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: 2. Coordination and Networking

Activity: 2.2 Coordination of EHEA Reforms

**Name of the Experts:**

* Mr **Kauko Hämäläinen,** Component Leader, Professor Emeritus, Finland
* Mr **Jouni Kangasniemi,** Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland
* Mr **Rait Toompere,** Archimedes Foundation, Estonia

**Dates of the Mission:** 14-18 March 2016,Baku

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

 Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)

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

This mission (Activity 2.2.) was a continuation of missions 2.1. and 2.5.

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

The objective of the mission activity was to **assess the present institutional set up within the Azerbaijan Ministry of Education and the related institution, based on comparison with best practices in similar administrative set up in EHEA, and recommend improvements for the overall institutional architecture.**

On the first day of the mission, BC Project leader *Emin Amrullayev* and the STEs discussed the objectives of the mission and the main concerns in the higher education system in Azerbaijan. It was said, that the Twinning project as a whole is a good “reality check” for the Ministry to see how they can manage the change needed. Also, it can support the on-going activities already initiated.

Currently, the university sector in Azerbaijan is wide (53 universities). Responsibilities are divided between different sectors. 19 universities operate under the Ministry of Education and 19 under other ministries. There are also 15 private universities.

The following issues were identified in the discussion:

* The number of study places in the universities has not followed the demographic changes in the country. Currently the number of students competing for the seat has been as low as 1,4.
* Student mobility to the neighboring countries and recognition of their degrees obtained is problematic (5 000 students studying in neighboring countries every year).
* Lack of proper exchange of data about the degrees obtained in the universities abroad
* Lack of discussion forums with the stakeholders (e.g. possibility of commenting different documents) and continuity of their involvement to support MoE.
* Roles of different persons inside the ministry (HEI department) were a bit unclear.
* There is a need to simplify the formats of the most important policy reports so that the key outcomes could be disseminated more effectively. (Challenge of using all documents delivered for or prepared by the ministry)
* There is rather weak link between the financing of the higher education and HE policies. Most of the funding is allocated according the student numbers
* There are only about 10 persons working for the HE sector in the Department of Research, Higher Education and Vocational Education – compared to the number of staff the ministry seems to have too many responsibilities to follow up.

RTA *Reijo Aholainen* suggested that quality assurance system is one of the main issues to focus during the week.

**4. Time Schedule of the Mission**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Activities/Meetings**BC experts met (title and institution) | **Remarks** |
| 14.3.2016 | Meeting with the RTA ***Reijo Aholainen*** |  |
|  | Meeting with mr. ***Emin Amrullayev*** - Head of the Department of Education Development programs, ms. ***Vusala Gurbanova*** - Senior Advisor of Science, Higher and Secondary Special Education Department, mr. ***Azad Akhundov*** - Senior Advisor, Science and Higher Education Department  |  |
|  | ST experts meeting: summary of the day/reporting |  |
| 15.3.2016 | Workshop on current institutional arrangements of the support of Bologna process. ***Lala Piriyeva***, Azerbaijan Technical University, Registration and Assessment department, ***Shafag Shahmammadova***, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Department for Curriculum and Quality Control,***Vusala Gurbanova***, Afgan Abdullayev and Tofig Ahmadov MoE***Farida Jafarova,*** Azerbaijan University of Languages, 2 year student (Sabah group),***Nigar Rahmanova***, Azerbaijan University of Languages, 3 year student, philology and journalism faculty |  |
|  | ST experts meeting: summary of the day/reporting |  |
| 16.3. | Workshop on good practices in Finland, Estonia and other EHEA countries. *(Participants listed on a separate list by RTA office)* |  |
|  | ST experts meeting: summary of the day/reporting |  |
| 17.3. | ST experts: Reporting and preparing the recommendations |  |
| 18.3. | Mission review with MoE representatives and with the BC PL team |  |

**5. Achievement of the Expected Results**

Planned action was achieved.

This report is based on interviews of the MoE staff (3 persons), two workshops arranged by the project, and on previous mission reports and background information received. Also, experiences and good practice implementing Bologna process in Estonia and Finland has been used.

**6. Unexpected Results**

Unexpected results were not identified during the mission.

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

Involvement of Erasmus+ Agency in the internationalization of HEIs: Meeting with the Agency could not be arranged during the mission. Also, general information about the funding of universities in AZ would benefit the work of ST experts in the future, when preparing the recommendations.

