

ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS ANALYSIS PRESENTED BY AZERBAIJAN STATE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

This assessment provided by University of Alicante has been undertaken in accordance with the guidelines for assessment provided by the Project Co-ordinator. We understand that the main aim of the present SER evaluation is to raise the awareness about the important role QA plays for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Accordingly, our remarks and suggestions are presented with a view to providing a practical framework in which Partner Country HEIs could apply to improve their SER and, as a consequence, further develop their Internal Quality Assurance Systems. At the same time, strengthen a 'Quality Assurance' culture within Azerbaijan HEIs. Last but not least, the external expert would like to stress the importance of there being an overall plan which is adequate, effective and realistic for the abovementioned purposes.

Bearing in mind that Azerbaijan is a signatory to the Bologna Process, we need to point out that the SER of the existing internal quality assurance system (QA) of Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (APSU) was developed using ISO 9001:2015 as a point of reference. Yet, the guidelines for assessment (as determined by the Project Co-ordinator) require that external experts focus on how well partners institutions have adapted, or could adapt to integrate the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs). This situation presents as a complicated approach for assessment. It would probably have been far more relevant, and less time consuming, if the documents developed by ANECA had been used as the point of reference from which to undertake and report each SER rather than the use of an ISO which bears no relevance to the principals for QA in Higher Education as articulated in the ESGs.

Consequently, our first observation relates to the use of ISO 9001:2015 with which to orient the Needs Analysis as it is presented by APSU. This particular ISO is very general in nature, even though it is recognized as having global, as well as a proven usefulness as a point of reference from which to check compliance of generic QA systems. As APSU has an existing internal QA system and has declared its intention to enter the EHEA perhaps a 'self-evaluation' exercise that deployed the principals of the (ESG) as a point of reference would most definitely have given the institutional internal evaluation a far more refined and relevant focus. Our second observation relates to the fact that APSU chose to undertake the SER using the recommendations provided by way of a Focus Group. If a survey(s) had also been deployed the SER may well have reflected more detail regarding the current status of the internal QA system.

Nevertheless, in order to overcome the incongruity between ISO 9001:2015 and the ESGS, UA has adopted the following approach to this particular assessment:

- (a) Provide comments as to how the weaknesses highlighted in the existing system (as identified by the Focus Group in terms of alignment with ISO 9001:2015) could be overcome.
- (b) Apply the underlying principles of the ESGs as the criteria with which to identify the concrete steps that can be incorporated into a Plan of Action which will bring APSU into line with the requirements for institutions that aspire to be incorporated into the EHEA.

However, as noted in this SER ...*quality assurance (in education) is not widespread/well known notion in Azerbaijan and thus there is not sufficient expertise on modern quality assurance systems*.....which may well explain the limitations of the approach adopted by APSU. In October, 2018 UA representative had the opportunity to conduct an interview with representatives of APSU – Vice Rector, a Dean, members of staff and student representatives - which provided further and more detailed information from which to revise this review of the institution's SER. Accordingly, UA has been able to build on this additional information to provide further clarification regarding conformity or non-conformity with the requirements of ISO 9001:2015 as well as to add more detail to the actions that could be taken for alignment with the requirements of the European Standards & Guidelines.

1. Assessment of how well current QA efforts align with objectives for QA systems specified in ISO 9001:2015.

The SER' as it has been presented summarizes the functioning of the current internal QA system in order to highlight the perceived strengths, 'weaknesses' and/or insufficiencies of the system. Recommendations were put forward by the Institution as the means with which to overcome some of these challenges. One of the problems with this internal review and the recommendations presented for the way forward is that the Focus Group was not entirely representative of all of the 'actors' that are generally involved in such a process. In essence, an internal QA system should provide all of the affected target groups with a 'democratic process' in which all voices are heard and considered. The fact that neither past or present students nor future employers were represented in the Focus Group is probably related to the present confusion around exactly who are the stakeholders?

Consequently, it would seem that these recommendations only seek to strengthen the system in terms of general QA functions and not so much to fulfill the aspirations of 'a common national QA framework' for Azerbaijan as embodied in the ESG. Bearing in mind that this SER does not address all of the criteria specified by ISO 9001:2015 the table provided below contains a summary of the specified *shortcomings* or non conformity of the present QA system and some suggestions provided by the external expert for steps to be taken to strengthen the resilience of the existing system. Prior to moving to the full development and implementation of an Internal QA System and the related QA Plan, Senior Management need to reflect on why the institution was unable to provide responses for all of the criteria covered in ISO 9001:2015. Then the first institutional aim needs to be focused on building both a functional very stable foundation prior to taking the steps required (outlined in the suggested Plan of Action) to begin the process of harmonization with the ESGs.

