



# Student Employability and Entrepreneurship in Central Asia

A Project UNIWORK Report

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A Project UNIWORK Report



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### Legal Notice

The present document was developed and edited by the partner institutions of the Tempus Project UNIWORK '*Strengthening Career Centres in Central Asia Higher Education Institutions to empower graduates in obtaining and creating quality employment*', under the coordination of the University of Alicante (Spain).

The results, views and opinions expressed in this Report are based on the results of the survey and analysis done by the partners. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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## Project UNIWORK

UNIWORK ‘*Strengthening Career Centres in Central Asia Higher Education Institutions to empower graduates in obtaining and creating quality employment*’ (Project Ref. Number 544126-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-ES-TEMPUS-JPHES) is a 3-year long Higher Education Capacity Building project running from December 2013 to November 2016, funded by the European Commission under the Tempus programme. It brings together a total of 25 partners including 15 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) - 3 in the EU (Spain, Austria, UK), 2 in Kazakhstan, 3 in Kyrgyzstan, 2 in Tajikistan, 2 in Turkmenistan and 3 in Uzbekistan - as well as the Ministry of Education in each of the five Central Asian countries and a Chamber of Commerce in each.

UNIWORK aims to boost the links between universities and enterprise in order to foster sustainable socio-economic development in the five countries of Central Asia by enhancing the capacities of partner Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to effectively improve the employability of their graduates and stimulate an entrepreneurship culture among their students.

In order to achieve this, the UNIWORK partners are working to transform the career centres in twelve Central Asian HEIs into truly efficient instruments to develop students’ and graduates’ employability and to promote and support employment and entrepreneurship amongst them. In addition, project activities are geared towards fostering relationships between the HEIs and the enterprise sector (future employers of university graduates), by providing networking opportunities between them and by developing tools and mechanisms for an active involvement of enterprises in the career centres.

By the end of the project, UNIWORK HEI partners will have modernised career centres with well-trained staff which will offer new or enhanced services to help develop their students’ employability and support entrepreneurship, as well as an improved network and relationship with the entrepreneurship sector and with other career centres. They will in effect be a role model for other HEIs in the region.

## Executive summary

Within the UNIWORK project students, career centres, companies and organisations related to students' employability were asked to give their opinion on the infrastructure, the offers and the cooperation with the university, organisations and companies of career centres.

The conducted student survey analyses the perception of more than 1100 students and graduates of Central Asian universities regarding the support of universities for their career development and employability. Furthermore it examines whether the university, its career centre and other stakeholders are able to increase their enterprising skills and their entrepreneurial thinking.

According to the responses of the students/graduates, most of the respondents have most of the necessary employability/enterprise competences. Skills like risk taking, critical thinking and strategic planning are relatively weakly developed compared to the other competences. In another question some of the respondents answer that they do not get support in developing these skills by career centres. Some respondents also perceive that these skills, as well as competences such as negotiation skills and creativity, are not sufficiently taught.

Here one can identify room for intervention, as developing these skills can be taught in extra-curricular trainings or counselling sessions, which can be offered by career centres.

Concerning services offered by a career centre, only a few respondents are very satisfied with them, but in total the relative majority is at least satisfied with the services as a whole, and only some are dissatisfied while no one is very dissatisfied. Only a small number of respondents per service say that this service does not exist. The services with the least positive answers are mock interviews, resume critique and job search training.

Another part of the questionnaire deals with entrepreneurial attitudes and activities of the respondents. Almost two thirds of the respondents think that they have the knowledge, skills and experience to establish a business. In total the answers suggest that entrepreneurial activity is relatively high in the participating regions among students, but the support by programmes is lacking.

Among services for potential entrepreneurs, business networking and entrepreneurial trainings are prevalent according to two thirds of the respondents. On the other hand, only 40% of the respondents know of business incubators in their region. Although the entrepreneurial activity seems to be relatively high among the respondents, only one third uses the services for potential entrepreneurs (business incubators, start-up consulting, business mentoring, entrepreneurial training, business networking and financing services). A huge majority perceive these services as very useful or useful. However the small number of respondents reflects the fact that these services are not used very often.

According to the students'/graduates' feedback, possible training needs of Central Asian career centres are:

- Offering of enterprising/employability soft skill trainings
- Offering measures for preparation for self-employment
- Offering job search trainings/measures

As a second source of information companies, associations and career centres themselves were interviewed on how cooperation is working between them.

Interviewed companies cooperate with universities in particular in the area of qualification trainings for their employees, recruiting of students and R&D cooperation.

Interviewed associations connect students with potential employers, organizing job fairs, organizing career days, hosting employer and/or graduate databases and placements. Most of the interviewed organisations/associations cooperate with universities or their career centres.

Interviewed career centres' responsibilities are manifold. Career centres offer trainings and seminars, counselling, organize events (job fairs, company visits, conferences etc.), internships and cooperation with stakeholders and companies, hosting of employer and graduate databases. Cooperation with other departments and stakeholders in the region works well.



