TWINNING AZERBAIJAN

Support to the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Further Adherence of the Higher Education System to the European Higher Education Area (AZ-ad-EHEA)

**AZ/14/ENP/OT/31**

**EU Short Term Expert Mission Report**

**1. Basic Information**

**Component and Activity:**

Component: 1. Legal and Regulatory

Activity: 1.2 Revisions of the Legislative Framework

**Name of the Expert:** Ms Heli Mattisen

**Dates of the Mission:** 20-24 February 2017

**Contractor:** Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) /

Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)

**2. Relevant Background Information/State of Affairs**

As a result of the previous mission of Activity 1.2 that took place on 7 – 11 November 2016, the STEs Lagle Zobel and Helka Kekäläinen proposed a number of recommendations regarding the new draft of accreditation standards and accreditation rules developed by ANO. Based on the recommendations, ANO drafted new versions of standards and rules which was translated by Twinning office and sent to the STE’s of the Legal Component.

The final version of the Accreditation Rules of Higher Education Institutions (Accreditation Rules) and Standards determining the compliance of the activity of institution with the requirements of state education standards (Accreditation Standards) should be forwarded to the Cabinet of Ministers for approval in March 2017.

**3. Objectives and Tasks of the Mission**

The main objectives of the Mission were:

* Comprehensive discussion of ANO’s regulations in the light of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and identification of areas for improvement
* Formulation of concrete recommendations for the improvement of the drafts of Accreditation Standards and Accreditation Rules.

**4. Time Schedule of the Mission**

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| **Date** | **Activities/Meetings**  BC experts met  (title and institution) | **Remarks** |
| 20.02.2017 | * Meeting of STEs * Kick-off meeting at the MoE, inter alia discussing next steps in developing a new version of State Standards for Higher Education and Statute for Higher Education Institution * Meeting in ANO: meeting with ANO staff, defining main topics for diccussions during the mission   Participants from MoE and ANO: Tofig Ahmadov,Vusala Gurbanova, Aytaj Pashayeva, Tarana Mammadova, Anar Muradov, Elmira Manafova, Marziya Aghayeva, Konul Ibadova  Tofig Musatafayev; STE’s Helka Kekäläinen, Heli Mattisen, Hilla Auren; RTA‘steam | - |
| 21.02.2017 | - Azerbaijan State Economic University:  Meeting with the Rector and the self-evaluation team, briefing of the site visit for the pilot evaluation  Participants: Adalat Ibadov, Shahin Bayramov, Rasim Sharifov; Sevda Hajibayova, Humay Agayeva, Anar Huseynov, Mehriban Maharramova, Afet Jafarova , Reshad Maharramov, Navai Aliyev, İnara Rzayeva, Ulviyya Rasulova, Ragif Gasimov, Mirsahib Eminov, Fatima Aliyeva; ANO: Tofig Ahmadov, Elshan Nuriyev, Tarana Mammadova, Anar Muradov. RTA team, STE’s Helka Kekäläinen, Heli Mattisen, Hilla Auren   * ANO: Discussion of the ANO’s accreditation standards with ANO team.   Participants: Tofig Ahmadov, Elshan Nuriyev, Tarana Mammadova, Anar Muradov, Farida Huseynova; RTA team, STE’s Helka Kekäläinen, Heli Mattisen, Hilla Auren. | - |
| 22.02.2017 | * Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University: Meeting with the Rector and the self-evaluation team, briefing of the site visit for the pilot evaluation   Participants: Jafar Jafarov, Gamar Isayeva, Leyla Aliyeva, Munavvar Rajabova,Konul Asgarova, Farida Huseynova,  Anvar Imanov, Yashar Huseyneliyev, Asef Kazimov, Shahla Ahmadova, Senan Aliyev; ANO: Tofig Ahmadov,  Elshan Nuriyev, Tarana Mammadova, Anar Muradov; RTA team, STE’s Helka Kekäläinen, Heli Mattisen, Hilla Auren.   * Project Steering committee meeting | - |
| 23.02.2017 | * Azerbaijan Technical University: Meeting with the Vice Rector and the self-evaluation team, briefing of the site visit for the pilot evaluation   Participants: Khalig Yahudov, Natig Ahmadov; Ali Khalilov, Elvin Bakhtiyarli, Mammadaslan Guliyev, Mehman Binnatov, Israil Elyazov, Huseyn Mirzayev, Mirzali Seyidzade, Fuad Mammadov, Nilufar Rahimova, Gabil Hashimov, Akif Bakhshiyev, Rafayil Ahmadov, Elchin Rzayev; ANO: Tofig Ahmadov, Konul Ibadova, Tarana Mammadova, Anar Muradov; RTA team, STE’s Helka Kekäläinen, Heli Mattisen, Hilla Auren.   * ANO: Discussion of Accreditations Rules with ANO team.   Participants: Tofig Ahmadov, Elshan Nuriyev, Tarana Mammadova, Anar Murado; RTA team, STE’s Helka Kekäläinen, Heli Mattisen, Hilla Auren. | - |
| 24.02.2017 | * Meeting with Tofig Ahmadov: discussion of further steps regarding accreditations standards and rules as well as organisation of pilot evaluations * Meeting with Emin Emrullayev: agreement on reimbursement of the fee for local experts by the beneficiary * Meeting with Sülhaddin Gozalov and Vusala Gurbanova: study visit to Brussels; information about next missions regarding the roadmap for doctoral education and revision of the new draft of State Standards for Higher Education   Participants: RTA team, STE’s Helka Kekäläinen, Heli Mattisen, Hilla Auren. | - |