Issue as identified by ISO 9001-2015	Conformity	Non Conformity	Areas for improvement
<p>1. <i>Context of the organisation</i></p> <p>1.1 <i>Understand the context in which the Institution operates</i></p> <p><i>Does the organization monitor and review information about external and internal issues?</i></p> <p>1.2 <i>Understanding the needs and expectations of interested parties</i></p>	<p>Institutional strategy and goals are accessible to all relevant institutional actors. Intended integration into EHEA and introduction of modern teaching practices</p> <p>QA dept with 2 employees who report directly to Rector</p> <p>Students are included but future employers are not, also other relevant actors need to be identified</p> <p>At the moment policy covers: review of study programs, documentation related to</p>	<p>This information needs to be accessible by all stakeholders</p> <p>The institution needs to articulate exactly how it will integrate into the EHEA which then needs to be articulated in a detailed Plan of Action to conform and also how alignment with ESG will occur?</p> <p>There is no formalised QA system or information management system</p> <p>No official documentation provided to support the statement that the QMS has been fully implemented and that it is functional.</p> <p>Develop the mechanisms necessary with which to provide feedback and controls for the internal QMS.</p>	<p>Publish institutional strategy and goals on webpage and make these a public statement available for all stakeholders</p> <p>Urgent requirement to develop and agree internal QA strategy and then provide QA unit employees with training in all aspects of the QA plan and the principals of ESGs</p> <p>Undertake Stakeholder Identification exercise. Develop Stakeholder Engagement Plan of Action to include appropriate ministries, external accreditation bodies, other entities that impose</p>

<p>1.3 <i>Determining the scope of the quality management system</i></p> <p>1.4 <i>Quality management systems and its processes</i></p>	<p>academic process. annual academic Performance Review, structure and process for student evaluation of academic staff, teaching methodologies and courses; attendance records for staff and students. The management system is a bottom up approach and this has been well established.</p> <p>It appeared that the only monitoring system was survey based. Many meetings are held but no official feedback is provided to shore up the IQMS.</p>		<p>legal/other requirements, future employers and other relevant actors from the wider society.</p> <p>The QMS needs to support institutional strategy and goals.</p> <p>QA system needs to be comprehensive, wherever possible framed around ESG principals and made available in electronic form.</p> <p>QA system needs to be accessible by all interested parties.</p> <p>The current system is fragmented. Requires input from all areas/depts of the institution that are engaged with maintaining strategies and realizing institutional goals.</p>
<p>2. <i>Leadership</i></p>	<p>University management committed to further development and refinement of QA system</p>	<p>It appears that most 'leadership' activities are implemented on an informal basis, not yet part of internal QA.</p>	<p>Accountability processes need to be outlined in detailed Plan of Action to support integration into EHEA and harmonise with Bologna Process. Quality objectives need to be established by university management and articulated in policy</p>
<p>3. <i>Planning</i></p>	<p>Necessity for planning recognized at all levels of the institution.</p>	<p>Lack of interaction with external stakeholders to determine how to prepare teachers for entry to the labour market</p>	<p>Need for regular appraisal of relevance of existing strategies and institutional goals and how these relate to 'quality in education'. Urgent need for engagement with future employers</p>

<p>4. <i>Support</i></p>	<p>All relevant resources are at disposal of QA unit and employees have had training in IT and English.</p>	<p>Mechanisms exist but mostly informal and not embedded in either an approved QA Strategy or Plan</p>	<p>Clearly identify the role that this unit has to contribute and document employee roles within the unit, reporting requirements i.e. to the Rector or University Council etc.,</p> <p>Provide employees with documented job specifications.</p> <p>Provide on-going training and support for QA unit employees</p>
<p>5. <i>Performance Evaluation</i></p>	<p>Monitoring and evaluation exists but seems to be on an ad-hoc basis</p>	<p>Monitoring system is survey based and feedback is not used in any meaningful manner as it appears at the time of completing the revision of the assessment of then SER.</p>	<p>Criteria need to be developed and agreed for all QA processes and mechanisms.</p> <p>Regular and clearly specified communication channels are required, providers and receivers of relevant information need to be identified and officially recognized as actors intrinsic to the QA process.</p> <p>Develop clearly specified feedback mechanisms with which to gauge 'customer satisfaction'.</p> <p>Provide Professional Development programs for academics and particularly for 'tutors'. Assess usefulness of new programs.</p> <p>Requirement to make findings from all internal audits/reviews 'public'.</p>

2. Recommendations for Plan of Action to bring existing QA policy into line with requirements of ESGs.

It appears that the existing internal QA system has been designed with two purposes in mind:

- To support APSU to fulfill internal goals; and,
- To strengthen the position of APSU both within Azerbaijan and the EHEA.

