it must be underlined that none of the documents can be considered a working tool as the application has stated ('..which should plan the institution's international activity and growth for the period 2015 - 2020, providing key actions, expected numbers of students, marketing plans, new developments, etc.'). There are no milestones, indicators, distribution of responsibilities, or budget planning included. As 'International Relations Office management Guide for Iranian HEIs,' (another major outcome foreseen), we noted that 'guide' which was supposed to provide guidance to 'effectively manage an IRO' is basically the project description and a compilation of research articles. It does not serve the stated purpose and the title and content are incoherent and misleading.

Source: Final Report Assessment

However, one of the **most visible aspects of the projects' impact** is the establishment of a national network in for internationalization within the context of the higher education system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It has brought together leaders, managers, researchers, lectures and IRO staff from Consortium HEIs.

## 3.2. Broadening Horizons for Individuals

### 3.2.1. Academic staff

The CBHE action has given professors from Partner Countries the opportunities to meet their peers in different countries. By working together in international consortia, professors have become aware of different perspectives, gained new insights into their academic field and were exposed to international quality standards in education. The CBHE projects have allowed them to collaborate with other experts in their area leading to a direct peer-to-peer knowledge transfer from Europe to the Partner Countries. They have also gained valuable work experience through the teaching of students in a different country and from different countries (sometimes in a foreign language), especially through the 'Special Mobility Scheme' of the CBHE action:

#### International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

One of the objectives of the GeoNetC project has been to train partner university staff in development and dissemination of eLearning courses, as well as pedagogy. Generally, this has been carried out through continuous cooperation and joint course development, including physical partner meetings in all Partner Countries. Discussions and demonstrations by European partners have been made during these meetings, with the intention to inspire.

Additionally, four staff members, one from each partner university in Iraq and Iran, have been trained in eLearning at the coordinating university (Lund) in Europe. During two weeks, this Training of Trainers (ToT) have focused on how to run eLearning courses, both from an administrative and pedagogic point of view. The partner staff, in very close cooperation with active eLearning teachers and technicians from Lund, followed students, marked exercises, interacted with students and staff etc. The participants were selected by the partner universities, and consisted of permanent staff to be engaged in eLearning in the future.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

Two different categories of academics can be distinguished, namely a) experienced academics and b) young academics at the start of their career:

- a) These academics advanced were their career, but limited as regards further vertical growth at their home universities. By bringing an international dimension to their work, CBHE projects have offered these staff members a new lease of life, allowing them to broaden their perspectives. However, by the same token this also means that often, not the field's leading academics are participating in CBHE projects. Thus, a monopolization within the HEIs can occur. Access to EU projects is regarded as 'territorial gain' and not necessarily as something to be shared. This also holds true for Programme Country staff members for the same reasons and is leading to these networks of these 'peer groups' to produce 'mediocre' outcomes. It should also be outlined that the motivation to be part of a CBHE project is not always only connected to the project's content or cooperation aspects but also to the **generous funding** that the CBHE project offers for personnel costs of professors. The additional remuneration is covering tasks that should be part of the normal tasks of the academics, namely the updating of their degree programmes in the case of curriculum development projects.

This goes hand in hand with the **'one size fits all' programme structure** of the CBHE action that makes it possible for academics and universities to include a huge variety of project ideas in their applications. Academics and 'professional project writers' sell/recycle project ideas that do not always correspond to the real needs of the HEI in Region 9 and the CBHE actions suffers from a high number of 'recurrent beneficiaries'.

All of the above refers to CBHE in general, however also in Region 9, which was not covered by one of the predecessor programmes (e.g. TEMPUS), these tendencies were evident from the beginning. As already mentioned, one of the two projects falls into this category and the following project generation has seen the same patterns. Recurrent beneficiaries often active in the South Mediterranean Region (Region 3) have simply repeated their schemes into the neighbouring Region. Their success in the selection process is obviously a result of their acquired drafting skills and the fact that the security situation in the Region is discouraging newcomers and inexperienced HEI.

- b) Young academics are given the possibility to occupy leadership roles for project packages and are exposed to an international working level. They get access to EU funding which prevents a further brain drain.

In general, trainings and workshops organized within the CBHE projects have allowed academics to acquire new skills and knowledge in various disciplines:

#### **International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

Training and dissemination workshops were also held for stakeholders and associate partners, in the Partner Countries, with the aim of providing basic knowledge about GIS/RS and their applications in environmental management, disseminating the activities conducted in the project, and encouraging university-government cooperation for environmental management, with a focus on GIS and remote sensing applications.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

160 academic staff members from Iran and Iraq participated in different trainings, which mostly took place at Programme Country institutions. The new skills and knowledge will also strengthen the home universities and improve education standards.