**5. Achievement of the Expected Results**

The expected results of the mission were achieved. The new draft of Accreditation Rules and Accreditation Standards, as well as recommendations were discussed. Due to the active participation of ANO, it was possible to critically evaluate the impact and applicability of recommendations.

Remarkable efforts have been made by ANO in reviewing the existing Accreditation Rules and Accreditation Standards. In order to provide further support ANO regarding the improvement of their regulatory framework, we have the following recommendations:

**Regarding the Accreditation Standards**

1. Some positive modifications regarding stakeholder involvement and use of student feedback in updating study programmes, the use of modern teaching materials and creative methods in teaching and learning, as well as a reference to ECTS have been made in the Accreditation Standards regarding part 4 (study programmes).

However, **the concept of learning outcomes has not yet been introduced in the Standards**. According to clause 1.2 of the ESG, institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programs. The programs should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. This should serve the overall objective of student-centred learning established in clause 1.3 of the ESG.

We **strongly recommended** adding to part 4 of the Draft Standard also explicit requirements for learning outcome based programme development as well as assessment of achieved learning outcomes. For example, following criteria could be added / reviewed:

* *(Standard 4) Objectives, intended* ***learning outcomes****, admission and graduation requirements of the programmes* ***are clearly defined****; qualification resulting from the programme is clearly specified, communicated and* ***referred to the appropriate level of the national qualifications framework*** *(Remark: as the AzQF is not approved yet, the European QF or reviewed State Standards of Higher Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan could be referred to)*
* *(Standard 5)Practical work/internship supports the* ***achievement of the learning outcomes*** *of the programme.(in current draft:**Institution shall organize internships for learners)*
* *(Standard 5) Student assessment shall be objective, consistent, transparent and* ***support the achievement of learning outcomes****.(in current draft: Correct, objective and transparent assessment of learners’ knowledge shall correspond to existing rules as well as to the international best practice)*

1. We also **recommend reconsidering some criteria** in the current draft version focused on checking the quantity rather than focusing on the quality of education, *e.g. 2.8. The office work shall be run in line with the requirements of existing legislation; 3.2. Number of employees on the payroll (full-time, part-time etc.), as well as of those working on a substitution and hourly basis and their workload shall correspond to existing norms;*

*6.9. Number of doctoral and dissertation students assigned to one academic supervisor shall correspond to norms* etc. The investment of expert-time requested for checking the fulfilment of the aforementioned requirements will not in balance with the level of potential impact for quality improvement.

1. The inclusion of requirements for **further sustainability of teaching staff** cannot be detected in ANO regulations. It would still be advisable to add this requirement to the Accreditation Standards. The STEs recommended adding to the criteria for teaching staff also requirements for future sustainability. An example might be taken from the Accreditation Manual, which includes a following requirement: *The distribution of full-time teaching staff by age and qualifications facilitates the sustainability of studies in a certain study area.*
2. Current drafts include the definition of accreditation introduced in Education Law. We **recommend** adding to the definition the purpose of improving the quality of higher education in Azerbaijan, as to ANO’s mission statement *– Improve quality in higher education to increase local and international competitiveness of higher education.*

