

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of

Higher Education in Azerbaijan

- Manual for Pilot Evaluations

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# 1 Overall framework and objectives of evaluation

Azerbaijan joined the Bologna Process in 2005. 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 the work has been the publication Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area[[1]](#footnote-1) (also known as ESG). The revised ESG 2015 were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area in May 2015. As a result of the participative revision the responsible bodies are confident that they reflect a consensus among all the organisations and ministries involved on how to take forward quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area and, as such, provide a firm basis for successful implementation.

Twinning project *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)* offers the opportunity for applying the new Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Azerbaijani higher education. Twinning is a European Union instrument for institutional cooperation between Public Administrations of EU Member States and of beneficiary or partner countries. The EU Member States to carry out this project are Finland and Estonia. Twinning projects bring together public sector expertise from EU Member States and beneficiary countries with the aim of achieving concrete mandatory operational results through peer to peer activities. The relevant mandatory result of the project for developing the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in higher education in Azerbaijan (AzSG) is to draft them in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and test them with three higher education institutions.

The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. In addition, institutions have policies and processes to ensure and improve the quality of their other activities, such as research and governance. At the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement. Taken together, these create trust in the higher education institution’s performance. A successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public of the quality of the institution’s activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement). Quality assurance and quality enhancement are thus inter-related. They can support the development of a quality culture that is embraced by all: from the students and academic staff to the institutional leadership and management.

The ESG may be used and implemented in different ways by different institutions, agencies and countries. The EHEA is characterised by its diversity of political systems, higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations. In order to create the Azerbaijani understanding of the ESG the Twinning project and the Azerbaijani Ministry of Education invited a drafting group to work on a proposal. The drafting group consisted of stakeholders from Azerbaijani universities, representatives from the Ministry of Education, students and experts from Finland and Estonia.

The evaluations will be implemented in four stages. First, the higher education institution carries out a self-evaluation and prepares the evaluation material. Next, a team of experts examines the material and then visits the institution. Finally, the results of the evaluation are published in the form of a report.

Chapter 2 of the manual describes the assessment areas and the final outcome of the evaluation, and Chapter 3 outlines the evaluation process.

# 2 Focus and outcome of evaluation

The aim of the institutional evaluation is to support the strategic management of higher education institutions, provide external feedback to the institutions’ own internal quality assurance procedures, and inform stakeholders of the compliance of the process and outcomes of teaching and learning to the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education.

The final outcome of a pilot evaluation is a publicly available report that gives recommendations for improvements, as well as, identifies strengths and good practices in the university.

## 2.1 Assessment areas and criteria

1. **Strategic and organisational management**

The higher education institution has defined its mission and quality policy/values. The development plan of the institution is in accordance with the mission statement and quality policy, and takes into account national priorities and society’s expectations. The institution’s system of governance supports the implementation of the development plan in accordance with the mission statement and quality policy.

1. The vision and mission of the institution are clearly defined and the result of a process involving all relevant stakeholders (staff, students, external stakeholders); stakeholders are aware of the mission and values of the institution.
2. The development plan is compliant with the mission statement, as well as with the aims and objectives of the institution; institutional strategic planning leads to strategic planning of all units. Processes to evaluate the achievement of the objectives are in place; annual (or biannual) action plans are in place, followed and monitored.
3. The management structure of the institution supports the achievement of the institutional goals, and clear division of responsibilities among structural units is defined.
4. Involvement of all relevant internal stakeholders from different levels of the organisation to decision-making processes is ensured.
5. Financial planning and management is in accordance with strategic planning and is transparent; relevant units are involved in financial planning and management processes; the allocation of financial resources as well as the administration and development of infrastructure are economically feasible, and are based on the objectives of the development plan of the institution.
6. Rights and responsibilities (incl. research, if appropriate) of staff members are clearly described (job descriptions), and staff development measures are in place. The institution has an effective system to support R&D activities of academic staff members (e.g., incentives for conducting research, counselling related to intellectual property, support for publishing in international journals, motivating cooperation with employers).
7. The institution supports academic integrity and is vigilant against academic fraud; it supports guarding against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students and staff.
8. Employee satisfaction with their roles and responsibilities, the work environment, and their experiences with management is regularly surveyed; the results of surveys lead to continuous improvement of activities.
9. Internal and external communication takes into account the needs of various stakeholders; communication is purposeful and effective; information provided is accurate, transparent and accessible to internal and external stakeholders.
10. Activities of the higher education institution are supported by up-to-date information technology solutions, including the study information system, e-learning opportunities, and communication portals for students and teaching staff; up-to-date information sources (incl. electronic databases) are available to the staff and students.
11. The working conditions, teaching and learning environment, and R&D conditions (library, studios, workshops, laboratories etc.) support the achievement of institutional and educational objectives.
12. Internal quality assurance mechanisms are implemented in order to ensure that the university functions in line with its development plan. Procedures for monitoring, reporting and follow-up are clear and functional.
13. **Study programmes** (applied on 2 samples of study programmes from different academic units)

The design and development of study programmes is in line with educational objectives of the institution, expectations of the society, labour market needs, and the latest research. The qualification resulting from a programme is in accordance with the national qualifications framework and ECTS principles.