As a result of these interviews, the following have been identified as areas where development is needed in the career centres:

- Strengthening networking skills
- Development of cooperation schemes with associations
- Implementation of employability / enterprise skill / entrepreneurial skill enhancing measures (especially the increase of training offers for soft skill development)
- Implementation of job search and resume trainings

UNIWORK contributes to the development of these fields by implementing trainings to foster the skills of the career centre employees as well as by procuring the necessary equipment to modernise the career centres of its Central Asian partner universities and fostering networking initiatives between the career centres and the enterprise sector.

## Introduction and methodology

Despite their diversity in population size and resources, republics in Central Asia share many challenges. 20 years after the disintegration of the planned-economy system, Central Asian economies suffer from a lack of entrepreneurial tradition & soaring unemployment. Population growth of the working aged greatly exceeds the rate of new job creation. Higher Education Institution (HEI) graduates face severe difficulties in finding quality employment. Thus enhancing opportunities for youth ranks top on policy agendas. Target 16 of the UN Millennium Goals directly addresses this problem, urging governments to improve labour market insertion of youth. All five Central Asian countries are pursuing important Higher Education modernisation agendas to improve graduate employment. However, most measures (including those inspired by Tempus) focus on adjusting teaching methods & offer, whilst not paying attention to becoming more responsive to the demands of an increasingly diverse student body, nor to building capacities of HEIs to promote graduate placement and entrepreneurship.

A study was conducted in order to create a knowledge base for definition and implementation of further activities. The main objective of the survey was to gain in-depth understanding of labour market needs, gain valuable feedback from graduates and entrepreneurship conditions.

In order to get these results a quantitative survey among students as well as interviews with companies, associations and career centre staffs were conducted.

The aim of the quantitative surveys among students was

- To gather information on enterprising skills and competences of students in Central Asia
- to have an overview of the current status of services of career centres in Central Asia
- to get information on opportunities of self employment and support for start-ups in Central Asian countries

The aim of the qualitative interviews among career centres, companies and association was:

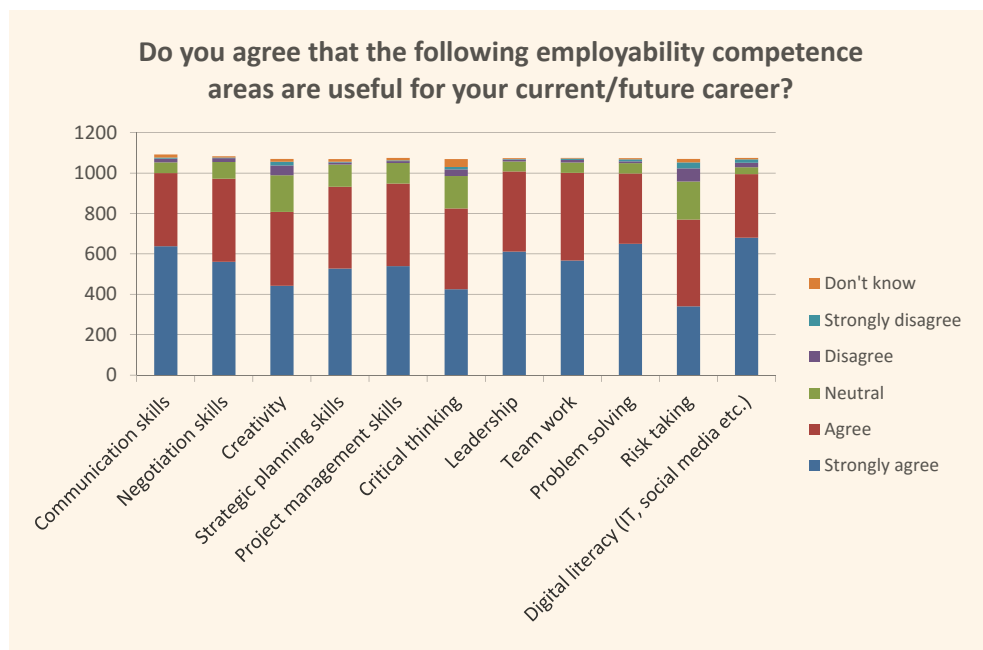
- to identify labour market needs for students
- to gather knowledge about existing cooperation between career centres and industry as well as governments
- to explore feasible improvement strategies.

Therefore the following steps were undertaken:

- Methodology development
- Survey design and interview guidelines compilation
- Data collection from Central Asian universities and conducting of interviews with employers, career centres and associations;
- Analysis of the data and compilation of the report

