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| ***ESG PART 1***  ***STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE*** | **CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS IN AZERBAIJAN** | **PREVIOUS OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS GIVEN ON THE SUBJECT** | **RECOMMENDATIONS BY STEs** |
| ***1.1 Policy for quality assurance*** | Implementation of internal quality assurance in HEIs is in the emerging stage. In some institutions, QA units and a position for a QA manager have been established, ISO standards adopted, etc.  Although there is some evidence of planning and action in the institutions, the whole PDCA cycle has not firmly taken root yet. QA structures and processes still need to be discussed and put in place. |  | * There is need to discuss and have a clearer, common understanding of what internal quality assurance means. * It would be beneficial for institutions to hear experiences of how HEIs in other countries have built up their internal QA systems and processes and learn more about how institutions within the country or internationally can collaborate (by sharing experiences, etc.). |
| ***1.2 Design and approval of the programmes*** | Design of the programmes and curricula follows the state educational standards. Standards are discipline-wise. Standards are prepared by the expert teams appointed by the MoE. The teams consist of representatives of the universities in the academic discipline. The standards are revised on the regular basis. At present system HEIs have a limited authority to design and approve the content of their programmes. | Limited autonomy of Azerbaijani HEIs to design their own programmes. Low involvement of students and other stakeholders in the design of programmes. (Output 7) | * HEIs need to be given more autonomy to decide on the structure and content of their curricula. This is crucial in order to allow them to take more responsibility and ownership for the entire study process in the institution. Such autonomy will also be conducive to the development of internal QA processes in the institutions. There is a need to find a reasonable balance between control exercised by authorities/the state and the autonomy given to HEIs with regard to decision-making on institutional level when it comes to study programmes etc. in a way that is both befitting and beneficial for the institutions with regard to the development of quality assurance system, taking into account the Azerbaijani cultural context, values and present circumstance. * External stakeholders and students also need to be involved more closely with the development of study programmes. However, this is complicated in the situation where the decisions regarding programmes are made outside the institution. |
| ***1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment*** | Teaching process at present time seems to be teacher-centred rather than student-centred. Only the minority of teachers use innovative, interactive and modern methods and technology in the teaching-learning process, although the situation has said to be improved considerably during the last years.  As informed by students, the main methods, in many cases used by the academic staff are 1) lectures, 2) seminars, and 3) report writing.  The current system does not seem to encourage critical thinking of students Also, it was mentioned during the meetings that the present-day students are still very much oriented towards the final outcome – receiving good marks, and not so much the study process itself, i.e. taking true ownership of their studies.  When students are not satisfied with the performance of teachers, they are able to give anonymous feedback on teachers through student surveys carried out in the institution and also turn to the Student Youth Organization in their HEI. However, it could not be established whether this happens in all HEIs.  The outcome of student assessment (grades, achievement of learning outcomes) is given great importance. The assessment of student’s knowledge is part of accreditation procedure.  Time constraints did not allow identifying the methods and criteria for testing and examinations of students and establishing whether the HEIs have formal procedures in place regarding assessment and student complaints. | Variety of teaching/learning methods. Variety and relevance of students’ assessment to be reviewed as the emphasis placed on knowledge testing. (Output 7) | * More attention needs to be given to the inclusion of modern and interactive teaching methods in the teaching-learning process. * In order for students to take an active role for their learning process, it necessitates more openness in communication between teachers and students, willingness to learn on part of the teaching staff, experiment and try out the new, give students to carry out much more independent work (incl. encouraging students to use the libraries) and help students to acquire the knowledge of how to conduct research. * Very much emphasis is placed on achieved learning outcomes (student assessment). It is equally vital to assess the skills and competences that have been acquired during the learning process. It was mentioned during the interviews how students are only oriented towards getting good grades and not in the learning process itself. Yet, the present teaching-learning practices and the accreditation system only seem to reinforce such student behaviour. |
| ***1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification*** | Admission is organised centrally for all who want to enter a higher education institution by Central State Admission Committee. HEIs do not have the autonomy to choose their students. According to the interviews students’ progression is followed by the professors primarily by number of credits achieved and grades earned. Peer tutors (senior students) seem to be in a remarkable role offering guidance for the other students. Certification is regulated on the state-level. | No evidence on the regulation on or functioning of recognition of prior learning (Output 7) | * Systematic collection and use of data on students’ progress is usually seen as a necessary part of internal quality assurance systems of HEIs. It is recommended to focus on this when building up the institutional quality assurance systems. |
