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: 3.5 Enhancing Practices and Procedures

**Name of the Experts:** Mr Gunnar Vaht; Ms Baiba Ramina

**Dates of the Mission:** 17–21 October 2016

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

Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)

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

The Republic of Azerbaijan signed the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) in 1997 and was first country that ratified (1998) the Convention. The preliminary system of recognition of foreign qualifications was introduced in 1992, but the Government Regulation on recognition process according to the principles of the LRC was adopted in 2003.

Until 2016 the competent authority for nostrification was Ministry of Education, since April 2016 the recognition and nostrification tasks were transferred to the ANO when this new institution was established for accreditation and nostrification/recognition.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is highly interested in qualified specialists studied abroad, and for this purpose there is a strict and detailed assessment of study programmes and foreign qualifications. The recognition authority often meets the problem that the quality of some individual qualifications from some countries of former Soviet Union is not at appropriate level to the labor market in Azerbaijan.

About 70% of foreign qualifications are recognised in practice, 20% are not recognised on the reason that knowledge of holders of foreign qualifications are at lower level than requirements in national standards and 10% of applicants present incomplete documentation for nostification.

The ANO is the only competent authority for recognition of foreign qualifications in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The holder of qualification should present the application together with all documentation on-line to the ANO. According to the national legislation, all documents must be translated and certified by *apostille*. In case the country is not party to the Hague Convention, the legalisation is required. The time limit is usually one month and the process is not free of charge to the applicant.

The procedure to the nostrification has three steps: 1) checking application and documents submitted for nostrification, and assessing whether the qualification is awarded by a recognized education institution; 2) assessing and giving equivalency to the qualification, and 3) inviting the applicant to the interview, and making final nostrification decision.

The assessment of foreign qualification for nostrification is based on seeking equivalency of the study programme. During the assessment of programme it is compared whether the programme completed abroad correspond to the national standard of the same or similar programme. The assessment of equivalency takes place at universities where the same or similar programmes are offered. The comparison of equivalency includes the list of courses and number of hours of each course. The programme content should be the same or very similar to the programme provided by the universities in Azerbaijan. In case the programme is not offered by the universities in Azerbaijan, the foreign qualification should be not recognized.

If a foreign qualification is not recognized, the ANO will explain the reason of rejection. The applicant has right to appeal the nostrification decision.

At the end of nostrification process an applicant receive two certificates – one for general recognition and one for nostrification.

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

The objective of the mission was to facilitate the elaboration of a proposal for reflecting higher education of the AzQF in Azerbaijani recognition procedures and practices. The objective includes interviews of the staff at ANO on present practices and future plans on recognition of higher education qualifications, qualifications giving access to higher education and periods of study.

Main tasks and methods were to work together with local experts on recognition of qualifications concerning higher education at ANO and higher education institutions in order to enhance current recognition process (criteria and procedure) in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The method consisting also visits to universities in order to facilitate the role of higher education institutions in assessment of foreign qualifications, periods of study and credit transfer. Important part of the methods to facilitate the main objective of the mission was the seminar/workshop on academic and professional recognition of qualifications in the European Union, and on implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in EHEA.

**4. Time Schedule of the Mission**

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| **Date** | **Activities/Meetings**  BC experts met  (title and institution) | **Remarks** |
| 17.10.2016 | Kick-off meeting of the mission on Objective of Activity 3.5 at the Ministry of Education:  Mr. Azad Akhundov – Senior Adviser, Science and Higher Education Department, CL3  Mr. Tofig Ahmadov – Senior Adviser, Science and Higher Education Department, RTA CP  Mr. Tarlan Arzumanov – Language Assistant  Ms. Zahra Jafarova – Ministry of Education  Mr. Reijo Ahonen – Resident Twining Adviser |  |
| 18.10.2016 | Interview with ANO staff.  Overview of assessment and recognition system in Azerbaijan; tasks of ANO in recognition process and information provision. |  |
| 19.10.2016 | Seminar in ANO focusing on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition convention and its implementation on national level; professional recognition in the EU; overview of the academic recognition in Estonia and Latvia – criteria and procedure. |  |
| 20.10.2016 | Interviews in higher education institutions. Visit to the Baku State University and Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University. |  |
| 21.10.2016 | Meeting at the Ministry of Education. Mission review. Observations, remarks and recommendations. Proposals for next mission. |  |

**5. Achievement of the Expected Results**

The expected results of the mission were proposals for updating recognition procedures and practice.

All expected results were achieved.

**6. Unexpected Results**

No unexpected results occurred.

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

No issues regarding the mission were left open. The purpose of the mission was fulfilled.

**8. Recommendations for Future Missions**

It is recommended to organise a one-day seminar on recognition of foreign qualifications and periods of study to the representatives of Ministry of Education, ANO and higher education institutions focusing on the recognition practices of Estonia and Latvia, in the European Higher Education Area according to the principles of the LRC and its subsidiary texts. It is relevant that all staff of the ANO will attend on the seminar, because the topics presented on the seminar is relevant for day-to-day work on assessment of qualifications.

In addition to the seminar the experts recommend a workshop on assessment criteria and recognition practices to the staff of ANO.

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

Until March 2016 the nostrification process took place at the Ministry of Education, and from April 2016 this duty moved, and responsibility was given to the ANO, the new organization for accreditation and recognition. The ANO is operating few months only, but is already well prepared and dynamic division for assessment and recognition of foreign qualification. The staff of the division is open to introduce new developments according to the LRC and its subsidiary texts.

