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THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE SOCIETY: CAPACITY BUILDING FOR EVIDENCE BASED POLICY MAKING ON SOCIAL PROTECTION OF THE POPULATION

Nowadays we are witnessing how the nature of higher education is rapidly changing. The 21st century we live in is marked by very rapid and profound social transformation, we are observing a transition from the transportation as a dominant human activity to communications, economies are becoming more dependent upon computers and networks. The society is rapidly evolving into a post-industrial, knowledge-based society, and this transformation is marked by a shift in culture and technology as profound as the shift that took place a century ago when our agrarian societies evolved into industrial nations (Drucker, 1994). Industrial production is steadily shifting from material- and labor-intensive products and processes to knowledge-intensive products. A radically new system for creating wealth has evolved that depends upon the creation and application of new knowledge. In a very real sense, we are entering a new age, an age of knowledge, in which the key strategic resource necessary for prosperity has become knowledge itself—educated people and their ideas (Bloch, 1988). Thus the twenty first century we live in puts increasing pressures on universities to shift from the traditional education towards synergies between academia and state and private initiatives in the field of social sciences among the others. Strengthening applied social research at HEIs to foster the initiation of knowledge based social policy development plays crucial role in this regard.

Academic disciplines and endeavours are characterized by rapidly changing trends and currents. Two such trends which at present seem to have an especially powerful and salient effect on the development of different academic disciplines are: (1) the demand or desire that academic knowledge should have some practical use, and (2) the tendency to view an increasing number of phenomena from a social perspective. Within most subjects and disciplines these two trends seem to be unrelated. Within the social sciences, however, they have been integrated or unified

and in many ways function in a mutually reinforcing manner. A concrete manifestation of this tendency is apparent in the explosive development of applied social research we have witnessed in recent years (Nafstad 1981a).

Today the universities serve society by educating the young generations, preserving our cultural heritage, providing the basic research so essential to our security and well-being, training our professionals and certifying their competence, challenging our society and stimulating social change. But the age of knowledge will substantially broaden the roles of higher education. Erich Bloch, former Director of the U.S. National Science Foundation, stated it well when he noted, “The solution of virtually all the problems with which government is concerned: health, education, environment, energy, urban development, international relationships, economic competitiveness, and defense and national security, all depend on creating new knowledge—and hence upon the health of our universities” (Bloch, 1988).

There are many challenges the higher education system faces at the age of knowledge. Taking this into account the overall aim of the current proposal is to attempt to globalize knowledge partnerships between EU universities and PCs, promote innovation, extend policy debates, and establish a new generation partnership model to develop global knowledge economies what would be possible through the development of trilateral partnership between the governments, universities and industry in Azerbaijan.

After regaining independence in 1991 Azerbaijan Republic has proclaimed its stance for democracy and the rule of law inclusive of the pledge to pursue the efforts to advance human rights and ensure social protection to all groups of the population in general and the most vulnerable groups in particular in line with the country’s respective international legally binding commitments. The ratification of the related human rights treaties in early 1990s constitutes the landmark initiative that has opened new prospects for the creation of an enabling legal and policy environment for improved social protection services.

Nevertheless, social protection rendered to the country’s population still falls short of being properly tailored to the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups of the population given the lack of qualitative and quantitative assessments on particular challenges faced by them. As known, during the soviet era Azerbaijan was not among the countries where the state policies on different dimensions of the socio-economic life of the population were informed by the findings of the relevant research data. It is worthwhile to note however that although there has

been series of initiatives to ensure that the ideologically-driven politics on social protection services prevalent during the realm of the USSR are replaced with rational decision-making schemes based on the research data produced by different civil society actors within the last couple of decades, there is a definite shortage of national institutional, technical and human capacities to foster the production of the evidence based data that is representative, reliable and valid.

The mechanisms and capacities to produce evidence based data for the formulation of informed policy making are of particular importance for Azerbaijan Republic at present. The country has been ranked as an upper middle income country according to the most recent data indices produced by the World Bank. The rapid economic development of the country creates more prospects for change and more opportunities for the effective utilization of evidence based data in policy and practice to ensure improved provision of social protection services.

