



Culture &
Creativity

EU-Eastern Partnership Programme

INTERACTIVE & ACCESSIBLE LITERATURE IN AZERBAIJAN

A policy brief for Culture & Creativity
EU-Eastern Partnership Programme

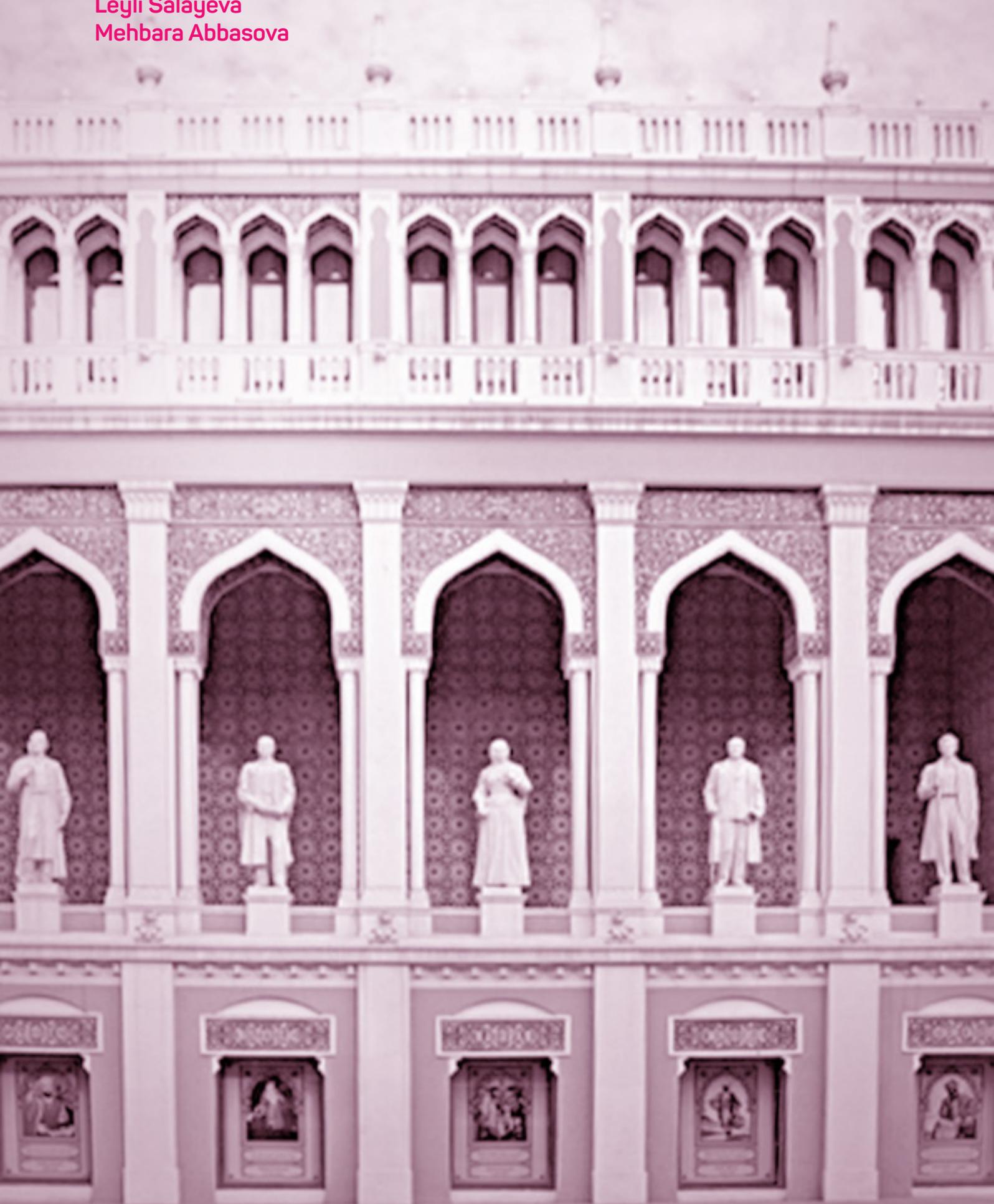
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Executive Summary

With an increased interest in literature, many amateur writers and poets are emerging on the literary scene in Azerbaijan. However the further development of their writing skills is limited as teaching literature is still done only at universities. The main obstacle is that an applicant should have a certain knowledge base and should gain certain score to pass entry exams and to be admitted to a faculty. Also higher education qualifications in literature are available only in four cities in Azerbaijan.

The absence of massive open online courses (MOOCs) or workshops in Azerbaijani creates the risk of disaffecting young amateur writers and this may lead to a loss of potential talent. At the same time a lack of an interactive element in teaching literature may result in the deceleration of the development and modernisation process.

Currently The Nizami Institute of Literature at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences is the main scientific centre advancing the science of literary studies, but all of their studies remain on paper only.

Easy access to MOOCs and their rapid development creates opportunity for Azerbaijan to promote innovation in literature education and to position itself to take a leading role in CIS countries.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Education establishes collaboration between the Nizami Institute of Literature at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences and one of the largest educational technology companies such as Coursera (that offer MOOCs) to create online courses or workshops.