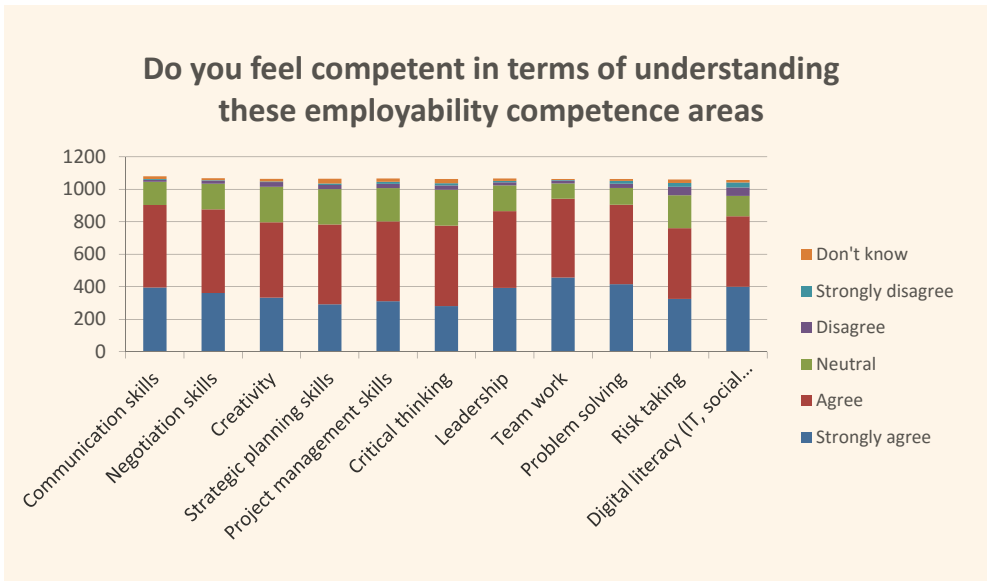
## Main findings student/graduate survey

The following pages give an overview of the survey conducted in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. It is based on the responses from more than 1100 students or graduates in these countries.



**Diagram 1: Usefulness for current/future career (all respondents)**

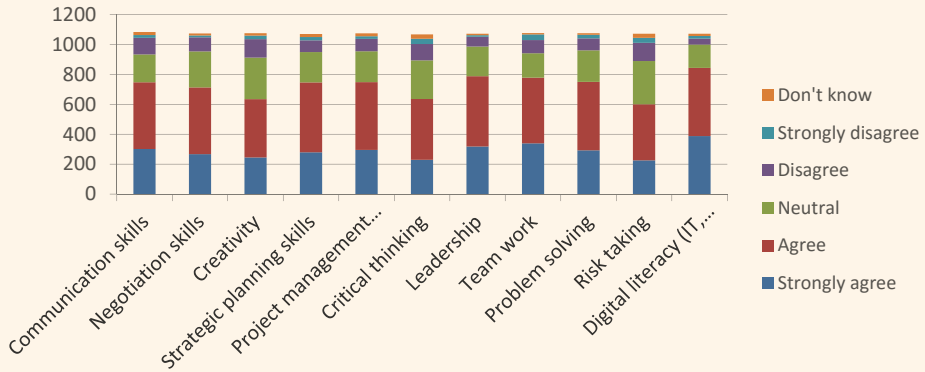
Diagram 1 shows the respondents' perception about the usefulness of employability competence areas for their current/future career. A vast majority of respondents answers that all of the competences are useful, with most positive answers (strongly agree and agree) to be found for leadership (1008), team work (1001), communication skills (1000), problem solving (998) and digital literacy (995).



**Diagram 2: Feeling competent in competences (all respondents)**

Diagram 2 illustrates the respondents’ perception about their own employability competences. Again most of the respondents state that they feel competent in these employability competences. The majority of respondents feel most competent in teamwork (942 “strongly agree” and agree” answers), followed by problem solving (905), communication skills (903) and negotiation skills (876). On the other hand risk taking had only 760 positive responses (strongly agree or agree), followed by critical thinking (760) and strategic planning skills (783).

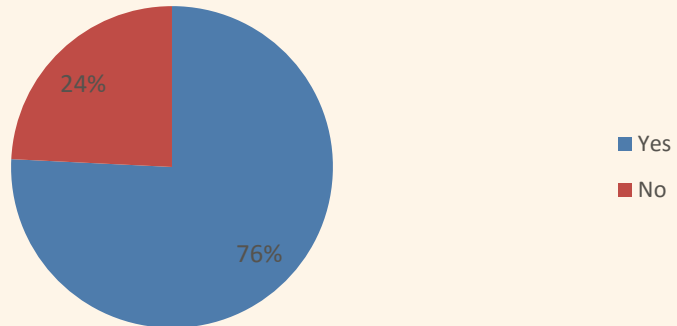
**Do you agree that in your degree programme the following employability/enterprise competences are sufficiently taught?**