The CBHE action has given to staff from the Region the opportunity to **develop their intercultural** skills, by working together with colleagues in a multi-country consortium. Academic and administrative staff have gained intercultural experience working with EU countries and with their neighbouring countries, which is not common for Iran and Iraq. Often, only within an EU-funded international consortium does it becomes possible to receive endorsement by both the university and the national authorities to collaborate with HEIs from neighbouring countries.

### International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

Potential cultural differences between partners have not significantly influenced the work here. On the contrary, cultural diversity has benefited the project results by better adapting the course materials and contents to local cultural aspects and needs, e.g. by using examples and exercise data that are meaningful for the partner countries students and institutions. For the European countries, there has also been the advantage of gaining insight and knowledge about environmental issues not considered extensively in previous academic curricula.

### Internationalisation of Higher Education in Iran (561753-EPP-1-2015-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

HEIs in this project have benefited from interaction with institutions from other countries, acquisition of soft skills to manage cultural diversity, exposition to innovation and new ideas as well as the attainment of crucial linguistic competences. These are all key competences to boost employability and resilience in the Iranian job market for students.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

#### 3.2.2. Students

One of the main drivers of internationalisation has been the need for universities to attract students and professors in view of raising the level of education offered and to become more competitive in the global education market. The CBHE action has helped HEIs to set up high level study programmes which has increased the visibility and appeal of the HEI in the national context and contributed to stopping the brain drain. Cooperation **with EU partners** also provides students with a certain level of guarantee regarding the **fair treatment of their merits** in societies that are also marked by **nepotism and corruption**.

In total, 52 students were enrolled in the new and upgraded courses and 26 students received a training or took part in a mobility exercise within CBHE projects.

The impact of the CBHE project (here specifically Project 2) on students has been manifold. They have been beneficiaries of modernized or new study programmes and have been exposed to innovative teaching and learning methods and motivational approaches. The availability of new or improved equipment and infrastructure, working with foreign academics, new methodologies and short-term mobilities have enhanced both the academic and practical competences of students.

The CBHE action **strongly encourages cooperation of universities with the labour market**. In a number of projects in other Regions representatives from the private sector are involved in designing new curricula that are more appealing and relevant for the business world. Professors who internalize this entrepreneurial and long-term perspective have been the main exponents of this cooperation, which has translated into internships for students and, in some cases, job offers after graduation. Evidence shows that curriculum development projects working closely with private sector partners and including internships within university education have a higher student employability rate and are therefore much more appealing to national and international students.



Linkages between higher education institutions and local and **regional labour markets** are of paramount importance to sustainable economic development. These linkages are critical to the task of supporting broader societal goals, fuelling the creation of knowledge, advancing research, and educating a new generation of leaders able **to engage in the global knowledge economy** but also steeped in their own cultural and linguistic traditions. In the Middle East and North Africa, **these linkages have been less developed** and have not effectively served the broader goals of society. There is a growing recognition that Arab higher education systems should focus more on improving the **'relevance' of their services** in terms of knowledge and research and in linking them to the labour market and economic development. (Katherine Wilkens, 2011, Higher Education Reform in the Arab World. Page 7).

However, it should be pointed out that aside from notable exceptions (see below), the overall involvement of private business partners in the universities' curricula development is limited and lags behind expectations. Project 2 is no exception: private business participation was limited to a merely passive role.

#### **International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

Within this project, in connection to the partner meetings in Iran and Iraq, workshops/training sessions with local stakeholders have been organized. The aims and objectives of GeoNetC were then communicated, as well as more general information about eLearning, geographical information systems, and remote sensing.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

Some CBHE projects include concrete support structures, such as career centres, incubators or students support services, which have developed strategic and sustainable links with the labour market and **provide trainings in soft and transversal skills**:

#### **International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

Since eLearning is not fully recognized at all public universities, partner countries have seen a possibility to market the newly produced courses in cooperation with private education institutions. These companies have well-established links to society, and will thus increase visibility of the GeoNetC developed courses.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

In other Regions, as a result of CBHE projects, many students could establish first contact with the private sector and this interaction has increased their employability. Unfortunately, this is not the case for Region 9 where only Project 2 could have potentially led to such an outcome.

Although the students are the main end beneficiaries of the CBHE projects, they have only been sporadically involved in project activities. The development and modernization of curricula, and therefore the identification of students' needs for their future, is still seen as the domain of the universities and their academic staff.

### 3.2.3. Administrative staff

CBHE projects have an impact on administrative staff as well. This particularly relates to staff from the **offices for international affairs and staff responsible for project financial management**, who have to be well acquainted with the regulations and procedures relating to project implementation.