However, it also needs to be recognized that there is a requirement for ongoing 'self-reflection and analysis' to support continuous improvement of the internal QA system

Yet, it seems that the internal QA system currently lacks rigor in that existing monitoring and evaluation activities do not provide the *type of feedback from which continuous improvement can proceed*. In addition, a reading of the 'self-evaluation' reveals that at the moment the QA system is very much in the developmental phase despite the fact that it has been functional for a number of years. Thus, it is timely for the institution to take the steps necessary to align institutional QA endeavours with the common framework for QA in Higher Education provided within the ESG. The Plan of Action outlined below attempts to identify the steps that APSU might like to take to bring its existing internal QA system into line with the aspirations enshrined in the ESG.

Some of the proposed actions may appear to be 'highly ambitious aspirations' nevertheless these actions can be factored in over a five-year or even a ten-year time span and co-ordinated to be implemented with the institution's long-term strategies and goals. Below we have provided an example template which could be further developed by APSU once it has clearly articulated either a short-term and long-term strategy- or both - that will help the institution to further integrate into the EHEA (and harmonise with the Bologna Process) and at the same time align with the principals embodied in the ESGs.

ESG REQUIREMENT	STEPS THAT NEED TO BE TAKEN PRIOR TO FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION	IMPROVEMENT (to be completed by ASPU)	RESPONSIBLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION	DEADLINE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - QA POLICY - DESIGN AND APPROVAL OF PROGRAMMES - STUDENT CENTRED LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT - STUDENT ADMISSION, PROGRESSION, RECOGNITION AND CERTIFICATION - TEACHING STAFF - LEARNING RESOURCES AND STUDENT SUPPORT - INFORMATION MANAGEMENT - PUBLIC INFORMATION - ON-GOING MONITORING AND PERIODIC REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES - CYCLICAL EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE 	<p>CONSIDER INTERNAL QA REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL AREAS IDENTIFIED BY ESG</p> <p>DESIGN PROCESSES AND MECHANISMS THAT ARE FIT FOR PURPOSE</p> <p>DEVELOP IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES</p> <p>PEER-REVIEW BY EXPERTS – introduces transparency</p> <p>IDENTIFY CRITERIA FOR FORMAL OUTCOMES</p> <p>INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING</p> <p>PROCESSES FOR</p>			

	COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS			
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Adapted from Galán Palomares (2016)

Listed below are some obvious inconsistencies between existing internal QA processes and the ESGs. The recommendations for Proposed Actions might help ASPU to reconsider and reorient its QA objectives – as articulated in policy – and to implement these actions over a short or long-term timeframe, whichever is the most appropriate for the Institution.

POLICY

ESGStandard:

Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

Observation: It is not clearly obvious from the Needs Analysis exactly how 'policy' is defined, documented and then implemented.

Proposed actions:

- University management to clearly articulate the 'commitment' to pursuing QA in education
- University management to clearly define and make public what steps need to be taken to bring quality of education at APSU closer into alignment with the ESGs.
- Define additional mechanisms necessary with which to underpin the framework in which internal QA system functions taking into consideration the requirements/needs of all of the affected stakeholders.
- Once developed, publish policy making it both 'user-friendly' and accessible to all affected stakeholders.

DESIGN AND APPROVAL OF PROGRAMS

Standard:

Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes.

Observation: While there appears to be a review process for all study programs it is not clearly evident from the Needs Analysis exactly how this is organized within the institution?

Proposed actions:

- Undertake comprehensive internal review of the process for design approval and accreditation of new and existing study programs.
- Develop additional QA mechanisms around this process.
- Include and encourage students and future employers to take an active role in the review process.

STUDENT CENTRED LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESMENT

Standard:

Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

Observation: This is priority for harmonization with the Bologna Process and integration into the EHEA. Currently, APSU has much work to do in this area.

Proposed actions:

- Undertake a review of student retention rates and identify areas where improvement is required to ensure that there is engagement with students at all points along the learning process
- To further strengthen the institution's place as a leading HE provider in the area of Education in Azerbaijan, the region and the wider EHEA define whether or not if courses are designed around Learning Outcomes? If not, Provide Professional Development courses for all academic staff in how to develop courses around Learning Outcomes as well as how to write Learning Outcomes. (To this end there are many electronic resources available from the internet that have been developed and written by Dr. Declan Kennedy, University College Cork – a recognized expert in the EHEA in this particular aspect which is deemed to be critical to the learning/teaching/assessment process).
- Wherever possible include representatives of Student Organizations in decision-making processes, particularly related to the content of proposed study programs, as well as ongoing evaluation of existing study programs.

