ANNEX I

**Main strengths and areas of improvement in the area of higher education in the Republic of Azerbaijan based on pilot evaluations**

**SUMMARY OF THE PILOT EVALUATION IN UNEC, ASPU AND AZTU (mark with ‘X’):**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Assessment area** | Fully conforms to requirements | Mostly conforms to requirements | Partially conforms to requirements | Does not conform to requirements |
| 1. Strategic planning |  |  | X X X |  |
| 2. Management |  | X | X X |  |
| 3. Human resources |  | X X | X |  |
| 4. Study programmes and their development |  |  | X X X |  |
| 5. Students |  | X X | X |  |
| 6. Research activities |  | X | X | X |
| 7. Teaching and learning resources and support services |  | X X | X |  |

**OVERALL STRENGTHS**

* The roles and focuses of the universities – pedagogy, economy, technology – are clear and well justified
* Willingness to improve, awareness of the need for change
* Orientation towards improving the management structure and create conditions for the senior management staff to take more responsibility and ownership in fulfilling their role
* Awareness of the need to improve management and leadership competences

**OVERALL AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT**

* The universities should work on its mission and vision statements and general objectives, which could be more academic in content and which lay down the general framework for the strategic choices.
* All the relevant stakeholders should be taken along to the strategy process in the future. The universities should pay more attention to inform all stakeholders about the strategic development plan and the objectives.
* Even if the management and staff are aware of the needs to monitor changes in the labour market, the needs of the society, and the need to involve more stakeholders, addressing those needs requires a more systematic and efficient approach.
* Management of lower level is very fragmented – very many positions and duties. There is too much focus on rector’s level – middle management level does not work properly.
* Reviewing of study programmes and syllabuses should be conducted regularly. Students and external stakeholders should be involved in these reviews.
* The improvement of teaching staff’s competencies as well as the monitoring of the improvement should be systematic.
* More emphasise should be given to the relevance of up-to-date teaching materials, technical resources should be improved and the efficient use of technical equipment in the teaching and learning process assured.
* Learning outcome based and student-centred approach in teaching and learning need to be developed, e.g. praising the first one and supporting the last ones, as the chain is as strong as the weakest link; more real elective courses students; assessment of achieved learning outcomes instead of multiple choice tests etc.
* Establishing systematic mechanisms that support the staff in conducting research activities. The change from teaching mind set to research mind set should be prioritized. Access to international research databases is integral to improving research activities. Courses and training on research methodologies and skills should be offered to students.
* Internationalization is a challenge at all levels – better English language skills, at least one full course in English, participation in exchange programmes (both, academic staff as well as students), international research projects etc.
* The distribution of full-time teaching staff by age is uneven. More younger, qualified and motivated teachers and researchers are needed in order to facilitate the improvements in the area of higher education.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE STATE LEVEL**

* The legal and normative framework which regulates governance of higher education institutions should be reconsidered by the Ministry of Education to allow universities to implement a more effective management system, e.g., have two different governing bodies – academic council and operational management body.
* Higher education institutions should be granted more freedom and autonomy to continuously modify and update the curricula of their study programmes according to needs of labour market and based on recent research results.
* Doctoral studies should be reorganised based on the Bologna system, as the 2-level system of doctoral degrees is demotivating and may cause losing the interest of young generation to start their academic career.
* Access to up-to-date academic research through electronic databases should be ensured at all Azerbaijani higher education institutions.
* For internationalisation of higher education and in order to become part of international research community, the English language competences should be raised already at the level of secondary education. National curriculum should be reconsidered having stronger emphasis on acquiring English language skills.

ANNEX I

**Component 4: Standards and Guidelines for QA in Higher Education**

**Activity 4.6: Analysis of the Pilots 5-9 June 2017**

**Summary of the key findings of the analysis of pilot evaluations**

The Learning café workshop took place on June 7, 2017 in the Azerbaijan Technical Universities in four stations.

1. **The topic of the first station was Self-evaluation** and the Secretary and Rapporteur was Kati Isoaho.
2. **The following themes of discussion were proposed to the pilot university representatives:**

* Assess the Guidelines for Self-Evaluation document. What was useful and how could the document be improved? How do you consider the number and contents of claims included in each category? What kind of appendices would be most beneficial (e.g. statistics, organisation chart, other figures etc.) to be included in the self-evaluation report?
* Asses the process of conducting the Self-Evaluation: Was it useful? How was the cooperation with your colleagues? Did you learn anything new? How would you organize it next time? Would you need external trainers for it? Who should at least be involved in the self-evaluation process? How would you assess your university´s capacity to write evaluative text and how would you enhance/improve it?

