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: 3. Developing AzQF

Activity: 3.4 Further Implementation of the AzQF

**Name of the Expert:** Mr Olav Aarna,Ms Maiki Udam, Ms Aune Valk

**Dates of the Mission:** 8-12 May 2017

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

Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)

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

The development of Azerbaijani National Qualifications Framework (AzQF) for lifelong learning started already in 2011 supported by the World Bank and the European Training Foundation (ETF) projects. By 2012, the draft Decree on establishing the AzQF was developed, stipulating the main principles, institutions involved, level descriptors, placement of types of qualifications, and quality assurance of qualifications. In 2012 the draft AzQF was submitted to the Council of Europe for expertise. Recommendations proposed by the Council of Europe expert have been taken into account while designing the AzQF final draft. Seminars introducing the AzQF to stakeholders and international partners were held in 2012 and 2014. Until recently, the Decree has still been a draft form.

In 2014, ETF prepared a comprehensive document “Analysis of existing qualification standards in Azerbaijan”, containing the descriptions of different qualifications' levels as well as concrete recommendations for further actions for 2015-2017 with division of roles and responsibilities in development, revision, approval and application of AzQF. A draft of the implementation plan for the AzQF has also been prepared by the ETF and Azerbaijani counterparts.

In November 2015 the Minister of Education introduced the draft AzQF document to the line ministries and other stakeholders. Feedback from different ministries included several recommendations for amendments in the text.

During the last two years the Ministry of Education (MoE) staff has been renewed fundamentally. Only one person, Mr. Azad Ahundov, has been involved in the development of AzQF from the very beginning. As a result, the new staff members, incl. the heads of departments and units of the MoE have limited understanding about the AzQF purpose, objectives, guiding principles, and the way to implement it. More importantly, until recently there has been no clear ownership of the AzQF in the MoE.

The current state of affairs is the following. In the first week of May 2017 the Minister of Education submitted the draft Decree on establishing the AzQF with minor changes to the Cabinet of Ministers for approval. Following the decisions taken at the meeting with the minister on 22 July 2016, a secretariat headed by the deputy head of Apparatus Mr. Farzali Gadirov has been established at the MoE to administer further development and implementation of the AzQF. National expert Mr. Ilkin Nazarov has also prepared a draft “Action Plan on Implementation of National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2018-2025)”, and a “Concept of establishment of National Commission and Secretariat for implementation of AzQF” commissioned by the MoE.

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

*Objective*:

The elaboration of a roadmap for the further implementation of the AzQF sections relevant for higher education (leading towards a successful self-certification).

*Tasks (methods)*:

1. An one-day workshop on further implementation of the AzQF HE sections for the representatives of MoE and universities has been conducted for 10-20 people;
2. A roadmap with objectives, responsibilities, timelines and an indication of required resources for the self-certification process has been drafted.