**Diagram 3: Teaching of enterprising skills in degree programmes**

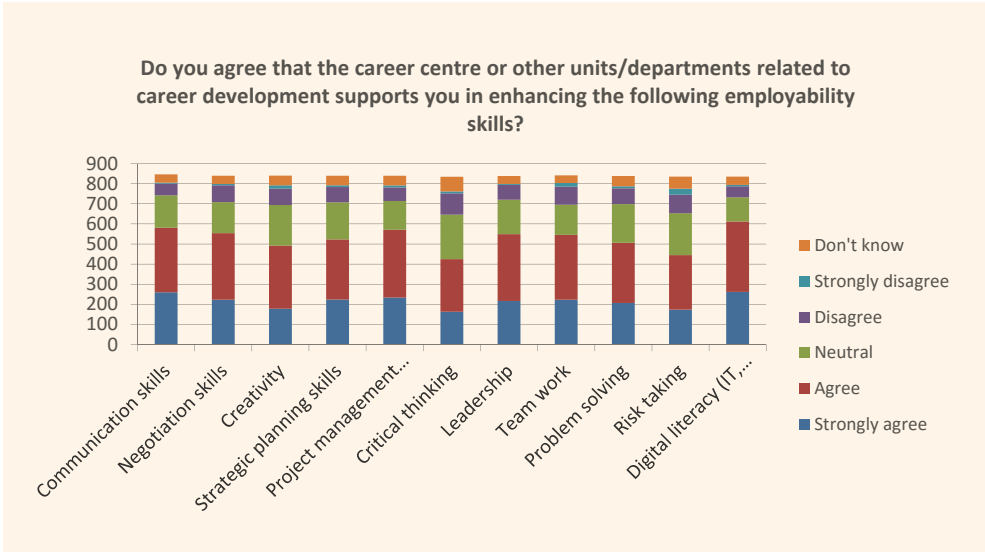
Diagram 3 illustrates if the respondents think that the employability/enterprise competences are sufficiently taught in their (current or past) degree programme. There are again more positive answers than negative ones, but the results are less clear than in the previous questions. In particular risk taking (600), creativity (634) and critical thinking (635) have significantly less positive responses than before.

**Does your university have a career centre or other units/departments related to career development supporting you in gathering employability skills?**



**Diagram 4: Career centre in the university**

Most of the respondents (76%) answer that their university has a career centre, as is shown in Diagram 4. The negative responses (24%) can be interpreted in that either the university does not have a career centre, or the respondents do not know about it.



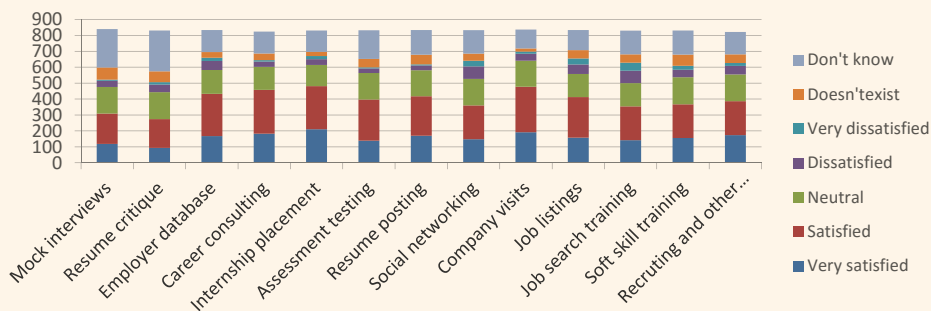
**Diagram 5: Support of career centres in gaining employability skills**

Diagram 5 illustrates the results of the question “Do you agree that the career centre or other units/departments related to career development supports you in enhancing the following employability skills?”. Digital literacy is evaluated best with 612 positive answers, followed by communication skills (581) and project management skills (571). On the other side of the ranking one can find critical thinking (425), risk taking (445) and creativity (492).

Diagram 6 shows how satisfied the respondents are with career centre services. The services of career centre or similar institutions are perceived as satisfying to the majority of respondents. Here is a ranking of the services ranked by “very satisfied” and “satisfied” answers:



### How satisfied are you with the following services of your career center or other units/departments related to career development



**Diagram 6: Satisfaction with services of career centers**

Services	Very satisfied/ satisfied
Internship placement	481
Company visits	477
Career consulting	458
Employer database	433
Resume posting	418
Job listings	412
Assessment testing	397
Recruiting and other events	387
Soft skill training	367
Social networking	360
Job search training	354
Mock interviews	309
Resume critique	274

Internship placement is ranked highest followed by company visits and career counselling. Resume critique can be found at the bottom of the table followed by mock interviews.

How comfortable would you feel in recommending the career centre or other units/departments related to career development to a close friend?

