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. Kristiina Tõnnisson, Mr. Mikko Vieltojärvi, Ms. Hilla Aurén

**Dates of the Mission:** 3 – 7 April 2017 (Ms. Kristiina Tõnnisson), 5 – 7 April 2017 (Ms. Hilla Aurén and Mr. Mikko Vieltojärvi)

**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 (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 to 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) and test them with three higher education institutions.

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 first two days of the mission focused on preparing the experts of the evaluation group for the site visit. During the last three days of the mission, the evaluation group conducted a site visit to the University, interviewing management, staff, and students of the University.

**4. Time Schedule of the Mission**

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| **Date** | **Activities/Meetings**  BC experts met  (title and institution) | **Remarks** |
| 3 April 2017 | Kick-off meeting at the Ministry of Education   * Mr. Sülhaddin Gozalov (MoE), Mr. Tofig Ahmadov (ANO, RTA Counterpart), Mr. Elshan Nuriyev (ANO), Mr. Orkhan Sultanov (ANO), Mr. Raqif Gasimov (UNEC), RTA, RTA’s assistants * Evaluation team members: Mr. Anar Naghiyev, Ms. Aytan Mirzayeva, Mr. Shukur Sadikhov, STE Ms. Tõnnisson (Chair of the evaluation team) |  |
| 4 April 2017 | Meeting of the evaluation team at the Azcot Hotel   * Mr. Anar Naghiyev, Ms. Aytan Mirzayeva, Mr. Shukur Sadikhov, STE Ms. Tõnnisson (Chair of the evaluation team) * Mr. Tofig Ahmadov (ANO, RTA Counterpart), Mr. Elshan Nuriyev (ANO), Mr. Orkhan Sultanov (ANO) |  |
| 5 April 2017 | Azerbaijan State Economic University   * Evaluation team: Mr. Anar Naghiyev, Ms. Aytan Mirzayeva, Mr. Shukur Sadikhov, STE Mr. Mikko Vieltojärvi, STE Ms. Kristiina Tõnnisson (Chair of the evaluation team), STE Ms. Hilla Aurén (project manager of the pilot evaluation) * Observers: Mr. Tofig Ahmadov (ANO, RTA Counterpart), Mr. Elshan Nuriyev (ANO), Mr. Orkhan Sultanov (ANO) * Interviews of Top Management (Rector and Vice Rectors), Deans and Directors, Scientific Council, Teaching staff, Quality assurance centre staff and student representatives |  |
| 6 April 2017 | Azerbaijan State Economic University   * Evaluation team and observers (same as above) * Interviews of Teaching staff, Support services staff and students from different faculties |  |
| 7 April 2017 | Azerbaijan State Economic University   * Evaluation team and observers (same as above) * Interviews of Teaching staff, students, and other staff * Meeting with the Rector for initial feedback on the pilot evaluation * Final evaluation team meeting |  |

**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 the Azerbaijan State Economic University.

During the training, STE Ms. Tõnnisson reviewed the aims of the evaluation, the code of ethics guiding the evaluation team, and how to conduct the interviews and present questions. A long and thorough discussion about challenges and opportunities of Azerbaijan’s higher education was held among all participants during the kick-off meeting. Later the discussion focused on challenges of the site visits and possibilities of writing evaluation report. The second day focused more concretely on preparing the meeting with various stakeholders and on formulating the questions. The team worked the full day on forming and reforming, on structuring and restructuring, on focusing and refocusing the questions for all sessions for the meetings during the 3 days long site visit.

The site visit was carried out successfully over three days and the team interviewed altogether nearly 100 members of the university on three different campuses. Interview sessions were held with the management, teaching staff, support and administrative staff as well as students from different faculties. During the interviews, the evaluation team was able to ask questions to verify and supplement observations made based on the self-evaluation report and other material submitted by the university.

Observers from the Accreditation and Nostrification Office (ANO) accompanied the evaluation team. The interviews were conducted in English, translated into Azerbaijani.

The University contact person had expressed beforehand concerns about external stakeholders being unable to attend the interviews. The evaluation team used the time that was allocated for interviewing external stakeholders by interviewing personnel from the Career Centre, the Internship Centre and the Communication and Marketing Department. The ability of the evaluation team to quickly adapt to changing conditions during the interview process was a key to making the site visit successful. The cooperation with the University was carried out in a good atmosphere.

**6. Unexpected Results**

The site visit had to be rescheduled with very short notice, and as a result the original mission plan was adjusted. The evaluation team ended up having one additional day for an all-day meeting among the evaluation team, which provided very useful. Under the guidance and instruction of STE Kristiina Tõnnisson, the team was able to create a common understanding of the most important issues for the interviews and to prepare the final list of interview questions. Although this day was not part of the original mission plan, due to the other two STEs’ difficulties in obtaining visas during the Nowroz holiday, the site visit was moved toward the end of the week (Wednesday-Friday) and this opened up one more day for the team to prepare.

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

The request of compensation for local participants of the evaluation team is being processed at the Ministry of Education. In addition, the participation of the evaluation team members in the Pilot Analysis has to be confirmed.

**8. Recommendations for Future Missions**

As recommendations for the next two pilot evaluations, the STEs suggest the following:

* Reserve considerable amount of time for creating a common understanding among the evaluation team before the interviews. It is important that team members are prepared and they have thought about what are the main issues to find out during interviews, since time in-country before the site visit will be limited.
* 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 and rules during the interviews) with the contact person of the university.
* There are several terms which the STEs realized have different meanings or lack meaning in the local context, and it is crucial to establish shared understanding of such concepts (e.g. course, syllabus, curricula, study programme, subject, learning outcome etc.); It would be useful to have some short written introduction to national higher education system before the visit.
* 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.

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

The Pilot Evaluations are a pivotal point in the Twinning project. One Pilot Evaluation has now been conducted and two more are to take place within the month of April. The Pilot was conducted in good cooperation with the participating higher education institution. ANO has also been actively involved and will be sending observers to all three site visits.

The Pilot Analysis is set to take place in early June. Although the timeline for the Pilots is quite short and the teams are pressed for time, the Pilots 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.

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