Current system of recognition (nostrification) of foreign qualifications is focusing on the content of the programme, the content of each course, number of working hours and other input elements that makes the recognition too detailed and complex. According to the subsidiary texts and recognition in light of qualifications framework the recognition of foreign qualifications should be based on five elements of the qualifications – level, workload, profile, quality and learning outcomes. The ANO works for simplification of the nostrification process, but the draft guidelines for new recognition system are not yet adopted by the Government.

One purpose to the new guidelines is to simplify the recognition process of the qualifications awarded by the universities in the lists of internationally recognised rankings. It is foreseen, that 500 ranked universities will be automatically recognised by other bodies and there is no need to apply the recognition by the ANO. However, it is recommended that all qualification should be threated on same way, despite whether the institution is ranked or not in the list of world rankings. According to the ENIC network practice the ranking should be not taking into account as a criterion.

According to the general principles and spirit of the LRC, the assessment of foreign qualifications should be changed from equivalency of the programmes and qualifications to the assessment of outcomes towards the recognition of qualifications unless substantial differences can be shown. Assessment and recognition process in Azerbaijan is still based on seeking for equivalence. The higher education programme completed in a foreign university is compared with the same or similar programme in Azerbaijan and if there is no full match or if such programme or such programme is not offered in the universities in Azerbaijan, the recognition is rejected and the holder of a foreign qualification cannot enter to the labour market.

Therefore it can be suggested that the Ministry of Education will improve the recognition procedures moving from equivalence to the recognition if there is no substantial differences can be shown between the foreign and national qualification. For this purpose there are important there are several tools and guidelines presented and approved like European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual, which is a good practical guidelines for recognition authorities, credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide fair and flexible recognition of foreign qualifications and periods of study.

Also it can be suggested to use and implement subsidiary texts to the LRC to improve recognition of qualifications concerning higher education. Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (revised, adopted in 2010), and Recommendation on the Use the Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications (adopted in 2013) are the fundamental tools for this process to introduce recommended criteria and procedure towards fair recognition based on learning outcomes.

The qualifications awarded upon completion of the on-line programme are not recognized in Azerbaijan. The same position is also in some other countries party to the LRC, even in principle the mode of study should be not a criterion in the system recognition of qualification. The mode of study doesn´t reflects the quality of study, learning outcomes or qualification earned.

The ANO receives a lot of foreign qualifications for recognition, the important amount of applicants are coming from the countries of former Soviet Union, mostly from Russian Federation and Ukraine. There are problems with fake degrees, studies and documents from these countries. The ANO is putting a lot of efforts to check the authenticity of diplomas and studies, and quite a lot of time is spent for verification and interviews of the applicants/holders of qualifications. However the time limit for assessment at ANO is one month which is a good practice in the European Higher Education Area.

The ANO is using on-line application tool and is interested to improve on-line recognition procedures and digital student data exchange. Therefore it can be suggested the ANO to get acquainted with Groningen Declaration ideas (<http://www.groningendeclaration.org/>) on student digital data exchange.

ENIC and NARIC Networks are useful in collecting information about education systems and lists of recognized education institutions, and for experience and best practices. The ANO looking forward to cooperate with the ENIC network, because it can benefit a lot being a part of ENIC listserv, where is active everyday information exchange about education systems, higher education institutions and qualifications. The ENIC network is established to exchange information and support assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications as well to exchange information on higher education systems and recognised institutions.

Effort should be put to improve language skills of the recognition staff of ANO. The working language of ENIC network is English, also all projects introduced by the European Commission and working documentation presented by the Council of Europe and UNESCO is in English. Therefore to be member of the ENIC network and recognition process in the European region the use of English is necessary.

During the mission two universities were visited to review the assessment and recognition procedures at the institutional level. The Baku State University and Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University both have experience in international cooperation providing joint programmes and participating on student exchange activities.

The applicants holding a foreign secondary school qualification will be assessed by the universities. In case the applicant has not a required level language skills or the secondary school study programme in a foreign country has no relevant courses in the programme, the foundation year is provided before admission to the first year of undergraduate courses.

Higher education qualifications in access to second and third cycle studies will be assessed by ANO, the university will forward the application to the ANO for recognition of a qualification. For recognition of access qualifications (secondary education certificates), the universities are competent recognition authorities and assessment of such qualifications take place at the institutions. The assessment process is not regulated or not very clear at institutional level. There are no regulation for certain assessment criteria and there is no guarantee that applicants have information about the assessment and recognition procedure. There is more coordination and collaboration recommended between the higher education institutions and ANO, but it means also additional duty and responsibility for ANO. Higher education institutions need standard guidelines for recognition. The Ministry of Education and ANO may provide the guidelines for this issue on the basis of EAR manual.

The recognition of periods of study and transfer of credits are responsibilities of higher education institutions. Each university has a commission assessing marks and credits obtained during the semester, year or more abroad. Universities have willingness to improve the recognition of periods of study, however, still a lot of attention is paid to seeking for equivalence of subject content. Therefore it can be suggested to universities to use EAR manual for higher education institutions which is a good practical guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide flexible recognition of periods of study. It is suggested to benefit from ECTS User Guide, since ECTS is based on the learning achievements and workload.

**Baku, 21/10/2016 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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

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