While there are series of important facets of the overall mechanism to address the lack of evidence based data for informed social policy making in Azerbaijan Republic, the institutions of higher education are among the most indispensable and crucial agents to foster the change. This is mainly given their potential to catalyze the process by providing human resources equipped with relevant knowledge and skills as well as producing the relevant methodologies for systematic data collection.

This approach is also fully in line with the national development goals. The national development strategy of Azerbaijan Republic “Azerbaijan: Vision 2020” endorsed by the presidential decree of 2011 clearly sets out the strategic directions for the improved social protection policies. The document also elaborates on the mechanisms to be worked out to provide necessary support to the institutions of higher education in building the capacities of the academic personnel to meet the country’s socio-economic development requirements as well as to contribute to the development of the transformation of these institutions into centres of education, research and innovation.

Therefore the proposed project aims at contributing to the process of developing the evidence based policy making in Azerbaijan Republic by building capacity of HEIs in the sphere of applied social research and establishing the Center of Excellence in Applied Social Research.

There is no single definition of capacity building. Over the years however a general understanding has developed where, to quote for example UNESCO “capacity is the ability of

individuals, organizations and systems to perform appropriate functions efficiently, effectively and sustainably” (UNESCO, 2005).

In the development context this has come to mean the way individuals, groups, institutions and societies strengthen their abilities to, on the one hand, perform core functions, solve problems and formulate and achieve objectives, and, on the other, to understand and deal with their development needs in a broad context and in a sustainable manner (UNESCO, 2005; UNDP, 1997). For the purposes of this study we may take a leaf from the pages of the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), which divides the issues of capacity building for development into:

- (a) Human resource development: providing the skills, information, knowledge and training to enable actors to perform effectively.
- (b) Organisational development: the elaboration of management processes, structures and procedures within organisations as well as with regard to their relationships to other stakeholders (such as the business community and government).
- (c) Institutional and legal framework development: creating and maintaining legal and institutional arrangements that enable organisations, institutions and agencies to enhance their capacities (IIEP, 2006).

Capacity building in the research and higher education sector of a society is crucial to all other sectors in that society. This is important in the context of developing countries since public investments in research is often torn between (at least) two main goals: scientific and social. Scientific goals are usually expressed as a desire to achieve international recognition and academic standing in branches of science while social goals are expressed as the aspiration to strengthen industrial capacity, educate the national workforce including its leaders and decision makers, and address national challenges (Meek et al., 2009). This simple duality however is confounded by the argument that scientific capacity is a social goal in its own right, and a key component of sustainable development and general social and institutional capacity building in developing countries. For example Kearney (2009) outlines seven values that stem from research investments that may lead to social and economic capacity benefits:

- contacts with international research
- provision of local analysis and advice
- identification of relevant research agendas

- critical thinking in higher education
- evidence-based criticism and debate for policy making
- capacity to train future generations of researchers
- stimulation of national innovation systems.

Typically in developing countries, research capacity is centralised at the larger higher education institutions (HEIs) which then assume responsibility for fostering the national commitment to research, promoting a culture of inquiry, developing the capacity to utilise international research results and assuring the acquisition of research skills. Such a system, which is both centralized but has only weak capacity at the outset, is precarious and faces three main challenges (Kearney,2009). These are

- a) the dilution and redirection of possible resources for research;
- b) challenges posed by the rapid expansion of higher education to meet increasing demand; and
- c) fragmentation of research-oriented action.

In all three of these areas it seems that one possible strategy would consist of creating critical mass in research in a smaller number of carefully selected areas.

Drawing on the above reasoning we can summarise the relevance of CoEs for capacity building in developing countries in the following way. CoEs may be an instrument for capacity building in so far as they have the potential to realise human resource development, improve organisational capacity and create an institutional and legal framework in the research and higher education field, including its effects on innovation and socio-economic development. The consolidation of resources does not necessarily imply a choice between a scientific and a social agenda, but could instead act to bridge these two.