STUDENT ADMISSION, PROGRESSION, RECOGNITION AND CERTIFICATION

Standard:

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Observation: *It is unclear from the SER exactly how this chain of events in a student's educative lifetime is managed at the institutional level. It also appears that the institution has a Support and Advice Centre (presumably for students.) However a representative from this centre was not part of the Focus Group making it difficult to gauge whether or not this entity plays an active part in providing services for Student Admission, Progression and Certification, as well as exactly what kind of support is available for students? There is, however, an existing process for academic appraisal and performance evaluation by students as well as for learning resources.*

Proposed actions:

- Include the necessary QA mechanisms in the internal process to ensure that the management of these particular areas are not fragmented and that if possible they are managed by one particular unit within the institution.
- If non-existent, derive the necessary QA mechanisms and processes to include Support and Advice Centre as integral to the quality process. Ensure that the role of this centre is widely understood across entire student population.

TEACHING STAFF

Standard:

Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

Observation: *It seems that within existing internal QA policy academic performance is evaluated at both institutional level and by students on a regular basis. However, it is unclear exactly how these evaluations tie in with both the recruitment of new and*

existing academic staff. This aspect needs to be fully considered and recruitment procedures need to be transparent.

Proposed action:

- Ensure that annual performance reviews are transparent and meaningful processes
- If possible, identify the means with which Professional Development courses in new teaching and research methodologies that place the student at the centre of the learning or research process can take place on a regular basis. To this end review the relevance to the HE land-scape of Student Centred Learning, Active Research projects and other student focused teaching/learning methodologies.
- Encourage academics to publish in either Azerbaijani, Russian or English
- Provide training in how to secure funding for relevant research projects

LEARNING RESOURCES AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Standard

Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided. Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

Refer to actions proposed for Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification as well as actions proposed to bring Teaching Staff into line with ESGs priorities

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Standard:

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

Observations: It is not yet obligatory that the existing internal QA system align with external QA initiatives embodied in a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which seems to explain the fragmented and incomplete state of the existing QA policy. Therefore, the actions proposed below should be instituted as a matter of priority to introduce the transparency inherent to the functioning of QA systems. In addition, easy access to reliable data is crucial for informed decision-making and for knowing what works well and what needs attention.

Proposed actions:

- While the information gathered depends, to some extent, on the type and mission of the institution, it might be useful for APSU to consider developing some Key Performance Indicators with which to monitor and evaluate institutional progress towards achievement of the stated goals. Further actions could involve but not be limited to the following:
 - Develop and maintain a profile of the student population
 - Monitor student progression, success and drop-out rates on a cyclical basis
 - Establish an efficient way in which to assess students' satisfaction with their programmes;
 - Develop simple feedback mechanisms that provide information regarding the relevance and quality of Learning resources and available student support
 - Identify the means with which to follow the career paths of graduate and post graduate students

It is vital that students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and the planning for follow-up activities.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Standard:

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

Observation: *There does not currently appear to be the means with which to make information regarding both QA policy and process accessible to all affected stakeholders as well as the wider society.*

Proposed action:

- Publish either a summary or provide full information of the functioning and the outcomes of the internal QA system on an annual basis

ON-GOING MONITORING AND PERIODIC REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES

Standard:

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

Observation: *Given the state-of-play with QA in HE in Azerbaijan it is not surprising that APSU struggles to identify the means with which to effectively monitor and evaluate the output from the internal QA system. This is a critical part of any QA process as it assures that review and revision of study programmes is appropriate. Most importantly, without a robust monitoring and evaluation process it is difficult for universities to create a supportive and effective learning environment for their students.*

Proposed actions:

- Instigate the means with which to evaluate the following on a cyclical basis:
 - The content of each study program offered in the light of the latest research in the given discipline thus ensuring that the courses on offer are not obsolete
 - The changing needs of society
 - The students' workload, progression and completion
 - The effectiveness of procedures for assessment of students;
 - The student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to each study program;
 - The learning environment; support services; and, their fitness for purpose for each study program.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst APSU has an internal QA system it is not yet fully developed neither does it currently support the stated goal of the institution in that many of processes and mechanisms need to be either or improved to bring the existing system into alignment with the ESG. Prior to alignment with the principals enshrined in the ESG some fundamental and general QA processes need to be addressed as listed below:

1. All future internal QA reflective processes should include – wherever possible - representatives of all ‘actors’ that have a stake in the quality assurance process.
2. Staff of the QA unit need to undertake extensive and on-going training in how to implement ESG.
3. Immediate emphasis needs to be placed on professional development in new teaching methodologies, particularly in relation in how to write Learning Outcomes and design courses around Learning Outcomes
4. Overall, far more emphasis needs to be given on how to improve the teaching-learning-assessment process
5. All new study programs must have at their centre Student-Centred Learning
6. The emergent QA policy and the results of a rigorous monitoring and evaluation process need to be accessible by all stakeholders as well as the wider society.

REFERENCES

Equip Project 2015, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Brussels, Belgium available at http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

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