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: 2.3 Roadmap for Institutional Arrangements

**Name of the Experts:** Prof. Kauko Hämäläinen

Director Rait Toompere

**Dates of the Mission:** 11-15 July 2016

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

Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)

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

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

The objective of the activity 2.3 (Roadmap for institutional Arrangements) is to assess the present institutional set up within the MoE and in the related institution, based on comparison with best practices in similar administrative set up in EHEA, and recommend improvements for the overall institutional architecture.

In the first meeting with the Moe representatives and Reijo Aholainen the objective of the mission was defined to start to plan a platform for better communication with HEI´s, different stakeholders and MoE. The development and finalizing the planning of a platform will go on in the next two missions of experts.

During the first meeting Rait Toompere presented, how services for HEI`s are organized in Estonia in the Archimedes Foundation. Kauko Hämäläinen presented the work of Finnish Education Evaluation Centre. The objective was to present different practices in both countries and analyze, which of them are potentially good practices to think about in Azerbaijan. The organizations in Estonia and Finland are very special in a way, that Archimedes is combining many kinds of student services and evaluations and in Finland FINEEC has combined the evaluations of all levels of education (from kindergartens to higher education) to the same organization.

In the discussions with Reijo Aholainen the main objective of the mission is to organize seminars for Erasmus+ and EHEA experts and representatives of the HEI´s and MoE to present good practices from Finland and Estonia and to plan possibilities and means of networking in this area.

**4. Time Schedule of the Mission**

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| **Date** | **Activities/Meetings**  BC experts met  (title and institution) | **Remarks** |
| 11.7 | Meeting with 5 representatives from the MoE, in MoE | Very positive attitude for new ideas and experiences from other countries. |
| 12.7 | Workshop on Insitutional building, in MoE, Erasmus+ and EHEA experts from MoE and HEI´s |  |
| 13.7 | Workshop in AHO, all personnel, Meeting with representatives from MoE | Eager group to develop the new organisation |
| 14,7 | Planning the platform, Open seminar on networking | Very big number of high level participants, about 50 persons |
| 15.7 | Writing report and reporting ited |  |

**5. Achievement of the Expected Results**

Seminars, a workshop and meetings with MoE experts was organized as planned.

**6. Unexpected Results**

Accreditation and recognition were not the main focus of our mission, but they are anyway important partners for HEI´s. We had possibility to visit the new Accreditation and Notrification Center. We told our experiences from Finland and Estonia, how we started to create evaluation and recognition functions. They have now six persons working full time for the unit. The final number at the beginning will be 12. From our experience it is a proper number of professionals to create and implement a well-functioning system. E.g FINHEEC started with six persons and it has been growing gradually and number of staff is about 10, who are working for HE.

ANO is using as starting point the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. This is a procedure, which can be strongly supported. ANO has just started to develop their accreditation system, e.g. evaluation criteria’s and standards, training of evaluators, possible international cooperation.

The personnel of ANO is very willing to ask comments of their evaluation model, when it is ready and translated into English. This Twinning-project can be one good forum to help them finalize the evaluations manuals.

In the future there are many interesting questions for ANO to think about and solve:

- What is the role of accreditation in developing HE in AZ based on up-to-date evaluation information? What are the central problems HE system is meeting in society and are evaluations really concentrating in societally important and critical themes?

- Is accreditation alone enough to support MoE in decision-making or are other forms of evaluation needed?

- Which are the most effective ways to disseminate evaluation results?

- How ANO can support HEI`s in developing useful and effective quality management systems in HEI´s?

- How to combine internal and external evaluations?

- What kind of international cooperation and networking could be useful and possible?

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

The following questions came out during the final discussion in the end of this Mission:

How students unions can work more effectively in networks to support higher education development? The project could bring good examples from Finland and Estonia to demonstrate good practices.

During the rest of the projects practical examples of support services organized jointly together with different HEIs could be demonstrated.

Who has responsibility to initiate new networks and what could be the first steps?

What MoE can do to improve the visibility in communication with HEIs? How to build a trust between MoE and universities?

During the mission we described good practices of networking. There have been also critical points in implementing them. In the following missions it can be interesting to describe them in order to try to avoid them.

**8. Recommendations for Future Missions**

This was the first mission in trying to develop communication and networking between universities, stakeholders and MoE. During this mission we informed experiences from Finland and Estonia in creating organizations for evaluations, international cooperation, recognitions and other relevant services connected to the Bologna process. Also the creation of platforms for cooperation was started. The structure and process how to proceed was planned.