**8. Recommendations (including recommendation for future missions)**

1. **Issues related to the ministry and stakeholders**
* **Main findings:** There is still a challenge with the organizational settings.It was clear, that the number of staff promoting HEI sector and Bologna process in the Ministry of Education is small and tries to work effectively. In the workshops (during the mission) it became clear that resources need to be used wisely and priority areas of the work need to be identified. A lot of staff’s time is spent on issues with minor impact (such as advising students/parents about study possibilities, advising universities on single issues etc.). A lot of direct requests are sent directly to the ministry. Even issues, where universities have/should have greater responsibility to advise/inform. Division of work between the ministry, universities and external stakeholders remains unclear in several areas of work.
* **Recommendations for MoE:** MoE is recommended to renew the procedures and clarify the responsibilities and delegation of powers in the ministry/Department for Higher Education (e.g. Act on the MoE/ Permanent Secretary’s (Head of the Ministry) Decision on the ‘Work in the Ministry’ or similar decision).
* Bologna process should not be seen as a separate project belonging to few civil servants, but as one of the main policy reforms and areas to work in the Department of Research, Higher Education and Vocational Education.
* Members of the workshop stressed the importance of internal capacity building. To strengthen the knowledge on Bologna process, the following issues should be taken into account: General understanding of Bologna process issues need to be shared between the whole Departement. Ensuring the language skills. Fluency in Azerbaijan and English languages are needed. Summaries of the most important reform reports should be made available in Azerbaijan language, even if it produces some extra work in the beginning.
1. **Co-operation with the stakeholders**
* **Main Findings:** The implementation of the Bologna process into the HEI sector in Azerbaijan is seen as an important reform. It enables full access of Azerbaijan HEIs to international HE co-operation and improves the quality of the higher education sector as a whole. Since that is seen as a top priority at the moment, it became clear that the Ministry should prioritize the areas, where it takes the full responsibility of the process and areas where planning and decision making is delegated to universities or other stakeholders.
* **Recommendations for MoE:** As far as experience from Finland and Estonia can be learned, new discussion and decision making forums and bodies could be considered, even establishing a separate support agency to promote Bologna process. (In Finland [www.cimo.fi](http://www.cimo.fi), and in Estonia [www.archimedes.ee](http://www.archimedes.ee)). The agencies and different working forums have been used regularly to support the work between the ministry and universities (in several fields, not only Bologna process): Annul meetings with the executive group of the universities (especially rectors), Meeting with the vice rectors/deans of the universities on study related issues, Regular meetings with the university rectors confederation, Curriculum development task force and Forums created for targeted priority areas e.g. Teacher Forum to promote quality of teachers work and new opportunities for professional development. e.g In Finland, the current Teacher forum consists of broad variety of representatives/stakeholders from universities, research institutes, labor market organizations, student organizations and ministry personnel. The Chairperson of the Forum is nominated from the university sector, secretarial work is provided from the ministry and participants represent their own organizations. Similar practice could be used when establishing new forums.
1. **Political framework and steering of Bologna process**
* **Main findings:** For implementation of Bologna process in the country there is a need for mapping of all tasks and responsibilities of Bologna process and have a clear distribution of the roles of the stakeholders. It should be clear “who is doing what and when“, and necessary resources should be made available accordingly.
* **Recommendations for the Moe:** Have a holistic and clear picture of Bologna process implementation in Azerbaijan. It is essential to map all tasks and responsibilities and ascertain all necessary parties (stakeholders).The MoE is recommended to compile roadmap for future actions and find out if new resources are needed or re-allocation of resources.
* **Recommendation for future missions:** Planning more trainings and consultations with the aim to raise the visibility and understanding of (complexity of) Bologna process among the stakeholders. (Universities, Study guidance councellors, Student unions, Representatives of working life, researchers, external experts, rectors conferences etc.)
1. **Internationalisation of HE (Mobility, recognition of learning outcomes, ECTS)**
* **Main findings:** Internationalisation of HE in the context of mobility and ECTS is mainly universities responsibility. It easily leads to varied understanding (not a common/shared understanding) of general principles of Bologna process and internationalisation.
* **Recommendation for the MoE:** It is recommended that MoE drafts a up-dated policy document for the implementation of the Bologna process and internationalisation of HE sector. This document should give a central view of what should be done in a near future and where to prioritize the resources. Main subdivisions are follows: 1) Creation of a supporting legal environment (from quality to immigration policy); 2) The internationalisation of teaching (set quantitative and qualitative objectives); 3) The support system for internationalisation.

