ANNEX II

**Component 4: Standards and Guidelines for QA in Higher Education**

**Activity 4.6: Analysis of the Pilots 5-9 June 2017**

**Recommendations for further activities of ANO supporting the implementation of an EHEA compatible QA system in Azerbaijan**

1. **The Assessment Criteria**

* The key terms in the Accreditation Manual (e.g the Quality Assurance system) need to be explained more so that everyone involved in the evaluations can have a joint understanding.
* According to the international experts, the number of sub-criteria under the assessment criteria is far to high. However, which of these criteria need to be removed or merged, needs further discussion. The number of sub-criteria under different criteria should be balanced out more (under some criteria there are currently 5 or 6 sub-criteria, whereas under others there are as much as 8 or 9), as within the timeframe given, it was difficult for the experts to get information about all the criteria. On the other hand, the university representatives found all the criteria to be very important. It is important to eliminate all possible overlapping between the criteria.
* The pilot universities suggested that the criteria should be graded in a more measurable way instead of „conforming“/“not conforming“, e.g in percentages. However, each criteria might have its strengths and weakesses and measuring them in such a strict manner might reduce the overall anaytical quality of the report.
* It is very important to make sure that all the stakeholders can understand the assessment criteria in a uniform way. ANO has to remember that criteria has to be applicable to all kinds of universities specialized in humanities, social sciences, law, etc.
* The universities suggested to highlight as separate assessment areas the professional development of staff (in-house training) and the cooperation between universities and the industry/labour market. However, these topics are already covered by the existing assessment areas.
* Maybe there could be some sort of a „free assessment area“ that ANO and the HEI could decide upon together – one optional evaluation area on which the HEI could get some enhancement-based feedback.

1. **Self-evaluation**

* It is highly recommended to provide public self-evaluation trainings to HEIs in order to raise their capacity in how to conduct SER on an institutional level. ANO could take responsibility for that. Also, institutions themselves could appoint external experts as „critical friends“ for consulting purposes. Institutions could also benefit from benchmarking with previous self-evaluation reports.

ANO is advised to apply a road map approach to development of self-evaluation capacity of the HEIs. For the coming years it is necessary to provide concise support for the HEIs in this matter, but it might be possible to increase the level of autonomy in self-evaluation process later in future, when the institutional capacity has reach the more mature level.

* Before sending the SER to the expert panel, it should be checked whether 1) all the areas are covered, 2) all requirements set for SER are met, 3) additional data are there, and 4) the report is clear for readers. A balance has to be struck by ANO not to influence the content of the report but make sure it gives all information necessary for assessment. One option would be to include the requirements towards SER in the assessment criteria to be fulfilled as a prerequisite before checking other assessment areas. It is important to keep one eye on the ESG and the other on the local context.
* As there were some differences between the institutions how they organized the SER process internally, there were some challenges reaching the right persons and getting their input. Therefore, it is recommended to introduce some guidelines regarding the organization of the process in a HEI.
* More background data (statistical data) is needed for evaluations.Various factual information should be included as annexes (e.g job descriptions). However, appropriate context should be provided for the quantitative data. It is recommended to always provide in the SERs very general background data regarding the finances, students, teaching staff. Similar information about every single university should be available to the panels.

Another recommendation is that he institution itself should have some targets for different assessment areas (e.g student numbers). Some it could also be quantitative indicatiors about reaching targets in certain areas which should be supported by data in appendixes. Which kind of targets should be added to whic areas, should be elaborated by ANO. The data should then be analysed and connected to the targets. Standardized indicators could be used in the process (dropout rate, applications per study place). Information important of institutions’ point of view should be included.

1. **Composition of panels and training**

* The foreign members of the panel pointed out that they would need some more information on the local HE system. Therefore, it is recommended to have mixed teams of both foreign and local experts.
* It is suggested to adopte a code of ethics for experts: ANO should establish selection criteria for the best available experts to provide objectivity (there should be a mechanism for conflict of interest) before the evaluation process.
* As it is a very important requirement of the ESG to have a student on the evaluation panel, it is the task of ANO to find the students interested in the external evaluation process and also allocate appropriate resources for their training. Also, the need of a student perspective and the importance of the role of the student in a team should be better explained in the process. Very active cooperation with student unions is suggested to build up joint understanding of the whole assessment system.
* It is highly recommended to consider including the labor market representative in the panel. It is necessary to build trust between the society and the university. ANO should start working into the direction of involving the labor market representatives in the process.
* It is very important to have at least as the chair to the panel an international expert who can demonstrate new skills and provide a learning experience for local experts.

It is also recommended to hire international trainers to train ANO experts.

* When ANO succeeds in adopting new accreditation standards, it is important to communicate with different stakeholders to dissaminate information about the new standards.

1. **The site visit**

* Regarding the whole evaluation process:
* the timeframe (from the compilation of SER to writing the report) could be reconsidered: whether there should be more time for writing the report/submitting comments by the HEIs. ANO should thinking this through quite carefully: agreeing on the dates of the visit, submitting the report, deadlines/timelines should be in place.
* It could be good to have the role and tasks of the Project Managers set out in some kind of format so that it would be also clear to them – e.g, should they take notes during site visit, how much are they allowed to interfere with writing the report, etc.
* It is important to have one contact person in the HEI in order during the whole evaluation process in to ensure the continuity of the process.
* Before the site visit:
* It is crucial to have a detailed visit schedule ready well before the site visit. It is also important to get all the names of the interwiees before the site visit so that the team could check whether they shall meet all the necessary people.
* In the future, in order to improve that everything in the institution is well understood and prepared in time, the Project Manager could maybe meet/talk to the contact person before the visit so that everything is coordinated. Guidelines should be in place how to prepare for the visit. Also, all the people who come to the interviews could be informed about the panel members.
* During the site visit:
* Deep consideration should be given to how much time should be allocated to see the facilities and have a tour of the institution.
* If necessary, it is suggested to have a meeting at the end of the visit to clarify some issues that remained unclear, depending on the topic.
* It could also be considered to aski feedback right after the visit about the panel members and performance of the experts. This would also be useful feedback for the agency in deciding whether to use these experts again.
* As a general remark, it was suggested that EKKA and FINEEC could maybe support this new evaluation process in Azerbaijan at the beginning to make sure it starts successfully.

1. **The report**

* Although the Manual seems to provide enough information, more guidelines are needed for the experts how to write the report – e.g, what is the expected level of detail, in what style the report should be written and what kind of background information is needed. It is of essence that all the reports are written in a consistent manner.
* It is recommended to develop a method/toolkit to help the Project Manager how to work in different situations for the teams.
* The evaluation reports should also be public in the future, discussed in the universities and also with the whole sector. It is important for ANO to spread the knowledge system-wide, organize seminars, meta-analyses.
* There should be given clear guidelines to the institutions how to comment on the reports.
* After the committee receives the comments and decides which ones to consider, there could be a cover letter why some comments have/haven’t been accepted.
* It would be useful for ANO to follow up on its own activities, e.g conduct a their metasynthesis on their own operations and develop their own actions, as this is a requirement of the new ESG.