| ***1.5 Teaching staff*** | The recruitment of university staff (teachers) takes place through public competition open for all HEIs. Decisions regarding recruitment are made at the level of the institution.  The development of academic staff is the responsibility of each institution.  By law, the recruitment procedure for chairs of departments and deans of faculties differ from other staff: candidates are submitted to a special “search committee”; the committee proposes at least two names/candidates to the rector, and the rector makes the final decision.  During interviews, the importance of qualified staff was emphasised by the universities as well as MoE. It is considered that good results in teaching-learning process very much depend on the highly qualified academic staff. | This standard of ESG has been most positively assessed in Output 7 and regarded as strength. |  |
| ***1.6 Learning resources and student support*** | Learning infrastructure is evaluated as a part of the accreditation process. Textbooks and other study material created by teaching staff seem to play an essential role when assessing teachers’ success in his/her work. |  |  |
| ***1.7 Information management*** | According to Output 7 performance indicators are widely used, yet their scope and accuracy is not clear. There feedback systems are in place at the institutional level, usually for students. | Detailed questions regarding the data used indicated potential gaps in data on/from alumni, employers, in some cases students’ and staff feedback. (Output 7) | * Feedback gathered and used on the level of institutions should cover staff, students, graduates/alumni, employers. |
| ***1.8 Public information*** | In Output 7 this is seen as one of the strengths within the Azerbaijani HEIs. It seems that sufficient information is available on the activities of universities, including the programmes. However, according to the interviews it is not common to publish the results of the self-evaluation. | Highest score in Output 7 survey. |  |
| ***1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of the programmes*** | HEIs have limited academic freedom regarding the design and content of the study programmes and teaching process, which are largely covered by centralized documentation and regulations. Such limitations inhibit institutions to take full ownership and responsibility for innovative design and content and perhaps also take a more active role in communicating their needs to the labour market, since too much is decided on higher levels of authority. However, current accreditation functions as a form of periodic review, but in the sphere of external quality assurance. | Limited autonomy of innovation of programmes. Insufficient communication with stakeholders. | * Involvement of external stakeholders in the regular review of the content of curricula provided that HEIs are given the necessary freedom to design their own programmes in accordance with their specific mission. |
| ***1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance*** | All HEIs in Azerbaijan, regardless of their legal and organizational form, undergo periodical external assessment (accreditation) once in every 5 years (and every 3 years in case an institution has been established by foreigners and/or persons without citizenship; foreign legal entities) by the Ministry of Education. Accreditation process involves both institutional and programme accreditation. | The universities have been critical with regard to the relevance and complexity of the picture provided by quality assurance/accreditation. | * The current system of accreditation that attempts to cover the entire institutional assessment as well as the review of all the study programmes in the institution is very ambitions and needs to be revisited. The accreditation process is extensive for the institution and the accreditation commission and the results of two different types of assessments depend on one single assessment committee. |
| ***ESG PART 2***  ***STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE*** | **CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS IN AZERBAIJAN** | **PREVIOUS OBSERVATIONS DONE & RECOMMENDATIONS GIVEN ON THE SUBJECT** | **RECOMMENDATIONS BY STEs** |
| ***2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance*** | Current accreditation criteria do not directly address the processes related to internal quality assurance or assess their effectiveness | Not all parts of institutions’ systems are included and assessed in the accreditation process (e.g., strategy, process mapping, feedback, evidence and data use, information management). (Output 7) | * It is recommended to clarify in the state-level regulations whether the HEIs are required to have an internal quality assurance system. * It is also recommended to leave some flexibility for the HEIs at the level of a single institution to define the structure and processes included in the internal quality assurance system. |
| ***2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose*** | The mechanism for external quality assurance is the accreditation of HEIs in accordance with the principles laid down in “Rules for accreditation of educational institutions”, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on 28 September 2010. Currently, the Accreditation Unit within the Ministry of Education is responsible for carrying out accreditation of all the HEIs in Azerbaijan regardless of their organizational and legal form.  The external stakeholders’ involvement in the development of current accreditation rules has been very low or almost non-existent.  Accreditation, according to the Education Law, is defined as a procedure to determine and approve the adherence of an educational institution’s activities to the national education standards and its status.  As the present system attempts to assess the entire institution with all of its curricula.  