Drafting special programmes and set- up implementing bodies as following steps are necessary.

* **Recommendations for future missions:** Further consultations and seminars of good practice implementing Bologna and internationalisation.
1. **External evaluations**
* **Main findings:** Up until now, MoE has organized accreditation itself, and accredited 12 HEI´s already during the past two years. Accreditation processes have been implemented effectively with very small resources. Only one person has been responsible for organizing them and the evaluation groups have not been paid anything, even when they are using relatively long time for evaluations. Evaluation teams have been large compared to many European countries and time used for evaluation visits have been longer than in many other countries. The accreditation process has been analyzed in more details in the mission report 2.1.
* Soon to be established Evaluation and Nostrification Department will meet most of the European standards for quality assurance agencies, e.g. the new Department has a legal status, which seems to guarantee the independent and autonomous functioning, The Department regularly publishes reports, it’s resources are adequate. The process of evaluation includes self-evaluations, evaluation visit and public reporting of the results as well as follow-up of the use of recommendations.
* MoE has a clear plan to establish Accreditation and Nostrification Department (AND). It will be attached to the Ministry of Education. The number of staff will be 32 people. The legal expertise and licensing section is developing the regulations of the new Department. Also the structure, staff schedule, financing and budget of the Department etc. will be decided.
* **Recommendations to the MoE:** The new accreditation and recognition department will be relatively big compared to the number of staff of higher education department in MoE. It is good to analyse, if other functions can be united to these two functions, e.g. mobility and ECTS promotion, as is done in Estonia. Now the staff of HE department is so small, that all persons working there are overloaded with work. In many countries MoEs are policy oriented strategical organisations and operational work is done in other organisations under the Ministry (compare e.g. Archimedes in Estonia or CIMO in Finland). Also, Ministry could consider using seconded/temporary staff (university personnel, int’l experts) to share both the information and workload.
* It is important to re-define the role of (AND’s) stakeholders in different phases of evaluations: in negotiation the scope of the evaluation, selection the criteria on which it will be judged, taking part in the evaluation teams, interpreting the results and utilization of the results.
* **General recommendations:** It is good to think, if accreditation is the only form of evaluation. It could also be useful for MoE to organize also other kinds of evaluations like audits of quality assurance systems of HEIs (compare the procedures in Finland) or thematic evaluations of important areas of higher education policy (such as mobility, lifelong-learning, recognition processes etc).
* It is good to evaluate the new department for accreditation and recognition (nostrifications) according the European standards for quality assurance agencies. One good objective can be to try to become an affiliate member of ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance) and then later on apply a full member status. Critical points now seem to be the role of students and other stakeholders in participating in planning, implementing and using the results of accreditations.
1. **Potential conflicts of interests implementing Bologna process**
* **Main finding:** The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan is planning to establish Accreditation and Recognition (Nostrification) Department.
* **Recommendations for the MoE:** Establishing accreditation system, we recommend to follow the standards set in „Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education.“ According to the standards: *“Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence*. *Organizational independence, demonstrated by official documentations that stipulates the independence of the agency`s work from third parties such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organisations.”*
* We recommend to follow Bologna process and establish ENIC centre (<http://www.enic-naric.net/>) to meet the Lisbon recognition convention regulations. ENIC centres are international networks created for facilitating the true and fair recognition of education obtained abroad and for promoting academic and professional mobility. They are evaluating foreign qualifications and diplomas, providing information about foreign HE systems, making qualification assessment according state higher education standards (making recognition proposals), providing information about state higher education system for international use.
* The use of the concept of “Nostrification” is not widely used in European context. We would recommend using the term recognition instead of nostrification, in the future.
* **Recommendations for future mission:** Further consultations are needed
1. **Internal Quality Assurance**
* **Main findings:** There are more and more examples of promising practices in HEIs in Azerbaijan in developing quality assurance system, but according experiences from other countries it takes many years to develop useful QA system for an institution. Same situation is also in Azerbaijan. According to an international evaluation there is still lack of quality culture in HEIs and real QA systems are not yet fully functioning in Azerbaijan. Management of quality work must be developed, quality of teacher – student relations and connections to working life as parts of QA work need also improvement.
* **Recommendations for the MoE:** Evaluation of quality systems can be part of accreditation. There are good examples of standards for quality systems in some countries (e.g. in Finland), which can be modified to the use of HEIs in Azerbaijan.
* In the workshop, it was proposed that training courses for people responsible of QA systems in universities should be organized. Also, international experiences (from Finland and Estonia) could be distributed in the same occassions. The Twinning project could help Ministry in organizing these training courses.
* More targeted training programs on ‘Bologna issues’ should be created for persons working in Quality Assurance Units in the different universities.
* Voluntary networking between the QA Units could help sharing good practice between the universities. Ministry of Education could activate and encourage the universities to be active in forming the networks.
1. **Bologna activities and Erasmus+ agency cooperation**
* **Main findings:** The ST experts had limited knowledge on Azerbaijan Erasmus+ agency and it’s activities. Therefore, recommendations below, are based on experience from other countries.
* **Recommendations for the MoE:** When planning further national activities, it`s good to map all possibilities in a frame of Erasmus+ now and in the future. HE quality improvement (quality and better competitive advantage) is a key factor. For measuring of quality improvement it is needed to set up proper set of indicators. In Estonia, special programmes supporting teaching quality and educational sciences in universities are in use. Special attention is being paid in improving the efficiency and quality of doctoral studies and increasing the number of specialists holding PhDs in all sectors of the economy. Each doctoral graduate will have spent at least one semester studying abroad. There should be clear picture what kind of opportunities students, staff and trainees in HE have and what kind of information needs to be shared. Also, what kind of cooperation is possible between HE institutions, research and business organisations within Azerbaijan and internationally.
* ECTS is a critical point for student mobility. Therefore, it is important to have a common framework for implementing ECTS. Good example to promote this could be ‘Erasmus+ Learning Agreement’ model, where all parties agree on conditions and how learning outcomes are recognised in student mobility programmes, within and between the universities, so that studies/credits obtained abroad/other universities can be included in the degree programme (at student’s home university).
* **Recommendation for future missions.** Future missions could help in setting national priorities and in mapping possibilities for future cooperation between Erasmus+ agency and MoE.
1. **Support for student mobility and general communication**
* **Main findings:** A lot of students are studying abroad, especially in the neighboring countries. Student mobility between universities in Azerbaijan is relatively small. Also, International and already established exchange programs (Erasmus) could be used much more actively between the neighboring countries and EU countries.
* **Recommendations.** It would be useful to produce a brochure for the universities to clarify the aims, different elements and working areas of Bologna process. The brochure could then be delivered to the universities (e.g. “*Bologna Process in short”*). Other materials should be prepared, collected, linked and made easily available through ministry’s (or relevant body’s) web page (National EHEA/Bologna website).