Partnership with MOOCs will also provide excellent opportunities to promote Azerbaijan literature around the world, if translation of the courses into other languages, such as English and Russian is considered.

Introduction

For the past decade the interest in literature has increased in Azerbaijan. This can be evidenced by the number of books published (both in Azerbaijan and abroad) by local writers and poets who write mainly in the Azerbaijani and Russian languages. The young novelist Elchin Safarli and detective novelist Chingiz Abdullayev are vivid examples of local writers achieving international success. One of the main reasons for the increased interest in literature is that Soviet censorship has been removed and writers have gained more freedom in self-expression. At the same time with the rapid development of social networks, it has become easier to get access to public opinion and to promote works.

However these young writers and poets are often amateurs and do not have any support for further developing their writing skills. Their desire to move from an amateur to professional status is difficult as there is no easily accessible and publicly available support system such as workshops or webinars in the Azerbaijani language. Teaching literature is done at universities but only a select few have access due to restrictions and entry requirements.

In Azerbaijan there was always more emphasis on higher education, therefore the idea of designing and conducting public courses or workshops was underdeveloped.

Contemporary education is an agent of modernisation in various forms. Traditionally, the content of education was esoteric and metaphysical; its communication was limited to certain classes. Modern education has a fundamentally different orientation and organisation. Its content is liberal and exoteric.

The aim of this brief is to suggest opportunities for making literature education accessible to all groups of writers, without restrictions, such as age and disability.



Current Situation

Contemporary and general Azerbaijan literature is mainly taught at state universities (Baku State University, Azerbaijan State Pedagogics University, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku Slavic University, Azerbaijan Teachers Institute and Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Art for Bachelor and Master Degrees; The Nizami Institute of Literature at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Science for Master's and PhD) and a few private universities in Baku. In other regions of Azerbaijan, there are only four cities (Sumgayit, Ganja, Nakhchivan and Lenkoran) where literature faculties exist. In order to enter these universities, an applicant is required to have a certain knowledge base in order to pass entry exams. Places are limited and making access to higher education highly competitive. Successful candidates have to therefore pass five subjects (mother language, literature, mathematics, history and foreign language) and gain no less than 500 points (out of 700) in the entrance exams.

Inclusive education faces a number of challenges. Because of infrastructure problems, access to education for people with disabilities is also restricted. Despite extensive construction and improvement over the last 10 years there has been little progress in adapting education buildings for people with disabilities to a sufficiently high enough standard. At the same time public transport is not adapted for people with disabilities. Currently in Azerbaijan there are about 570,000 people with a disability, representing 6% of the total population of Azerbaijan. Of these, 65,000 people – are minors.

There are two major bodies in Azerbaijan that are platforms for writers: The Union of Azerbaijan Writers and The Nizami Institute of Literature at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences. The first body mainly organises discussions on books of emerging and existing writers, and the second body's function is to act as the main scientific centre advancing the science of literary studies. Also some of the museums conduct evenings dedicated to the discussion of works of certain writers or poets.

For this research other electronic sources were reviewed in order to check for the availability of online courses on creative writing and poetry in the Azerbaijani language. None was found.

Creative¹ writing and poetry is a fast-growing field both globally as well as in Azerbaijan. Today's creative writers are enjoying more assignments, thanks to the rise of social media and digital marketing. Companies are developing more online campaigns, corporate blogs, and consumer communities - all of which require in-house or contracted copywriters.

Best practice for making literature interactive and accessible are either through computer based courses or workshops.

¹ There are more writers than ever. In parallel the number of creative writing courses in tertiary education has grown dramatically in the last 20 years across the globe. There are 40 creative writing post-graduate degrees in the UK (the US have about 300), and over 11,000 adult education courses. The Times Higher (Aug 6th, 2004, p.22). 70 universities in Australia offer creative writing courses. (John Dale, *The Conversation*, May 25, 2011)

Options

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are internet-based courses, free of charge, that have incredibly large numbers of students. A typical MOOC has specific start and end dates, a more-or-less defined topic of study, facilitator/s, and assessments. Students watch short video lectures online and complete the assignments that are graded either automatically or by peers.

Easy access to MOOCs and their rapid development create an opportunity for Azerbaijan to promote innovation in literature education and to position itself to take a leading role in CIS countries.

Option 1: There is an opportunity for Azerbaijan Institutions to partner with MOOC companies, and to make literature interactive and accessible

Option 2: To take no further action allowing literature to develop through scholars but without wider distribution.

OPTION 1:

The Nizami Institute of Literature emphasises the importance of Azerbaijani literary studies on the basis of national and universal values in the XXI century. The great scientific traditions and important scientific achievements of the Institute of Literature increase the influence of this scientific research institution ever more. In accordance with the modern development principles and guidelines of the country the Nizami Institute of Literature takes serious efforts to improve its function as the main scientific centre advancing the science of literary studies. However, all of their studies remain in a printed format and are accessible only for scholars. At the same time only two universities in Baku have a faculty of literature.

