WP1. Scoping and Analysis of Quality Assurance in Azerbaijan Universities

NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT
Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University

Baku – 2018

1. Introduction and Background

This section describes the purpose of the needs assessment and the specific questions and issues the assessment was designed to explore.The purpose of this needs assessment report is to review what has been done so far with regard to functioning of the quality assurance system (QAS) at the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU) and its current status and to figure out what measures should be implemented in short run and long run to ensure its full operation. Such assessment would also enable us to reveal the quality objectives and the way (approaches and tools) they were addressed. It would show shortcomings and suggest appropriate corrective measures. It would also help to identify the university QAS's main clients and stakeholders (external and internal) and their needs and the ways to meet their expectations/requirements.

2. Method

The focus group interview techniques have been chosen as a research method for the university QAS needs assessment. It was decided to interview the university top management and specialists that are directly involved in QA and/or have substantial experience in international projects management:

1) Rector
2) Vice rector on academic affairs
3) Vice rector on scientific affairs
4) Vice rector on international relations affairs
5) Vice rector on economic and administrative affairs
6) The head of academic department
7) Dean of the faculty of history and geography
8) Chair of the department of history
9) Head of the quality assurance department
10) Head of research and development department
11) International relations department specialist

A questionnaire (survey based on ISO 9001:2015) was distributed among the members of the focus group who were asked to individually evaluate all aspects related to the status of the QAS in our university and come up with their marks (from 0 to 5)for each category. The collected data were summarized and the marks that reflect the attitudes of the majority were taken as a survey result for each QA item. Then the results and conclusions were announced/discussed at the final meeting of the focus group.

The report consists of six sections and each section's questions are set to reflect particularaspects such as context of the organization, the leadership commitment and engagement issues and its ability to take accountability, the organization's ability to plan and achieve the QA objectives; organization's resources (both human and material - infrastructure), its ability to set and regularly check the QA-related monitoring and evaluation indicators and regularly checkthe QA-related performance and identified opportunities for timely improvement of its operations.

The survey was aimed at identification of the current state of quality assurance operations at the ASPU, revealing the gaps and insufficiencies, and discussing the ways to overcome these issues in order to ensure full functioning of the quality assurance system at the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University.

It should be mentioned, as a general comment, that the quality assurance (in education) is not widespread /well known notion in Azerbaijan and thus there is no sufficient expertise on modern quality assurance systems. We consider these facts as major limitations for achieving the desired results in the conduct of the survey.

3. Key findings

3.1 Context of the organization

   a) Understanding the organization and its context.

   b) Understand the needs and expectations of stakeholders/interested parties

   c) Determinethe boundaries of quality management system

   d) Quality management system and its processes

3.1.1 Understanding the organization and its context

Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU) is the first higher education institution (HEI) in Azerbaijan focused on teacher education. Over 160,000 teachers and scientific specialists have been trained at the ASPU since its foundation in 1921.

Currently the university provides education in its two campuses in Baku and 5 regional branches in Aghjabadi, Guba, Shaki, Shamakhi, and Jalilabad. Azerbaijan State Pedagogical College, School 7, and Azerbaijan Teacher Institute (since 2015) are attached to the ASPU. There are 8 Faculties (Faculty of Philology, Faculty of Primary Education, Faculty of Preschool Education, Psychological Service and Speech Therapist/Logopedia, Faculty of Physics and Technology, Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics, Faculty of History and

Geography, Faculty of Chemistry and Biology, and Faculty of Music, Fine Arts, Physical Training and Pre-military Service), 35 Chairs and 7 Scientific-research laboratories, and a number of departments. Besides, the university has its Library Information Centre, Support and Advice Centre, Sport Halls, Medical Service Centre, Student organizations and a dormitory, for hosting of incoming students.

The university offers 22 Bachelor's, 18 Master's and 25 Doctoral study programmes, and serves to over 17,000 students (together with all branches) including more than 200 international students with 725 academic and 587 administrative staff working in ASPU's Baku buildings. Azerbaijani and Russian are languages of instruction at the ASPU.

