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)

Annex to the Mission Report of Activity 2.4. **Steering and Coordinating** by short term experts Mr Kauko Hämäläinen and Mr Rait Toompere

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**STE recommendations to the Ministry of Education and for future missions**

**Recommendations for Future Missions**

**Recommendation 1: Establishing** **a platform or platforms for better networking**

There is a need for Azerbaijan model or models of networking with stakeholders in the field of higher education to develop the level of higher education. There is insufficient communication, networking and coordination within and between the MoE, the HEIs and stakeholders. Better coordination and networking could be helpful in enhancing HE.

Improving communication requires a platform, which could be a permanent coordinating structure between the MoE, the HEIs and stakeholders.

**The tasks of the platform** could be the following:

* **To promote higher education policy and practice e.g.**
  + Mobility and recognition
  + Graduate employability and labor market relevance
  + Learning outcomes
  + Intenal and external evaluations
  + Lifelong learning / professional development
  + Strenghtening involment of stakeholders
* **To support structural changes**, e.g. creating joint study programs and merging universities or programs
* **To support the development of** 
  + (work-oriented) **teaching**,
  + high level and **relevant research** and
  + **innovations**

**Roadmap how to proceed**

The establishment of an electronic Newsletter could be the first step to create a platform. The tasks of a Newsletter can be:

* Improving communication and common uderstanding among the stakeholders
* Uniting into a single information platform all possible parties
* Collecting information in a way, that all participants could have a voice in a Newsletter
* Informing what is in focus at the national and international level
* Informing about financing possibilities
* Identifying the main needs in HE

Successful launch of the Newsletter helps **in creating formalised platform**(s).

Composition of the platform is crucial. It is important to find out all stakeholders of the platform and to define their roles. Together with improving co-operation by a platform, probably there is also need for changes in university system e.g. joint study programmes or merging smaller institutions. It can be difficult to coordinate and develop higher education institutions if they are under the different ministries.

For proper functioning of the platform it`s necessary to compile co-operation agreement (covenant). Cooperation agreement should consist of following parts:

* Platform Mission

Definition of the strategic need, formulation of the strategic goals and ways of achieving strategic goals.

* Platform Objectives and Activities

There should be clear composition of primary objectives and core activities (externally and internally).

Key results have exceptional importance and they should be carefully analysed.

The Agenda setting should be in compliance with the activities and expected results.

* Platform Operations

Together with the composition of the cooperation platform, it is necessary to fix leadership, role and composition of the coordination group. It is a question of ownership and sustainable functioning of the platform. How the coordination group will be formed and how to strive for a balanced representation of network members should be solved transparently.

The first coordination group will be responsible for e.g. drafting the agenda, preparing meetings, keeping the process going on between meetings, alignment with the MoE, information procedures, external and internal communication processes and organising any reflection and follow up in general.

The Coordination Group establishes information flows and communication channels in order to build up and maintain the necessary transparency, participation and trust between network members.

Financing of the cooperation platform, representation, frequency and location are also important to decide.

**Recommendation 2: Establishing Rector´s conference**

Azerbaijan has examples of good practices of cooperation and networking of HEI`s to develop e.g. some special topics, like quality assurance systems, career centers and student mobility. Anyway more systematic networking between HEI´s could be useful for developing national higher education and separate HEI´s.

Rector´s conferences have been working very effectively in many countries. They promote higher education, research and arts by addressing far-reaching, university-related issues. The aim is normally to influence higher education and research policy, and to promote the common interests of universities and closer cooperation between them. They are active also in international co-operation. They have established relationships with European affiliate and umbrella organisations. Also developing the European Higher Education Area is an example of international co-operation. So summary of the tasks is:

* To promote common interests of universities
* To influence higher education and research policy
* To support international co-operation
* To develop the European Higher Education Area to meet European standardsDeclaration of quality (mutual recognition)
* Organizing study-related/scientific conferences, workshops and symposiums

**Roadmap how to proceed**

It could be good to develop one or more rector´s conferences in AZ. The number of them should be decided based on the needs of different kinds of HEIs. In practice it can be motivating for HEIs if they implement their networks by themselves and also pay the expenses from their own budgets. E.g. in Finland both conferences have 2-3 full time experts working for them.

Examples of the tasks of the conferences in AZ can be as follows:

* To provide universities with prerequisites for high-quality, work-oriented higher education as well as research, development and innovation
* to influence and promote higher education policy in AZ
* to promote co-operation between universities
* to promote international cooperation
* to learn good practices from each others

So the conferences can have a role at national and institutional level. They can influence the development the higher education, it´s legislation and regulations, funding and intellectual resources.

Members can be rectors of universities or universities (actual members) and also representatives of university owners (supportive members). Rectors are normally representatives of universities in the meetings.

Network can start at voluntary basis with those who are willing to join and which are under MoE. Their rectors together with representatives from MoE can write the first regulations for it as well as strategy for next 2-4 years. Later they can accept more members.

Regulations should include at least the following topics:

* Purpose of cooperation
* Main functions
* Criteria for membership
* Funding
* Management bodies and structure
* Selection of chairman, vice-chairman, secretariat
* Regular meetings and possible working groups

At the beginning it could be good, if MoE can support new rector´s conferences economically, but later universities could pay a member fee and organize conferences, seminars etc. to collect the money needed for the budget of the networks. How much each member is paying can depend on the size of a university.

