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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: 4.5 Pilot Evaluations

Name of the Expert: Ms Eve Eisenschmidt, Mr Hannu Apajalahti, Ms Tiia Bach

Dates of the Mission: 10 – 14 April 2017

Contractor: Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) /
Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)



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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 (also known as the ESG). The Twinning project offers an 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 to test them with three higher education institutions.

In April 2016 a Drafting Group was appointed by the Ministry of Education to work on a proposal for AzSG. A draft manual for the pilot evaluations was discussed with the Advisory Group in a seminar in June 2016. The draft was published on the Twinning project's website in order to get feedback on the assessment areas and criteria. Amendments were made to the manual based on the feedback. The capacity of the pilot institutions to conduct a self-evaluation was supported through several trainings, which took place starting in September 2016. The self-evaluation reports were submitted by the three pilot universities in January-February 2017 and were translated into English. In February 2017 informative visits were conducted to all three higher education institutions participating in the pilot. Practical details of the upcoming site visits were discussed during these visits.

The main aims of the pilot evaluations have been set as: supporting the strategic management of institutions, providing external feedback to the institutions' own internal quality assurance procedures as well as informing the 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 the pilot institutions with information regarding their strengths and good practices as well as recommendations for the institutions' further development.

3. Objectives and Tasks of the Mission

The overall 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 (ESG). The objective of Activity 4.5 is to coordinate a trial/test run of the Standards and Guidelines at three higher education institutions in Azerbaijan. The first pilot was conducted at the Azerbaijan State Economic University during the STE mission of 3-7 April 2017.

The aim of the current mission was to conduct a pilot evaluation at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University during the week of 10-14 April 2017. The first day of the mission focused on preparing the members of the evaluation group for the site visit. That followed by a three-day visit to the university, during which the evaluation team held interviews with the management, staff, students, alumni and external stakeholders of the institution. The outcome of the visit will be an evaluation report, which in addition to recommendations to the university under evaluation will also provide suggestions to the Ministry of Education regarding regulations governing the Azerbaijani higher education.

4. Time Schedule of the Mission

A detailed schedule of the mission is attached to the report (see *Appendix 1*).



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5. Achievement of the Expected Results

The expected results for the mission were achieved: a practical testing of the Standards and Guidelines was carried out at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University.

A long and thorough discussion about challenges and opportunities of Azerbaijan's higher education was held among all participants during the kick-off meeting at the Ministry of Education on the first day of the mission. During the second half of the day the team had its meeting, which included a training for the team members by STEs Ms. Eisenschmidt (chair of the evaluation group) and Ms Bach (Project Coordinator) who reviewed the aims of the evaluation, the code of ethics guiding the evaluation team, and how to conduct the interviews and present questions. The team members then focused on formulating detailed questions for the interviews that were going to be held during the site visit with various stakeholders and developing the interview strategy.

The site visit was carried out successfully over three days and the team interviewed altogether nearly 80 members of the university on one of the campuses in Baku. Interview sessions were held with the management, deans, teaching staff, support and administrative staff, students, alumni and employers. During the interviews, the evaluation team was able to ask questions to verify and supplement observations that had been made on the basis of the self-evaluation report and other material submitted by the university. The interviews were conducted in English and translated into Azerbaijani. The interviews were held in a good and open atmosphere.

Three observers – one from Baku State University and two from the Accreditation and Nostrification Office (ANO) – accompanied the evaluation team in order to learn from such evaluation process.

The evaluation team had a good cooperation with the contact person and other representatives of the university who were extremely helpful during the entire site visit by providing everything that was necessary for the team to successfully complete its work.

6. Unexpected Results

None.

7. Issues Left Open After the Mission

None.

8. Recommendations for Future Missions

As recommendations for the next pilot evaluation, the STEs suggest the following:

- A detailed schedule of the site visit was sent only a day before arrival at the university. Thus, the evaluation group did not have a clear idea beforehand who exactly (people and their positions) they were going to meet. If possible, ensure that the team receives it earlier to better prepare for the interviews.
- It is highly recommended that even if the evaluation process is new for the local team members, all members do the preparation work on the Self-Evaluation Report of the institution under evaluation and give their initial input by sending to the Project Manager



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(STE from FINEEC/EKKA) questions that arise while reading the report, and list the topics that should be further discussed during the site visit. This would allow the Project Manager to do considerable amount of preparatory work by the first team meeting on Monday (collect the questions, sort them, etc.).

- It is important to allow ample time before the site visit for the team members to get to know each other better, and for the STEs take that opportunity to get to know the local context, culture, what kind of behaviour might be appropriate during the visit and what is not.
- The team leader should pay enough attention that everyone from the team has had enough time to share his/her own understanding of the situation before the site visit. Some extra time might be needed to figure out the best possible approach to asking the questions and dividing the roles among the team members. It is important to secure that each team member is actively involved in the whole process.
- The project manager (STE from FINEEC/EKKA) should use enough time to establish a shared understanding of the practical details (especially number of interviewees, interview settings, room arrangements, name labels for the interviews, and rules during the interviews) with the contact person of the university. If necessary, make re-arrangements during the site visit (e.g., if the rectorate has been prepared for the interviews, ask for a more appropriate, separate room where discussions can be held). In that sense the meeting with the university's contact person was extremely helpful on the first day of the mission; the team could go through the practical details of the visit (some of which seemed to come as a surprise, although this had been shared by email earlier), clarify some issues and questions, request for additional materials, etc.

9. Conclusions and General Remarks Concerning the Project

The pilot evaluations are a pivotal point in the Twinning project. Two pilot evaluations have now been conducted. The pilot evaluation in Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University was conducted in good cooperation with the participating higher education institution. ANO has been actively involved in the process and these evaluations have been hopefully an interesting experience for the local observers. The evaluation team felt very well supported and taken care of by the Resident Twinning Adviser and other support staff during the whole week. We are equally thankful for excellent interpretation that was provided for the interviews during the site visit.

The Pilot Analysis has been planned for early June. Although the timeline for the pilots is quite short and the teams are pressed for time, they will likely provide plenty of useful feedback on the criteria and evaluation model of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Azerbaijan.

(Date and place)

(Signature of Expert)

(Date and place)

(Signature of Expert)

(Date and place)

(Signature of Expert)