**4. Time Schedule of the Mission**

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| **Date** | **Activities/Meetings**  BC experts met  (title and institution) | **Remarks** |
| 8 May | Meeting with RTA and MoE representatives:  **Mr Sülhaddin Gözalov** - Head of Higher and Secondary Professional Education Unit, MoE;  **Ms Vusala Gurbanova** - BC Component Leader II, Leading advisor at Science, Higher and Secondary Professional Education Department, MoE;  **Mr Azad Akhundov** - BC Component Leader III, Senior advisor at Science, Higher and Secondary Professional Education Department, MoE  Preparation of the mission |  |
| 9 May | Victory Day – A Public Holiday  Independent work in the hotel: preparing the NQF seminar |  |
| 10 May | Interview with  **Mr. Farzali Godirov** - Deputy Chief of Staff, AzQF Coordinator, MoE;  **Mr Sülhaddin Gözalov** - Head of Higher and Secondary Professional Education Unit, MoE;  **Mr Azad Akhundov** - BC Component Leader III, Senior advisor at Science, Higher and Secondary Professional Education Department, MoE  *Topics*: Current status of the AzQF, future plans regarding the implementation of the AzQF  Elaborating the presentation for AzQF implementation seminar, based on the information gained from Mr Gadirov |  |
| 11 May | AzQF Implementation seminar  Participants:  **1. Ms Vusala Gurbanova** - BC Component Leader II, Leading advisor at Science, Higher and Secondary Professional Education Department, MoE  **2. Mr Azad Akhundov** - BC Component Leader III, Senior advisor at Science, Higher and Secondary Professional Education Department, MoE  **3. Mr Elvin Nasibov** - Chief of Staff, Institute of Education, MoE  **4. Mr Eldar Salahov** - Head of Department, VET Agency, MoE  **5. Ms Shalala Salimova** - Leading advisor at Law Department, MoE  **6. Mr Zohrab Kalbaliyev** - Senior advisor at Human Resources Department, MoE  **7. Mr Firidin Hamzayev** - Head of Unit at Preschool and General Education Department, MoE  **8. Ms Tarana Mammadova** - Senior advisor, Accreditation Department, ANO  **9. Mr Emin Nasirov** - Head of Nostrification Office, ANO  **10. Mr Nigar Ismayilzade** - Deputy head of Department, VET Agency | Although in the initial task description also the university representatives were expected to participate, it became clear during the process that at this stage it is too early to invite HEI-s to this very preliminary information dissemination seminar.  Seminar slides are in Annex 1. |
| 12 May | Report writing  Mission review with RTA and MoE representatives:  **Mr. Ilkin Nazarov** – Independent consultant who contributed to developing AzNQF and Action Plan;  **Ms. Lala Ganiyeva** – education expert involved in AzNQF and Action plan development;  **Ms Vusala Gurbanova** - BC Component Leader II, Leading advisor at Science, Higher and Secondary Professional Education Department, MoE;  **Mr Azad Akhundov** - BC Component Leader III, Senior advisor at Science, Higher and Secondary Professional Education Department, MoE |  |

**5. Achievement of the Expected Results**

All expected results were achieved.

**6. Unexpected Results**

There were no unexpected results.

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

There are no issues that have been left open after this mission.

**8. Recommendations for Future Missions**

As it has been the final mission week of the Component 3 then there are no more missions coming.

For future projects we would recommend to deal especially with the following issues concerning the implementation of the AzQF:

1. Developing the system for recognition of prior (including non-formal and informal) learning;
2. Creating databases/IT system(s) for managing the information about students, staff, study progress, admission, graduation etc;
3. Training teachers in innovative teaching and assessment methods.

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

The mission has proved to be successful. The AzQF development and implementation process has gained new momentum. The draft “Action Plan on Implementation of National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2018-2025)”, and the “Concept of establishment of National Commission and Secretariat for implementation of AzQF” are a good starting point for launching the AzQF implementation.

A general recommendation would be to add also wider impact indicators to the action plan, e.g., increased mobility of students and staff, increased participation of adult people in lifelong learning, employment rate of graduates of VET and higher education, etc.

The recommendations concerning further development of the Action Plan are incorporated into the text of the document and in the column under the title Note (cf. Annex 2).

Discussions with the employees of the MoE and participants of the seminar on 11 May 2017 revealed the following overarching problem areas requiring special attention for the success of the AzQF implementation process:

1. Timeframe of implementation

Implementation of the AzQF means developing a new and contemporary National Qualifications System, with the AzQF serving as a nucleus of this system. The Action Plan encompasses the period 2018-2025. It foresees actions in five groups:

1. Improving legislative framework in connection with implementation of AzQF.
2. Creating institutional system coordinating AzQF implementation.
3. Bringing content of qualifications into conformity with the labor market requirements.
4. Improving and strengthening quality assurance system.
5. Promoting implementation of result-based qualification system.

Many activities cover very long period, e.g. 4.1. Creating National Qualifications Register (2018-2025). Obviously the creation of the Register does not take seven years. More important is to know by which time the Regiser will become functional.