Although administrative and financial staff are key people in international cooperation, their role is not always very visible in the project activities. Moreover, given the nature of their work, they cannot always be the first enjoying mobility opportunities. However, regular interaction via email and skype with their counterparts in other countries has brought learning opportunities and given them insights into best practice on financial and grant management. Sometimes, they have been able to **introduce new practices within their own university systems**. Dealing with international projects, they have to work in English and in this way, their language skills tend to considerably improve. The equipment budget has allowed administrative staff to purchase new technology and to use their newly acquired skills for the benefit of their home universities. Some CBHE projects specifically target administrative staff:

#### Internationalisation of Higher Education in Iran (561753-EPP-1-2015-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)

HEI management staff at Iranian partner HEIs (Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Deans, etc.) were involved across the board in different activities in this project. They were highly involved in the establishment of the IHEI Network, the organization of national conferences as well as the participation of the IHEI Network in Higher Education events. They received six trainings + two extra trainings that they replicated for a wider audience within their HEIs and beyond the consortium. Particularly, staff from other IROs were targeted during the at least 18 replication workshops conducted during the final conference.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

In total, 120 administrative staff of Region 9 universities were trained within the 2015 projects.



## 4. REGIONAL COOPERATION AND NATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

There is significant potential for internationalisation through intra-regional cooperation. Several important initiatives already exist to foster such cooperation in both teaching and research.

**The CBHE action has contributed to the strengthening of the cooperation in the Region.** It provides a means by which universities can work together on themes of mutual interest across national and ethnic boundaries and it promotes people-to-people contact, which help to change mentalities and diminish prejudices.

In working together, exchanging best practices and benchmarking against each other, each country has learned from its neighbours. The creation of regional budget envelopes for the CBHE action has further fostered regional cooperation and exchange. Regarding the geographical scope, it can be said that 50 % of the projects in 2015 are regional projects involving 15 institutions from different countries.



## 5. INCLUSIVENESS

### 5.1. People with Fewer Opportunities

Both CBHE projects in Iran and Iraq claim to focus on the involvement of people with fewer opportunities. The projects concentrate mainly on students with disabilities (visual disability, hearing disability, physical disability). However, while there is no substantial evidence for the claim for Project 1, Project 2 does indeed offer opportunities for disadvantaged groups:

#### **International MSc Educational Programme in Environmental Management and Modelling (561967- EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)**

This project is not about gender balance or equal opportunities in its nature. However, it creates positive impact regarding these issues: eLearning systems provide equal accessibility to learning/teaching and training materials for all genders to be trained. Furthermore, vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities that have difficulties to physically make it to college campuses, may attend remotely.

Source: Final Report and related Assessment

### 5.2. Institutions Located in less developed regions

Both projects in Iran and Iraq have reached HEIs outside the capitals. In terms of geographical coverage, the consortia comprise universities located throughout the two countries.

This cooperation among universities from the same territory is very important for the Region, where the trace of conflict is still present. Institutions located in the main cities tend to appear more often in the consortia but there is no geographical monopoly.



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The most fundamental of the many challenges facing Iraq's higher education sector is that of **re-establishing its universities as independent institutions**, dedicated to education, and free of political, religious, and ethnic influence. There has been no independent quality control agency to monitor and **ensure minimum standards** in teaching and research across higher education institutions. And there have been no government or private research-funding bodies to consistently encourage, nurture, and reward excellence in research (Zahra Rasian, 2009, Higher Education Governance in Developing Countries, Challenges and Recommendations: Iran as a case study, NONPARTISAN EDUCATION REVIEW / ESSAYS, Vol.5, No.3. page 5

The further development of the Higher Education sector in the Region is key to peaceful development and linking the region to an ever more interconnected global society. Currently they are ill-equipped due the fact that critical parts of the **Region's economies are uncompetitive, with too much undue political interference and an underdeveloped private sector.**

Iran and Iraq are important countries in the Middle East. Iran has a strong higher education system, but **suffers from international embargoes and limited international cooperation** generating a need for technological improvement, as well as cooperation initiatives, to improve national facilities. Despite this, the current competence in, for example, IT and computer science is quite well developed in the country. Iraq has a long tradition in education and has been a focal point for free education and giving scholarships to non-citizens. In the field of geomatics, the close connections to the former USSR have produced a generation of highly technically competent individuals. However, due to the unrest during the last two decades, the prevalence of such competence has significantly decreased.