**Main findings 1: Need of a platform for networking**

During the meeting with MoE representatives (13.07.2016), they stressed a need for more cooperation in different levels. There is insufficient communication, networking and coordination within and between the MoE, the HEIs and stakeholders. There is a need for enhancing coordination and networking.

Improving communication requires a platform, permanent coordinating structure between the MoE, the HEIs and stakeholders. Summing up the MoE representatives opinion there is a need for Azerbaijan model or models of networking with stakeholders in the field of higher education.

**Recommendations for MoE**: 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:

* Network 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.

* Network 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.

**Main findings 2: Rector´s conference**

There are in AZ some 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.

E.g. in Finland two rector´s conferences have been working very effectively, one for universities (15 members), one for universities for applied sciences (18 members). They promote higher education, research and arts by addressing far-reaching, university-related issues. The aim is to influence the Finnish 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 actively established relationships with European affiliate and umbrella organisations. Also developing the European Higher Education Area is an example of international co-operation.

**Recommendation**

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 HEI´s. In practice it can be motivating for HEI´s 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.

The tasks of the conferences can be as follows (based on Finnish experiences):

* to influence and promote higher education policy in AZ
* to promote co-operation between universities and exerts influence on the international stage
* to provide universities with prerequisites for high-quality, work-oriented higher education as well as research, development and innovation.

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 (actual members) and also representatives of university owners (supportive members).

Practical networking matters can be overseen by a board (or e.g. executive committee). In Finland it is comprised of the President and five other members, who are elected at the annual meeting. The President and other Board members serve a term of two years. Members convene at joint meetings held a few times each year. Board meetings are generally held once a month. 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.

**Main findings 3: Regional cooperation**

There are plenty of HEI´s in AZ compared to the number of population. Majority of them are in Baku. In some countries like Finland 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). Regional cooperation and merging has been a trend in many countries in Europe, Estonia and Denmark being as pioneers from 2005 and many other countries have followed like German, France and Finland.

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. 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

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.

**Recommendation**

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.

**Main finding 4: 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.

**Recommendation**

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.

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.

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

**Testing the proposals for networking and platforms:**

**Open seminar on “Networking universities and cooperation with stakeholders”** took place on Thursday, 14.07.2016 at 14-17 in the University of Oil and Industry.

Main objective of the seminar was to analyse the needs for cooperation and networking and to facilitate the preparation of a medium term work plan/roadmap for improving coordination and networking within and between Azerbaijan higher education institutions and with their stakeholders and the Ministry of education. The seminar was attended more than fifty participants from different universities.

The moderator of the seminar Mr. Sülhaddin Gozalov from Ministry of Education held an opening speech, where he stressed the need for deeper cooperation and gave some examples. Professor Kauko Hämälainen gave a presentation of “Networking between universities and cooperation with working life” and gave examples of good practices in Finland. Mr. Rait Toompere spoke about “Networking between universities and international cooperation”. He described how various is today international cooperation between higher education institutions and stakeholders. He described the four proposals mentioned in chapter 7 above and also a methodology how to establish cooperation platform.

After some spontaneous speeches from audience, questions for working groups were presented by the representative of the Ministry of Education, Mr. Sülhaddin Gozalov:

1. Please think about Azerbaijani model for networking and cooperation with stakeholders
2. What kind of problems may arise with the implementation of this model?
3. What are the expectations from the MoE, HEIs and labor market?
4. Is there any need for change in legislation?
5. How university management shall be changed to make the above-mentioned model work?
6. Is there a need for establishment of a new body? What kind of body it shall be?

There was brainstorming according questions in small groups to get ideas and visions from audience. Feedback was given from seven working groups. Feedback varied in content and details, but all working groups agreed, that networking is essential. Further efforts are needed to meet society challenges. Several speakers stressed a need for deeper and effective cooperation between universities and business life. There are many big national problems in HE, which could be tried to solve with better cooperation.

Even there was clear need for developing cooperation and networking, there were different opinions e.g. what should be the combination of rectors conferences. Some participants proposed that they should be based on disciplines or study fields, like medicine, technical studies and education. Also there can be big differences of the needs of small and poor universities and big and well-functioning institutes. Some people doubted, what can be the role of networking in a situation, when there are hard competition between universities.

Working groups gave written feedback from results of the discussions to the MoE representatives for further analyses. According to questions and open seminar results there is a need during the next missions to make next steps to achieve concrete results. During next visits the content and implementation of the platform should be planned together with local authorities.

At the beginning it can be best, that MoE is active in creating and starting new networks, otherwise nothing happens. During the next two mission it can be clarified, how this can happen in practice.

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