1. Processes for the design and approval of the programmes are defined and implemented.
2. Programmes are designed with objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy, national standards for higher education, national qualifications framework, expectations of the society and economy, and labour market needs.
3. The content of the study programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline is up-to-date.
4. Objectives, intended learning outcomes and graduation requirements of the programmes are clearly defined; qualification resulting from the programme is clearly specified, communicated and referred to the appropriate level of the national qualifications framework.
5. Objectives, learning outcomes, teaching and learning methods (incl. students’ independent work), assessment methods and criteria are described and available for relevant stakeholders.
6. Expected student workload is defined in ECTS.
7. Practical work/internship supports the achievement of the learning outcomes of the programme.
8. Study programmes are monitored and reviewed regularly; relevant stakeholders (incl. students) are involved in these processes.
9. Graduate satisfaction with the quality of study programmes are surveyed and analysed; the results are considered in the development of study programmes.
10. **Teaching and learning**

Teaching and learning takes into account the educational needs of students, provides flexible learning opportunities and encourages active participation of students in creating the learning process.

1. Clear admission processes and requirements based on qualities necessary for the completion of study programmes are defined and implemented consistently.
2. In teaching and learning process individual and special needs of the student are taken into account and the active participation of the student in creating the learning process is encouraged.
3. Student workload in line with ECTS is assured.
4. Student assessment is objective, consistent, transparent and supports the achievement of learning outcomes.
5. Up-to-date and interactive teaching methods and educational technology are used in teaching and learning process.
6. Up-to-date teaching materials are used.
7. Students are involved in research and development activities; the supervision of students’ research papers (seminar papers, applied projects, final thesis) is well organised.
8. The institution has a system for the recognition of prior learning and work experience.
9. Studentsare regularly asked for feedback on teaching and learning process (teaching and learning methods, assessment, learning materials etc.); feedback is analysed and leads to continuous improvement of activities.
10. **Research and development**

The higher education institution has defined objectives for its R&D activities, measures their implementation, and ensures the link between research and education.

1. The objectives for R&D are defined. The achievement of the objectives and the impact of R&D activities are regularly measured (scientific and educational publications, doctoral students etc.).
2. The institution monitors the needs of society and the economy, and takes them into account in planning its R&D activities.
3. The institution promotes and upholds high quality academic and ethical standards of research; procedures for dealing with allegations of research misconduct are defined and followed.
4. The institution has financial resources needed for R&D activities and a strategy that supports their acquisition in order to be competitive at international level.
5. Institution has an effective system to support the R&D activities of academic staff members (e.g., incentives for conducting research, counselling related to intellectual property, support for publishing in international journals, motivating the cooperation with employers).
6. The institution participates in different regional and international R&D networks in their areas of academic activities.
7. **Academic staff**

Academic staff with adequate qualifications ensure the achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes of the study programme, as well as the quality and sustainability of teaching and learning.

1. Principles and procedures for the recruitment and development of the academic staff arise from the educational objectives of the institution.
2. The qualification of the academic staff and the number of full-time staff are in accordance with national requirements and the responsibilities, workload and the number of supervised students, and, thus, ensure the achievement of educational and scientific objectives of the institution.
3. The distribution of full-time teaching staff by age and qualifications facilitates the sustainability of studies.
4. The academic staff members are supported by the higher education institution and are regularly engaged in professional and teaching-skills development.
5. Academic staff members participate in international exchange programmes, projects and conferences.
6. The teaching staff collaborate in the fields of teaching and research within the higher education institution and with external partners (practitioners in their fields, employers, and staff members at other Azerbaijani or foreign higher education institutions).
7. Qualified foreign and visiting teaching staff and practitioners participate in teaching within the study programme.
8. Assessment of the work of the teaching staff takes into account the quality of their teaching as well as of their research, including development of their teaching skills, and their international mobility.
9. **Students**

The shift towards student-centred learning and flexible modes of learning and teaching are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support.