Since Azerbaijan regained its independence in the early 1990s the Azerbaijani government has initiated series of reforms to modernize the country's education system. In this regards the importance of research in social sciences as well as its application to the emerging needs of the population can not be underestimated. The demands and expectations on Azerbaijani higher education are continuously increasing, with pressures for new evidence informed practices. The higher education institutions need a strong research base to help it to

meet these expectations. The state programs being currently developed also present demanding agenda for applied social research (in the evaluation of social programmes, policy development, clinical and public health research, etc.) and a challenge for researchers and the educational institutions to work together to develop policy and practices that are evidence-based. However, the current infrastructure of applied social research in higher education institutions in Baku, as elsewhere in Azerbaijan, has proven to be inadequate in this respect.

There is a relatively small capacity for excellent research at the Departments of Social Sciences at HEIs in Azerbaijan with a much greater reservoir of available potential if training and infrastructure could be enhanced. Therefore the wider objective of the proposal is to strengthen applied social research at Azerbaijani HEIs in order to contribute to the initiation of knowledge based social policy development in Azerbaijan via mobilizing the potential and expertise of the EU and PC universities.

The Capacity Building network and the establishment of the Center of Excellence in Applied Social Research will address these problems by developing a national infrastructure to enhance the research capacity of faculty members as well as PhD and master level students. The partner universities will organize the Network in the frames of this project. The EU university partners' significant concentration of expertise in applied social research is expected to be of enormous contribution in this respect.

Target group:

The target for the current proposal comprises academic (teaching and research) staff employed by Azerbaijani HEIs who are engaged in research in social sciences, administration and quality assurance personnel, as well as PC labour markets and the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic. It is expected that the predominant majority will be composed of members of Faculties/Departments of social sciences but the Network is also open to members of other HEI departments whose research is relevant to the development of social sector in the country. Taking into consideration the fact that HEIs in Azerbaijan have a relatively low proportion of research-active staff, it is evident that there is a significant target population for capacity building activities in the sphere of applied social research.

The proposed project will try to address the following strategic aims:

1. To achieve distinction in research and world-class research capacity, but with an aim to

addressing social and economic issues of national importance and generating qualified human resource capacity. Rather than exclusively focusing on supporting basic science capability and industrial innovation, this mainly includes improving the skills of researchers across the community and training young researchers in areas of national priority.

2. To stimulate specialisation and competence in the higher education system. Specifically, by developing research-led teaching in the higher education system, developing training programmes and increasing collaboration within the system. Developing new relationships between HEIs and communities (including triple-helix type relationships) are also included here.

3. To stimulate academic-industry collaboration including user-driven research collaboration addressing national and global challenges. By stimulating research and networks supporting social problem solving as well as product development and business development, CoEs can promote local knowledge transfer.

Specific objectives addressed within the project are :

Research capacity building

- Strengthening the HEIs in terms of research capacity, and enrichment of research training and basic education in applied social research.
- Strengthening university-based scientific infrastructure

Networks/partnerships

- Creation and strengthening of international research networks between EU and PCs
- Engagement of senior private-sector research talent to forge industry-academic links
- Increasing domestic co-operation of HEIs with national research institutes and other organizations dealing with research
- Creation of sector-specific interfaces with research users in areas of strategic importance
- Infrastructure creation used by academics and industry partners alike, facilitating access for university academics and students to important research infrastructure in industry

Training and skills

- Introducing new and modernizing the existing courses on research at master and PhD levels, putting more emphasis on applied social research skills and knowledge
- Training masters and PhDs for industrial and university recruitment

- Disseminating expertise and skills to various actors, e.g. through public-private partnerships involving the business enterprise sector and training professionals, or through Center of Excellence graduates taking employment in partner industries.

Socio-economic development

- Promoting better diffusion and exploitation of the knowledge produced by HEIs, e.g. through non-traditional dissemination of outputs such as using the internet or specialist training workshops, maximizing the accessibility of research to target groups.
- Providing reliable advice to government, business and civil society through expertise, and by providing models and knowledge resources for policy agencies. This will also involve identifying significant shortcomings in social services and making recommendations to relevant agencies to overcome them
- Outreach activities in order to involve, and disseminate knowledge to, students, underrepresented groups and communities