Some of the largest educational technology companies that offer MOOCs in creative writing are Coursera and FutureLearn. They work with major worldwide universities and other organisations to make some of their courses available online, offering courses in different subjects, including literature. Some MOOCs offer all their courses “accessible for free” some courses have the option to pay a fee to receive verified certificates, appropriate for employment purposes. These students authenticate their course submissions by sending webcam photos and having their typing pattern analysed.

For MOOC students, the benefit is obvious: Instead of paying ever-expanding tuition fees, they can watch high-quality lectures, and be directed to the same reading materials as their in-class peers. MOOCs also provide interactive quizzes and homework help from other online students.

As of 2012 Coursera was reported to have 1.5 million students signed up for its programmes serving at 100 online courses, and 5 million people have signed up to study with FutureLearn in just 3 years. 75% of these learners are based outside of the UK, coming from over 190 countries around the world.

It should be noted that among CIS countries, only Russian Universities are Coursera partners. FutureLearn works with UNESCO, but has no formal partners



in the CIS. None of universities in the Caucasus region are partners with either non-profit organisation.

The below are the seven main criteria that were used to assess this recommendation in order to identify the risks and benefits of choosing this option:

RISKS

Added value: While The Nizami Institute of Literature is already establishing a partnership with Coursera, it should ensure that it does not duplicate other programmes that might be under development at Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic.

Practical Learning - Graduate creative writing programmes are best led by working poets, rather than scholars, as poets have both an academic approach towards the topic and a love of the written word in their on-campus dialogue about poetry and within society in their off-campus dialogue.

BENEFITS

Quality Control – Coursera, for example, employs a robust application and revalidation process developed by computer science professors from Stanford University, which matches or exceeds national standards. Analysis of keystroke dynamics during typing is used in combination with webcam images to confirm the identity of fee-paying “signature track” students during exams and tests.

Access to everyone: Anyone can sign up for a class. You don’t need a degree or previous knowledge to follow a course, only the willingness to learn.

No distance or time constraints: Education will be decentralised (i.e. not only available in Baku) and people in other regions of Azerbaijan will gain access to education. At the same time it gives students an option of learning at their own pace, following their own schedule.

Resources: Working with MOOCs creates opportunities for literature educationalists to share knowledge while compiling a course or workshops and to lead the courses. At the same time if we consider the budgetary crisis, this option provides long-term efficiencies with minimum financial input, as the courses will be digitalised and existing IT application platforms can be used.

Networking - MOOCs bring people together from all over the world and encourage engagement between staff and students. Participants help each other to interpret the material, seek out different or related sources, and use social networking to share their interpretations. Through this distributed learning, participants gain a better understanding of the material and can get immediate feedback if questions arise.

Partnership with MOOCs also provides excellent opportunity to promote Azerbaijan literature around the world, if translation of the courses into other languages, such as English and Russian is considered. At the same time MOOCs can expand their international partnership by including another country - Azerbaijan.

OPTION 2:

If the current situation does not change then there could be the following long-term risks:

- Literature might stop its development and modernisation
- The current and next generation will have a poor knowledge of Azerbaijani literature
- Young amateur writers will not be able to develop the full potential of their talent

As higher education is the only source for creative writing and poetry courses at present, and as the number of students who want and who can afford to enter university is restricted, no change to the current situation might affect literature negatively in general. This is because courses and workshops are an effective platform for establishing a network of writers and communities in which literature, particularly poetry, is discussed. At present this means most students come from Baku. It is preferable to develop such networks across all areas of Azerbaijan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- MOOCS are a good way of reaching people outside the traditional education system in Azerbaijan. This includes people who want to pursue poetry and literature as more than a hobby, older people and people with disabilities, among others.
- The Nizami Institute of Literature can benefit from utilising the latest technological developments, such as MOOC applications. More than share international courses, the institute could develop its own courses and define the quality of the qualification.
- This collaboration is already happening successfully in Russia. The Institute could contact some of them to understand what is required and learn how it benefits the universities.
- By encouraging these studies, Azerbaijanis with a passion for literature can develop into creative professionals. The ability to write poetry is a transferrable skill that can be used in the performing arts, film, TV, publishing, radio, copywriting, advertising and marketing sectors, and therefore can benefit society more widely.
- The partnership with Coursera and other MOOCs will also provide excellent opportunity to promote Azerbaijan literature around the world, if translation of the courses into other languages, such as English and Russian is considered.

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Решетлы дасты

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• Я ВЕРНУСЬ...

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Note

The policy briefs are the result of capacity building work undertaken by the EU-Eastern Partnership Culture and Creativity Programme in 2016-2017 with 240 Programme Associates, who had completed a series of eight workshops in business management for mid-career cultural operators. The purpose of these briefs is to help them additionally understand the role of professionals in providing concise and neutral policy advice in the area of their competence. The task was to identify problems within the sector, provide potential models, options and solutions, support critical thinking, evidence-based policy analysis and the formulation of recommendations. The ideas were developed by the Associates themselves.

The report is developed with the assistance of the EU-Eastern Partnership Culture and Creativity Programme. The content of this report does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the publication lies entirely with the author.



Program Avrupa İttifakı tarafından finanse edilmiştir



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