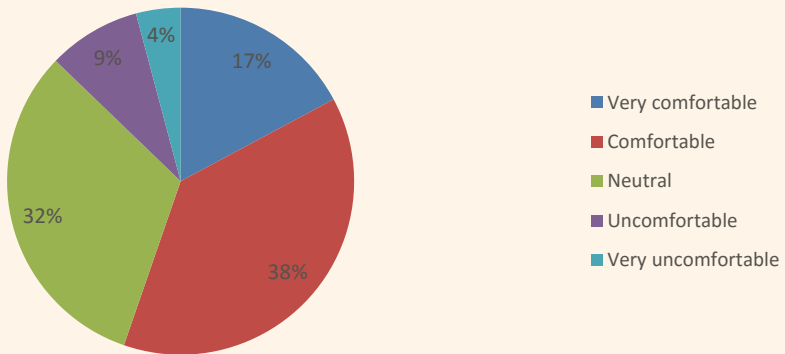
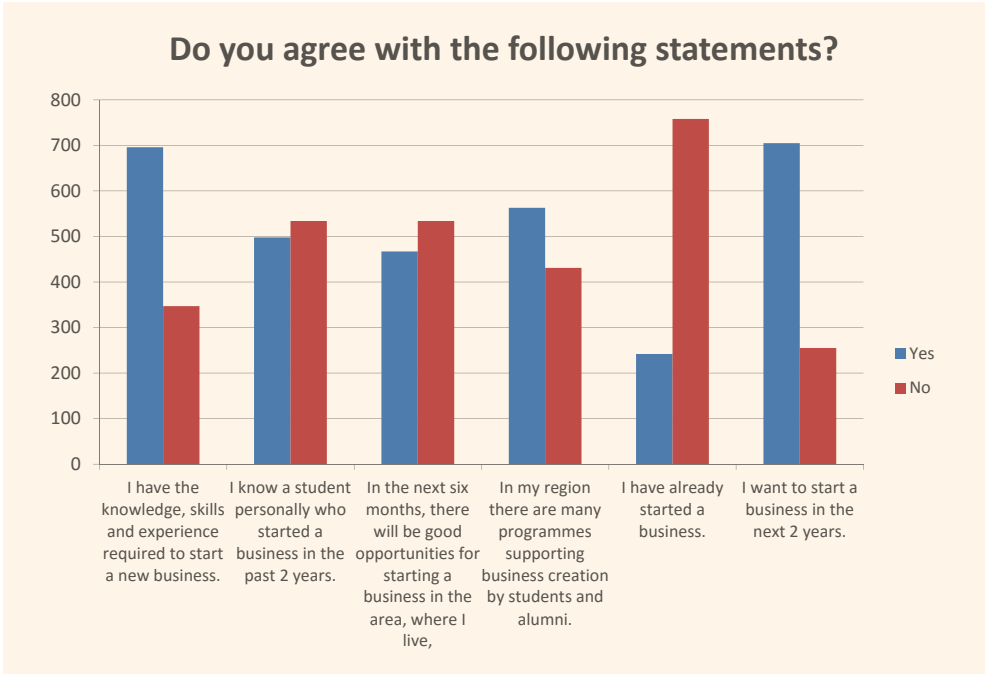


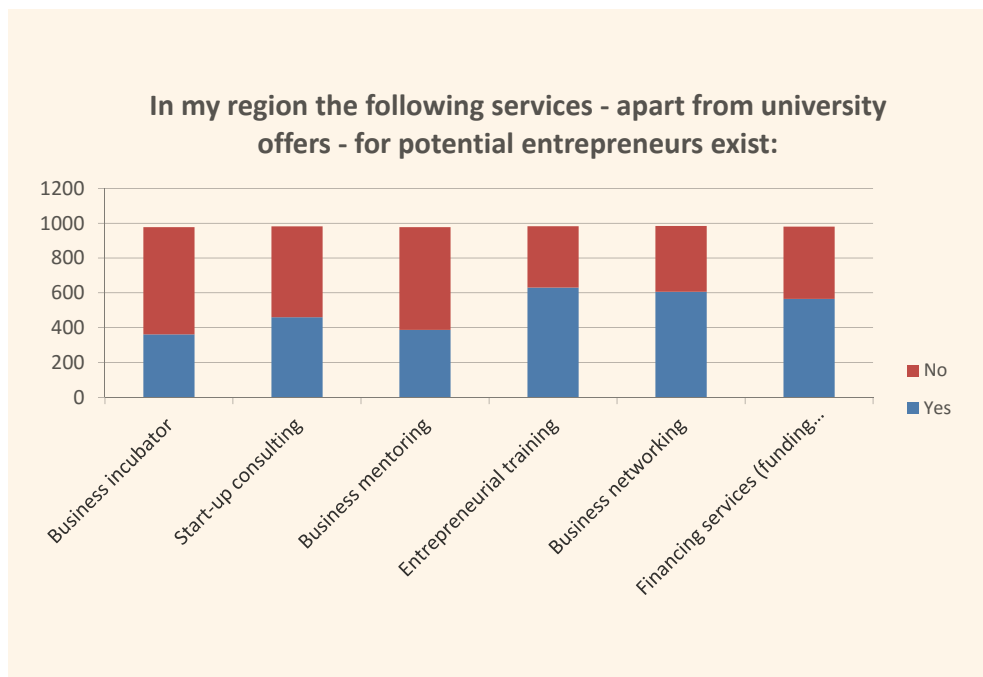
Diagram 7: Recommendation of career center to a friend

Diagram 7 illustrates the question, if the respondents would feel comfortable in recommending the career centre (or other units/departments) to a close friend. More than the half (55%) would feel very comfortable or comfortable. Only 13% would feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable.



**Diagram 8 Entrepreneurial activity in the region**

Diagram 8 depicts if the respondents agree to six statements regarding entrepreneurial activity of the respondents and their environment. Almost 700 respondents agree to the first statement “I have the knowledge, skills and experience required to start a new business.”, while 280 disagree. Slightly less than half of the respondents know students who started a business. More than half of the respondents perceive that there is enough governmental support in the region. More than 75% are thinking of starting a business in the next two years and about one fourth have already started a business.