The Mission of the university is to become a leading university of education and research in Caucasus and Central Asia; to promote innovative approach to the transfer of knowledge through teaching and research; and to contribute to the improvement of socio-economic wellbeing in the country. The Vision of the University is to provide progress, prosperity and security of the country through its professional staff meeting the challenges of the 21st century. Its policy, among other things, is aimed at introduction of the modern education practices and integration into European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Its staff is involved in development of internal quality assurance system.

Analysis of the collected responses shows that the majority of the focus group membersbelieve that the institution determines the internal and external issues that are relevant to organization purpose. The group also agrees that the current internal functions of the university quality assurance system are: review of the syllabuses and study programs and documentation related to the academic process, annual evaluation of academic staff, conduct of surveys aiming at the student evaluation of teaching processes, staff and student attendance control, etc. However, a number of these functions are either non-existent, or underdeveloped or not used on a regular basis. For example, the functions like the students' feedback towards the study programs (internal issue), and monitoring of the university alumni employability (external issue) arenot sufficiently developed.Another efficient tool for monitoring the external issues is a feedback from the schools directors where the university alumni are employed.

The responses of the focus group on organization and its context also show that, the university understands the necessity of the QA system and its appropriateness to the university's policy and strategic plan. At the same time the group realizes that the university's current QA system should be transformed to a new system by further development of existing functions and introduction of new ones.

The requirements and expectations of the stakeholders (students, academic staff, Ministry of Education, etc.) in the quality management system are well understood in the institution and the appropriate Statute of the recently established quality management department is to be developed and approved shortly.

There is a clear understanding of all three types of the university's QA system processes (main processes, management processes and maintenance processes) and interrelations between them. The members of the focus group realize that the establishment of a comprehensive QAS with required outputs/ products will require the use of certain resources (human, financial, etc.) and look forward to development of the cost-effective system identification of the scope and boundaries of the university's quality managementsystem within the Statutes.

Although the roles and responsibilities of all QAS actors and the mode of the resource usehave been identified,the focus group members underlined that for successful execution of these activities it is extremelyimportantto properly document, update and maintain the abovementioned information.

3.2. Leadership

a) leadership and commitment;

a.1 General information

a.2 Customer's focus

Themembers of the focus group agree that the university leadership is committed and engaged in all activities related to the development of the QAS and is highly responsive to all quality assurance related initiatives. The university rector actively participated inidentification of the quality control strategy and initiated the establishment of independent quality assurance department (reporting to the rector only) and its deployment by two experienced professionals.

The goals of the quality assurance system are determined according to the strategic plan of the University and the quality assurance department is a part of a new structure of the university.

It was underlined in the course of the focus group discussion that the students (and their parents) and schools/labor market (since we educate teachers) are our main clients and their satisfaction is our first priority. So the QAS would enable to better meet our clients' requirements through regular conduct of surveys and getting feedback from the labor market. This, in its turn, would contribute to the process of the study programs' review and enhancement.

Policy

b) policy;

b.1 Establishing of quality policy

b.2 Communicating the quality policy

c) Organizational roles, responsibilities and authorities

The members of the focus group agree on existence of the university quality policy. It mainly covers information related to the study process (syllabuses, lectures, laboratory work, etc.) and carries a fragmentary form.They stressed the necessity of establishment of comprehensive quality policy and think that it has to be developed by cooperation of all structures of university and top management with coordination of the quality assurance department. It should comply with the university strategy and describe the university goals in the field of quality assurance. It should contain certain instructions and regulations for particular quality related processes/activities describing their The lack of documented quality policy may lead to confusion among all participants of the quality assurance process on their duties, responsibilities, tasks, activities and sequences of activities and, as a result, to unnecessary repetitions, delays and frustration. Such policy would also contribute to better communication between various structures within the university that is currently insufficient for some structures. Another important feature effective quality policy is an easy accessibility of its documentation.