**Picture 1:** Web page on Bologna process, *Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland*



**Picture 2:** National EHEA website of *www.Archimedes.ee.* See also *www.CIMO.fi*

* National Erasmus+ Agency has an important role to inform about Bologna process and assist the Ministry in doing so.
* For the Ministry of Education and to wider international audience, it would be useful if the Ministry would prepare a document describing the higher education sector in Azerbaijan and universities/programs available. E.g. in Finland a small booklet “Higher Education in Finland (currently 2015-2016) is prepared every two years. The booklet consists of the following sections:
	+ 1. Why to study in Finland (info for students/parents) (1 pg.)
	+ 2. Short description of the Higher education sectror and structure of (Finnish) Education System (2 pg)
	+ 3. Short presentation of all universities (and universities of applied sciences) (0,5-1 pg each), consisting of information about its location, size, facilities, fields of education, bachelor’s and master’s degree programmes taught in other language than Azerbaijan), international activities and areas of specialization and possible status (accreditation/private/public etc.). Address to the institutes web page.
	+ 4. Summary of Fields of study/institutions and degree programs offered for foreign students/locals. (a copy of the Finnish booklet will be provided
* **Recommendation for next mission:** Quality agreement between Azerbaijani universities could be a good starting point for recognition of learning outcomes in different universities. Willingness to prepare such an agreement should be explored. Good practice from Estonia: Universities have made together an agreement on supporting the quality in HE. We would recommend a similar co-operation to take place also in Azerbaijan: <http://www.ern.ee/index.php/en/quality-agreement>