Through cooperation, all partner countries will **improve the quality of their respective academic programs.** The European partners will make their courses more attractive and well adjusted for students from the Middle East. In addition,

they will **increase the general quality and add state-of-the-art learning components to their offerings**, and the partners from the region will significantly increase the academic rigour and quality in the education they provide.

The most important identified needs are the **lack of relevant and high quality education, knowledge, and expertise (particularly at postgraduate level), limited access to information, lack of security, and weak connections to global society.** Iran suffers from international embargoes and limited international cooperation, while Iraq is subject to civil war due to instability during the last three decades. Also, in both countries, the education systems and teaching methods are very traditional in nature, and at this time do not have reach outside of traditional target groups.

## 6.1. Challenges

The bellow challenges are based on the analyses of the 2015 CBHE projects in general, together with the specific challenges identified for Region 9:

- The CBHE action in general is characterised by a high number of **recurrent beneficiaries**, both institutions and individual. In the long term, this leads to a **lack of innovative project ideas** (and few new collaborations) and diminishes the impact of the CBHE action. This has also been the case in Region 9 which is not covered by a predecessor programme.
- **Internationalisation strategies** in HEIs are often absent or insufficiently developed. The creation of project consortia often lack a long-term strategic vision for the development of the HEIs, while proposals tend to be developed due to existing or recurrent collaborations.
- The **large maximum grant amount** of EUR 1 million sometimes leads to ‘inflated’ project budgets and lowers cost efficiency of project activities. In terms of staff costs, we have observed that individual professors and consultants worked on several CBHE projects in parallel, thus incurring high staff costs. This kind of project ‘monopolisation’ by individuals is not desirable and leads to projects that are thematically repetitive, and to sub-optimal project results.
- The **active** participation of **non-academic partners** in CBHE projects is limited and the involvement of private business remains a challenge. Finding mechanisms to integrate more non-academic partners is vital given their importance for ensuring the relevance of new and updated study programmes for the labour market (see Project 2).
- **Accreditation** is sometimes problematic because it takes a long time and does not allow the running of degree programmes within the eligibility period of the CBHE project.
- **Regional and cross-regional** projects face various administrative and management challenges due to the different rules and regulations applied in different countries. This is particularly true for tendering procedures. On average, one third of the CBHE grant is reserved for the purchase of equipment. Complications and delays in the **tendering procedures** generate significant implementation problems for the projects and sometimes equipment will only be available at the very end of the project duration.
- The creation of **key project management** documents for quality assurance, management processes, promotion and disseminations often does not meet expected quality standards (lack of indicators, milestones, responsibilities, and timelines) for a well-managed project.
- The ability to **reach out beyond the initial partnership** needs to be further developed and should become a key priority for the projects. Intensive dissemination of project outcomes and results during and after the project funding period plays an important role. Excellent results should be more highly valued and shared with other HEI working in the same field and facing the same challenges.
- For a number of CBHE projects, **appropriate institutional endorsement** by the HEI administration is not or only partially in place. HEIs must invest more in using CBHE projects for strategic development and provide adequate support via international offices and financial departments. Often, a lack of synergies between different CBHE projects (and with other funded Erasmus+ initiatives) within the same institution is observed.

- Proper **involvement of decision makers and national authorities** (especially within the Structural Projects and in Joint Projects aiming at the system level – see Project 1) is lacking for many projects. This is concomitant with a lack of commitment from national authorities to follow-up and incorporate the CBHE projects and results into their national educational strategies.
- There is a lack of **financial autonomy on the part of the HEIs**, for instance in Iraq. Without their own funds and separate bank accounts at HEI level, institutions face severe challenges for the financial management and the implementation of international projects. This causes huge administrative burden and delays project activities since the request for funds may require lengthy procedures engaging many hierarchical levels for approval. This jeopardises the sustainability of the project results because the regulations hinder attempts to generate additional income via for example consultancy and research services.
- In the majority of cases, **students** are not participating in project conception, design and implementation. They are mainly integrated at the end of the CBHE project during its testing phase, if at all. If the expectations and needs of students or student associations (which could be involved in the project consortia) are not sufficiently taken into account, this reduces the relevance of their studies for the labour market and the sustainability of the funded degree programmes.
- There is **poor infrastructure** – equipment, facilities, and services – such as high-speed Internet and advanced computer systems.
- There is **little experience on the ground in e-learning tools** and doubts about open- and equal-access to information and information technology given the political and economic situation;
- **Poor English skills** within both the student and the academic body.
- In general, it is debatable whether, **in countries in crisis and also of geostrategic interest** for the EU, a **project-based approach** as soft-power tool is adequate. This is because it entails, in many respects, delegating policy development and representation to beneficiaries. Needless to say, desk monitoring (last but not least with an attribution of 25-30 project per Project Officer) does not begin to address the issue.