1. Students (incl. prospective students) are provided accurate and up-to-date information about the content, intended learning outcomes and graduate employment of the programmes.
2. Academic, career and psychological counselling is provided by the higher education institution.
3. Students’ academic progress is monitored and supported; the institution has processes and tools to support special educational needs.
4. Students’ rights and responsibilities are clearly defined; appeal mechanism as well as the system for the detection and prevention of academic fraud are in place.
5. Flexible learning opportunities are provided for students (incl. internal and external mobility).
6. The higher education institution supports the international mobility of students, and the students’ participation in international mobility is increasing.
7. Graduates are competitive in the labour market (incl. international) in their specialty area and the institution monitors the employment of its graduates.
8. Students participate in decision-making bodies as well as in elections of student unions.
9. The institution has mechanisms to support the internationalisation of the student body.
10. Students are regularly asked for feedback on the support services, and the feedback leads to continuous improvement of activities.

# 3 Evaluation process

The evaluation process consists of the following main stages:

1. Appointment and training of the international evaluation group

2. Self-evaluation and compilation of other material by the higher education institution

3. Site visit to the higher education institution

4. Publication of the report.

3.1 International evaluation group

3.1.1 Composition and operating principles of the evaluation group

The evaluation is carried out by an international evaluation group. The group consists of five members: three Azerbaijani experts, who are acquainted with the domestic higher education system, and two international experts. The working language of evaluation is English.

Project Leaders appoint the evaluation group and its chair. Group members are selected so that they represent staff and management of higher education institutions, as well as students. In addition, a member from outside the higher education sector (representative from working life) is involved whenever possible. The goal is to include a few individuals with prior experience in the external evaluation of higher education institutions in the evaluation group.

The members of the evaluation group are on an equal footing as evaluators. A project manager from FINEEC/EKKA in charge of the evaluation supports the work of the group, and takes part in the group’s activities as an expert of the external evaluation of higher education.

Requirements for members of an evaluation group:

* Members of the group are independent, and they present neither the interests of the organisation they belong to, nor the interests of any other third parties.
* Members of the group confirm by signature an obligation to maintain the confidentiality of information (except for that published in the final report) that has become known to them by their membership in an evaluation group and the lack of conflicts of interest. A person is disqualified from acting as a member of the evaluation group if he or she is an interested party or if confidence in his or her impartiality in relation to the higher education institution subject to the evaluation comes under question. A conflict of interest is presumed to be present in the following cases:
  + a group member has an employment or other contractual relationship with the higher education institution subject to the evaluation at the time of evaluation, or he or she has had an employment relationship with that higher education institution within five years prior to the site visit;
  + a group member is participating in the work of a decision-making or advisory body of the higher education institution subject to the evaluation at the time of evaluation;
  + a group member is studying at the higher education institution subject to the evaluation, or graduated from it less than five years ago;
  + the membership connected with the higher education institution subject to the evaluation includes a person closely related to an evaluation group member – spouse or life partner or a family member.
* The evaluation group has good knowledge of the higher education system and its regulation.
* At least one member of the evaluation group has experience in the management of a higher education institution.
* The evaluation group has experience in the development of a higher education institution.
* The evaluation group has experience in teaching activities in a higher education institution.
* The student member of the evaluation group has experience in higher education as a student and may have participated in the development of education or in the work of a decision-making body at a higher education institution.
* Members of the evaluation group have the necessary teamwork skills to conduct the evaluation.
* Members of the evaluation group are proficient in the working language of the evaluation.
* Members of the evaluation group must base their evaluation on transparent and systematically applied criteria, as well as on material collected in connection with the evaluation.
* Members of the evaluation group must take an objective approach towards the higher education institution subject to the evaluation, as well as recognize their position of power and the responsibility relating to it. They must carry out the evaluation in line with the code of conduct.
* Members of the evaluation group must carry out the evaluation through good cooperation and interaction with the higher education institution subject to the evaluation.

Additional requirements for the chair of an evaluation group include:

* Chair of the evaluation group must have prior experience in the external evaluation of higher education institutions;
* Chair of the evaluation group must have knowledge or experience of higher education management.

Prior to the appointment of the evaluation group, the HEI is given the opportunity to comment on the group’s composition, especially from the perspective of disqualification.

The experts sign an agreement that specifies the tasks related to the evaluation, fees and any other conditions related to the assignment.