1. **The members of the evaluation groups were asked to discuss the following questions:**

* Asses the Self-Evaluation documents as the guiding documents for the evaluation work: What worked well? What created most misunderstandings or difficulty? What was missing? How could the Guidelines for Self-Evaluation be improved?
* How would you develop the self-evaluation capacity of your Azerbaijani colleagues? For instance, is there need for increasing capacity in group work, stakeholder involvement, student involvement or evaluative and reflective writing, etc.

1. As a result of the discussions, three main issues were discussed: the practical side of conducting SER, the usefulness of the criteria in the Accreditation Manual and the quality of the SERs. **As a result, the following key findings can be outlined**:

* From a practical point of view, a lot universities felt that there were some challenges regarding the scheduling issues (which are common on institutional level) and reaching the relevant persons inside the institutions due to these scheduling issues – an examination period was taking place at the same time as the report-writing.
* It was also mentioned in the discussion that to carry out SER process, institutions need to build up a team of more than 10 people involved with someone in charge. It should be a team effort and never the responsibility of solely one person to take care of the process.
* One of the advantages of the SER process is that it creates a possibility for different chairs in the HEIs to get to know each other and each others’ activities better than before.
* One point of concern was that the use of the final report was not fully clear for all the university representatives.
* There were different opinions on the usefulness of the SER criteria: on the one hand, they cover all the key operations of the university, but on the other hand, they were not considered to be measurable enough – more figures and equals would have been needed.
* It was highlighted that because Azerbaijan cooperates internationally, the SER criteria should be applicable globally, not only in the European context.
* The quality of level and information provided in SERs was also discussed. The evaluation team members would have needed more descriptive information on the universities’ operations, and foreign experts were hoping for more information on the local HE system. Also, the general opinion seemed to be that there should have been more appendixes to the SERs – there was too much factual information in the report that made it challenging to read.
* There were some gaps in SERs, as some areas that were not discussed e.g: how the strategic plan was developed, what tools were used and who participated in the process, etc. Also, it was felt that the reports were always not analytical/informative enough. It has to be decided how to avoid gaps in the future – whether to provide more guidelines or to raise the capacity of the HEIs how to conduct SER on an institutional level.
* The local experts were commended by the foreign colleagues, as they served a necessary purpose of providing information on local context and Azerbaijani HE system.
* In conclusion, it can be said that the SER is crucial for the whole evaluation process. If the quality of SER is good, it makes the whole process successful. It is the task of ANO to stress this in the future and raise the capacity of HE institutions in this matter.

1. **The topic of the second station was Criteria and Manual for Pilot Evaluations and the** Secretary and Rapporteur was Kirsi Hiltunen.
2. **The following discussion themes were proposed to the pilot university representatives:**

* Assess the Manual for Pilot Evaluations document. What was useful and how could the document be improved?
* Assess the assessment areas and criteria: What worked well and what should be improved? Please, discuss with your group each criteria individually. Which areas were most difficult to self-assess? Where did the criteria overlap? Where were the biggest differences between the self-evaluation and the external evaluation? What would you leave out? Anything you would like to include?
* What other feedback would you like to give to develop Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and future QA system in Azerbaijan?

1. **The members of the evaluation groups were asked to discuss the following questions:**

* Assess the functionality of the assessment areas and criteria: How could they be improved?
* Please, discuss with your group each criteria individually. Which areas were most difficult to assess? Where did the criteria overlap? Where were the biggest differences between the self-evaluation and the external evaluation? What would you leave out? Anything you would like to include?
* What other feedback would you like to give to develop Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and future QA system in Azerbaijan?

1. **As a result of the discussion, the following key findings can be outlined**:

* The Manual for Pilot Evaluations was considered to be very good – systematic and providing good guidelines for self-evaluation. The manual provides an outline of how the learning environment and innovative practices could be applied in a university. The guidelines explain in detail how to develop management, strategic planning and research in a university. According to the university representatives, the manual outlined ways in which a quality assurance system could be established in a university. If was also found that the manual opens the way to interactive discussions both within university and with the external stakeholders. The manual also fosters the culture of reporting, establishing quality as an integral asset, and encourages communication between the students and the faculty.
* It was concluded there was not too much overlapping between different criteria – some was found in research and human resources (e.g, a question of involvement of staff in research projects and information about quality management system), but not much. The universities wouldn’t leave out anything from the criteria and believe that all of them are needed.
* It was also discussed which areas were the most difficult to self-assess/assess, and the following criteria were pointed out:
* the assessment area of management was mentioned twice;
* study programmes and their preparation (many people do not have skills yet to transfer from the traditional way to the new way);
* the prioritization of research areas and how research activities support teaching
* the human resources: it was not considered fit for purpose to have a requirement that selection procedures for administrative staff should be open for public (selected usually from amongst the graduates and university staff).
* the infrastructure (for the evaluation panel) because there was not enough data, i.e., the panel could only visit 5-10 classrooms.
* The biggest difference between self-evaluation and external evaluation was considered to be that the SER was more focused on quantitative aspects and the qualitative aspects were missing.