3.3 Planning

a) Quality objectives and planning to achieve them

b) planning of changes

The university quality objectives and the required resources (human and technical) have been discussed and determined in the course of a number of meetings with participation of the top management, academic department, Academic Council, faculties and QAC employees. These objectives are consistent with existing quality policy and relevantto enhancement of customer satisfactionand are to be shortly documented in the QAC statutes. The focus group members underlined that the objectives are measurable, which makes possible theassessment of the performance against the stated objectives. The focus group members pointed out that once the statutes are approved, the next step is to revise and update the mechanisms of the quality objectives' monitoring. In this regard, the responsibilities of the university structures that are involved in this monitoring process should be clarified and documented.

All in all, the quality objectives exist and are being monitored, but this process has to be systemized, properly documented and communicated to appropriate parties.

This in turn would enable to reveal possible shortcomings in functioning of the quality assurance system, such as inconsistency in the work of relevant university structures, repetitive activities, etc. The focus group members underlined the importance of evaluation of the QMS performance and respective analysis of situations when such shortcomings arise and of the conduct of corrective measure/change (for instance change in assignments for particular university

structures, etc.). Although these changes are carried out at the university, they should be implemented regularly in a planned manner.

3.4 Support

The ASPU has made a substantial effort to support the establishment and proper functioning of the university QMS in recent years. The following resources were used for this purpose: financial, material, renovated offices and training classes, teaching aids, conference halls, canteens, sport facilities, dormitories hardware and software, library books and magazines, publishing facilities, power and water supply, IT support, medical services, etc. However, the university infrastructure does not fully meet the modern standards.

A lot of efforts have been made for the staff (including QA Department staff) capacity building, like organization of trainings (including IT and English language trainings), workshops, seminars and conferences with participation of local and international experts. The staff involved in the QMS activities is competent in their fields, most of them have PhD degree and are good fit for the positions they occupy. The academic staff performance evaluation would enabl to implement the staff optimization and introduce the merit-based salary policy. However, there were limited gatherings devoted to determination/explanation of the required competencies of the staff that is (or to be) involved in the work of the QMS. Also there is a lack of information sessions on awareness of the involved staff of the quality policy, quality objectives and their roles and contributions to this process.

The university ensures the awareness of the parties involved in QMS activities of the quality policy and quality objectives. Moreover, these people are involved in the quality policy and objectives development. They properly understand the topics of communication between each other's, and with whom they have to communicate on particular issue. Telephone conversations, emails, and meetings (when required) are the main ways of communication between the structures. The established communication system does not specify fixed timing for communication and in most cases it is implemented on ad-hock basis. The members of the focus group agree that there is a need for advanced system of communication among involved parties that would use electronic networking tools and would have determined time for communication. There is also a need for clear understanding of what parties should provide/communicate information to what parties and when (hierarchy of reporting).

Currently the majority of documented information is related to academic process and is stored at various places (dean's and departments' offices, etc.). This causes issues with availability of documents. The focus group members stressed that an electronic system should be established in the future, the one that would document, store and update the quality management system related information on regular basis.

3.5 Performance Evaluation

3.5.1.1.Monitoring, measurement, analysis and evaluation. In general, taking into consideration positive changes taking place in the University over the last years, there is a need for more precision and clarity of criteria for performance assessment and improvement of the current situation.

As an example, it is still premature to confirm that the study programs and syllabi are developed in full conformity with the expectations aligned with the objectives pursued by the institutional strategy, national standards of the Higher Education, society, economy and labor market. Currently, the study programs, curricula and syllabi are being renewed and their majority's redevelopment process is underway to ensure that the redesigned documents will soon meet the respective standards and requirements. Applying best practice and learning from and through the international experience gained in this area would be important.

It is noteworthy that, like in all universities in Azerbaijan, the ASPU develops study programs in compliance with the national standards for the higher education. As soon as the national standards for the higher education are developed and approved by a special commission of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the study programs are designed by the ad hoc commissions of the University, documented and implemented accordingly.

3.5.1.2. Customer satisfaction. Monitoring the customer needs, comprehension, expectations and level of satisfaction, as well as tools for obtaining this information, its further monitoring and review remain underdeveloped in the ASPU, and efforts are being made to further improve this area.