**Regarding the Accreditation Rules**

1. According to clause 3.1 of the revised ESG, the quality assurance activities undertaken by the agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are made available to the stakeholders. At the moment, the object of accreditation is not clear – is institutional accreditation combined with programme accreditation or should all programmes be accredited separately. Due to the voluminous amount of study programs, the current approach (accrediting the institutions together with study programs) does not allow devoting sufficient attention to the overall quality of the programs and thus, remains inevitably formalistic. We **recommend** **clarifying the approach towards combining institutional and programme accreditation during the first period of accreditations** in accreditation rules.
2. As there is still no legal framework regarding the possible use of foreign agencies in the accreditation process, no further developments can be detected regarding the use of foreign agencies in the accreditation process in ANO regulations. Presumably, **changes should first be made on legislative level**. Thus, we **strongly recommend** **including the conditions and procedure for the use of foreign agencies** in the Statute of HEIs and mention this possibility also in the Accreditation Rules. Whether or not to officially recognize the results of any kind of cross-border evaluation is obviously a policy decision for the MoE, i.e. Accreditation Council headed by the Minister. However, we believe that allowing these kinds of activities would create a positive incentive for further internationalization of the HEIs and also ANO. It would also help to disseminate best practices of other agencies.
3. According to clause 3.3 of the ESG, agencies should be independent and act autonomously. This includes organizational and operational independence and independence of formal outcomes. Currently, ANO enjoys a fair amount of operational independence. However, as ANO is a part of the MoE and the final decisions are made by the Accreditation Council chaired by the minister of education, **organizational independence is clearly lacking.**

As soon as the full trust of the Ministry has been gained, we recommend **giving ANO full organizational and operational autonomy** regarding its procedures and formal outcomes of the quality assurance processes. Implementing this recommendation definitely requires some fundamental changes on legislative level.

1. As a remarkable development, changes have been made in clause 6.1 of the Accreditation Rules regarding the election of Accreditation Council on a permanent basis for four years. Although the inclusion of student members in the Council has not been specifically mentioned in the Rules, an explanatory statement has been added to the Rules (although it is not quite clear whether this will also remain in the final version of the Rules). It would still be advisable to **make the inclusion of a student member in the Council obligatory** and also **specify the amount of members in the Council**. We also **recommend defining the proportion of independent experts in the Accreditation Council and agree upon the criteria for their election**. An example of composition rules for the council applied by EKKA can be found [here](http://ekka.archimedes.ee/wp-content/uploads/Formation_Assessment_Council_Appeals_Committee.pdf).

The reviewed principles of election and composition of the Council, including possible limitations, should be included also in the Statute of HEIs.

1. According to clause 2.5 of the ESG, any outcomes or judgments made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision. In other words, to ensure equal and fair treatment of the HEIs, the margin of discretion of the Accreditation Council should be limited by some basic decision-making principles.

A worksheet has been prepared for the Accreditation Commission (in the Final Review of the Accreditation Commission) for determining whether different accreditation areas are in line, partially in line or not in line with the Accreditation Standards.

The Accreditation Rules (see clauses 6.4 – 6.7) give the Accreditation Council an option to make one of three decisions based on the Accreditation Review: to fully accredit the institution/study programme if they meet the standards; to accredit the institution/study programme for 1 year if they partially meet the standards; and not to accredit the institution/study programme if the standards are not met.

However, the principles, pursuant to which the Council determines whether the standards are fully/partially/not met have not been elaborated in the Rules, providing the Council with a very wide margin of discretion in decision-making. In order to ensure equal treatment of all the HEIs and guarantee the consistency and predictability of accreditation results, it would be **advisable to develop some sort of a framework for decision-making for the Council**. E.g, it could be clarified - either in the Accreditation Rules or some other ANO regulation made available to the public - **how the assessments given by the Accreditation Commission to different assessment areas affect the final outcome of accreditation process**.

1. Pursuant to clause 2.4 of the ESG, external quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s). As a very positive development in line with the ESG, the possibility of involving student members as well as foreign experts in the Commission have been added to clause 4.4 of the Accreditation Rules. However, according the ESG, the involvement of a student member in mandatory.
2. According to clause 2.6 of the ESG, full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. According to clause 6.8.1 of the reviewed version of the Accreditation Rules, *the outcome of accreditation of the institution and its separate study programmes is posted on the official homepage of the Office*. This is in line with the recommendation given by the STEs, but **it should be clear that not only the accreditation decisions but also the accreditation reports should be available to the public**.
3. At the moment, **follow-up activities** have not been described in the ANO regulations. If ANO is planning to organize such activities, it would be advisable to consider elaborating this also in the regulations. According to clause 2.3 of the ESG, as a part of implementing process of external QA activities, agencies should have a consistent follow-up process for considering the action taken by the institution.

**6. Unexpected Results**

There were no unexpected results.

**7. Issues Left Open After the Mission**

There were no issues left open after the Mission.

**8. Recommendations for Future Missions**

There are 2 missions left in the Component 1 and it is important that the revision of the State Standards of Higher Education and the Statute of Higher Education Institution planned for the last mission week will and support the development of quality in higher education in Azerbaijan.

**9. Conclusions and General Remarks Concerning the Project**

The sound and constructive cooperation between the higher education department and ANO in developing the legal framework for quality assurance in higher education is crucial.

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**(Date and place) (Signature of Expert)**