3.1.2 Tasks of the evaluation group

Duties of members of an evaluation group include the following:

* reviewing the self-evaluation report and other material submitted by the higher education institution;
* determining any additional material that may need to be requested from the institution;
* examining documents that regulate the evaluation to be conducted;
* participating in the expert training;
* participating in the meetings and discussions of the evaluation group;
* contributing to the drafting of the evaluation report before the site visit;
* preparing and drawing up interview questions for the site visit;
* conducting a 3-day site visit as planned; in addition, having a preparatory 1-day meeting prior to the site visit and a 1-day concluding meeting after the site visit;
* drawing up the final report and formulating recommendations;
* examining the comments of the higher education institution on the evaluation report and considering them when finalising the report;
* performing other tasks related to evaluation activities according to the division of tasks among the members of the evaluation group;
* adhering to the agreed deadlines.

Additional duties of the chair of an evaluation group include the following:

* chairing the meetings of the evaluation group;
* leading the group during the site visit;
* giving preliminary feedback of the evaluation group to the higher education institution at the end of the site visit;
* taking responsibility for the evaluation task as a whole and preparing and editing the final report jointly with the project manager;
* ensuring with the project manager that the opinion of the evaluation group is justified.

Duties of the project manager include the following:

* organising a training event for experts;
* supporting the evaluation group’s work by taking part in the team’s discussions as an expert in the external evaluation of higher education, acting as a secretary of the evaluation group, and instructing the group as concerns the assessment criteria;
* being the point of contact between the higher education institution and the evaluation group;
* editing the evaluation report jointly with the chair of the evaluation group.

The higher education institution subject to the evaluation appoints a contact person who is responsible for the communication between FINEEC/EKKA and the institution.

## 3.2 Self-evaluation and other material for evaluation

The higher education institution compiles material for the evaluation, the goal being to provide the evaluation group with a sufficient knowledge base and evidence for the evaluation work. The material consists of a self-evaluation report drawn up by the institution and other material. The material must be submitted to FINEEC/EKKA in English.

### 3.2.1 Guidelines for self-evaluation report

The higher education institution draws up a self-evaluation report in line with the guidelines provided in Appendix X. The institution chooses how to carry out its self-evaluation and write the report.

In its report, the institution is expected to carry out as reflective a self-evaluation as possible, identify areas in need of development and provide a concrete description of its practical measures related to the quality work. The report must focus on evaluation rather than description. The higher education institution should be prepared to present evidence of the issues brought up in the self-evaluation report during the site visit.

### 3.2.2 Other material

* An organisation chart and a concise description of the organisation of the higher education institution, as well as the number of students and staff (max. three pages)
* Development plan, strategy etc. GROUP WORK ON FRIDAY!…
* …
* …

### 3.2.3 Submission of material

The higher education institution submits its self-evaluation report and other material to FINEEC/EKKA in electronic format at the latest ten weeks prior to the site visit. In addition to the materials mentioned above, the evaluation group is allowed to request the institution to provide other materials deemed necessary prior to or during the site visit.

## 3.3 Site visit

The purpose of the site visit is to verify and supplement the observations made based on the written material submitted by the HEI. The goal is to make the visit an interactive event that supports the development of the institution’s operations. Interviews are carried out in English.

The site visit lasts three days. The project manager prepares a schedule of the visit in cooperation with the higher education institution, and in accordance with the wishes expressed by the evaluation group. During the visit, the group interviews representatives of the institution’s management, teaching and other staff groups, students and external stakeholders. The evaluation group may conduct evaluation visits to individual faculties, departments or units. The visit concludes with a meeting with the management. At the end of the meeting, the evaluation group gives the institution preliminary feedback based on the observations made during the visit.

## 3.4 Evaluation group’s report

The findings of the evaluation are summarised in a report written by the evaluation group on the information accumulated during the evaluation process (submitted documents, site visit, additional material). The report is written collaboratively by the evaluation group and by drawing on the expertise of each team member. The report follows a standardised structure and covers:

* Description of the evaluation process;
* Concise description of the higher education institution;
* Evidence, analysis and findings;
* Strengths and features of good practice;
* Recommendations for further development and follow-up action.

The institution is given the opportunity to point out errors of fact before the report is finalised. The final report is approved by Project Leaders.

The report is published in English on Twinning project’s website. The length of the report is max 45 pages.

**APPENDIX 1: Assessment areas and criteria**

**APPENDIX 2: Guidelines for the self-evaluation report**

**GUIDELINES:**

* …
* …

**CONTENT AND HEADINGS OF THE SELF-EVALUATION REPORT:**

**1. …**

**2. …**

**.**

**.**

**.**

**X. Implementation of the self-evaluation**

Describe how your institution carried out the self-evaluation and prepared the self-evaluation report. What ideas did the evaluation process bring up? Evaluate the success of the process.

1. The document *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2015)is available at http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)