However, it was also mentioned that there were no so much differences between SER and the evaluation report. According to some HEIs, the experts seemed to have studied the activities so well ”as if they had had informants from the universities”.

* Also, a discussion took place wheteher something should be added to the criteria. Professional development of staff was mentioned as a separate assessment are, as well as cooperation between university and the industry and the academic ethics. It was also mentioned that there should be criteria in place how to assess study programme groups. The universities expressed an opinion that the sub-criteria included in the table should also be graded and the grading should be more measurable. They also found that the grading should be measurable (including percentage).The evaluation teams, in turn, considered there to be enough assessment areas but far too much sub-criteria.
* A question was raised by the teams wheter the data collected by MER could also be used in evaluations.

1. **The topic of the third station was Site-visit and the evaluation process** and the Secretary and Rapporteur was Tiia Bach.
2. **The following discussion themes were provided for the pilot university representatives:**

* Assess the timetable of the evaluation: How could the timetable be improved?
* Assess the implementation of the site visit: What worked well and how could the site visit be improved?
* Assess the performance of the FINEEC/EKKA project manager: Where did she/he perform well? How could the activities of the project manager be improved?
* Assess the cooperation between FINEEC/EKKA and your university: What worked well and how could the cooperation be improved?
* Assess the work of the evaluation group: Where did it perform well, what could it have done better?
* Assess the whole audit process: What was the best for your university and what could be improved?

1. **The members of the evaluation groups were asked to discuss the following themes:**

* Assess the overall scheduling of the evaluation: How could the scheduling be improved?
* Assess the team’s preparation for the site visit: What worked well, and how could the preparation be improved?
* Assess the implementation of the site visit: What worked well, and how could the visit be improved?
* Evaluate the activities of the FINEEC/EKKA project manager: What worked well, and could the activities of the project manager be improved?
* Assess the training provided prior to the evaluation: What worked well, and how the training be improved?
* Assess the activities of your evaluation group: Where did the team succeed, what could have been done better?
* What kind of feedback would you like to give to FINEEC/EKKA in general? What did you learn from the evaluation process?

1. **As a result of the discussion, the following key findings can be outlined**:

* All the panel members were found to be well-prepared, professional and constructive.
* The university representatives found that the timetable for the visit was appropriate and there was a sufficient mount of time for the site-visit (three days). They had a clear overview before the visit how the visit would look like. However, some inferviewees were invited to the discussions at the last minute, which was challenging. All the important units in the HEIs were covered.
* The experts found that the preparation for the visit went very well and the tasks were clearly divided. However, more supportive documents should have been presented by the institutions.
* The experts appreciated that all the interviews were conducted in an open and transparent atmosphere. Regarding the site visit – more time was needed to see the facilities needed. This should be taken into account in the future.
* It was brouht out that there was too little time for some expert teams to prepare the evaluation reports. In the future, HEIs need more time to submit their comments to the report.
* According to the university representatives, the questions asked at the interviews were relevant, but sometimes not specific enough and not enough tailored to the profile of the university. Sometimes it was felt that the length of interviews should have been longer.
* The collaboration between universities and project management was good. HEIs appreciated the possibility to present addidional materials during the process.
* Regarding the whole process, it was mentioned that analysing all the assessment areas gave the universities an input for drafting study development plan, identify their weaknesses, etc.
* It was considered to be very important that more local experts are trained and the teams include labour market representatives in the future.

1. **The topic of the fourth station was Report** and the Secretary and Rapporteur was Touko Apajalahti.
2. **The following themes were discussed with the pilot university representatives:**

* Assess the content of the evaluation report: What was useful, what was unclear or unnecessary?
* How would you improve reporting?
* What would be the best way to disseminate the information of the pilots? Who should read the report?

1. **The members of the evaluation groups discussed on the following topics:**

* Assess the process of producing the evaluation report: What worked well, and how could the process be improved? You may also comment on the quality of the report.
* What would be the best way to disseminate the information of the pilots? Who should read the report?

1. **As a result of the discussion, the following key findings can be outlined**:

* Both the teams and universities were satisfied with the quality of the report. The HEIs were especially satisfied with the practical recommendations they can use in their development activities.
* The teams got good support from the chairs and Project Managers.
* To improve the process, there could be more guidelines for the team members to write the report (regarding the style, level of detail, special tools like Google Docs, etc.).
* It was stressed that enough time is needed for writing the report and the translation should be of high-quality to avoid any misundestandings. The responsible persons for each topic should also check the facts in the report.
* Regarding how to disseminate the results: both univesities and the panel members found that the reports should be also public in the future and published both on universities’ and ANO’s website.
* The report should be read by basically all stakeholders: the university management (who can make a change), student representatives, external partners (who can influence change), and everyone in the university (who should be committed to change.) Also, the Ministry, because sometimes system-wide changes are needed.