Practical networking matters can be overseen by a board (or e.g. executive committee). It can include e.g. the President / Chairman and five other members, who are elected at the annual meeting. The President and other Board members serve a term of two years. (One year can be too short for effective working). Members convene at joint meetings held a few times each year. Board meetings can be hold e.g. once a month or even more often, if something urgent must be prepared.

It is common also to have working groups. In Finland there are working groups in Education, R&D, International Activities, Administration, Finance and Legislation. Various projects and seminars are also organized annually in Finland by the conferences.

**Recommendation 3: Regional cooperation**

Regional cooperation and merging has been a trend in many countries in Europe, Estonia and Denmark being as pioneers from 2005. Many other countries have followed like German, France and Finland. In Finland the government wanted to tackle different performance of Finland's universities in international rankings, compared with the country's top ratings at school level in the Pisa test rankings. E.g. in Estonia mergers have been a way of coping with a demographic decline of young people.

Universities in a same region has started to merge with each other’s or move parts of institution to another structurally or functionally. It is also common that HEI´s create support systems and facilities together (e.g. libraries, ICT-services, student support services and even teaching facilities).

Many HEI´s have also started to divide the programs they are teaching, so that there are not too many similar programs close each other’s in one region. The idea is to concentrate teaching and research into bigger units to enhance the level of teaching and research. So both merging and autonomous institutions working in partnership are examples of trends in European HE.

In some countries universities have been developing cooperation and merging voluntarily, in some countries government has been backing to combine institutions and made the decision. One objective have been to create bigger universities with many study fields and disciplines together. Mergers are also a way of "streamlining" and reducing duplication. One objective has been to support the capacity of HEIs in becoming better in international comparisons.

It is not guaranteed that merging is useful. Bigger universities can gain higher profiles and increase their reputations. One positive example in Finland is Aalto University, which has been going up 50 places in international rankings in a couple of years after merging two universities and part of a third university. Anyway mergers need a lot of time, positive attitude from the institutes and energy to be successful. Saving money should not be the main reason to merge because return on investment takes many years.

**Roadmap how to proceed**

It could be good to think about closer cooperation between universities functioning in same areas in AZ. Functional co-operation can be easiest to implement (common ICT-services, libraries, student services etc.). The objectives can be same as described above. Rector´s conference can be one forum to plan and implement local cooperation.

**Recommendation 4: *Increasing participation in* international cooperation and academic networks**

In parallel with creating local and national cooperation platforms it`s useful to take part in international cooperation and academic networks. Academic life today is marked by cooperation of universities and stakeholders across borders and by the presence of higher education networks of various types and geographic context. Even more, networks are cooperating actively with each other. Cooperation in such a way is a new phenomenon of 21st century and we have big variety of different, mainly non-governmental, international associations in the field of higher education. For example there are associations for universities like European University Association or Coimbra Group.

There are very many thematic networks like Association for Teacher Education in Europe or European Consortium of Innovative Universities. There are very active students networks as European Student`s Forum and European Student`s Union. There are higher education support structures as European Association for International Education (EAIE) and International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) connects institutions financing and promoting international cooperation in the field of higher education.

**Roadmap how to proceed**

We recommend MoE to analyse Azerbaijan needs and situation in the field of international associations in higher education. If necessary MoE can support or recommend universities or students organisations to join some associations.

Student organisations need financial support to participate in international cooperation.

For example during the meeting in ANO (13.07.2016), ANO representatives expressed the need to have better cooperation with students and get more quality input from students side. Cooperation Azerbaijan student organisations with international student organisations could help to improve cooperation at home because international organisations have lot of experience and good practices in different fields.

MoE could also analyse marketing needs of Azerbaijan higher education and be up to date on activities what other countries are doing. Azerbaijan is very progressive country in its international presentation. You have organized many events of World and European importance. Higher education could be also very good reason to promote Azerbaijan as a good study destination together with rich culture, beautiful country and nice people. It`s useful to join regularly EAIE and NAFSA events, what are the World biggest higher education fairs, to get good ideas, join international workshops and ensure large visibility of Azerbaijan higher education.

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

**Results from the Open seminar**

In the Open seminar recommendations above was discussed. Mainly recommendations for a new newsletter and cteation a rectors´ conference was discussed. All participant agreed that it is important to develop both of them. Time seems to be ripe and right to get started. General opinion seemed to be, that universities are stronger together than anole.

The following questions were raised:

* Who are representing universities, only rectors or also other professionals e.g. deans or directors of some units?
* Is participation voluntary or mandatory at the beginning?
* Where will the office be (in a university, in different building e.g.)
* Who decides the focus of the network?
* What can the legal status of the conference be?
* Can stakeholders from industry or from other stakeholder groups be partners in the conference?
* How the new network should be called (association, conference etc.)?

It is good now to go on planning the regulations together with representatives from HEIs. During our next visit the we could analyse and reflect the next version. A new rector´s conference could start in some form already at the beginning of next year. Also the planning of the newsletter could be started in MoE with the help of STEs of this Twinning project.

There were very positive cooperation between representatives from MoE, project organization and STEs. There were clear need to develop networking, especially recrtor´s conference and newsletter mentioned in 8.