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: 4. Standards and Guidelines for QA in HE

Activity: 4.4 Fostering the Self-Evaluation Capacity

**Name of the Expert:** Ms Kirsi Hiltunen, Ms Hannele Keränen

**Dates of the Mission:** 26-30 September 2016

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

 Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)

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

International cooperation in quality assurance has been an essential element of the Bologna process aiming to create a European Higher Education Area. A central tool in this work has been the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Twinning project offers the opportunity for applying the ESG in Azerbaijani higher education. One of the mandatory results of the project is to develop Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Azerbaijan (AzSG) in line with the ESG and test them with three higher education institutions.

A Drafting Group was appointed by the Ministry of Education in April 2016 to work on a proposal for the Azerbaijani Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The drafting group consisted of representatives from Azerbaijani universities, the Ministry of Education and students as well as Finnish and Estonian experts. The Accreditation and Nostrification Office also joined in the work of the drafting group. Based on the ESG, taking into account the National Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan, interviews in previous missions and discussions with different stakeholders, the first proposal for AzSG (including the description of the overall framework, the evaluation process, assessment areas and criteria) was drafted.

The main aims of the pilot evaluations were also set: to support the strategic management of institutions, to provide external feedback to the institutions’ own internal quality assurance procedures as well as to inform internal and external stakeholders of the compliance of the institutions’ quality assurance with the ESG. The pilot evaluations will have an institutional approach with the focus on teaching and learning. The evaluation report will provide pilot institutions with information regarding their strengths and good practices as well as recommendations for institutions’ further development.

The first draft of the manual was discussed with the Advisory Group in a seminar on 1 June 2016. After the discussion, the Twinning Office published the draft on its website in order to get written feedback on the assessment areas and criteria. The feedback was considered by STEs and other relevant actors in August, and necessary amendments were made on the manual. It was concluded that as the enhancement-oriented approach is new for Azerbaijani higher education institutions, there is a need for further seminars and trainings which will be provided for the pilot institutions in autumn 2016.

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

The aim of the Component 4 is to develop Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in higher education in Azerbaijan in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and test them in three higher education institutions. The objective of the Activity 4.4 is to support the capacity to conduct a self-evaluation for the external evaluation in the pilot institutions. In accordance with the needs expressed in former missions, another objective of the mission is to support the capacity of the pilot institutions to develop their internal quality assurance.

**4. Time Schedule of the Mission**

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| **Date** | **Activities/Meetings**BC experts met (title and institution) | **Remarks** |
| 26.9.2016 | Preparatory meeting: STEs Kirsi Hiltunen, Hannele Keränen, RTA Reijo AholainenPreparation for the trainings | Preparation for the trainings and other organisational needs  |
| 27.9.2016 | STEs Kirsi Hiltunen and Hannele KeränenRTA Reijo Aholainen, Language Assistant Tarlan Arzumanov, RTA Counterpart Tofig Ahmadov List of the participants of the university in the annexTraining at Azerbaijan Technical University- Introduction to AzSG- Evaluation process for the pilot evaluations- Foundation for self-evaluation- Developing internal quality assurance in a university- Examples of good practice from Finland | Training to support the capacity to conduct a self-evaluation for the external evaluation and to develop internal quality assurance in the pilot institution |
| 28.9.2016 | STEs Kirsi Hiltunen and Hannele KeränenRTA Reijo Aholainen, Language Assistant Tarlan Arzumanov, RTA Counterpart Tofig Ahmadov List of the participants of the university in the annexTraining at Azerbaijan State Economic University- Introduction to AzSG- Evaluation process for the pilot evaluations- Foundation for self-evaluation- Developing internal quality assurance in a university- Examples of good practice from Finland | Training to support the capacity to conduct a self-evaluation for the external evaluation and to develop internal quality assurance in the pilot institution |
| 29.9.2016 | STEs Kirsi Hiltunen and Hannele KeränenRTA Reijo Aholainen, Language Assistant Tarlan Arzumanov, RTA Counterpart Tofig Ahmadov List of the participants of the university in the annexTraining at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University- Introduction to AzSG- Evaluation process for the pilot evaluations- Foundation for self-evaluation- Developing internal quality assurance in a university- Examples of good practice from Finland | Training to support the capacity to conduct a self-evaluation for the external evaluation and to develop internal quality assurance in the pilot institution |
| 30.9.2016 | STEs Kirsi Hiltunen and Hannele KeränenRTA Reijo Aholainen, Language Assistant Tarlan ArzumanovMeeting with Tofig Ahmadov, Zahra Jafarova and Sulhaddin Gozelov | Reporting on the mission, meeting with counterparts |

**5. Achievement of the Expected Results**

Three trainings were held according to the plan at Azerbaijan Technical University, Azerbaijan State Economic University and Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University. The trainings consisted of an introduction to AzSG and evaluation process for the pilot evaluations, foundation for self-evaluation and examples of developing internal quality assurance in Finnish higher education institutions. Good practices from Finland were also introduced by STEs and discussed with the participants.