Tutoring (across a wide variety of subjects) is an important part of the teaching-learning process and should be further developed to meet the evolving requirements. There is a need to determine a student-tutor ratio, ensure the tutors' relevance to their responsibilities, and take actions for enhancing their professional knowledge and skills. Improvement of tutoring services will also stimulate the development of the academic engagement of the students.

The University offers equal education opportunities to all students, regardless of their nationality, language, religion, sex, social status and opinion. The University regularly hosts, particularly during the examination sessions, "Open Doors" for parents, various structures and institutions as well as a wider public.

At the same time, students from secondary schools are widely invited to the University and introduced to diverse specialties and their peculiarities as well as available facilities. Chairpersons of student organizations (such as Student Youth Organization, Student Scientific Society, and Student Trade Union) also regularly

meet with the Rector and senior management. To ensure objective and rapid response to the emerging challenges and needs, a hotline and special boxes for anonymous complaints and suggestions are available in the University and all its branches.

3.5.1.3. Analysis and evaluation. Overall status of the monitoring process, measurement per each criterion, analysis and evaluation is unsatisfactory, and challenges remain in measuring and reviewing the university needs, monitoring and identifying a timeframe for the implementation, as well as conducting results analysis and evaluation.

Due to lack of an assessment procedure that would help align the study programmes with the identified requirements of the labour market and interested parties, a monitoring and assessment system to guide the study programmes is missing in the University.

Efforts are being made to identify and prevent academic falsification in the ASPU, as well as verify plagiarism. Several meetings have been held in the University to introduce new software and explain the working mechanism. It is noteworthy that over the past two years, as the first step, the Master's essays submitted by the post-graduate students have been validated, with no concessions and meeting the existing requirements. The Vice Rector for Science and Innovations is vested with the responsibility for applying plagiarism checking software. However, the scope of work remains too narrow to cover the teaching-learning guidance, Bachelors' final essays, PhD dissertations, books, and other publications. There is a room for improvement in this area.

3.5.2. İnternal audit. Evidence of the understanding of the importance of quality assurance in the University is the establishment of Quality Assurance Department in November 2017, as part of the EQAC project. Improvement of the assessment of the management system's performance and effectiveness is mandatory. Within the ongoing EU-funded project, a Quality Assurance Department has been established under the auspices of the Rector, as a fully independent structure in the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU).

A short-term monitoring of the activities and documentation of some departments and structures of the University was conducted by the QA Department, and its findings were reported to the Academic Council and discussed at its meetings. Participation in the national and international training sessions and workshops was encouraged over the last months. However, there is a need to improve the quality management system and implement (as per planned intervals) its monitoring and assessment.

3.5.3.1. Management review. As far as the approach to overall management is concerned, following his appointment in 2016, a new Rector

introduced an external and internal self-assessment system. The University measured the overall status quo in a number of areas and, based on its findings, developed a strategic plan and initiated reforms to optimise Academic and administrative staff and existing structures.

The chairpersons of the student organisations are members of the Academic Council to maximise effectiveness of the university management and ensure student participation in the decision making process. They have the right to vote and speech at the deliberations of the Academic Council. The faculty chairs of the student organisations take part in the discussions of the faculty academic councils.

3.5.3.2. Management review inputs. Despite the improvements, the changes related to the internal and external aspects of the quality management system, customer satisfaction, recommendations of the interested parties, level of the quality objectives implementation, level of performance, alignment between the products and services, efficiency of the taken actions, considering the risk assumption and available opportunities, are not at the desirable level.

Meetings with the University students, parents, and staff are regularly organised by the Rector (every Thursday and Friday) and Vice Rectors (three times a week) to discuss their suggestions and/or complaints and ensure that the customer and regulatory requirements are understood and consistently met. Similar meetings, with no limitations, are also organised by the University departments.