**Diagram 9: Entrepreneurial services in the region**

Diagram 9 shows the answers to the question which services apart from university offers for potential entrepreneurs exist. The no-answers can be interpreted as that the services either do not exist or the respondents do not know about them. This is the ranking of the yes-answers for the services:

Start-up offers	
Entrepreneurial training	630
Business networking	606
Financing services	565
Start-up consulting	460
Business mentoring	387
Business incubator	361

In the past have you used one or more of these services?

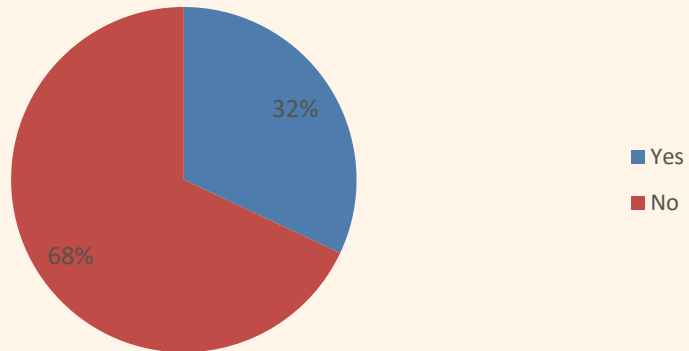
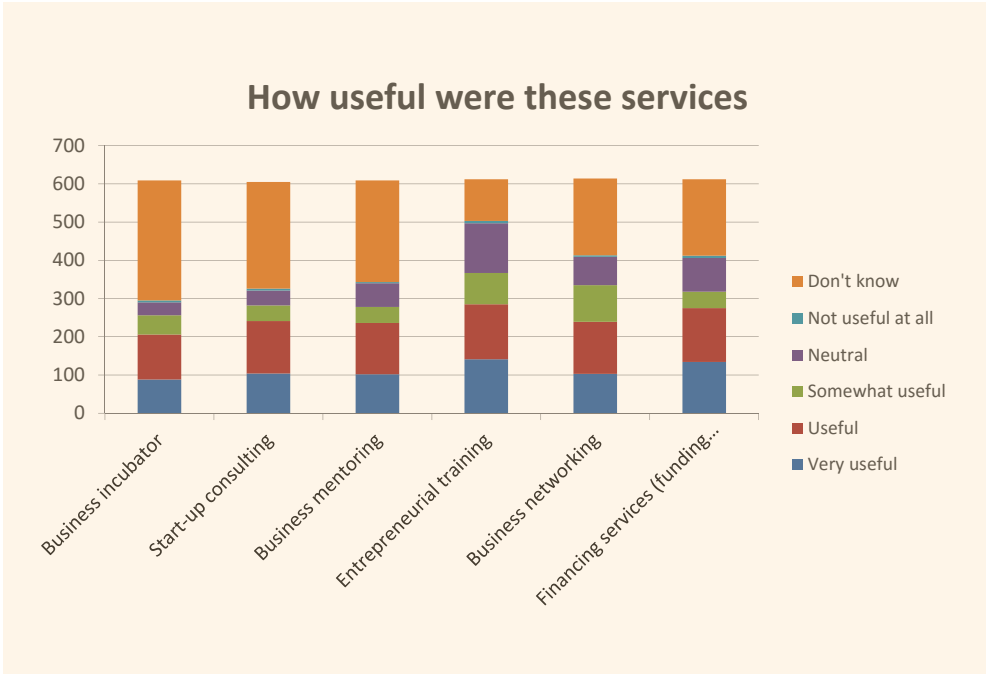


Diagram 10: Use of entrepreneurial services

Two thirds of the respondents answer that they have not used any of the services from the question above, as illustrated in Diagram 10.



**Diagram 11: Usefulness of entrepreneurial services**

Diagram 11 illustrates how the respondents perceive the usefulness of the services. The vast majority of the respondents - excluding don't know - perceive all of the services as very useful, useful or somewhat useful.

## Country summaries

### Kazakhstan

More than 300 responses were collected in Kazakhstan. Almost every competence was seen as equally useful with a few competences such as risk taking and creativity having significantly fewer positive responses. Although they agree that these competences are useful for their future career, respondents feel less competent. Even fewer students and alumni feel that these competences are sufficiently taught and that the career centre (if existing) supports in enhancing these competences.

About a fourth of all respondents do not know if career centre services exist. The majority of the remaining respondents are very satisfied or satisfied with all of these services. As a result a majority of the respondents feel comfortable in recommending the career centre to others.

Almost two thirds of all respondents perceive that they have the knowledge, skills and experience required to start a business. As a result more than three fourths of all respondents want to start a business in the next two years and a quarter have already started a business. Less than half of the respondents know about support services for start-ups in their region and only 25% have used these services. The majority of respondents knowing about start-up services are satisfied with them.

### Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan the universities have collected more than 300 responses. Every competence was perceived as very useful, but risk taking, critical thinking and creativity have significantly less positive responses. The respondents perceive these skills as useful for their future career, but few feel competent in these skills. According to the responses from Kyrgyzstan a smaller group of students perceive that these competences are sufficiently taught and that the career centre (if existing) supports in enhancing these competences.

About a third of all respondents do not know if the listed career centre services exist. A vast majority of the rest are satisfied with all of these services, which leads to the majority of the respondents feeling comfortable in recommending the career centre to others.

Almost two thirds of all respondents perceive that they have the knowledge, skills and experience required to start a business. As a result more than 80% of all respondents want to start a business in the next two years. Furthermore, more than 25% have already started a business. Less than half of the respondents have knowledge about support services for start-ups in their region and a fourth has have used one or more of these services. The majority of respondents knowing about start-up services are satisfied with them.

## Tajikistan

In Tajikistan more than 100 students and alumni answered the questionnaire. Every competence was perceived as very useful, but as in all other countries risk taking, critical thinking and creativity have significantly less positive responses. Although the perception of a huge majority is that these skills are useful for their future career, they feel slightly less competent in these skills. Differently to the students from the countries analysed in the previous sections, more of them think that these competences are sufficiently taught and that the career centre (if existing) supports in enhancing these competences.

Less than 20% of all respondents do not know if the listed career centre services exist. Among the remaining 80% or more, a vast majority of respondents is satisfied with all of these services. Therefore the majority of the respondents feel comfortable in recommending the career centre to others.

More than 70% respondents perceive that they have the knowledge, skills and experience required to start a business. As a result more than three fourth of the respondents want to start a business in the next two years. Furthermore more than 30% have already started a business. Contrary to other observed countries more than half of the respondents have knowledge about the support services for Entrepreneurial training, business networking and financing services for start-ups in their region. Almost 40% have used one or more of these services. A huge majority of respondents knowing about start-up services find them useful.



## Turkmenistan

In Turkmenistan universities have collected 240 responses from students and alumni. Almost every competence was perceived as useful. The only skill perceived by a minority as not useful for their future career is creativity. Data suggests that the majority of respondents are not competent in digital literacy. The majority feel competent in the remaining skills and competences. While the majority thinks that digital literacy, negotiation skills and leadership are sufficiently taught, other skills like creativity teamwork and networking are perceived as insufficiently taught. The situation is similar for support from career centres.

Students from Turkmenistan are relatively well informed about services offered by career centres. Only for some services, like mock interviews and resume critique, a relatively high number has no knowledge about it. Respondents are especially satisfied with career counselling, internship placement, resume posting and company visits. The satisfaction with other services is relatively low compared to other countries. Despite this the majority of the respondents feels comfortable in recommending the career centre to others.

More than 70% of respondents perceive that they have the knowledge, skills and experience required to start a business. More than 60% want to start a business in the next two years. Furthermore more than 30 % have already started a business. Contrary to other observed countries, more than half of the respondents have knowledge about the support services for Entrepreneurial training, business networking and financing services for start-ups in their region. Only a quarter has used one or more of these services. A huge majority of respondents knowing business incubators, start-up consulting and business networking, state that these services are useful.

## Uzbekistan

Almost 100 responses were collected in Uzbekistan. Almost every competence was seen as equally useful with the exception of risk taking, which received significantly fewer positive responses. Though they agree that these competences are useful for their future career, respondents feel less competent. Even fewer students and alumni feel that these competences are sufficiently taught and that the career centre (if existing) supports in enhancing these competences.

The majority of the respondents is very satisfied or satisfied with all of the listed career centre services. Therefore a majority of the respondents feel comfortable in recommending the career centre to others.

More than 80% of all respondents perceive that they have the knowledge, skills and experience required to start a business. As a result more than 60% of all respondents want to start a business in the next two years and more than 40% have already started business. More than half of the respondents know about support services for start-ups in their region and almost 45% have used these services. The majority of respondents knowing about start-up services are satisfied with them.

## Main findings of the interviews with companies, associations and career centres

This section deals with the interviews with companies, associations and career centres in Central Asia about cooperation of companies, public bodies and association with career centres/universities. Due to the relative low number of responses (which were intended from the beginning) a separate analysis for each partner country is not useful.

### Companies

The majority of interviewed companies know about service offers by universities for companies, especially about training offers. Many companies also use these offers, especially in the area of qualification trainings for their employees. Only some companies answered as to how they would rate the services they use, but the ones responding give a positive feedback.

While some of the companies state that they are cooperating with close universities or career centres, others said that they are also working with other universities. According to the respondents the area of cooperation is often the recruiting of graduates, but companies also use other services like trainings for their employees or R&D cooperation (with students). The way the cooperation between companies and universities is implemented is similar in many cases. Some of the companies contact the dean or other contact persons who arrange meetings with appropriate students and alumni. Some answer that in seminars joint research projects will be developed and thereafter implemented. Regarding recruitment, some universities have more intense cooperation than others. In some cases universities even conduct tests to select appropriate students. In other cases meetings between students and the company will be arranged.