The Action Plan on the *Implementation of the National Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan* (approved by the President in 2015) describes that preparations are under way to revise the current accreditation rules for institutions and study programmes and bring them into accordance with international experience by the MoE during 2016-2017; approving them by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2017; preparation of quality standards and indexes for all stages and levels of education. | There is ambiguity of purpose and objectives of accreditation. QA mechanism is seen as too strict, complicated and demanding. Low interaction with labour market, employers and stakeholders, incl. students in all stages of quality cycle from design through delivery to evaluation. There is no review and improvement strategy or procedure. (Output 7) | * Set a clear purpose for accreditation: Is only institutional accreditation needed or also accreditation of study programmes? If both, how can these be conducted in the best possible way? A wider discussion among various actors (incl. MoE, HEIs, employers etc.) should be initiated. * As the procedure and criteria of accreditation of HEIs is reviewed in the context of the Action Plan, it is advised to involve external stakeholders, such as labour market representatives, students, industry representatives, and consider their views before the adoption of the rules. |
| ***2.3 Implementing processes*** | Processes of accreditation are prescribed in the above mentioned state-level documentation which covers parts carried out by MoE and institution to be accredited.  The implementing processes cover the stages described in ESG.  The system of follow-up activities is not clerarly expressed in current regulations. | Critical comments on formulation of conclusions, appeal and involvement of institution and follow-up (Output 7) | * It is recommended that a clear process of follow-up is designed and introduced in cooperation with representatives of HEIs. |
| ***2.4 Peer-review experts*** | Accreditation commissions consist of members that have the necessary expertise in evaluation of the fields taught in the HEI and who are members of other HEIs, incl. deans or vice-rectors. The no-conflict-of interest is guaranteed by way of not including members who are in contractual relations with the institution under accreditation. Accreditation has been conducted only with local experts, in the Azeri language. Accreditation commissions have very seldom involved representatives of employers; there have been no student members present in the commissions. The number of members in a commission depends on the number of fields/study programmes at the institution. | External experts are seen as competent and well selected; there information missing in their training and instruction; no involvement of employers, stakeholders and students. (Output 7) | * The systematic involvement of employers/professional practitioners and students in the work of accreditation commissions is advisable. * Consider possibilities of including some foreign experts in the commissions in order to increase the international experience of the members and thus bring more of that experience to the HEIs in Azerbaijan – one of the hopes also expressed by the institutions visited. |
| ***2.5 Criteria for outcomes*** | The area indicators and criteria set for the accreditation are specified in the document “Criteria determining the compliance of the activity of an education institution with the requirements of the state education standards”. | Criteria are set and published. (Output 7) | * The document describing the criteria and indicators for accreditation may also need some revision. Some area indicators seem to somewhat overlap, e.g., “organisation of qualification courses for teachers (part of “Staff of institution” area) and “engagement of scientific-pedagogical staff in qualification courses in foreign countries” (under the area of “International cooperation” could be considered combining. The development of educational materials is mentioned in 3 different places in the document. * It could also be pointed out that the current criteria are very quantitative rather than qualitative, not taking into consideration the quality and content. For example, an institution is required – according to the present indicators – to have a certain number of monographs published over the past year per 100 members of the teaching staff (incl. creative works at institutions specialised in art or sports); but not considering whether their content and is appropriate and high quality. |
| ***2.6 Reporting*** | The outcomes of accreditation (expert commission’s report and the accreditation decision of the) are made public on the MoE’s website after the Accreditation Council has made the accreditation decision. Accreditation results are also publicized in the media.  The employers the STEs met were not aware of the accreditation system or accreditation results of HEIs.  The HEI is given an opportunity to review the expert report for its accuracy and submit possible comments within one week. | Involvement of the institution for comments is not clear. (Output 7) | * HEIs should be given more time to familiarise themselves with and comment on the initial expert report in order to fulfil the whole purpose of commenting: it should not only be a formal procedure but be conducive to producing a high-quality report. * Increase the awareness of external stakeholder groups (employers) about the accreditation system, its purpose and results in Azerbaijan.   One way of doing this is to involve employers in accreditation commissions. As the understanding of how employers can impact the content and quality of curricula gradually develops among them, the interest in participating in the accreditation process will also slowly increase. This in turn will boost the collaboration between institutions and the industry. |
| ***2.7 Complaints and appeals*** | The accreditation rules foresee a procedure for appeals. It is specified that an educational institution can appeal against the negative accreditation decision. The appeal is made against the Accreditation Commission. | No evidence in the rules and regulations. (Output 7) | * It must be pointed out that this appears to be a rather uncommon/unusual practice that experts themselves can be sued in the court of law, and it is advisable to revise the current procedure. Instead, the agency or authority who makes the final accreditation decision (in this case the Accreditation Council, the Ministry of Education) should be appealed against. The experts only provide independent expertise at the request of the Ministry and should not be held responsible for the negative proposals for accreditation decisions they make. |