We recommend to define intermediate milestones of the AzQF implementation, e.g. self-certification of the AzQF in reference to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (and European Qualifications Framework) by 2020 (p.5.8).

1. Institutional structure for the AzQF implementation

The Concept foresees establishing two new bodies for coordinating the implementation process:

* National Commission,
* Secretariat.

The Secretariat is envisaged as an independent structural unit of the MoE, performing three functions:

* Management of qualifications;
* Development of qualification standards;
* Development of the National Qualifications Register.

The functions and structure of the Secretariat seem appropriate. However, performing these functions is a full-time job for substantial number of employees. Therefore, the experts strongly recommend:

* Establish the Secretariat as an independent department of the MoE with permanent staff (gradually growing in number);
* Consider changing the name for more appropriate one, because the present one is misleading. It rather refers to the secretarial support for the National Commission.
* Formalise the roles of the institutional partners involved in the different aspects of the AzQF implementation, incl. functions performed for different types of qualifications, on an appropriate level.

It is of utmost importance to engage all partners and stakeholders (ministries and agencies, educational institutions, student unions, employers’ organisations) into the implementation process of the AzQF. It requires regular communication not only in formal setting of meetings of the National Commission and other decision making bodies, but also different less formal means of informing each other about the developments and problems with respect to the AzQF implementation.

1. Qualifications standards

In the draft Action Plan on Implementation of National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2018-2025) development of different qualification standards is foreseen (see 3.2, 3.5, 3.6). We recommend to have two sets of standards:

* Level standards for eight levels of the AzQF;
* Sectoral standards for specific occupations/professions, including tasks and competences of a particular occupation/profession. These standards could also include assessment standards for assessing, validating and certification persons’ competence.

Based on the level standards and sectoral standards both the national and institutional curricula can be developed. There is no need for separate *qualification standards on formal ed*ucation (3.6.1) and *qualification standards for non-formal and informal education* (3.6.2).

1. Human resource development: training and networking

It is obvious that engagement of people, training and supporting them is crucial in the successful application of any new initiative.

Besides classical training that is necessary for several groups and topics, we recommend to create and support networks of practitioners. Professional networks have proved to be better teacher training method than traditional face to face training (see additional Measure 2.7).

For developing and applying outcomes-based curricula, introducing new teaching and assessment methods, developing systems for recognition of prior (informal and non-formal) learning

(counselling, assessment and accreditation), supporting mobility and academic recognition, developing lifelong learning opportunities at universities etc, there must be people responsible for these topics in the HEIs. In the starting phase, there is often just one person in the institution who shall introduce it. For him/her it is very difficult if there is no support. The best supporters are people with similar tasks and experience in other institutions. Helping these people to get together and create a network is very important if you want that the best practices are shared. Centralised leading and support system may be not enough in these cases.

As the largest target group in applying the changes are university teachers, it would be useful to set up centre(s)/units that are responsible for teaching academic staff (see additional Measure 2.6).

1. Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior (informal and non-formal) learning (RPL) is a corner stone of lifelong learning mindset. Currently this topic is covered at two levels in the action plan: legislation and promotion to end-users. The most difficult target group is, however, universities. Preparing their systems and training their people (counselling and assessment of RPL) are even more crucial and recommended to add to the action plan.

1. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance, both internal and external, is an important part of national qualifications systems. One objective in the action plan is *Improving internal and external quality assurance system and linking it with ESG and EQAVET* (4.3).

The topics that need further consideration with respect to the ESG are among others:

* Independence of ANO (especially in regard to decision-making process, i.e the accreditation/assessment decisions should not be influenced by any third body, including MoE);
* Follow-up procedures and activities during review cycles.

In addition, it is necessary to train institutions on internal quality assurance, including self-evaluation, and review experts on external quality assurance.

Creation of databases and IT systems would help to collect and monitor data about study programmes, staff, students and alumni.

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