## 6.2. Recommendations

The analysis of the 2015 CBHE projects in general together with the specific challenges identified for Region 9 suggest the following recommendations for changes and improvements:

- The action should focus more on **targeted structural change** in the Partner Countries. The **Structural Projects** should be better integrated and brought in line with the national priorities of Partner Countries for the development of their educational systems. The Ministries of Education play a critical role for the exploitation, upscaling and mainstreaming of CBHE project results and adequate measures should be set up to better link them to the Structural Projects.
- **Better cooperation between the Ministries of Education** with DG EAC in Region 9 should be encouraged in order to ensure structured information and follow-up policies for CBHE projects

taking place in the countries. This way, it would not be entirely left up to beneficiaries to present themselves as ‘emissaries’ of the EU. Bridging the link between potential applicants and Ministries of Education would facilitate working practices when identifying good proposal ideas. The Ministries should facilitate the process rather than being obstacles for regional programme implementation. This should in turn lead also to more applications for Structural Projects, which at this stage seem of more importance than Joint Projects.

- More HEIs must adopt a **strategic approach** and focus their participation in the CBHE action on projects that are in line with their medium- and long-term priorities and development goals. This ‘strategic interest’ orientation will then lead to better support of the CBHE projects (e.g. by the international office and finance department), the exploitation of cooperative practices between projects implemented at the same HEI, and above all to the sustainability of the projects following the end of their funding period.
- The **institutional capacity of Partner Country HEIs** to manage international projects needs to be further developed. Although there is a positive evolution of institutions taking over the coordination of CBHE projects, the Partner Country HEIs need more training and support to develop innovative project ideas, to submit competitive proposals and to ensure high quality implementation and management of international projects.
- The **diversity of HEIs** and individuals in the CBHE action needs to increase. The CBHE action focuses on high value projects and this favours experienced (often recurrent) and large HEIs. The ‘entry barriers’ for smaller institutions and newcomers are high. One way to counterbalance this challenge would be to dedicate a share of the budget to smaller projects covering certain types of activities only (i.e. staff training activities, university professor exchanges, module updates, summer schools, etc.). However, such an approach is more labour-intensive to manage from EACEA, and would require the introduction of simplified funding modalities (e.g. lump sums) and simplified or external monitoring of project activities.
- The **involvement of some professors in several parallel projects** (as coordinators and/or partners) – and benefiting from generous salary multiplications – needs to be reviewed as it undermines the quality of project outputs and deliverables.
- The **involvement of private businesses and relevant stakeholders** (e.g. Chambers of Commerce, professional associations, etc.) in CBHE projects needs to be increased while the connection to the world of work is important and students need relevant labour market skills. New approaches to ensure significant participation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, of companies active in the Region should be developed. Mandatory involvement of non-academic partners could be envisaged, where appropriate.
- **Students and student associations** should take part in CBHE projects (where relevant) from the very beginning. This would enrich project development and implementation and allow a better match between project outcomes and student expectations and interests. This would also contribute to guaranteeing the project sustainability, particularly for curriculum development projects.
- The **inclusion of more young academics** in CBHE projects would provide them with opportunities for continuous professional development and career options, and contribute to the fight against the brain drain.



- **More academics from the Programme Countries** should go to Region 9 partner HEIs to teach as **guest lectures on graduate and post-graduate courses** (BA, MAs and doctoral programmes) within the curriculum projects. This would foster knowledge transfer, enforce the ties and networks and provide more visibility and credibility vis-à-vis the student body. The security situation is certainly an obstacle but there are notable examples of EU HEIs that support their staff in visiting Iran and Iraq.
- It is important to fund projects that address the **job market needs**. This could be done through more cooperation with the Iraqi Ministries of Higher Education and the Ministries responsible for the labour market.
- Solutions need to be found to make possible the **money transfer of EU-funded projects to Iran and to allow Iraqi HEIs to open bank accounts**.





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# Erasmus+

## Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action

### Regional Report Iran, Iraq, Yemen

#### Resume

This report is based on the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency's evaluation of reports (interim, monitoring, final and impact) of the first generation of CBHE projects selected in 2015. In 2015, two projects were selected for an EU funding, namely:

1. Internationalisation of Higher Education in Iran  
(561753-EPP-1-2015-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)  
Region 9 Country: Iran
2. International MSc Educational Programme in  
Environmental Management and Modelling  
(561967-EPP-1-2015-1-SE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP)  
Region 9 Countries: Iran and Iraq

(these projects are referenced throughout the text as Project 1 and Project 2)