

Interview with Raziya Isayeva, Khazar University, Azerbaijan

In this interview we talk to Raziya Isayeva, Development Director at Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan. Besides this role she teaches management and is studying a PhD in Educational Leadership, and has been involved in European conversations around strengthening student engagement. She is also a [Higher Education Reform Expert](#), a member of an Erasmus+ funded pool of experts in countries neighboring the European Union.

1. We met you in March this year, when you participated in a Higher Education Reform Experts seminar in Kazakhstan on student engagement, also attended by our Director, Eve. Can you tell us first what you got out of the conference?

Participation in this conference was a very good experience in terms of learning different perspectives, different experiences of European countries and networking with people from different cultures. Participation in this kind of meeting extends your network and brings more opportunities and friendships.

I have read a lot on student engagement, we have written and are implementing some European projects on the theme and the projects are quite successfully implemented in universities. Still there were many things that I have learned during the seminar – one thing, for example, I liked a lot (and I am personally very attached to this idea) in student engagement is that it is very important that students are seen as partners, they need to feel themselves important and valuable.

I was very motivated by the speeches made by various speakers and hopefully many of the ideas will be possible to implement in Azerbaijan as well. I have set several activities for myself and my team at Khazar, namely to hold an international student conference on Student Engagement, to show the perspectives to Azerbaijani students, to invite international speakers so that students can see their contribution to education development in their own country and learn how their voice can make a difference and their active role in university management can bring positive changes.

We also agreed with Georgian and Kazakh partners to have comparative analyses on Student Engagement in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kazakhstan. I am also ready and very motivated to conduct this study by myself even if the partners do not have enough time or commitment.

2. How is the term “student engagement” understood in Azerbaijan? And how does your university approach it?

Student Engagement is partially, I would say, new, because there is some engagement in some universities. When we say ‘some’ it means that it is done at ad hoc basis, there is no systematic approach nor is the idea wholly understood. Some engagement exists but not in all aspects.

Private universities, like the one that I work for, Khazar, have student engagement - students are engaged in university management, they have their own governing body – the students’ union - which provides the university with feedback, and they do lots of other activities, sports, cultural,

clubs and so on, and they participate in Academic Council. Students also are engaged in quality assurance – they provide each university teacher with feedback on their teaching as well as the whole university on each university's activity. They know where to go in case if they have problems with curriculum, course design, schedule, and in any other case.

3. What might the key opportunities for development in student engagement be for Azerbaijan? And what might you need to realise those opportunities?

Not only internal but also external things need to be done – at the national and/or institutional levels.

At institutional level changes should come at cognitive level. University leadership should acknowledge the need of student engagement, student experiences in the development of university. Each member should understand the value of student participation and student experiences. People currently working for most of the HEIs are trained and educated in different culture and under different circumstances. For them to understand the new approaches it is very important that training and education is part of the human development strategy of the university.

Then the strategy can be developed to enrich the culture and soften the structure to accommodate student experiences.

Projects with European or any other western partners on the topic might also be a good contributor to the development of the notion, which is mostly new to Azerbaijani HEIs. European as well as local universities should start thinking of developing joint projects to broaden the concept of student engagement.

Universities should change culturally and structurally to welcome the idea and start implementing it, I can say as a result.

4. Your idea of wanting to “enrich the culture and soften the structure” is a great way of putting it. It certainly resonates with a lot of our experiences in Scotland where we have not only worked to change attitudes and practices but also tried to help formal processes like committees, surveys and regulations to work in accessible and inclusive ways that properly involve students. Is that the sort of thing you mean by this?

Yes, exactly. Universities need to change attitudes, bring in a new culture of students being the centre, the partner of the process, they need to understand they are the most important figure in the education process: this is done for them and with them. This is about the attitudes of university leadership which need a change (so far, and this is Soviet legacy, the general attitude is that the student is accepted as someone who needs to be told what to do and how he/she needs to learn rather than a partner who needs to be asked what he/she wants and how they want it), a new mindset, and I am deeply sure that this will come only with new, up-to-date, well educated, open minded, in other words ‘internationalized’ university leadership.

The tools you have mentioned - committees, surveys and regulations are very good to implement the idea, if you have one and if you believe that the participants are good enough to contribute. This should come first to Azerbaijani HEIs.

5. You've talked about the institutional challenges and opportunities. Finally, what about at the national level?

At the national level, an external body like the one you have might help a lot, first in providing HEIs with feedback on how they are doing in student engagement, for current and future students to decide if they want to study at this kind of university. Second, providing training or seminars for students and university staff members which will help them to understand what is student engagement, why it is important and necessary for them. An external body playing a role of reviewer of student experiences will effect a positive change in the situation.

There are many models of positive changes, yours is one of them. So there is a way – the only thing left is the willpower in this case.

Thanks to Raziya for being an interviewee. To suggest a future subject for interview, please [contact us](#).

This interview is part of a [series of occasional interviews](#) on our website with student engagement practitioners – both staff and students, and from within Scotland's university and college sector and beyond. The interviews aim to capture the different perspectives that people have on student engagement in the quality of learning.