### Associations

Associations support the enhancement of students' employability and entrepreneurship skills by connecting them with employers for internships and other ways for learning in practice. Some of the organisations organize job fairs or career days, while databases support the job matching of students. Some of the measures are successful, in particular internships,

career days and specific trainings for students. One respondent answers that they do not measure the success. One association has just started its activities and therefore cannot tell if the measures are successful yet. Below one can find a description of two well-working measures:

*“To enable the broadest possible segment of the market and get high-quality knowledge, each participant held several internships in companies in the branch in which he started his own business. The project covered a variety of business sectors: computer technology, garment manufacturing and design, catering, printing, media-production, the financial sector.”*

*According to the results of the project “Strengthening the development of social partnership in vocational education and training in Kyrgyzstan” the Department of Tourism decided to implement a project for sectorial qualification system based on the European Qualifications Framework in the activities of the Department. Also, the Ministry of Youth, Labour and Employment has welcomed the draft of Professional standards and qualifications framework and adopted it as the basis of state regulation. Also, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic on the recommendation of the Department of Tourism, has decided to make changes in state educational standards in the tourism sector in the preparation of bachelors according to project a professional educational standards and qualifications framework. At a joint meeting of representatives of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the European Commission, the project was recognized as the best and most promising for the country.*

Most of the associations cooperate with universities or university career centres. Only one association states that it is not cooperating with universities. They are mainly cooperating in offering trainings, working together in R&D processes, in placement of students for internships, offering mentoring programmes or matching vacancies for students or graduates. The cooperation is often implemented on a contractual basis. The majority of associations act as an intermediary between students/universities and employers.

## Career centres

The main responsibilities of the interviewed career centres are:

- Organization of cooperation with social partners acting as employers
- Organization of all types of professional practice
- Organizing seminars and conferences
- Hosting of employer and student/graduates databases
- Organization of employability and career development trainings
- Counselling
- Organisation of job fairs
- Organisation of company visits
- Publishing an information newspaper
- Job search and resume training
- Assessment testing

Most of the measures mentioned above are successful according to the answers of the career centres. Career centres are in regular contact with other faculties and departments of the universities. The involvement of the other departments includes the involvement in events organized by the career centre, in the development of the graduate database, in the development of students' careers, professional practical training and further employment.

In some cases the staff involved in the career centres is not permanent staff, they rotate in and out from different departments. This undermines any training efforts to build up capacities in the career centres compared to career centres with permanent staff financed by the university.

Interviewed staff also brought up the need to add retraining courses for recent graduates to increase their employability; this could be done in collaboration with the Alumni Association. They also point out that "*increasing the mobility of students and graduates should be among career centre objectives*". This so that students and graduates will be more psychologically ready to move to another city, region or country in order to get a better job.

## Conclusion

The two types of assessment have shown interesting results and some possible ways for capacity building in the existing career centres as well as the most urgent needs of students, companies and associations cooperating with career centres.

Many students/graduates think that they have learned employability/enterprise skills during their studies. Although career centres are supportive in developing these skills, there is still room for improvement in this regard.

A relatively high number of students/graduates are also willing to start their own business, but business support is somewhat lacking in the Central Asian countries.

The interviews suggest that existing cooperation between university career centres and companies or organisations works well, but that career centres probably need a bigger network.

In addition it is pointed out that career centres with a permanent staff, paid by the university, can develop their competences and get more out of trainings than can career centres with a rotating staff of different university faculty members. It is highly recommended that career centres have at least 2 permanent staff members.

Based on the results of the student/graduate surveys, as well as the interviews with associations, companies and career centres, the following areas have been identified for possible training of career centre staff:

- Strengthening networking skills
- Development of cooperation schemes with associations
- Implementation of employability/ enterprise skill/entrepreneurial skill enhancing measures
- Implementation of job search and resume/application trainings
- Acquisition of external funds

As a result of this assessment Tempus project UNIWORK has identified strategies to increase the capacities of the Central Asian career centres and thus to strengthen the employability and the enterprising skills of university graduates. The project aims to develop those skills by training the career centre employees in relevant skills that were found to be necessary to increase the career centres' potential to help. Furthermore, career centres in Central Asia will get new infrastructure in the course of the project's implementation.

Therefore the various initiatives of the UNIWORK project are focused on direct support for career centres:

- By increasing the skills and knowledge of career centres' staff.
- By introducing new infrastructure in the career centres.
- By starting new career centre initiatives such as the Enterprising Ideas Competition or online training.
- By fostering further contact with the business sector, increasing networking opportunities.



The present report

### *Student Employability and Entrepreneurship in Central Asia*

aims to provide an analysis on the support provided to students and graduates of Central Asian universities regarding the support of universities for their career development and employability. Furthermore it examines whether the university, its career centre and other stakeholders are able to increase students' and graduates' enterprising skills and their entrepreneurial thinking. In addition, the report looks at how companies, associations and career centres cooperate.

For more information about Tempus project UNIWORK,  
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