3.5.3.3. Management review outputs. In the light of the above mentioned, the University is determined to develop a performance assessment of the requirements stemming from the prospective needs and expectations, as well as prevent and mitigate undesirable adverse effects, and is making efforts in this area.

3.6. Improvement.
3.6.1. General.

If there are any inconsistencies, including any complaints, the University management reacts immediately, giving it a priority and finding a solution, focusing on the lessons learned to prevent any further replication of the irregularities. However, this process should be more systematically tracked.

The Quality Assurance Department is taking the lead in operationalization of a quality management system and will soon take all actions and measures to significantly improve the performance and effectiveness of the quality management system in the University.

It is worthwhile to mention that, as of this Academic year, the Academic staff performance will be assessed and the suggestions received from the students will be considered throughout the rating process. Thus, students will complete the questionnaires, which were designed specifically for the teachers' performance and classes' assessment, and their findings will feed into the differentiated salary scheme. At the same time, it should be noted that there is a need to create an effective and professional mechanism for monitoring the University's Academic staff performance and regular assessment of the staff qualifications and quality of the teaching and learning, as well as continuously improve these processes.

3.6.2. Nonconformity and corrective action.

The documentation related to the carried out activities, implementation of the reforms, and all stemming correspondence is available in the University. However, to identify the needs and opportunities of the University, as part of its sustainable improvement process, there is a need for continuous enhancement of analysis, evaluation results and outcomes of the management approaches.

With reference to the issues mentioned above, the measures being taken by the University to address challenges and resolve problems are insufficient to fully meet its targets. Hence, to continue the improvement process and raise the internationalisation level, there is a need to learn from experiences and apply best practices as well as use a mechanism to sustain control over all pillars of the development process.

3.6.3. Continual improvement.

Although the University's senior management always encourages the staff qualifications enhancement and regularly supports staff participation in various courses, training sessions and workshops, there is a room for improvement. The University lacks a system for a continuous improvement of the Academic staff professionalism and teaching skills.

The University is engaged in several international projects and partners within the EU's ERASMUS + Programme. Its cooperation with a number of countries within bilateral agreements and collaboration of the Academic staff with the overseas universities and participation in the international fora (events and conferences) are among positive factors.

However, the abovementioned measures remain insufficient for the ASPU to meet its key targets. There is a need to continue the improvement process and raise the internationalization level.

The SWOT analysis of the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Historical positive image of the University - State support - Competitive advantage in some specialties (teaching of mathematics and information, Azerbaijan language and literature, chemistry and biology) - Numerous graduates	- Poor position in local and global market (low local and global ratings) - Underdeveloped human resources (English language and computer skills) - Low teaching level - Poor infrastructure (material and technical base, library, IT, laboratory equipment) - Poor relationships with the university students, poor student – alumni network - No specific methods for studying internal and external problems in quality assurance system - Lack of modern communication system among university structures
Opportunities	**Threats / Risks**
Internal opportunities: - Clear vision of the direction of change of the new leadership of the University; - Saving of financial resources as a resultof staff optimization (reducing support staff, dismissal of aged staff unable to perform); - Possibility to increase education fees (low current level as compared with other HEIs); - Possibility to attract additional funds to the university as a result of the development of additional education and refresher programs; - Educational loans from the Educational Foundation for students with low-income. - Existing of a student dormitory for more than 300 students (for students	- Difficulties with the forecast for the need for pedagogical cadres - Lack of information on the alumni employability - Lack of teamwork skills in implementation of a new strategy (development of the documents, new implementation mechanisms, etc.) - Lack of qualified human resources able to implement serious reforms in the short run.

from low-income families and foreign students).	
External opportunities: • High demand for the university graduates in the labor market (in average three thousand vacancies per year in recent years); • The leading role of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the employment of the graduates specialized in teaching; • Suspension of teacher training in some (private) universities in recent years; • Centralized, merit-based appointments for teachers' vacancies throughout the country; • Encouragement measures to increase the teacher's reputation: • Additional funds to teachers in rural areas; • Salary increases for teachers with high diagnostic assessment scores; • Public investment for ADPU development (campus construction, etc.);	