There were approximately 20 participants in each training. The participants wanted to know more about the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Azerbaijan and they asked a lot of questions related to the assessment areas and criteria, the composition and operating principles of the evaluation group and materials related to the evaluation. The participants were also given a group assignment related to how to organize the self-evaluation process and who to involve in the self-evaluation process in the University in question. Through this assignment the participants got acquainted with the new AzSG.

STEs gave a detailed introduction to the overall framework of the AzSG, the aims of the pilot evaluations and the evaluation process as a whole (the composition and the code of ethics of the evaluation group, self-evaluation report and other material required from the institutions, site visit and the evaluation report). STEs and participants had lively discussions on the aims the pilot evaluations, the assessment areas and the criteria, and the composition of the evaluation group. Some participants voiced their concerns whether specific features in the Azerbaijani Higher Education System would be taken into consideration by the evaluation groups in the pilot evaluations. The STEs explained that in each evaluation group there will be three Azerbaijani experts with good knowledge of the Azerbaijani context. Furthermore, all evaluation groups will be trained by the Twinning project team.

The main aim of the trainings was to foster the capacity to conduct a self-evaluation for the external evaluation. The STEs asked participants to share their prior experiences and benefits of self-evaluations. Participants were able to recognize the advantages of self-evaluations. They also presented various forms of self-evaluation and mechanisms they have in place at the moment for both internal and external quality assurance. For instance, they provided examples of the mechanisms for collecting student feedback, after which there was a discussion on how to utilize the feedback in order to develop degree programmes. Yet the STEs got the impression that there might be some challenges in producing a reflective self-evaluation. STEs emphasized that in accordance with the principles of enhancement-oriented evaluation strengths and good practices will be identified in addition to providing recommendations for further development in the pilot evaluations.

Participants were also given some examples of internal quality assurance in Finnish higher education institutions. This triggered a lively discussion on the meaning of internal quality assurance. The importance of strategic planning and management (assessment areas I Strategic Planning and II Management) were highlighted and participants were given examples of internal quality assurance related to these assessment areas. Internal quality assurance related to the assessment areas III Human Resources, IV Study Programmes and their development, and V Students was also discussed. STEs also clarified that in the pilots the focus is on the processes and procedures to ensure and improve the quality of institution’s operations, and therefore there will not be for example tests for students.

STEs pointed out that when a higher education institution has more autonomy over the study programmes and their development, the more sophisticated internal quality assurance procedures and processes are needed. Increased autonomy also requires a paradigm change from external control to internal empowerment, adopting the principles of continuous improvement (such as implementing the plan-do-check-act cycle) and involving the key stakeholders, such as employees, students and external stakeholders, in continuous development. This paradigm change may take up from 5 to 7 years and requires commitment to the principles of enhancement-oriented evaluation.

Based on the trainings, the STEs noticed that there are different understandings of the purpose of external evaluations. There is also a need to enhance the capacity of internal quality assurance in the pilot institutions.

**6. Unexpected Results**

There was great interest among some participants of the trainings to participate in the pilot evaluations as Azerbaijani members in the evaluation groups.

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

No issues were left open after the mission.

**8. Recommendations for Future Missions**

1) FINEEC’s and EKKA’s Project Managers for the pilot evaluations should be appointed.

2) Pilot universities’ Contact Persons for the pilot evaluations should be appointed.

3) Evaluation groups for the pilot evaluations should be appointed.

4) Timetable for the pilot evaluations should be agreed with the pilot universities. The most urgent issue is to agree with the pilot universities when the site visits will take place in spring 2017.

5) Further discussions on the assessment areas and criteria as well as the principles of continuous improvement are needed with the pilot institutions.

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

Component 4 is labour intensive and some additional missions might be needed in order to receive the mandatory results. This should be taken into account when the savings are calculated in the project.

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